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## EDITED BY

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## REVIEWED BY

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National Pingtung University, Taiwan  
Jason Cong Lin,  
The Education University of Hong Kong,  
Hong Kong SAR, China

## \*CORRESPONDENCE

Niroj Dahal  
✉ [niroj@kusoed.edu.np](mailto:niroj@kusoed.edu.np)

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# Stories of stress: unveiling professional anxiety in mathematics teaching

Daya Ram Simkhada<sup>1</sup>, Niroj Dahal<sup>1\*</sup>, Binod Prasad Pant<sup>1</sup>,  
Laxman Luitel<sup>1</sup> and Netra Kumar Manandhar<sup>1</sup>

Kathmandu University School of Education, Lalitpur, Nepal

Professional anxiety in teaching refers to the stress and nervousness that educators experience due to their job duties and the challenges they encounter. This article explores the prevalence of professional anxiety among secondary school mathematics teachers at private schools in Nepal. The study aims to address the question: How do secondary school mathematics teachers narrate their experiences of professional anxiety? Using narrative inquiry as a research method and grounded on the theoretical perspective and lens of the job demand-control-support model (JDCS) and self-efficacy learning theory, this study narrates the stories of three secondary school mathematics teachers (two males and one female) from different private schools of Kathmandu Valley, Nepal. In-depth interviews were conducted for data collection, and identified and generated themes aligned to professional anxiety were used to analyze the findings. The findings reflect that professional anxiety increases over time. This research reveals that mathematics teachers, those in private schools, experience high levels of anxiety that persist over the years. Anxiety is linked to pressures such as the lack of a proper career plan, the gap between learning theories and actual classroom contexts, an inadequately structured curriculum, and insufficient resources for integrating technology into teaching practices. For boosting math teachers' professional responsibilities, the study concluded that understanding the causes and impacts of professional anxiety in teaching is crucial for developing effective supportive strategies. This study is a valuable resource for mathematics teachers to reflect on their professional anxiety.

## KEYWORDS

professional anxiety, math teachers, Kathmandu, narrative inquiry, support strategies

## 1 Introduction

The Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology oversees the school education system of Nepal, which is divided into basic and secondary education. Basic education includes Early Childhood Development (ECD) to grade eight, and secondary education covers grades nine to twelve. Teacher recruitment in Nepal varies depending on the type of school. However, the Teacher Service Commission (TSC) recruits permanent teachers in community schools through a competitive examination system. Candidates must have minimum qualifications, a teaching license, and pass written examinations and interviews, ensuring the quality and competency of teachers. In private schools, the recruitment process is primarily managed by School Management Committees (SMCs) or School Administrations. Private schools have more autonomy in hiring practices than community schools, typically evaluating candidates through interviews and practical teaching demonstrations.

With all of the above teachers' recruitment procedures in community and private schools in Nepal, professional anxiety is a common occupational stressor that can significantly affect job performance and overall well-being (Motowidlo et al., 1986). For instance, as a secondary

school mathematics teacher, researcher, educator, and author of school-level mathematics textbooks in Nepal, I (the first author) have personally observed widespread professional anxiety among fellow educators. Professional anxiety, in this case, means a higher level of stress and worry often felt by people in different jobs, caused by fear of losing their jobs, pressure to perform well, and issues within the workplace (Smith, 2017; Johnson, 2018). No doubt, this anxiety can lead to different emotional and mental reactions that can affect how happy they are in their job, their overall well-being, and their career path (Williams, 2019). In this sense, Taylor (2020) remarked that everyone may experience this anxiety differently, which can have short-term and long-term effects on their work lives. We have met many secondary school mathematics teachers struggling with constant pressure to improve their teaching and live up to the standards set by the Nepali education system. Similar to the claim of Roberts (2021), it encompasses a range of emotional and psychological responses that can impact job satisfaction, well-being, and overall career trajectory.

Likewise, professional anxiety can manifest differently for each individual and may have both short-term and long-term effects on their professional lives. Drawing from our lived experiences as researchers and as a secondary school mathematics teacher in Nepal, we have encountered numerous mathematics teachers who grapple with the ongoing pressure to excel in their teaching methods and meet the expectations established by the education system. For instance, challenges such as low salaries, pressure from administrators and parents to pass low-performing students, and the demand to complete the prescribed curriculum on time are common. In this context, I (the first author) have experienced moments of self-doubt and anxiety, often questioning whether I am doing enough to inspire and empower my students. These and other responsibilities, challenges, and overly ambitious teaching engagements contribute to professional anxiety among mathematics teachers. In Nepal, this anxiety is particularly noticeable among teachers working in private (institutional) schools. This issue of professional anxiety among secondary school mathematics teachers in private schools ignited our research interest. In general, the professional anxiety of math teachers can be understood as the stress and emotional discomfort math teachers experience in professional settings of private schools in Nepal.

