Resilience Under Pressure: A Scoping Review of Stress Coping Mechanisms among Malaysian School Leaders

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ABSTRACT

Background: School leaders in Malaysia navigate complex stressors, including administrative overload, inspector pressures and systemic challenges, necessitating robust coping mechanisms to maintain resilience and leadership effectiveness. Global literature does take into account educator stress but empirical research on coping strategies among Malaysian school leaders is limited with an important gap highlighted. Objectives: This scoping review seeks to identify stress coping mechanisms among Malaysian school leaders, explore associated stressors, examine cultural and contextual influences, and propose actionable interventions. Methods: Following Arksey and O'Malley's (2005) framework and PRISMA guidelines, we screened 20 studies that met the inclusion/exclusion criteria from an initial pool of 310 and then included 12 empirical studies (2000–2025) focused on Malaysian primary and secondary school leaders or teachers with leadership applicability. Data were charted and synthesized narratively, prioritizing qualitative themes over statistical metrics. Results: Key stressors include role overload, job demands, inspector pressures, and technostress, while adaptive coping mechanisms encompass teamwork, spirituality, task distribution, optimism and time management. Maladaptive coping, such as smoking was less prevalent. Cultural moderators like collectivism and Islamic spirituality, alongside contextual factors - urban vs. rural, public vs. private schools, significantly shape coping strategies. A framework grounded in the transactional stress model integrates these findings, highlighting leadership applicability. Conclusions: Malaysian school leaders rely on social and spiritual coping to manage administrative and systemic stressors, with collectivism fostering resilience. Interventions, including training programs and stress indices are proposed to enhance leader well-being. Future research should explore explicit leadership coping, longitudinal designs and broader demographic factors.

Keywords: Stress coping, School leaders, Resilience, Educational leadership, Scoping review.

INTRODUCTION

It is a high-stakes role in school leadership, and school leaders have to walk the tight rope of administrative roles, stakeholders' expectations and education reforms with personal and organizational resilience (Constantinides, 2022). Around the world, literature points towards the effect of stress on school leaders and workload stressors, accountability stresses and technological demands are major stressors for burnout and reduced effectiveness (DeMatthews et al., 2021; Doyle Fosco et al., 2023; Klocko & Wells, 2015). In Malaysia, a vibrant education system in a multicultural nation, the school principals have their unique set of challenges based on administrative overload, inspector and SDE/DOE officer pressures, syllabus pressure, and resource constraint (Hassan et al., 2019; Tahir et al., 2019; Zarin et al., 2022). These stressors are particularly strong in Malaysia's collectivist culture, where collective values, Islamic religiosity and hierarchical relationships influence how leaders assess and deal with stress (Azizi et al., 2025; Jogulu & Ferkins, 2016; Ng et al., 2024).

Malaysia's education system, which is administered by the Ministry of Education, places significant burdens upon school leaders like principals, deputy heads and senior teachers, who have to oversee curriculum

implementation, human resource management and compliance with national standards (Adams et al., 2020; Kenayathulla et al., 2024; Ministry of Education, 2011). Studies like Hassan et al. (2019) cite role overload as one of the key stressors, while Tahir et al. (2019) also speak of the unusual pressure from external examiners, reflective of Malaysia's top-down educational governance. Systemic stressors such as technostress from digital integration and fiscal problems in rural schools add to leadership complexity. Nevertheless, Malaysian leaders show resilience in adaptive coping techniques such as collaboration, sharing problems, and spirituality, which continue to be poorly researched in systematic reviews (Karunanithi & Suberamaniam, 2015; Zarin et al., 2022).

Previous literature on teacher stress tends to target teachers in general or broad stressors, with less focus on leadership-specific coping strategies. This omission is significant given that leaders' well-being directly affects school climate, teacher morale and student achievement (Hussain, 2025; Sun & Leithwood, 2012). A scoping review, as recommended by Arksey and O'Malley (2005), is suitable to map the scope of evidence, identify coping strategies, and look at cultural and contextual determinants of resilience. Through the synthesis of empirical evidence between 2000 and 2025, this review aims to provide a comprehensive picture of stress coping among Malaysian school leaders, with implications for leadership practice, professional development, and policy interventions. The review also considers cultural subtleties, including collectivism and spirituality, which are central in the educational landscape in Malaysia. The following three objectives are addressed in this scoping review:

