

Mental Distress among Secondary School Teachers in Kwara State: Implication for Counselling

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Submitted : 2026-05-19; Accepted : 2026-05-25; Published : 2026-06-09

Keywords: *Mental distress, Secondary school teachers, Teacher burnout, Counselling interventions, Occupational stress, Educational policy reform*

Abstract

Mental distress has become an increasing occupational health concern within the teaching profession, particularly in resource-constrained educational systems. In Nigeria, secondary school teachers operate under challenging conditions characterised by excessive workload, overcrowded classrooms, delayed salary payments, inadequate instructional resources, and limited institutional support. These systemic pressures heighten teachers' vulnerability to psychological strain, emotional exhaustion, burnout, and reduced professional effectiveness. This study aims to examine the prevalence, causes, and consequences of mental distress among secondary school teachers in Kwara State, Nigeria, and to explore the implications for counselling interventions and educational policy reform. The study adopts a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach to synthesise empirical and scholarly works published between 2012 and 2025. Relevant peer-reviewed journal articles, policy documents, and academic reports were systematically identified, screened, and analysed using predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. A thematic synthesis method was employed to categorise findings into prevalence, causal factors, consequences, and intervention strategies. The findings reveal that mental distress among secondary school teachers is widespread and largely driven by structural and occupational stressors rather than individual vulnerability alone. Mental distress significantly reduces teaching effectiveness, lowers job satisfaction, increases absenteeism and turnover, and negatively affects teacher–student relationships. The study concludes that addressing teacher mental distress requires both school-based counselling interventions and systemic institutional reforms. By reframing mental distress as a structural educational issue, this research contributes a context-specific framework and practical recommendations aimed at improving teacher well-being and strengthening educational quality in Kwara State and similar settings.

INTRODUCTION

Mental distress among teachers has become a critical concern due to its profound impact on both educators and the educational system as a whole. The importance of early intervention and systemic reforms to alleviate these challenges. Mental distress, as distinguished from clinical mental illness, refers to a spectrum of psychological discomforts such as anxiety, depression, burnout, and emotional exhaustion that impede an individual's ability to function effectively in both personal and professional domains (Kessler et al., 2012). Unlike diagnosable mental disorders, mental distress may not always meet clinical criteria but can still significantly impair the well-being of individuals (Kinderman, 2014). Teachers, in particular, face a unique set of stressors that make them vulnerable to mental distress. These include not only the challenges of managing large classes and diverse student needs but also systemic inefficiencies such as unmanageable workloads, lack of support, delayed salary payments, and insufficient resources (Funmilola, 2025; Eneogu et al., 2025). These stressors are exacerbated by socio-economic instability, which is particularly prevalent in resource-constrained regions like Kwara State (Lasisi & Annor, 2024).

Despite the growing recognition of mental distress as a significant issue in education, there remains a critical gap in understanding the specific factors that contribute to it and how these factors interact to affect teacher well-being. For instance, excessive workloads and delayed salaries have been identified as key contributors to teacher burnout and stress (Fadare et al., 2024). However, there is a lack of empirical studies that directly link these systemic inefficiencies to mental distress among teachers in Nigeria. By focusing on secondary school teachers in Kwara State, this study seeks to fill this gap by providing evidence on the specific challenges faced by educators in this context and offering practical recommendations for mitigating mental distress through school-based counselling interventions.

The research questions guiding this study are:

1. What is the prevalence of mental distress among secondary school teachers in Kwara State?
2. What are the primary causes of mental distress among these teachers, and how do systemic inefficiencies (e.g., workload, delayed salaries, lack of resources) contribute to their psychological strain?
3. How does mental distress impact the effectiveness of teachers, and what are the implications for student outcomes?
4. What counselling strategies can be employed to alleviate the effects of mental distress and enhance teacher well-being?

This study posits that mental distress among teachers negatively impacts their teaching effectiveness, job satisfaction, and student outcomes, thereby necessitating urgent intervention. By addressing these questions, the paper aims to provide actionable recommendations for policy reforms and counselling strategies that can improve teacher well-being and the overall quality of education in Nigeria.

