Navigating the Struggles: Challenges and Pressures Faced by New Secondary School Teachers in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

The teaching profession is considered one of the most challenging careers. Teachers, especially new teachers, are more exposed to challenges and pressures than experienced teachers. New teachers face various challenges and pressures at the beginning of their careers, which can lead some to leave the profession, particularly within the first five years of their teaching experience. Therefore, this qualitative study aims to identify the challenges and pressures faced by new secondary school teachers in the Malaysian education context. The study employed semi-structured interviews involving 12 new secondary school teachers. The thematic analysis findings revealed five challenges and pressures new secondary school teachers face: teaching and learning, workload, classroom management, relationships with senior teachers and parents, and challenges and pressures related to professionalism. The findings of this study can assist the Ministry of Education Malaysia, which is responsible for the continuous professional development of new teachers, in strengthening them to face the current challenges and demands in the teaching profession.

Keywords: Challenges, Malaysia, new secondary school teachers, pressure, qualitative study

INTRODUCTION

Teaching is widely recognised as one of the most challenging and complex careers globally, encompassing intellectual, emotional, and service-oriented dimensions (Mercer, 2020; Sikma, 2021). This complexity often translates into high-pressure environments for teachers (Mercer, 2020; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2018), particularly for those new to the profession. New teachers face significant challenges and obstacles when transitioning from teacher training to full-time teaching roles (Kutsyuruba et al., 2022). When unable to cope with these challenges, many may experience emotional stress, prompting a

substantial number to leave the profession—nearly half of teachers in many countries depart within the first five years of teaching (Räsänen et al., 2020; Ryan et al., 2017).

New teachers will be assigned to either primary or secondary schools. Still, studies (e.g., Kavita & Hassan, 2018; Kongcharoen et al., 2019) illustrate that secondary school teachers are more stressed than primary school teachers. Kongcharoen et al. (2019) conducted an international study, showing that secondary school teachers are more stressed than others due to the job's financial challenges and multiple responsibilities. Similarly, a domestic study by Kavita and Hassan (2018) identified seven key stress factors: relationships with parents and colleagues, workload, time constraints, student behaviour, workplace support, and lack of resources. According to their findings, the stress rates among secondary school teachers are higher than those among primary school teachers. They need to ensure that new secondary school teachers can now effectively deal with the challenges and pressures of the profession.

The complexities of the challenges and demands placed on new teachers are multifaceted (Gilbertson & Nicolaides, 2023; Larsen & Allen, 2021). Simultaneously, these teachers develop essential skills through classroom experiences (Larsen & Allen, 2021). New educators often confront various classroom challenges without the benefit of extensive prior experience, such as addressing challenging student behaviour, meeting diverse student needs, and creating engaging curricula (Damico et

al., 2018). Furthermore, new teachers are often expected to assume responsibilities similar to those of their more experienced colleagues, which can lead to elevated stress levels, emotional pressure, and burnout (Gratacós et al., 2021; Leroux, 2018). Accordingly, this study aims to identify the challenges and pressures faced by new teachers at the onset of their teaching careers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature indicates that new teachers are highly vulnerable to various challenges and stressors (Chandran et al., 2022; Karlberg & Bezzina, 2022). Both international and local studies (e.g., Awang & Shaari, 2021; Saidin et al., 2020; Svajda-Hardy & Kwok, 2023; Tahir et al., 2025) have reported that new secondary school teachers struggle with multiple issues, including pedagogical practices and classroom management, workload challenges (Chandran et al., 2022; Flores, 2020; Hamdan et al., 2024; Saidin et al., 2020), insufficient support from colleagues and administrators (Flores, 2020; Macalister, 2023; Saidin et al., 2020), disruptive student behaviours (Khalid & Husnin, 2019; Shah et al., 2022; Zahr, 2022), and difficulties in establishing relationships with students, parents, and staff (Abd Karim & Nordin, 2022; Marudadorai et al., 2023; Stewart & Jansky, 2022).

While Flores (2020) emphasises that the lack of administrative support significantly contributes to teacher stress, this finding may require reassessment within the Malaysian context, where a hierarchical work culture

can lead employees to be more passive and hesitant in voicing their needs or concerns, thereby limiting their capacity to receive adequate support (Yee et al., 2018). Consequently, these various demands and issues contribute to elevated levels of stress and burnout, resulting in negative emotions and teacher attrition (Burger, Bellhäuser, & Imhof, 2021). In Malaysia, studies on mental health and well-being among secondary school teachers reveal that those in their twenties exhibit more psychological symptoms than their older peers (Pau et al., 2022), indicating that new secondary school teachers may be at a heightened risk of experiencing psychological stress.

Most studies on the challenges and pressures faced by new teachers have been conducted in Western educational contexts. However, the cultural norms and school systems in Malaysia differ significantly from those in Western educational systems, which are characterised by centralised authority and a hierarchical structure (Bush & Ng, 2019). In contrast, Western educational systems tend to be more decentralised (Erss, 2023). While several challenges, such as workload, classroom management, and student discipline, are universal issues, how these challenges manifest and are confronted by new teachers often depends on the local educational system and culture. This study aligns with the statement by Kutsyuruba et al. (2017), which emphasises that contextual cultural factors influence the challenges faced by new teachers. In Malaysia, this reality is particularly complex due to its socio-cultural diversity and the multi-stream education system, which includes National Secondary School (*Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan* – SMK), National-type Secondary School *(Sekolah Menengah Jenis Kebangsaan* – SMJK)*, Fully Residential Schools *(Sekolah Berasrama Penuh* – SBP)*, and Religious Secondary Schools *(Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Agama* – SMKA)*. Each type of school embodies distinct societal values and cultures that can create a complex environment for new teachers, differing from those found in Western contexts.

