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Work-related stress in pre-school teachers and methods of assessing stress: A literature review [SUG 11/16 NEL]

By

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Part II

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Purpose / Research Question
This study aims to gather information that will contribute to the development of future studies aimed at investigating the impact of preschool teachers' work-related stress on children's learning in Singapore. To this end, the study has two objectives: to identify sources of work-related stress that are relevant to preschool teachers in Singapore and to identify measures that could be used to measure teacher stress in the local context.

Background
Research has shown that teacher stress has serious consequences for both teachers and children, as well as the quality of classroom interactions. Because teachers play a crucial role in supporting preschool children’s cognitive and socio-emotional development, it is important to understand the impact of teacher stress on teaching and learning in preschool, and to identify ways to alleviate teacher stress. Although research on these issues is currently ongoing in many countries, very little has been done in Singapore. To our knowledge, only a handful of studies have investigated the phenomenon of teacher stress in Singapore (Chan et al., 2000; Ko et al., 2000). However, there remains a gap in our knowledge about the stressors faced by our preschool teachers.

Participants
A total of 11 preschool teachers (all female) participated in one-on-one interviews about their experiences of stress at the workplace. The participants ranged in age from 27 to 60 years, with total years of teaching experience ranging from two to 23 years.

Research Methodology / Design
Using various databases covering psychological and educational journals as well as teacher journals, a literature review was conducted to gather information from prior studies about work-related stress in preschool teachers. The literature review was focused on identifying sources of work-related stress reported by preschool teachers and measures used to assess stress in preschool teachers.

Invitation letters were sent to a random selection of preschools in Singapore to recruit teacher participants for the interview portion of the study. The one-to-one interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format, guided by a set of questions around the topics of teachers’ job demands, job resources, and job control. Audio-recordings of the interviews were transcribed and analysed to identify common themes.

Findings / Results
We identified four sources of work-related stress from our interviews, i.e., classroom demands, workload, lack of workplace support, and professional identity. Some of these stressors are similar to those reported by secondary and junior college teachers in Singapore (e.g., “work overload”, “low evaluation of teachers from society”). However, there were also stressors that were unique to preschool teachers, including the lack of job security, managing children with special needs, and managing parental demands and expectations.

We identified several measures of work-related stress in the literature. While some measures were designed for general use with different types of jobs (e.g., Job Content Questionnaire and Effort-reward Imbalance Questionnaire), others were designed specifically for teachers (e.g., Teacher Stress Inventory) and childcare workers (e.g., Child Care Worker Job Stress Inventory). Although the psychometric properties of these measures
are satisfactory, additional research is needed in the local context to assess the suitability of these measures for the Singapore context.

**Conclusion**

Our findings from the interviews are useful in shedding some light on the struggles faced by preschool teachers in Singapore, but it is clear that more research is needed to address these issues at a larger scale. A logical next step would be to develop and pilot an instrument that could be used to measure stress in preschool teachers objectively and reliability. Our literature review on this topic serves as a useful starting point for this endeavour.

**Keywords**
Teacher stress; teacher well-being; preschool teachers;
Part III

INTRODUCTION

Prior studies have shown that preschool teachers play a crucial role in supporting children’s development via the provision of high-quality classroom interactions. However, their ability to provide such high-quality interactions is hampered by work-related stress. Prolonged exposure to stress has been shown to result in several undesirable outcomes, including lower job satisfaction and increased motivation to leave the teaching profession. In light of recent concerns about the high turnover rates of preschool teachers in Singapore (Ang, 2012) and the scarcity of local studies on teacher stress, it is clear that more research is needed to understand whether and how work-related stress affects preschool teachers in Singapore. As an initial effort to bridge this knowledge gap, the current study has two objectives:

1. To identify sources of work-related stress relevant to Singapore preschool teachers.
2. To identify measures that can be employed in the local context to measure teacher stress.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Teaching is stressful

Research conducted in Europe and Asia has shown that teaching is a stressful occupation (Chan, Lai, Ko, & Boey, 2000; Johnson et al., 2005; Kyriacou & Chien, 2004; Liu & Onwuegbuzie, 2012; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2016). According to teachers' self-reports, common sources of work-related stress include heavy workloads, lack of support from colleagues and supervisors, performance pressure, and management of difficult student behaviour (Chan et al., 2000; Kyriacou, 2001). Importantly, prolonged job stress has been associated with a variety of undesirable outcomes on teachers’ well-being and motivation, including lower job satisfaction (Chan et al., 2000), poorer psychological and physical well-being (Johnson et al., 2005), lower teaching self-efficacy and an increased motivation to leave the profession (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2016).

