EXPLORING THE SOURCES OF STRESS AMONG PUBLIC SCHOOL PRINCIPALS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF GLOBAL AND INDONESIAN PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract.

This study examines the sources of stress among public school principals in Bogor Regency, Indonesia. Using a qualitative approach, four principals from junior and senior high schools were interviewed. The findings indicate that significant stressors include interpersonal conflicts with senior teachers and parents, resource shortages especially financial constraints, and high demands from stakeholders for academic and non-academic achievements. Additional stressors specific to the Indonesian context are pressures from pseudo-journalists, the ambiguity of funding regulations, the implementation of the zoning system in student admissions, and mandatory performance evaluations. The study emphasizes the need for policy reforms to provide clearer guidelines, improve financial support, and offer conflict management training. Addressing these stressors is crucial for enhancing principal well-being and promoting effective school leadership. Future research should explore tailored solutions for these unique challenges in Indonesian public schools.

Keywords: public school; principal; stress and stressor

MENGEKSPLORASI SUMBER-SUMBER STRES KEPALA SEKOLAH NEGERI: STUDI PERBANDINGAN PERSPEKTIF GLOBAL DAN INDONESIA

Abstrak. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji sumber-sumber stres kepala sekolah negeri di Kabupaten Bogor, Indonesia. Metode penelitian yang digunakan adalah kualitatif. Empat kepala sekolah dari sekolah negeri tingkat menengah pertama dan atas diwawancarai. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa stressor yang utama meliputi konflik interpersonal dengan guru senior dan orang tua, kekurangan sumber daya terutama keuangan, serta tuntutan tinggi dari pemangku kepentingan terhadap pencapaian akademik dan non-akademik. Sumber stres yang spesifik dalam konteks Indonesia adalah tekanan dari wartawan gadungan, tidak jelasnya peraturan pembiayaan, penerapan sistem zonasi dalam penerimaan siswa baru, dan evaluasi kinerja kepala sekolah. Penelitian ini menekankan perlunya reformasi kebijakan untuk memberikan pedoman yang lebih jelas, meningkatkan dukungan finansial, dan menawarkan pelatihan manajemen konflik. Penanganan penyebab stres sangat penting untuk meningkatkan kesejahteraan kepala sekolah dan mendorong kepemimpinan sekolah yang efektif. Rekomendasi penelitian selanjutnya bagaimana mencari solusi yang berkaitan dengan sumber stres unik yang ditemukan di sekolah-sekolah negeri di Indonesia.

Kata Kunci: sekolah negeri; kepala sekolah; stres; stressor

I. INTRODUCTION

Based on international research findings, school principals' role is demanding and stressful (Sumintono *et al.*, 2015; Sogunro, 2012; Wells & Klocko, 2018), making them vulnerable to stress (Ulfiah *et al*., 2022). While the teaching profession as a whole is considered one of the most stressful occupations, with numerous studies examining the factors contributing to educator stress, research focusing specifically on the experiences of school principals remains limited, particularly in terms of academic publications readily accessible to the public. Nonetheless, despite the scarcity of such literature, various studies have been conducted in both developed and developing countries to provide valuable insights into the stressors faced by principals.

In the United States, studies on the perception of principal stress and its management are crucial due to the necessity of decision-making (Kaufman, 2019). Kaufman's survey-based study explores two phases: first, exploring the

role of stress, and second, strategies to manage stress. Research on principal perceptions is significant in the United States (Priester, 2024), with Priester's study being a dissertation with an American context. Similarly, studies conducted in Switzerland have found that a majority of school principals, both in primary and secondary settings, experience high levels of stress, with sources such as time constraints, interpersonal conflicts, and high role expectations being identified as key contributors. (Whitaker, 1996; Griffith, 2004; Sogunro, 2012). Interpersonal relationships and administrative burdens are recognized as stressors but to a lesser extent (Denecker, 2019; Izzati et al., 2023). Comparative studies between developed countries like the United States and Germany reveal similar findings to previous studies, highlighting excessive administrative tasks, volume of responsibilities, pressure to meet student and stakeholder expectations, and accountability to superiors (Hancock *et al*., 2019). Similarly, a study focusing on primary school principals in Finland identified workload, interpersonal

conflicts, resource shortages, and internal pressures as the primary sources of principal stress (Elomaa *et al.*, 2023). A study in Japan found that 14% of school principals and 30% of vice-principals experienced depression (Nitta *et al.*, 2019). This is particularly concerning as depression represents an advanced stage of stress. Prolonged stress, when it interferes with daily functioning, can lead to depression, highlighting the need for targeted interventions to address this critical issue.

