

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

# What are urban teachers thinking and feeling?

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**Abstract**

Teachers in urban schools experience significant stressors that can impact their effectiveness, well-being, retention, and ability to meet the needs of their students. The current mixed methods study explored 160 urban teachers' thoughts and feelings in response to challenging classroom situations, factors that predicted the prevalence of these reactions, and teachers' help-seeking attitudes. Results revealed the most prevalent thoughts that emerged were inability to resolve the situation, problem-solving, factors beyond the classroom, wanting a break, and personal locus of control. The most prevalent feelings that emerged were anger, anxiety, sadness, emotional exhaustion, incompetence, positivity, and confusion. The amount of professional and social-emotional support teachers received predicted a greater prevalence of productive thoughts and fewer negative emotions. Additionally, teachers related a relative openness to pursuing professional psychological services. Taken altogether, the findings suggest that urban teachers can be supported via forms of professional and social-emotional support in managing stressors in their workplace. Implications for professional development and teacher education programs are discussed.

**KEYWORDS**

teacher stress, teacher thoughts and emotions, urban teachers

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Teachers in today's schools encounter increasing demands to be effective in meeting the academic, social, and emotional needs of their students. While all teacher experience stressors, teachers in urban schools, as opposed to their suburban counterparts, may more acutely experience such challenges, given that students in urban environments are more likely to experience social-emotional difficulties (Atkins, Graczyk, Frazier, & Adil, 2003;

Balfanz, Herzog, & Mac Iver, 2007). In turn, teachers in urban schools, who disproportionately serve low-income and minority students, encounter notably higher levels of stress than teachers in other schools (Ouellette et al., 2018; Shernoff, Mehta, Atkins, Torf, & Spencer, 2011). Faced with higher levels of stress and oftentimes without adequate support to meet their students' needs, urban teachers increasingly experience burnout, a process of repeated emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and feelings of a lack of personal accomplishment, which leads them to leave the teaching profession at alarming rates (Fantuzzo et al., 2012; Yang, Ge, Hu, Chi, & Wang, 2009). According to a National Commission on Teaching and America's Future report, the national turnover rate has risen to 16.8% while in urban schools it is over 20%, a rate which eclipses the student dropout rate in certain districts (Carroll, 2007).

It is important to identify ways that stress can be reduced for teachers so that they can function more effectively and be less likely to leave the profession (Ouellette et al., 2018). Thus, the current study was designed to explore urban teachers' thoughts and feelings in response to challenging classroom situations, the prevalence of these thoughts and feelings, and their help-seeking attitudes in coping with emotional distress. If their thoughts and feelings pertain to aspects of their working conditions that can be changed or reveal ways to relieve their distress, there may be ways to intervene to prevent negative outcomes. Additionally, if these teachers convey openness to receiving professional psychological help to cope with the emotional distress associated with their jobs, mental health or counseling services may serve an important future role in supporting these teachers. The findings of this study have implications for teacher training, professional development, and support that would increase retention rates of teachers working in urban schools.

## 1.1 | Teacher stress and its sources

Researchers have commonly defined the term "teacher stress" as a teacher's experience of unpleasant negative emotions, such as anger, anxiety, frustration, or depression, produced by some aspect of his/her work (Kyriacou, 2001). Teacher stress may come from a variety of sources such as poor work conditions, poor social relations, lack of rewards, work overload, and/or routinization, but the reality is that oftentimes teachers experience stress from multiple contributing factors (Lait & Wallace, 2002; Shernoff et al., 2011). Research has found that teachers reported the following aspects of their work as major sources of stress: (a) Teaching unmotivated students, (b) maintaining discipline, (c) time pressures and workload, (d) coping with change, (e) being evaluated by others, (f) dealings with colleagues, (g) self-esteem and status, (h) administration and management, (i) role conflict and ambiguity, and (j) poor working conditions (Pithers & Soden, 1998; Travers & Cooper, 1996).

### 1.1.1 | Sociopolitical climate of teaching

With respect to the sociopolitical climate of teaching, educational policy in the United States over the past two decades has changed numerous aspects of teachers' daily experiences. Specifically, the No Child Left behind (NCLB) Act in 2001 and the subsequent educational reform movement sought to keep schools accountable for holding high and measurable expectations for student academic achievement through the administration of annual standardized tests. According to NCLB, schools that do not make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), a demonstration of incremental improvements of test scores, are at risk of potential corrective actions (e.g., replacing staff and instituting a new curriculum) and school restructuring. As school success and failure has become increasingly dependent upon increasing student standardized test scores, teachers have become increasingly evaluated based on their students' improved test scores, and at times fired when their schools fail to make AYP (Kumashiro, 2012; Nieto, 2003). As a result, Kumashiro (2012) asserts that we narrowly define what it means to be a good teacher merely in terms of the ability to raise test scores while labeling all others who may demonstrate success with students in other ways, as bad teachers. This is most prevalent the case, Kumashiro argues, in schools that do not already have high levels of student achievement, lack adequate educational resources, and serve a disproportionate

amount of low-income and minority children—urban schools. Thus, it is not surprising that test-based accountability policies have been identified as a major source of stress for urban teachers (von der Embse, Pendergast, Segool, Saeki, & Ryan, 2016). Such policies, in combination with other factors, have left many teachers feeling increasingly scrutinized and demoralized in demanding environments that offer little support (McNeil, 2000).

