JOURNAL OF CURRENT RESEARCH IN EDUCATION
LIFE LONG LEARNING

JOURNAL OF CURRENT RESEARCH IN EDUCATION
JCRE 2025; Vol. 4(1):58-48
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URL:https://kwasuspace.kwasu.edu.ng/handle/123456789/1185
ISSN: 1596-2504

EFFECTS OF SCHOOL TYPE AND LOCATION ON STRESS COPING STRATEGIES USED BY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS IN RIVERS STATE

By

ENOCH, EBIKETONE DIEMA PhD

Department of Educational Psychology and Counseling. University of Africa,
Toru-Orua, Bayelsa State – Nigeria.

dariusebi@yahoo.com,

08168521231

Abstract

This study explored the effects of school type, and location on stress coping strategies used by school principals in Rivers State. The research designed used for the study is an ex-post facto research design, the population of the study comprised all 258 principals of public secondary schools in Rivers State, a total of 155 school heads were selected through a stratified random sampling method. Two research questions and two hypotheses guided the investigation. Data collection was facilitated via an online survey instrument developed specifically for this study, title: Effects of School Type and Location on Stress Coping Strategies of Principals Scale (ESTLSCSPS). Mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research questions while independent z-test was used to test the hypotheses. The results indicated that there was no significant difference in the effects of the school type and location on stress coping strategies employed by school principals in Rivers State based on gender. Common strategies identified among participants across different groups included delegating tasks, engaging in physical activities, social interaction with peers, relaxation techniques, and fostering positive interpersonal relationships. Based on the findings, it was concluded that there was no significant difference between the stress coping strategies of male and female school principals based on their school type and there was no significant difference between the stress coping strategies of male and female school principals based on their location. It was recommended that Education authorities should institutionalize continuous professional development programs that strengthen principals' stress-management and leadership resilience. Also, Stress-reduction interventions should be context-sensitive, addressing the distinct environmental and operational challenges faced by urban and rural schools.

Key words: Gender, Stress, Coping Strategies, School, Type, Location, School Principals

Introduction

School leadership is increasingly recognized as a demanding and multifaceted role that places significant psychological and emotional strain on principals, owing to rising accountability pressures, policy reforms, and complex stakeholder expectations (Yaşar et. al., 2025). School principals must navigate a range of responsibilities, including instructional leadership, staff management, conflict resolution, and stakeholder engagement. These roles require a continuous balancing of competing demands and expectations, which can generate high levels of occupational stress (Day et al., 2016).

The capacity of school principals to adopt effective stress-coping strategies is vital, not only for their own well-being but also for sustaining school effectiveness; coping strategies are the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral methods utilized to manage demands that exceed one's resources, such as seeking social support, problem-solving, and focusing on the problem (Hojeij et. al., 2023). In educational leadership, effective coping mechanisms can mitigate the negative effects of stress, enhance decision-making, and improve job satisfaction and performance (Woods & Roberts, 2018).

According to a research on Successful School Leadership: Education Development Trust, it shows that the context in which school principals operate significantly influences the types of stressors they encounter and the coping strategies they employ. Two key contextual factors are school type and school location. The type of school, whether public or private, determines the nature of administrative structures, accountability pressures, resource availability, and stakeholder expectations (Day et. al., 2016). For example, public school principals might face bureaucratic constraints and limited resources, while private school principals might grapple with market competition and parental demands. These differences necessitate varying coping strategies.

Similarly, the location of a school (urban versus rural) affects the environmental and social context of leadership. Urban schools often experience higher student populations, needs, and greater community involvement, which may elevate stress levels (Leithwood et. al., 2020). Conversely, rural schools may face challenges such as limited infrastructure, isolation, and fewer professional development opportunities, influencing how school principals manage stress (Kaur, 2013).