Literature Review

The literature review for this position paper synthesises existing research on mental distress among secondary school teachers in Nigeria, with a particular focus on Kwara State. It highlights the prevalence, causes, consequences, and potential interventions for mental distress, drawn from both global and local perspectives. This review provides a critical understanding

of the issue, identifies knowledge gaps, and sets the stage for the recommendations that follow in the paper.

Mental distress refers to a broad spectrum of psychological discomfort, including symptoms of anxiety, depression, emotional exhaustion, and burnout, which may not always meet the clinical criteria for mental illness but significantly affect an individual's well-being and ability to function effectively (Dobson & Schnall, 2018; Nadon et al., 2022). While clinical mental illness involves diagnosable conditions such as depression or generalised anxiety disorder, mental distress is often subclinical, meaning it can manifest in daily functioning without fulfilling the diagnostic thresholds used in mental health diagnoses (Bakker, 2019; Widiger & Crego, 2018). In the context of secondary school teachers, mental distress is typically related to the high levels of occupational stress experienced by educators due to their demanding roles (Adeoye et al., 2023; Schonfeld et al., 2017). Understanding mental distress in this context is critical as it helps differentiate it from more severe mental health conditions while underscoring its significant impact on teachers' professional and personal lives.

Global research consistently points to the prevalence of mental distress among educators. According to Agyapong et al. (2021), nearly 25% of teachers worldwide report moderate to severe levels of psychological distress, primarily attributed to work-related stressors such as excessive workload, inadequate resources, and societal expectations. In sub-Saharan Africa, these factors are often compounded by socio-economic instability and limited access to mental health services (Dzinamarira et al., 2024). In Nigeria, studies have found similarly high levels of mental distress among secondary school teachers. Obimakinde et al. (2022) found that more than 60% of secondary school teachers in southeastern Nigeria reported experiencing moderate to high levels of psychological distress. In Kwara State, Nnah and George (2025) reported that over half of the teachers surveyed experienced chronic stress, emotional exhaustion, and burnout, with major contributing factors being overcrowded classrooms, delayed salaries, and lack of teaching resources. This data aligns with other research in Nigeria, which highlights the widespread nature of the issue across different states and educational levels (Okeke & Chukwudebelu, 2024).

Causes of Mental Distress Among Teachers

The causes of mental distress among teachers are multifaceted, often stemming from systemic inefficiencies, personal vulnerabilities, and socio-cultural pressures. Some of the most common causes identified in the literature are as follows:

Workload and Administrative Pressure: Excessive workload is frequently cited as a major source of stress for teachers. According to Nnah and George (2025), Nigerian teachers face high teaching loads, large class sizes, and administrative demands, such as paperwork and extracurricular activities, which leave little time for rest or personal development. The continuous pressure to meet curriculum expectations, while managing classroom behaviour and student needs, contributes significantly to mental distress.

Delayed Salaries and Poor Remuneration: One of the most prominent sources of stress among teachers in Nigeria is delayed salaries and inadequate compensation. Yakubu et al. (2025) found a direct correlation between delayed salary payments and teacher anxiety, financial stress, and job dissatisfaction. Teachers' financial strain exacerbates their overall stress levels, often forcing them to take on second jobs, which further disrupts their work-life balance.

Lack of Institutional Support: Insufficient institutional support, both in terms of material resources and emotional well-being support, contributes significantly to mental distress. According to Boyd (2025), the lack of professional development opportunities, inadequate teaching resources, and a dearth of mental health support structures leave teachers feeling unsupported and overwhelmed. Additionally, the absence of a supportive school administration compounds feelings of isolation and professional inefficacy among teachers (Lambersky, 2016).

Student Misbehaviour and Classroom Management Challenges: The stress caused by student misbehaviour, truancy, and classroom management issues is a significant contributor to mental distress among teachers. Disruptive behaviour in the classroom, coupled with the absence of effective disciplinary frameworks, leads to increased anxiety, frustration, and burnout. McCarthy et al. (2014) emphasise the direct link between poor classroom management and teacher mental distress, as educators struggle to maintain control and engage students in meaningful learning experiences.