### 1.1.2 | School-based factors

Various factors of urban school teachers' environment have the potential to cause stress. Main sources of stress identified by educational researchers include teaching students who lack motivation, maintaining discipline, being evaluated by others, poor administration and management, and poor working conditions (Duyar, Gumus, & Sukru Bellibas, 2013; Grayson & Alvarez, 2008; Ouellette et al., 2018). Additionally, research suggests that organizational stress within urban schools is a common experience. In their recent examination of urban stress in several low-income schools, Ouellette et al. (2018) found that organizational health was the strongest predictor of stress and satisfaction in urban teachers who faced significant challenges with student behavioral issues. In fact, giving teachers training on evidence-based classroom interventions did not significantly impact urban teachers' work-related stress or job satisfaction. Instead, their findings strongly suggest that organizational climate plays a primary role in determining urban teachers' overall stress levels on the job.

These organizational and administrative aspects, in combination with student-related factors, all play a role in creating a school climate. School climate pertains to the quality of relationships between individuals at school, that is, between students, teachers, and administrators, and how these relationships play out through the processes of teaching and learning, collaboration, support, and management (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009). Studies show that teachers' perceptions of school climate are a key predictor of teacher stress (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2009). Additionally, principal behavior, leadership, and management styles, all of which make up school climate, in turn impact teacher stress (Hurren, 2006; Ramalho, Garza, & Merchant, 2010). The relationships that are crucial to school climate, particularly between teachers, parents, and administrators, when unsatisfying, have been found to be sources of stress (Ouellette et al., 2018; Troman, 2000).

### 1.1.3 | Classroom-specific factors

Teachers also confront multiple pressures at the classroom level on a daily basis. At this level, the weight of administrative and organizational demands, such as large class sizes, mandated curricula, instructional strategies, high-stakes testing that constrains their autonomy, and the implementation of other whole-school requirements, take their toll on teachers (Moriarty, Edmonds, Blatchford, & Martin, 2001; Roeser et al., 2013). In addition to these demands, numerous educational researchers cite stress associated with managing student misbehavior and maintaining discipline, as a major and chronic source of their stress (Bierman et al., 2013; Leadbeater, Gladstone, & Sukhawathanakul, 2015). More specifically, when teachers experience negative interactions with difficult students on a daily basis, this interaction pattern becomes a source of negative thoughts and emotions, which can in turn impact teachers' cognitive functioning and motivation (Emmer & Stough, 2001; Ouellette et al., 2018).

Expectations to manage the emotional lives of their students in addition to teaching subject matter place a heavy burden on urban teachers. Numerous aspects of students' backgrounds, such as their behaviors, the personal issues they face on a daily basis, and variable family structures and amount of support outside of school, thus, all have the potential to indirectly contribute to teacher stress (Chaplain, 2008; Forlin, 2001; Gordon, 2002). Not only is teacher stress a major concern, but disruptive behavior interferes with overall classroom functioning and individual student academic achievement (Atkins, Hoagwood, Kutash, & Seidman, 2010). Performing their instructional tasks while simultaneously feeling burdened, overwhelmed, and underprepared to meet the mental health needs of students in their classroom, teachers are especially vulnerable to stress and decreased job satisfaction (Ball, 2011; Roeser et al., 2013; Williams, Horvath, Wei, VanDom, & Jonson-Reid, 2007).

## 1.2 | The role of teacher thoughts and emotions in stress and burnout

In addition to enumerating the myriad of stressors teachers face daily, educational researchers have put forth models that demonstrate the crucial role of cognitions in determining how teachers evaluate situations and respond accordingly. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) transactional model of stress suggests that an individual's experience of a challenging workplace situation leads to different short-term and long-term affective, physiological, and psychosocial outcomes via the following mediating processes: cognitive appraisal and coping. Cognitive appraisal entails a primary and secondary process—a primary appraisal includes evaluative judgments of the extent to which the situation poses a threat to the individual's well-being and a secondary appraisal includes a judgment about what, if any, coping actions would help in resolving the challenging workplace scenario (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Furthermore, a number of personal (e.g., self-efficacy, values, and goals) and environmental variables (e.g., demands and resources) impact the extent to which an individual appraises a situation as a threat and summon the coping strategies to resolve this situation. Similarly, Lambert, McCarthy, Fitchett, Lineback, and Reiser (2015) assert that stress occurs when teachers make a cognitive appraisal that their classroom *demands* exceed their classroom *resources*. This puts teachers who perceive the highest level of demands in proportion to the resources they possess, such as urban teachers, particularly at-risk for experiencing a stress response.

Chang (2009) antecedent appraisal model further elucidates the cognitive and emotional processes that lead teachers to experience situational distress in the short term and burnout in the long term. Chang's model argues that teacher's judgments in response to student behavior and other teaching tasks cause the unpleasant emotions that lead to teacher burnout when this sequence of events occurs chronically. The repeated pathway by which teachers' judgments lead to unpleasant emotions is what Chang terms *habitual patterns*. Based on her model, it is the *judgments* made in response to classroom situations that elicit the negative emotional experience that characterizes teacher stress. After studying the emotional responses of 554 teachers, Chang found that the judgments teachers made about student behavior—particularly in the way teachers appraise the congruence of their goals with what is happening in the classroom, the importance of these events, and the extent to which they felt agency, control, and ability to cope with the event—influenced the unpleasant emotions teachers experienced. Thus, according to Chang, the habitual patterns by which teachers appraise classroom situations are the cause of stress.