We came across various studies indicating the presence of anxiety among mathematics teachers in Nepal and in many other countries. For instance, when investigating math educators in the United States, Greshma (2007) conducted a study on mathematics anxiety among pre-service teachers and unveiled several factors contributing to their anxiety, such as a lack of confidence in their mathematical skills, a fear of not grasping mathematical concepts, and negative attitudes towards mathematics. In the context of Latin America, a study by Hanushek and Woessmann (2012) supported the assertion that many school-level mathematics teachers experience anxiety stemming from concerns about their ability to create an effective classroom environment. Furthermore, Näslund-Hadley et al. (2014) conducted a video study of teaching practices and discovered evidence of professional anxiety among teachers to some extent. Strengthening this argument, an exploratory study by Hong (2021) suggested that approximately 5 % (5%) of pre-service teachers in the Caribbean experience moderate to severe mathematics anxiety. These findings underline the global prevalence of professional anxiety among mathematics teachers and feature the need to address this issue to support educators and enhance the teaching and learning of

mathematics. All of these studies emphasize that professional anxiety among math teachers is a widespread issue globally, emphasizing the importance of addressing this matter to support teachers and improve math education (Smith, 2017; Johnson, 2018).

In the global context, mathematics teachers in Nepal are also grappling with anxiety. Gnawali (2023) highlighted the leading causes of anxiety among mathematics teachers in Nepal, pointing to the lack of educational materials, insufficient teaching resources, limited supporting literature, and the scarcity of research grants for enhancing mathematics classroom environments. This claim was further substantiated by Panthi and Belbase's (2017), which highlighted anxiety as a prevalent issue among mathematics teachers in Nepal. A confined examination of these studies (Dhakal, 2018; Panthi and Belbase, 2017) revealed an interesting trend: mathematics teachers in Nepal tend to experience heightened anxiety as their years of service accumulate. This contrasts with the global scenery, where extensive research has focused on pre-service teachers and their mathematics-related professional anxiety (Brown et al., 2012; Sloan, 2010). For instance, Brown et al. (2012) explore anxiety-inducing incidents reported by pre-service teachers during their mathematics practice-teaching experiences. Their analysis of common lesson plans and reflective assignments unveiled that pre-service teachers often grappled with anxiety, particularly when confronted with the unfamiliar predefined classroom structure.

Next, Dogan-Dunlap et al. (2007) found that 38% of pre-service teachers reported low confidence, leading to various forms of anxiety. In Nepal, however, in-service teachers exhibit higher levels of anxiety compared to their pre-service counterparts, as noted by Panthi and Belbase (2017). This anxiety is attributed to the scarcity of physical resources, which results in a loss of extrinsic motivation. Furthermore, Panthi and Belbase (2017) discussed major issues associated with mathematics teaching and learning in Nepal, emphasizing the inadequate teaching aids and materials available to mathematics teachers. Similarly, Bhattarai (2019) and Dhakal (2018) both identified stress and anxiety among mathematics teachers in Nepal, primarily stemming from the challenges of integrating ICT in a multicultural classroom. Joshi and Rawal (2021) confirm this claim. Luitel (2020) indirectly features the necessity of enhancing teachers' comfort and involvement in mathematics through context-based activities, which could somewhat alleviate stress. Dahal et al. (2019) supports the assertion that most secondary school math teachers in Nepal initially appear to be conformists, which is the root cause of their professional anxiety. Additionally, Acharya et al. (2021) explored mathematics educators' perspectives on the cultural relevance of basic-level mathematics in Nepal, proclaiming that culturally decontextualized curricula have added an extra burden, leading to stress and anxiety among basic-level mathematics teachers in Nepal.

The review of existing literature concerning the issue of professional anxiety among mathematics teachers revealed that there was indeed a level of anxiety among mathematics teachers in Nepali schools (Panthi and Belbase, 2017). However, it is noteworthy that the nature and underlying causes of this anxiety differed. While prospective mathematics teachers in economically developed countries worldwide tend to experience higher levels of anxiety, in-service math educators in Nepal appear to face more pronounced anxiety (Brown et al., 2012; Panthi and Belbase, 2017; Sloan, 2010). Thus, the root cause of this anxiety is often attributed to a lack of resources, and consequently, it tends to escalate as the years go by.

Despite these assertions, we found no research exploring the personal narratives and experiences of professional anxiety among mathematics teachers in Nepal.

Thus, professional anxiety among schoolteachers is a widely recognized but under-discussed topic in educational research in Nepal. With the gap above, this study aimed to bridge the gap in the existing literature by exploring the prevalence of professional anxiety among secondary school mathematics teachers in private schools in the Kathmandu Metropolitan City, Nepal. The following research question guides this study to meet the aim of the study:

- 1 How do secondary school mathematics teachers in private schools narrate their experiences of professional anxiety?

## 2 Theoretical perspective and lens

Examining work-related stress and its impact on employee well-being has gained significant interest recently. This inquiry has uncovered several key themes related to occupational stress, encompassing factors such as workload, mental fatigue, task performance, overly ambitious engagement, professional burnout, the role of organizational support in the job strain model, and the influence of social support on the experience of work-related stress (Hockey and Earle, 2006; Maslach et al., 1996; Searle et al., 2001; Viswesvaran et al., 1999). Considering these areas, the Job Demand-Control-Support Model (JDCS) has emerged as an invaluable theoretical perspective and lens for comprehending work-related stress (Hockey and Earle, 2006; Searle et al., 2001). Maslach et al. (1996) stated that this model posits that job demands, job control, and social support are fundamental factors that influence job strain and employee well-being. In the separate sub-headings below, we describe how the JDCS perspective and self-efficacy learning theory serve as theoretical referents of this inquiry.