Studies on the same topic in developing countries, such as Nigeria, highlight various stressors that impact the administrative duties of school principals and their ability to implement effective management strategies. For example, a study focusing on public secondary school principals in Rivers State emphasized the administrative challenges they face (Alasomuka, 2019). In Malaysia, a study by Tahir *et al.* (2018) examined stress sources and coping strategies through an Islamic approach. The study found that the highest stressors were related to managing student achievements, teacher competency, policy changes, and inspectorate visits. In contrast, administrative tasks, curriculum changes, and parental support were not significant sources of stress. A study in Gambia identified seven key stress factors: monthly salary, work experience, age, workload, gender, marital status, and work location (Igharo, 2013). Similarly, research conducted in Pakistan indicated that the main stress sources include school administration, parental pressure, societal expectations, and low student performance (Samina *et al.*, 2021).

In the Indonesian context, research on principal stress is limited. After conducting searches on freely accessible journal platforms such as Google Scholar, Lens.org, ResearchGate, Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), and Academia, only three articles were found that address principal stress within Indonesia: Septiawan (2018), Gaol (2020), and Ulfiah *et al.* (2022). Septiawan's study, conducted in a high school in Malang, identified a high workload, inappropriate task allocation, and lack of rest as the main sources of stress for principals. Gaol's literature review outlined five key factors contributing to principal stress: poor interaction with school communities, inadequate school resources, role complexity, workload, challenges in educational policy, and poor time management skills. Ulfiah's study, focusing on primary school principals, found that stress was largely attributed to unhealthy work environments and pressure from teachers, both of which negatively affect principal performance.

This study addresses a critical gap in understanding the stressors faced by public school principals in Indonesia, particularly in Bogor Regency. While most research on principal stress focuses on developed countries, Indonesia's unique challenges—such as centralized funding, bureaucratic constraints, and resource inequities—remain underexplored. Bogor Regency, with its diverse population and schools, faces additional pressures, including disparities between urban and rural schools, high student-teacher ratios, and complex administrative demands. The novelty of this research lies in its localized approach, which examines how regional and systemic factors contribute to principal stress. By focusing on

public schools in Bogor, it provides valuable insights into the specific challenges of managing schools within this socio-economic context. This study is significant for Bogor Regency, offering practical recommendations to reduce principal stress, such as streamlining bureaucracy, improving resource allocation, and developing leadership training programs, which can enhance school management and student outcomes. Nationally, the research contributes to policy reforms addressing broader systemic issues in public education, while globally, it enriches the limited literature on principal stress in developing countries, offering insights and strategies adaptable to similar contexts worldwide. By emphasizing Bogor Regency, this study serves as a model for addressing educational leadership challenges in Indonesia and beyond.

II. RESEARCH METHOD

To enhance understanding of the research process, we provide the following flow diagram along with its explanation:

TABEL 1. Flow Diagram of Reaserch
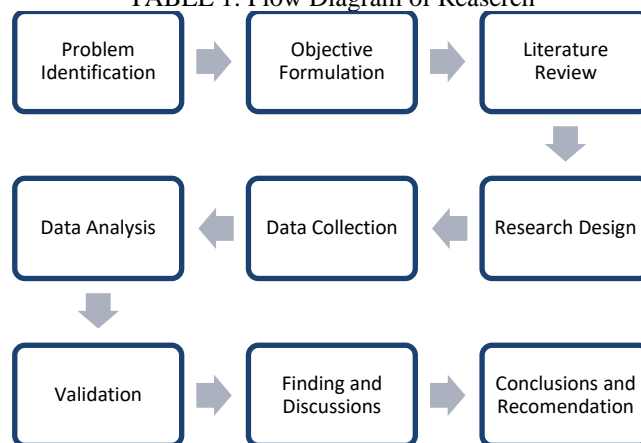
A. Problem Identification

Principal stress in Indonesia is underexplored, with unique challenges like centralized funding, ambiguous financial regulations, and disparities between urban and rural schools. This study seeks to identify stressors specific to Indonesian school leaders while comparing them to global contexts.

B. Objective Formulation

The study aims to explore stressors affecting principals in Bogor Regency and determine whether these challenges are distinct from those faced globally.

C. Literature Review

The literature review sets the foundation for the research, drawing on studies that explore principal stress globally and locally. In developed countries, stress is often linked to high accountability, resource limitations, and interpersonal conflicts. In Indonesia, limited studies have identified stress factors such as unhealthy work environments, role complexity, and challenges in policy implementation. These findings underscore the need for localized research to

better understand the unique pressures faced by Indonesian school leaders.