While the above models of teacher stress suggest that teachers' thoughts and emotions play a role in their experience of situational stress and burnout, these models come up short in capturing the phenomenology of a teacher's stress reaction. Teachers, who need to react to numerous environmental stimuli, may lack the time and cognitive capacity to make the multiple appraisals proposed by the models of Lazarus and Folkman (1984) and Chang (2009), to make the in-the-moment decisions their jobs necessitate. Furthermore, although each model suggests that certain appraisals or interpretations of events lead to the negative emotional state known as stress, they do little to elaborate the *content* of these appraisals and interpretations. It seems reasonable to believe that, according to previous transactional models, teachers perceive that their professional demands exceed their resources and that this mismatch eventually results in stress. Based on these conceptualizations of stress, it is difficult to imagine what teachers are *actually thinking* that leads them to experience unpleasant emotions and thus feel stress. It is still unknown how commonly teachers experience distressing thoughts and emotions. Likewise, research has yet to investigate the individual, classroom, or school-level factors that predict the prevalence of certain thoughts and emotions.

## 1.3 | Help-seeking attitudes

In determining how to help urban teachers cope with distressing thoughts and emotions, their help-seeking attitudes may provide a useful metric. The Attitudes Towards Seeking Professional Psychological Help (ATSPPH; Fischer & Turner, 1970) scale offers a valid and reliable construct in measuring teachers' help-seeking attitudes to cope with the prolonged emotional distress associated with the teaching profession.

While the ATSPPH scale has been utilized to measure help-seeking attitudes in undergraduate samples (Ang, Lau, Tan, & Lim, 2007), in ethnic minority groups in the United States (Duncan, 2003; Kim & Omizo, 2003; Tata & Leong, 1994; Wallace & Constantine, 2005), cross-cultural samples (Wrigley, Jackson, Judd, & Komiti, 2005; Yeh, 2002), and male adult prisoners (Skogstad, Deane, & Spicer, 2006), only one study to date has examined help-seeking attitudes in a population of teachers (Ang, Lim, Tan, & Yau, 2004). In a sample of trainee teachers in Singapore, Ang et al. (2004) found that teachers on average demonstrated slightly positive attitudes towards seeking professional help and that females had more positive help-seeking attitudes than males. However, the educational literature has not yet documented help-seeking attitudes in a population of urban teachers in the United States, yet this group of professionals may very much need additional supports that would be facilitated by positive attitudes toward help-seeking.

## 1.4 | Purpose of study

The current study was designed to document the content and prevalence of urban teachers' thoughts and feelings in response to challenging classroom situations, and identify predictors of these thoughts and feelings. Additionally, this study sought to measure these teachers' help-seeking attitudes. A qualitative approach was used to analyze the content of these thoughts and emotions and summarize their frequency. Binary logistic regression analyses were used to determine the significance of individual, classroom, and school-level factors in predicting the prevalence of categories of thoughts and feelings. Teachers' help-seeking attitudes were summarized quantitatively. These data were then used to formulate ways to support urban teachers.

## 2 | METHODS

Data analyzed in this study were part of a larger study on the social and emotional experiences of urban teachers.

### 2.1 | Participants

Participants included 160 teachers currently working full-time in an urban traditional public or charter school in the United States. An *urban* school was defined, in line with what the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (2012) for qualifying as an urban county, as a school located in a county with a population of 200,000 or more. Other inclusion criteria required participants to have worked as a teacher for at least 1 year and have earned a national teaching certification in the United States to qualify for inclusion. These teacher preparation programs could include traditional routes to teacher training (e.g., university-based programs) as well as alternative routes (e.g., Teach for America and Teaching Fellows).

With respect to age, gender, and ethnicity, on average participants were 36 years old ( $M = 35.65$ ; range = 22–61), female (96.3%;  $n = 160$ ), and White (90%;  $n = 160$ ), respectively. Participants possessed approximately 9–10 years of general teaching experience ( $M = 9.61$ ; range = 1–33) and 8 years of urban teaching experience ( $M = 8.44$ ; range = 0–33). In terms of education, most participants had earned a master's degree (54.4%;  $n = 160$ ), held a degree in an education-related subject area (70.89%;  $n = 158$ ), taught in a middle school (33.96%;  $n = 159$ ), and taught multiple subjects (52.54%;  $n = 158$ ). Table 1 contains a summary of this information.

On average, participants had a class size of 25 students ( $M = 24.98$ ; range = 4–50), felt that student discipline was a concern in their class ( $M = 3.44$ ; range = 1–4) and school ( $M = 3.84$ ; range = 2–4) between more than once a week to every day. Lastly, the participants felt that technology ( $M = 2.90$ ; range = 2–4) and other teaching resources ( $M = 2.73$ ; range = 1–4) were available in their school most of the time to all of the time, they received some professional support at their schools ( $M = 2.13$ ; range = 1–3), and received between no and some social-emotional support ( $M = 1.84$ ; range = 1–3).

**TABLE 1** Background data for all participant groups

Variable	Percentage of sample
Educational background	
Bachelors	43.13
Masters	54.40
Other	2.50
Degree field	
Education	70.89
Other field	29.11
Grades taught	
Pre-K	3.15
Elementary	32.70
Middle	33.96
High school	30.19
Subjects taught	
One subject	47.47
Multiple subjects	52.53
Location of school	
Northeast	11.88
Midwest	25.63
South	46.25
West	15.63

## 2.2 | Procedure

Participants were recruited to participate in an online study through a variety of teacher listservs provided by directors of Graduate School of Education programs, professional networks, and Facebook groups. Snowball sampling, which entailed encouraging participants to send the invitation to the study to anyone who may be eligible, was used. Recruitment was advertised as an opportunity to participate in a study that examined the “experiences of teachers working in urban schools, including stressful experiences associated with the daily realities of the teaching profession” for the purpose of learning “more about how best to support teachers who work in urban schools.” Participants were entered in a raffle to win a \$50 gift card.