### 2.1 Job demand-control-support model (JDCS) and self-efficacy learning theory

The JDCS model contends that elevated job demands, restricted job control, and limited social support create a high-strain job environment, potentially leading to adverse outcomes such as job dissatisfaction, burnout, and health issues (Viswesvaran et al., 1999). Conversely, when job demands align with sufficient job control and social support, employees such as mathematics teachers in school are more likely to experience a sense of mastery, contentment, and overall well-being (Hockey and Earle, 2006; Searle et al., 2001). Given the pertinence of the JDCS model in work-related stress and employee well-being, it was selected as the theoretical framework for this investigation. By scrutinizing the interplay between job demands, job control, social support, and the well-being of secondary school mathematics teachers in private schools in Nepal, this inquiry aimed to illuminate the intricate dynamics of work-related stress and its consequences on teachers' overall outcomes. When applied to the professional anxiety experienced by secondary school mathematics teachers in the private schools in Kathmandu Metropolitan City, it is reasonable to assume that job demands play a significant role in

contributing to anxiety. Mathematics teachers often feel overwhelmed and anxious due to large class sizes, limited resources, and the pressure to improve student performance. However, giving them more control over their work and providing social support can help reduce these stresses, leading to greater job satisfaction and overall well-being.

Next, we consider self-efficacy learning theory as a theoretical lens. According to this theory, self-efficacy pertains to an individual's belief in their ability to successfully execute tasks and surmount challenges within a specific domain (Bandura, 1986). In mathematics education, teachers with high self-efficacy are more inclined to approach their vocation confidently and enthusiastically. In contrast, those with low self-efficacy may encounter heightened anxiety and self-doubt. Betz (2007) postulates that by exploring the contextual construction of the relationship between self-efficacy and professional anxiety among mathematics teachers, valuable insights can be gained into the factors influencing their emotional well-being, ultimately enhancing their effectiveness in the classroom.

## 3 Narrative inquiry as a research method

For this study, we employed narrative inquiry research methodology (Clandinin, 2007), considering that math teachers' lives are shaped by their past and present experiences. Narrative inquiry offers room for reflection, deepens understanding, and facilitates learning for professional growth (Connelly and Clandinin, 2006). Aligned with Connelly and Clandinin (2006), we derived profound insights by exploring the narratives of the participants' experiences for generating the meaning of their professional anxiety. For instance, Carless and Douglas (2017) emphasized that the narrative inquiry method allows researchers to construct meaning through dialog collaboratively, recognizing participants as the experts of their own lives and deriving knowledge from them. Further, subscribing to the interpretive paradigm, we reflect on contextual events narrated by math teachers as research participants. In this regard, Clandinin (2000) added that interpretive researchers have ontological beliefs in the existence of multiple realities. Epistemologically, they emphasize the importance of subjective knowledge for generating contextual knowledge. Axiologically, they acknowledge that the researchers' subjective values and perspectives can, to some extent, influence the meaning derived from the study. In line with these principles, this study sought the participants' multiple viewpoints and strived to understand their subjective experiences. Similarly, Taylor and Medina (2011) argued that the interpretive paradigm helps researchers develop a contextual understanding of participants' real-life experiences and the culture they inhabit. Aligning with Taylor and Medina (2011) assertion, this article interprets participants' narratives on their experiences with professional anxiety in math, their understanding and conceptualization, and their professional application, all within an interpretive framework. Thus, this article interprets the participants' narratives on their experiences of math anxiety, subscribing to an interpretive research paradigm. Hence, participants from diverse mathematical backgrounds and contexts exhibit varied experiences and distinct methods of constructing knowledge. They perceive realities in multiple ways, and their experiences with professional anxiety in math also differ. Each participant's unique experience is

equally valued. This study was conducted among three secondary school math teachers (two males and one female) from different private schools in Kathmandu Valley, Nepal, and purposefully selected based on criteria (Dahal et al., 2024) from different private schools in Kathmandu Valley, Nepal as shown in Table 1. Table 1 in the following table shows the information of the research participants.

All the participants have been teaching mathematics for over 5 years. Participant 1 is a male secondary school mathematics teacher with over 5 years of teaching experience. He began his teaching career by offering home tuition. Participant 2 is also a male secondary school mathematics teacher with 6 years of teaching experience. Participant 3 is a female secondary school mathematics teacher with over 10 years of experience. She started teaching through home tuition and aspires to teach at the university level. Initially, we presented our research and its objectives to eight teachers. Subsequently, five teachers expressed interest, and ultimately, three teachers participated in the study by sharing their experiences of professional anxiety. Table 2 below illustrates the data collection procedures of the inquiry, and Table 3 shows the themes identified and generated.

