Examining Leadership Stress Among School Principals: Insights from Stress Sources and Coping Strategies

Gilang Gumilang Dawous[1], Djama'an Satori[2], Munir[3], Nugraha Suharto[3]

Educational Administration, Universitas Pendidikan, Indonesia[1,2,3,4]

Email: gilangdawous@upi.edu[1] , djamansatori@upi.edu[2] , munir@upi.edu[3], nugrahasuharto@upi.edu[4]

ABSTRACT: This study examines the types of stress, sources of stress, coping strategies, and their impacts on school principals' leadership. A descriptive quantitative approach was employed, with data collected from 325 elementary school principals in Garut Regency using a semantic differential scale questionnaire. Path analysis revealed that stress sources, such as workload, interpersonal conflicts, and limited resources, have a significant impact on stress outcomes, while stress types and coping strategies show weaker but measurable effects. Principals predominantly adopted problem-focused strategies, such as task prioritization and time management, and emotion-focused strategies, including seeking peer support and practicing self-care. These strategies were shown to moderate stress impacts, albeit to a limited extent. The study underscores the critical need for targeted interventions in stress management, focusing on equipping principals with effective coping mechanisms to enhance their productivity and well-being.

Keywords: coping strategies, leadership, school principals, stress, stress types.

ABSTRAK: Penelitian ini mengkaji jenis stres, sumber stres, strategi coping, dan dampaknya terhadap kepemimpinan kepala sekolah. Pendekatan kuantitatif deskriptif digunakan, dengan data dikumpulkan dari 325 kepala sekolah dasar di Kabupaten Garut melalui kuesioner skala diferensial semantik. Hasil analisis jalur menunjukkan bahwa sumber stres, seperti beban kerja, konflik interpersonal, dan keterbatasan sumber daya, memiliki pengaruh signifikan terhadap dampak stres, sementara jenis stres dan strategi coping menunjukkan pengaruh yang lebih lemah namun tetap terukur. Kepala sekolah sebagian besar menggunakan strategi coping berbasis masalah, seperti prioritas tugas dan manajemen waktu, serta strategi berbasis emosi, seperti mencari dukungan dari rekan sejawat dan melakukan perawatan diri. Strategi ini terbukti dapat memoderasi dampak stres meskipun dengan pengaruh yang terbatas. Studi ini menegaskan pentingnya intervensi yang terarah dalam manajemen stres, dengan fokus pada peningkatan kemampuan kepala sekolah dalam menggunakan mekanisme coping yang efektif untuk meningkatkan produktivitas dan kesejahteraan mereka.

Kata Kunci: jenis stres, kepemimpinan, kepala sekolah, stres, strategi coping.

INTRODUCTION

Managing leadership stress among school principals has become an urgent issue, particularly amidst increasing demands in the education sector. A survey revealed that over 70% of school principals report chronic stress due to excessive workloads and interpersonal conflicts. As leaders, school principals bear significant responsibilities aligned with their roles and functions. A leader's primary task is to guide their team toward success by applying fundamental principles such as providing guidance, fostering collaboration, encouraging initiative, and showing

individual care (Mahfouz, 2018)This responsibility entails accountability and trust, which must be fulfilled. However, in managing their duties, principals often face concerns related to knowledge, attitudes, and skills required for leading schools. These concerns, if not managed effectively, can escalate into stress. Unmanaged stress in the education sector has been shown to decrease academic achievement, reduce motivation, and increase dropout rates (Pascoe et al., 2020).

This study aims to understand the sources, types, and impacts of stress on school principals, as well as the coping strategies they employ. By focusing on school principals in Garut Regency, this research addresses gaps in the literature concerning stress management in educational leadership within the Indonesian context. The findings are expected to provide practical recommendations to enhance leadership effectiveness in schools.

Ilies et al., (2005) emphasize that leadership significantly impacts the hedonic well-being of both leaders and followers. Similarly, (Lundqvist & Wallo, 2023) note that leaders who maintain close relationships with employees contribute positively to workplace well-being. Leadership behaviors such as inspiring excellence, empowering team members, recognizing accomplishments, and developing talent are proven to mitigate organizational burnout (Weber et al., 2022). However, the stressors experienced by school principals not only directly affect their performance but also have the potential to create an unhealthy work environment for the entire school community. These impacts are evident in reduced productivity, interpersonal conflicts, and diminished capacity for strategic decision-making.