D. Research Design

A qualitative, exploratory approach was used, with purposive sampling selecting four principals from public schools: two junior high schools (SMPN), one senior high school (SMAN), and one Islamic junior high school (MTsN). This ensures diverse perspectives on stress sources (Palinkas *et al.*, 2015; Campbell *et al.*, 2020).

E. Data Collection

Data were gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, allowing principals to share detailed experiences about stress factors such as workload and policy pressures. The method ensured flexibility while maintaining focus on relevant themes (Belina, 2023).

F. Data Analysis and Validation

Recurring themes, including financial constraints and interpersonal conflicts, were identified through thematic coding. Findings were validated using triangulation, comparing interview data with literature and participant responses for consistency (Palinkas *et al.*, 2015).

G. Findings and Recommendations

The study identified both global stressors, like stakeholder demands, and unique challenges in Indonesia, such as zoning policies and pseudo-journalist pressures. Recommendations include streamlining bureaucracy, improving resource allocation, and offering leadership training programs to support principals in their roles.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study's findings are structured around the primary sources of stress identified in the literature review. Nevertheless, all informants emphasized only the most significant contributors to their stress, which we will detail. Issues such as administrative workload, curriculum changes, or regulations related to teaching and learning were not considered major stressors. Informants perceived these tasks as fundamental duties inherent to the role of school principals, thus making them more manageable and less stressful in comparison to other challenges.

The following are the sources of stress that we have summarized from the interviews with the informants

TABEL 2. Source of Stress

No.	Source of stress	Main issues
1.	Interpersonal Relationships	Conflicts with teachers, parents, and staff, Difficulties in managing seniority and institutional changes, Challenges with vice-principal appointments, discipline enforcement.
2.	Resource Shortages	Shortages in teaching staff, infrastructure, and financial resources,

No.	Source of stress	Main issues
		Strict regulations around school funding and operational budgets. Difficulty in engaging parents for financial support.
3.	High Demands from Stakeholders	Schools face high expectations for academic and non-academic performance. Tension between maintaining quality and adhering to tight funding rules
4.	Pressure from pseudo journalists	Pseudo-journalists disrupting school operations. Threats of false reporting and extortion. Limited efforts to regulate this issue
5.	Zone System in New Student Admission (PPDB)	Homogeneous Student Body, Reduced Selectivity Ongoing Controversy
6.	Assessment of School Principal Performance	Annual and four-yearly performance assessments Impact of evaluations on career security

A. Interpersonal Relationships

Interpersonal relationships between school principals and teachers, students, parents, and authorities can be significant sources of stress. School principals often face the challenge of balancing diverse interests and expectations, leading to tension and conflict. Inadequate conflict management can exacerbate stress and negatively impact their performance. Public schools, in particular, frequently experience interpersonal conflicts, especially when principals first assume their roles. Fields (2005) noted that first-year principals and assistant principals frequently faced conflicts, mainly arising from interactions with staff, parents, and occasionally students. These conflicts often arise from teachers and staff who are resistant to institutional changes aimed at improving school operations. As Informant 1 mentioned:

"I felt the burden of dealing with senior teachers at the beginning of my tenure, especially those who either underperformed or resisted the changes I introduced for school progress." (May 17, 2024)

This is common in public schools due to the emphasis on seniority based on age, rank, and length of service. At the school where Informant 1 currently works, the vice-principal structure previously deviated from the established guidelines, solely to accommodate seniority and maintain harmony.

Interpersonal conflicts also arise when principals appoint vice-principals or other staff members to positions perceived as not reflecting the interests of the school community. This situation presents a dilemma, as building a strong team requires balancing both competence and compatibility. Historically, the vice-principal role was viewed as a stepping stone for future advancement as a principal or supervisor, but the criteria have since been revised.

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Additionally, communication challenges occur when principals fail to clearly articulate new policies or expectations, leading to misunderstandings. Teachers and staff unfamiliar with stricter discipline often resist when principals introduce policies they see as conflicting with the school community's values. According to Informants 1, 2, and 3, disciplinary issues have lessened due to stricter regulations for civil servants, though non-compliance persists due to loopholes in the current rules. Clear and effective communication is essential to ensure the school community understands and complies with new policies.

