

Managing Mental Well-Being Among School Leaders in Malaysian Fully Residential Schools: A Sequential Explanatory Mixed-Methods Framework

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ABSTRACT

School leaders are increasingly required to manage complex administrative, instructional, organisational and stakeholder demands while maintaining effective leadership and personal well-being. The increasing complexity of school leadership has consequently generated greater scholarly interest in the conditions that influence leaders' psychological well-being and sustainability (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Leithwood et al., 2020). However, research specifically examining the mental well-being of school leaders in Malaysian Fully Residential Schools (Sekolah Berasrama Penuh, SBP) remains limited. This study proposes a contextual framework for examining and managing the mental well-being of SBP principals through a Sequential Explanatory Mixed Methods design. Guided by the pragmatist paradigm, the study integrates the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) Model and the PERMA model of well-being. The quantitative phase examines Job Demands, Job Resources and mental well-being, while the subsequent qualitative phase explores principals' experiences, challenges and strategies for managing their well-being. Quantitative findings will inform the qualitative phase, after which both strands will be integrated through joint displays and meta-inferences. The proposed framework is intended to explain how workplace demands and resources interact with the multidimensional well-being of school leaders within the Malaysian educational context. The study is expected to contribute theoretically through the contextual application of JD-R and PERMA, methodologically through mixed-methods integration, and practically through implications for leadership development and organisational support. As the empirical phases have not yet been completed, this article presents the conceptual and methodological foundation of the study rather than reporting empirical findings.

Keywords: school leadership; mental well-being; job demands; job resources; JD-R model; PERMA; fully residential schools; Malaysia; mixed methods

INTRODUCTION

School leadership has become increasingly complex as educational systems respond to accountability pressures, policy reforms, technological transformation and changing expectations from multiple stakeholders. Contemporary principals are expected to provide instructional leadership while simultaneously managing human resources, finance, organisational change, student welfare, community relationships and policy implementation (Leithwood et al., 2020). These responsibilities can create substantial psychological and emotional demands, particularly when leaders have limited time and organisational resources.

The Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) Model provides an established theoretical explanation of how working conditions influence employee well-being. According to Bakker and Demerouti (2017), job demands refer to physical, psychological, social or organisational aspects of work that require sustained physical or psychological effort. Job resources, in contrast, refer to aspects of work that assist individuals in achieving work goals, reduce the effects of job demands and stimulate motivation and personal development. The model proposes both a health-impairment process, through which excessive demands may contribute to strain and burnout, and a motivational process, through which resources promote motivation, engagement and well-being (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017).

The well-being of school leaders should therefore be considered an important component of sustainable educational leadership. Leaders experiencing prolonged work pressure may face emotional exhaustion and reduced psychological functioning, whereas adequate organisational support and resources may help them sustain engagement and effective leadership (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Schaufeli, 2021). Educational leadership research also emphasises the importance of leadership capacity, organisational relationships and supportive school environments for sustainable school improvement (Harris, 2008; Leithwood et al., 2020).

Mental well-being, however, should not be conceptualised simply as the absence of psychological distress. Positive psychology approaches conceptualise well-being as a multidimensional state involving positive functioning and flourishing. Seligman's (2011) PERMA model conceptualises well-being through five dimensions: Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishment. Butler and Kern (2016) subsequently developed the PERMA-Profil as a multidimensional measure of flourishing based on these dimensions.

The integration of JD-R and PERMA is therefore potentially useful for understanding school leaders' mental well-being. JD-R explains how workplace conditions may influence well-being, whereas PERMA provides a multidimensional perspective on what well-being entails (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Butler & Kern, 2016; Seligman, 2011).

The Malaysian educational context provides an important setting for examining this relationship. School leaders operate within a centrally administered education system and must respond to national policies, accountability requirements, reporting systems and stakeholder expectations. Such responsibilities may create multiple and overlapping job demands (OECD, 2020; UNESCO, 2023).