## 2.3 | Measures

### 2.3.1 | Demographic questionnaire

Participants completed a questionnaire which required them to report demographic information related to their personal background, teaching background, and school context. Personal background information included their age, gender, and ethnicity. Teaching background information included highest level of educational attainment, type of degree attained, the subject(s) they taught, number of years of teaching experience overall, number of years teaching in an urban school, and school location. School context information included class size, the extent to which student discipline was a concern in their classrooms and schools, the availability of technology and other resources at their schools, and the amount of professional and social-emotional support they received. The extent to which student discipline was a concern at the classroom and school level was measured on a scale that ranged from 1 to 4 (Never–Every day; respectively). Additionally, the amount of professional and social-emotional support received was measured on a scale that ranged from 1 to 3 (No support–A lot of support, respectively).

### 2.3.2 | Survey to record thoughts and emotions

To document teachers' thoughts and emotions in response to a challenging classroom situation, participants completed a qualitative survey. Survey questions asked participants to describe a challenging classroom situation they encountered over the past week, and their immediate thoughts and emotions in response to this situation.

### 2.3.3 | ATSPPH scale

To investigate the extent to which teachers are open to pursuing mental health or counseling services to cope with their emotional distress, participants completed the ATSPPH scale-short form (ATTSPHS-SF; Fischer & Farina, 1995). The ATSPHS-SF is a 10-item measure designed to assess respondents' attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help. On a four-point Likert-type scale (i.e., 0 = disagree; 3 = agree), participants indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with each item (sample item—"If I believed I was having a mental breakdown, my first inclination would be to get professional attention"). Scores for the instrument range from 0 to 30, with higher scores indicating more positive attitudes toward seeking psychological help. Half of the items on the scale are reverse-coded to bolster the scale's internal validity.

With respect to reliability, past researchers have reported Cronbach  $\alpha$  estimates of 0.84 in a sample of college students during the scale's development, and subsequent Cronbach  $\alpha$  estimates of 0.87 (Cepeda-Benito & Short, 1998) and 0.75 (Duncan, 2003) for other samples of college students. The test-retest reliability of the scale was reported to be 0.80 in Fischer and Farina (1995) study. With respect to convergent validity, higher scores on the ATSPHS-SF were related to less treatment-related stigma and greater intentions to seek treatment in the future in samples of college students and primary care patients (Elhai, Schweinle, & Anderson, 2006).

## 2.4 | Data analysis

### 2.4.1 | Content analysis

A conventional approach to content analysis was used to describe teachers' thoughts and feelings following a challenging classroom situation. This type of approach was chosen specifically to avoid using preconceived categories (Kondracki, Wellman, & Amundson, 2002) in investigating a phenomenon for which existing theory or research literature is limited. In accordance with a conventional approach, the researchers allowed categories and names for categories to flow from the data, thus forming data-driven categories (Schreier, 2014).

### 2.4.2 | Coding process

During the first stage of data analysis, the first author and two independent coders read through participants' qualitative responses, noting patterns in thoughts and feelings that were reflective of multiple responses. Each coder then organized these recurrent patterns into first-order categories that validly represented the data, were mutually exclusive in the content they included, and were exhaustive in fitting the relevant data. The three coders subsequently met to compare first-order categories. Examples of first-order categories of thoughts included "thoughts concerning student misbehavior" and "thoughts of wanting to leave profession" and first-order categories of feelings included "frustration" and "fear."

Coders found an initial 60% agreement in the first-order categories of thoughts and feelings they separately established. The three coders reached consensus on first-order categories and grouped them into second-order categories, a coding frame that is reflected in Tables 2 and 3. In this process, first-order categories of thoughts such as "thoughts of ineffectiveness of response," "thoughts of self-criticality in handling situation," and "thoughts of blaming others for inability to resolve situation" were grouped into the second-order thought category of "inability to resolve the situation."

**TABLE 2** Categories, example responses, and percentages of responses to questions about thoughts

	Category	What responses conveyed	Example responses	n	%
Thoughts	Inability to resolve situation	Sense of not being able to resolve situation effectively	"I had no idea how to resolve the situation"	92	57.5
	Problem-solving	Efforts to take different perspectives, generate solutions, and take action	"I can address this on a one on one conversation with the student"	71	44.38
	Factors beyond classroom	Acknowledgement of factors beyond classroom that impacted situation	"...why are some families so broken?"	33	20.63
	Needing a break	Desire to escape situation or teaching profession	"...I don't want to be involved with this situation."	19	11.88
	Personal locus of control	Acknowledgement of personal limitations in resolving situation	"I handled the situation as best as I could"	8	5%

After the coding frame was established, the first author and two independent coders coded all the participants' responses. The first author and independent coders met to resolve questions that arose in applying the coding frame to code specific responses. One question that arose pertained to whether qualitative responses such as "Where is the counselor [to resolve this situation]?" pertained to the "Inability to resolve situation" or the "Factors beyond classroom" thought category. All three coders met to discuss these examples and reach consensus about how to refine the coding scheme to ensure that coding categories were mutually exclusive. In this case, they refined the "Inability to resolve situation" to encompass a teacher's insinuation of blame towards others for the situations they were unable to resolve while the "Factors beyond classroom" thought category reflects a more neutral acknowledgment of factors (e.g., poverty and whole-school policies) that impacted a challenging classroom situation. In cases of disagreement about how to code specific responses, all three coders discussed the specific response until consensus was reached regarding the appropriate code. Inter-coder agreement (ICA) was calculated by dividing the number of agreements by the sum of the total number of agreements and disagreements. The ICA in this study averaged 71.45%.