In the Malaysian context, strong cultural values such as respect for authority and adherence to hierarchical structures can exacerbate the pressures faced by new teachers when interacting with more senior colleagues or school administrators. This is further compounded by the centralised nature of the Malaysian education system, where policies are often formulated at the federal level and uniformly implemented across all schools. Such an approach limits the autonomy of school leaders and teachers (Bush & Ng, 2019). Additionally, the multi-stream education system in Malaysia, which educates students in separate linguistic and cultural environments, raises concerns regarding proficiency and mastery of the Malay language among students (Lick et al., 2019). This presents unique challenges in communication and pedagogy for new teachers. Consequently, these cultural values and the multi-stream education system uniquely shape work-related stress in ways that differ from Western countries.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, further developed into the Bioecological Model (2005), as the primary theoretical framework to understand the challenges and pressures faced by new teachers within the Malaysian educational context. This theory elucidates that individual development occurs through the interactions between individuals and their contextual environments. Bronfenbrenner (2005) classifies these social contexts into five systems: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem.

1. Microsystem refers to the immediate environment in which an individual interacts directly, such as relationships within the family, peers, teachers, and classrooms. The challenges or stressors faced by new teachers arise from direct interactions with students, colleagues, and classroom management.

2. The mesosystem involves the connections between different microsystems, such as interactions with other teachers, parents, and school administrators. For instance, conflicts between new teachers and their peers or parents can generate additional stress for these educators.

3. The exosystem refers to external environments in which individuals do not engage directly but which nonetheless influence the development of new teachers. For example, decisions made by school authorities or district education offices regarding policy implementation and teaching assignments can significantly impact their well-being.

4. The macrosystem encompasses the broader social, cultural, and political contexts that shape all other systems. In the Malaysian context, cultural values such as respect for authority, societal expectations of teacher professionalism, and national education policies can create pressures for new teachers.

5. The chronosystem pertains to individual development shaped by life transitions, historical events, and periods. Historical events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, have accelerated changes in pedagogy, particularly in the adoption of technology and online teaching methods. These changes present challenges for new teachers who must adapt to both their profession and the evolving technological landscape.

Furthermore, this study utilises the Four Dimensions of Teacher Resilience Framework proposed by Mansfield et al. (2012) as a theoretical foundation to explain the strategies employed by new teachers in responding to the pressures they face. Mansfield et al. (2012) classified the protective factors of new teacher resilience into four dimensions: professional, emotional, motivational, and social dimensions. The professional resilience dimension encompasses aspects related to new teachers' instructional practices, such as preparing lessons, being organised

in tasks, employing practical teaching skills, engaging in self-reflection, and demonstrating flexibility and adaptability in new situations. The emotional resilience dimension characterises a new teacher's ability to bounce back from challenges, cope with job-related stress and demands, maintain a sense of humor, manage emotions effectively, prioritise self-care, and find joy in teaching. The motivational resilience dimension encompasses factors related to new teachers' motivation, including possessing an optimistic attitude, demonstrating a deep commitment, focusing on learning and improvement, and exhibiting self-confidence and a belief in their abilities. Lastly, the social resilience dimension encompasses aspects related to social interactions in the work environment, including possessing interpersonal and communication skills, building networks of support and relationships, seeking assistance, and receiving guidance in problem-solving.

Mansfield et al. (2012) emphasise that the interaction between personal factors and contextual factors is crucial in building resilience among new teachers. The professional, emotional, and motivational dimensions serve as protective factors for personal resilience, referring to the characteristics and abilities of individuals that enable new teachers to face challenges and pressures within their profession. Meanwhile, the social dimension acts as a contextual protective factor, referring to external support systems that provide the necessary social and professional support for teachers in managing the demands of the teaching profession.

Therefore, this study aims not only to confirm the challenges and pressures identified in previous literature but also to explore how the unique sociocultural context in Malaysia influences these challenges. Consequently, this study raises the research question: What challenges and pressures do new secondary school teachers in Malaysia face? The findings of this study will assist the Ministry of Education Malaysia in evaluating the design of professional development training for new teachers and in implementing targeted interventions to support those struggling with stress during the early stages of their teaching careers.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design, Data Collection Methods, and Sampling Techniques

This study employs a qualitative research design to gain a deeper understanding of the life experiences of new secondary school teachers (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). This approach facilitates rich, contextual insights by enabling participants to share challenges and pressures based on their experiences. Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted with 12 new secondary school teachers from four main types of secondary schools in Malaysia: National Secondary School (*Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan* – SMK), National-type Secondary School *(Sekolah Menengah Jenis Kebangsaan* – SMJK)*, Fully Residential Schools *(Sekolah Berasrama Penuh* – SBP)*, and Religious Secondary Schools *(Sekolah*

Menengah Kebangsaan Agama – SMKA*)* in the Klang Valley. The Klang Valley was selected based on findings from Othman and Sivasubramaniam (2019), which revealed high rates of depressive symptoms (43.0%), anxiety (68.0%), and stress (32.3%) among teachers in this region. Furthermore, the Klang Valley provides an educational context that reflects the diversity of the national education system, encompassing all four main types of secondary schools mentioned. This diversity enables the observation of various forms of challenges and pressures faced by new teachers.

Purposive sampling was employed to select teachers who would provide valuable insights. The criteria for participation included: (1) new secondary school teachers appointed by the Ministry of Education Malaysia with less than three years of service (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015), (2) representatives from each school type, and (3) teachers who were willing to participate in the study. Before conducting the interviews, informed consent was obtained from participants to ensure compliance with ethical standards and to safeguard both parties against potential legal issues. Approval was also secured from the Planning and Research Policy Division (BPPDP) of the Ministry of Education Malaysia and the State Education Department.