The challenges and pressures of leadership can significantly affect a school principal's performance. Research by Lumban Gaol (2020) identifies various sources of stress specific to school principals, including poor interactions with school communities, inadequate resources, role complexity, workload, education policy challenges, and ineffective time management. These stressors are particularly evident in Garut Regency, a region facing significant educational challenges such as limited resources and high workloads. This makes the area a relevant context for exploring how leadership can persist amidst substantial pressures. If stressors are not managed effectively, principals may experience either eustress—a positive form of stress that motivates them and their schools to face challenges responsibly—or distress, a negative form of stress that can lead to panic, despair, a (Kupriyanov & Zhdanov, 2014; Fevre et al., 2003). Prolonged stress affecting the organizational environment can result in burnout, a severe condition with potentially damaging effects on organizational well-being.

Managing all units within an organization is undoubtedly challenging for leaders. Both personal (internal) and organizational (external) factors contribute to burnout. A primary stressor for leaders lies in the challenge of balancing professional responsibilities with personal life (Gmelch & Ezeh, 2022). If stress originating from external sources, such as complex policies or interpersonal conflicts, is not managed effectively, school principals risk experiencing burnout that not only affects their personal health but also undermines organizational performance.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a descriptive quantitative approach to explore the relationships between stress sources, stress types, stress coping strategies, and stress impacts on school principals. It explicitly examines the mediating role of stress coping strategies, focusing on how these strategies influence the relationship between stress sources/types and their resulting impacts on leadership performance.

The study was conducted in Garut Regency, targeting elementary school principals. Using a purposive sampling technique, participants were selected based on specific criteria, such as having at least two years of leadership experience and currently serving as school principals. The sample consisted of 325 principals, determined using the Krejcie & Morgan (1970) table, ensuring statistical adequacy for Structural Equation Modeling (SEM).

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire comprising items measured on a semantic differential scale ranging from 1 (very low) to 10 (very high). The instrument was validated through a pilot test involving 30 school principals to assess clarity, reliability, and validity. The pilot test yielded Cronbach's alpha values of 0.89 for stress sources, 0.86 for stress types, 0.91 for stress coping strategies, and 0.88 for stress impacts, indicating high internal consistency.

Table 1. Reliability Metrics

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha
Stress Sources	0.89
Stress Types	0.86
Stress Coping Strategies	0.91
Stress Impacts	0.88

The constructs were further validated using Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), which confirmed that all factor loadings exceeded 0.50, meeting the threshold for acceptable measurement. The validated constructs were then used in the SEM analysis to test the hypothesized relationships.

Participants were approached through official channels facilitated by the regional education office. Anonymity and confidentiality were assured to encourage honest responses. The study emphasized its potential benefits for improving school leadership practices, which helped motivate participation.

The data were analyzed using SEM with AMOS software, involving the following steps: (1) Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) to validate constructs and measurement models, (2) Path Analysis to evaluate direct, indirect, and total effects, and (3) evaluation of model fit indices such as RMSEA (<0.08), CFI (>0.90), and TLI (>0.90) to assess the overall fit of the model.

Table 2. Model Fit Indices

Fit Index	Value	Threshold	Interpretation
RMSEA	0.07	< 0.08	Good Fit
CFI	0.93	> 0.90	Good Fit
TLI	0.91	> 0.90	Good Fit

Corresponding author: Gilang Gumilang Dawous (gilangdawous@upi.edu)

The hypothesized model in this study explores the relationships among stress sources, stress types, stress coping strategies, and stress impacts. Stress sources and stress types serve as exogenous variables, directly influencing stress impacts as the dependent variable. Stress coping strategies act as a mediating variable, moderating the effects of stress sources and stress types on stress impacts. Specifically, the model hypothesizes that effective coping strategies can reduce the negative effects of stress sources and stress types, thereby mitigating their impact on principals' leadership performance. These relationships were tested using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), which allowed for the evaluation of both direct and indirect effects.

Garut Regency was selected as the research site due to its unique challenges in education, including limited resources, high workloads, and complex school management issues. These conditions make the region an ideal context for studying stress and its impact on school leadership. While the findings are region-specific, they provide valuable insights into stress management practices that may be applicable in similar educational contexts.

