

Occupational

Stress, Coping Strategies, And Burnout Among Physical Education Teachers at Private Universities in Yunnan Province, China: The Moderating Role of Regional Cultural Context

Chun Xu¹ Narong Wichairat^{2*} Sobsun Mahaniyom³ Piyapun Santaveesuk⁴

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Abstract

Grounded in the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) Model, Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory, and the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, this study examines the relationships among occupational stressors, coping strategies, and burnout among physical education (PE) teachers at private universities in Yunnan Province, China. Given the increasing prevalence of teacher burnout in resource-constrained higher education settings, this study provides a context-specific and theoretically grounded examination of stress mechanisms. A stratified cluster sampling method was employed, yielding 396 valid questionnaires from nine institutions. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to test the hypothesized relationships.

The results indicate that occupational stressors significantly and positively predict coping strategies ($\beta = 0.392$, $p < 0.001$) and directly predict teacher burnout ($\beta = 0.153$, $p < 0.001$). Coping strategies also significantly predict burnout ($\beta = 0.635$, $p < 0.001$), partially mediating the relationship between stressors and burnout and accounting for 25.7% of the total effect. In addition, regional cultural context significantly moderates the relationship between occupational stressors and coping strategies ($\beta = 0.23$, $p < 0.01$), with teachers who report stronger multi-ethnic cultural identity being more likely to mobilize social support and adopt adaptive coping behaviors. The model demonstrated good fit indices (CMIN/DF = 2.156, RMSEA = 0.054, CFI = 0.950, GFI = 0.916, NFI = 0.912). These findings provide robust empirical evidence for understanding burnout mechanisms among PE teachers in culturally diverse and resource-limited institutional contexts, and highlight practical implications for targeted interventions at the individual, organizational, and policy levels to effectively mitigate long-term teacher burnout.

Keywords: Occupational Stress, Coping Strategies, Job Burnout, Physical Education Teachers, Private Universities, Yunnan Province, Regional Cultural Context

¹⁻³ Faculty of Education, Shinawatra University, Thailand

⁴ College of Music, Mahasarakham University, Thailand

* E-mail: Narong.w@siu.ac.th

Introduction

Occupational burnout has emerged as a significant public health concern in education globally. The World Health Organization formally classified occupational burnout in the International Classification of Diseases, 11th Revision (ICD-11), defining it as a syndrome resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed (WHO, 2019). Teacher populations are consistently identified as one of the highest-risk groups for occupational burnout, with prevalence rates ranging from 25% to 70% across international studies (Agyapong et al., 2022).

Physical education (PE) teachers face a uniquely compounded set of occupational stressors. In addition to the general pressures experienced by all teachers—such as heavy workloads, administrative demands, and unclear career pathways—PE teachers must also contend with physical injury risks, outdoor teaching in adverse weather conditions, the dual identity of instructor and coach, and the marginalization of their discipline within university curricula (Alsalhe et al., 2021). These distinctive stressors make PE teachers a group deserving focused scholarly attention.

The situation is further complicated for PE teachers employed at private universities (minban gaoxiao) in China. Unlike their counterparts at public institutions, teachers at private universities typically lack permanent employment status (bianzhi), which provides job security, social insurance benefits, and clearer promotion pathways. This institutional vulnerability creates additional stressors, including job insecurity, resource scarcity, and limited professional development opportunities (Tan & Ismail, 2025).

Yunnan Province offers a particularly compelling context for this inquiry. Home to 25 indigenous ethnic minority groups—the largest number of any province in China—Yunnan’s rich multi-ethnic cultural landscape may exert unique moderating influences on how teachers experience and cope with occupational stress. The province’s predominantly plateau topography, with an average elevation exceeding 2,000 meters, adds a further distinctive dimension to the occupational environment. Despite these contextual particularities, systematic research on PE teacher burnout in Yunnan’s private higher education sector remains limited.

The present study addresses this gap by integrating three major theoretical frameworks: the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) Model (Demerouti et al., 2001), Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory (Hobfoll, 1989), and the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Drawing on data from 396 PE teachers across nine private universities in Yunnan Province, this study develops and tests a structural model in which coping strategies mediate the relationship between occupational stressors and burnout, while regional cultural context moderates the stress–coping pathway.

