UNVEILING THE CHALLENGES OF STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP: PERSPECTIVES FROM MALAYSIAN RURAL SCHOOL LEADERS

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
	This article explores the strategic leadership challenges rural school leaders encounter in Malaysia. Utilizing a qualitative methodology using interviews on three rural school leaders as participants was applied to obtain an in-depth understanding of their experiences. Data from interviews were subsequently analyzed thematically. The qualitative analysis reveals detailed descriptions of the challenges faced by these leaders, categorized into three primary factors: school factor, teacher factor, and student factor. Five themes emerged as key challenges to strategic leadership in rural schools: (i) the absence of ICT infrastructure and equipment, (ii) insufficient professionalism among school leaders, (iii) the influence of parental and community factors, (iv) teacher attitudes, and (v) student personalities. These findings contribute to the broader discourse on strategic leadership in education, with a specific focus on primary and secondary levels in rural settings. By illuminating the multifaceted challenges faced by rural school leaders, this study offers valuable insights for policymakers, educational practitioners, and researchers aiming to improve leadership effectiveness and educational outcomes in rural areas.

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of leadership has undergone significant evolution, adapting to contemporary contexts and emerging needs. Historically, leadership was characterized by individual efficiency, autocratic or bureaucratic decision-making, and centralized control. However, the forces of globalization and the rapid proliferation of information have radically transformed the leadership landscape. As Elżbieta Rak-Młynarska (2022) notes, modern leadership demands a more dynamic approach, emphasizing outcome-oriented strategies, participative decision-making, flexible organizational structures, and a culture of shared responsibility. These changes necessitate leaders who can navigate complex environments and drive organizational success through collaboration and innovation (Karneli, 2023; Mayer et al., 2022; Muenjohn et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2022).

In the context of Malaysian education, the Malaysian Education Development Plan 2013-2025 outlines a comprehensive framework for school leaders. These leaders ensure high-quality teaching, manage resources efficiently, and foster parental and community partnerships (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2013). This framework reflects the shift towards inclusive and adaptive leadership strategies that can respond to the evolving educational environment. Recent studies, such as those by Zuraidah Abdullah et al. (2022) underscore the necessity for school leaders to adopt such strategies to navigate the challenges of modern education effectively. School leaders can create more resilient and responsive educational institutions by embracing these approaches.

Strategic leadership, crucial for achieving long-term organizational goals, is particularly vital in the educational sector. As Suharto (2023) highlights, strategic leadership helps educational institutions adapt and prosper by managing the present and planning for the future. This approach involves establishing a distinct vision and direction that aligns with broader educational contexts, anticipating and adapting to change, and addressing environmental factors like teacher quality to enhance student achievement (Al Huraizi & Marni, 2023; Carvalho et al., 2021). Nur Diyana Zakariah et al. (2023) further elaborate that overcoming barriers and developing comprehensive models are necessary to enhance educational institutions' quality and performance. These insights emphasize the need for strategic leadership to navigate the complexities of educational management and drive continuous improvement.

Malaysian school leaders, particularly those in rural areas, encounter myriad challenges in pursuing effective strategic leadership. Satinah Awang et al. (2019) found that senior leaders and experienced teachers in Malaysia's premier public schools face significant hurdles in sustaining initiatives like the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IBDP). This highlights the broader issue of resource and support disparities between urban and rural schools. Additionally, contemporary school leaders are confronted with more intricate issues compared to their predecessors. The unprecedented challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic have necessitated resilience and adaptability in school management. Chatzipanagiotou and Katsarou (2023) note that these challenges have required school leaders to develop new strategies and approaches to maintain educational standards and support their communities.

This study delves into the strategic leadership challenges within Malaysia's educational sector, focusing specifically on rural school leaders. It seeks to address the central question: What are the strategic leadership challenges faced by rural school leaders in Malaysia? By exploring this question, the study aims to provide practical insights and guidance for school leaders striving to enhance educational effectiveness and quality through strategic leadership.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review includes the definition of strategic leadership, rural schools in Malaysia and school leader challenges.