Initially, we presented our research and its objectives to eight teachers. Following this, five teachers expressed interest, and ultimately, three teachers participated in the study, sharing their experiences of professional anxiety. Participants' consent was obtained, and they were assured of anonymity through the use of pseudonyms, specifically Participant 1, Participant 2, and Participant 3. Likewise, the first in-depth interview lasted an average of 53.29 min, the second averaged 45.25 min, and the third averaged 38 min, using open-ended questions and including multiple follow-up interviews and discussions with the research participants. The interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed. Additionally, notes were jotted to ensure the clarity and precision of the interviews, considering

the narrated experiences of participants as data (Dwyer et al., 2017). The data was coded by identifying and marking keywords and phrases, which were then used to generate and identify themes, as shown in Table 3. The data was subsequently categorized into the following identified and generated themes: (1) early career mathematics teachers are more anxious, (2) teachers feel difficulty in replicating theoretical skills in actual classroom context, (3) private school teachers face more pressure to complete courses on time and (4) lack of available resources. These themes were then discussed with theoretical and literature support.

### 3.1 Ensuring quality and addressing ethical issues

This study received approval from the Research Committee at Kathmandu University School of Education on June 8, 2023, with the approval code MEdMath-011-Edu. Qualitative research uses human experiences, perceptions, practices, cultures, beliefs, and values as data to generate new knowledge and/or insight. Ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research is crucial for maintaining and assuring the quality of the study (Connelly and Clandinin, 2006; Dahal, 2023). Trustworthiness can be achieved through credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability (Killiam, 2013). To maintain the credibility of this study, we engaged in prolonged interactions with the participants both in the field and virtually, discussing the purpose of the study and the reasons for their selection as research participants. Likewise, member checking was conducted by sharing the collected data and findings with the participants. We also created detailed descriptive notes and employed a subscribed perspective and theoretical lens for triangulation. To ensure data stability, we asked

TABLE 1 Participant information.

Participant	Gender	Qualification	Teaching experience	Current role	Additional information
Participant 1	Male	B Ed in Mathematics	Over 5 years	Secondary school mathematics teacher	Started teaching from-home tuition.
Participant 2	Male	M Ed in Mathematics	6 years	Secondary school mathematics teacher	
Participant 3	Female	Master degree	Over 10 years	Secondary school mathematics teacher	Started teaching from home tuition and hope to teach at the university level.

TABLE 2 Data collection procedures.

Step	Process
Initial contact	We initially presented our research and its objectives to eight teachers. Following this, five teachers expressed interest, and ultimately, three teachers participated in the study, sharing their experiences of professional anxiety.
Informed consent and anonymity	Participants' consent was obtained, and they were assured of anonymity through the use of pseudonyms, specifically Participant 1, Participant 2, and Participant 3
Interviews	The first interview lasted an average of 53.29 min, the second averaged 45.25 min, and the third averaged 38 min using open-ended questions, including multiple follow-up interviews and discussions.
Data recording and transcription	The interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed. Additionally, notes were taken to ensure the clarity and precision of the interviews.
Data analysis	The data was coded by identifying and marking keywords and phrases, which were then used to generate and identify themes.

TABLE 3 Identified and generated themes.

Theme	Description
Early-career mathematics teachers are more anxious	Many early-career mathematics teachers in private schools in Kathmandu experience anxiety due to a lack of preparedness for the profession. Teachers often enter the field unexpectedly and face pressure from schools and parents, making it difficult to sustain their initial enthusiasm.
Teachers feel difficulty in replicating theoretical skills in actual classroom context	Teachers struggle to apply educational theories in real classroom settings due to time constraints, resource limitations, and mismatches between curriculum expectations and practical teaching conditions. This creates stress and frustration among early-career educators.
Private school teachers face more pressure to complete courses on time	Teachers in private schools experience significant pressure to complete course materials within tight timeframes, often at the expense of innovative teaching methods. The issue is compounded by students being promoted without mastering fundamental concepts, leading to additional stress for teachers.
Lack of available resources as the reason for teachers' anxiety	A shortage of teaching resources forces educators to rely on traditional lecture methods, making it harder to engage students. Teachers recognize the need for innovative teaching strategies but feel constrained by inadequate school support, adding to their professional anxiety.

similar questions using synonyms. We comprehensively described the research context, field, and participants to enhance transferability and make the findings applicable to other studies in similar contexts. Confirmability was maintained through team discussions and peer debriefing. We also reflected on our journey from the beginning to the final stages of the article to ensure the accuracy of data analysis and findings. In these ways, we have strived to present the data fairly, without manipulation or bias, as “experience happens in a place or places over time, and in a relationship” (Lindsay and Schwind, 2016, p. 15).

Ethical considerations are integral to conducting ethical research, which involves doing better and avoiding harm (Creswell and Poth, 2016). These considerations also relate to the fairness of the research process. To uphold the ethics of this study, we obtained informed consent from the participants, informing them that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time if they felt uncomfortable answering the interview questions. We maintained the confidentiality of the participants' identities and shared the study findings with them to ensure the fairness of the collected data, which they approved for publication. We expressed our gratitude to the participants for sharing their experiences.

