CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.0   Background

Occupational stress in teaching profession has been a long-standing concern particularly in the primary and secondary education programmes (Choi & Yaacob, 2015; Norashid & Hamzah, 2014; Tajulashikin, Fazura & Mohd. Borhan, 2013; Nurul Izzah, Zailina, Saidi & Haslinda, 2010; Teresa, 2010; Dana, 2009; Karen, 2009; Konnie, 2009; Ross Azura & Normah, 2008; McCormick & Ayres, 2008; Antoniou, Polychroni & Vlachakis, 2006). The commitments toward the growth of the students, the community and clerical works are clearly the sources of occupational stress in the teaching profession in Malaysia (NUTP, 2008; Hassan & Nurul Hazeran, 2005; Marzita, 2005).

Occupational stress is often described as an incompatibility between the individual working environments which includes emotional, mental, and behavioural reaction to vulnerability caused by elements in the job environment (Edimansyah, 2008). The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services of National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) defined occupational stress as:

*"*The harmful physical and emotional responses that occur when the
requirements of the job do not match the capabilities, resources,
or needs of the worker.*"*

*(*NIOSH,2008*)*

In 2010, the Ministry of Education Malaysia (MOE) established a special committee in handling the teachers' workload issues called *Jawatankuasa Khas Menangani Isu Beban Tugas Guru* (JKMIBTG) followed by the declaration of recommendations through JKMIBTG 2012. However, despite the recommendations made by the MOE in handling the issues, studies have shown that school teachers are still facing occupational stress as reported earlier by the National Union of the Teaching Profession (NUTP) through Hassan and Nurul Hazeran (2005). In the report, the survey conducted by NUTP indicated that teachers in the states of Selangor, Melaka, Negeri Sembilan and Kuala Lumpur area were the mostly affected by unmanageable workload which leads to uncontrollable stress issues (Tajulashikin, Fazura & Mohd. Borhan, 2013; Norashid & Hamzah, 2014).

Presently, teachers are required to possess multiple skills to achieve numerous goals daily. They must have students excel in their academics, correct social problems by inculcating positive moral values, guide students in finding their potentials in various talents and wide range of abilities as well as providing a positive ethical development in schools (Santavirta, Solovieva & Thorell, 2007). The teaching profession also demands quick adaptations to changes. Hence, teachers must be ready to adapt to the new curricular and current teaching methods based on the fast-growing need of the education system globally. Therefore, teachers are dealing with unmanageable occupational stress in achieving their goals and roles as educators (Choi & Yaacob, 2015).

1.1   Managing the Occupational Stress

As a responsible employer to more than one hundred thousand teachers in Malaysia, the MOE provides its employees with motivational courses, seminars as well as counseling services to assist teachers in managing and separating their stress levels in their working and private lives. With the establishment of the Counseling and Psychology Department and Units, the services provided for the teachers include group counseling, face-to-face counseling or via email and telephone counseling. In regards to email counseling, it can only be obtained systematically through *Bahagian Psikologi dan Kaunseling, Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia* (Division of Psychology and Counseling, Ministry of Education Malaysia). Thus, teachers can systematically choose any available counselor to communicate by email and simply wait for a reply. As for telephone counseling services, teachers may contact the Division of Psychology and Counseling to talk to any counselor through their direct phone lines.

Jointly with the Sector of Psychology and Counseling, State Education Department as well as the District Education Offices, teachers can always get connected to any counselor via phone or email. The appointment date will then be proposed to the teachers to facilitate face-to-face counseling. The counseling sessions will be conducted at each State Education Department or District Education Offices, and if necessary, the teacher can also directly meet with the counselor on appointment basis at the Division of Psychology and Counseling located in Putrajaya.

In the Human Resource Development and Management field, managing occupational stresses through the Employee Assistance Programs and Services has been reported to improve the employees' working and private life motivation as well as increasing their productivity (UNDP, 2004; Paul Steele, 1998; Shirley, 1997; Megranahan, 1995; Scanlon, 1990).