After appropriate codes for all responses were established, frequencies and percentages, that is, the number and percentage of times participants' responses pertained to one of the established categories for each open-ended question, were calculated for the whole participant sample. The categories constructed for each open-ended question demonstrated the *content* of thoughts and emotions that occurred in response to a challenging classroom situation. The percentages by which participant responses pertained to each category demonstrated the *prevalence* of particular thoughts and emotions.

**TABLE 3** What responses conveyed, example responses, and percentages of responses to questions about feelings

	Category	Example responses	n	%
Feelings	Anger	"Annoyed," "frustrated," "exasperated"	131	81.88
	Sadness	"Sad," "depressed," "despair"	73	45.63
	Anxiety	"Nervous," "afraid," "panicked"	53	33.13
	Emotional Exhaustion	"Tired," "emotionally exhausted," "despondent"	33	20.63
	Incompetence	"Inadequate," "incompetent," "like a failure"	19	11.88
	Positivity	"Confident," "hopeful," "compassion"	18	11.25
	Confusion	"Confused," "shocked," "astounded"	9	5.63



### 2.4.3 | Binary logistic regression

To determine predictors of the prevalence of categories of thoughts and feelings, binary logistic regression analyses were used. Grade Level Taught, Educational Background, Class Size, School Region, Student Discipline Concern in Class, Student Discipline Concern in School, Professional Support Received, and Social-Emotional Support Received were chosen as variables to predict the prevalence of categories of thoughts and feelings. These variables were chosen as predictors because previous research has shown them to impact factors that impact teachers' experiences, particularly their stress and satisfaction (Ouellette et al., 2018).

Twelve regression models were run to assess if the above independent variables predicted the prevalence of each of the five categories of thoughts and the seven categories of feelings formulated via qualitative analysis. In each model, all of the predictor variables were entered as covariates. Three of these predictor variables, Educational Background, School Region, and Grade Level taught, were categorical. Certain levels of these categorical covariates (i.e., a Elementary school level for Grade-Level taught, a Bachelor's educational level for Educational Background, and a Northeastern location for School Region) were entered as baselines for these variables. Missing values, 1.3% ( $n = 2$ ) of the total cases, were excluded from analysis.

## 3 | RESULTS

### 3.1 | Thoughts in response to challenging classroom situations

Responses to the open-ended question that asked participants to relate their thoughts in response to a challenging classroom situation were categorized according to themes that emerged during their analysis. The following categories of thoughts that emerged from the data included: Not being able to resolve the situation, problem-solving, factors beyond classroom, wanting a break, and personal locus of control. Additionally, responses oftentimes produced content that pertained to multiple categories. Please see Table 2 for a description of the above categories, example responses, and percentages of responses that pertained to each category.

#### 3.1.1 | Inability to resolve situation

Thoughts pertaining to this category expressed teacher participants' sense of not being able to resolve the challenging classroom situation effectively. Examples of these responses include "I had no idea how to resolve the situation," "I don't know how to reach these students," and "I need someone else to come and handle this so I can teach." When confronted with situations they were unable to resolve effectively, teachers tended to *blame themselves* or *blame others* (i.e., students, school staff, and parents) for not being able to resolve the situation effectively. Examples of participant responses in which they *blame themselves* include "I am very hard on myself if...I didn't meet their [students'] needs perfectly" and "This is my fault, I am a bad teacher." Examples of participant responses in which they *blame others* include "I thought my students are lazy" and "I can't believe I have to deal with this." Overall, 57.5% of participant thought responses pertained to not being able to resolve the challenging classroom situation effectively.

#### 3.1.2 | Problem-solving

Thoughts pertaining to this category demonstrated participants' attempts assess the challenging classroom situation and its causes, propose solutions, and in certain cases act to solve it. Examples of these responses include "I thought that this student is having a hard day," "I can address this on a one on one conversation with the student," and "I asked for advice from my department and administrators." In total, 44.38% of participant thought responses pertained to problem-solving.

### 3.1.3 | Factors beyond classroom

Thoughts pertaining to this category related an acknowledgment of factors beyond the classroom, such as a student's family background or whole-school policies, which influenced the challenging classroom situation. Examples of these responses include "I felt sympathy for those students who worked really late, for the kid whose mom is a single parent and so he works to help her out....," "I felt frustrated that IEPs, meant for good, often do harm," and "...my students are being hurt by this new discipline plan and the new administration does not want to support the teachers." In total, 20.63% of participant thought responses pertained to factors beyond the classroom that impacted the challenging classroom situation.

### 3.1.4 | Needing a break

Thoughts pertaining to this category reflect participants' desire to take a break from some aspect of the challenging situation and in some cases take a permanent break from the teaching profession. Examples of these responses include "I want to be on break too!," "...I don't want to be involved with this situation," and "I thought, 'I need to get out of this job.'" Overall, 11.88% of participant thought responses pertained to needing a break.

### 3.1.5 | Personal locus of control

Thoughts pertaining to this category demonstrated participants' acknowledgement of their personal limitations in resolving the challenging classroom situation. Examples of these responses include "I know that I can't fix all the problems this student is facing in his life," "I handled the situation as best as I could," and "I can only accomplish so much, and as long as I give it my all I need to be happy with what I was able to do." In total, 5% of participant thought responses pertained to locus of control.

### 3.1.6 | Feelings in response to challenging classroom situations

Responses to the open-ended question that asked participants to relate their feelings in response to a challenging classroom situation were categorized according to themes that emerged during their analysis. Likewise, the following categories of feelings that emerged from the data included: Anger, anxiety, sadness, emotional exhaustion, incompetence, positivity, and confusion. Oftentimes participants related emotions that belonged to more than one category in their responses. Please see Table 3 for a description of the above categories, example responses, and percentages of responses that pertained to each category.

