

## Coping with stress: Exploring the lived experiences of English teachers who persist in Malaysian rural schools

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### ABSTRACT

Teaching English as a second language is a long and complex undertaking, particularly when it is done in multilingual rural areas where English serves a limited purpose. The purpose of this phenomenological case study was to shed light and describe the lived experiences of ten English teachers who persist in rural schools in Sabah, Malaysia. Data gleaned from in-depth interviews and observations and were thematically analyzed. The research questions captured teachers' perceptions of the existing teaching and learning environment, sources of stress and coping strategies through interviews and observations. The findings depicted that rural schools do not benefit from a conducive environment to support English teaching and learning due to the limited English environment, shortage of teaching resources and poor physical environment. The findings also revealed that dealing with low English proficiency (LEP) students was their main stressor in teaching English in rural schools, followed by students' disruptive behaviours, excessive workload and lack of support. To cope with the stress, teachers first evaluate and assess possible solutions through a stress appraisal process. The present study identified that the personal, social, professional and institutional coping strategies were used by teachers to cope with stress faced. The findings have implications for the teaching of English in rural schools and could offer recommendations for changes in educational practices in which the authorities, school administrators and teachers could collaborate in improving English education in rural schools and thus students' learning, achievement, and school reputation.

**Keywords:** Coping strategies; English teachers; rural schools; stress

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### INTRODUCTION

In today's era of globalisation and internalization, the importance of English cannot be denied as it is the most commonly spoken language in the world. The teaching of English as a second language has been compulsory in many countries to ensure their citizens to have better opportunities for career advancement. Nevertheless, many of those living in rural areas struggle with the seemingly insuperable difficulties associated with their underperforming rural schools in English subject (Azman, 2009; Cheng, Yunus, & Mohamad, 2016; Ee,

2012; Marwan, Sumintono, & Mislán, 2012). The concern over rural students' low achievement in the subject has been discussed quite extensively in the literature (Azman, 2011; Ee, 2012; Hassan & Rasiah, 2011; Nur, 2015; Wreikat, Kabilan, & Abdullah, 2014). Findings from several studies have shown that this phenomenon is more apparent in developing countries such as Tanzania (Mosha, 2014), Colombia (Holguín & Morales, 2016) and Bangladesh (Hossain, 2016). In the Malaysian context, the World Bank's (2010) report has provided alarming evidence of the disparity between

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urban and rural schools which is seriously pressing students' achievement in the subject, and this situation is the most serious and remains a prominent issue in poorer states such as Sabah, Kelantan, and Malacca.

In the context of rural Sabah, the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (2013) noted that due to a larger proportion of rural schools, Sabah is recorded as the lowest-performing state in all public examinations. Furthermore, the multi-racial and multilingual rural communities (Azman, 2009), as well as heterogeneous and culturally diverse ethnic groups interestingly coloured the uniqueness of English language learning (Hariharan, Arsaythamby, & Ho, 2013). Above and beyond this situation, the low level of students' achievement in rural schools eventually contributes to the ongoing devitalisation of entire communities who are already living with a socio-economic disadvantage (Cheng et al., 2016). Many studies have highlighted that this poor performance was a consequence from the fact that most rural students experience contact with the language only during their English language classes in schools (Musa, Koo, & Hazita, 2012). Hence, rural students depend almost solely on their teachers (Ien, Yunus, & Embi, 2017). In addition, rural students are also found to be passive learners, and they often consider English as a subject that is too difficult that they give up trying to accomplish the tasks given (Suran & Yunus, 2016).

While the aforementioned studies have associated student factors with the poor achievement of the subject, many scholarly studies have also linked rural students' achievement with teacher factors such as teacher burnout (Mukundan & Khandehroo, 2010), high teacher turnover rates (Nur, 2015; Rao & Jani, 2011; World Bank, 2010) and lack of high-quality teachers in rural schools (Cheng et al., 2016; Marwan et al., 2012; Nur, 2015; World Bank, 2010). The findings of these studies indicated the accumulation amount of stress had led teachers to be burned out, thus lowered their motivation which consequently rendered the English teaching and learning process to be ineffective (Cheng et al., 2016). The effects of multiple stressors are predominantly strong in rural schools (Nur, 2015). Thus, it does not come to a surprise when stressed and burned out teachers stay in the classroom, student achievement diminishes (Mousavy & Nimehchisalem, 2014). The pathway from this constituted multi-source stress on teachers resulted in low student achievement and led to a negative impact on rural communities.