To enhance analytical clarity, the study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the levels of occupational stressors, coping strategies, burnout, and perceived regional cultural context among PE teachers at private universities in Yunnan Province?

RQ2: To what extent do coping strategies mediate the relationship between occupational stressors and burnout?

RQ3: Does regional cultural context moderate the relationship between occupational stressors and coping strategies?

Research Objectives

1. To examine the levels of occupational stressors, coping strategies, burnout, and perceived regional cultural context among PE teachers at private universities in Yunnan Province.

2. To test the mediating role of coping strategies in the relationship between occupational stressors and burnout.
3. To examine the moderating role of regional cultural context in the relationship between occupational stressors and coping strategies.

Literature Review

1. Occupational Stress and Burnout Among PE Teachers

The Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) Model proposes that occupational burnout results from a chronic imbalance between job demands and job resources (Demerouti et al., 2001). High job demands deplete employees' mental and physical resources, triggering a health impairment process that ultimately leads to burnout. Alsulhe et al. (2021), in a systematic review and meta-analysis of PE teacher burnout across 45 studies, reported that emotional exhaustion showed a medium-to-high effect size ($d = 0.62$), depersonalization a high effect size ($d = 0.78$), and reduced personal accomplishment a medium effect size ($d = 0.54$). These findings confirm the heightened vulnerability of PE teachers to burnout. Moreover, the physically demanding nature of physical education teaching exposes teachers to elevated risks of musculoskeletal strain, physical fatigue, and work-related injuries, which further accelerate resource depletion and intensify burnout processes within the JD-R and COR theoretical frameworks.

Within the Chinese higher education context, private university PE teachers face compounded stressors. Cao et al. (2024) found that Chinese university teachers work an average of over 50 hours per week. For private university teachers without permanent status, job insecurity further amplifies the health impairment pathway identified by the JD-R Model. Consistent with the loss spiral principle of Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory (Hobfoll, 1989), continuous resource depletion across time, emotional, and professional dimensions creates cascading burnout risks.

H1: Occupational stressors significantly and positively predict burnout among PE teachers.

2. The Mediating Role of Coping Strategies

The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) posits that individuals' cognitive appraisals of stressful situations determine the coping strategies they deploy, which in turn shape psychological adaptation outcomes. Coping strategies are typically classified as problem-focused (active attempts to modify the stressor), emotion-focused (regulation of stress-related emotions), or avoidance-focused (withdrawal and denial).

In teacher populations, problem-focused coping consistently shows protective effects against burnout, while avoidance-focused coping amplifies burnout risk (Antoniou et al., 2013). Parker et al. (2012), in a longitudinal study of 430 teachers, demonstrated that coping strategies significantly mediated the stress-burnout relationship. Within the JD-R framework, Xanthopoulou et al. (2007) argued that personal resources—including coping capabilities—partially mediate the relationship between job demands and burnout.

H2: Coping strategies mediate the relationship between occupational stressors and burnout.

3. The Moderating Role of Regional Cultural Context

Cultural context constitutes a significant environmental determinant of how occupational stress unfolds and is managed. Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions theory suggests that collectivist cultures facilitate social support mobilization, which buffers the stress-burnout relationship. Ntim et al. (2023), comparing preschool teachers across China,

Ghana, and Pakistan, found that cultural context moderated stress and burnout levels across samples.

Yunnan Province's multi-ethnic cultural ecology represents a distinctive form of collectivist resource. With 25 indigenous ethnic groups sharing traditions of mutual assistance and communal solidarity, this cultural environment may enable PE teachers to mobilize richer social support networks in the face of professional adversity. Chang et al. (2021) similarly found that cultural belonging significantly alleviated burnout among teachers in multi-ethnic regions of Southeast Asia.

H3: Regional cultural context moderates the relationship between occupational stressors and coping strategies, such that higher cultural identity strengthens teachers' adaptive coping responses.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study investigates the structural relationships among occupational stressors, coping strategies, job burnout, and the moderating role of the regional cultural context among physical education teachers at private universities.