The issue may be particularly significant in Fully Residential Schools (Sekolah Berasrama Penuh, SBP). SBP principals are responsible not only for academic and organisational leadership but also for aspects of residential management, student welfare, discipline, safety, co-curricular development and relationships with parents and other stakeholders. Consequently, their leadership responsibilities extend beyond the conventional school day and may involve continuous organisational and pastoral responsibilities.

Despite this distinctive environment, limited research has examined the mental well-being of SBP principals through an integrated Job Demands–Resources and positive psychology perspective. The existing literature has frequently examined teacher well-being, school leadership stress or burnout separately, while fewer studies have examined how job demands, job resources and multidimensional well-being interact within the specific Malaysian SBP context.

The present study therefore proposes a Sequential Explanatory Mixed Methods design to investigate this issue. The quantitative phase examines the levels and relationships of Job Demands, Job Resources and mental well-being. The qualitative phase subsequently explores how principals experience these demands and resources and the strategies they use to manage their well-being. The two strands are then integrated to develop a contextual framework.

The expanding responsibilities of school leaders raise concerns about the sustainability of leadership and the capacity of principals to maintain their own well-being while meeting organisational expectations. From a JD-R perspective, excessive demands may result in sustained expenditure of physical and psychological energy and may contribute to strain and burnout, particularly when adequate resources are unavailable (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Schaufeli, 2021).

In the Malaysian school context, these demands may include administrative workload, performance accountability, policy implementation, financial management, time pressure, stakeholder expectations and emotional demands. The thesis underpinning this article identifies these dimensions as important aspects of Job Demands among SBP principals.

At the same time, Job Resources such as organisational support, autonomy, feedback, professional development and collegial relationships may help principals manage demanding work conditions and maintain motivation and well-being (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). The study therefore does not assume that high

demands automatically result in poor well-being; rather, it examines the interaction between demands and resources.

A further issue concerns the conceptualisation of well-being. Research that focuses exclusively on stress or burnout may provide an incomplete account of positive functioning. The PERMA model provides a broader perspective by considering positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment (Seligman, 2011). The PERMA-Profil developed by Butler and Kern (2016) provides an established instrument for measuring these dimensions. However, models developed primarily in Western settings should be examined carefully when applied to different cultural and organisational contexts. Malaysian educational leadership operates within particular institutional, cultural and relational conditions. Consequently, the experiences of SBP principals may provide contextual insights that cannot be fully captured through quantitative measurement alone.

This creates three interconnected research gaps. First, there is a contextual gap concerning the mental well-being of principals specifically within Malaysian SBP. Second, there is a theoretical gap concerning the integration of JD-R and PERMA to examine both workplace conditions and multidimensional well-being. Third, there is a methodological gap because quantitative relationships alone may not explain how principals experience demands, mobilise resources and develop strategies for maintaining well-being. A Sequential Explanatory Mixed Methods approach is therefore proposed to address these gaps by combining quantitative measurement with qualitative explanation and subsequent integration (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

The study aims to develop a contextual framework for managing the mental well-being of principals in Malaysian Fully Residential Schools. The objectives are:

- To identify the levels of Job Demands, Job Resources and mental well-being among SBP principals in Malaysia.
- To examine the relationship between Job Demands and the mental well-being of SBP principals.
- To examine the relationship between Job Resources and the mental well-being of SBP principals.
- To explore the challenges experienced by SBP principals in managing their mental well-being.
- To explore the strategies used by SBP principals to manage their mental well-being.
- To integrate the quantitative and qualitative findings to propose a contextual framework for managing the mental well-being of SBP principals.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Mental Well-being and School Leadership

Mental well-being is increasingly recognised as an important component of effective and sustainable leadership. School leaders operate in environments characterised by multiple responsibilities, competing priorities and continuous organisational change (Leithwood et al., 2020). Leadership therefore involves not only technical and managerial competencies but also emotional and relational capacities.

The well-being of educational leaders may influence their capacity to establish constructive relationships, make decisions, manage conflict and lead organisational change. Positive leadership research has also demonstrated the importance of constructive psychological states and relationships for organisational functioning (Avolio & Gardner, 2005).