Semi-structured Interview Questions

This study employs a semi-structured interview protocol as a method of data collection. A pilot study was conducted to test the semi-structured interview questions, involving three respondents, before finalizing the questions to obtain important feedback regarding responses, format, and duration. This study employed probing techniques, which involve asking follow-up questions to participants when answers are unclear or incomplete and require more specific or in-depth information (Bougie & Sekaran, 2019). The interview protocol questions are as follows:

1. Could you introduce your background? For example, your educational background, the subjects you teach, and the duration of your teaching experience.

2. Can you describe your daily life as a new teacher? For instance, the number of working hours each day and the frequency of attending school on weekends within a month?

3. What challenges and pressures do you face as a new teacher at the school?

Data Analysis, Triangulation of Data Sources, and Reliability of Qualitative Research

All recorded interviews have been transcribed (Tracy, 2020). As suggested by Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2018), the transcription process involved carefully listening to the recorded interviews and transcribing them. The interview transcripts were analysed using a thematic analysis guided by the research questions. A manual coding process was conducted to identify emerging themes and subthemes.

Triangulation refers to the analytical methods used during fieldwork and in formal analysis to validate findings by comparing evidence from various sources (Yin, 2016). Bougie and Sekaran (2019) identified four types of triangulation: (i) data source triangulation, (ii) researcher triangulation, (iii) theory triangulation, and (iv) methodology triangulation. Data source triangulation involves collecting data from various individuals and groups to obtain diverse perspectives and validate information (Carter et al., 2014). Therefore, this study conducted triangulation through different data sources by conducting semi-structured interviews with new secondary school teachers from four main types of secondary schools in Malaysia, namely National Secondary School (*Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan – SMK*), National-type Secondary School *(Sekolah Menengah Jenis Kebangsaan – SMJK)*, Fully Residential Schools *(Sekolah Berasrama Penuh – SBP)*, and Religious Secondary Schools *(Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Agama – SMKA)* in the Klang Valley, Malaysia.

This study employed several methods to enhance the validity and reliability of the research. Among them, this study ensured the accuracy of the interview transcripts by reviewing the audio recordings while reading the transcripts. Furthermore, member checking was also conducted by sending the interview transcripts for review and subsequent confirmation by the participants to ensure the accuracy of the interview transcripts in relation to their experiences

(Birt et al., 2016). Additionally, reliability was maintained during data analysis by reviewing and refining the formed themes to ensure consistency, avoiding overlap or coincidence.

To ensure the reliability of the research findings, this study also utilised Cohen's Kappa analysis to measure the agreement among raters for the themes and subthemes developed in this study (Wilhelm et al., 2018). McHugh (2012) explains that this analysis can also determine the extent to which the chosen unit of analysis accurately describes the themes that emerged from the interviews. In this study, the accuracy and validity of the constructed themes and subthemes were reviewed and validated by four experts, comprising three experts in the fields of psychology and counseling, and one expert in the field of education, as shown in Table 1.

This study employs Cohen's Kappa analysis to ascertain the reliability value among expert panels regarding the themes identified from the interviews, ensuring that the findings are accurate and credible. The interview analysis revealed five themes and 17 subthemes from the qualitative data. The Cohen's Kappa formula utilised for calculating the agreement value among the expert panels is as follows:

$$K = \frac{\text{Pr}(a) - \text{Pr}(e)}{1 - \text{Pr}(e)} \qquad [1]$$

Pr(a) represents the relative agreement observed among raters, and Pr(e) denotes the probability of chance agreement. This probability is calculated using the observed

Table 1
List of experts involved in verifying the accuracy of themes and subthemes

Expert	Position/ Qualification	Area of Expertise	Organization	Years of Experience
1	Senior Lecturer	Counseling Psychology	Sultan Idris Education University	20
2	Lecturer	Education	Teacher Education Institute of Technical Education	19
3	District Education Counselor	Counseling Psychology	Klang District Education Office	23
4	School Counsellor	Guidance and Counseling	Taman Tasik National Secondary School	15

data for each rater's chance of randomly assigning each category. A perfect agreement among assessors would yield a value of k=1, while a lack of agreement beyond random chance would result in a value of k=0.

This study uses Cohen's Kappa agreement level indicators taken from Bernard and Ryan (2010), with the following interpretations: values below 0.00 indicate very weak agreement, 0.00–0.20 indicates weak agreement, 0.21–0.40 indicates moderately weak agreement, 0.41–0.60

denotes moderate agreement, 0.61–0.80 represents good agreement, and values between 0.81 and 1.00 indicate excellent agreement. Table 2 presents the results of Cohen's Kappa values from the assessments of four experts. The analysis revealed that all themes and subthemes exceeded a Kappa value of 0.81, indicative of an excellent level of agreement. Thus, Cohen's Kappa values convincingly demonstrate that the experts concur on the themes and subthemes identified in this study.