To define, the Employee Assistance Services (EAS) is an employee benefit program in managing stress. The services are designated and intended to help employees handle their problems that would adversely impact their work performance and overall wellbeing. EAS has been used as a tool in managing the occupational stress in diverse working field (Freda, 2000; Tamara, 1999). Generally, it includes assessment, short-term counseling and referral services for employees and their household members. In addition to face-to-face and group counseling, EAS also provides online-counseling and consultation through the Internet and toll free telephone services 24 hours a day.

EAS has been widely taking interest in the teaching profession abroad (BIE, 2011; Shasta, 2011; CCOHS, 2009; Nebo, 2007; VHI, 2001). After reviewing recent studies, stress levels among teachers in Canada and United Kingdom have decreased after using the services provided by the EAS. According to Sandys (2012), EAS is an effective program to address mental health and substance abuse problems at the workplace. Evidence have shown that EAS has helped employees improve their workplace performance (Harris, Adams, Hill, Morgan, & Soliz, 2002; Hargrave et al., 2008), employee mental health, wellness and substance abuse (Mcleod, 2001), turnover (Hughes, Elkin, & Epstein, 2004), as well as presenteeism and productivity (Hargrave et al., 2008).

The role of EAS is now becoming a rising concern in many workplaces (Mercer, 2008). The program is present in nearly every work setting regardless of its size, personnel or type of employment (Clifford, 2011). The significance of such widespread application is that there is an accompanying desire for determining the type of EAS in each type of workplace and a means of assessing whether it meets the needs of the stakeholders (Clifford, 2011).

1.2   Statement of Problem

Many teachers are experiencing and are exposed to emotional and psychological problems (Yeh, 2006; Karen, 2009). The issue of occupational stress in the teaching profession is still an apparent topic of endless research throughout the years locally and internationally. According to Sandeep (2010), classrooms in developing countries remain overcrowded and teachers face highly stressful workplace environment, intensive verbal communication, prolonged standing, high volume of workload which are some of the many factors which highly impact levels of stress.

According to Mulvihill (2007), the vulnerability of teachers toward stress was also based upon their school grade level and the school location. In the study, Mulvihill reported that primary school teachers exhibited a moderate vulnerability to stress compared to secondary school teachers who exhibited serious vulnerability to stress. As for location, rural teachers reported a moderate vulnerability to stress while urban teachers reported serious vulnerability. For teachers who are vulnerable, their stress can get worse and may lead to a condition called burnout.

In addition, the NUTP concluded the main sources of current high levels of teachers' stresses include excessive workload and working hours that are often intensified by government initiatives, such as large class sizes, pressures of assessment targets and inspections, pressure by administrators and lack of professional development opportunities (NUTP, 2011).

Siti Nor Afzan (2009) notes that the teaching profession in Malaysia is exposed to severely high risk of mental illnesses. The burdens carried by teachers in the profession are complex and can lead to bipolar, depression and schizophrenia. Others include high blood pressure and migraine. These findings were also reported by Sveinsdottir, Gunarsdottir & Fridriksdottir (2007), which proved that psychiatric

or psychosomatic disorders are the leading causes of premature retirement among teachers.

An informal observation and interviews with teachers from District G in Selangor showed that they agreed on the positive quality and results they may possibly receive from the counseling services. However, most of them fear the consequences of joining the services due to negative perceptions. These teachers are afraid the community will misunderstand them as developing psychosomatic disorders. Moreover, some of these teachers confessed that their working hours are in conflict with the counselors' time of availability. A few teachers admitted that they were not clear onthe methods andprocedures to see the counselor.

Marwaha & Livingston (2002) discovered several factors positing this general trend in getting professional help through counseling. It includes the fear of being stereotyped, distrust in counseling professionals, shame, embarrassment and the fear of being perceived as weak. Since psychotherapy has been perceived as "a potentially difficult, embarrassing, and an overall risky enterprise", it often cultivates fear and avoidance of mental health services. As a result, seeking professional counseling is viewed only as the teacher's last resort in receiving help (Vogel, Wester, Wei & Boysen, 2005).