Although this study adopts a cross-sectional design, future research could consider a longitudinal approach to observe how stress and its impacts evolve over time. Integrating qualitative methods, such as interviews or focus groups, would also enrich the findings by providing a deeper understanding of principals' coping mechanisms and lived experiences.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Results

The findings of this study address the research questions, focusing on the types of stress, sources of stress, stress impacts, and coping strategies employed by school principals. Data from 325 elementary school principals were analyzed using path analysis through AMOS software. The analysis revealed that stress sources, such as workload, interpersonal conflicts, limited resources, and external policy pressures, were the most significant contributors to stress impacts, including decreased productivity, reduced decision-making effectiveness, and challenges in maintaining team cohesion. Coping strategies varied among the respondents, with some adopting problem-focused approaches, such as task prioritization and time management, while others employed emotion-focused strategies, including seeking peer support and practicing self-care. The results indicated that principals who combined these strategies experienced better outcomes in mitigating the negative effects of stress. Path analysis confirmed that stress sources had a dominant influence on stress impacts, while coping strategies moderated this relationship, highlighting their critical role in stress management. The path analysis findings are visualized in the following diagram:
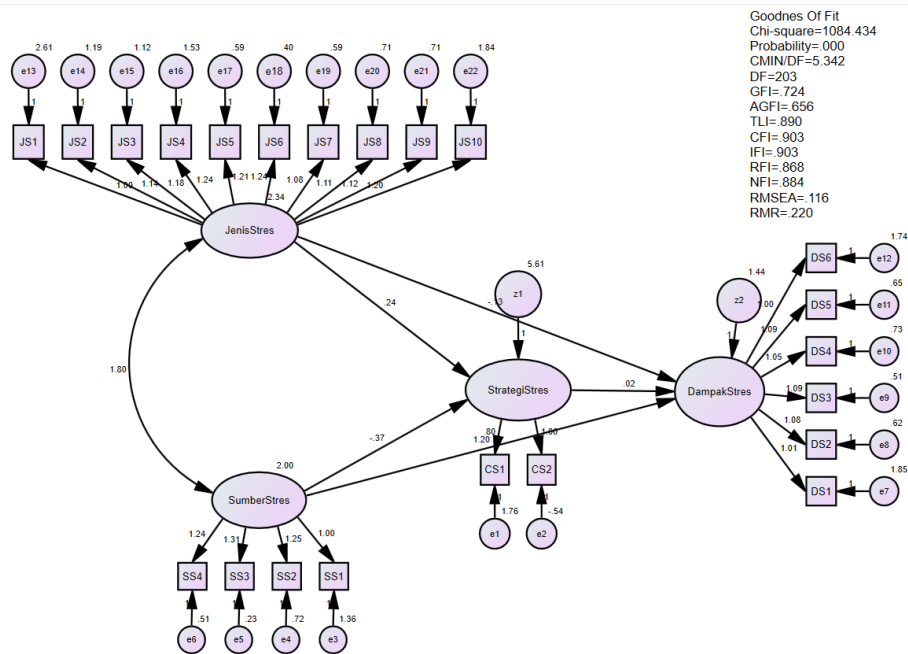
Corresponding author: Gilang Gumilang Dawous (gilangdawous@upi.edu)

Figure 1. Path Analysis

Direct Effects of Variables

Table 1. Standardized Direct Effects (Group number 1 - Default model)

	Stress Types	Stress Sources	Coping Strategies	Stress Impacts
Coping Strategies	.159	-.291	.000	.000
Stress Impacts	-.128	.944	.056	.000

Based on the Standardized Direct Effects table, the direct influences among the related variables can be summarized as: 1) The direct effect of stress types on stress coping strategies is 0.159, indicating that stress types have a positive influence on stress coping strategies by 15.9%. This means that for every one-unit increase in stress types, stress coping strategies increase by 15.9%; 2) The direct effect of stress sources on stress coping strategies is -0.291, indicating that stress sources have a negative influence on stress coping strategies by 29.1%. This means that for every one-unit increase in stress sources, stress coping strategies decrease by 29.1%; 3) The direct effect of a stress type on stress impacts is -0.128, indicating that a stress type has a negative influence on stress impacts by 12.8%. This means that for every one-unit increase in a stress type, stress impacts decrease by 12.8%; 4) The direct effect of stress sources on stress impacts is 0.944, indicating that stress sources have a positive influence on stress impacts by 94.4%. This means that for every one-unit increase in stress sources, stress impacts increase by 94.4%; and 5) The direct effect of stress coping strategies on stress impacts is 0.056, indicating that stress coping strategies have a positive influence on stress impacts by 5.6%. This means that for every one-unit increase in stress coping strategies, stress impacts increase by 5.6%.