While the stressors to be dealt with are considerable for teachers in general, they are particularly intense for those serving in rural schools (Nur, 2015). The World Bank (2010) presented a comprehensive review to illustrate the stressors faced by teachers in Malaysian rural schools:

A lack of resources is one reason for their relatively poor performance, but other factors also come into play. For example, there is a high turnover of teachers in these schools as well as a shortage of teachers in English, mathematics, and science. Due

to the small size of these schools, many teachers in rural schools are expected to cover several grades at the same time (multi-grade teaching), which means that they are unable to impart each grade's curricula separately. Also, the infrastructure of these schools is often inadequate. Some schools do not have electricity for 24 hours a day or an adequate source of water (p.92).

Rao and Jani (2011) noted that teachers are commonly more interested in serving in schools with high socio-economic status in urban areas and this situation results in a higher turnover rate among teachers at rural schools. Consequently, rural schools are facing issues in retaining quality teachers (Marwan et al., 2012; Nur, 2015; World Bank, 2010). The consistent fluctuation of teachers coming and going out from rural schools has a negative impact fiscally on educational settings. In general, the challenge of how to make English teachers stay for a long period in rural schools where they are sent to serve is a crucial concern in the country's educational settings.

Even though schools are generally meant for students, it is undeniable that students are influenced by teachers who are actually affected by their workplace and its circumstances (Goodlad, 2004). Teachers should not be 'lost' but rather be able to identify the stressors, cope with them, and enjoy teaching more confidently and enthusiastically throughout their profession. For this objective, research is needed to seek for better understanding of English education in rural schools through the teachers' perspectives. Therefore, through exploring the lived experiences of English teachers who have persisted in rural schools, this study may reveal their perceptions about teaching English in the rural environment, the sources of their stress and how they cope with stress faced. By gaining insights into their world, this study would provide findings that are more conclusive and offer valuable opportunities for the teachers to reflect on their profession, as well as significant understanding for a considerably wider application. In response to the objective, this study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of English teachers who persist in rural schools in Sabah state?
2. What are the sources of stress for teachers in teaching the English language at rural schools?
3. How do English teachers in rural schools cope with stress?

### **Research underpinning theories**

This study utilizes the Theory of Stress, Appraisal and Coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) as guidance in the current study investigations. This theory aided the researchers in exploring English teachers' lived experiences in rural schools. Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Theory of Stress, Appraisal, and Coping explain how individuals face and react to problems, issues, difficulties, and challenges. The three major concepts in this theory—stress, appraisal and coping—are

interrelated to one another. These three concepts can be viewed through the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) to explain the transaction or interaction between a person and environment that becomes the sources of stress due to the imbalance between demands and resources. This dynamic model has become the framework to evaluate the processes of coping with stressful events, in which stressful experience is interpreted as person-environment interaction.

This theory has provided the researchers with guidelines and a strong basis to address the issue under study. The function of this theory in the present study is to arrange ideas, concepts, and models coherently and systematically to develop meaning in order to explain, interpret and justify the study. Marican (2005) stressed that there are three major roles of theories in a study, which are to organize knowledge and justify findings, to predict new findings and to guide the intended study. In providing a full understanding of the functions of the theory, the researchers were able to generate questions in which this theory is beneficial in gathering the aspired research data.