1. To identify Malaysian school leaders' stress coping mechanisms, both adaptive (e.g., teamwork, spirituality) and maladaptive (e.g., smoking).
2. To examine stressors inducing stress in Malaysian school leaders, including administrative, interpersonal and systemic stressors.
3. To recommend interventions, such as training and policy levers, to enhance resilience and school leaders' well-being.
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MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Design

This scoping review follows Arksey and O'Malley's (2005) five-stage framework including identifying the research question, identifying relevant studies, study selection, charting data and collating results. Its' also supplemented by Levac et al. (2010) recommendations for methodological quality. The review is informed by PRISMA guidelines for transparent reporting (Tricco et al., 2018). The iterative process maps the scope of evidence on coping mechanisms of stress among Malaysian school leaders, including qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods studies. No consultation with stakeholders was conducted, but the process was refined iteratively to suit the aim of the review and the Malaysian education context.

Eligibility Criteria

Studies were included if they met the following criteria:

1. Population: Focused on Malaysian primary or secondary school leaders (e.g., principals, deputy heads, senior teachers) or teachers with explicit or implicit applicability to leadership roles (e.g., shared stressors like role overload).
2. Concept: Addressed stress coping mechanisms, including adaptive strategies (e.g., teamwork, spirituality) and maladaptive behaviors (e.g., smoking).
3. Context: Conducted in Malaysian educational settings, spanning public, private, urban, rural, Tamil, or Islamic schools.
4. Study Types: Empirical studies (qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods), peer-reviewed articles, theses, grey literature or systematic reviews focused on coping mechanisms.
5. Publication: Published in English or Malay between January 2000 and April 2025 to capture contemporary evidence.

Exclusion criteria included:

1. Studies solely on teachers without leadership applicability.
2. Studies not addressing stress coping mechanisms.
3. Non-Malaysian contexts or higher education settings (e.g., Aziz, 2015).
4. Non-empirical studies, except systematic reviews.
5. Publications in languages other than English or Malay.
6. Studies before 2000 to ensure relevance to current educational policies.

Explicit applicability referred to direct leadership focus (e.g., deputy heads in Tahir et al., 2018), while implicit applicability included teacher studies with leadership-relevant stressors or coping (e.g., Hassan et al., 2019).

Search Strategy

Search strategy targeted databases such as Scopus, Web of Science and ERIC to identify relevant literature. Keywords included "stress coping," "school leaders," "principals," "teachers," "Malaysia," "resilience," "stressors," and "educational leadership," combined with Boolean operators (AND, OR) to broaden the search. Synonyms like "head teachers," "administrators," and "coping strategies" were included to capture diverse terminology. Grey literature, including theses, conference papers, and Ministry of Education reports, was considered to ensure inclusivity. The search was limited to 2000–2025 and English or Malay publications, reflecting Malaysia's bilingual academic landscape. Literature was searched between the years 2000 and 2025 in nine databases because there was a lack of studies on stress coping mechanisms among Malaysian school leaders. Refer to Review

Table 1 for documentation of search.

Table 1 Search Documentation

Database/Source	Search String	Results (Initial)	Results (After Screening)
Scopus	("school leader*" OR principal* OR headteacher* OR headmaster* OR "school administrator*") AND ("stress coping" OR "coping strateg*" OR "coping skill*" OR "stress management" OR "coping mechanism*" OR "stress relief" OR "well-being") AND (Malaysia OR Malaysian OR "Malaysian school*")	157	120
ERIC	("school leader*" OR principal* OR headteacher*) AND ("stress coping" OR "coping mechanism*") AND Malaysia	122	100
Web of Science	("school leader*" OR principal*) AND ("stress coping" OR "coping mechanism*") AND Malaysia	116	90

Note: The comprehensive search (2000–2025) in various databases produced 395 initial results, which were narrowed down to 310 following deduplications. Following application of inclusion/exclusion criteria, 12 studies were selected for the final review, testifying to the rarity of studies focusing on Malaysian school leaders' coping mechanisms for stress.

Screening and Selection

A two-stage screening process was applied to 20 identified studies. In the pre-screening phase, four studies were excluded for irrelevant contexts or topics: Aziz (2015) focused on higher education, Mahmud (2018) on non-stress issues, Hisham (2017) on credit card behaviour and Naing (2021) on smoking habits without leadership relevance. Of the remaining 16 studies, title/abstract and full-text reviews were conducted, resulting in 12 included studies that met eligibility criteria as seen in

Table *2*. Four studies were excluded during screening.

Data Charting

Data were extracted into a 5-column charting table, capturing study details, study design (e.g., quantitative, qualitative), coping mechanisms (e.g., teamwork, spirituality), cultural coping mechanisms (e.g., collectivism), and their key findings.