The literature review reveals several variables which related to the impact of one's perception towards seeking professional counseling. The variables include the fear of disclosing distressing information (Komiya, Good &Sherrodi, 2000), anticipated risks and social stigma attached to mental health services (Vogel et al., 2005), avoidance of painful emotions (Kahn & Hessling, 2001), religiosity (Komiya et al., 2000) as well as the fear of embarrassment (Outram, Murphy & Cockburn, 2004). Therefore, in order to acculturate trust in seeking help through counseling, human capital development program such as the EAS have taken an extra step to improve the counseling services to a whole different dimension.

According to Ruiz (2006), the EAS has become a very important and popular institutional mechanism in promoting health and emotional wellbeing, reducing absenteeism and improving performance. Studies from Chan, Neighbors & Merlatte (2004) and Elliot & Shelley (2005) earlier also showed that EAS has significant impacts on improving workers productivity and adversely influencing their work performance and overall health.

The purpose of the EAS is to provide employees and teachers in this country with easy access to confidential counseling and to assist them in coping with either personal or job related issues. However, some organisations and schools have set up their own internal EAS group or team which is managed by the Human Resource Department (Snyder, 2004).

The findings have proven that the EAS has potentially changed the existing counseling services to a more acceptable level. In turn, it can also be another occupational stress management intervention in the educational institution. Therefore, thorough observation and research is necessary to identify whether an EAS can be a method to help teachers dealing with matters impacting their working and personal problems. Hence, this research was based on the following questions divided into four research phases;

(a) Phase One;

1. What are the teachers' demographic background and their feelings toward work- life and home-life challenges as well as their challenges toward help-seeking through the counseling services?

2. What are the teachers' levels of perceptions toward help-seeking through counseling services?

3. What are the teachers' levels of expectations toward Employee Assistance Services?

(b) Phase Two;

1. What are the suitable criteria of Employee Assistance Services for school teachers in the selected district based on the Phase One's findings?

2. What are the challenges of the current practices of the counseling services that can be enhanced through Employee Assistance Services?

(c) Phase Three;

1. Employee Assistance Services Handbook development and validation of the subject matter experts:

> i) Based on the Phase One and Phase Two's findings.

> ii) Based on the literature reviews' findings.

(d) Phase Four;

1. How effective is the pilot Employee Assistance Services based on the participants level of pre and post-perceptions toward help-seeking through counseling services?

2. What are the participants' satisfactions toward the counseling services in the pilot Employee Assistance Services?

1.3 Research Objectives

The results of this study provided answers to the following objectives:

(a) Phase One;

1. To identify the teachers' demographic background and their feelings toward work-life and home-life challenges as well as their challenges toward help-seeking through the counseling services.

2. To identify the teachers' levels of perceptions toward help seeking through counseling services.

3. To identify the teachers' levels of expectations toward Employee Assistance Services.

(b) Phase Two;

1. To determine the suitable criteria of Employee Assistance Services for school teachers in the selected district based on the Phase One's findings.

2. To identify the challenges of the current practices of the counseling services that can be enhanced through Employee Assistance Services.

(c) Phase Three;

1. To develop the Employee Assistance Services Handbook and the validation from the subject matter experts:

   i) Based on the Phase One and Phase Two's findings.

   ii) Based on the literature reviews' findings.

(d) Phase Four;

1. To identify the effectiveness of the pilot Employee Assistance Services based on the participants level of pre and post-perceptions toward help-seeking through counseling services.

2. To determine the participants' satisfaction toward the counseling services in the pilot Employee Assistance Services.

1.4   Significance of the Study

The intent of this research is to add a greater body of knowledge by providing an in-depth understanding of the teachers' perceptions on help-seeking through counseling services as part of the occupational stress management method. This study aimed to develop a handbook of the EAS by perceiving suitable criteria from the focus group discussions and in-depth interviews as well as combining the teachers' expectations toward EAS. This study also identified the effectiveness of the EAS that was tested among the teachers in the selected district based on the participants' level of pre and post-perceptions toward help-seeking through counseling services.