Recent research highlights that school principals employ a range of coping strategies to manage occupational stress, broadly categorized into **problem-focused** and **emotion-focused** mechanisms. For instance, a study among educational leaders in the United Arab Emirates found that principals often relied on social support, task planning, and self-motivation to cope with stress effectively (Hojeij et. al., 2023). Similarly, school managers in Guiuan, Philippines, reported that delegation of duties, building collegial relationships, and effective time management were key coping approaches that enhanced their leadership resilience (Abiera, 2023).

In addition, principals in private schools in Nepal adopted strategies such as maintaining work–life balance, participating in professional development programs, and engaging in mindfulness or relaxation exercises to reduce emotional exhaustion (Koirala, 2024). Cognitive-behavioral techniques—including cognitive restructuring, relaxation training, and problem-solving—have also been identified as effective interventions for alleviating stress and burnout among school leaders (Rao & Sharma, 2024).

Moreover, a recent cross-sectional study conducted after the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that strong coping skills, self-efficacy, and proactive coping significantly reduced the likelihood of principals considering leaving the profession, underscoring the protective role of effective coping mechanisms in sustaining leadership commitment (Herman et. al., 2023). Collectively, these findings emphasize that adaptive coping strategies are central to the psychological well-being and professional effectiveness of school principals across diverse educational contexts.

Despite these insights, there remains a paucity of empirical studies specifically exploring how school type and location influence stress coping strategies among school principals in Rivers State. This gap is problematic given that Rivers State, like many regions, has a diverse educational landscape with varied socio-economic, infrastructural, and cultural factors.

Statement of the Problem

School principals in Rivers State are increasingly confronted with complex challenges that elevate occupational stress and threaten their ability to lead effectively. The pressures stem from a combination of factors, including heavy workloads, accountability demands, staff management issues, student discipline, and community expectations. These stressors can lead to burnout, reduced job satisfaction, and ultimately, diminished school performance (Kyriacou, 2001; Woods & Roberts, 2018).

One critical factor that influences the experience and management of stress among school principals is the type of school they oversee. Public and private schools operate under different regulatory frameworks and resource constraints, which can affect the nature and intensity of stressors. For instance, public school principals often contend with stringent government policies and limited funding, whereas private school principals may face the pressures of maintaining enrollment and financial viability. Despite these differences, there is limited understanding of how these contrasting contexts shape the stress coping strategies used by school principals in Rivers State.

Several studies have explored the relationship between school context and coping strategies among principals in various parts of the world. For instance, **Amanchukwu and Ololube (2019)** examined stress management among secondary school principals in Nigeria and found that administrative workload, poor funding, and inadequate infrastructure were key stressors, while effective delegation and peer collaboration were common coping mechanisms. Similarly, **Ledesma (2020)** reported that school heads in the Philippines used adaptive strategies such as team building, open communication, and time management to address context-specific stress factors.

In South Africa, **Moyo and Lingard (2021)** found that urban school principals faced stressors related to student indiscipline and parental pressure, whereas rural principals struggled with professional isolation and lack of teaching resources, leading to differing coping approaches. **Hojeij et. al., (2023)** also revealed that coping strategies among school leaders in the UAE varied by school type—public school principals leaned more on social support networks, while private school principals adopted self-regulation and problem-focused coping strategies to deal with market competition and performance pressures.

More recently, **Herman et. al., (2023)** highlighted that proactive coping, emotional resilience, and social connectedness reduced burnout and turnover intentions among school principals globally, particularly in post-pandemic contexts. Similarly, **Koirala (2024)** found that school location significantly affected stress levels among principals in Nepal—urban principals reported higher psychological strain due to policy pressures, while rural principals experienced greater frustration linked to isolation and limited infrastructure. Although these studies demonstrate a growing interest in understanding contextual differences in coping strategies, few have specifically addressed **how school type and location interact to influence stress management among school principals within the Nigerian context**, particularly in Rivers State. This justifies the need for localized empirical research that investigates how these contextual factors shape principals' coping mechanisms, thereby informing targeted professional development and support frameworks for educational leaders.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to investigate the effects of school type and location on the stress coping strategies employed by school Principals in Rivers State Nigeria. The specific objectives of the study were to:

1. Determine the difference in the effects of school type on the stress coping strategies employed by school principals in Rivers State based on gender; and
2. Investigate the difference in the effects of location on the stress coping strategies employed by school principals in Rivers State based on gender.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. Is there difference in the effects of school type on the stress coping strategies employed by school principals in Rivers State based on gender?
2. Is there difference in the effects of location on the stress coping strategies employed by school principals in Rivers State based on gender?