Synthesis of Results

Synthesis followed a narrative approach, guided by thematic analysis in structuring findings into coherent themes: social coping, spiritual resilience, administrative burden, and cultural resilience. Qualitative findings, e.g., on the benefits of teamwork (Hassan et al., 2019) and spiritual practice (Ab Aziz et al., 2019), were prioritized over quantitative findings (e.g., ß values in Hassan et al., 2019). Integration was structured based on the transactional stress model and included stressors, coping style, cultural moderators, contextual variable and interventions. A conceptual framework was formulated to integrate the variables, presenting a conceptual model for Malaysian leadership resilience.

RESULTS

Study Selection

Screening began from 395 included studies, that reflect Malaysia's educational research context. However, studies on coping strategies for Malaysian school leaders' stress are especially scarce, indicating gaps in the evidence and the need for this review. Four were excluded prior to screening since they were not within eligibility criteria. Of the 16 studies screened, 12 were included after title/abstract and full-text screening. Four were excluded at screening, and three others due to reasons concerning eligibility (e.g., inapplicability to leadership). **Figure** *1* - The PRISMA flow diagram in provides a graphical abstract of the decision process.

Study Characteristics

The 12 studies used different methodologies: quantitative (e.g., Hassan et al., 2019; Karunanithi and Suberamaniam (2015)), qualitative (e.g., Alizadegani et al. (2014); Hamid and Ghazali (2022), mixed-methods (e.g., Abu and Aziz (2010); Ab Aziz et al. (2019); Tahir et al. (2019), and one systematic review (Zarin et al., 2022). Populations ranged from school leaders such as deputy heads (Tahir et al., 2018) and head teachers (Hamid and Ghazali (2022)), administrators/senior teachers (Hashim & Kayode, 2010), to teachers with stressors or coping mechanisms of a leadership nature (e.g., Hassan et al., 2019; Karunanithi and Suberamaniam (2015)). Contexts were also wide-ranging, including public schools (e.g., Hassan et al., 2019; Tahir et al., 2018), private schools (e.g., Parahakaran (2021)), urban contexts (e.g., Tahir et al., 2018), rural contexts (e.g., Ab Aziz et al. (2019)), and specialist contexts such as Tamil (Karunanithi and Suberamaniam (2015)) and Islamic schools (Hashim & Kayode, 2010). Sample sizes ranged from small qualitative studies (e.g., Alizadegani et al. (2014), n=2) to large surveys (e.g., Zarin et al., 2022, n=8,967). Information on the studies is provided in

Table *2*.

Synthesis of Findings

Stressors

Administrative stress was the most common issue, mainly caused by role overload among primary school teachers, which affected their well-being (Hassan et al., 2019). High workloads and administrative duties also created chronic stress in secondary and Tamil schools (Zarin et al., 2022; Karunanithi & Suberamaniam, 2015). Deputy heads faced added pressure from inspectors and education officers due to Malaysia's hierarchical system (Tahir et al., 2018). Stress from student behavior was moderate but significant, requiring leaders to balance discipline and care (Zarin et al., 2022). Parental expectations further increased external pressure (Tahir et al., 2018). Other systemic stressors included technostress from digital tools (Zarin et al., 2022), curriculum-related