Table 2
Cohen's Kappa value from experts

Theme & Subtheme	Expert 1	Expert 2	Expert 3	Expert 4	Rating
Challenges and pressures of teaching and learning:					
1. Diversity of students' learning levels	1	1	1	1	1
2. Teaching non-option subjects	1	1	1	1	1
3. Integration of technology in teaching and learning (T&L)	1	1	1	1	1
4. Language barriers in learning	1	1	1	1	1
5. Limited teaching materials	1	0.93	1	1	0.98
Challenges and workload pressure:					
1. Clerical tasks workload	1	1	1	1	1
2. Excessive workload	1	1	1	1	1
3. Various side tasks	1	1	1	1	1
4. Work-life balance	1	1	1	1	1

Table 2 *(continue)*

Theme & Subtheme	Expert 1	Expert 2	Expert 3	Expert 4	Rating
Challenges and pressures of classroom management:					
1. Student behaviour issues	1	1	1	1	1
2. Overcrowded classrooms	1	1	1	1	1
3. Lack of student engagement	1	1	1	1	1
Challenges and pressures in relationships with senior teachers and parents:					
1. Establishing and maintaining a good relationship with senior teachers	1	1	1	1	1
2. Establishing and maintaining a good relationship with parents	1	1	1	1	1
3. Negative attitudes of parents	1	1	1	1	1
Challenges and pressures of professionalism:					
1. Teacher competency	1	1	1	1	1
2. Balance between theoretical knowledge and actual practical experience in schools	1	1	1	1	1

FINDINGS

Demographic Profile of Study Participants

Table 3 presents the demographic profile of the twelve new secondary school teachers who participated in this study. Five of the participants are male, and seven are female, with three teachers from each type of secondary school. In terms of teaching experience, the participants include two teachers with less than one year of experience, three teachers with one to two years of experience, and seven teachers with two to three years of experience.

Table 3
Demographic profile of study participants

Demographic Profile	Number of Study Participants (N)
Gender	
Male	5
Female	7
Type of Secondary School	
National Secondary School (SMK)	3
National Type Secondary School (SMJK)	3
Entire Boarding School (SBP)	3
Religious National Secondary School (SMKA)	3
Teaching Experience / Years of Service	
≤ 1 year	2
1 – 2 years	3
2 – 3 years	7

Challenges and Pressures Faced by New Secondary School Teachers

Thematic analysis identified five key challenges and pressures new secondary school teachers encountered, summarised in Table 4. These challenges fall under the following themes: (i) challenges and pressures of teaching and learning, (ii) challenges and pressures of workload, (iii) challenges and pressures of classroom management, (iv) challenges and pressures of relationships with senior teachers and parents, and (v) challenges and pressures of professionalism.

Challenges and Pressures of Teaching and Learning: Five Challenges and Pressures

The challenges and pressures most frequently reported by new teachers from four types of secondary schools are related to teaching and learning. These challenges and pressures have been discussed by 10 new teachers (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P10, and P12) who consider teaching and learning the primary challenges and pressures. In facing these challenges and pressures of teaching and learning, there are five specific challenges and pressures they must navigate, namely (i) the diversity of student learning levels, (ii) teaching non-elective subjects, (iii) integrating technology into teaching and learning (T&L), (iv) language barriers in the learning process, and (v) limited teaching materials. Table 5 presents excerpts from interviews with participants in this study regarding the challenges and pressures they face in teaching and learning.

Table 4

Summary of the five challenges and pressures faced by new secondary school teachers (themes and subthemes)

Challenges and Pressures (Theme)	Subthemes
Challenges and pressures of teaching and learning	1. Diversity of student learning levels 2. Teaching non-option subjects 3. Integration of technology in teaching and learning 4. Language barriers in learning mediation 5. Limited teaching materials
Challenges and pressures of the workload	1. Clerical tasks workload 2. Excessive workload 3. Various side tasks 4. Work-life balance
Challenges and pressures of classroom management	1. Student behavioural issues 2. Overcrowded classes 3. Lack of student participation
Challenges and pressures of relationships with senior teachers and parents	1. Establishing and maintaining good relationships with senior teachers 2. Establishing and maintaining good relationships with parents 3. Negative attitudes of parents
Challenges and pressures of professionalism	1. Teacher competency 2. Balance between theoretical knowledge and actual practical experience in school

Table 5

Challenges and pressures of teaching and learning: Sub-themes and interview excerpts

Subthemes	Interview Excerpts
Diversity of student learning levels	P1: "For me, the challenge I face in this boarding school is, umm... in terms of the abilities and learning levels of the students. In Form 2, I teach classes 2A and 2C, which means the top and bottom classes. So, in that regard, it is a challenge for me to overcome when my students in class A are quite fast. Class C is slower." P2: "When there are students who are too fast, there are also students who are too slow in the same class, which means we have to restructure our teaching methods. We need to consider the students' levels. Okay, that is the challenge I face at school." P12: "This school is excellent. However, there are still students who are somewhat less outstanding in their learning and are placed in the same class as other students who are quite outstanding. So, my challenge is ensuring those students understand the lessons I teach."
Teaching non-elective subjects	P3: "I need to teach subjects not in my field. So my challenge is when I get this geography subject, I have to study that subject again because we need to understand the facts, right?" P5: "The challenge and pressure for me is that the subjects I teach are not the same as the options I studied in university. For example, I hold a Bachelor's degree in Home Science Education, but I was assigned to a school that does not offer that option. So I was assigned various subjects, starting with History, then switching to Design and Technology (RBT), Geography, and Physical Education and Health (PJK)." P10: "The pressure comes from teaching subjects that are not my option. As I mentioned earlier, my major is Shariah, but I am required to teach subjects unrelated to Shariah. For example, Malay Language (BM), I do not specialize in BM, so that is a challenge, and we accept that challenge. However, we become afraid when we think we might teach incorrectly."
Integration of technology in teaching and learning	P4: "The challenges during our school days were heavily reliant on online tools because of the COVID period. Ermmmm, on that part, I feel we need to be more knowledgeable in technology and multimedia to attract students; we want them to pay attention while I am teaching." P6: "The challenge from a technological perspective is that this school uses Microsoft Showcase School as a medium. Therefore, we need to align our approach; it is not just about using books; we are not limited to books; we need to utilize technology." P7: "The challenge of incorporating technology into my teaching methods. Because now, students' attention spans in class are short. After 5 or 10 minutes, they are not interested in what we have to offer them."
Language barriers in the learning process	P7: "The biggest challenge is language when communicating with the kids. Interacting with those students is difficult because some cannot speak Malay or English fluently. Not all students, but there are a few." P8: "This school has Chinese and Indian students, so there are communication difficulties. For example, some Chinese students here do not understand Malay and have little trouble communicating. They do not understand what we are saying if they are not interested in the teaching and learning sessions. They rely on their friends to explain things back to them."
Limited teaching materials	P1: "The challenge from the perspective of materials. I still contact my UIA (International Islamic University) classmates to share teaching materials." P2: "The challenge in terms of teaching materials. As new teachers, we have not yet explored these resources extensively. We usually get reference materials from the senior teachers; we often ask them to obtain reference materials."