Research Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were designed for the study:

1. There is no significant difference in the effects of school type on the stress coping strategies employed by school principals in Rivers State based on gender.
2. There is no significant difference in the effects of location on the stress coping strategies employed by school principals in Rivers State based on gender.

Methodology

This study employed an ex-post facto research design, which is suitable for investigating existing conditions without manipulating any variables. From the population, a sample of 155 principals was selected using a stratified random sampling technique with strata based on **school type (public and private)** and **school location (urban and rural)** to ensure proportional representation of principals across different educational contexts in Rivers State.

Data were collected using a researcher-developed questionnaire titled: Effects of School Type and Location on Stress Coping Strategies of Principals Scale (ESTLSCSPS). The instrument consisted of 25 items, divided into two sections: Section A gathered demographic information from the respondents. Section B focused on issues related to the research

objectives and was structured using a 4-point Likert scale as follows: Very High Extent (4 points), High Extent (3 points), Low Extent (2 points) and Very Low Extent (1 point).

The face and content validity of the questionnaire were confirmed by three experts from the Department of Educational Psychology, Guidance and Counselling at Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Port Harcourt. Their feedback was incorporated into the final version of the instrument to enhance clarity and relevance. To determine the reliability of the instrument, a pilot test was conducted with 30 principals from public secondary schools in Abia State, who were not part of the main study. The responses were analyzed using the Cronbach Alpha method, yielding a reliability coefficient of 0.86, which indicated a high level of internal consistency.

The researcher assisted by two trained research assistants, distributed copies of the validated questionnaire to the sampled school heads. The questionnaires were administered both physically and electronically, depending on accessibility. 155 copies were completed and accurately filled, retrieved and sorted for analysis. The collected data were analyzed using both Mean and standard deviation which were used to answer the research questions. Independent samples z-test was used to test the null hypotheses at a 0.05 level of significance. This analytical approach allowed the researcher to determine whether significant differences existed in the stress coping strategies of school heads based on variables such as school type and location

Data Analysis

Research Question 1: Is there difference in the effects of school type on the stress coping strategies employed by school principals in Rivers State based on gender?

Table 1: Mean $(\overline{X})$ and Standard Deviation (SD) on the difference in the effects of school type on the stress coping strategies employed by school principals in Rivers State based on gender.

No	Items	Male Principals		Female Principals			Remark
		$\overline{x}$	SD	$\overline{x}$	SD	$\overline{x}$ $\overline{x}$	
	Watching movies relieves me from stress	3.09	0.83	2.66	0.97	2.88	Agreed
	Chatting with love ones reduces stress	3.34	0.86	2.61	0.93	2.98	Agreed
	Attending comedy shows relieves stress	3.02	0.90	3.11	0.83	3.07	Agreed
	Watching football reduces stress	3.11	0.87	2.90	0.77	3.01	Agreed
	Going for recreational activities reduces stress	3.00	0.88	2.90	0.80	2.95	Agreed
	Average	**3.11**	**0.87**	**2.84**	**0.86**	**2.98**	

Data on Table show that all the items (6-10) had weighted mean scores above the criterion mean of 2.50 and were adjourned as the stress coping strategy based on school type among secondary school principals in Rivers State. In summary, with an aggregate weighted mean of 2.98 which is above the criterion mean of 2.50, the respondents agreed that watching movies relieves them from stress, chatting with love ones reduces stress, attending comedy shows relieves stress, watching football reduces stress and going for recreational activities reduces stress.