syllabus pressure in private schools (Parahakaran, 2021), and financial constraints in rural areas (Kaur, 2021). Overall, school administrators faced multiple stressors that required effective coping strategies. Figure 2 presents bar charts summarizing the percentage of studies reporting specific stressors and coping mechanisms among Malaysian school leaders.
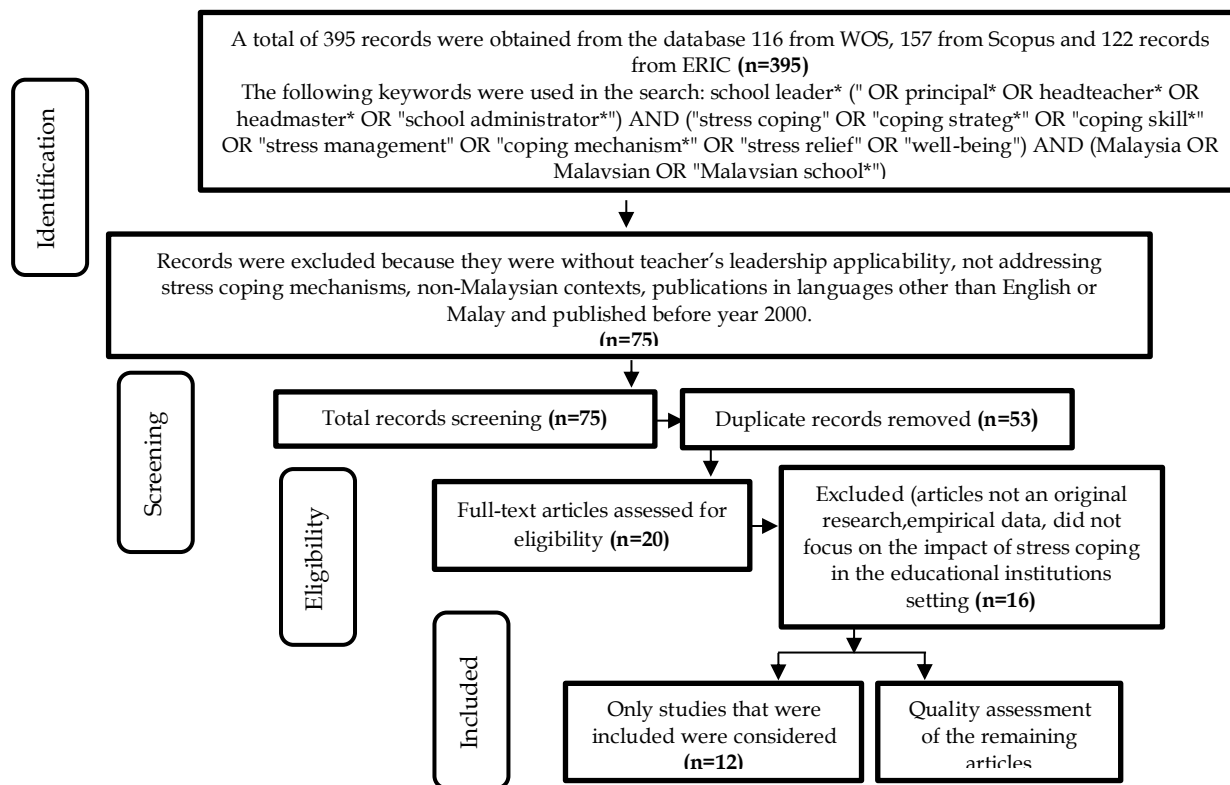

Figure 1 PRISMA Flow Diagram

Table 2 Data Extraction and Study Characteristics Table

Study Details	Study Design	Coping Mechanisms	Cultural Coping Mechanisms	Key Findings
(Abu & Aziz, 2010)	Mixed-methods (survey, n=95)	Evaluation-based, emotional, problem-based	None noted	School administration low stress; students' behavior moderate
(Alizadegani et al., 2014)	Qualitative (interviews, n=2)	Understanding stressors, student participation, emotion control	None noted	Effective emotion control reduces stress
(Al-Naggar et al., 2012)	Cross-sectional (survey, n=495)	Smoking (7.8%)	None noted	Smoking as maladaptive coping
(Ab Aziz et al., 2019)	Mixed-methods (survey, n=173)	Praying, time management	Islamic spirituality	Workload stress; spiritual coping effective
(Hamid & Ghazali, 2022)	Qualitative	Optimism, resilience	None noted	Optimism reduces stress
(Hashim & Kayode, 2010)	Mixed-methods	Problem-solving, collaboration	Islamic values	Administrative stress managed
(Mohamad & Jais, 2016)	Quantitative (survey)	Emotional intelligence	None noted	EI reduces stress
(Jamaludin & Ghazali, 2012)	Qualitative (open-ended, n=8)	Problem-sharing, time management	None noted	Administrative stress; social coping

(Karunanithi & Suberamaniam, 2015)	Quantitative (survey, n=240)	Planful problem-solving, positive reappraisal	Community	Urban higher stress; problem-focused coping
(Parahakaran, 2021)	Mixed-methods	Meditation, peer support	SSEHV	Syllabus stress; spiritual coping
(Tahir et al., 2019)	Mixed-methods (survey, n=120)	Collaboration (implied)	Hierarchical dynamics	Inspectors high stress; collaboration helps
(Zarin et al., 2022)	Systematic review (n=8967)	Problem-sharing, smoking	Collectivism	Job demands high stress; scarce coping data
(Hassan et al., 2019)	Quantitative (survey, n=150)	Teamwork, spirituality (implied)	Collectivism, spirituality	Role overload strongest stressor; teamwork helps