### **The burnout phenomenon among rural English teachers**

The existing literature on burnout among English teachers in Malaysia depicts that the burnout level is significantly high (Mahboobeh, Mukundan, & Nimehchisalem, 2012; Mousavy & Nimehchisalem, 2014; Mukundan & Khandehroo 2010; Mukundan, Pezhman, Abdolvahed, Umi Kalthom, & Husniah, 2015). Nevertheless, these studies were focusing more on the influence of age, gender, marital status and school type on teacher burn-out, and little analytic attention has been paid to those who serve in rural schools. Considering the circumstances of the work environment in rural schools, English teachers face a greater tendency to burn themselves out compared to their counterparts in urban schools. Coping with stress, on the other hand, is not an easy task in rural schools environment. To ensure this, teachers need to be exposed to and equipped with a challenge-identification ability and effective coping mechanisms to encounter difficulties or manage the stress faced.

One of the direct negative effects of teacher burnout is the increased possibility of teacher turnover. In 2010, the World Bank reported that the low retention of high-quality teachers in rural schools causes the problem of low students' achievement due to the teacher turnover trend to urban schools. Although the specific figure of teachers transfer in the country remains unclear, a study by Krei (2000), depicted that the possibilities for teachers to move to higher socio-economic schools are four times higher than in the opposite direction. This signifies that the high teacher turnover is the primary reason for teacher shortage rather than the issue of teacher retiring (Ingersoll, 2001). The consequence of this trend has caused the disparity between urban and rural schools is further widened

(Marwan et al., 2012).

Another negative effect of the burnout phenomenon among English teachers is the lack of quality teachers serving in rural schools. Teacher quality is defined as teachers who consistently display competence in classroom instruction and the ability to produce strong students' achievement scores (Mitra, Dangwal, & Thadani, 2008). The fact that many rural teachers move to urban schools is well documented. However, the question of why teachers leave is less straightforward, as variations of multiple factors play a potential role. Nevertheless, another question arising from this situation is whether rural schools are able to keep their teachers motivated to maintain "*teacher quality*" to continue serving in the schools. Moreover, most rural schools teachers are novice teachers who are young and have just graduated (Yang, 2014). In general, inexperienced young teachers are attributed to the lack of teacher quality (Nur, 2015). This is because young teachers are more susceptible to both emotional exhaustion and depersonalization leading to burnout (Mukundan & Khandehroo, 2010). In fact, novice English teachers often do not feel adequately prepared for the challenges in their first few years of teaching (Senom, Zakaria, & Ahmad Shah, 2013).

In studies on teachers who have left the teaching profession, factors similar to teacher burnout among English teachers are noted. These factors included, for instance, job satisfaction and absence of supportive school environment (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2015). One clear challenge for English teachers in rural schools is the dissatisfactions with the teaching and learning environment. It should be noted that the environment of the workplace in which the teacher teaches may somehow affect the way the teaching and learning process takes place, and the locality aspect like rural areas is taken into consideration (Suliman & Yunus, 2014). Also, noted issues faced by English teachers at risk of or already burned out were high levels of stress (Mahboobeh et al., 2012; Mukundan & Khandehroo, 2010; Mukundan et al., 2015). Abdullah, Uli and Salahudin (2007) argued that poor working conditions, especially in rural areas, contributed to low morale and dissatisfaction, which lead to teachers stress. In rural schools, English teachers play a very crucial role to bring in language exposure to ensure students are able to learn as they may be the only source of English (Kabilan, 2007). Hence, to achieve this, it is important for teachers to seek satisfaction not only in the intrinsic aspects of teaching task but also in other aspects related to their lived experiences.

Although the review on burnout phenomenon among English teachers, teacher turnover and retaining high-quality teachers have been addressed in the literature to varying degrees, several areas relevant to this study appear to be empirically understudied. There is inadequate information about those who persist in rural schools in Sabah, Malaysia. Investigating this specific group of teachers would provide great potential for new additional stressors associated with being in

unique multilingual rural communities in Sabah. While the occurrence of additional stress seems reasonable, there is a lack of studies that would point out confirmation or rejection of this assumption. The potential impact of the lived experiences of English teachers who persist in rural Sabah secondary schools has yet to be explored. Avoiding teachers from being burnout by understanding their thoughts on the rural environment, stress faced and coping strategies, was the major concern of this study, and therefore may provide an avenue for additional insights.