Importance of understanding teacher stress in pre-school classrooms

Exposure to high-quality preschool environments has clear benefits for children’s development. Specifically, the provision of high quality teacher-child interactions in the domains of emotional support, instructional support, and classroom organization (Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre, 2008) contribute positively to children’s socio-emotional, cognitive, and language development (Hamre & Pianta, 2010; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Mashburn et al., 2008; Rhodes & Hoston, 2012). For example, Mashburn et al. (2008) showed that effective instructional support (e.g., providing high quality feedback and supporting the development of thinking skills) was associated with greater gains in vocabulary, letter naming, and math skills in preschool. Effective emotional support (e.g., developing positive relationships with children and being sensitive to their needs) was related to gains in social competence and decreases in problem behaviors. Through the provision of high quality classroom interactions, teachers also foster the development of effective self-regulation skills in children (Blair & Raver, 2015).
However, teachers’ abilities to provide such high-quality learning environments may be hampered by stress (Downer, Jamil, & Maier, 2012). Several studies have reported a negative association between teacher stress and quality of emotional support (Friedman-Krauss, Raver, Morris, & Jones, 2014; Zinsser, Bailey, Curby, Denham, & Bassett, 2013). According to Jennings and Greenberg (2009), highly stressed teachers are prone to have more conflictual interactions with their students and are less likely to establish supportive relationships with them, all of which would negatively influence the emotional climate of the classroom. More recently, Jennings (2015) found that preschool teachers who reported higher levels of emotional exhaustion were less able to provide quality instructional support in the classroom.

Teacher stress has also been linked to various child outcomes, including poorer social skills (Siekkinen et al., 2013) and poorer socio-emotional functioning (Zinsser et al., 2013). For example, Zinsser et al. (2013) found children in classrooms with more stressed teachers tend to display less emotional regulation, productive involvement, and prosocial behaviors than children in classrooms with less stressed teachers. From the perspective of stress contagion theory (Milkie & Warner, 2011), stressful experiences can spill over from one stressed individual to another within a shared social setting (e.g., a classroom). In a recent study involving elementary school teachers, higher levels of teacher burnout significantly predicted higher morning cortisol levels (indicative of higher stress) in students (Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2016). This finding supports the notion that higher levels of occupational stress in teachers could transfer to their students. Another study found that elementary school children who were part of stressful classroom environments exhibited more behavioural and adjustment problems (Milkie & Warner, 2011).

In summary, teacher stress has serious consequences for both teachers and children, as well as the quality of classroom interactions. Because teachers play a crucial role in supporting preschool children’s cognitive and socio-emotional development, it is important to understand the impact of teacher stress on teaching and learning in preschool, and to identify ways to alleviate teacher stress. Although research on these issues is currently ongoing in many countries, very little has been done in Singapore.

**Research on teacher stress in Singapore**

To our knowledge, only two studies have investigated the phenomenon of teacher stress in Singapore. In a survey conducted with 316 secondary and junior college teachers, Ko et al. (2000) identified seven sources of teacher stress. The most commonly reported stressors were “work overload”, “lack of time for personal and family life”, unfulfilled job responsibilities and self-expectations”. The remaining stressors were “unnecessary tasks and red tape”, “insufficient support from colleagues”, “low evaluation of teachers from society”, and “conflicting or insufficient support from superiors”. In another study, Chan et al. (2000) found that teachers reported the most stress compared to general practitioners, lawyers, engineers, nurses, and life insurance personnel. Similar to Ko et al.’s (2000) results, teacher stress was attributed mainly to performance pressure and work-family conflicts. Notably, both studies did not involve preschool teachers. In addition, there are as yet no local studies examining how stress impacts on teaching and learning in the classroom.