Bar charts (**Figure 2**) display the percentage of the studies citing individual stressors (left) among Malaysian school leaders. Most significant stressors identified were role overload (16.7% of the studies), inspector pressure (8.3%), student behavior (8.3%), parental expectation (8.3%), workload demands (8.3%), technostress (16.7%), and syllabus pressure (8.3%), documenting different kinds of challenges across different school environments. Bar graphs reporting the proportion of studies noting each stressor (left) and coping methods (right) by Malaysian school leaders. Effective coping styles like teamwork (16.7% of studies), spirituality (16.7%), division of labor (8.3%), optimism (8.3%), and time management (8.3%) are common, while poor coping like smoking (8.3%) is uncommon. The coping mechanisms were categorized under social support, spiritual practices, task-oriented, emotion-focused, time management, and maladaptive behaviors (see details in **Table 3**).
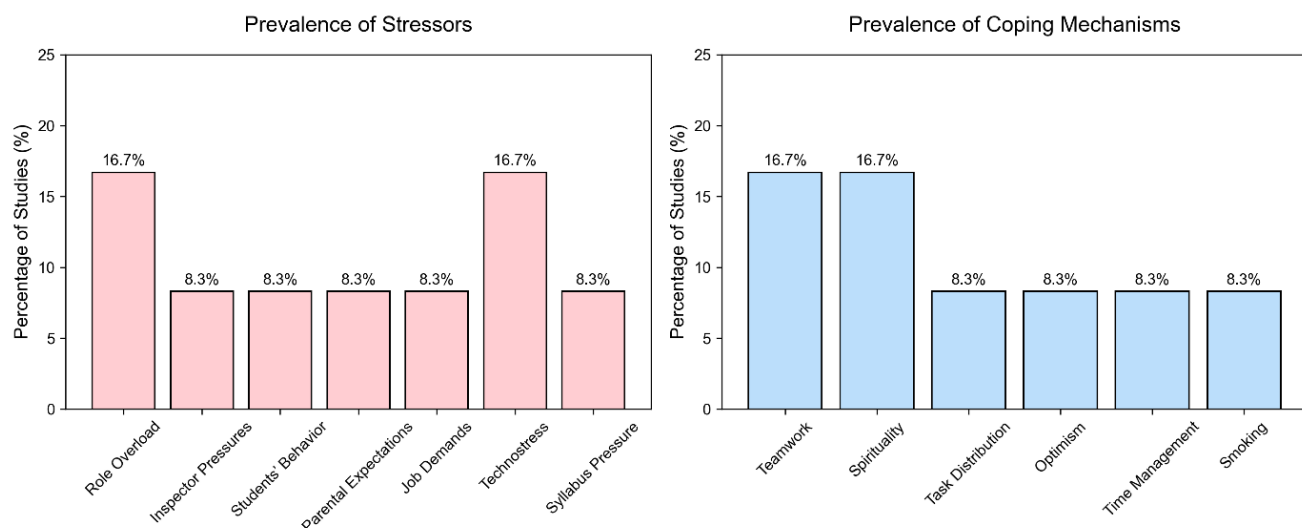

Figure 2 Prevalence of Coping Mechanisms and Stressors Among Malaysian School Leaders. (Source: This Study)

Coping Mechanisms

Adaptive coping strategies were widely documented, bearing witness to the Malaysian school leaders' resilience. Problem-focused coping took the form of planful problem-solving, effective within rural Tamil schools where teachers placed value on well-organized task planning (Karunanithi and Suberamaniam (2015)) and organized stressor ratings (Zarin et al., 2022). Task allocation eased role overload by apportioning duties across primary school staff, leading to efficiency (Hassan et al., 2019). Managing time was crucial to music teachers balancing instructional and administrative roles (Jamaludin & Ghazali, 2012) and rural school teachers maximizing workload (Kaur, 2021). Making use of training, such as engaging in stress management workshops, was proposed as an anticipatory practice among primary teachers (Hassan et al., 2019). Affective coping embraced positive reappraisal, whereby city Tamil teachers reconfigured adversity into learning experiences (Karunanithi and Suberamaniam (2015)), and control of emotions employed by personal instructors to self-regulate tension responses (Alizadegani et al. (2014); Zarin et al., 2022). Optimism characterized head teachers by developing resilience as well as effective leadership (Hamid and Ghazali (2022)). Social coping strategies, for instance,