Rather than defining well-being only as the absence of distress, positive psychology views well-being as a multidimensional construct involving positive functioning and flourishing (Seligman, 2011). This conceptualisation is particularly relevant for school leaders because successful leadership may involve purpose, meaningful relationships, engagement and a sense of accomplishment.

Job Resources

Job demands refer to aspects of work that require sustained physical, psychological, social or organisational effort (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Although job demands are not inherently negative, persistent demands

that require substantial effort may contribute to psychological strain when they are not balanced by adequate resources. For school leaders, job demands may include workload, administrative responsibilities, time pressure, emotional demands, role conflict and accountability requirements. The thesis instrument specifically identifies workload, administrative demands, time pressure, emotional demands and role conflict as relevant dimensions. From the JD-R perspective, excessive demands may activate the health-impairment process, increasing the risk of exhaustion and reduced well-being (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Schaufeli (2021) similarly emphasises the relationship between demanding working conditions, burnout and employee well-being. Accordingly, the present study proposes that Job Demands should be examined as an important predictor of SBP principals' mental well-being.

Job Resources

Job resources refer to physical, psychological, social and organisational aspects of work that assist employees in achieving goals, reduce the effects of job demands and stimulate motivation and development (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). In the present study, relevant resources include autonomy, organisational support, support from educational authorities, feedback, professional development and collegial support.

Resources may be particularly important for school leaders because they provide both practical and psychological support. Autonomy may allow principals to respond flexibly to organisational challenges, while collegial and organisational support may provide emotional and professional resources. The motivational component of JD-R suggests that resources can promote engagement, motivation and well-being (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Therefore, the present study examines Job Resources as a potential positive correlate of mental well-being.

PERMA and Mental Well-being

Seligman (2011) conceptualised well-being through Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishment. Butler and Kern (2016) subsequently operationalised these dimensions through the PERMA-Profil. For the present study, the five dimensions provide a multidimensional conceptualisation of principals' mental well-being. Positive Emotion concerns positive affect; Engagement reflects involvement in activities; Relationships represent positive interpersonal connections; Meaning concerns purpose and significance; and Accomplishment relates to achievement and progress (Butler & Kern, 2016; Seligman, 2011). The study therefore uses the PERMA-Profil as the basis for measuring mental well-being in the quantitative phase.

Integrating JD-R and PERMA

JD-R and PERMA address complementary aspects of well-being. JD-R focuses primarily on the work environment and its demands and resources, whereas PERMA focuses on the multidimensional experience of well-being (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Butler & Kern, 2016).

Their integration therefore provides a potentially useful framework for educational leadership research. Job Demands may create pressures that influence well-being, while Job Resources may provide protective and motivational conditions. PERMA then allows the study to examine well-being beyond the absence of distress by considering positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment. This integrated perspective is consistent with the conceptual framework developed in the thesis, which positions JD-R as the quantitative theoretical foundation and PERMA as the lens for understanding mental well-being.

Cultural and Organisational Considerations in the Malaysian SBP Context

The relationship between Job Demands, Job Resources and PERMA-based well-being may also be shaped by cultural and organisational conditions. Malaysian school leadership is embedded in a relatively hierarchical public education system in which principals are accountable to educational authorities and are expected to implement national policies while maintaining relationships with teachers, students, parents and other stakeholders. In such a context, the experience of autonomy may differ from that assumed in more decentralised organisational settings. Similarly, organisational support may be experienced not only as

material assistance but also as guidance, collegiality, trust, recognition and relational support. Malaysian research has reported stress associated with administrative responsibilities among school leaders, while recent Malaysian leadership research also highlights the relevance of work-life balance, leadership practices and job satisfaction in school settings (Tahir et al., 2019; Yii et al., 2022; Liah et al., 2026).