Challenges and Workload Pressure: Four Challenges and Pressures

The second challenge and pressure new secondary school teachers face in their teaching careers is the challenge and pressure of workload. In facing this challenge and pressure of workload, there are four specific challenges and pressures that they encounter, such as (i) workload of clerical tasks, (ii) excessive workload, (iii) various side tasks, and (iv) work-life balance. Nine new teachers (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P7, P9, P10, and P12) discussed the challenges and pressures of their workload. Table 6 presents example excerpts from interviews with participants in this study regarding the challenges and pressures associated with their workload.

Table 6

Challenges and workload pressure: Subtheme and interview excerpts

Subthemes	Interview Excerpts
The workload of clerical tasks	P5: "So being a teacher is not just about teaching, but there are many other tasks like clerical work, creating files. Teachers must do much clerical work; it is mandatory for teachers, which presents the challenge and pressure to adapt." P7: "Administrative tasks. As a class teacher or homeroom teacher, I am responsible for updating student and parent data paperwork. We update this information periodically, and within 6 months, we need to update it 2, 3, 4, or 5 times. If parents change jobs, we need to update student information." P9: "When we are educational officers, we have to manage everything related to education, not just teaching. So we have clerical tasks. That is one of the biggest pressures of being in school right now." P12: "The career pressure aside from being a teacher. It means the clerical work is more than the work of teaching. I am also a class teacher, so if I am a class teacher, I have to collect payment from students, write receipts, and communicate a lot with parents about fees."
Excessive workload	P3: "My work is too much... too much to the point that sometimes we do not have time to eat. It is like we are bombarded with work. Once one task is completed, another task arises. That can also be a source of stress for me, right?" P4: "The tasks at school are not just about teaching; we have many other responsibilities. For example, we must be involved in other management aspects such as documentation, curriculum, and discipline. All of this is where the teachers play a role." P9: "The challenge of work pressure is overwhelming. We must look after the welfare of our students. Besides that, we must manage paperwork for programs and certain files, subject coordinator files, class teacher files, etc."
Various side tasks	P1: "Teachers have side tasks too. For example, I am a health teacher and at the same time, I am part of the Islamic Education committee. Within the Islamic Education Committee, we have programs. Then, as a health teacher, I also work with PBSM (the Red Crescent Society). This means many things need to be done." P2: "These side tasks can be quite disruptive for new teachers because we are just starting to organize each of our classes, manage our schedules, and prepare our materials. Side tasks, such as documentation, can be quite burdensome. For instance, as a warden, we stay here (at the school) and are here 24 hours on the weekends."

Table 6 *(continue)*

Subthemes	Interview Excerpts
Work-life balance	P3: *"Sometimes, at home, I still have to come to school on weekends. Even at night, I sometimes get disturbed because of the programs I have to attend. The programs are due to the boarding facilities, you see. That is also one of the pressures, I must say."* P10: *"This school has night classes for the KKQ subject (Al-Quran Skills Class). My child is still small and often hospitalized; my child is not well. So, when there are night classes, I have to attend, which adds much stress because I have to leave my children behind, and my husband has to take care of them. But, yes, almost every night, if not every night, well... three times a week."*

Challenges and Pressures of Classroom Management: Three Challenges and Pressures

The third challenge and pressure faced by new secondary school teachers is the challenge and pressure of classroom management. In confronting these challenges and pressures of classroom management, they endure three challenges: (i) student behaviour issues, (ii) overcrowded classes, and (iii) lack of student engagement. Six new teachers have discussed these challenges and pressures (P3, P6, P7, P8, P9, and P12). Table 7 presents examples of interview excerpts from participants in this study, highlighting the challenges and pressures associated with classroom management.

Table 7

Challenges and pressures of classroom management: Subthemes and interview excerpts

Subthemes	Interview Excerpt
Student behaviour issues	P3: *"What I can say is that my students lack manners. When speaking to teachers, their manners are like talking to a peer; when we speak, they protest. That is also a challenge that I need to tackle."* P9: *"The biggest challenge I see is the students' behaviour. Their behaviour is something we really cannot handle."*
Overcrowded classes	P6: *"The number of students is also larger. So, classroom management becomes quite difficult to control. When combining two classes, it can become overcrowded, with some having more than 30 students. So, controlling it is hard."* P7: *"The number of students in a single class is indeed large, sometimes reaching up to 40 students in one class. My biggest challenge is ensuring all the kids understand what I teach."*
Lack of student engagement	P8: *"So, when students do not want to learn, we feel like they are just playing around, which makes us stressed in class. It makes us feel like we want to leave the classroom."* P12: *"The challenge and pressure of how to deal with students who lack motivation to learn. It means some students seem less motivated and do not have the initiative to study seriously."*

Challenges and Pressures in Relationships with Senior Teachers and Parents: Three Challenges and Pressures

In addition to the challenges and pressures of classroom management, new secondary school teachers also face challenges and pressures related to their relationships with senior teachers and parents. Table 8 shows that there are three challenges and pressures in relationship management: (i) establishing and maintaining good relationships with senior teachers, (ii) establishing and maintaining good relationships with parents, and (iii) negative attitudes from parents. These challenges and pressures have been explained by six new teachers (P1, P3, P4, P6, P9, and P11), who view their relationships with senior teachers and parents as challenges and pressures they must navigate in their teaching careers.