HO_1: There is no significant difference in the effects of school type on the stress coping strategies employed by school principals in Rivers State based on gender.

Table 2: Summary of z-test Analysis on the effects of school type on the stress coping strategies employed by school principals in Rivers State based on gender.

Principals	N	$\overline{X}$	SD	Level of sig	Df	z-cal	z-critical	Decision
Male	98	3.11	0.87	0.05	153	2.50	1.96	Significant (Accepted Ho_1)
Female	57	2.84	0.86					

Data on the Table revealed the summaries of Subject, mean, standard deviation and z-test of difference between the difference between the stress coping strategies of male and female school principals based on their school type. The calculated z-test value used in testing hypothesis stood at 2.50, while z-critical value stood at 1.96 using 153 degree of freedom at 0.05 level of significance.

At 0.05 level of significance and 153 degrees of freedom, the calculated z-value of 2.50 is greater than the z-critical value of 1.96.. Consequently, the researcher accepted the null hypothesis, and concluded that there was no significant difference in the effects of the school type on stress coping strategies employed by school principals in Rivers State based on gender.

Research Question 2: Is there difference in the effects of location on the stress coping strategies employed by school principals in Rivers State based on gender?

Table 3: Mean $(\overline{X})$ and Standard Deviation (SD) on the difference in the effects of location on the stress coping strategies employed by school principals in Rivers State based on gender.

No	Items	Male Principals		Female Principals			Remark
		$\overline{x}$	SD	$\overline{x}$	SD	$\overline{x}\,\overline{x}$	
	Playing football reduces stress	2.93	0.91	2.81	0.77	2.87	Agreed
	Swimming reduces stress	2.85	0.97	3.00	0.74	2.93	Agreed
	Playing table tennis reduces stress	2.86	0.94	2.86	0.82	2.86	Agreed
	Jogging reduces stress	3.07	0.80	2.98	0.79	3.03	Agreed
	Walk out reduces stress	2.98	0.81	2.64	0.78	2.81	Agreed
	Average	**2.94**	**0.89**	**2.86**	**0.78**	**2.90**	

Data on Table show that all the items (11-15) had weighted mean scores above the criterion mean of 2.50 and were adjourned as the stress coping strategy based on location among secondary school principals in Rivers State. In summary, with an aggregate weighted mean of 2.90 which is above the criterion mean of 2.50, the respondents agreed that playing football reduces stress, swimming reduces stress, playing table tennis reduces stress, jogging reduces stress and walk out reduces stress.

HO_2: There is no significant difference in the effects of location on the stress coping strategies employed by school principals in Rivers State based on gender.

Table 4: Summary of z-test Analysis on the **effects of location on the stress coping strategies employed by school principals in Rivers State based on gender.**

Principals	N	$\bar{X}$ (Mean)	SD	Level of Sig.	Df	z-cal	z-critical	Decision
Male	98	2.94	0.87	0.05	153	0.77	1.96	Significant (Accept HO_2)
Female	57	2.86	0.86					

Data in the Table show the summary of mean scores, standard deviations, and the z-test result comparing the stress coping strategies of male and female school principals based on their location. The calculated z-value was **0.77**, while the z-critical value was **1.96** at **0.05 level of significance** with **153 degrees of freedom.**

Since the calculated z-value (0.77) is **less than** the critical z-value (1.96), the null hypothesis (**HO_2**) was **accepted**. This implies that there was no significant difference in the effects of the location on stress coping strategies employed by school principals in Rivers State based on gender.

Discussion of Findings

The results of the study revealed that there was no significant difference in the stress coping strategies of school principals based on school type and gender/location. These findings provide critical insights into how contextual and demographic factors influence principals' ability to manage occupational stress in Rivers State.