CONCEPT OF STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP

Ireland and Hitt (1999) defined strategic leadership as the ability of leaders to plan budgets, manage, and interact with others to achieve long-term organizational goals. Strategic leadership should necessarily play a relevant role in strategically focused schools. While according to Boal and Hooijberg (2001), strategic leadership focuses on leaders who create and develop the organization while based on their views Finkelstein et al. (2009) in terms of corporate governance and top leadership, strategic leadership refers to the study of the leaders who lead an organization and its impact on the organization's achievements.

Davies and Davies (2009) stated that strategic leadership focuses on formulating strategies and implementing change and improvement management strategies towards an effective and excellent educational organization. Latest study by Hitt et al. (2019) demonstrated that strategic leadership in the context of education requires leaders to integrate technology and innovation in the teaching and learning process to ensure the effectiveness of education in the digital age. Based on the views of past researchers, strategic leadership refers to the ability of a school leader who is forward-looking and always in the direction according to the current developments in education.

RURAL SCHOOLS IN MALAYSIA

The definition of "rural" has not been agreed upon by educators worldwide, despite a rise in studies on rural education (Coladarci, 2007). Rural schools in Malaysia represent a significant segment of the nation's educational landscape, catering primarily to communities residing in remote and less developed areas. These schools face unique challenges stemming from geographical isolation, limited infrastructure, and socioeconomic disparities compared to their urban counterparts (Ardi Marwan et al., 2018). Educational attainment and quality in rural schools have been longstanding concerns, exacerbated by factors such as teacher shortages, inadequate facilities, and difficulties in accessing educational resources (Tieken & Montgomery, 2021). Despite various governmental initiatives aimed at improving rural education, disparities persist, impacting student outcomes and educational equity.

Efforts to enhance rural education in Malaysia have included policy measures to upgrade school facilities, increase teacher deployment, and introduce special incentives to attract educators to rural areas (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2013). However, the effectiveness of these initiatives varies, with persistent challenges such as high teacher turnover rates and difficulties in retaining qualified staff (Norhafezah Yusof et al., 2020). The educational experiences and outcomes of students in rural schools continue to be shaped by these multifaceted challenges, highlighting the ongoing need for targeted interventions and comprehensive strategies to address educational disparities across different geographical contexts in Malaysia.

SCHOOL LEADER CHALLENGES

School leaders face multifaceted challenges in managing educational institutions, especially in diverse and under-resourced settings like rural and indigenous communities (Stone-Johnson & Weiner, 2022). These challenges encompass ensuring adequate resources and facilities for quality education, navigating budget constraints, and managing personnel effectively (Muhammad Nadeem et al., 2020). Moreover, Nasreen (2019) highlights that school leaders must also address complex issues such as student discipline, low attendance rates, and cultural barriers that affect learning outcomes. They also play a critical role in fostering parental and community involvement to support educational goals (Munje & Mncube, 2018). Balancing these responsibilities requires strategic leadership skills, resilience in handling crises, and a deep understanding of socio-economic factors impacting student achievement and school performance.

PAST STUDIES

Study by Kunalan et al. (2022) examined educational strategic leadership (ESLP) among leaders of Malaysian risky schools, aiming to develop and validate a structural model for ESLP. Data from 472 leaders of 141 secondary schools were analyzed using descriptive statistics, confirmatory factor analysis, and SEM. Findings showed leaders' high propensity for ESLP, identifying nine key practices: strategic orientation, translation, intervention, alignment, competencies, restlessness, absorptive capacity, adaptive capacity, and wisdom. SEM confirmed the model's validity and reliability. The study emphasized the need for a context-specific training program in strategic educational leadership to enhance leadership effectiveness and school outcomes in Malaysian risky schools.