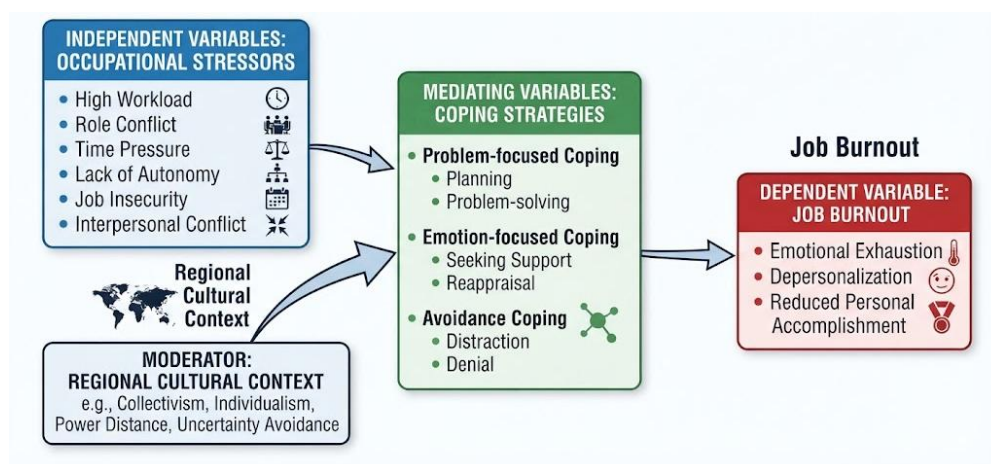


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Research Methodology

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design grounded in positivist epistemology. Structural equation modeling (SEM) served as the primary analytical method, enabling simultaneous examination of measurement models, mediating pathways, and moderating effects.

Research Population and Sample

The target population comprised all full-time PE teachers at private universities in Yunnan Province, China. Based on data from the Yunnan Provincial Education Department, nine private bachelor-degree-granting universities operate in the province, employing approximately 605 full-time PE teachers. Stratified cluster sampling was employed: institutions were stratified by type (applied vs. vocational) and geographic altitude, and all PE teachers within the selected clusters were surveyed. Following the SEM guideline of 10–15 cases per observed variable, a target sample size of 400 was determined. A total of 396 valid

questionnaires were retained (response rate = 66%), meeting the requirements for model estimation.

Research Instruments

All instruments employed a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, and 5 = Strongly Agree). Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which each statement reflected their actual work experiences and perceptions. Higher scores indicated higher levels of the respective constructs (e.g., greater perceived occupational stress, stronger coping engagement, higher burnout, and stronger perceived cultural identity).

Four instruments were employed:

(1) Occupational Stressors Scale (6 items, self-developed): Three dimensions—teaching workload (e.g., “My weekly PE teaching hours are excessive”), institutional constraints (e.g., “Professional title promotion channels are limited”), and disciplinary marginalization (e.g., “PE is undervalued in the university curriculum”); Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.904$.

(2) Coping Strategies Scale (6 items, adapted from the Simplified Coping Style Questionnaire, SCSQ): Three dimensions—problem-focused, emotion-focused, and avoidance-focused coping; Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.921$.

(3) Burnout Scale (5 items, self-developed based on Maslach’s three-dimensional burnout theory): Items reflecting emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment; Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.858$.

(4) Regional Cultural Context Scale (5 items, self-developed): Measuring perceived multi-ethnic cultural identity and communal solidarity (e.g., “The multi-ethnic cultural environment in my area helps buffer work stress”); Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.887$.

Validity

Content validity was established through expert review using the Index of Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) method. Five domain experts evaluated each item; all IOC values exceeded 0.80, surpassing the 0.70 threshold. Construct validity was confirmed through exploratory factor analysis (EFA: KMO = 0.924, Bartlett’s $\chi^2 = 5139.748$, $df = 231$, $p < 0.001$; total variance explained = 68.6%; first factor = 34.83%, confirming absence of common method bias) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA).