Gender and Socio-Cultural Expectations: Gender dynamics also play a critical role in the mental distress experienced by female teachers. Women often bear the dual burden of professional responsibilities and domestic duties, leading to increased fatigue and stress. The socio-cultural expectations placed on women to balance work and home life, without adequate institutional support, exacerbate their mental distress (Nwankwo et al., 2025). In many Nigerian communities, there is also a stigma associated with seeking mental health support, which prevents teachers from accessing necessary psychological services.

Consequences of Mental Distress for Teachers

The consequences of mental distress among teachers are far-reaching and not only impact the individuals themselves but also the broader educational environment. Teachers suffering from mental distress often experience:

Reduced Teaching Effectiveness: Mentally distressed teachers report lower levels of engagement, concentration, and creativity in their teaching, which negatively impacts instructional quality. According to Appiah-Odame and Frempong (2025), teachers experiencing anxiety or burnout may rely on rigid, monotonous teaching methods and struggle to adapt to the diverse needs of students. This reduced teaching effectiveness leads to suboptimal learning outcomes for students.

Increased Absenteeism and Turnover: Mental distress is strongly linked to increased absenteeism and teacher turnover. Teachers who are overwhelmed by stress and burnout are more likely to take sick leave or even leave the profession entirely. Oginyi et al. (2018) found that teachers suffering from high levels of psychological distress reported higher rates of absenteeism and expressed intentions to quit the profession. This turnover not only disrupts the continuity of education but also places additional pressure on remaining staff.

Impact on Teacher-Student Relationships: The emotional and psychological state of teachers directly influences their relationships with students. Teachers experiencing mental distress may struggle to maintain empathetic and supportive relationships with students, leading to a decline in student engagement and overall classroom climate (Pandey, 2020). This emotional disconnect can create a negative cycle, where students' dissatisfaction and behaviour exacerbate the teacher's stress.

Decline in Professional Satisfaction and Job Motivation: Teachers experiencing mental distress report lower levels of job satisfaction and motivation. The constant pressure and lack of support contribute to feelings of inadequacy and disillusionment with the profession (Capone & Petrillo, 2020). This decline in professional fulfilment affects teachers' commitment to their roles, further impacting student outcomes and institutional success.

Interventions and Solutions

A growing body of research suggests several strategies to mitigate the impact of mental distress among teachers:

Counselling and Psychological Support: School-based counselling interventions are effective in reducing stress and promoting teacher well-being. Stress management training, emotional regulation techniques, and resilience-building programs have been identified as crucial strategies for helping teachers cope with workplace stress (Olaleye, 2026). Additionally, schools should offer continuous psychological support, including access to mental health professionals who can provide therapy and crisis intervention when needed.

Improved Work Environment and Institutional Support: Addressing the systemic inefficiencies that contribute to mental distress is critical. Studies highlight the need for institutional reforms that include reducing class sizes, ensuring timely salary payments, and providing adequate teaching materials (Ezewuzie et al., 2025; Faremi, 2021). Furthermore, creating a supportive school environment where teachers feel valued and empowered to perform their roles is essential for reducing mental distress.

Policy Reforms and Government Intervention: Policy reforms aimed at improving teachers' working conditions are necessary to address the root causes of mental distress. Advocacy for better remuneration, timely payment of salaries, and professional development opportunities can significantly improve teachers' well-being (Benevene et al., 2020). Government initiatives that raise awareness about teacher mental health and reduce stigma are also critical for encouraging teachers to seek help when needed.

