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Human Resource Management and Teacher Work Capacity in Kazakhstani Schools

Abstract

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Abstract

This study examines how school-level human resource management (HRM) practices shape teachers' work capacity in Kazakhstan. Based on 10 semi-structured interviews with teachers, deputy heads and school directors, it explores how workload, material resources, staffing, professional development, performance evaluation, leadership support and teacher voice affect teachers' daily work. The findings suggest that teachers' ability to work effectively depends not only on their qualifications and professional commitment but also on organisational conditions at the school level. Large classes, limited classroom space and unequal access to technical resources increase job demands and constrain opportunities to provide individualised feedback. By contrast, mentoring, developmental appraisal, collegial exchange, professional development and supportive leadership serve as important job resources. Drawing on the Job Demands–Resources framework, the study illustrates how these demands and resources are experienced by teachers and school leaders. It offers practical recommendations for school management in Kazakhstan.

Keywords: human resource management, teachers, workload, leadership, professional development, schools, Kazakhstan, qualitative research

Introduction

Teachers are central to school quality, yet their effectiveness depends on more than their knowledge and professional skills. The organisational conditions in which they work also matter. Previous research has linked teacher quality and working conditions to student learning, school performance and other educational outcomes (Leithwood et al., 2020; OECD, 2019).

In recent years, Kazakhstan has increased investment in school modernisation, including infrastructure, educational technology, curriculum innovation, professional development and new school models such as Comfort Schools (Government of Kazakhstan, 2025). Nevertheless, school modernisation does not automatically ensure that teachers have sufficient time, resources, leadership support and feedback to teach effectively. From an HRM perspective, schools are not only educational institutions but also workplaces in which workload, leadership, resource availability, appraisal, training, feedback and recognition shape employees' experiences. Employee effectiveness therefore depends not only on individual abilities and motivation but also on organisational support and working conditions (Boxall & Purcell, 2016).

This is particularly important in schools, where teaching is knowledge-intensive, relational and emotionally demanding (Runhaar, 2017). Nevertheless, school-level HRM is often treated as an administrative function rather than a strategic management responsibility. Workload allocation, retention, mentoring, professional development and leadership support are commonly handled as separate administrative matters rather than as connected HRM priorities. School leaders who expect teachers to improve learning, use technology and meet diverse student needs must support them both as professionals and as employees.

This study addresses this issue by examining teachers' working conditions in Kazakhstani schools from an HRM perspective. Specifically, it explores how school-level organisational conditions may help or hinder teachers' capacity to perform their work. It considers teachers' and school leaders' accounts of resource

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availability, class size, staffing, appraisal, professional development, communication and opportunities for teacher voice. The aim of this exploratory qualitative study is to understand how these HRM practices and organisational conditions are perceived and experienced by teachers and school leaders.

The study draws on 10 semi-structured interviews with teachers, deputy heads and school directors from public and private schools in Kazakhstan. It addresses the following research question: How do school-level HRM practices and organisational factors influence teachers' work capacity in Kazakhstani schools? As an exploratory qualitative study, it seeks to understand participants' experiences rather than test hypotheses or estimate statistical relationships.

The paper offers three contributions to research on HRM in education. First, it applies an HRM perspective to teachers' work in Kazakhstan, highlighting the role of organisational conditions alongside individual skills and competencies. Second, drawing on the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), it identifies demands and resources described by teachers and school leaders and shows how the same practice can be experienced differently across settings. Third, it illustrates how leadership support and developmental HRM practices may help teachers manage large classes, staff shortages and limited infrastructure. Overall, the study conceptualises schools as workplaces in which HRM practices shape teachers' experiences of work.

Literature Review

HRM in educational organisations

HRM encompasses how organisations recruit, develop, motivate, appraise and retain employees. Boxall and Purcell (2016) argue that HRM should be understood in relation to broader employment relationships and managerial choices, rather than as a collection of isolated policies. This perspective is particularly relevant to schools, where teachers' work is shaped by policies, professional norms, community expectations and local working conditions. Although public schools are not commercial organisations, they also rely on effective HRM.