Besides managing relationships with teachers and staff, principals must also navigate interactions with parents. In the current era of information transparency, even minor school errors can quickly escalate into significant issues. Discontented parents may raise their concerns on social media or report them to higher authorities, often resulting in direct reprimands for principals. As Informant 3 noted, his urban community, parents scrutinize everything that happens at school, so he has to weigh his decisions carefully to avoid major issues. Unsatisfactory service can lead to immediate protests. Parental dissatisfaction becomes particularly problematic when parents have connections with government officials, either at the district level or within higher institutions, which can result in direct reprimands from superiors.

B. Resource Shortages

Resource shortages are a significant source of stress for school principals (Hancock *et al*., 2019; Ulfiah *et al*., 2022). According to the informants, newly established schools often face shortages of teachers and educational staff. Additionally, physical infrastructure and support facilities are insufficient, placing considerable strain on principals to find solutions. Informant 2 shared:

"I was once assigned to a newly established high school in a remote area. The facilities, including infrastructure, were limited, as were the human resources. I had to maximize the available resources to ensure smooth school operations. There were few permanent teachers, so the school had to hire contract teachers, even though the financial resources were very constrained. Due to the limited facilities, the student body was small, which also led to challenges in recruiting more students. Sometimes, I felt stressed trying to manage certified teachers who lacked teaching hours because of the limited number of classes." (May, 22 2024)

A key resource shortage highlighted by all informants is financial constraints. According to regulations, school funding comes from various sources, including the State Budget, Central and Provincial School Operational Assistance (BOS), School/Madrasah Committees, and others (Regulation of the Minister of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology No.18 of 2023, Article 2, Paragraph 3). However, informants noted that this financial support does not fully meet the ideal needs of schools. They expressed concern over the strict regulations governing the use of these funds, with many principals wary of using them for fear of violating the rules, which could lead to legal issues, including accusations of corruption (Putri & Panjaitan, 2023). The informants explained, though the School Operational Assistance (BOS) covers most of the school's needs, principals often hesitate to use the funds due to the stringent regulations. It's easier not to use them than to risk potential complications later.

The restrictive nature of both central and provincial BOS funds forces school principals to seek alternative funding sources. According to the regulations, schools can accept voluntary contributions from parents through school committees, as long as they are not mandatory or arbitrarily imposed (Regulation of the Minister of National Education No. 75 of 2016, Article 10, Paragraph 2). However, this rule presents ambiguities, as Informant 3 pointed out:

"There is a public perception that schooling is entirely free. The government forbids any fees, yet at the same time, it allows schools to receive community contributions through school committees. It's a politicization of free education—officially it's discussed as free, but in reality, schools are still dependent on community contributions. This creates confusion."(May 30, 2024)

Despite the allowance for contributions, principals struggle to collaborate with parents to finance activities not covered by government aid. This limits the school's ability to innovate and undertake additional initiatives.

C. High Demands from Stakeholders

The community increasingly expects schools to meet high societal standards, especially as the perception grows that government funding makes education entirely free. This belief pushes parents to demand more from schools, often without realizing the financial and resource constraints schools face. For well-established public schools, this is a significant challenge. Schools are expected to maintain their reputations by excelling in both academic and non-academic arenas, such as winning national science and sports competitions, which require considerable resources and funding. However, these schools often find themselves limited by financial constraints and regulations on the use of government aid, making it difficult to meet these expectations. As Informant 2 highlighted:

"Our school is well-known in the community, so we must maintain the quality and meet expectations. There's a strong push from superiors and agencies to perform well in competitions like OSN (National Science Olympiad) and sports. However, the regulations on school operational funds are restrictive, making it hard to meet the financial demands, forcing us to seek creative alternatives." (May 22, 2024)

Additionally, public scrutiny intensifies these pressures. When stakeholders, particularly parents, feel that their expectations aren't met, they may lodge complaints or escalate the issue to higher authorities such as the ombudsman. Informants 1, 2, and 3 reported being investigated, requiring

them to clarify that their decisions followed proper procedures. Principals, especially those lacking mental preparedness, find this highly stressful, as it not only consumes time but also affects their psychological well-being.

These findings align with research indicating that the duties of school principals are increasingly intricate, as societal expectations now demand schools to take on broader roles within the community and better address the varied needs of students and parents (Markow *et al*., 2013). Besides, they also face universal stressors, including public scrutiny, social media pressures, and accountability demands, all of which emphasize the importance of addressing their emotional well-being in educational leadership (Mahfouz, 2018).

D. Pressure Pseudo Journalists and NGOs

All informants highlight that one of the major external stressors for school principals is the frequent visits by pseudo-journalists from NGOs. These individuals claim to be seeking information about school policies, particularly the use of BOS (School Operational Assistance) funds. This issue has persisted, particularly since the government increased educational funding by allocating 20% of the national budget to education, thereby attracting more scrutiny.