This research attempts to assess the EAS role and criteria as the medium to help teachers who are dealing with unmanageable challenges and stresses in their work-life as well as home-life. This area of research is very significant due to till date, very few documented studies on occupational stress management has been conducted specifically on Employee Assistance Services in promoting help through the counseling services in the teaching profession. Most of the previous studies conducted were focusing on identifying the stresses and workload factors among the teachers in the context of Malaysian's education system (Tan, 1996; Punanesvaran,

2000; Zakiah, 2003; Siti Mardziah, 2006; Abdull, Abd. Rahim & Mohammad Yazi, 2006; Kamaruzaman, 2007; Tajulashikin, Fazura & Mohd. Borhan, 2013; Norashid & Hamzah, 2014). Therefore, this research might contribute to the occupational stress management field of studies and its' issues as well as a source of knowledge in the future. This research shall hopefully be another open arm to the future research of its kind and shall help to enhance the existing counseling services as the occupational stress management method through the suggested criteria for the teachers.

1.5   Scope of Study

This research aimed to identify the teachers' challenges in their work-life and home-life, to identify the teachers' perceptions of the existing practices of counseling services as a method for occupational stress management in teaching profession, to determine the teachers' expectations toward occupational stress management services, to promote suitable criteria of Employee Assistance Services (EAS) through the existing services provided for teachers by developing a handbook, and to identify the effectiveness of the Employee Assistance Services (EAS) through the suggested services that has been developed among the teachers.

This study focused on suggesting other platforms of the workplace wellness programs enhancement through the criteria of Employee Assistance Services. This study does not suggest new counseling method module. Currently, there are many counseling modules that are used as the counselors' guideline and have been tested and proven as it was applied. Through the research findings, the suggested Employee Assistance Services Handbook was able to be developed in this study. It was tested in this study as part of the existing counseling programs offered to the teachers involved as the research participants.

This research only focused on full-time primary and secondary national daily school teachers, school administrators, and counselors in the selected district in Selangor. This research also involved the counselors from the Education Department in Selangor and the counselor from the national level. Only national daily schools in the selected district are considered as the source of potential respondents in this research despite the schools' locations and types of schools (SK, SJKT, SJKC and SMK) due to the differences in the administration of the boarding schools as well as the religious school.

The teachers' perceptions toward the existing practices of counseling services as a method for occupational stress management in teaching profession are including their opinion toward counseling services implemented by other agencies and units through other ministries in the government such as the Credit Management and Counseling Agency (AKPK), National Population and Family Development Board (LPPKN) as well as the National Anti-Drug Agency (AADK).

1.6 Definition of Terms

- **Employee Assistance Services (EAS) –**

  EAS also known as Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) are confidential information and support services designed to support employees who have work or personal problems; the program offers a 24-hour helpline and full EAPs also offer access to face-to-face or telephone counseling, where necessary (Sullivan, 2013). In this research, a module of EAS was developed for District G school teachers based on the suitable criteria based on surveys conducted in Phase I and Focus Group Discussions as well as the In-Depth Interviews in Phase II.

- **Perception –**

  Mulla Sadra's Theory of Perception has divided perceptions into three types; sensible perception, imaginary perception, and rational perception (Afifeh Hamedi, 2013). In this research, teachers' perceptions were evaluated based on their level of self-stigma, social stigma, emotional openness as well as anticipated risk and utility toward help seeking through counseling services at their workplace. The surveys were conducted in Phase I. In this study, the teachers' perceptions toward help-seeking through counseling services were measured through the *Self-Stigma of Seeking Help (SSOSH)* Instrument designed by Vogel, Wade, and Haake (2006), the *Social Stigma for Receiving Psychological Help (SSRPH)* Instrument designed by Komiya, Good and Sherrod (2000), the *Distress Disclosure Index (DDI)* designed by Kahn and Hessling (2001), and the *Disclosure Expectations Scale (DES)* designed by Vogel and West (2003).