#### 3.1.7 | Anger

Feelings pertaining to this category ranged from mild to more extreme forms of anger. Examples include participants who related feeling "annoyed," "irritated," "frustrated," "exasperated," and "enraged." Overall, 81.88% of participants reported feeling anger in response to the challenging classroom situation.

#### 3.1.8 | Sadness

Feelings pertaining to this category ranged from mild to more extreme forms of sadness. Examples include participants who related feeling "sad," "disappointed," "hurt," "depressed," and "despair." In total, 45.63% of participants reported feeling sadness in response to the challenging classroom situation.

### 3.1.9 | Anxiety

Feelings pertaining to this category ranged from mild to more extreme forms of anxiety. Examples include participants who related feeling “nervous,” “anxious,” “afraid,” “overwhelmed,” and “panicked.” In total, 31.13% of participants reported feeling anxiety in response to the challenging classroom situation.

### 3.1.10 | Emotional exhaustion

Feelings pertaining to this category related participants’ sense of emotional depletion. Examples include participants who related feeling “tired,” “emotionally exhausted,” “defeated,” “like giving up,” and “despondent.” In total, 20.63% of participants reported feeling emotional exhaustion in response to the challenging classroom situation.

### 3.1.11 | Incompetence

Feelings pertaining to this category related a sense of personal ineffectiveness in resolving the challenging classroom situation. Examples include participants who related feeling “helpless,” “not in control,” “like a failure,” “inadequate,” and “incompetent.” In total, 11.88% of participants reported feeling in response to the challenging classroom situation.

### 3.1.12 | Positivity

Feelings pertaining to this category conveyed a positive emotion such as confidence, connection, hope, or support. Examples include participants who related feeling “confident,” “hopeful,” “compassion,” “supported,” and “pleased.” Overall, 11.25% of participants reported feeling in response to the challenging classroom situation.

### 3.1.13 | Confusion

Feelings pertaining to this category ranged from mild to more extreme states of confusion. Examples include participants who related feeling “confused,” “bewildered,” “shocked,” and “astounded.” Overall, 5.63% of participants reported feeling in response to the challenging classroom situation.

## 3.2 | Regression analyses

### 3.2.1 | Significance of models

Table 4 displays each of the 12 regression models, the results of the model evaluation tests, the goodness-of-fit tests, and the Cox and Snell  $R^2$  values for the statistically significant models. Cox and Snell  $R^2$  values provide a more conservative estimate of effect size since their values do not reach a maximum of one (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003). The Hosmer–Lemeshow tests were not significant for only certain outcomes and predictors, signifying that only certain models were a good fit for the data.

According to the measures above, Model 2 ( $\chi^2(11) = 25.668; p < 0.01$ ), Model 4 ( $\chi^2(11) = 22.804; p < 0.05$ ), and Model 6 ( $\chi^2(11) = 19.783; p < 0.05$ ) were statistically significant. Model 2 explained 15.0% of the variance in the presence of the Problem-Solving category of thoughts. Model 4 explained 13.4% of the variance in the presence of the Needing a Break category of thoughts. Model 6 explained 11.8% of the variance in the presence of the Anger category of feelings. These statistics are summarized in Table 4.

**TABLE 4** Likelihood ratio tests and goodness-of-fit tests for models that consisted of individual, classroom, and school-level variables ( $n = 158$ )

Model	DV	Model evaluation	Goodness-of-fit test	Cox and Snell
		Likelihood ratio tests	Hosmer–Lemeshow	$R^2$
1	Not Able to Resolve Situation	205.669	10.98	
2	Problem-Solving	191.74**	7.73	0.150
3	Factors Beyond Classroom	139.81	5.39	
4	Needing Break	93.30*	4.71	0.134
5	Personal Locus of Control	51.51	9.63	
6	Anger	136.67*	6.46	0.118
7	Sadness	204.08	9.07	
8	Anxiety	186.58	11.18	
9	Emotional Exhaustion	151.94	7.39	
10	Incompetence	109.18	4.27	
11	Positivity	103.56	9.42	
12	Confusion	56.03	9.64	

Note. Individual predictors included grade level taught, educational background, class size, school region, student discipline concern in class, student discipline concern in school, professional support received, and social-emotional support received.

\* $p < 0.05$ . \*\* $p < 0.01$ .

### 3.2.2 | Significance of predictors at the individual, classroom, and school level

Table 5 displays the results of the individual predictors for each model pertaining to different categories of thoughts and feelings. The strongest and most consistent predictor of different categories of thoughts and feelings was Professional Support Received, which was statistically significant in predicting the presence of the Problem-Solving ( $\chi^2(1) = 13.883$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), Needing a Break ( $\chi^2(1) = 7.018$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), and Personal Locus of Control ( $\chi^2(1) = 7.469$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ) thought categories, and the Anxiety ( $\chi^2(1) = 5.144$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ) feelings category. More specifically, increasing the professional support teachers reported receiving was associated with a (4.60 times) increased likelihood of a Problem-Solving thought response, a (0.16 times) decreased likelihood of a Needing a Break thought response, an (10.63 times) increased likelihood of a Personal Locus of Control thought response, and a (0.40 times) decreased likelihood of an Anxiety feelings response. Another more common predictor of different categories of thoughts and feelings was middle school Grade Level Taught, which was statistically significant in predicting the presence of the Factors Beyond Classroom thought category ( $\chi^2(1) = 4.675$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ), and the Sadness ( $\chi^2(1) = 3.880$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ) and Positivity ( $\chi^2(1) = 3.947$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ) feelings categories. Likewise, a middle school Grade Level taught was associated with a (0.26 times) decreased likelihood of a Factors Beyond Classroom thought response, a (0.42 times) decreased likelihood of a Sadness feelings response, and a (4.19 times) increased likelihood of a Positivity feelings response.