## **METHOD**

### **Research design**

The present study investigates ten English teachers serving in rural secondary schools in Sabah, Malaysia using qualitative phenomenological case study approach. The purpose of a phenomenological approach is to understand the issue from lived experiences and perceptions of specific respondents (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006). Furthermore, Yin (1994, p.51) defined a case study as *"an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident"*.

Yin (1994) suggested the case study as a particular style of educational research that may be appropriate for investigating the concept of English teaching in a specific context, as for this study, the case of rural secondary schools.

### **Research participants**

In this study, purposive sampling was utilized to select prospective teachers. The first criterion of the participant selection was to select teachers with TESL or TESOL qualifications. The second criterion was to select teachers who were going to be teaching in rural secondary schools for three or more years during data collection as they could provide rich information on the phenomenon under study. The third criterion set for the selection of teachers was to select teachers whose place of origin is located in urban areas. Potential teachers for this study were solicited during formal and informal meetings, courses and informal discussions.

Ten teachers participated in this study, consisting of one male and nine females. All of them came from different educational backgrounds but met the three criteria set for the sampling for this study. The search for potential teachers ended when the data reached saturation level, in which there was sufficient information to replicate the study and no new data emerged. The data gathered was able to answer the research questions, and the ability to gain additional new information had been accomplished and further coding was no longer feasible (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992).

### **Data collection and analysis**

The researcher in the qualitative paradigm is the primary tool in the data collection process (Bogdan &

Biklen, 2006). In this study, teachers' points of view, opinions and meaningful responses that contain rich, detailed and descriptive answers were the primary searches. Therefore, semi-structured interviews were used as a primary method to collect data to further illuminate the experiences that the participating teachers gained when teaching in rural schools. By using semi-structured interviews, this study was able to achieve clarity and attained a deeper understanding of the lived experiences as from the teachers' perspectives. The recordings were transcribed, and field notes were reviewed immediately after the session to ensure accurate interpretation as the researchers could still freshly recall the information.

On the other hand, observations were also conducted to gain insider's perspectives of the phenomenon under study as another source for the triangulation of data, increasing the trustworthiness of the study and fill any gaps between what research participants narrated through interviews and what actually happens. The researchers have attempted to acknowledge what had been seen and noted in actual reality. Reflections were done at the end of each session as an addition to the field notes. Apart from triangulation, data verification and filling the gaps, some of the data obtained in the observations were also used as talking points in the post-observation interviews.

Thematic analysis was then used to analyse the data gathered for this study. Thematic analysis is a method to identify, analyse and report themes of data (Boyatzis, 1998). It is different from other qualitative data analyses as it focuses more on portraying patterns or themes in the data. Identification of patterns or themes through thematic analysis can be done inductively and deductively (Frith & Gleeson, 2004). This study uses inductive thematic analysis in which the themes identified are closely related to the data itself (Patton, 1990). This means that inductive thematic analysis is a data coding process that can expand according to the research questions. Inductive thematic analysis tends to analyse themes in the data in details, without giving attention to the related themes from the findings in previous research. In other words, the themes that emerged are derived from the data itself. The selection of thematic data analysis fits the theoretical orientations of this study in the assumption that gathered data represents the reality of teachers' lived experiences. This is due to the essentialist method or realist characteristic of thematic analysis, which reports the teachers' experiences, the meaning of the experiences, and the effects of the social interactions (Willig, 1999).

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **The lived experiences of English teachers who persist in rural schools in Sabah state**

The English teachers in this study had served rural schools in Sabah state for periods ranging from three years to decades of service in this setting. As such, they

defied rather than contributed to the teacher turnover as noted in the literature (Marwan et al., 2012; Nur, 2015; World Bank, 2010). However, in the exploration of their lived experiences in rural schools, teachers in this study described their experiences in negative words and connotations, indicating general dissatisfactions, specifically in the context of the teaching and learning environment for English subject. They noted that the disadvantages of the rural environment contributed to disinterest for the teaching and learning of English subject. In concert with the literature, teachers in this study spoke in depth about the dissatisfactions and negative impacts of the environment have on their behaviour and teaching practices. The disadvantages of the environment were remarked as unavoidable and an apparently ever-present issue in rural schools, an associated stressor for burnout among teachers recognized in a number of studies (Mukundan & Khandehroo, 2010; Nur, 2015; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2015; Wreikat et al., 2014). One significant answer to the central research question could be illustrated in a conclusion that rural schools lack a conducive environment to support English language teaching and learning. The data disclosed that teachers' experiences encompassed less supportive environment for English learning, shortage of teaching resources as well as a poor physical environment in rural Sabah secondary schools.