Runhaar (2017) suggests that school-level HRM is more effective when aligned with educational objectives and perceived by teachers as supportive rather than merely administrative. Both formal practices, such as appraisal and workload allocation, and informal practices, including trust, communication, recognition and teacher voice, may matter. Teaching is relational and emotionally demanding (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2018), making the interaction between these practices and everyday working conditions particularly important. School-level HRM can therefore be understood as a combination of formal and informal arrangements that shape teachers' work.

Job demands and job resources in teachers' work

The Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model provides a framework for examining teachers' experiences at work. It distinguishes job demands—including workload, emotional pressure, time constraints and challenging working conditions—from job resources, such as autonomy, feedback, leadership support and training (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

Teaching involves preparing and delivering lessons, assessing and supporting pupils, communicating with parents and completing administrative tasks. These responsibilities can become more demanding when classes are large, resources are limited or pupils require additional support. At the same time, laboratories, digital tools, mentoring, collaboration, equitable workload allocation and constructive appraisal can help teachers fulfil their roles (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2018). Access to such resources may vary across Kazakhstani schools. The JD-R framework is therefore useful for considering how school-level HRM practices and organisational conditions either increase teachers' demands or provide resources that support their work.

The same organisational practice may be experienced differently depending on its implementation. For example, appraisal may generate pressure when experienced primarily as a means of control, but may serve as a resource when it offers constructive feedback and development opportunities.

Professional development, mentoring and teacher retention

Professional development is another important HRM function, enabling teachers to update their knowledge and skills as educational requirements and pupils' needs change. It may include courses, seminars, coaching, mentoring, peer observation and collaborative lesson planning.

Research suggests that induction and mentoring can improve teacher commitment, retention, teaching practices and student outcomes (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Kehoe & Wright, 2013). In Kazakhstan, school-based professional development is also associated with teacher categories, certification and appraisal.

Although these systems may support career progression, they can also generate assessment-related pressure and administrative demands. Teacher development should therefore extend beyond certification to mentoring, constructive feedback and peer learning, particularly where staffing is limited or many teachers are at an early career stage.

From a JD-R perspective, these practices may function as job resources by strengthening teachers' knowledge, confidence and ability to adapt. They may be particularly valuable when schools face recruitment and retention difficulties and need to support existing staff.

Performance management and appraisal in schools

In schools, performance management commonly involves lesson observations, examination results, teacher portfolios, professional categories and participation in competitions. Ideally, these practices clarify expectations, provide constructive feedback and support improvement (Delvaux et al., 2013). However, appraisal experienced mainly as control may undermine confidence and discourage teachers from speaking openly. Developmental approaches to appraisal are therefore important (Huber & Skedsmo, 2016). Feedback should identify strengths and areas for improvement without creating unnecessary anxiety. Recognition should also encompass less visible aspects of teaching, including everyday classroom practice, emotional labour, support for vulnerable pupils and inclusive education, rather than focusing exclusively on awards and formal achievements.

Performance management can therefore involve both demands and resources. Extensive documentation and bureaucracy may increase pressure, whereas developmental feedback, recognition and mentoring may support improvement. Understanding teachers' perceptions of these practices is consequently important.

Leadership support, teacher voice and wellbeing

Support from school leadership is an important job resource. Supportive leaders can help reduce stress, promote collaboration and strengthen teachers' sense of effectiveness (Kraft et al., 2021). Leadership responsibilities may be shared among school directors, deputy heads and subject leaders (Spillane, 2006). Through their influence on motivation, capacity and working conditions, leaders may also contribute indirectly to student outcomes (Leithwood et al., 2020). Teacher voice is another important resource. When teachers feel able to communicate ideas and concerns and believe that their views are valued, they may be more willing to innovate and remain engaged. Leadership support and opportunities for voice should therefore be considered part of the organisational conditions in which teachers work.

Analytical framework

The literature suggests that teachers' work capacity can be examined through the interaction between school-level job demands and job resources. The JD-R model provides the principal framework for interpreting participants' accounts, while the analysis remains open to themes arising from their experiences of HRM practices and organisational conditions in Kazakhstani schools.