The first hypothesis (HO_1) tested whether principals in public and private schools differ in their coping strategies. The result showed no statistically significant difference, indicating that principals across both school types employ similar coping mechanisms to manage stress. This finding aligns with Hojeij et al. (2023), who found that both public and private school leaders in the UAE used comparable coping techniques such as social support, problem-solving, and emotional regulation despite facing different institutional pressures. It also supports Day et al. (2016), who asserted that while the nature of stressors may differ by school type, the coping responses often converge around adaptive behaviors that sustain school effectiveness.

The result is further consistent with Amanchukwu and Ololube (2019), who reported that Nigerian secondary school principals irrespective of school type shared similar coping mechanisms such as delegation, collaboration, and communication. In both public and private schools, principals must balance administrative workload, stakeholder expectations, and limited resources (Woods & Roberts, 2018), which demand resilience and adaptive coping. Thus, while public principals often face bureaucratic and funding constraints, and private principal's grapple with enrollment and market pressures, both groups appear to rely on common stress management approaches such as time management, peer collaboration, and emotional control. This supports Yaşar et al. (2025), who described modern school leadership as universally demanding and psychologically taxing, irrespective of institutional context.

Regarding the second hypothesis (HO_2), the findings indicated that there was no significant difference between male and female principals' stress coping strategies across locations (urban and rural). This result suggests that gender does not significantly influence how school leaders cope with occupational stress, and that both male and female principals face similar contextual challenges in their leadership roles.

This outcome reinforces Leithwood et al. (2020) and Kaur (2013), who emphasized that the stressors experienced by school leaders such as large student populations, inadequate infrastructure, and stakeholder expectations are largely contextual rather than gendered. Both male and female principals in urban and rural schools in Rivers State likely experience overlapping stress sources and therefore resort to similar coping responses such as social support, problem-solving, and professional collaboration (Hojeij et al., 2023; Herman et al., 2023).

The finding also supports Koirala (2024), who found that coping differences among principals were more influenced by school location and resource access than by gender, as both male and female principals in Nepal relied on work–life balance and mindfulness strategies. Similarly, Moyo and Lingard (2021) observed that both urban and rural South African principals engaged in adaptive coping through teamwork and peer networks, regardless of gender. This underscores that coping mechanisms are shaped more by contextual challenges than by demographic differences.

Overall, the findings from both hypotheses converge to highlight that school leadership stress is a universal phenomenon (Yaşar et al., 2025; Day et al., 2016), and that effective coping mechanisms such as social support, task delegation, emotional resilience, and proactive problem-solving are widely adopted among principals across types, genders, and locations. The consistency of coping approaches across different contexts suggests that contextual pressures, institutional demands, and leadership responsibilities outweigh demographic distinctions in determining how principals respond to stress.

These results validate the argument in the Statement of the Problem that while school type and location may expose principals to varying stressors, the overall intensity of stress and coping tendencies are broadly similar. Consequently, interventions to enhance stress management among school principals in Rivers State should focus on systemic and contextual challenges (e.g., administrative overload, resource shortages, and stakeholder expectations) rather than gender or school-type differences.

This conclusion aligns with the positions of Herman et al. (2023) and Woods & Roberts (2018), who both emphasized the need for institutional support systems, resilience training, and professional networks to mitigate leadership stress and sustain effectiveness in educational administration.

Conclusion

The study revealed no significant difference in the stress-coping strategies of male and female school principals across different locations. This outcome suggests that gender does not substantially influence how principals respond to occupational stressors. Instead, contextual dynamics such as administrative workload, stakeholder expectations, and resource availability appear to play a more defining role. Overall, effective coping among school principals is essential for sustaining leadership efficiency and institutional performance.

Recommendations

1. Education authorities should institutionalize continuous professional development programs that strengthen principals' stress-management and leadership resilience.
2. Stress-reduction interventions should be context-sensitive, addressing the distinct environmental and operational challenges faced by urban and rural schools.
3. Peer mentoring and collaborative leadership networks should be promoted to enhance social support and collective problem-solving among principals.
4. Future research should extend this inquiry by exploring the mediating influence of organizational culture, leadership style, and policy environment on principals' coping strategies.

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