Teachers noted that rural schools suffer from limited English environment due to lack of supportive language resources. Several factors were remarked as the attribution to the situation. First, within rural communities, English is not considered as a second language and is not used communicatively due to the frequent use of their native ancestral language. Second, students' low linguistic property in English, socioeconomic status, and family educational background are also considered as contributing factors. Third, lack of language exposure is also considered as a factor pertaining to limited English environment due to insufficient resources such as visual learning support, as well as an incomprehensive implementation of English programmes.

Shortage of teaching resources was another description attributed to the absence of appropriate teaching and learning environment in rural schools. The teachers' experiences encompassed the depletion of resources as well as inequity distribution of those resources. They criticized that some of the materials were unsuitable for rural secondary school students. Aside from that, the data depicted that rural secondary schools experience limited information and communication technology (ICT) facilities such as limited internet access and inadequate ICT equipment. Moreover, the analysis demonstrated that there were insufficient teaching resources available to support English teaching in these schools. The teachers believed that scarce funding and inequity in the distribution of the resources were the factors of this situation. Studies documenting this factor as attribution for departure from

rural schools concurred with the findings as part of the reasons for teacher burnout and turnover (Hassan & Rasiah, 2011; Ming, Hall, Azman, & Joyes, 2010; Wreikat, Kabilan, & Abdullah, 2014).

Another discussed attribution was the poor physical environment. The most discussed description in regards to the poor physical environment is inadequate English learning facilities. They noted that the inadequacy hinders the overall teaching and learning process. Furthermore, teachers also described that rural schools had to use deprived furnitures such as damaged and old tables and chairs. This resulted in uneasiness and often contributed to misbehaviour among students. Another factor expressed by the teachers that contributed to the poor physical environment was the poor air quality due to ventilation problems. Their concern was on the thermal discomfort of the occupants in the classroom in which they claimed had affected the mood and drawn away students' attention from learning. This is in accordance to Parsons (2014) who pointed out that high temperature has a powerful influence on humans, associated with irritability, subjective discomfort and distress, and thus can be a major source of dissatisfaction in the workplace, which leads to health issues and productivity, decreases morale and lowers productivity within the environment. The teachers believed that insufficient funding was a major cause for this situation. Apart from that, an external disturbance was also one of the teachers' concerns in regards to the physical environment.

In short, the English teachers in this study recognized the context of teaching and learning environment factors addressed in the literature in relation to their lived experiences in rural schools. However, none of the environmental factors remarked by teachers had led them to move to another school or leave teaching permanently, despite the dissatisfactions expressed in their descriptions. The negative descriptions on the context of teaching and learning environment in the literature were not considered as sufficient drive for these teachers to depart from rural schools.

### **The sources of stress for teachers in teaching the English language at rural schools**

Teachers in this study revealed that even though the stress was perceived unconstructively, they had experienced accumulation of similar sources of stress which were clearly associated with the context of the teaching and learning environment in rural secondary schools. The finding is in concert with the Theory of Stress, Appraisal and Coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) where stress is defined as a specific relationship between individuals and the environment that is perceived as taxing or exceeding their resources and threatening to their wellbeing. Teachers' descriptions centred on four sources of stress as being specifically taxing to their teaching work which are dealing with LEP students, students' disruptive behaviours, excessive workload, and lack of support.

The most mentioned source of stress by the teachers in this study was dealing with LEP students. All teachers admitted that it was stressful and viewed it as a grappling and taxing task to deal with "*weak students*" who were struggling with English learning due to the low property of the language, failed to comprehend the basic structure of English sentences, and strong first language interference. Factors associated with limited English environment were remarked as attributions to LEP among rural students including lack of language exposure, the status of English language, socio-economic and family educational background. Teachers also believed that it was due to strong first language interference, students' negative perceptions toward English learning and lack of motivation to learn the language. Moreover, most students in rural schools rely very much on teachers for the exposure of the language. In addition, unrealistic expectations from school administrators and teachers themselves on LEP students were also identified to contribute to their stress.