In a commissioned study, Ang (2012) examined leading professionals’ perspectives on improving the preschool sector in Singapore. The study participants comprised key stakeholders from the early childhood sector, including teachers, principals, and training providers. A key finding that emerged from this study is “… an overwhelming concern over the turnover of qualified and experienced preschool teachers” (p. 51). The study also revealed that high turnover rates were mainly due either to teachers moving from one setting to another or leaving the profession altogether. Some media reports have also documented the substantial amount of stress that preschool teachers face on a daily basis (e.g., Foo, 2013).

Although these studies have shed some light on the kinds of stressors faced by teachers in Singapore, there is clearly a gap in our knowledge about the stressors faced by
our preschool teachers. Given that most 5- to 6-year-old children in Singapore spend a substantial portion of their time in preschool ("Childcare enrolment surges as more mums go back to work," 2016), it is essential to address this knowledge gap. In particular, systematic research is needed to evaluate the extent to which work-related stress hinders preschool teachers' abilities to provide an optimal learning environment that supports children’s growth and development.

The current study

The aim of this study is to gather information and data that will contribute to the development of future research projects aimed at investigating the impact of preschool teachers’ work-related stress on children’s learning in Singapore. To this end, the current study has two objectives. The first objective is to identify sources of work-related stress that are relevant to preschool teachers in Singapore via a literature review and interviews with preschool teachers. The second objective is to review previous studies to identify measures that could be used to measure teacher stress in the local context.

METHODOLOGY

Using various databases covering psychological and educational journals (e.g., PsycINFO, PsycARTICLES, ERIC) as well as teacher journals (e.g., Teacher Reference Center), a literature review was conducted to gather information from prior studies about work-related stress in preschool teachers. The literature review was focused on identifying sources of work-related stress reported by preschool teachers and measures used to assess stress in preschool teachers.

Invitation letters were sent to a random selection of preschools in Singapore to recruit teacher participants for the interview portion of the study. A total of 11 preschool teachers (all female) agreed to participate. The participants ranged in age from 27 to 60 years, with total years of teaching experience ranging from two to 23 years. The one-to-one interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format, guided by a set of questions around the topics of teachers’ job demands and rewards (see Appendix for the interview protocol). Audio-recordings of the interviews were transcribed and analysed to identify common themes.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Sources of work-related stress relevant to Singapore preschool teachers

We identified four sources of work-related stress from our interviews, i.e., classroom demands, workload, lack of workplace support, and professional identity.

Classroom demands

The participants identified three key stressors in the classroom. The first was meeting the needs of children with special needs. The teachers’ key concern was that they were not well-trained and lacked the confidence to provide the appropriate level of care. Nonetheless, a few participants indicated that they were keen and eager to integrate these children into mainstream classrooms, and were open to acquiring more intensive training in special needs care.

The second stressor was ensuring the safety and well-being of children. Participants felt that it was their responsibility to ensure the safety of each child, thus they had to “always be careful and observant”, and to give full attention to the children “all at the same time” because young children were prone to accidents. Apart from safety, participants also felt the responsibility to pay more attention to children with social-emotional issues, which may stem from family issues such as divorce or the arrival of a new sibling.
The third stressor was *catering to children’s varying learning needs*, i.e., having to manage a class of children with a wide variety of learning needs and skills. For example, one participant found it challenging to teach a K2 class comprising children with mixed abilities. Another participant, a Tamil language teacher, shared that she had to spend more time translating between Tamil and English in the classroom due to an increasing number of children with poor foundations in Tamil.

While each of the three stressors are challenging on their own, the difficulties are compounded for teachers who have to deal with all three stressors on a daily basis. Moreover, these problems are further exacerbated if the class size is very large.

**Workload**

The participants identified two stressors associated with workload. The first stressor was *having a large amount of non-teaching tasks*. During certain periods of the school year (e.g., end-of-term), teachers had to complete “an excessive amount” of non-teaching tasks, such as filling up portfolios, rehearsing for year-end concerts, attending professional development workshops, and facilitating parenting workshops. The majority of the participants indicated that they had to work overtime or continue working at home to complete these tasks, which adversely affected their work-life balance.

