



## Occupational psychosocial health policies in Hong Kong schools: A review and exploration of key stakeholder perceptions

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### ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** It is widely acknowledged that teachers are suffering from work-related health problems. However, the implementation of relevant occupational safety and health (OSH) policies is complex and under-studied. This study reviews key legislation of relevance to psychosocial health and explores stakeholders' perceptions on their implementation in Hong Kong (HK) schools.

**Methods:** The content of OSH legislation applicable to psychosocial health was systematically reviewed by the modified WHO checklist on legislation. Semi-structured interviews were then conducted with 38 key stakeholders. These were transcribed and subjected to Framework Analysis.

**Results:** The review showed that there were several ambiguities in the legislation and the interviews found that awareness and understanding in relation to OSH issues and policies differed on the basis of the level of implementation bodies. The importance of management, trust, communication and interpersonal relationships was emphasised.

**Conclusion:** On the basis of the study it is concluded that implementation of psychosocial health policies in HK schools is poor and there appears to be a gap among stakeholder communication. Also, the content of these policies needs to be clarified so that it can be more conducive to implementation in practice. The improvement of OSH climate and social capital could foster a more effective implementation of OSH policies.

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### 1. Introduction

It is a fundamental right of workers to work in an environment that is physically, psychologically and socially healthy. Recent occupational safety and health (OSH) research has focused on workers' psychosocial well-being. There is, for example, a wealth of scientific data on the prevalence and impact of work-related stress that has contributed to the development of both national and inter-

national legislation underlining the importance of risk assessment and risk management [1]. However, different policy initiatives have not had the anticipated impact on practice [2,3]. A need for studies evaluating relevant legislative or public policy initiatives has been identified [4], and concerns are now focused on the implementation and enforcement of OSH policy and services [3].

In Hong Kong (HK), psychosocial well-being and especially work-related stress have been identified as key issues of concern in OSH [5–7]. However, as in other countries, problems have been identified with OSH policies and their relevance to these key issues of concern. Even though legislation and policies are available, workers' health and safety is not well protected as there is inadequate enforcement and an inability to translate knowledge into practice [8].

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Some occupations are at greater risk of psychosocial problems than others. For example, teachers have a greater risk of work-related mental illness [9]. Teachers' psychosocial work environment in HK has received attention recently due to several teachers committing suicide and many experiencing health problems. From January 2008 to March 2009, eight teachers committed suicide, six directly due to work-related stress [5]. Over 60% of HK teachers have reported that they are stressed or very stressed [10]. Up to 23% of teachers suffered from psychological problems, and were recommended to seek immediate medical treatment [6].

These studies on teachers have mainly focused on general models of stress and provide a rich understanding of the psychosocial work environment and health [11]. However, existing studies have put much emphasis on teachers' health problems and their impact, focusing on the teacher as an individual. Few studies have explored the teachers' experience in the organisational context, and especially key stakeholders' understanding and perceptions and the translation of existing policies into practice. This study seeks to address this gap.

Previous literature has recognised the importance of policy interventions, and the development of OSH legislation and policies is one of the most significant achievements in HK. In HK, legislation governing protection for the OSH of employees includes: the Employment Ordinance, the Employees' Compensation Ordinance, the Factories and Industrial Undertakings Ordinance (FIUO), the Boilers and Pressure Vessels Ordinance (BPVO) and the Occupational Safety and Health Ordinance (OSHO). OSH matters associated with teaching activities and support services in HK schools are mainly under the control of the OSHO, the key legislation governing teachers' OSH and their psychosocial work environment. It states employers' general obligations to protect employees' safety and health at work. The HK Occupational Safety Service enforces this legislation through the inspection of facilities and investigating accidents and violations; they also give free advice on OSH planning and management and educate the public on OSH [13].

In order to better understand the issues underlying the implementation of policy, this study reviews the major content of the OSHO and explores the development and implementation of OSH policy in HK schools from the perspective of key stakeholders.

## 2. Methods and participants

### 2.1. Legislation review

As mentioned, HK teachers' work activities are mainly under the control of OSHO, other existing legislation is less relevant to the current context. Hence, in order to address the psychosocial health issues among HK teachers, the content of OSHO was reviewed using the modified WHO Checklist on Mental Health Legislation [14]. This checklist was originally designed for reviewing mental health legislation; however, mental health legislation and OSH legislation share common properties of social policy as they are both concerned with social and welfare issues [15].

Hence the checklist was modified in order to fit the context of the current review. Inappropriate wording in the checklist was modified and irrelevant sections were omitted. The modified version is shorter than the original checklist, with only six sections: (1) preamble; (2) objectives; (3) definitions; (4) access to OSH services; (5) rights of the employers and employees; and (6) responsibilities of different bodies. Table 1 presents the modified checklist with examples of the reviewed legislation. For each component, three questions are addressed: (a) Has the issue been adequately covered in the legislation?, (b) Has it been covered, but not fully and comprehensively?, (c) Has it not been covered at all? If the response is either (b) or (c), the feasibility and local relevance of including the issue must be decided, leading to drafting of local appropriate legislation.

### 2.1.1. Interviews

In order to study the implementation of legislation from a top down approach, a total of thirty eight stakeholders representing the organisations that develop, implement and determine the outcome of OSH policy in HK schools were selected according to the level of implementation process for interviews (see Table 2 for details). The development and implementation of OSH policies require input from different organisations and stakeholders. However, there are several key stakeholders that are critical in developing the OSH policies. At the government level, the researchers of this study identified two key responsible bodies for developing and implementing HK OSH policies: the Legislative Council, the Committees of the Labour Advisory Board – Committees on OSH for policy making, and Labour Department for implementing OSH policies at the government level. In addition, local implementers and teachers' representatives were selected from sampled secondary schools by using convenience sampling, which included the majority types of secondary schools in HK (Government, subsidised and private), and different locations of the schools (covered all five districts of HK).

Invitation letters and the research proposal were sent to all Legislative Council members, their political parties (six of them in total) and Committees on OSH. In addition, teachers' representatives were invited directly by the researcher in order to avoid pressure from their colleagues and superiors. Thirty invitations in total were sent directly to the school principals (local implementers) and teachers' representatives. A separate invitation was sent to the biggest teachers' trade union in HK. All 6 major political parties and the committees on OSH replied. Each political party appointed a legislative council member as their representative and the Committee on OSH sent two representatives for taking part in the interviews. In addition, twenty six school level participants agreed to take part in the study and four rejected the invitations due to their busy schedule. The biggest HK teachers' trade union appointed two representatives for the interviews. For the purpose of analysis the participants were divided into three groups: policy makers ( $n=8$ ), implementers ( $n=14$ ) (government implementers and school implementers) and teachers' representatives ( $n=16$ ) who were responsible for the development and implementation of OSH policies in schools.

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