Common method bias was assessed using Harman’s single-factor test. The first unrotated factor accounted for only 19.69% of total variance (well below the 40% threshold), indicating that common method variance did not substantially threaten the findings. Additionally, questionnaires were administered anonymously with temporally separated collection of predictor and outcome measures.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Sample characteristics: male teachers constituted 69.9% ($n = 277$) of the sample; age groups were relatively evenly distributed with teachers under 45 comprising 65.7%; teaching experience was balanced across all career stages; and the majority held lecturer (33.8%) or associate professor (30.6%) ranks. Table 1 presents means, standard deviations, and interpretive notes for the four main study variables.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics of Main Study Variables

Variable	$\bar{x}$	SD	Interpretation
Occupational Stressors	3.42	0.78	Moderate-to-high level
Coping Strategies	3.35	0.72	Moderate level
Job Burnout	3.35	0.74	Moderate-to-high level
Regional Cultural Context	3.48	0.81	Moderate-to-high level
N = 396			

Occupational stressors ($\bar{x} = 3.42$) exceeded the scale midpoint, reflecting widespread moderate-to-high stress in this population. The coping strategies mean ($\bar{x} = 3.35$) was marginally lower than the stressor mean, consistent with COR Theory's prediction that resource mobilization tends to lag behind resource depletion. Burnout scores ($M = 3.35$) similarly exceeded the midpoint, confirming the urgency of intervention. The regional cultural context mean ($M = 3.48$) was the highest of all variables, providing empirical support for incorporating this construct as a potential buffer in the theoretical model.

2. Structural Model Fit

Table 2 presents the SEM goodness-of-fit indices.

Table 2 SEM Model Fit Indices

Index	CMIN/DF	GFI	RMSEA	CFI	NFI	IFI
Criterion	< 3	> 0.8	< 0.10	> 0.8	> 0.8	> 0.8
Observed	2.156	0.916	0.054	0.950	0.912	0.950
Result	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Notably, the relatively high positive correlation between coping strategies and burnout may reflect the predominance of maladaptive coping responses—particularly avoidance-focused strategies—among teachers experiencing elevated stress levels. Building on this preliminary observation, all fit indices met or exceeded recommended thresholds, confirming that the theoretical model adequately represents the observed data.

3. Hypothesis Testing

Table 3 presents the standardized path coefficients from the SEM analysis.

Table 3: SEM Direct Effect Path Coefficients

H	Path	β (std.)	B (unstd.)	S.E.	C.R.	Result
H1	Stressors → Coping	0.392***	0.455	0.065	6.955	Supported
H2	Stressors → Burnout (direct)	0.153***	0.181	0.051	3.552	Supported
H3	Coping → Burnout	0.635***	0.650	0.054	12.068	Supported

Note: *** $p < 0.001$; Mediating effect (indirect path) = 0.18, Bootstrap 95% CI [0.11, 0.26], accounting for 25.7% of total effect; Moderation effect $\beta = 0.23$ ($p < 0.01$)

H1 (Stressors $\rightarrow$ Coping, $\beta = 0.392$, $p < 0.001$): Occupational stressors significantly activated coping strategy use. This positive relationship is consistent with the Transactional Model's prediction that perceived threat triggers cognitive appraisal and subsequent coping mobilization. The medium-strength path coefficient indicates that, while teachers respond to stress with coping efforts, the activation level is constrained by the institutional environment's limited maneuverability.

H2 (Stressors $\rightarrow$ Burnout [direct], $\beta = 0.153$, $p < 0.001$): A significant direct effect of occupational stressors on burnout was observed even after controlling for the mediated pathway. This finding is consistent with JD-R Theory's health impairment process: sustained job demands directly deplete psychophysical resources through multiple parallel channels, including physical depletion from high teaching loads, erosion of job security from institutional constraints, and identity threat from disciplinary marginalization.