A qualitative research study by Ahmad Aizuddin Md Rami et al. (2023) on Strategic Leadership Towards Sustainable Planning for Community Development in Malaysia assessed its impact within Malaysia's Villages Development and Security Committee. The study employed semi-structured interviews and purposive sampling to select sixty participants, including chairmen, secretaries, and ordinary members. Using an inductive approach for data analysis, the research identified five main themes: strategic direction, ethical practices, exploitation and maintenance, development of human capital, and sustaining a corporate culture. These findings underscore the importance of strategic leadership in driving organizational change in rural settings.

Another qualitative study by Lopez et al. (2022) explored the role, experiences, and challenges of principals in Orang Asli primary schools during the Covid-19 pandemic, highlighting the critical importance of school leadership in crisis management. Using purposive sampling, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with principals. The analysis revealed three main themes: roles and responsibilities, challenges during the pandemic, and strategies and expectations. The findings underscored the pivotal role of principals in navigating their schools through unprecedented times, emphasizing the need for focused efforts by principals and educational policymakers to support the workforce, families, and students. This study contributes to the understanding of leadership in school organizations, particularly in the context of Indigenous communities during a global crisis.

Despite significant research into educational strategic leadership, there remains a notable gap in understanding the unique strategic leadership challenges faced by rural school leaders in Malaysia. Previous studies, such as those by Kunalan et al. (2022), focused on educational strategic leadership in risky secondary schools but did not specifically address the distinct hurdles encountered in rural contexts. Ahmad Aizuddin Md Rami et al. (2023) assessed strategic leadership within rural community development but did not target educational institutions. Lopez et al. (2022) emphasized crisis management during the Covid-19 pandemic for Indigenous school principals, yet did not explore broader strategic leadership issues beyond the crisis. Moreover, the cross-cultural aspects of leadership in rural schools, which are critical given Malaysia's diverse cultural landscape, remain underexplored. Additionally, there is a lack of detailed investigation into the development and implementation of strategic leadership programs specifically designed for rural school leaders. Addressing these gaps, my study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the strategic leadership challenges in rural Malaysian schools, incorporating cross-cultural perspectives and offering practical solutions for leadership development. This research will contribute to enhancing leadership effectiveness and improving educational outcomes in rural settings.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology includes the research design, sampling technique, data collection and instruments, validity and reliability as well as data analysis procedures.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study employs qualitative methods to examine the strategic leadership challenges faced by rural school leaders using a fundamental qualitative design, which is one of the six qualitative research designs recommended by Merriam (2009) This design is well-suited in exploring the challenges faced by school leaders. Creswell (2017) describes qualitative research as a flexible approach, not prescribing specific methods or procedures This

approach aligns with the researchers' objective to explore and understand the complex challenges encountered by rural school leaders in the realm of strategic leadership. Consequently, the findings and conclusions derived from these case studies are expected to be more robust and credible, being grounded in multiple sources of information.

SAMPLING TECHNIQUE

This study utilized purposeful sampling, a technique endorsed by researchers such as Creswell (2015), Merriam & Tisdell (2016) and Miles & Huberman (1994). Purposeful sampling enables the researchers to select participants who possessed relevant experience and rich information pertinent to the study's objectives. According to Creswell (2007), purposeful sampling is particularly suitable for qualitative research as it ensures that participants have the necessary leadership qualifications and practical experience to provide valuable insights. In this study, three participants with over six years of experience in school leadership were selected.

Regarding sample size adequacy, the study included a total of three participants, which aligns with Merriam and Tisdell (2016) view that in qualitative research, the focus should not solely be on the quantity of participants but rather on the depth of contribution each participant makes towards addressing the research questions. This approach ensures that the data collected are rich and nuanced, offering comprehensive insights into the strategic leadership challenges faced by rural school leaders.

DATA COLLECTION AND INSTRUMENTS

This study used the interview method as a data collection method. Prior to the interview, the researcher had made thorough preparations and planning. As emphasized by Merriam (1998), thorough preparation and planning are essential components of qualitative research. The interview sessions were based on a set of semi-structured interview protocols, which had been endorsed by a panel of experts, including linguists and experts in the field of leadership. The interview protocol was divided into three parts: (a) Opening questions, which aimed to introduce the study and ensure the consent of participants to participate in the research; (b) key questions, which consisted of questions related to the challenges faced by rural school leaders in adopting a strategic leadership style; and (c) Closing questions, where participants were encouraged to share any additional suggestions on the challenges faced by rural school leaders.