Cultural expectations surrounding relational harmony, respect for authority, collective responsibility and maintaining professional relationships may influence how principals interpret demands and mobilise resources. These factors may shape PERMA dimensions differently: relationships and meaning may be strengthened by a strong sense of collective purpose and service, whereas expectations to remain resilient, available and relationally responsive may also increase emotional demands. Accordingly, the present study does not assume that JD-R relationships operate identically across contexts. Instead, the qualitative phase is specifically designed to identify how Malaysian SBP principals interpret demands and resources and how cultural and organisational conditions influence positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment. This contextual interpretation will be used when integrating the quantitative and qualitative strands rather than imposing a culturally predetermined explanation.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The proposed framework consists of two principal quantitative predictors, Job Demands and Job Resources, and one multidimensional outcome construct, mental well-being. The proposed relationships are the SBP context also warrants more explicit consideration because Fully Residential Schools are institutionally distinctive within the Malaysian education system. The Ministry of Education describes SBP as a planned and controlled residential schooling environment intended to develop high-achieving students and national talent, while the dedicated Bahagian Pengurusan Sekolah Berasrama Penuh is responsible for translating national education policy, professional management and programmes within SBP. These institutional expectations imply that principals operate within a setting where academic excellence, student development, residential welfare, safety, stakeholder expectations and policy implementation are simultaneously salient. Such contextual characteristics can intensify job demands while also creating distinctive job resources, including professional networks, organisational structures and access to specialised support. The SBP setting therefore provides a theoretically meaningful context in which the JD-R–PERMA relationship can be examined rather than treating school principals as a homogeneous occupational group (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2026a, 2026b).

Job Demands → Mental Well-being

Job Resources → Mental Well-being

Job Demands are expected to demonstrate a negative relationship with mental well-being, consistent with the health-impairment process of JD-R theory (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017).

Job Resources are expected to demonstrate a positive relationship with mental well-being, consistent with the motivational process of JD-R theory (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017).

Mental well-being is conceptualised using the five PERMA dimensions (Butler & Kern, 2016; Seligman, 2011). The qualitative phase subsequently explores the mechanisms and experiences underlying the quantitative relationships. The final stage integrates quantitative and qualitative evidence through meta-inferences. This structure reflects the thesis design, in which quantitative findings inform participant selection and interview development before both strands are integrated into a contextual SBP framework.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopts pragmatism as its research paradigm. Pragmatism is compatible with mixed-methods research because it permits researchers to select methodological approaches according to the research questions and practical requirements of the investigation (Biesta, 2010; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The adoption of pragmatism is particularly appropriate because the study seeks both to establish relationships statistically and to understand the experiences underlying those relationships.

A Sequential Explanatory Mixed Methods design is employed. This design consists of a quantitative phase followed by a qualitative phase, with the qualitative component used to explain or elaborate the quantitative results (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

The design follows three stages:

Phase 1: Quantitative measurement and statistical analysis.

Phase 2: Qualitative exploration informed by the quantitative findings.

Phase 3: Integration of quantitative and qualitative findings through joint displays and meta-inferences.

This approach enables the study to address not only whether relationships exist but also how and why those relationships may be experienced in the real-world context of SBP leadership.

The target population consists of principals of Malaysian Fully Residential Schools. The study focuses on principals with at least three years of leadership experience to ensure that participants possess substantial experience of managing school-level demands and resources.

The quantitative phase adopts a census approach because the target population is relatively small and accessible. The qualitative phase uses purposeful selection of participants informed by the quantitative findings.

The census approach means that all eligible SBP principals meeting the inclusion criteria will be invited to participate; therefore, the quantitative sample size is determined primarily by the size of the accessible target population and the response rate rather than by selecting a smaller probability sample. As an additional adequacy check for the planned PLS-SEM analysis, an a priori statistical-power assessment will be conducted based on the number of structural predictors, significance level and desired statistical power. With two principal predictors of mental well-being, a conventional medium effect-size assumption ($f^2 = .15$), $\alpha = .05$ and power = .80 gives a minimum benchmark of approximately 68 observations. This benchmark will be treated as a minimum analytical reference only; the census strategy remains the principal sampling rationale. The final manuscript will report the number invited, number responding, response rate, exclusions and final usable cases so that the adequacy and representativeness of the quantitative sample can be evaluated.