Corresponding author: Gilang Gumilang Dawous (gilangdawous@upi.edu)

Table 2. Indirect Effects of Variables

	Stress Types	Stress Sources	Coping Strategies	Stress Impacts
Coping Strategies	.000	.000	.000	.000
Stress Impacts	.009	-.016	.000	.000

Based on the Standardized Indirect Effects table, the indirect effects on stress impacts can be summarized as: 1) The indirect effect of stress types on stress impacts through stress coping strategies is 0.009, indicating that stress types have a positive indirect influence on stress impacts via stress coping strategies by 0.9%. This means that for every one-unit increase in stress types, stress impacts increase indirectly by 0.9%; 2) The indirect effect of stress sources on stress impacts through stress coping strategies is -0.016, indicating that stress sources have a negative indirect influence on stress impacts via stress coping strategies by 1.6%. This means that for every one-unit increase in stress sources, stress impacts decrease indirectly by 1.6%.

Table 3. Total Effects of Variables

	Stress Types	Stress Sources	Coping Strategies	Stress Impacts
Coping Strategies	.159	-.291	.000	.000
Stress Impacts	-.119	.928	.056	.000

The Total Effect is the sum of both direct and indirect effects. Based on the **Standardized Total Effects** table, the total effect on stress impacts can be summarized as: 1) The total effect of stress type on stress impacts is -0.119, indicating that stress type has a total negative effect on stress impacts by 11.9%. This means that for every one-unit increase in stress type, the total stress impacts decrease by 11.9%; 2) The total effect of stress sources on stress impacts is 0.928, indicating that stress sources have a total positive effect on stress impacts by 92.8%. This means that for every one-unit increase in stress sources, the total stress impacts increase by 92.8%.

Table 4. Coefficient of Determination

	Estimation
Coping Strategies	.033
Stress Impacts	.696

Based on the **Coefficient of Determination** table, the following conclusions can be drawn: 1) All exogenous latent variables, namely stress type and stress sources, collectively account for 3.3% of the variance in stress coping strategies. Since this value is less than 50%, the effect is categorized as very low; 2) All exogenous latent variables, including stress type, stress sources, and stress coping

strategies, collectively account for 69.6% of the variance in stress impacts. As this value exceeds 50%, the effect is categorized as strong.

Discussion

The primary objective of this study was to examine the relationships among stress sources, stress types, stress coping strategies, and stress impacts on school principals. The analysis focused on the mediating role of stress coping strategies and their influence on the relationship between stress sources and types with stress impacts. The findings reveal several significant dynamics in the interplay of these variables, offering valuable insights into leadership stress management in educational settings.

Stress sources emerged as the most influential variable, with a strong direct positive effect (94.4%) on stress impacts. This finding underscores how external pressures, such as excessive workloads, interpersonal conflicts, and limited resources, significantly exacerbate stress levels among school principals. These results align with prior research, such as (Nápoles, 2022), which highlights the critical role of external stressors in shaping leadership challenges. Addressing these systemic stressors is essential for reducing the overall burden of stress on principals. Conversely, stress types demonstrated a negative effect (-12.8%) on stress impacts, suggesting that certain stressors, such as manageable deadlines or constructive criticism, may act as motivators under specific conditions. This aligns with the concept of "eustress," as described by (Demerouti, 2024), where not all stress is inherently detrimental and may even enhance performance in certain contexts.

Stress coping strategies, while showing a modest direct effect (5.6%) on stress impacts, play a complex mediating role in the relationships among the variables. The indirect effects analysis revealed that stress types have a slight positive influence (0.9%) on stress impacts through coping strategies, indicating that certain stressors might encourage the adoption of mechanisms to mitigate stress. In contrast, stress sources exhibited a negative indirect effect (-1.6%), suggesting that high levels of stress sources could overwhelm the effectiveness of coping strategies. These findings highlight the nuanced role of coping mechanisms and their dependency on the intensity and type of stress experienced. While coping strategies may provide relief, they cannot fully counterbalance the effects of systemic stress sources without broader organizational support.