Additionally, assorted other individual, classroom, and school-level factors were found to predict the presence of different categories of thoughts and feelings. A Southern ( $\chi^2(1) = 4.282$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ) or Western ( $\chi^2(1) = 7.80$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ) school region was statistically significant in predicting the Problem-Solving thoughts category. Namely, teachers who identified a Southern or Western school location displayed a (0.28 times and 0.13 times) decreased likelihood of a Problem-Solving response. Student Discipline Concern in Class was statistically significant ( $\chi^2(1) = 4.207$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ) in predicting the Factors Beyond Classroom thoughts category; and specifically a higher level of concern about in-class student discipline was associated with an (1.94 times) increased likelihood of a Factors Beyond Classroom response. A master's level ( $\chi^2(1) = 6.039$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ) Educational Background was

statistically significant in predicting the Anger feelings category, a teacher's high school ( $\chi^2(1) = 4.018$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ) Grade Level Taught was statistically significant in predicting the Sadness feelings category, and Social-Emotional Support Received ( $\chi^2(1) = 7.026$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ) was significant in predicting the Positivity feelings category. More specifically, teachers who attained their master's degree displayed a (0.30 times) decreased likelihood of a Anger response. Teachers who taught high school displayed (0.38 times) decreased likelihood of a Sadness response. Lastly, increasing the amount of social-emotional support teachers received was associated with an (3.79 times) increased likelihood of a Positivity feelings response.

### 3.2.3 | ATSPPH scale

This study also sought to determine urban teachers' level of openness to seeking professional psychological help in coping with emotional distress. Teachers ( $N = 150$ ) in the current study reported slightly positive help-seeking attitudes ( $M = 19.87$ ;  $SD = 6.27$ ). On average, these teachers rated each item on the scale a 2.0, signifying partial agreement with statements that reflected a positive orientation to pursuing professional psychological services.

## 4 | DISCUSSION

This study examined the content and prevalence of urban teachers' thoughts and emotions in response to a challenging classroom situation. In summary, the data revealed that most teachers' thoughts pertained to not being able to resolve challenging situations effectively. A sizable portion of urban teachers reported thoughts that pertained to their problem-solving abilities and factors beyond the classroom that impacted their experiences of reported challenging classroom situations.

Examining the content of urban teachers' thoughts permitted a more precise conceptualization of what was on these teachers' mind, or what *stressed* them out, during and after they confronted a challenging classroom situation. In doing so, many of the above findings align with those of past educational researchers. For example, in line with Lambert et al. (2015) model of teacher stress, which purports that stress arises when teachers make a cognitive appraisal that their classroom *demands* exceed their classroom *resources*, the majority of teachers in this study thought that they lacked the necessary resources to resolve the challenging classroom situation (e.g., "I had no idea how to resolve this situation"). Lambert et al. (2015) also found that groups of elementary teachers who perceived high demands in relation to resources had lower levels of job satisfaction and were more likely to be planning to leave the profession. Likewise, perhaps teachers who related thoughts of needing a break or leaving the profession can be viewed through this lens, that is, their need for a break or desire to leave the teaching profession reveal a perception that the demands of the challenging classroom situations they confront are disproportionate to the resources they possess to resolve them.

The significance of thoughts pertaining to problem-solving abilities and factors beyond classroom also has precedence in the teacher stress literature. According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984) model of stress, part of the cognitive *appraisal* process entails a judgment about what, if any, coping actions would help in resolving the challenging workplace scenario. Urban teachers who reported thoughts related to problem-solving seem to have been involved in the process of deciding which coping actions to take. Additionally, the mention of a myriad of factors beyond classroom, such as students' family background and school-level policies, in teachers' thought responses further confirm studies that identify these aspects as potential teacher stressors (Blasé, 1986; Chaplain, 2008; Forlin, 2001; Gordon, 2002).

The data also revealed that urban teachers related a diverse range of emotions, mostly negative, in response to a challenging classroom situation. Notably, four out of five teachers reported a form of anger, nearly half reported a sense of sadness, and a sizable portion reported feelings of anxiety and emotional exhaustion. The finding that urban teachers face situations that cause them to experience distressing emotions is no surprise. Researchers have commonly defined the term "teacher stress" as a teacher's experience of unpleasant negative emotions, such as

anger, anxiety, frustration, or depression, produced by some aspect of his/her work (Kyriacou, 2001). Furthermore, urban teachers have been found to experience higher levels of stress, and thus higher levels of distressing emotions, than their suburban counterparts (Abel & Seward, 1999). However, the prevalence and extreme content (e.g., “despondent” and feeling “terror”) of these negative emotions, especially given the reality that urban teachers experience challenging classroom situations on a daily basis, was revealing. Perhaps, in line with Chang (2009) antecedent appraisal model, the teachers who reported feelings of emotional exhaustion are suffering from the repeated activation of unpleasant emotions by triggering challenging classroom situations.