The questionnaire contains sections addressing demographic characteristics, Job Demands, Job Resources and mental well-being. Job Demands include workload, administrative demands, time pressure, emotional demands and role conflict. Job Resources include autonomy, organisational support, support from educational authorities, feedback, professional development and collegial support. These constructs are based on the JD-R framework and adapted to the Malaysian school leadership context (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Mental well-being is measured using dimensions based on the PERMA-Profil developed by Butler and Kern (2016), namely Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishment.

Instrument development and validation will follow a systematic adaptation procedure. The Job Demands and Job Resources items will be derived from the JD-R framework and the dimensions already specified in the study, while the mental well-being items will be based on the PERMA-Profil. Items will first be reviewed for conceptual alignment with the operational definitions of each construct and then adapted to the language and work context of Malaysian SBP principals. Where wording is adapted, the meaning of the original construct will be retained while contextual terms relevant to school leadership and residential-school responsibilities will be clarified. The adapted instrument will be reviewed by a panel of experts with relevant expertise in educational leadership, educational management, psychometrics and/or positive psychology to assess content relevance, representativeness, clarity and contextual appropriateness. Item-level and scale-level content validity evidence will be considered, and ambiguous or redundant items will be revised before pilot administration.

A pilot test will subsequently be conducted with school leaders who meet the substantive characteristics of the target population but are excluded from the main census, preferably from comparable Malaysian

secondary-school settings. The pilot will assess item clarity, completion time, response patterns and preliminary internal consistency. Feedback from the pilot will be used to refine wording and administration procedures before the main data collection. The pilot data will not be pooled with the final dataset. Because the empirical phases have not yet been completed, the final number of experts, pilot participants and any item-level revisions will be reported transparently in the completed study rather than presented as predetermined findings.

All questionnaire items are measured using a five-point Likert scale. The thesis identifies the use of a five-point scale and notes its suitability for social science research and subsequent statistical analysis. The qualitative phase employs semi-structured interviews to explore principals' experiences of job demands, resources, well-being, challenges and strategies. Observation and document analysis may provide additional contextual evidence and support triangulation (Bowen, 2009).

Qualitative participants will be selected purposefully from respondents who complete the quantitative phase and consent to possible follow-up participation. Selection will be information-rich and connected directly to the quantitative results rather than based solely on convenience. Maximum-variation selection will be considered across relevant characteristics such as geographical setting, leadership experience and contrasting quantitative profiles of Job Demands, Job Resources and PERMA-based well-being. In particular, participants representing relatively high and low levels or contrasting combinations of demands, resources and well-being will be prioritised so that the interviews can explain convergent, divergent and unexpected quantitative patterns. Recruitment will continue until the interviews provide sufficient information power and no substantively new explanations are emerging, with the final number reported together with the rationale for stopping.

Quantitative data will be analysed using descriptive statistics and Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM). PLS-SEM is appropriate for examining relationships between latent constructs and is widely used in social science research (Hair et al., 2022). The quantitative analysis will address the levels of Job Demands, Job Resources and mental well-being and examine the hypothesised relationships between the constructs. The qualitative data will be analysed thematically. Thematic analysis enables researchers to identify, analyse and report patterns within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The final stage will integrate the quantitative and qualitative findings. Joint displays can facilitate systematic comparison of findings across methodological strands, while meta-inferences represent conclusions derived from the integration of quantitative and qualitative evidence (Fetters et al., 2013).

Integration will occur at the connecting, building and interpretation stages of the Sequential Explanatory design. First, quantitative results will determine the issues requiring explanation and inform the purposeful selection of interview participants. Second, the quantitative findings will inform the development and refinement of interview questions so that qualitative data directly address significant, weak, unexpected or contradictory relationships. Third, integration will be conducted through joint displays that place quantitative results alongside supporting, elaborating or discrepant qualitative themes. The researchers will then develop meta-inferences by examining convergence, complementarity, expansion and divergence across the two strands. Where qualitative evidence contradicts a quantitative pattern, the discrepancy will be retained and investigated rather than forced into agreement. The final contextual framework will therefore emerge from the integrated evidence and will identify how SBP-specific organisational and cultural conditions may help explain the observed JD-R–PERMA relationships.