The total effects analysis further reinforced the dominant role of stress sources, which exhibited a total positive effect of 92.8% on stress impacts, whereas stress types showed a total negative effect of 11.9%. These results underscore the importance of addressing external stressors as a primary strategy to alleviate leadership stress. Furthermore, the findings emphasize that while stress coping strategies are crucial, their success depends on the context and the nature of the stressors they aim to address. This insight resonates with studies such as Bouhsaien & Azmani (2024) which highlight the variability in coping strategies' effectiveness depending on the specific challenges faced by leaders.

Corresponding author: Gilang Gumilang Dawous (gilangdawous@upi.edu)

These findings also contribute to the broader literature on leadership and stress management. While existing studies, such as (Czakert et al., 2022) emphasize the role of supportive leadership behaviors in mitigating workplace stress, this research brings new perspectives by demonstrating the substantial influence of external stress sources on stress impacts (Yoho, 2021). Moreover, it validates the concept that stress coping strategies, though limited in direct impact, serve as critical mediators that can moderate stress outcomes when effectively employed.

From a practical standpoint, these findings underscore the need for targeted interventions to manage stress among school principals. Policymakers and school administrators must prioritize systemic solutions, such as reducing workloads, improving resource allocation, and fostering collaborative environments (Elomaa et al., 2021). Training programs should also focus on equipping principals with adaptive coping mechanisms tailored to specific stressors. Establishing a supportive school culture that provides emotional and social resources can further enhance the effectiveness of coping strategies.

While this study provides significant insights, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. The cross-sectional design captures stress dynamics at a single point in time and may not fully reflect how these relationships evolve (Hayes et al., 2022). Future research should adopt a longitudinal approach to observe changes in stress levels and coping mechanisms over time. Additionally, integrating qualitative methods, such as interviews or focus groups, could provide a deeper understanding of principals' lived experiences and the nuances of their coping strategies (Abbasi, 2018; Chute-Festervan, 2022; Erskine & Georgiou, 2017a, 2017b; Luturlean et al., 2019; VanGronigen, 2022). Research by Sennoga, (2022). These approaches would enrich the findings and offer a more comprehensive understanding of leadership stress management.

Stress sources emerged as the dominant factor influencing stress impacts, while stress types demonstrated potential to mitigate stress under specific conditions Upadyaya et al., (2021). Coping strategies, despite their limited direct effect, play a critical mediating role that underscores their importance in addressing leadership stress. These findings highlight the need for a multifaceted approach to stress management that addresses systemic challenges, enhances coping strategies, and fosters resilience among school principals (Reid, 2022)..

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis of direct, indirect, and total effects, this study concludes that stress sources are the most influential factor affecting stress impacts on school principals, with a total effect of 92.8%. This finding highlights the critical role of external pressures, such as workload, interpersonal conflicts, and limited resources, in exacerbating stress levels. In contrast, stress types showed a negative total effect of 11.9%, indicating that certain stressors, such as manageable challenges, can potentially act as motivators rather than detriments. Stress coping strategies, while demonstrating a modest direct effect of 5.6% on

Corresponding author: Gilang Gumilang Dawous (gilangdawous@upi.edu)

stress impacts, play a nuanced role as mediators, with their effectiveness highly dependent on the intensity and nature of the stressors.

These findings underscore the importance of systemic interventions to address external sources of stress, such as resource allocation, policy demands, and workload management, to mitigate their detrimental effects. Enhancing the quality of coping strategies through tailored professional development programs can further equip principals with the tools needed to navigate high-pressure environments. By addressing these factors, principals' productivity and mental well-being can be better preserved, ultimately fostering a more effective and resilient leadership framework.

While this study provides significant insights, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. The cross-sectional design captures data at a single point in time, limiting the ability to observe changes in stress dynamics over a longer period. Additionally, the study primarily relied on quantitative methods, which, while robust, may not fully capture the lived experiences of principals. Future research could adopt a longitudinal approach to track how stress levels and coping strategies evolve. Integrating qualitative methods, such as interviews or focus groups, could also provide richer insights into the contextual factors that shape stress management.

In the broader context, these findings offer valuable implications for educational policy and practice. Policymakers and school administrators should prioritize addressing systemic stressors as a foundational step in improving leadership sustainability. Additionally, fostering a supportive organizational culture that promotes mental health and equips principals with adaptive coping mechanisms can enhance their capacity to lead effectively under pressure. By adopting these strategies, schools can better support their leaders, ensuring both productivity and well-being in demanding educational settings.

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