Informant 4, who has been a school principal for only a year, shared:

"These journalists disrupt my daily work. They show up uninvited, demanding transparency on school plans and policies they believe harm the community. Despite the fact that financial transparency reports are submitted to the relevant authorities like the inspectorate and BPKP (Financial and Development Supervisory Agency), we still have to deal with them. Their frequent threats to publish defamatory stories in their media feel like extortion."(May 2, 2024)

The risk of false reports is a significant concern for principals, as it damages both the school's and the principal's reputation, regardless of the validity of the claims. This requires schools to issue public clarifications, further increasing the principals' workload. Additionally, these pseudo-journalists often use extortion tactics, expecting principals to pay for "transportation costs" to avoid negative reports. Since school management rules do not allow the use of funds outside specific guidelines, principals end up paying from their own pockets to avoid issues. Despite the fact that this problem has been ongoing for a long time in various schools, regulatory bodies have done little to address it, allowing the distress caused by these pseudo-journalists to continue.

E. Zoning System

The implementation of the zoning system in the New Student Admission (PPDB), as introduced by Regulation No. 51 of 2018 from the Minister of Education, has become a significant source of stress for school principals, particularly at established public schools. Even after revisions in Regulations No. 20 and No. 44 of 2019, the zoning system prioritizes prospective students from specific geographic areas, reducing the emphasis on academic performance. Schools are required to allocate a minimum of 50% of their seats to students within their zones, with the rest distributed through other channels such as affirmative action and achievement-based admissions. Despite this minimum, the zoning system often dominates, preventing schools from selecting high-performing students and potentially lowering the academic standards of prestigious schools (Widyastuti, 2020). Informant 2 highlighted this challenge, noting,

"We often joke with other principals that just maintaining educational quality is now considered an achievement." (May 22, 2024)

The zoning system has led to more homogenous student bodies, affecting overall academic performance. However, at less preferred schools, it can enhance institutional quality. Informant 3, the head of an MTsN (Public Islamic Junior High School), noted that their school avoids zoning-related issues due to different Ministry of Religious Affairs regulations, although local applicants are prioritized to prevent conflict. While principals acknowledge that PPDB (new student admissions) can be stressful, transparent rules are essential for fairness and public acceptance. The zoning policy, on the other hand, reveals a gap between public and private schools. Ideally, private schools would attract students based on their quality and appeal, allowing families free choice. In practice, the zoning policy has disrupted this process, favored public schools and limited private schools' ability to recruit students.

F. Assessment of School Principal Performance

In accordance with government regulations implemented in 2010, school principals must undergo annual performance evaluations conducted by school supervisors appointed by the Department of Education or Ministry of Religious Affairs district offices. Additionally, every four years, their performance is reviewed by an assessment team comprised of school supervisors, educators, support staff, and school committees (Guidelines for Assessing the Performance of School/Madrasah Principals, 2012). Informants describe these evaluations as a source of stress due to their complexity, which is compounded by school accreditation processes. The latter involves six assessment components: personal and social qualities, instructional leadership, school development, resource management, entrepreneurship, and instructional supervision. These align closely with the eight standards evaluated during school accreditation.

Although these evaluations and accreditations are scheduled well in advance, they significantly add to the principal's workload. The results highlight both strengths and areas for improvement, with consecutive poor evaluations potentially leading to demotion from the principalship back to a teaching position. Therefore, school principals strive diligently to meet the required performance standards to safeguard their careers and maintain their professional reputations.

IV. CONCLUSION

School principals play a crucial role in the success of educational institutions but often face significant stress, particularly in Indonesia, where global challenges intersect with unique local issues. This study, conducted through in-depth interviews with four public school principals in Bogor Regency, identified key stressors such as interpersonal conflicts with senior teachers and parents, financial constraints, and demands from multiple stakeholders. These stressors, while common globally, are exacerbated in Indonesia by ambiguous financial regulations, pressures from pseudo-journalists, challenges with the zoning system for student admissions, and the increasing demands of performance evaluations. These compounded pressures not only affect the principals' professional performance but also their personal well-being. The study emphasizes the urgent need for clearer policies, particularly in financial management and student admission systems, along with conflict management training to better equip principals for their complex roles. Further research should explore whether these challenges are prevalent nationwide and evaluate the effectiveness of policy reforms and targeted training in reducing stress and enhancing school leadership in Indonesia.

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