Challenges and Pressures of Professionalism: Two Challenges and Pressures

The fifth challenge and pressure faced by new secondary school teachers is the challenge and pressure of professionalism. As shown in Table 9, this study summarizes that they have endured challenges and pressures regarding (i) teacher competency and (ii) the balance between theoretical

Table 8

Challenges and pressures in relationships with senior teachers and parents: Subthemes and interview excerpts

Subthemes	Interview Excerpts
Establishing and maintaining good relationships with senior teachers	*P3: "It is normal for friends to talk behind our backs; I have also heard that. There must be some who are dissatisfied with us."* *P4: "Another challenge for me is building relationships with the existing teachers, the experienced teachers at the school. They say that when we enter someone else's territory, we must adapt; we cannot just bring our ways."* *P11: "Seniority, like when we are new... There is a gap between seniors and juniors. So that is a challenge for us. That challenge still exists even now."*
Establishing and maintaining good relationships with parents	*P6: "Regarding guardians here (in this school), some are more educated. They have their ways, so we need to be educated as well. Some of them, even if we make a mistake, say we are letting their child down."* *P11: "Challenges from outside, for example, parents themselves. They expect our school to always be the best or the highest. We need to communicate a lot with parents. So when we talk with the parents, we understand their expectations and can sometimes explain that their expectations may be somewhat inaccurate."*
Negative attitudes of parents	*P1: "Right now, we cannot use corporal punishment, so with such limitations, what other ways do we have to educate? As in this school, the exam results and students' rankings are posted in the canteen, and parents complain... it's embarrassing for my child. However, from another perspective, I think it builds character; it motivates the children to rise to the challenge. However, even when we do this, parents still question it."* *P9: "We cannot control the students too strictly because if we go overboard, parents will get angry with the teachers. So that is the pressure. A simple example is when we assign a lot of homework, and a student's parent calls us asking why we give so much homework; their child has no time at home."*

Table 9
Challenges and pressures of professionalism: Subthemes and interview excerpts

Subthemes	Interview Excerpts
Teacher competence	*P4: "We need to know a lot about technology and multimedia. In that regard, it is challenging to keep up, especially in the 21st century, where students often know more than we do. We must learn and always feel like we are advancing beyond them."* *P5: "Because I teach at a High-Performance School, my skills need to be enhanced, whether it is communication skills with students or skills in teaching and learning, because the level of the students here is high."* *P9: "In class, when we teach, sometimes something we tell the students is more advanced than what the teacher knows. So that puts pressure on us because we need to learn more than what our students know, especially on current issues."* *P11: "This school has selected students, so for me, that is pressure. In class, we must be prepared because students will ask questions, and they may pose out-of-the-box or related questions that are not covered in the syllabus. So we have to study in advance."*
The balance between theoretical knowledge and practical application in schools	*P4: "We come to school not just to teach; we need to understand that there are other management tasks we have to handle. So for me, challenges like that are real because they showed us how things work during our time in university, but we did not know when to apply that in real life."* *P7: "It is a different scenario from what we were exposed to in university, where we tried to create lesson plans (RPH) using our friends as students. At that time, it seemed easy because our objectives could be achieved; however, it is different when we apply that to a real-world school setting. On campus, objectives are often met, but when we come to school, achieving just one objective is already a big deal."*

knowledge and actual practical experience in schools. This challenge and pressure of professionalism have been discussed by five new teachers (P4, P5, P7, P9, and P11) as one of the challenges and pressures they need to overcome.

DISCUSSION

The study finds that when new secondary school teachers in Malaysia start teaching is problematic and puts them under pressure. New secondary school teachers face various challenges in their first years of teaching. Karlberg and Bezzina (2022) and Ngang et al. (2014) discovered that these freshmen lack experience in the actual teaching environment. New secondary school teachers in Malaysia face five challenges and pressures: Five challenges: challenges and pressures due to (i) teaching and learning, (ii) workload, (iii) classroom management, (iv) senior teachers and parents' relationships, and (v) professionalism.

All five challenges can be analysed through Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model (2005), which emphasises the influence of various layers of social systems on an individual's development, specifically that of new teachers. The challenges of teaching and learning, as well as classroom management, can be associated with the microsystem, which represents the environment closest to the teacher, such as students and the classroom

context. Conversely, challenges related to workload, including various ancillary tasks and documentation, are linked to the exosystem, which encompasses the decisions made by school administration that can significantly impact their well-being. Additionally, challenges concerning relationships with senior teachers and parents fall within the mesosystem, referring to the interactions between two microsystems. In this regard, tensions or a lack of effective communication between new teachers and their senior colleagues or parents can hinder the adjustment process within the profession. Lastly, challenges related to professionalism, such as pressures associated with teacher competence, can be linked to the macrosystem, which denotes the value systems and cultural frameworks underpinning the educational structure. In the Malaysian context, the cultural values of society that place high expectations on teacher professionalism create additional stress for new educators.