The data obtained during the interview sessions were recorded using an audio recording device and copied into a notebook. After each interview, the recorded interviews were translated into verbatim forms. The researchers involved the study participants in the process of validating the results to ensure that the researchers' interpretations were accurate. After the assessment, participants made changes to the verbatim by adding or removing certain parts. Next, the researchers proceeded to collect the entire text of the interview.

VALIDITY & RELIABILITY

Before implementing the interview protocol with the actual study participants, the researcher undertook two steps to evaluate its content: expert review and pilot studies. After completing these steps, the researcher incorporated the feedback received to revise the interview protocol and the questioning approach. Additionally, the study participants were read the questions prior to the actual interview to ensure they understood the requirements. On top of that, the researchers engaged in a peer debriefing process to obtain valuable insights and comments from colleagues and experts who specialize in the same topic. This consent can improve the reliability of the data in addition to testing the accuracy and validity of the data (Merriam, 2009).

DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURES

Data analysis is an essential process in qualitative studies. Researchers simultaneously applied a constant comparison method between data collection methods and data sources to pinpoint the key themes of strategic leadership challenges. According to Corbin and Strauss (1998), the constant comparison process allows researchers to build models inductively by categorizing, coding, and refining categories, and then making connections between categories. Researchers carried out this process systematically and simultaneously. Once

the researchers conducted the interviews, they transcribed them verbatim, proceeded with the analysis, and repeated this process until the research reached its conclusion. Upon completion, the researcher filled out a discovery case form, which was a summary of the interviews for each case. They further analyzed the verbatim transcript using the Atlas-ti 23 software. Researchers created open codes and then grouped them into several categories. This category is known as 'process axial codes'. The process persisted until it formed the themes and sub-themes of strategic leadership challenges.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The results of the thematic analysis conducted on the interview data have identified three main factors related to the strategic leadership challenges of rural school leaders. More information on the leadership challenges is explained as follows.

Lack of ICT Infrastructure and Equipment (School Factor)

In this digital era, the use of information and communication technology (ICT) is crucial for improving the quality of education. However, many schools in Malaysia still face problems due to a lack of ICT equipment, such as computers, projectors, and stable internet access. This issue was highlighted by the first and third participants of the study as follows:

> *"For example, the provision of materials, LCD, smart TV, this needs support from the Ministry of Education and Culture who provide it."* (1:22 ¶ 22 in PS 1)

> *"... among our students too, some do not have devices to follow online learning given the family's economic constraints"* (3:23 ¶ 16 in PS 3)

Poor infrastructure is also a significant obstacle to the development of strategic leadership. School leaders are often less concerned with infrastructure needs than with the addition of students and teachers. As one participant explained:

> *"Another challenge when you get here, walking a long way from the village to here. I think there should be a bridge directly to the school"* (1:29 ¶ 4 in Transcript PS 1) *"We have an office there, I have a senior assistant and no room. Looking at that, I need a new building, so it's beyond my means"* (1:30 ¶ 4 in PS 1)

The lack of school infrastructure can expose school children to danger, especially in rural areas and islands. Some school leaders are less concerned with the safety of students, as highlighted by the first participant:

> *"There is no fence so when I see that, so I want to fence this school, because before when I saw my teachers, when he came back there was no door and he wanted to go down from the front, from the back into the garden"* (1:31 ¶ 4 in PS 1)

The lack of basic facilities such as clean water supply, electricity, and clean toilets negatively impacts the learning environment. Inadequate basic facilities can affect the health and well-being of students and teachers, which in turn affects their academic performance and morale. One participant illustrated this issue:

> *"Apart from that, this is an island area, this island area is usually an island that does not have water facilities.... Because here, when there is a drought, rain is expected."* (1:35-40 ¶ 6 in PS 1)

School Leaders' Professionalism (School Factor)