Methodology

Research design

This study adopted an exploratory qualitative design based on semi-structured interviews with teachers and school administrators. Qualitative research is well suited to examining experiences, contextual meanings and organisational processes (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Rather than testing hypotheses or seeking statistical generalisability across Kazakhstan, the study explores how participants understand HRM-related aspects of teachers' working conditions. Interviews allow participants' experiences to be considered in depth and compared across different school contexts.

Sample

The sample comprised 10 interview participants: teachers, deputy heads and school directors from public and private schools, including older and newer institutions in different cities. Participants included subject teachers, primary teachers and leaders with responsibility for academic management and development. This range of roles and settings enabled the analysis to consider different perspectives on working conditions and school-level HRM. Table 1 summarises the anonymised participants. The interviews provided context-specific insights into recurring HRM-related patterns; the study does not claim that the sample represents all schools in Kazakhstan (Guest et al., 2006).

Table 1. Participant profile

Code	Role	School context	Main subject / responsibility

T1	Teacher	Public urban school	Kazakh language and literature
T2	Teacher	Public urban school	Physics
T3	Teacher	Public / urban-peripheral school	English
T4	Teacher	Urban school	Primary education / English
T5	Teacher	Private / advanced school	Mathematics
L1	Senior leader	Advanced private school	Development / physics
L2	Deputy head	Urban school	Academic leadership
D1	Director	Public urban school	School leadership
D2	Director	Public urban-peripheral school	School leadership
D3	Director	Public school with inclusive education	School leadership

Data collection

The semi-structured interviews covered participants' backgrounds, school type, material and technical resources, class size, workload, staffing, appraisal, professional development, leadership feedback, teacher voice and school climate. For analysis, these topics were grouped into five categories: (1) participant and school background; (2) workload, class size and resources; (3) staffing and teacher development; (4) evaluation and professional development; and (5) leadership support, teacher voice and school atmosphere. Participants could also raise issues relevant to their roles. Teachers generally discussed their everyday experiences, whereas school leaders focused more on staffing, retention, resource allocation and development. This allowed employee and management perspectives to be compared. Interview excerpts were translated and lightly edited for clarity while preserving their intended meaning.

Data analysis

The interviews were analysed thematically, following an approach designed to identify, analyse and report recurring patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The JD-R framework informed the interpretation while allowing themes to emerge from the data. First, transcripts were read repeatedly to develop familiarity with participants' accounts. Second, initial codes were assigned to issues such as large classes, limited classroom space, technical resources, appraisal, mentoring, leadership support, teacher voice and staffing shortages. Third, codes were grouped into broader HRM-related themes. Fourth, accounts from teachers and school leaders were compared for similarities and differences. Finally, five themes were selected for presentation in the findings.

During interpretation, conditions associated with greater workload, time pressure, emotional strain or difficulty performing tasks were treated as job demands. Conditions that supported teachers' work, development or ability to cope were treated as job resources. Some areas, notably staffing and performance management, had both demand and resource characteristics depending on participants' experiences. The aim was not to rank factors statistically but to describe recurring patterns and how participants experienced different organisational conditions.

The final themes were:

Workload and class size as HR demands.

Material resources as job resources.

Staffing, retention and internal teacher development.

Performance management and professional development.

Leadership support, teacher voice and wellbeing.

Table 2 illustrates how initial codes were grouped into higher-order themes and interpreted through the JD-R framework. Participants were informed that interviews would remain anonymous and be used for research purposes. Neither individuals nor schools are named; participant codes are used throughout to protect anonymity.