The second most mentioned stress was dealing with students' disruptive behaviours. This stressor was seen as a significant predictive factor contributing to emotional exhaustion for teachers. Poor physical environment, specifically large class size and thermal discomfort were the reasons remarked by teachers that caused students to misbehave in classrooms. Due to these factors, students often experience discomfort and lose their attention in the classrooms, thus resulting them to be lethargic and being aggressive, such as making too many unnecessary noises (Harmer, 2002). This stress-producing situation lowers students' motivation and increases their anxiety. Nevertheless, teachers in this study also felt that the disruptive behaviours of students might also be influenced by other factors such as discipline levels and socio-cultural background.

Excessive workload, both teaching and non-teaching related was the third most mentioned stressor. In regards to teaching-related workload, three teachers in the study criticised the changes in the curriculum specifications as one of the factors contributed to their stress. Other than that, being burdened with non-teaching related workload was also identified as a source of stress. Teachers revealed that they struggled from the pressures of these school-related engagements rather than focusing on teaching. Their experiences encompassed spending time doing numerous clerical work such as keying in students' data and inputting them into databases, attending meetings and briefing both inside and outside schools, carrying duties for extra co-curriculum activities, preparing and submitting paperwork and documents, as well as preparing for observations. Moreover, holding several non-teaching related posts also contributed to their stress. The teachers also moaned that they did not have enough time to properly plan and prepare for their lessons simply because they had to complete other work to meet the deadlines and demands from their administrators.

The fourth and final source of stress mentioned was the lack of support. The teachers in the study discussed two types of support; the teaching resources support and social support. First, teachers in the present study revealed that they felt stressful to work with a limited supply of teaching resources. Noting that rural schools suffer from limited English environment, teachers argued that more teaching resources are needed to expose students to the language. Secondly, teachers in this study also cited that lack of social support from administrators and the surrounding community as a factor of their stress. The data also depicted that the mentioned stress has arisen due to the claim that teachers were not prepared to teach in rural schools in the teacher-training programmes.

In conclusion, teachers in this study recognized and discussed the sources of stress pertaining to the context of rural schools as noted in the literature, specifically stressing issues on dealing with LEP students and disruptive students' behaviour, excessive workload and lack of support. This suggests that teachers in the present study were concerned more about students' well-being and achievement compared to non-teaching related engagements. Moreover, for all teachers in the study, the identified stressors did not cause the teachers to leave their positions although the literature reported that these stressors are major factors in teacher burnout. These were the points of departure from the existing literature. Findings of this study suggested that teaching English in rural schools is perceived to be a stressful profession, as all of them expressed that they did not find teaching in rural schools as enjoyable but rather a grappling and taxing task. The findings also indicated that the sources of stress recognized by teachers in this study have a strong relationship with the disadvantages of the teaching and learning environment in rural schools. This relationship was something to which the teachers believed related to their stress.

#### **The ways English teachers in rural schools cope with stress**

In coping with the stress faced, the English teachers in this study revealed that they first spent much time, both inside and outside their working hours, to evaluate whether the stress faced could threaten and provide negative impacts to them and seek for possible solutions. This is in accordance with Lazarus' (1993) explanation on the cognitive appraisal process where it occurs when a person is assessing his or her response to the stress. Interestingly, they revealed that thinking about teaching-related stress specifically on students' learning was the most frequently thought by them, whereas non-teaching related stress seemed to be less thought by them. Four coping strategies—personal, social, professional and institutional—emerged from data analysis, where each strategy encompassed two or more specific strategies that captured a vital component of the described lived experiences.