The second stressor was *managing parental demands and expectations*. Some participants lamented the lack of parental involvement in their children’s education while others spoke about the pressure of having to meet the differing expectations of parents regarding their children’s education. For example, some parents may value academics while others value a more holistic education. Other parents may expect teachers to push their children academically without considering the child’s age or developmental pace. This results in an increase in teachers’ workload as they have to juggle between meeting parents’ expectations while executing their lesson plans and catering to the children’s different learning abilities.

**Lack of workplace support**

In general, participants indicated that they had adequate classroom resources to carry out their lessons. However, there were mixed responses in terms of the *adequacy of support received from superiors and colleagues*. While the majority felt that their superiors and colleagues were concerned about their well-being and appreciated their efforts, two participants indicated otherwise. One participant felt a lack of concern, appreciation, and trust from her superior. Another participant in a private kindergarten indicated that her superior’s demands and expectations was a major source of stress.

**Professional identity**

Participants’ key concern in this area was *society’s perception of their value as early childhood educators*. In general, participants felt that their family and friends had positive opinions of, and respected their roles as teachers. Where the general public is concerned, the participants felt that perceptions have improved over the years, but they still hear comments from the public that preschool teachers were “nannies” whose job was to simply “play with the kids only…” . Another participant shared that the general public is unaware of “…the amount of things that teachers have to do … behind the scenes”. One participant surmised that these negative perceptions may be linked to the low salaries of preschool teachers, which is closely linked to their professional identities.

Another concern that participants raised was related to *job security*. The first threat to job security was the policy of first having a two-year contract when teachers enter the teaching profession, which creates a sense of uncertainty because teachers worry about the possibility of not being offered a permanent contract. A second threat to job security was the proliferation of government kindergartens, which could lead to the closure of private kindergartens, thus causing the staff in these schools to lose their jobs.
Measures of work-related stress

Based on our literature review, we identified several measures of work-related stress. Descriptions, sample items, and psychometric properties of the measures are summarized in Table 1. While some measures were designed for general use with different types of jobs (e.g., Job Content Questionnaire and Effort-reward Imbalance Questionnaire), others were designed specifically for teachers (e.g., Teacher Stress Inventory) and childcare workers (e.g., Child Care Worker Job Stress Inventory). Although the psychometric properties reported in Table 1 suggest that these measures are reliable, we did not find local studies using these measures. Thus, pilot studies should be conducted to ensure that the measures are suitable for the Singapore context.

CONCLUSION

Our findings from the interviews indicate that some of the stressors faced by preschool teachers, e.g., “work overload”, “low evaluation of teachers from society”, and “conflicting or insufficient support from superiors” are similar to those reported by secondary and junior college teachers in Singapore (e.g., Ko et al., 2000). However, there were also stressors that were unique to preschool teachers, including the lack of job security, managing children with special needs, and managing parental demands and expectations. Due to their excessive workload, preschool teachers also reported a lack of work-life balance.