Table 2. Overview of thematic analysis

Illustrative initial codes	Main theme	JD-R interpretation
Large classes, limited feedback time, classroom management, additional preparation	Workload and class size	Job demand
Limited classrooms, technical resources, laboratories, digital equipment	Material resources	Job resource / absence of resources as a demand
Staffing shortages, recruitment difficulties, mentoring, retention	Staffing, retention and internal teacher development	Job demand and job resource
Appraisal, lesson observations, attestation, feedback, training	Performance management and professional development	Demand or resource depending on implementation
Leadership support, recognition, communication, voice, psychological safety	Leadership support, teacher voice and wellbeing	Predominantly job resources

Findings

Workload and class size as HR demands

The first theme concerned workload and class size. Several teachers reported that larger classes reduced the time available for individualised feedback and made classroom management more demanding. One teacher at a long-established public school described classes of up to 35 pupils and explained that they responded by using more whole-class, interactive and project-based activities. Nevertheless, preparation, classroom management and emotional demands remained substantial. A physics teacher similarly reported classes of up to 34 pupils and difficulty meeting individual needs despite incorporating group and individual projects. By contrast, an English teacher explained that English classes were divided into smaller groups above a certain enrolment threshold, allowing greater individual attention. Other subjects could continue to be taught in groups of 34 or more pupils, leaving less time to review homework or support individual learners.

These accounts suggest that workload varied both within and between schools. Subject-specific rules for dividing classes could create unequal demands among teachers working in the same institution. Large classes also increased the emotional demands associated with classroom management, student motivation and lesson preparation.

Material resources as job resources

The second theme concerned material and technical resources. Participants identified interactive whiteboards, laboratories, STEM rooms, computers, internet access and subject-specific equipment as important resources for effective teaching. However, access varied across schools. A physics teacher described how newer laboratory equipment, a STEM room and laptops made practical lessons more engaging and encouraged pupils to participate in experiments. Another experienced teacher subjectively estimated the availability of equipment at their school at approximately 60% of what they considered necessary, noting that some classrooms lacked screens and that teachers had no dedicated room for rest or lesson preparation. According to this participant, teachers frequently had to move between classrooms.

School directors also emphasised the importance of resources. One director described how greater financial autonomy had enabled classroom renovations, purchases of interactive whiteboards and improvements to the digital learning environment. Another stressed that technology becomes outdated quickly and that schools need funding for maintenance and replacement, not merely one-off purchases.

Overall, participants described material resources as supportive when they were available and usable, but as a source of frustration and additional work when they were insufficient. Updated technology was seen as potentially reducing workload, whereas shortages could increase it.

Staffing, retention and internal teacher development

Recruitment and teacher retention emerged as major concerns for school leaders. Participants reported difficulty attracting teachers in some subjects, particularly mathematics and foreign languages, where schools compete with better-paid or more prestigious occupations.

A director of a suburban school described the difficulty of attracting qualified teachers because of its location relative to schools closer to the city centre or to teachers' homes. The director specifically mentioned shortages of Russian-speaking primary teachers and chemistry teachers. In response to

recruitment difficulties, school leaders described relying on professional development, mentoring and emotional support to strengthen their existing workforce.

These accounts illustrate a common HRM challenge: where recruitment from the external labour market is difficult, schools may need to invest more heavily in internal staff development. One school described recruiting less experienced teachers and supporting them through mentoring and internal learning opportunities. This may be particularly relevant for schools outside central urban areas. In this context, staffing shortages increase job demands, while mentoring can provide a resource for teachers.

Another school leader discussed the additional staffing and development requirements associated with inclusive education. Teaching pupils at home or supporting pupils with additional learning needs requires appropriate specialist knowledge, skills and working conditions. The leader described the importance of training and opportunities for teachers to share classroom practice.

Participants' accounts suggest that staffing involves more than filling vacancies: it also entails retaining and developing teachers. Staff in specialised roles may need additional professional support to maintain motivation and develop their skills. School leaders described manageable workloads, emotional support, recognition, coaching, professional development and a positive working environment as potential retention strategies. One leader emphasised the importance of listening to teachers rather than managing through criticism or pressure.

Performance management and professional development

The fourth theme addressed performance appraisal and professional development. Teachers described lesson observations, feedback, certification, competitions, awards and student results as elements of performance management, but their attitudes towards these practices differed. One participant associated career progression with certificates, awards and periodic attestation, reportedly undertaken every five years.