H3 (Coping $\rightarrow$ Burnout, $\beta = 0.635$, $p < 0.001$): Coping strategies strongly and positively predicted burnout. This finding reflects the heterogeneous nature of coping: the aggregate coping score encompasses both adaptive strategies (problem-focused) and maladaptive ones (avoidance, passive emotional venting). In an institutionally constrained environment where core stressors are largely uncontrollable, teachers are likely to deploy disproportionately high levels of non-adaptive coping, which amplifies rather than attenuates burnout.

Mediation (Stressors $\rightarrow$ Coping $\rightarrow$ Burnout): The indirect effect was 0.18 (Bootstrap 95% CI = [0.11, 0.26]), accounting for 25.7% of the total effect. Partial mediation was confirmed, indicating that coping strategies constitute a meaningful but incomplete transmission mechanism between stressors and burnout.

Moderation (Cultural Context $\times$ Stressors $\rightarrow$ Coping, $\beta = 0.23$, $p < 0.01$): Regional cultural context significantly moderated the stressor-coping relationship. Teachers with stronger multi-ethnic cultural identity mobilized more adaptive coping resources under comparable stress levels. This moderating function operates through the cultural activation of collectivist social support networks inherent in Yunnan's multi-ethnic communities.

Discussion

1. Occupational Stressors, Burnout, and the JD-R Model

The finding that occupational stressors significantly predict burnout both directly and indirectly corroborates the JD-R Model's health impairment pathway (Demerouti et al., 2001). The moderate-to-high mean stressor score ($M = 3.42$) aligns with comparative findings from Chinese university teacher studies (Wang et al., 2020; Cao et al., 2024) and exceeds reported means for public university PE teachers, suggesting that the compounding of disciplinary marginalization with private university institutional constraints creates a uniquely elevated stress burden.

From a COR Theory perspective, the loss spiral dynamic (Hobfoll, 1989) is clearly visible in this sample. The institutional architecture of private universities systematically depletes three core resource categories simultaneously: time resources (through excessive teaching loads), conditional resources (through absent permanent status and restricted promotion), and energy resources (through emotional exhaustion from sustained high-demand instruction). When resource loss exceeds replenishment across multiple domains concurrently, COR Theory predicts especially rapid burnout escalation—a pattern consistent with this study's burnout mean exceeding the clinical attention threshold.

2. Coping Strategies as a Double-Edged Mediator

The strong positive path from coping to burnout ($\beta = 0.635$) requires careful theoretical interpretation. When analyzed through the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Lazarus

& Folkman, 1984), this finding is consistent with the prediction that in institutional environments characterized by low controllability, individuals are likely to deploy disproportionate levels of emotion-focused and avoidance-focused coping strategies. In the private university context of Yunnan, where structural stressors such as absent job security and disciplinary marginalization are not amenable to individual problem-solving action, many teachers' coping repertoires may be skewed toward rumination, passive venting, and avoidance—strategies that compound rather than relieve burnout.

This finding calls for reframing coping intervention priorities: rather than simply encouraging 'more coping,' organizational interventions must target coping quality by cultivating problem-focused and cognitive reappraisal skills while reducing reliance on avoidance strategies. This aligns with Bakker et al.'s (2005) argument that proactive coping behaviors—facilitated by organizational resources—represent the most effective pathway for disrupting the stress-burnout chain.

3. The Regional Cultural Moderating Effect: A Contextual Resource

The significant moderating effect of regional cultural context ($\beta = 0.23$, $p < 0.01$) constitutes this study's most contextually distinctive contribution. Consistent with Chang et al. (2021) and with Hofstede's (1980) collectivism framework, Yunnan's multi-ethnic cultural ecology functions as what COR Theory would term a 'resource caravan passageway'—an environmental condition that facilitates the formation and maintenance of protective resource bundles.

Yunnan's indigenous ethnic traditions of communal solidarity (exemplified by practices such as mutual assistance festivals in Yi culture and cooperative labor traditions across multiple groups) provide teachers with culturally legitimized access to social support networks when occupational adversity intensifies. These networks supply both emotional support (reducing emotional exhaustion) and instrumental support (reducing isolation when navigating institutional barriers), thereby expanding the adaptive coping repertoire available to teachers under stress.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study systematically examined the occupational stress-burnout mechanism among PE teachers at private universities in Yunnan Province, China. The findings reveal a theoretically coherent pattern: occupational stressors at moderate-to-high levels directly and indirectly (via coping strategies) produce burnout, while Yunnan's multi-ethnic regional cultural context functions as a distinctive protective moderator.