## 4 Findings

Early career mathematics teachers often find themselves overwhelmed with anxiety and challenges as they start their teaching profession. All three participants in this study also started their teaching profession unprepared with different hopes and dreams. They entered classrooms without formal training or guidance, even though they had teaching licenses. As a result, they navigated the initial days of their teaching careers in discomfort. The participants' narratives reveal the daunting transition from being a student excelling in mathematics to assuming the role of a mathematics teacher and the unforeseen challenges. Moreover, this research uncovers a range of pressures faced by secondary mathematics teachers, including the urgency to complete extensive course materials within strict timelines and the struggles of managing student homework assignments. In making the findings more explicit, in this section, we have discussed the findings—identified and generated themes: (1) Early career mathematics teachers are more anxious, (2)

Teachers feel difficulty in replicating theoretical skills in actual classroom context, (3) Private school teachers feel more pressure to complete prescribed course on time, and (4) Lack of available resources as the reason for teachers' anxiety. These themes are elaborated in brief under different sub-headings below.

### 4.1 Early career mathematics teachers are more anxious

All three participants shared their experiences as early-career mathematics teachers and felt more anxious in Kathmandu's private schools. It emerges that many mathematics teachers do not adequately prepare themselves for the teaching role. As a result of this lack of preparedness, they often find themselves uncomfortable during the initial days of their teaching careers. Concerning this, the second participant shared the following:

In school, I excelled in mathematics, scoring 99 out of 100. After secondary level, my neighbors approached me to help their children with their studies. I accepted their request, and gradually, I began to find joy in my role as a mathematics teacher. This is how I entered this profession. As you can see, it has been 4 years since I started teaching mathematics as a home tutor (Participant 2, Interview Recordings, August 5, 2023).

The statement from Participant 2 emphasizes his journey into becoming a mathematics teacher. Despite not initially intending to pursue teaching as a career, the participant's positive experiences and satisfaction from helping students learn math gradually led him to continue in this role. This statement reflects how, sometimes, math teachers in private schools in Nepal stumble into teaching unexpectedly but discover a passion for it through their interactions with students and the positive impact they can make on their education. It also suggests that the initial experiences enable teachers to recognize it as a rewarding and fulfilling career, even if it wasn't initially part of their plans or aspirations. But is this initial feeling of happiness sustained? Continuing the sharing, participant 2 narrated, “No, not at all. In my case, soon I began to feel the circle of pressure-pressure from school, from parents...But, you see, I could not leave the job as well.”

Likewise, the experience of the first teacher-participant mirrored a similar trajectory. It is generally observed in Nepal that after completing their school education, many students from rural locations migrate to Kathmandu for further studies and start searching for job opportunities that suit them. Teaching subjects in private schools emerges as one of the most viable options. Consequently, they enter the teaching profession without any formal professional preparation. This lack of preparedness turns out to be the major cause of professional anxiety. Bringing this into reflection, the first teacher-participant shared his journey:

No, I did not plan on becoming a teacher, to be honest. I was looking for a government job. While I was still a BA student, I began teaching at a private school. You see, staying and studying in Kathmandu was quite expensive, so I needed a job to support myself. Once I stepped into teaching, it became my path, and I could not turn back. Initially, it was quite challenging, especially because English was a significant hurdle for me. Back then, teaching in English and ensuring students understood the lessons was quite daunting (Participant 1, Interview Recordings, August 1, 2023).

The above narrative illustrates a personal and unplanned career trajectory that developed out of necessity and ultimately led to a commitment to teaching, even in the face of initial difficulties. In Nepal, though there is a policy provision concerning qualification benchmarks, many private schools do not seem to follow this provision. Some seemingly brighter students choose to teach Math in private schools not as long-term career choices but as interns before moving to other options. As years pass, many of them cannot leave the job. “You see,” said the first participant, “I knew it was not my dream job; slowly, my passion for teaching faded, but I could not leave the job...there were no other options, I could make me jobless.”

Similar was the experience of the third teacher-participant. Like many early career teachers, he faced certain challenges and anxieties at the beginning of her teaching career. When the teacher started working at the school, she and the students were new to each other. This unfamiliarity created a sense of nervousness, as they were essentially strangers to each other. This initial unfamiliarity is a common source of anxiety for early career teachers. In her experience, the students tried to take advantage of the situation, which likely means they tested the boundaries and rules, a common behavior when students encounter a new teacher. This would have added to the teacher's anxiety. Despite the initial challenges, the teacher made an effort to be friendly and gradually started incorporating various teaching activities to engage the students. This is a typical approach for new teachers who are trying to build rapport and create a positive classroom environment. The teacher mentions that they did not actively seek professional growth opportunities, and the school did not encourage them. This lack of support for professional development can contribute to the anxiety of early career teachers, who may feel they are not growing or advancing in their careers. Despite this, she continued adapting to students', administrators', and parents' demands, eventually becoming her way of life. This suggests a persistent effort to meet the expectations and requirements of various stakeholders, which can be a significant source of stress and anxiety for early career educators. Thus, her narratives focus early career teachers' common experiences and anxieties as they navigate the challenges of building

relationships with students, managing behavior, and striving to meet expectations without necessarily receiving strong support for professional growth. This underlines the need for support and professional development opportunities for new teachers to help them thrive in their roles.