The participant regarded these measures as indicators of performance but also described the psychological pressure associated with high-stakes assessments. This illustrates how appraisal may be experienced simultaneously as recognition and as a source of stress. Another teacher valued lesson observations conducted by a deputy head and the coaching that followed, while emphasising that the delivery of feedback mattered. The participant noted that unexpected classroom incidents could occur even during a well-prepared lesson and argued that appraisals should take account of teachers' everyday working conditions and challenges.

Professional development was also evident in teachers' accounts. Participants described sharing teaching methods and strategies with colleagues. One teacher referred to buddy or peer-tutoring approaches, while school leaders described mentoring, individual coaching, internal seminars and collaborative teaching or school-based research activities. Leaders reported identifying training needs through lesson observations, questionnaires and monitoring.

Leadership support, teacher voice and wellbeing

The fifth theme concerned leadership support, teacher voice and wellbeing. Across interviews, participants described leadership support as an important resource, particularly when leaders listened to teachers, welcomed ideas and helped resolve problems.

Several teachers spoke positively about their relationships with school leaders and reported feeling comfortable discussing lesson ideas, receiving feedback after observations and seeking assistance when needed.

School leaders also emphasised listening, maintaining an open-door policy and supporting staff with work-related and personal difficulties. However, opportunities for teacher voice were not always experienced equally. Although teachers generally felt able to discuss teaching approaches, some hesitated to criticise leadership because of hierarchy, respect for authority or concerns about being misunderstood. Younger teachers appeared particularly hesitant to express concerns.

These accounts suggest that teacher voice is shaped partly by school climate and perceived psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999).

Wellbeing also emerged as a concern. One teacher suggested providing a quiet room where staff could rest during the working day. This example suggests that teachers' wellbeing may depend not only on pay and leave arrangements but also on opportunities to recover during the school day.

Figure 1 summarises the five themes and illustrates how school-level HRM practices and organisational conditions may operate as either demands or resources. The role of practices such as appraisal and staffing depends partly on how teachers experience their implementation.

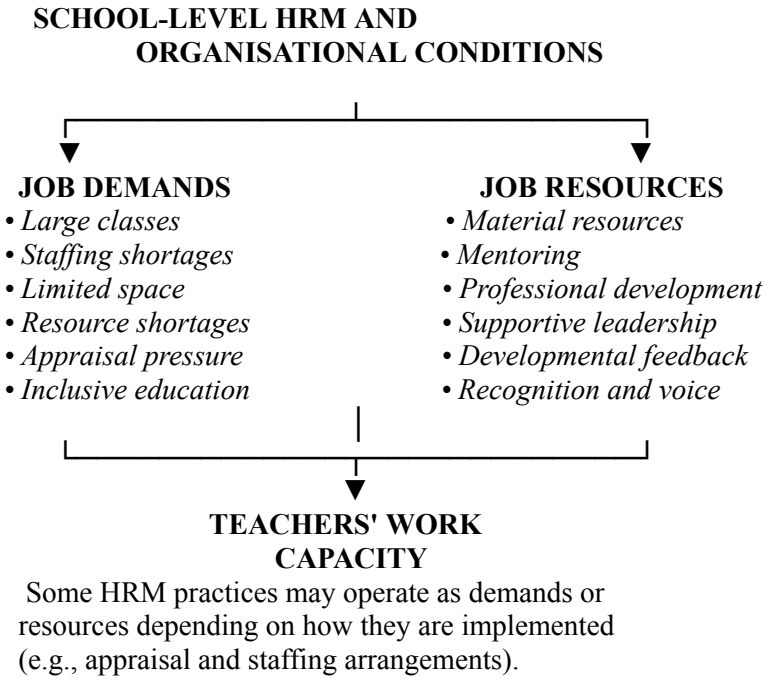


Figure 1. Theoretical model

Discussion

The findings illustrate how school-level HRM practices and working conditions relate to teachers' perceived work capacity in Kazakhstan. Participants described large classes, limited classroom space, staff shortages, pressure to achieve results and the demands of inclusive teaching. They also identified material resources, mentoring, constructive feedback, recognition and professional learning as forms of support. These accounts are broadly consistent with the JD-R model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). This study contributes to the literature by illustrating how teachers and school leaders perceive and experience school-level HRM practices across different organisational contexts.