These findings are useful in shedding some light on the struggles faced by preschool teachers in Singapore, but it is clear that more research is needed to address these issues at a larger scale. A logical next step would be to develop and pilot an instrument that could be used to measure stress in preschool teachers objectively and reliability. Our literature review on this topic serves as a useful starting point for this endeavour.
Table 1. *Measures of work-related stress*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale / questionnaire</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Sample items</th>
<th>Psychometric properties</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Job Content Questionnaire (JCQ; Karasek, Brisson, Kawakami, Houtman, Bongers, &amp; Amick, 1998)</strong></td>
<td>Self-administered instrument to measure social and psychological characteristics of jobs. Comprises 5 scales: 1. Decision latitude 2. Psychological demands and mental workload 3. Social support 4. Physical demands 5. Job insecurity</td>
<td>Decision latitude:  - My job requires that I learn new things. Psychological demands and mental workload:  - I am not asked to do an excessive amount of work. Physical demands:  - My work requires rapid and continuous physical activity.</td>
<td>Based on data from 6 studies conducted in 4 countries (Karasek et al., 1998), means, standard deviations, and correlations between scales were substantially similar across studies. Reliability (Cronbach’s alpha) was good for most scales; values ranged from 0.61 to 0.86.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Effort-reward Imbalance (ERI) Questionnaire (Siegrist, Starke, Chandola, Godin, Marmot, Niedhammer, &amp; Peter, 2004).</strong></td>
<td>A measure of work distress, which was developed based on the ERI model. The model proposes that where there is an imbalance between work effort and reward, such that the effort is greater than the reward, work stress results, which may lead to a range of adverse health outcomes. The model also proposes that over-commitment (personal motivation to work excessively) increases the risk of adverse health outcomes. The questionnaire uses 4-point Likert scales and comprises 3 subscales: effort (6 items), reward (11 items), and over-commitment (6 items).</td>
<td>Effort:  - I have constant time pressure due to a heavy work load. Reward:  - My job promotion prospects are poor. Overcommitment:  - Work rarely lets me go, it is still on my mind when I go to bed.</td>
<td>Based on data from 5 study populations (France, Sweden, Belgium, Britain, Germany), the ERI questionnaire showed satisfactory reliability. Cronbach’s alpha values ranged from 0.61 to 0.78 (effort subscale), 0.77 to 0.88 (reward subscale), and 0.64 to 0.82 (overcommitment subscale; Siegrist et al., 2004). Confirmatory factor analyses using the same dataset indicated that each item loaded significantly on its subscale. Based on a sample of 1074</td>
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Teachers’ Occupational Stress Questionnaire (Antoniou, Polychroni, & Vlachakis, 2006)  

| Teachers’ Occupational Stress Questionnaire (Antoniou, Polychroni, & Vlachakis, 2006) | A self-report questionnaire comprising 30 statements referring to the degree of stress caused by occupational stressors. Teachers identify the level of stress that they experience using a 6-point Likert-scale (1 = it is not stressful at all; 6 = it is very stressful). Principal components analysis with varimax rotation based on data from 493 Greek teachers (Antoniou et al., 2006) extracted 6 factors explaining 45.7% of the total variance. The factors were:  
1. In-class problems and recognition by others  
2. Interactions with students and colleagues  
3. Teachers’ workload  
4. Students’ progress  
5. Government support  
6. Continuous demands for teaching. | In-class problems and recognition by others:  
- Items related to discipline problems, lack of parental recognition of teachers’ work  
Interactions with students and colleagues:  
- Items related to lack of involvement in school decisions, difficult relationships with colleagues  
Teachers’ workload:  
- Items related to chores over and above the teacher’s role, lack of teaching assistants  
Students’ progress:  
- Items related to slow progress, limited interest by pupils  
Government support:  
- Items related to lack of support by the government  
Continuous demands for teaching:  
- Items related to stress resulting from continuous evaluation of students  

Based on data from 388 Greek teachers, Antoniou, Ploumpi, & Ntalla (2013) reported reliability (Cronbach’s alpha) values for some of the subscales: working conditions (α = 0.89), teachers’ workload (α = 0.88), pupils’ interest in learning (α = 0.76), support and recognition from the state (α = 0.74).
**Teacher Stress Inventory (TSI; Fimian & Fastenu, 1990)**

The TSI is a self-report questionnaire that assesses sources and manifestations of teacher stress. The instrument clusters 20 experiences into 5 types of stress sources and 29 experiences into 5 types of stress manifestations. “Sources of stress” items were preceded by the general framing question “how much do you feel stressed by the following?” “Manifestations of stress” items were preceded by “How often do you experience the following?”. Responses are provided on a 5-point Likert scale. The stress sources are: Time management, Work-related, Professional, Discipline and Motivation, and Professional Distress.

The five types of stress manifestations are: Emotional, Fatigue, Cardiovascular, Gastronomical, and Behavioral. Sample experiences for each type of stress manifestations are as follows: “Feeling depressed”, “Sleeping more than usual”, “Feelings of increased blood pressure”, “Stomach cramps”, and “Using alcohol”.