## 4.2 Teachers feel difficulty in replicating theoretical skills in actual classroom context

Participant 1 reflected on his transition from learning various theories in the university to the practical challenges of teaching in a school setting. He initially believed in ensuring all students comprehended a topic before moving on, but this approach proved time-consuming and hindered progress on the curriculum. His dedication to project work was met with surprising indifference from parents who prioritized written exam scores. These experiences left him feeling unsettled. Making a brief reflection, he shared:

You see, we learn many learning theories in university classes. While there, we think we know many things about teaching at school. But, when I joined the school and began teaching, I found that teaching job was not easy. There were many contextual challenges. I thought I had to move to the next lesson only when all the students were familiar with the topic. It was time-consuming. And what happened, you see- I did not manage to complete the units allocated for the first-terminal exam. And the same thing happened the next time. I invested more time in assigning students the project works. While on progress report distribution day, to my surprise, many parents were less concerned with students' project work and more with their marks in written exams. All such experiences bothered me (Participant 1, Interview Recordings, August 1, 2023).

Meanwhile, Participant 2 lamented the stark contrast between abstract theories like scaffolding and real-world resource limitations, feeling unjustly blamed for these shortcomings. At some points, he shared, ‘*Classroom is more than abstract theories. They suggest ‘scaffolding’, and something like connecting with real-life scenarios. Our school principal suggests for the same. But, do we have resources for all these? And blame is made for us.*’ The amplified stress and anxiety from the theory-practice gap were more visible in the sharing of Participant 3. As she shared, she embraced progressive curriculum ideas, particularly performance assessment in math class. However, her enthusiasm collided with the school's inability to provide necessary resources, reflecting the frustrating paradox of being urged to innovate without the support to do so effectively. Recalling an incident from her early teaching career, she recounted a time when she attended a curriculum-related workshop, an experience that initially filled her with enlightenment and inspiration. This workshop helped her to explore progressive curriculum approaches and innovative teaching methodologies. Amid the sessions, one concept captured her attention with fervor – performance assessment. She recognized the potential of performance assessments as a valuable tool for evaluating student progress in her math classes. Intrigued and motivated by her newfound knowledge, she resolved to take proactive steps. She crafted an action plan and developed

lessons that integrated performance assessments to determine students' growth. However, implementing these assessments necessitated specific resources, such as portfolio files and storage spaces for papers and related records. Regrettably, the school was ill-equipped to furnish these essential materials, leading to frustration.

Her disappointment with the school's inability to support her innovative endeavors highlights the paradox of demanding innovation from teachers while withholding crucial resources. This deficiency in support emerged as a formidable obstacle to effective teaching, casting a shadow over her enthusiasm. Furthermore, her request for extended class periods to accommodate activity-based learning met with resistance, indicating a reluctance to disrupt the established school routine. Her narrative paints a vivid picture of educators grappling with frustration and disillusionment as they confront barriers to implementing progressive teaching methods that could enhance the learning experience for students. This narrative underlines the critical importance of advocating for innovative teaching and ensuring that educators receive the essential resources.

### 4.3 Private school teachers face more pressure to complete courses on time

In this inquiry, the teachers who participated expressed that the pressure to cover course materials within a specified timeframe would contribute to anxiety among mathematics educators in private schools. Many of the textbooks used in these schools contain a substantial amount of content, and both school administrators and parents would expect teachers to ensure timely completion of these materials. This heightened expectation would place additional stress on teachers and would hinder their ability to explore innovative teaching and learning methods. Regarding this issue, the third teacher-participant shared the following perspective:

No, not at all. I find my colleagues to be very supportive. Seniors are always willing to assist new teachers and provide valuable feedback. Our primary source of pressure is the urgency to complete the curriculum within the stipulated timeframe. This pressure can sometimes escalate into a significant source of stress, especially when parents express dissatisfaction if we do not meet the expected timelines (Participant 3, Interview Recordings, August 10, 2023).

In Nepali schools, students are often promoted without considering their ability to meet learning objectives. Consequently, many students lag behind their peers, struggling to grasp fundamental concepts as they advance to higher grade levels. This poses a significant challenge for secondary school mathematics teachers. On the one hand, they must cover the extensive course material within the curriculum; on the other hand, they are compelled to revisit and reinforce basic concepts from previous years. Participant 2 articulated this challenge by saying:

Completing the coursebook on schedule is just one aspect of our struggle. Furthermore, students are advanced to higher grades without adequate learning preparation. It becomes exceptionally challenging for us as educators when they reach secondary level.

This situation is particularly precarious in private schools like ours, where we constantly grapple with high levels of stress (Participant 2, Interview Recordings, August 5, 2023).

Despite receiving support from administrators and fellow teachers, educators felt there was a lack of understanding and support regarding students' homework assignments. A belief still exists that assigning more homework leads to better learning outcomes. However, students do not particularly enjoy having an excessive amount of homework. Consequently, the issue of homework assignments has become a source of increased anxiety for math teachers. Participant 2 lamented with a furrowed brow and a weary sigh, "It is baffling. The students seem to have lost their enthusiasm for homework, yet the administrators and parents demand more assignments. It's as if the pressure to pile on more work directly contributes to our escalating stress levels." Taking a moment to reflect, he continued, "But, to be fair, I can not deny that our school's principal and administration have been incredibly supportive throughout this trying period. They have proactively sent us to various training programs, trying to equip us with the tools to navigate this challenging terrain."