teamwork, higher morale and shared responsibility in primary schools, a culture of support development (Hassan et al., 2019). Discussing issues with teachers or spouses eased administrative burdens (Zarin et al., 2022; Jamaludin & Ghazali, 2012), while peer working or peer collaboration with heads aided deputy heads in managing inspectors' pressure (Tahir et al., 2018). Peer support through SSEHV programs developed resilience among private schools (Parahakaran, 2021). Spiritual coping, including meditation, was effective in reducing syllabus stress in private schools (Parahakaran, 2021) and promoting inner peace in rural settings (Kaur, 2021). Praying according to Islamic tradition was an important resilience technique employed in rural schools (Ab Aziz et al. (2019)), with more generic spirituality aiding coping in primary schools (Hassan et al., 2019). Maladaptive coping, specifically smoking, was mentioned in 7.8% of secondary teachers and was related to dissatisfaction with work and tension (Al-Naggar et al., 2012; Zarin et al., 2022).

Table 3 Coping Strategies

Category	Coping Strategy	Type	Notes/Studies Referenced
Social Support	Teamwork	Adaptive	Enhances morale (Hassan et al., 2019; Zarin et al., 2022)
Spiritual Practices	Spirituality	Adaptive	Islamic praying, SSEHV meditation (Ab Aziz et al. (2019); Parahakaran, 2021)
Task-Oriented	Task Distribution	Adaptive	Often proposed in interventions (Hassan et al., 2019)
Emotion-Focused	Optimism	Adaptive	Bolsters resilience (Hamid and Ghazali (2022))
Time Management	Time Management	Adaptive	Noted in secondary settings (Zarin et al., 2022)
Maladaptive Behavior	Smoking	Maladaptive	Less common, health concerns (Al-Naggar et al., 2012)

Cultural Moderators

Coping processes were moderated significantly by cultural variables, reflecting the collectivist, religio-nature of Malaysia. Collectivism fostered inter-group support with stress reduction for problem-sharing with colleagues or spouse in secondary and music teachers (Zarin et al., 2022; Jamaludin & Ghazali, 2012). Working in groups, prevalent among primary schools, cultivated a spirit of shared work with increased morale and reduced loads for individuals (Hassan et al., 2019). Peer support through SSEHV programs in private schools encouraged resilience by creating networks of community (Parahakaran, 2021). Spirituality served as the framework for coping, particularly in rural and Islamic environments. Islamic practices such as praying and spiritual reflection were widely used by rural teachers to manage workload stress (Ab Aziz et al. (2019)) and by primary teachers to enhance inner strength (Hassan et al., 2019). SSEHV, an education program for values, advocated for meditation and inner peace, supporting private school educators with syllabus stress (Parahakaran, 2021). Power relations within a hierarchy increased tension, particularly for deputy heads confronted with inspector and SDE/DOE officer top-down pressures, reflecting Malaysia's formalized education system (Tahir et al., 2018). Social influences, such as the cultural values of the Tamil community, structured problem-focused coping in Tamil urban and rural schools, reflecting resilience through cultural identity (Karunanithi and Suberamaniam (2015)). Islamic school values framed administrators' coping, which included spiritual and communal strategies (Hashim & Kayode, 2010). These culture moderators are most crucial for the school leaders because they need to navigate communal norms, spiritual actions, and hierarchies with the goal of creating staff coherence and resilience.

Contextual Factors

Contextual influences impacted stress and coping styles. Urban settings experienced higher stress levels due to challenging work and bureaucratic pressures, as seen in Tamil schools (Karunanithi and Suberamaniam (2015)) and inspectorate public schools (Tahir et al., 2018). Urban leaders experienced complex stakeholder relationships, including parental expectations, that required adaptive coping like collaboration and optimism (Tahir et al., 2018; Hamid and Ghazali (2022)). Rural settings, however, experienced moderate stress, where religious coping styles, such as praying and meditation, were prevalent among rural educators (Ab Aziz et al. (2019); Hassan et al., 2019; Kaur, 2021). Rural schools experienced scarce resources, augmenting financial stressors but fostering community-based resilience (Kaur, 2021). School types also impacted experiences: public

schools coped with administrative pressure and overload of roles due to national curriculum pressures and management systems (Tahir et al., 2018; Hassan et al., 2019). Private schools were subject to syllabus pressure, necessitating spiritual and peer coping (Parahakaran, 2021). Tamil schools engaged community-based problem-solving based on cultural identity (Karunanithi and Suberamaniam (2015)), while Islamic schools integrated religious values into administration coping (Hashim & Kayode, 2010). These environmental determinants show the diverse challenges and coping strategies in Malaysia's educational environment, guiding particular leadership reactions.