Personal coping strategies, encompassing four specific strategies, were the most frequent strategies used by teachers to cope with stress. The first one was the cognitive strategies. Three teachers remarked that staying positive had helped them to go through the obstacles in their teaching profession. Other teachers noted that avoiding thinking about stress was also helpful to cope with stress. The second strategy was the physical strategies, some of which were active while others were passive. The teachers commented that doing such physical activities could help to relieve stressful thoughts and clear their mind. The third personal coping strategies utilized was behavioural strategies. These strategies involved engagement in everyday routines in which the teachers claimed to stray away from their thoughts from the stress. Emotional strategies such as praying and spending time with family were viewed as a form of therapy that aided teachers to cope with stress.

Social coping strategies were the second most frequent strategy mentioned by teachers in the study. Throughout all interviews, the teachers mentioned how communication with other people had helped them to persist in teaching. They acknowledged that collegial support was not only desirable but also an important component in coping with the stress. Additionally, three teachers remarked that turning to family in times of crisis for a simple conversation or reflection was also a significant social coping strategy.

Professional coping strategies were the third mentioned strategy used by teachers. Four specific strategies were recognised under professional coping strategies. The first strategy was adaptability. Several teachers noted that teaching in rural schools required one's ability to adapt to the rural environment. The second specific professional strategy was the use of pedagogical skills. The teachers remarked that using pedagogical skills such as creating fun activities could help in lessen the negative impacts of the stress. The third professional coping strategy shared was seeking and increasing pedagogical knowledge. Searching for teaching strategies on the internet, articles, videos, and pursuing postgraduate studies were some of the examples given by the teachers. Ensuring classroom control at the beginning of the schooling year was the fourth professional strategy mentioned.

The final strategy used by teachers to cope with the stress was the institutional coping strategies, specifically the implementation of a subject-based classroom. Teachers recognized that the use of subject-based classroom was significant in the teaching and learning process as they claimed that it provided the mood needed for language learning.

All in all, the teachers in this study have recognized and discussed the coping strategies used in accordance with the prediction by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) in that different person may utilize different coping strategy as a response to similar stressors. Relating to their lived experiences, they began by appraising the stress and then used the coping strategies either to solve the problems or to release the stress.

Nevertheless, the fact that teachers recognized and discussed the coping strategies pertaining did not mean that they would diminish the effects of stress or function as absolute solutions. They were also not considered and highlighted as a factor to stay or leave rural schools but functioned more as psychological support to teachers. The coping strategies shared by teachers in the study may offer insight and ideas for other teachers in similar settings to cope with stress faced. Moreover, it can also contribute to the in-service teacher training programmes by extending more support and suggestions on stress management to reduce burnout and turnover rates among English teachers in rural schools.

## **CONCLUSION**

The triangulation of data postulates clearly that the English teachers in this study viewed the rural schools suffer from the disadvantages of teaching and learning environment. The researchers found that limited English environment, shortage of teaching resources and poor physical environment were the reasons that the environment failed to support English language teaching and learning. This has significantly contributed as sources to the teachers' stress and the formation of teachers' sense of self-efficacy. Dealing with LEP students, dealing with students' disruptive behaviours, excessive workload and lack of support were identified to be the sources of teachers' stress. Furthermore, the researchers also revealed that the English teachers in the study appraised the stress cognitively to seek possible solutions. Personal, social, professional and institutional coping strategies were the four strategies used by the English teachers as coping mechanism either to manage and alter the stress or to regulate the response to the stress.

The final depiction of the findings was through the descriptions of the English teachers' lived experiences as described in this study. The description of what was experienced by these teachers can be summarized as remarkable perseverance in serving rural schools. Although the teachers have described that they operated in an unsupportive environment for English language teaching and learning, it was not perceived as a significant aspect of their decision to remain to teach in rural schools.

These findings advance the understanding in the field of English education in rural schools by providing insights into the subject, and context-specific descriptions of the lived experiences and perceptions of the teachers. It is believed that the findings of this study are significant as they contributed new knowledge to the body of literature on TESL, specifically in rural education, in-service professional development courses and teacher training programme. The knowledge generated from this study could offer recommendations for changes in educational practices in which the authorities, school administrators and English teachers could collaborate on improving English education in rural schools and thus positively impacting students' learning, achievement, and school reputation.

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