The primary challenge and pressures facing new secondary school teachers in Malaysia are related to teaching and learning. Some of these challenges to teaching and learning that constitute pressures to T&L include (i) diversity of students' learning levels such as a single teaching approach may not effectively reach all students, (ii) teaching non-elective subjects such as new teachers are assigned to teach subjects that students are required to take, such as mathematics or science, rather than elective classes they might prefer, (iii) adopting technology in teaching and learning such

as the integration of technology in the classroom especially for new teachers who may not be as familiar with digital tools or resources, (iv) language barrier in the learning stages such as a new teacher may have students who are new to the language and struggle to understand instructions or engage in discussions, and (v) paucity of teaching materials such as limited access to teaching materials can restrict a teacher's ability to deliver practical and engaging lessons, impacting student learning.

In this study, one of the challenges new teachers face in a single classroom is that students can learn at a wide range of levels. Three participants (P1, P2, and P12) who teach at fully residential schools and cluster schools of excellence experienced challenges when delivering instruction because learners do not learn at the same level. This is particularly challenging for new teachers as they learn their pedagogical skills. The study by Al-Naimi et al. (2020) reveals that new teachers in Qatar struggle to manage students' differences because of a lack of teaching experience. In this regard, the study found that resilient teachers employ various teaching strategies to address diverse challenges in their teaching (Mansfield et al., 2012; Mat Yamin & Lian, 2025; Shirazizadeh & Abbaszadeh, 2023).

New secondary school teachers find themselves under pressure to teach non-elective subjects. The problem arises when they are tasked with teaching areas in which they are not specialised. A similar issue of having teachers taught to teach subjects that are not their electives is also

a familiar issue in Malaysia (Ibrahim & Mohamed, 2021). The issue of teachers being assigned to teach non-option subjects remains prevalent due to placements that do not align with their subject specialisations (Dareng et al., 2024). In this regard, school administrators assign non-option teachers to specific subjects without considering their qualifications and expertise. This case aims to train new teachers in taking on responsibilities, specifically in acquiring content knowledge. According to Ngang et al. (2014), new teachers often struggle with subject content knowledge because they are frequently assigned to teach subjects that are not their areas of expertise.

Also, new secondary school teachers face challenges and pressures when integrating technology into teaching and learning. Three participants, P4, P6, and P7, reported facing challenges using technology in their teaching. Chandran et al. (2022) also discovered that the techniques of new teachers using technology for instruction are difficult. New teachers also reported language barriers in the learning process. Two participants, P7 and P8, who are currently teaching at National Type Secondary School (SMJK), mentioned that they found it difficult when some students were not proficient in the medium of instruction, either Malay or English. This finding is consistent with the results reported by Sali and Kecik (2018), who noted that the new teachers in their study encountered difficulties with language instruction due to the students' lower language proficiency levels. New teachers also have issues with limited teaching materials. Two participants (P1 and P2) indicated that creating teaching materials is complex, as it requires obtaining reference materials from other sources for instructional purposes. New teachers are hindered in delivering effective instruction when there is a lack of adequate teaching materials and equipment (Sali & Kecik, 2018).

However, the second challenge and pressure that new secondary school teachers face is workload. Workload aspects comprise (i) clerical workload where the requirement for teachers to handle extensive documentation highlights a lack of administrative support, (ii) undesirable overload such as the expectation for teachers to participate in extracurricular activities, which can stem from a school culture that undervalues teachers' well-being, (iii) diverse ancillary assignments which can be caused by insufficient funding or poor resource distribution within schools, and (iv) work-life balance such as where teachers struggle to balance their teaching tasks with family responsibilities. Four participants (P5, P7, P9, and P12) reported feeling stressed while working on clerical tasks, including preparing paperwork, updating student data, and collecting fees. However, previous studies have reported that teachers experience stress comparable to that associated with clerical duties, due to their traditional teaching routines (Tsubono & Mitoku, 2023). Moreover, three participants (P3, P4, and P9) indicated high workloads. A spokesperson said they are often asked to take on additional roles

on top of their existing workload, making it very challenging. In this regard, heavy workload is considered one of the common reasons that induce new teachers to leave the profession (Perryman & Calvert, 2020). They also indicate that P1 and P2, the new teachers, experienced stress from extraneous assignments, including club supervision, documentation preparation, and school warden duties. Ariffin et al. (2021) found that teachers who undertake ancillary work beyond their capabilities experience more stress. New teachers also struggle with maintaining a work-life balance. Two participants (P3 and P10) reported feeling stressed because they had to give up personal time outside working hours to focus on work. Chaaban and Du (2017) found that teachers who are overwhelmed by workload and its impact on work-life balance struggle to fulfill their family commitments.

The third challenge and pressure on new secondary school teachers is classroom management. There are three challenges and pressures they must confront: (i) student behaviour issues such as students from challenging home environments may exhibit disruptive behaviour as a coping mechanism, making it essential for teachers to understand and address these underlying factors, (ii) overcrowded classrooms such as overcrowded classrooms present logistical challenges that affect not only teaching efficacy but also student learning outcomes. High teacher-to-student ratios can hinder individualised attention and support, and (iii) lack of student engagement, such as

the disconnect between curriculum design and student interests, leading to a lack of engagement. Teachers must find ways to make lessons relevant and engaging to foster better learning experiences.