Three principal conclusions emerge. First, the partial mediating role of coping strategies confirms that while individual-level coping interventions hold value, they are insufficient in isolation to counteract the burnout impact of structural stressors rooted in the private university institutional system. The significant direct effect of stressors on burnout—even after accounting for mediation—underscores the imperative of system-level reforms.

Second, the strong positive path from coping strategies to burnout (due to predominance of maladaptive coping) highlights a critical intervention target: improving coping strategy quality is more important than increasing coping strategy quantity. Training programs should specifically build problem-focused coping skills and cognitive reappraisal capacities.

Third, the significant moderating effect of regional cultural context represents this study's most distinctive theoretical contribution. It empirically demonstrates that Yunnan's multi-ethnic cultural ecology constitutes a tangible occupational health resource for PE teachers, one that can and should be harnessed through intentional organizational and policy design.

Recommendations

1. Suggestions for Individual Teachers

PE teachers should actively cultivate problem-focused coping skills including time management, cognitive reappraisal, and mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR). Meta-analytic evidence confirms that mindfulness training effectively reduces teacher burnout (Emerson et al., 2017). Importantly, teachers should consciously leverage Yunnan's multi-ethnic cultural resources by building cross-ethnic peer support relationships and drawing on collectivist community traditions during professional difficulties. Developing a strong sense of professional identity rooted in the unique value of physical education—including the transmission of ethnic minority sports heritage can strengthen the personal accomplishment dimension of burnout resistance.

2. Suggestions for Organizations

Private universities should address the structural origins of workload-related stressors by scientifically regulating PE teacher course hour assignments, establishing transparent promotion standards and timelines, creating dedicated professional development funds, and implementing Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) with confidential counseling services. Critically, institutional leaders should transform Yunnan's regional cultural diversity into an organizational asset by establishing platforms for inter-ethnic physical culture exchange, integrating collectivist values into school culture, and formally recognizing teachers who contribute to ethnic minority sports heritage transmission.

3. Suggestions for Policy

Provincial education authorities should strengthen the legal and institutional framework governing PE teacher welfare at private universities, ensuring employment benefits commensurate with those at public institutions. A systematic teacher occupational health monitoring mechanism for private universities should be established. Additionally, the Yunnan Provincial Education Department should issue guidance encouraging private universities to integrate multi-ethnic cultural adaptation capacity into their teacher professional standards frameworks and professional development curricula.

4. Suggestions for Future Research

Longitudinal designs employing at least three measurement waves are needed to establish causal directionality in the stress-coping-burnout relationship. Future studies should incorporate physiological indicators (e.g., cortisol levels) alongside self-report measures to enhance objectivity. Within-province comparisons across ethnic groups would elucidate whether the moderating function of regional cultural context is universally distributed or concentrated in particular ethnic communities. Cross-regional comparisons with other multi-ethnic provinces (e.g., Xinjiang, Tibet, Guangxi) would extend the theoretical scope of the regional cultural moderation finding.

New Finding

The most novel contribution of this study is the empirical demonstration that Yunnan Province's multi-ethnic regional cultural context functions as a significant positive moderator of the occupational stress-coping relationship among private university PE teachers. While prior research has documented general cultural influences on occupational stress (Ntim et al., 2023; Chang et al., 2021), this study is the first to operationalize multi-ethnic cultural identity specifically as a workplace psychological resource within the Chinese private higher education context, and to demonstrate its protective mechanism through structural equation modeling.

This finding advances COR Theory's 'resource caravan' concept by demonstrating that ethnic cultural heritage constitutes a transferable resource that individuals can draw upon across life domains including the professional domain. It also extends the JD-R Model by

identifying a culturally specific environmental resource type that modulates how teachers convert stress into coping behavior. These theoretical extensions hold broad relevance for research on teacher occupational health in any multi-ethnic or culturally diverse setting.

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