First, the analysis places teachers' work capacity within the broader organisation of work. Participants' accounts suggest that qualifications and commitment alone do not explain their perceived ability to meet teaching requirements. Access to equipment, class allocation, staffing arrangements and opportunities for rest also mattered. This supports an HRM perspective that considers performance in the context of the wider work system (Boxall & Purcell, 2016). Subject-specific arrangements for dividing classes also suggest that teachers working in the same school may experience different demands.

Second, HRM practices were not always experienced exclusively as either demands or resources. Appraisal was a clear example: lesson observations and feedback could support improvement, while certification requirements and pressure associated with student outcomes could create strain. Thus, teachers' experiences of implementation matter alongside the formal purpose of a practice. Developmental support and evaluative pressure may coexist within the same appraisal system.

This suggests that the demand–resource characteristics of an HRM practice cannot necessarily be inferred from its formal design. Researchers should also consider how practices operate in employees' everyday work. Appraisal, for example, may support learning while generating pressure through formal evaluation requirements.

Third, staffing challenges and professional development appeared closely connected. Where recruitment was difficult, leaders described using mentoring and internal learning opportunities to support existing staff. The value of professional development as a job resource therefore needs to be understood in relation to the challenges it addresses. However, mentoring cannot be assumed to eliminate the demands associated with unfilled posts. Future research could examine when such support helps teachers manage staffing pressures and when those pressures exceed available resources.

These findings illustrate the application of the JD-R framework to school-level HRM: mentoring and professional development may help teachers cope with shortages, but they may not fully offset the associated demands. The effectiveness of these resources should therefore be considered in the context of specific organisational challenges.

Fourth, opportunities for teacher voice appeared to depend on hierarchy, trust and psychological safety, alongside formal communication channels (Morrison, 2011). Although leaders described open-door policies, teachers appeared more comfortable discussing teaching methods than questioning management decisions. Younger teachers were particularly cautious. Access to leaders and willingness to challenge their decisions are therefore distinct. In JD-R terms, voice may function as a resource when teachers expect a constructive response and feel safe raising concerns.

Fifth, school leaders appeared to play an important role in translating formal HRM practices into everyday support or pressure. Listening, recognition and constructive feedback were relevant to participants' experiences. Leadership may therefore be understood both as part of HRM implementation and as a resource in its own right, helping to explain why similar practices are experienced differently across schools.

The findings do not establish causal relationships or demonstrate measurable effects on performance, wellbeing or job satisfaction. Rather, they identify perceived demands, resources and implementation conditions that future quantitative or mixed-methods studies could examine, including potential relationships among appraisal, psychological safety, voice and work capacity.

The study has several practical implications. First, school leaders should treat class size as a workload issue, given the demands described by participants. Second, investment in teaching equipment should take account of teachers' needs and ensure that resources are accessible, maintained and useful in everyday practice; teachers should also be involved in relevant decisions. Third, appraisal should emphasise development through constructive feedback, mentoring, coaching and appropriate professional learning opportunities. Fourth, schools facing recruitment difficulties should strengthen internal development through mentoring for early-career teachers, peer observation, knowledge-sharing, seminars and needs-based training. These measures may be particularly relevant to schools outside major urban centres and those experiencing subject-specific shortages.

Conclusion

This study explored how school-level organisational conditions and HRM practices relate to teachers' perceived work capacity in Kazakhstani schools. Five themes emerged: workload and class size; material resources; staffing, retention and internal teacher development; performance management and professional development; and leadership support, teacher voice and wellbeing.

Participants' accounts suggest that qualifications and professional commitment are not the only factors shaping teachers' working experiences. Workload allocation, resource availability, staffing, feedback, training, mentoring, recognition and psychological safety also matter. Supportive leadership and internal development were described as helpful, while large classes, uneven access to resources and staff shortages remained sources of pressure. These exploratory findings provide a basis for further investigation rather than evidence of causal effects.

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