Interventions

Interventions to enhance school leaders' resilience were suggested or implied across studies. Stress management training programs for primary teachers in time management and task allocation skills can be implemented and extended to leaders to prevent role overload (Hassan et al., 2019). Optimism and emotional intelligence workshops could supplement head teachers, with evidence from Hamid and Ghazali (2022). Policy measures, such as the creation of a stress index, were called for to measure comprehensively stressors, coping resources, and outcomes, to offer evidence-based intervention in leader wellbeing support (Zarin et al., 2022). This would be utilized as an index to guide Ministry of Education policies aligned with the professional development focus and education reforms in Malaysia. These interventions address school leaders' operation necessities, giving them tools with which to address administrative and systemic issues and to access cultural strengths like collectivism and spirituality.

DISCUSSION

Summary of Evidence

This 12-empirical-study scoping review (2000–2025) synthesizes Malaysian school leaders' stress-coping strategies, bridges concepts, themes, types of evidence, review purposes and applicability to priority groups while contextualising findings in Asian educational settings. Concepts are stressors (administrative, interpersonal, systemic), coping strategies (adaptive, maladaptive), cultural moderators (collectivism, spirituality) and contextual variables (urban/rural, school type). Themes like social coping, spiritual resilience, administrative burden and cultural resilience that emerged from diverse evidence: qualitative studies (e.g., Hamid and Ghazali (2022), on optimism), quantitative questionnaires (e.g., Zarin et al., 2022, n=8,967), mixed-methods (e.g., Tahir et al., 2018; Ab Aziz et al. (2019)), and a systematic review (Zarin et al., 2022). Objective 2 (stressors) was tackled, with administrative stressors like role overload dominating primary schools (Hassan et al., 2019), while inspector pressures faced deputy heads in public schools (Tahir et al., 2018). Interpersonal stressors like students' behavior and parents' expectations were moderate but substantial in secondary settings (Zarin et al., 2022). Systemic stressors like technostress resulting from digital integration and syllabus pressure embodied modern-day educational demands (Zarin et al., 2022; Parahakaran, 2021). For Objective 1 (coping strategies), adaptive coping prevailed: social coping through teamwork improved morale and shared responsibility (Hassan et al., 2019), spiritual coping through Islamic praying and SSEHV meditation encouraged inner strength (Ab Aziz et al. (2019); Parahakaran, 2021), and emotion-focused coping like optimism improved leadership resilience (Hamid and Ghazali (2022)). Maladaptive coping, i.e., smoking, occurred less frequently but correlated with stress (Al-Naggar et al., 2012). Objective 3 (cultural/contextual factors) came up with collectivism as a moderator that brought problem-sharing and peer support (Zarin et al., 2022; Hassan et al., 2019), and Islamic spirituality formed the basis of rural coping (Ab Aziz et al. (2019)). Urban schools were under more administrative pressure (Tahir et al., 2018), whereas rural environments tapped spiritual resilience (Hassan et al., 2019). Public schools underwent role overload, and private schools underwent syllabus pressure (Parahakaran, 2021). Objective 4 (interventions) proposed training plans to optimize task distribution and a stress index to monitor well-being (Hassan et al., 2019; Zarin et al., 2022). Relevance to key groups involves school principals adopting teamwork and spiritual practices to manage stress, policymakers (e.g., Ministry of Education) adopting training and stress indices to support resilience, and teachers creating culturally responsive professional development to supplement Malaysia's collectivist culture.

Implications for School Leadership

The findings have theoretical and practical implications for Malaysian school administration. Practically, administrators can use social coping strategies, such as enhancing teamwork and sharing of problems, to resist administrative strains, as seen among primary schools (Hassan et al., 2019). Such coping strategies are consistent with Malaysia's collectivist culture, where group support enhances morale and reduces pressure on the individual. Spiritual coping, including Islamic prayer (Ab Aziz et al. (2019)) and SSEHV meditation (Parahakaran, 2021), offers culturally tailored resilience interventions that can be incorporated into professional development training. Time management training courses, task delegation, and emotional intelligence can also better equip leaders to cope with role overload and job demands (Hassan et al., 2019; Hamid and Ghazali (2022)). For example, positive reappraisal and optimism workshops could be tapping into the strengths of head teachers (Hamid and Ghazali (2022)), while stress management training could be designed to address systematic stressors such as technostress (Zarin et al., 2022). Policy-wise, a stress index by the Ministry of Education, proposed by Zarin et al. (2022), can systematically monitor leader well-being and direct targeted interventions while supporting Malaysia's educational reform agenda. Such an index would track stressors (e.g., role overload, inspector pressures) and effective coping, providing evidence-based inputs for resource planning. Theoretically, the model generalizes the transactional stress model by including cultural moderators like collectivism and spirituality, yielding a culturally nuanced conceptualization of leadership resilience (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). This model can be used for global leadership studies, particularly in collectivist cultures, where religious coping and community coping can enhance resilience (Leithwood & Sun, 2012). The model also highlights the confluence of contextual factors, e.g., urban and rural settings, which can be used to further comparative leadership studies.