### 4.4 Lack of available resources as the reason for teachers' anxiety

Teachers in Nepal have been expressing concerns about the lack of essential resources for effectively teaching mathematics in many schools. Consequently, they find themselves compelled to rely on traditional lecture methods, which tend to disengage students. One of the participating teachers remarked that "students frequently perceive mathematics as challenging. They often try to avoid it, leading to a lack of enthusiasm for math teachers. Unfortunately, we are also constrained by a lack of resources to actively engage them..." In today's digital age, students are highly familiar with electronic media and enjoy learning through technology integration. The demand for incorporating technology into teaching and learning has significantly increased, especially in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, numerous private schools still lack the necessary resources to employ technology effectively in teaching mathematics. Another teacher participating in the discussion added:

In many instances, I utilize activities and videos to make the learning experience more engaging for students. When students enjoy the class, they become more motivated, which brings me satisfaction as an educator. Nevertheless, students commonly view mathematics as difficult, making it challenging to spark their interest. Their focus has waned, possibly exacerbated by the distractions of extended COVID-19-related holidays. Excessive electronic devices and media use may have eroded their foundational knowledge. Perhaps we can recapture their attention by employing diverse teaching and learning resources that are known to engage them. Unfortunately, our access to such resources remains quite limited (Participant 2, Interview Recordings, August 5, 2023).

Despite recognizing the importance of adopting progressive teaching and learning approaches, educators often find themselves

persisting with conventional practices due to resource constraints. This disparity between their conceptualization of effective teaching and the methods they employ, influenced by limited resources, results in added stress and anxiety in their professional lives. One teacher-participant candidly expressed:

We are well aware of effective teaching methods, particularly the value of hands-on learning. We have received extensive training in this regard. However, our limited access to necessary resources hinders our ability to implement activity-based teaching. Consequently, resorting to traditional problem-solving on the chalkboard and asking students to follow suit seems more convenient. We acknowledge that this approach falls short of the ideal, yet we continue to employ it (Participant 1, Interview Recordings, August 1, 2023).

These participants' statement highlights the disconnect between the educators' grasp of effective teaching techniques and the practical challenges they confront within their educational institutions. Despite recognizing the advantages of active learning, resource constraints compel them to rely on a less optimal method, causing them to experience heightened stress.

## 5 Discussion

We have initiated a theoretical discussion based on the study findings. First, we reviewed the insights gained from the analysis, followed by a theoretical exploration. As outlined in the literature review section, we examined the study findings through the lenses of the Job Demand-Control-Support Model (JDCS) and Self-efficacy Learning Theory (Maharjan et al., 2025). The professional anxiety experienced by secondary school mathematics teachers bears striking similarities to findings from previous global studies. For example, Brown et al. (2012) investigated the teaching anxieties of pre-service elementary teachers, focusing on their reflections regarding mathematics teaching experiences. Their research highlighted that mathematics educators often struggle with professional anxiety at the beginning of their careers. This observation is consistent with Greshma's (2007) conclusions, which indicated that mathematics anxiety tends to decrease in developed countries like the USA as teachers gain more experience. Greshma's study revealed that as teachers accumulate experience, their anxiety levels typically diminish. This inquiry aligns with these findings by demonstrating that mathematics teachers in private schools in Kathmandu are also facing professional anxiety. However, it differs slightly from studies conducted in developed countries in one significant way: the professional anxiety of mathematics teachers in private schools in Kathmandu has not decreased over the years. In many instances, the lack of available resources appears to be the primary factor contributing to this persistent anxiety. This assertion is supported by earlier studies (Bhattarai, 2019; Dahal, 2022; Dhakal, 2018; Joshi and Rawal, 2021).

Although distinct from the private schools in Kathmandu, Panthi and Belbase (2017) identified inadequately designed mathematics course content as a pervasive issue in teaching and learning mathematics within the context of Nepal. This study reached a similar conclusion. Despite these professional concerns, as also noted by

Dogan-Dunlap et al. (2007), the teachers involved in this study found that they were learning through teaching. For them, it served as an intermediary approach to teaching and learning mathematics for prospective educators, helping them manage their professional anxieties. A similar recommendation was made by Luitel (2020), who emphasized the importance of critical self-reflection moments for mathematics teachers, enabling them to gain awareness and maintain composure in their professional real. Also, Wagle et al. (2023a) eloquently discussed that to ensure the meaningfulness of making teaching the career choice, a proper career plan, and continuous professional growth need to be the priority of teachers.

According to the Job Demand-Control-Support Model (JDCS), the study's findings align with the model's perspective. The JDCS model posits that job demands, control, and support have an impact on employees' well-being and job-related outcomes. In this instance, the professional anxiety experienced by secondary school mathematics teachers can be analyzed through the lens of the JDCS model. The research conducted by Brown et al. (2012) and Greshma (2007) corroborates the JDCS model's assertion that entry-level mathematics teachers often grapple with professional anxiety. This corresponds with the job demand aspect of the JDCS model, which asserts that enhanced job demands can increase stress and anxiety. Furthermore, Greshma (2007) discovery that mathematics anxiety changes with teaching experience is in harmony with the JDCS model. According to the model, as teachers gain more control over their work and develop greater expertise, their anxiety levels tend to decrease. This implies that the control component of the JDCS model can help alleviate professional anxiety.