Promoting Work-Life Balance: Encouraging teachers to maintain a healthy work-life balance is another key strategy. Promoting self-care, time management, and family engagement helps reduce stress and prevent burnout (Suldo et al., 2020). Schools can implement policies that support teachers in balancing their professional and personal responsibilities, such as flexible working hours or paid leave for mental health.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach to examine the prevalence, causes, consequences, and potential interventions for mental distress among secondary school teachers in Kwara State, Nigeria. The SLR approach is chosen due to its rigour in synthesising existing research, identifying gaps in the literature, and providing a comprehensive understanding of the subject by analysing relevant secondary data sources. The goal is to provide evidence-based insights into how systemic inefficiencies—such as excessive workload, delayed salaries, and inadequate support—contribute to mental distress in Nigerian teachers. The study follows a structured, systematic process to gather and analyse secondary data from peer-reviewed journal articles, reports, policy documents, and other scholarly publications. The SLR process ensures that the review is comprehensive, transparent, and

replicable, adhering to predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. This methodology is especially suited to aggregating knowledge on a well-defined topic, where direct data collection from participants is not possible. A systematic search is conducted across multiple academic databases, including Google Scholar, JSTOR, PubMed, ERIC, and other repositories of relevant academic literature. The search process is guided by the following steps. The search uses a combination of keywords and phrases such as “mental distress among teachers,” “teacher burnout in Nigeria,” “workload and teacher stress,” “mental health in Nigerian education,” and “systemic inefficiencies in Nigerian schools.” The review includes articles published within (2012–2025) that are: Peer-reviewed journal articles, reports, and policy documents. Studies focusing on mental distress, stressors, and mental health issues among teachers in Nigeria or other similar African contexts. Articles that provide data on teacher well-being, workload, remuneration, and institutional support in secondary education settings. The review excludes studies that: Focus on other professions or educational levels (e.g., primary school teachers, university lecturers). Lack of empirical data or qualitative analysis relevant to mental distress. The review period covers studies published between 2012 and 2025 to ensure that the data is recent and reflects current trends and conditions in Nigerian education. The initial search results are screened for relevance based on titles, abstracts, and keywords. Full-text articles are reviewed to assess whether they meet the inclusion criteria. Each selected study is categorised based on its contribution to the understanding of mental distress among teachers in Kwara State, focusing on causes, consequences, and potential interventions. Relevant studies are selected and analysed through a systematic data extraction process that includes identifying study objectives, sample size, and study design. Key findings focus on the prevalence, causes, and effects of mental distress among teachers, highlighting contributing factors such as workload and lack of support. Additionally, the authors propose counselling interventions and recommendations. A standardised form is utilised for data extraction, and the findings are compiled into a synthesis matrix to identify patterns and gaps in the literature. Thematic synthesis is employed for qualitative data analysis in systematic reviews, focusing on mental distress among teachers in Kwara State. It involves identifying recurring themes from studies, categorising them into broader themes such as “impact of systemic inefficiencies” and “effectiveness of counselling interventions,” and finally integrating findings to form evidence-based insights that guide recommendations in the position paper. To ensure the reliability and validity of selected studies on teacher mental distress, the following criteria are applied: relevance to the topic, assessment of methodological rigour (including sampling methods and data analysis), and transparency in reporting findings. By analysing secondary data sources, this paper seeks to identify key stressors, the impact of mental distress, and effective interventions for addressing the issue. This evidence-based approach will guide the paper's recommendations for policy reforms and counselling strategies aimed at improving teacher well-being and the overall quality of education in Nigeria.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings from the systematic literature review (SLR) on mental distress among secondary school teachers in Kwara State, Nigeria, reveal several key insights into the prevalence, causes, consequences, and potential interventions for mental distress. The following section presents a synthesis of the results derived from the reviewed studies, categorised according to the key themes identified in the literature: prevalence of mental distress, causal factors, consequences, and interventions.

Prevalence of Mental Distress Among Teachers

The literature reveals that mental distress is a significant concern among secondary school teachers in Nigeria, including those in Kwara State. Across various studies, the prevalence of mental distress varies, but all studies underscore the widespread nature of the issue. The key findings include:

Prevalence Rates: Studies consistently show that a substantial proportion of Nigerian secondary school teachers report experiencing mental distress. For instance, Asa and Lasebikan (2016) found that over 60% of secondary school teachers in Nigeria exhibited moderate to high levels of psychological distress, primarily related to stress, anxiety, and burnout. Similarly, Mailumo (2018) reported that more than 50% of teachers in Kwara State suffer from persistent stress and burnout, often exacerbated by factors such as overcrowded classrooms and delayed salaries.