**Stress sources:**
- Time management (e.g., having to do more than one thing at a time)
- Work-related (e.g., finding that the school day pace is too fast)
- Professional (e.g., needing more status and respect)
- Discipline and motivation (e.g., having to deal with inadequate or poorly defined discipline policies)
- Professional distress (e.g., lacking opportunities for improvement)

**Reliability coefficients of the TSI stress sources ranged from 0.75 to 0.85, and the stress manifestations range from 0.78 to 0.87. For the whole scale, alpha was 0.93 (Fimian & Fastenau, 1990).**

**Classroom Appraisal of Resources and Demands (CARD; Lambert, McCarthy, & O'Donnell, 2007)**

The CARD is based theoretically on transactional models of stress, but focuses specifically on the demands of the classroom environment and the material resources available to teachers to meet those demands. The CARD measures teachers’ stress by

**Demands scale comprises 4 subscales:** children with problem behaviors, other student-related demands, administrative demands, and lack of instructional resources.

**Resources scale comprises 4**

Lambert, McCarthy, O'Donnell, & Melendres (2007) reported satisfactory reliabilities for both the Demands scale (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.92) as well as the Resources scale (α = .95).

Lambert et al. (2009) reported
### Abbott-Shim, 2001

Examining the perceptions of both classroom demands as well as resources provided by the school. It comprises two scales: Classroom Demands (35 items about the severity of demands based on various aspects of the classroom) and Classroom Resources (30 items addressing the helpfulness of various school resources). Each item is rated using a 5-point Likert scale.

- Subscales: Instructional resources, additional adults in the classroom, support personnel, and specialized resources.
- Subscale-specific reliabilities (Cronbach’s α) ranging from 0.84 to 0.94.

### Child Care Worker Job Stress Inventory (CCWJSI; Curbow, Spratt, Ungaretti, McDonnell, & Breckler, 2000)

The CCWJSI was developed through a combination of qualitative and quantitative research and the full measure comprises 3 scales: Job Demands, Job Control, and Job Resources. Each scale consists of 17 items, each rated using a 5-point Likert scale.

- **Job Demands:**
  - I have to work long hours
- **Job Resources:**
  - I have one-on-one time with the children
- **Job Control:**
  - I have control over taking time off from work when I need it

Based on data from 188 childcare workers, Curbow et al. (2000) reported satisfactory Cronbach’s α for each subscale: Job Demands (0.77), Job Resources (0.89), and Job Control (0.88).

Prior work has reported significant associations between high job demands and feelings of burnout and exhaustion (e.g., Curbow et al., 2000; Li-Grining et al., 2010).
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
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APPENDIX

Hello [teacher's name], thank you for agreeing to take part in this interview. Pre-school teachers play a vital role in helping children to develop. However, very little is known about the experiences of pre-school teachers, particularly in Singapore. We understand that teaching can be a very stressful occupation, and as with other occupations, stress may affect how teachers perform at their workplace. Thus, the purpose of this interview is to understand more about the types of stress that you face as a pre-school teacher. In the longer term, we hope that these findings will contribute to improving the quality of pre-school education in the future.

I'll be recording the interview today for documentation and analysis purposes. However, please be assured that all the information you provide us with today will be kept confidential. Your name and other personal information will not be divulged when we report the results of this study.

Background Information
1. Name
2. Age
3. Educational background/ level of education
4. Where you trained as a teacher
5. Describe the pre-school that you’re working at (name, curriculum, hours, mission/values)
6. Current position
7. The level you’re teaching
8. Number of years you have taught
9. Number of years at current pre-school
10. What motivated you to become a teacher?

Job Stress and Rewards
11. What are some of the stressors that you face at your job?
12. What are some of the student-related stressors that you face?
13. Do you find that the school resources and policies adequately support your job?
14. Do you find yourself under pressure because of your work demands?
15. Do you find that you have enough freedom/autonomy at your workplace?
16. What are some things that you like about your job?
17. Does your job fulfil your professional interests?
18. Do you find your job meaningful?
19. What do you feel about your job prospects/ opportunities for advancement?
20. Does your job allow you to have a work-life-balance?
21. How do you feel about the support and recognition you get from your job?