Leaders who lack self-confidence or do not strive to improve their skills and knowledge tend to be comfortable with the status quo rather than being proactive for improvement. The second participant described this issue:

"He will remain with the unyielding group no matter what. Let it be like this... And a third-class mind will also arise…" (2:57 ¶ 38 in PS 2)

Leaders also need to be brave enough to make changes. Fear of taking risks can inhibit innovation, growth, and improvement in organizations. One participant noted:

"It means we have to be firm with the decision. The challenge is that people will hate us. But let's not look for the hate part..." (2:62 ¶ 34 in PS 2)

Poor communication between school leaders and staff contributes to a lack of professionalism. Ineffective communication can cause misunderstandings, conflicts, and dissatisfaction among school members. One participant supported this statement:

"… leaders need to have virtue for their teachers, let's not condemn them, I think if we condemn them, they will be more down." (1:21 ¶ 20 in PS 1)

Another participant emphasized the need for effective communication:

"The challenges are many. But we need to communicate. And let's not shame them. We have to call..." (3:56 ¶ 20 in PS 3)

School leaders who do not identify the causes of school issues before making decisions often face problems in implementing effective strategies. As one participant stated:

"… sometimes there are times when we give our opinion and people don't accept it... eh I'm right but what it means is when we sit slowly with him, he only says we don't really want to come, his son is sick." (2:68 ¶ 34 in PS 2)

Creativity is essential to overcome challenges and find new ways to improve the quality of education. However, many rural school leaders lack the skills or courage to think outside the box. This was further supported by a participant:

"The challenge of ideas is, how to develop ideas, how we as leaders can't just sit back." (2:14 ¶ 24 in PS 2)

Parental and Community Factors (School Factor)

Negative attitudes and non-constructive criticism from parents can affect the professionalism of school leaders. Parents who often criticize without giving constructive suggestions can impact the morale and motivation of school leaders. This issue was highlighted by the third study participant:

"...but there are many challenges for him, the challenges of his parents, report the parents... like this... just accept it" (3:47 ¶ 28 in PS 3)

Excessive interference from parents in school affairs can also be an obstacle to the professionalism of school leaders. Less professional school leaders may not have the courage or skills to set clear boundaries between the role of parents and the role of the school. This was highlighted by another participant:

"...the third challenge is the parents, there are parents who can accept and there are parents who cannot accept and continue... people bring back statements from the past, that was that time, include guidelines up to the extent that parents can intervene or people said to care too much" (2:47-51 ¶ 18 in PS 2)

Spreading inaccurate or incorrect information through social media without verifying its truth can cause misunderstandings and dissatisfaction among the school community. One participant expressed concerns about this issue:

> *"Then the teacher's challenge is a little bit viral, we live in an age where everyone can't control viral sharing, it's just wrong... if there is no guide, everyone is free to do that"* (2:50 ¶ 18 in PS 2)

Lack of resources from the community is also a big challenge for rural school leaders. School leaders may lack the skills or initiative to seek additional resources from stakeholders. One participant supported this statement:

> *"But now, if this is my challenge, I need to network with corporate members."* (1:39 ¶ 22 in PS 1)

Teacher Attitude (Teacher Factor)

Senior teachers who are not ready to change and make the school a comfort zone can hinder progress. Senior teachers resistant to change and innovation can impede school leaders' efforts to improve the quality of education and achieve their strategic goals. One participant explained:

> *"Because my challenge here is different, my challenge here is the old, senior teachers."* (2:54 ¶ 24 in PS 2)

Senior teachers who are less concerned with the latest knowledge may have difficulty adapting to changes in curriculum, educational technology, and new teaching approaches. This was raised by another participant:

> *"...cannot be implemented face-to-face and there are among teachers especially senior teachers who are not skilled in ICT"* (3:22 ¶ 16 in PS 3)

Teachers who are not IT literate may find it difficult to integrate technology in their teaching. In this digital age, the use of ICT is important to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Teachers who are not IT literate may not be able to take advantage of available digital tools and resources, leading to a decline in teaching quality. One participant articulated this concern:

> *"So why does that happen, because for people who don't do it, let this teacher be an IT expert, let him do it."* (2:64 ¶ 38 in PS 2)

Another participant supported this statement:

> *"We will find many people in the organization who do not catch up, for example, many teachers who do not dare to do the Google form or to try using it."* (3:70 ¶ 38 in PS 3)

Student Character (Student Factor)

The attitude of students in rural schools is often influenced by their locality or environment. Local culture that may not prioritize education can affect student behavior, as noted by a participant:

> *"Another challenge here, this place is semi-urban. If you say this is a village, it's not really a village. But it's just the suburbs, boys can go to the city. So the culture is mixed."* (2:55 ¶ 24 in PS 2)

Students living in rural areas face challenges such as lack of access to quality educational facilities and exposure to technology. This was highlighted by a participant:

"But when there is a pandemic, students study at home and we cannot focus on them while online. Because there are many restrictions online" (3:28 ¶ 16 in PS 3)

Rural localities are often associated with lower socioeconomic status. Students from low-income families may face various challenges affecting their attitude and personality. One participant explained:

"Teaching in the city, a city boy, a little urban... in terms of him having his attitude, his way, his style" (2:13 ¶ 22 in PS 2)

Student character refers to the behavior, values, and ethics shown by students in their daily lives. Leaders recognize that students have manners and morals but emphasize that easy access to information and external influences through technology and the internet may influence their behavior. One participant supported this view:

"But actually, for the current period, if our school is really struggling, it's not just the challenges, it used to be the students were the only challenges. I want to make sure that students succeed with excellence. Now our student's challenge has to be split into two, the student's excellence is his character" (2:52 ¶ 18 in PS 2)

Access to various information and external influences through technology and the internet may influence student behavior. One participant elaborated:

"Because what I see now, many students today are smart. But in terms of manners and morals, I don't want to say that they don't have manners and morals, but maybe they have easy access to various things now." (3:30 ¶ 36 in PS 3)

In conclusion, the findings of the study related to the challenges encountered based on the school leaders in rural areas are as follows:

a) Lack of ICT Infrastructure and Equipment (School Factor)

    i.   Schools in Malaysia still face a shortage of ICT equipment such as computers, projectors, and stable internet access.
    ii. School leaders are less concerned about infrastructure needs than more students and teachers.
    iii. School leaders are less concerned about the safety of school staff.
    iv. Basic facility brackets.

b) School Leaders' Professionalism (School Factor)

    i.   School leaders feel comfortable with what is available without being proactive for improvement.
    ii. School leaders lack the courage to take risks to make decisions.
    iii. School leaders are less concerned about the choice of speech when communicating.
    iv. School leaders who do not identify the root cause of school community issues before making a decision.
    v.   Rural school leaders don't have the skills or courage to think outside the box.

c) Parental and Community Factors (School Factor)

    i.   School leaders do not have the skills to deal effectively with these criticisms.
    ii. Some school leaders may not be brave or skilled enough to make it clear what the parent's role is and what the school's role is.
    iii. School leaders lack the skills to reconcile the diverse parenthoods.
    iv. School leaders lack the skills or initiative to seek additional resources from stakeholders.

d) Teacher Attitude (Teacher Factor)

    i. Senior teachers are not ready to change and make the school as a comfort zone.
    ii. Senior teachers who are less concerned about the latest knowledge.
    iii. Non-IT literate teachers may face difficulties in integrating technology in their teaching.

e) Student Character (Student Factor)

    i. Students behave negatively due to environmental influences.
    ii. The attitude of students influenced by this locality can lead to a lack of motivation and interest in learning.