In particular, Participants P3 and P9 reported experiencing difficulties in managing problematic student behaviour. It is concluded that misconduct, including disruptive behaviour, disrespect toward teachers, and classroom disruption, is the primary source of stress for teachers (Aldrup et al., 2018; Dicke et al., 2014). They also reported that overcrowded classrooms were a challenge to classroom management. P6 and P7 informed this study that having a large number of students in a class has impacted classroom control, making it difficult for P6 to ensure that students understand the instruction. Previous research supports these findings: class size is associated with stress related to classroom management (Finn, 2019), based on the assumption that larger class sizes lead to a more significant workload and increased opportunities for students to be disruptive. Additionally, new teachers reported that they are often subjected to considerable pressure without meaningful student engagement in learning. Previous studies have found that when students misbehave and disengage in class, new teachers tend to feel less effective in their teaching (Gunn & McRae, 2021).

The fourth challenge and pressure new secondary school teachers face is winning the standards from senior teachers and parents. This challenge and pressure include (i) building up and sustaining good

relationships with senior teachers, such as establishing collaborative and supportive relationships with experienced colleagues, which is essential. New teachers often rely on senior teachers for guidance and mentorship, and fostering these connections can enhance their professional development, (ii) building up and sustaining good relationships with parents, such as engaging effectively with parents in establishing trust and collaboration in enabling teachers to support students' academic and emotional needs, and (iii) parents' negative attitudes such as some parents preconceived notions of what teaching should look like or may be skeptical of new educational practices introduced by new teachers. Earlier, Thomas et al. (2019) found that relationships and support from colleagues have also been important for helping new teachers overcome the challenges of the first few years of teaching. Studies have shown that parent relationships and involvement can either facilitate or deteriorate the relationship between teachers and students (Aspfors & Bondas, 2013). In addition, teachers are likely to become stressed and burn out if they do not feel a level of support or respect from parents (Kutsyurba et al., 2019; Whalen et al., 2019).

Moreover, a new secondary school teacher's fifth challenge or pressure is professionalism. Teacher competency, encompassing the knowledge, skills, and professional attitudes that a teacher must possess to educate their students effectively, is one challenge this relates to. Secondly, balancing theoretical knowledge with school realities, such as managing diverse classrooms, accommodating different learning styles, and dealing with administrative pressures, is another challenge. These four new teachers (P4, P5, P9, and P11) were poorly equipped and unversed in the skills required before being placed as teachers. This area is emphasised because it is crucial for new teachers' effectiveness in achieving student success (Kutsyuruba et al., 2016). Furthermore, two teachers (P4 and P7) reported facing challenges and pressures when what they learned in college did not match the classroom realities. As Uhrich et al. (2023) and Al-Naimi et al. (2020) have found, studies have been conducted that demonstrate it is not easy for new teachers to bridge the gap between the knowledge they acquire through formal education and the skills required of them in the workplace.

CONCLUSION

This study examines the challenges and pressures faced by new secondary school teachers in Malaysia during their first three years of teaching. The findings indicate that new teachers encounter challenges and pressures from five aspects: (i) challenges and pressures of teaching and learning, (ii) challenges and pressures of workload, (iii) challenges and pressures of classroom management, (iv) challenges and pressures of relationships with senior teachers and parents, and (v) challenges and pressures of professionalism.

The intricate interplay between these challenges aligns with Bronfenbrenner's

Ecological Systems Theory, which emphasises how interactions within multiple contextual environments shape individual development. For instance, the microsystem reflects the immediate pressures new teachers face from their classrooms and colleagues, while the mesosystem emphasises the impact of relationships with parents and other teachers. These interactions create stressors that can hinder new teachers' adaptation to their roles. The exosystem sheds light on external influences such as district policies and administrative decisions, which can impede their professional growth. Furthermore, the macrosystem captures the broader cultural and societal pressures within the Malaysian educational context that shape teachers' experiences and expectations. The chronosystem highlights how significant events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, have necessitated rapid adaptations in teaching practices, further complicating the challenges new teachers face.

In response to the pressures identified, targeted interventions are crucial. The Four Dimensions of Teacher Resilience Framework proposed by Mansfield et al. (2012) provides a valuable lens through which these strategies can be developed. To bolster new teachers' professional resilience, school administrators should implement mentoring programs as outlined in the New Teacher Development Program (PPGB) 2.0. This professional support not only addresses the practical skills needed for effective teaching but also fosters a sense of belonging and decreases feelings of isolation. Regular monitoring, through the submission of mentee progress reports to the District Education Office (PPD), can further enhance the mentorship experience, ensuring that new teachers have continuous access to guidance.

To strengthen the pedagogical and emotional skills of new teachers, a series of micro-training sessions can be organised under the supervision of the Training Unit at the PPD. These training sessions will cover effective teaching strategies, classroom management, and self-empowerment workshops. This initiative aligns with the Malaysian Education Development Plan (PPPM) 2013-2025, specifically Shift 4: Transforming Teaching into a Preferred Profession, which aims to ensure that every teacher is a quality educator.

Like other studies, this study has certain limitations. The first limitation is the small number of study participants. Therefore, the findings may not be generalisable to a larger population. The second limitation is that the challenges and pressures can only be explored from the perspective of new secondary school teachers, as the study participants were limited to this group. The third limitation pertains to the potential for interviewer bias during the semi-structured interview process, as the interviewer's posing of questions may inadvertently influence the participants' responses. The fourth limitation is that this study was conducted solely in the Klang Valley, which may not adequately represent the cultural variations found in rural areas or other states in Malaysia.

This study suggests that future research could utilise survey studies to collect data on the challenges and pressures faced by new teachers by gathering a larger sample. Furthermore, future studies could also involve other perspectives, such as those of school administrators and experienced teachers. Additionally, future studies could consider employing a longitudinal study design to trace the evolving experiences of challenges and stress among new teachers throughout their early years of service.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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