- **Social Stigma –**

  The impact that social stigma has on individuals who need professional counseling is evident from the previous research findings that many prefer to forgo mental health benefits, which are provided by their employers and instead opt to pay for psychological services on their own to prevent the risk of disclosure in the workplace (Greenidge, 2007). Stigma attached to seeking professional counseling has been identified as a major deterrent to seeking counseling (Outram, Murphy, and Cockburn, 2004). In this study, the respondents' level of social stigma was measured through the *Social Stigma for Receiving Psychological Help (SSRPH)* Instrument designed by Komiya, Good and Sherrod (2000). This instrument is to assess an individual's perception of how stigmatizing it is to receive psychological treatment. The SSRPH consists of five (5) items which are scored on a Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

- **Self-Stigma –**

In contrast to public endorsement of stigma, self stigma is a reduction in an individual's self-esteem or self-worth as a consequence of that individual's self-identification as being someone in need of mental health services (Heather, 2008). Self-stigma can be a thought of as "what members of a stigmatized group may do to themselves if they internalize public stigma" (Corrigan, 2004). In this study, the respondents' level of self-stigma was measured through the *Self-Stigma of Seeking Help (SSOSH)* Instrument was designed by Vogel, Wade, and Haake (2006) to evaluate concerns about the loss in self-esteem and overall sense of worth a person would feel if they decided to seek help from a psychologist or other mental health professional. The SSOSH consists of ten (10) items which scored on a Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

- **Emotional Openness –**

Emotional openness refers to the degree to which a person is comfortable talking to others about personally distressing information (Kahn & Hessling, 2001). A high level of emotional openness indicates a strong ability and level of comfort with disclosing personal information with others, and more specifically with strangers. In this study, the level of respondents' emotional openness was measured with The *Distress Disclosure Index (DDI)* designed by Kahn and Hessling (2001). The instrument was used to measure an individual's perception when talking to others about personally distressing information. The *DDI* consist of twelve (12) items which assessed each respondent's level of self-disclosure and self-concealment. The items are rated on a Likert-type scales ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

- **Anticipated Risk and Utility –**

  Anticipated risk and utility is defined as "an individual's perception of the consequences associated with self-disclosing to someone" (Vogel & Wester, 2003). These anticipated risks are perceived as even worse than the problem itself thus hindering service utilization. This is particularly true for people from cultures where it is prohibited to disclose information about oneself or the family to strangers (Vogel & Wester, 2003). In this study, The *Disclosure Expectations Scale (DES)* was used to measure the respondents' perception of anticipated risk and anticipated utility of seeking professional counseling. The *DES* was designed by Vogel and West (2003), and consists of eight (8) items which assess an individual's expectations about the outcomes of talking about an emotional problem with a counselor which are rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very).

- **Expectations toward Employee Assistance Services –**

  To understand the respondents' expectations toward the Employee Assistance Services (EAS) as a component in the workplace wellness management based on the current practices, programs and seminar on the mental health aspects, the researcher developed an in-house instrumentation of the *Expectations toward Employee Assistance Services* scales (*EtEAS*) for the purpose of developing the suggested Employee Assistance Services Module. The items in this survey were aimed to identify the respondents' expectations toward the EAS types of services, meet-up location, referral system, and procedures. It consists of 33 items rated on a Likert-type scales ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

- **The Satisfaction Survey –**

The Satisfaction Survey used in this research was adapted and similar to one developed by Harlow (1998) and Anema (2011) who utilized a five item Lickert-type scale to measure employees' satisfaction toward an internal EAP and EAS. Among the items assessed in this survey were perceptions and attitudes of the effect of the EAP/EAS use on the career, confidentiality of the programs and services as well as its overall effectiveness. This survey consists of 11 items ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.