DISCUSSION

Based on the findings of the study on the strategic leadership challenges faced by school leaders in Malaysia, three main factors have been identified: school, teacher, and student factors. The most significant challenge is the lack of adequate resources and facilities in rural Malaysian schools. These rural schools often face financial constraints, dilapidated infrastructure, and outdated technology, making it difficult for school leaders to implement strategic plans that require substantial financial and technological support (Maslawati Mohamad et al., 2023). According to Heller (2021), rural schools frequently rely on insufficient government aid to cover their basic needs, hindering the implementation of innovative strategies aimed at improving educational quality. To address this, the government and private sectors must increase investments in rural education, providing modern infrastructure and technology to create an optimal learning environment This is in line with Murugi and Mugwe (2023) who mentioned that effective leadership and stakeholder involvement in strategic planning can improve the implementation of strategic plans in schools. Therefore, addressing these disparities is crucial for empowering school leaders to execute strategic plans that foster educational excellence and equitable opportunities for all students.

In addition to financial constraints, inadequate school facilities further disrupt the educational environment and pose safety risks to students. This is also supported by Permana et al. (2023) who claimed that lacking of adequate school infrastructure facilities, affects the teaching and learning process in schools. Participants in this study highlighted the hazardous journeys students undertake due to the absence of proper pathways and bridges to the school. There is an urgent need for new buildings and office spaces to accommodate administrative functions. However, these improvements often exceed the financial and logistical capabilities of school leaders operating within limited budgets and resource constraints. Study by Akhter et al. (2018) proved that the majority of school leaders were not satisfied with budgets and funds provided, and faced difficulties in spending allocations efficiently and effectively for the maximum benefit of learners. Basic facilities such as clean water, electricity, and sanitation are also lacking, significantly impacting the health and well-being of students and staff. Unfortunately, without external support from governmental bodies or private sector initiatives, school leaders face significant challenges in addressing these infrastructure deficits independently (Azlin Norhaini Mansor et al., 2022). This reliance on external assistance underscores the critical role of broader stakeholders in supporting the rural schools, ensuring they have the physical infrastructure necessary to facilitate effective leadership and educational advancement. Collaborations with local communities and stakeholders could facilitate the construction and maintenance of essential infrastructure.

The integration of information and communication technology (ICT) is crucial for enhancing educational quality in this digital age (Pettersson, 2018). However, many rural schools in Malaysia face significant challenges due to inadequate ICT infrastructure, including insufficient computers, projectors, and reliable internet access (Idarwana Hasin & M. Khalid M Nasir, 2021). Nor Asiah Razak et al. (2019) mentioned about the lack of ICT resources hinders both teaching and learning processes. One participant highlighted the need for ministry support in providing essential ICT materials, such as LCD projectors and smart TVs. Another participant noted the economic constraints preventing students from accessing online learning due to the unavailability of personal devices. To overcome these challenges, government initiatives should prioritize the distribution of ICT resources and training programs for both teachers and students, ensuring they can effectively utilize digital tools.

Additionally, the professionalism of school leaders is another critical factor influencing the effectiveness of strategic leadership. Leaders who lack confidence or fail to continuously improve their skills and knowledge tend to maintain the status quo rather than seeking proactive improvements (Liebowitz & Porter, 2024; O'Connor Jr., 2017). This issue was evident in the observations of the study's second participant, who described some leaders as resistant to change and innovation. According to Bush (2021), effective strategic leadership requires the ability to make firm decisions and take calculated risks, yet many school leaders exhibit a fear of inciting discontent among staff and community members, thus hindering progress. To foster professional growth, regular leadership training programs and workshops should be implemented, emphasizing the importance of innovative thinking and effective communication.

The attitudes of teachers, particularly senior staff, significantly impact the implementation of strategic leadership. Senior teachers who are resistant to change and innovation can create a comfortable yet stagnant environment, impeding progress. This is supported by Lomba-Portela et al. (2022) who claimed that teachers' resistance to educational change is primarily influenced by legislative changes and perceived excessive functions, with greater resistance observed among older teachers. One participant noted the difficulty of motivating senior teachers who are set in their ways and uninterested in adopting new knowledge or teaching methods. This resistance is further compounded by a lack of ICT literacy among some teachers, which is crucial for integrating technology into the classroom. Nurhabibah et al. (2018) concurred, mentioning that teachers lack self-confidence in using ICT, and factors such as gender, education level, and age influence ICT literacy competence. Continuous professional development programs should be offered to enhance teacher effectiveness, focusing on the latest educational technologies and teaching methodologies. Encouraging a culture of lifelong learning among teachers will help them adapt to evolving educational demands.