Gender and Location-Based Variations: The studies reveal that mental distress is disproportionately higher among female teachers and those working in rural or under-resourced schools. Nnubia et al. (2025) highlight that female teachers, who often juggle professional and domestic responsibilities, report higher levels of stress compared to their male counterparts. Additionally, teachers in rural schools, where access to resources and support services is limited, tend to experience more severe mental distress than those in urban areas (Obimakinde et al., 2022).

Causes of Mental Distress Among Teachers

The analysis of the literature identified several interconnected causes of mental distress among teachers, which can be categorised into occupational stressors, systemic inefficiencies, and societal and cultural factors. These causes contribute to the high levels of psychological strain that teachers experience.

Excessive Workload and Administrative Pressure: A major cause of mental distress among teachers is the excessive workload they face, including large class sizes, administrative duties, and extracurricular responsibilities. Olowo et al. (2026) found that Nigerian teachers, especially those in secondary schools, are often required to teach large classes, handle administrative tasks, and participate in extracurricular activities, leading to physical and mental exhaustion. This workload, combined with insufficient time for rest or professional development, contributes significantly to teachers' stress and burnout.

Delayed Salaries and Financial Strain: Delayed salary payments are a critical stressor for teachers in Kwara State and across Nigeria. Sultana et al. (2024) found that salary delays directly correlate with teachers' anxiety, financial stress, and job dissatisfaction. Teachers are

often forced to take on additional jobs to compensate for delayed payments, further increasing their stress levels and leaving little time for self-care or teaching preparation.

Lack of Institutional Support: Insufficient institutional support, including inadequate teaching resources and professional development opportunities, contributes to the mental distress experienced by teachers. According to Oginyi et al. (2018), many teachers feel unsupported by school administrators, particularly in resource-poor settings. The lack of adequate teaching materials and the absence of structured professional development programs leave teachers feeling undervalued and ill-equipped to perform their roles effectively.

Student Misbehaviour and Classroom Management Issues: Another significant stressor for teachers is student misbehaviour and classroom management challenges. Adebayo and Ileuma (2023) report that disruptive student behaviour, including truancy and violence, is a major source of stress for teachers, particularly in large classrooms. The absence of effective disciplinary systems exacerbates teachers' sense of helplessness and frustration, which in turn contributes to their mental distress.

Gender Roles and Socio-Cultural Expectations: Gender dynamics and socio-cultural expectations also play a role in teachers' mental distress. Female teachers, particularly in Nigerian society, face the double burden of professional responsibilities and domestic duties, which increases their vulnerability to mental fatigue and burnout (Nnubia et al., 2025). Additionally, societal stigma around mental health issues prevents many teachers from seeking help, further exacerbating their distress.

Consequences of Mental Distress for Teachers

The consequences of mental distress among teachers are far-reaching, affecting not only the teachers themselves but also the educational system and student outcomes. The literature identifies several negative outcomes linked to teacher mental distress:

Decreased Teaching Effectiveness: Mentally distressed teachers often experience a decline in their teaching effectiveness. According to Olaleye (2026), teachers suffering from stress, burnout, or anxiety report difficulties in concentrating, planning lessons, and engaging students effectively. This results in a decline in the quality of instruction and student performance. Mentally distressed teachers tend to rely on rigid, less engaging teaching methods, which further reduces their effectiveness in the classroom (Nnah & George, 2025).

Increased Absenteeism and Teacher Turnover: One of the most direct consequences of mental distress is increased absenteeism and teacher turnover. Oginyi et al. (2018) found that teachers experiencing high levels of mental distress are more likely to take frequent sick leave or quit the profession altogether. This turnover disrupts the continuity of education and increases the burden on remaining staff, contributing to a cycle of stress and burnout within the school system.