The analyses of within group differences in teachers’ thoughts and feelings in response to challenging situations revealed important findings that have clear implications for helping urban teachers have more productive thoughts and less negative feelings about their situations in the classroom. First and foremost, the regression analyses revealed that teachers who have higher levels of professional support have far more productive thoughts in reaction to challenging situations and have less anxiety. Furthermore, teachers with more social and emotional support had more positive emotional responses to classroom challenges. With respect to other within-group differences, teaching middle school students was more related to lower sadness and increased positive emotions associated with challenging classroom situations. In terms of areas for potential interventions to be made available, these data support the contention that increased support from the school will help teachers feel more capable of handling classroom challenges. When their help-seeking attitudes were measured using the ATSPPHS, teachers reported a relative openness to seeking professional mental health services. This suggests that, if presented with the resources and information to pursue these services, on average these teachers would consider this form of support. Likewise, professional psychological services may serve as an opportunity to increase social and emotional support for teachers who may not have such natural supports in their current contexts.

#### 4.1 | Implications

The current study’s findings can inform practical efforts to better support urban teachers by equipping them with the knowledge, skills, and importantly, professional support to meet the social and emotional demands of their job. Better supporting urban teachers can come in many forms including providing professional development, or changing policies to increase support and resources. For example, given the prevalence of thoughts that reflect general perceptions of not being able to resolve challenging classroom situations, greater efforts could be made to assess which specific aspects of their jobs urban teachers feel less well equipped to perform. Likewise, individual teacher consultations or coaching might be made available to provide teachers with the knowledge and skills to effectively resolve classroom situations they identify as challenging. Such training may also entail helping urban teachers develop more self-compassionate and positive ways of viewing their efforts to resolve these situations.

Furthermore, given the prevalence of distressing thoughts and emotions, urban teachers should be aware of the potential impact of such thoughts and emotions and how to be provided with skills to better manage them in the short-term and lessen them in the long term. Psychoeducation that informs urban teachers of the role that thoughts and emotions play in responding to stress may have a powerful role in normalizing an intrapsychic experience that many may consider too shameful to disclose. Additionally, teachers would benefit from training in skills related to emotional regulation (e.g., relaxation, mindfulness, etc.) given the emotionally activating nature of their occupation.

An additional form of psychoeducation, given teachers’ relative openness to pursuing professional psychological services, should include information and resources about different modalities of mental health services and their potential emotional benefits. Supportive forums, such as therapy or teacher support groups, may serve as avenues for teachers to process their thoughts and feelings associated with challenging classroom situations and thus lessen the long-term emotional burden teachers carry. Lastly, interventions to aid teachers in activating teachers’ positive emotions about their profession may serve to lessen their daily distress.

Since professional support was such an important predictor of a host of relevant thoughts and feelings pertaining to coping with stressful, challenging classroom situations, administrators may serve a powerful role in

improving the well-being of urban teachers. There are a variety of ways they might act which would make a difference, but a starting point would be to improve efforts to determine where teachers need greater professional support. Once specific areas of greater professional support are identified, administrators can make better efforts in allocating resources to provide as much support as possible. For example, if in one urban school, teachers need greater access to master teachers who can serve as mentors (or coaches), administrators could work with their districts and/or local universities to provide additional support for their staff. In some cases, if the professional support desired is the availability of professional counselors, administrators could work with their districts to identify Employee Assistance Programs or mental health professionals that are used by the district who could provide additional support of this nature.

## 4.2 | Limitations and future research

Despite the merits of the study, there were several limitations impacting its external validity. First, the ability to generalize the findings of this study to a broader sample of urban teachers would be limited by selection bias. Participants were recruited for this study via online forums and professional networks. Teachers self-selected to participate in a study that examined the “experiences of teachers working in urban schools, including stressful experiences associated with the daily realities of the teaching profession” for the purpose of learning “more about how best to support teachers who work in urban schools.” Likewise, urban teachers who wanted to share their experiences and sought to provide such information for the betterment of other teachers took the survey. These desires may not be reflective of other members of the teaching profession. Since the participating urban teachers were also Nationally Certified Teachers, they may not represent the overall population of urban teachers. Also, data collection occurred during the months of November and December 2016 and reflects teachers’ thoughts and emotions during one snapshot in time.

Further limitations of the study suggest avenues for further research. For example, although the study produced findings concerned the content of urban teachers’ self-reported thoughts and emotions, it is beyond the purview of this study to infer types of teachers’ thoughts and emotions that are actually adaptive to their social, emotional, or pedagogical functioning, or that of their students. Potential future studies may entail investigating teachers’ thought patterns, mindsets, or emotional states that promote their success and allow them to remain in the urban teaching profession in the long term. Conversely, investigating maladaptive thoughts, mindsets, and emotional states may provide psychological insight into which teachers leave the profession early. Furthermore, it is important to identify what interventions teachers believe would be effective in reducing their stress. Interestingly, Ouellette et al. (2018) found that training teachers in evidence-based behavioral intervention techniques did not reduce their overall levels of stress or increase their job satisfaction, so it would be important to find out from urban teachers what they believe would bring about such outcomes. Given the potential importance of professional psychological services in reducing teacher stress, such an investigation should also entail investigating factors that promote or serve as barriers for teachers in pursuing the professional or social-emotional support they need.

## 5 | CONCLUSION

This study contributed to the literature by examining the content and prevalence of urban teachers’ thoughts and emotions. Findings suggest that when confronted with a challenging classroom situation, urban teachers’ thoughts commonly pertained to not being able to handle the situation, to problem-solving, and of factors beyond classroom that influence these situations. Urban teachers commonly experienced negative emotional states, such as anger, sadness, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion. Furthermore, urban teachers who received more professional and social-emotional support experienced more productive thoughts and emotions and less negative feelings about challenging classroom situations. Overall, teachers demonstrated a relative openness to seeking professional

psychological help as an avenue for support. Researchers, policymakers, and practitioners may wish to examine ways to intervene to provide urban teachers with professional and social-emotional support to reduce their distress and encourage them to stay in the profession for longer.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

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