Finally, the character and behaviour of students in rural schools are heavily influenced by their local environment and socioeconomic status. Rodríguez-Hernández et al. (2020) found that there is a positive relationship exists between socio-economic status and students' personality and academic performance in education. Participants observed that students in rural areas often display attitudes shaped by their surroundings, which may not prioritize education. The challenges of online learning during the pandemic further exacerbated these issues, as students faced numerous restrictions and lacked adequate supervision at home. The lower socioeconomic status of many rural families also presents significant barriers, affecting students' motivation and interest in learning. In line with this, Edgerton and McKechnie (2023) claimed that students' subjective perceptions of their physical school environment, along with attendance, socioeconomic status, and gender, are significantly related to academic achievement. To address these challenges, school leaders must develop effective strategies to foster positive student character and create a conducive learning environment. This can be achieved through comprehensive support programs that involve parents, community members, and external agencies, ensuring holistic development and academic excellence among students in rural schools.

IMPLICATION AND RECOMMENDATION

The study's findings underscore the urgent need for targeted policies to address resource and facility disparities in rural schools. Policymakers should prioritize reallocating funds to narrow the gap between urban and rural educational environments, focusing on infrastructure improvements, technological advancements, and essential amenities such as reliable water and electricity. Tanghe and Schelfhout (2023) emphasize that addressing the identified lack of professionalism among school leaders requires robust professional development initiatives that emphasize strategic leadership, risk management, and innovative practices. Additionally, the inadequacies in ICT infrastructure and digital literacy among educators highlight the need for comprehensive strategies to integrate ICT effectively, including the provision of necessary equipment and training.

To tackle these challenges effectively, increased funding for rural schools is paramount, alongside mandatory professional development programs aimed at enhancing leaders' strategic acumen and fostering innovation. According to Cervantes-Vergara (2023), investments in modern ICT infrastructure and teacher training will facilitate the seamless incorporation of digital tools into educational practices. Strengthening community and parental engagement through consistent communication and collaboration can further bolster school support networks. Implementing comprehensive student support programs that cater to both academic and non-academic

needs is also crucial. Finally, establishing a rigorous monitoring and evaluation framework will ensure the efficacy of these strategies, enabling ongoing refinement based on feedback and evolving challenges.

Strategic leadership is vital for steering educational institutions toward excellence despite multifaceted challenges. Effective strategic leadership empowers school leaders to proactively address organizational, infrastructural, environmental, and community-based hurdles, fostering a culture of innovation and continuous improvement (Cobbinah, 2020). Moving forward, there is a pressing need for further research to develop a tailored strategic leadership model for educational leaders in the Malaysian context, ensuring sustained progress and resilience in the face of evolving educational landscapes.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study highlights the multifaceted challenges faced by school leaders in rural Malaysian schools, categorized into school, teacher, and student factors. However, the limitation of this study is the geographic focus on rural areas only. Therefore the findings may not capture the full spectrum of strategic leadership challenges faced by school leaders in different contexts within Malaysia. As for the current scope of study, the lack of adequate resources, including financial constraints, dilapidated infrastructure, and outdated technology, significantly hinders the implementation of strategic leadership plans. Additionally, the integration of ICT and the professionalism of school leaders are critical areas requiring urgent attention and improvement. The attitudes of teachers, particularly senior staff, and the character and behavior of students further compound these challenges, necessitating comprehensive strategies to foster a conducive learning environment. Addressing these issues requires concerted efforts from the government, private sector, local communities, and school leaders themselves. By investing in modern infrastructure, enhancing ICT integration, promoting continuous professional development, and fostering positive student character, the quality of education in rural Malaysian schools can be significantly elevated, ensuring a brighter future for the students and the nation as a whole.

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