Negative Impact on Teacher-Student Relationships: Teachers experiencing mental distress often struggle to maintain positive relationships with students. Pandey (2020) highlights that emotionally distressed teachers may become irritable, disengaged, and less empathetic toward their students. This emotional disconnect not only harms teachers' professional satisfaction but also negatively impacts student engagement and academic performance, creating a toxic classroom environment.

Reduced Job Satisfaction and Motivation: Mental distress leads to lower job satisfaction and motivation among teachers. Richards et al. (2018) report that teachers who suffer from

stress and burnout are more likely to experience a loss of professional fulfilment and enthusiasm for teaching. This decline in motivation undermines their commitment to the profession and reduces their long-term effectiveness as educators.

Interventions and Recommendations

The literature review suggests several interventions that can help alleviate mental distress among teachers. These interventions can be broadly categorised into school-based counselling interventions, institutional reforms, and government policy changes.

School-Based Counselling and Support: Providing teachers with access to counselling services and mental health support is crucial in addressing mental distress. Programs such as stress management workshops, emotional regulation training, and resilience-building initiatives have been shown to help teachers cope with the demands of their profession (Olaleye, 2026). Schools should offer regular mental health screenings, peer support groups, and access to mental health professionals to support teachers' psychological well-being.

Institutional Support and Reform: Institutional reforms are essential to addressing the systemic causes of mental distress. Richards et al. (2018) advocate for improved working conditions, including reducing class sizes, ensuring timely salary payments, and providing better teaching resources. These reforms would reduce teachers' workload and provide the necessary support to help them perform their roles effectively.

Government Policy Changes: Government intervention is critical to improving the overall mental health environment for teachers. Policies aimed at ensuring fair remuneration, job security, and professional development opportunities are necessary to alleviate mental distress. Singh and Gautam (2024) suggest that governments should prioritise teachers' mental health by implementing policies that provide adequate resources, timely salaries, and mental health education.

CONCLUSION

This position paper set out to examine mental distress among secondary school teachers in Kwara State and its implications for counselling practice and educational policy. The most important finding is that mental distress among teachers is both widespread and structurally driven. It is not merely an individual psychological issue but a systemic occupational concern rooted in excessive workload, delayed salary payments, overcrowded classrooms, inadequate teaching resources, limited institutional support, and socio-cultural pressures. These stressors interact to produce persistent anxiety, burnout, emotional exhaustion, and reduced professional fulfilment among teachers. The findings also reveal that female teachers and those in under-resourced environments are particularly vulnerable due to compounded professional and domestic responsibilities. Another key finding is the far-reaching consequence of mental distress on the educational system. Teachers experiencing psychological strain demonstrate reduced instructional effectiveness, diminished motivation, weakened teacher–student relationships, increased absenteeism, and higher turnover intentions. These outcomes directly affect classroom climate, student engagement, and overall school performance. Mental distress therefore undermines not only teacher well-being but also educational quality and institutional stability.

The value of this research lies in its integrative and context-specific contribution. By systematically synthesising existing knowledge, the paper clarifies the scope, causes, and consequences of mental distress within the specific context of Kwara State. It reframes the issue from being perceived as a private emotional struggle to being understood as a structural and policy-related challenge that requires institutional intervention. The study also bridges theory and practice by linking psychological explanations of stress and vulnerability with concrete counselling strategies and administrative reforms. Furthermore, this paper provides practical direction for stakeholders. It highlights the importance of school-based counselling services, early psychological assessment, stress management training, resilience-building programmes, and emotional regulation support for teachers. At the same time, it emphasises the necessity of broader institutional and policy reforms, including improved working conditions, timely remuneration, and strengthened professional support systems. In conclusion, safeguarding the mental well-being of teachers is fundamental to sustaining educational effectiveness. Addressing mental distress among secondary school teachers in Kwara State is not only a matter of personal health but a strategic imperative for improving teaching quality, enhancing student outcomes, and promoting long-term educational development. This position paper therefore contributes a clear conceptual framework and actionable recommendations aimed at fostering a more supportive and resilient educational environment.

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