Strengths and Limitations

The review's strength lies in its comprehensive synthesis of 12 diverse studies, spanning a wide array of stressors, coping mechanisms and cultural moderators. The inclusion of qualitative, quantitative and mixed-methods studies, coupled with a systematic review (Zarin et al., 2022), provides methodological robustness. Focus on Malaysia's collectivist and spiritually rich climate provides unique insights, transferable to similar education systems in culturally equivalent countries. The thematic analysis that identifies patterns of social coping, spiritual resilience, administrative burden and cultural resilience contributes to qualitative depth and aligns with the review goals. The conceptual framework predicated on the transactional stress model is a new contribution to leadership literature by integrating culture and context within its analysis. Limitations must be acknowledged, however. Some research employed inferred leadership coping styles, particularly in teacher-focused studies (e.g., Hassan et al., 2019; Tahir et al., 2018), thereby discrediting direct extrapolation to deputy heads or principals. Small sample sizes in qualitative research, e.g., Alizadegani (2014, n=2), compromised generalizability, whereas regional concentrations, e.g., Hassan et al.'s (2019) Jerantut sample, might not accurately reflect urban or diverse Malaysian contexts. The scarcity of longitudinal research constrains knowledge about coping effectiveness over time, and the prevalence of cross-sectional designs (e.g., Hassan et al., 2019; Karunanithi and Suberamaniam (2015)) limits causal inference. These constraints highlight the need for cautious interpretation and targeted future studies.

Future Research Recommendations

Future research needs to overcome the limitations of the review and extend the evidence base. In particular, leadership-oriented research needs to look at coping styles among deputy heads and principals beyond teacher-centred findings (e.g., Hassan et al., 2019). Longitudinal designs would assess the long-term efficacy of coping strategies, such as teamwork or religious activities, to provide insight into sustained resilience. Larger samples, comprising diverse regions (e.g., urban Kuala Lumpur, rural Sabah) and school types (e.g., national, vernacular, international), would enhance generalizability. Other stressors, such as gender-related stress, work experience, or leadership tenure, are worthy of examination to establish differential effects on coping. Intervention studies, such as the efficacy of training programs (Hassan et al., 2019) or stress management technology, may be able to offer actionable solutions for leader well-being. Comparative research with other collectivist cultures (e.g., Indonesia, Singapore) may be able to cross-validate the applicability of the framework, testing whether universally, collectivism and spirituality will enhance resilience. Finally, by embracing innovative

methodologies, such as mixed-methods or big data analysis, subtle stress and coping patterns might become apparent, consistent with Malaysia's push for educational innovation. These approaches would strengthen the evidence base, guiding Malaysian school leaders in how to more effectively steer a complexifying education environment.

CONCLUSION

This scoping review gives a detailed integration of Malaysian school principals' stress coping measures, highlighting resilience to administrative, interpersonal and systemic stresses. Overload roles, job demand and pressures from inspectors dominated the challenges but were met by resilience through leaders' adaptability using teamwork, spirituality, delegating tasks, and optimism. Collectivist nature and religious orientation of Malaysia, specifically Islamic practice and SSEHV principles, foster effectiveness in coping, promoting inner and communal strength. Contextual variables, including urban versus rural settings and public versus private schools, affect diverse coping strategies and therefore targeted interventions are essential. The framework developed, based on the transactional stress model, integrates stressors, coping, moderators and interventions into an overall model of leadership resilience. Proposed interventions, such as training programs and a stress index, are aligned with Malaysia's learning agenda, allowing leaders to flourish. Stakeholders, most likely the Ministry of Education, must invest in culturally responsive strategies promoting leader wellness to ensure long-term educational excellence. Future studies of this explicit leadership coping, longitudinal designs, and diverse samples will keep this area on the move, allowing Malaysian school leaders to lead resiliently and impactfully.

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