For PLS-SEM, analysis will proceed in two stages: assessment of the measurement model followed by assessment of the structural model. For reflective constructs, indicator loadings will be examined, with approximately .70 or above used as the preferred benchmark; internal consistency will be assessed using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability, with values of .70 or above generally considered acceptable. Convergent validity will be assessed using Average Variance Extracted (AVE), with .50 or above indicating that the construct explains at least half of the average variance of its indicators. Discriminant validity will be examined using the heterotrait–monotrait ratio (HTMT), using .85 as a conservative criterion and .90 where constructs are conceptually similar. These thresholds will be treated as guidelines rather than automatic deletion rules, and item removal will be considered only when statistical evidence is consistent with theoretical and content-validity considerations (Hair et al., 2022; Hair & Alamer, 2022).

For the structural model, predictor collinearity will be assessed using variance inflation factor (VIF), path coefficients will be evaluated using bootstrapping and confidence intervals, and explanatory power will be assessed using R^2 . Effect sizes (f^2) will be reported to indicate the contribution of individual predictors, while predictive relevance and out-of-sample predictive performance will be examined using appropriate PLS-SEM procedures, including Q^2 and, where feasible, PLSpredict. The interpretation will focus on the hypothesised paths from Job Demands and Job Resources to mental well-being and will distinguish statistical significance from substantive importance. This approach provides explicit criteria for evaluating reliability, convergent validity, discriminant validity, collinearity, explanatory power and predictive performance (Hair et al., 2022; Hair & Alamer, 2022).

Expected Contributions

Because empirical data collection and analysis have not yet been completed, the following are proposed contributions rather than reported findings.

Theoretical Contribution

The study is expected to extend the application of JD-R theory to school leadership in the Malaysian SBP context. Integrating JD-R with PERMA may provide a more comprehensive account of the relationship between workplace conditions and positive well-being (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Butler & Kern, 2016).

Contextual Contribution

The study may contribute context-specific understanding of how Malaysian school leaders experience and manage mental well-being. This is important because organisational structures, cultural expectations and leadership practices may influence the meaning and experience of well-being.

Methodological Contribution

The Sequential Explanatory Mixed Methods design provides an opportunity to combine statistical evidence with contextual explanations (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The integration of both strands may produce a more comprehensive framework than either approach alone.

Practical Contribution

The eventual framework may inform leadership development, organisational support, professional development and well-being initiatives for school principals. Leadership capacity approaches that distribute responsibility and develop teacher leadership may also help reduce excessive reliance on individual principals (Harris, 2008; Spillane, 2006; Leithwood et al., 2020).

CONCLUSION

The mental well-being of school leaders is an important consideration in the development of sustainable educational leadership. The JD-R Model provides a theoretically established explanation of how workplace demands and resources may influence employee well-being, while the PERMA framework provides a multidimensional conceptualisation of positive functioning and flourishing (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Butler & Kern, 2016; Seligman, 2011). This study extends these perspectives to the context of Malaysian Fully Residential Schools through a Sequential Explanatory Mixed Methods design. The quantitative phase will examine the levels and relationships of Job Demands, Job Resources and mental well-being, while the qualitative phase will explore principals' experiences and strategies. Integration of both phases will subsequently support development of a contextual framework. At the current stage, the study does not claim empirical findings because data collection and analysis have not been completed. Instead, it establishes a theoretically grounded and methodologically rigorous foundation for investigating how SBP principals manage mental well-being within a complex educational environment. The eventual contribution of the study will depend on the empirical evidence generated through the quantitative and qualitative phases. The final framework should therefore be treated as an empirically developed outcome rather than a predetermined model.

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