However, in reference to the JDCS model, the current study presents a slight deviation from the findings observed in developed countries. It indicates that the professional anxiety experienced by mathematics teachers in private schools in Kathmandu does not decrease over time, in contrast to what the JDCS model would predict. The primary reason for this divergence is the inadequacy of available resources, which can be interpreted as a deficiency of support within the JDCS framework. Inadequate resources may impede teachers' ability to effectively manage their job demands, resulting in persistent anxiety. This assertion is further bolstered by prior research conducted by Dhakal (2018), Joshi and Rawal (2021), Bhattarai (2019), and Dahal (2022), all of which support the claim that the scarcity of available resources remains a primary factor contributing to the sustained professional anxiety among mathematics teachers in private schools in Kathmandu. This finding aligns with the JDCS model's emphasis on the significance of job support in alleviating job-related stress and anxiety. Here, the claim by Wagle et al. (2023b) seems relevant that to strengthen teachers' professional well-being, the shifts in human resource development must go together with the shifts in pedagogical design and schooling structure. In this line, as Bhattarai and Wagle (2023) suggest, ensuring belongingness through a strong student-teacher relationship would minimize the level of professional anxiety arising from a lack of physical resources.

## 6 Conclusion and implications

The study reveals that secondary-level mathematics teachers in private schools in Kathmandu, Nepal, experience persistent professional anxiety in math teaching and learning. Contrary to



global trends where anxiety diminishes with experience, Nepali teachers face sustained stress due to systemic challenges: inadequate career planning, a disconnect between pedagogical theories and classroom realities, rigid curriculum demands, and insufficient resources (e.g., technology and teaching aids). These pressures are exacerbated by administrative and parental expectations to complete extensive syllabi on time, often at the expense of innovative teaching methods. The narratives highlight how resource constraints and institutional inflexibility force teachers to rely on outdated practices, perpetuating disengagement and frustration. The Job Demand-Control-Support (JDCS) model and self-efficacy theory contextualize these findings, underscoring that high job demands without adequate control or support mechanisms lead to chronic anxiety. Low self-efficacy stemming from unpreparedness amplifies stress.

The implications of the study highlight several key areas for improvement. To provide practical support for teachers, schools should prioritize resource allocation, including technology, teaching aids, and storage for activity-based materials, to enable innovative pedagogies. Mentorship programs and collaborative peer networks could assist novice teachers in navigating early-career challenges, thereby bridging the gap between theory and practice. Regarding curriculum and policy reforms, policymakers must revisit curriculum design to balance content breadth with depth, allowing flexibility for reinforcing foundational concepts. Teacher training programs should integrate practical, context-specific strategies to prepare educators for real-world classroom dynamics. Institutional accountability is also crucial. Private schools need structured professional development opportunities and reduced administrative pressures, such as unrealistic syllabus deadlines. Schools should foster dialog with parents to align expectations, emphasizing holistic learning over exam-centric outcomes. The study reinforces the relevance of the JDCS model but highlights contextual nuances. Persistent anxiety in resource-scarce settings necessitates rethinking “support” to include material and institutional backing. Self-efficacy theory underscores the need for confidence-building interventions, such as workshops on adaptive teaching strategies.

## Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

## Ethics statement

Written informed consent was obtained from the minor(s)' legal guardian/next of kin for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

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## Author contributions

DRS: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Software, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. ND: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. BPP: Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. LL: Methodology, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. NKM: Methodology, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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The authors declare that no Gen AI was used in the creation of this manuscript.

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## Annex: interview guidelines

1. Could you please provide an introduction along with your personal and educational background?
2. What motivated you to start your career as a mathematics teacher?
3. How did you become a secondary school mathematics teacher? How long have you been teaching?
4. How do you feel about being a mathematics teacher? Have you been enjoying your profession as a secondary school mathematics teacher?
  - a. Was teaching your dream profession? How did you prepare to become a mathematics teacher?
5. Have you experienced any events where you felt the teaching profession was a blessing for you? Could you please narrate one?
6. Have you experienced any events where you felt the teaching profession was a cause of stress, difficult circumstances, challenges, or an extra burden for you? Could you please narrate one?
7. In your experience, what are the challenges of teaching mathematics in institutional schools?
8. In your experience, what are the challenges of teaching mathematics compared to other subjects?
9. In your experience, what factors contribute to increasing professional pressure and stress for mathematics teachers?
  - a. How do curriculum, textbooks, and reference resources impact this?
10. In your experience, how do school administration and the parental community create an environment of extra pressure and stress?
  - a. How do administrative support, student attitudes, and parental pressure play a role?
11. How do you experience teaching mathematics as a male teacher (for male participants) or a female teacher (for female participants)?
12. What strategies have you been using to minimize the stress of teaching mathematics?
13. Have you ever experienced difficulty in solving any math problems? If so, could you share an example?