One School’s Management of Students With Intellectual Disabilities During the COVID-19 Outbreak in Japan: A Study Based on Interviews With Teachers

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Abstract
This study aimed to elucidate how school employees caring for students with intellectual disabilities managed emergencies caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. It attended to decision-making by school managers as well as the engagement of local teachers in the outcome resolution process. A total of 10 teachers employed in different positions were purposefully selected from a school for students with intellectual disabilities in Osaka, Japan, and interviews were conducted with them via Zoom. The thematic analysis identified six significant premises: sensemaking, emergency responsive organization, high morale, planning through prioritization, risk management, and recovery from adverse incidents. The findings suggest distributed leadership functions to successfully sustain security in educational practices. Additionally, the empirical study consisting of interviews with staff in multiple positions reveals that all of the staff’s proactive participation in decision-making and the communication process enabled the school to cope with the pandemic crisis as a united organization.

Keywords
COVID-19, distributed leadership, management, school for students with intellectual disabilities, thematic analysis

Introduction
This study aimed to identify leadership needs of schools in managing unpredictable and long-lasting crises, for instance, COVID-19 and other future disasters. Specifically, we investigated how a huge
school in Japan for students with intellectual disabilities, with numerous staff and students at high risk owing to the pandemic, copes with the crisis. This article focuses on the first half year of the COVID-19 pandemic (January–July 2020). The article’s originality involves awareness of local teachers’ engagement and school managers’ decision-making during COVID-19.

The Early Stage of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Japan

The COVID-19 pandemic has exerted tremendous impact on education, forcing the closure of schools and affecting more than 1.6 billion children in more than 190 countries (UNESCO, 2020). Although the COVID-19 pandemic is still present, some researchers have conducted empirical studies of school leadership focusing on the period of large scale school closure and reopening during the pandemic’s early stage (Beauchamp et al., 2021; McLeod and Dulsky, 2021; Thornton, 2021).

In Japan, the first infection was identified on 14 January 2020, and the first death occurred on 13 February 2020. After that, the number of infections gradually increased. On 27 February 2020, the government suddenly announced that a full-scale school closure would begin in Japan on March 2 (MEXT, 2020a). At the peak on April 22, 93% of public schools in Japan were closed (MEXT, 2020b). Most schools’ reopening was repeatedly postponed except for some few areas in which the virus did not spread. Subsequently, schools were gradually reopened once the first wave of the pandemic decreased in Japan, and 99% of the public schools finally reopened by June 1 (MEXT, 2020b). On 27 November 2020, the education minister announced that national-scale school closure would never occur again even in a state of emergency. Therefore, almost all schools in Japan remained open during the second through fifth waves of the pandemic—with peak numbers of daily infected population from the first to the fifth at 720, 1605, 7957, 7238, and 25,992—except for periods when each school required quarantine measures. However, only a few clusters have ever been reported in schools (MEXT, 2020a). It is essential to identify the ways in which schools and their staff members confronted emergencies through the periods of school closure, school closure extension, and the reopening of schools. It is also crucial to ascertain how schools have remained open and coped with the pandemic-induced crises. Answers to such queries can help mitigate the impact of the ongoing pandemic worldwide and generate a body of knowledge that can assist in handling future disasters.

School Distributed Leadership for Managing a Crisis

The present study focused on the school leadership and management efforts to overcome crises. A crisis is defined as “an urgent situation that requires immediate and decisive action by an organization and, in particular, by the leaders of the organization” (Smith and Riley, 2012, p.58). The COVID-19 pandemic can be considered a crisis that demands special management initiatives to be adopted by the educational institution or its leaders. Some previous studies have focused on school management and leadership during the COVID-19 crisis. In the United Kingdom, Beauchamp et al. (2021) interviewed 12 principals from four nations. They extracted five common themes for leadership and management in crisis situations: external expectations and pressures, power and authority, values and attitudes, communications, and extraordinary resilience. Thornton (2021) queried 18 principals in New Zealand regarding their strategies for management during the lockdown period. The author divided the early stage of the COVID-19 pandemic into three
phases—crisis, adaptation, and opportunity—referring to previous studies (Mutch, 2020; Smith and Riley, 2012; Wooten and James, 2008) and extracted eight significant themes: (1) addressing challenges, (2) prioritizing wellbeing, (3) communicating, (4) checking in, (5) adaptability and optimism, (6) distributing leadership, (7) focused reflection, and (8) availing opportunities. (1) and (2) were extracted as themes in the crisis phase, (3)–(6) in the adaptation phase, and (7) and (8) in the opportunity phase. These two studies elucidated that strong, responsive leadership in an emergency and close communication with people inside or outside schools facilitated institutions’ ability to confront the crisis.

The aforementioned studies targeted principals’ statements. Indeed, the preferences, decision-making, and actions taken by principals represent factors vital for the handling of conditions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, it is also essential to clarify how local teachers were engaged in the decision-making process of the schools because they are responsible for educational applications and students’ health. They cannot blindly obey the decisions of school managers (principals and vice principals in Japan); instead, they represent significant actors in on-site efforts to confront the crisis. These at-risk groups are akin to Lipsky’s (2010) conception of street-level bureaucrats who work on front lines. Thus, every decision or action taken by a local teacher influences the outcomes of the policies imposed by the school management. The engagement of teachers thus cannot be neglected.

McLeod and Dulsky’s (2021) research on leadership during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic includes interview data not only from school leaders but also local teachers and instructional coaches in the United States and China. According to findings, school leaders should have a strong vision of the organization’s path, share values with its members, stay in touch with stakeholders through various communication tools, ensure the health and wellbeing of the staff, encourage their professional development, provide food and maintain mental health for children and families in need, ensure equity, and find hope in the future. Although that study includes various perspective from educators in different positions, there is no organizational perspective for investigating how the staff in the same school collaboratively faced the crisis because they sampled educators from different schools.

Recent research on school management has emphasized the importance of the participation of local teachers, advocating distributed leadership (Bush, 2008; Harris, 2011). Some researchers have suggested that distributed leadership is also effective in overcoming crisis situations (Harris, 2020; Harris and Jones, 2020; Thornton, 2021). However, no previous investigations have evidenced how school employees have collaboratively managed the crisis conditions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The present study elucidates how managers think and make decisions, how local teachers engage in the decision-making processes, and how communication occurs between the staff members of schools in times of crisis.

Additionally, this study focuses on distributed leadership in special schools for students with intellectual disabilities. We can learn much from those schools’ complex and dynamic strategy because of Japanese special education’s unique context. In Japan, most students with moderate, severe, or profound intellectual disabilities attend special schools segregated from mainstream schools. Therefore, many students with intellectual disabilities gather from a large area. The ratio of teachers to students is much higher than in regular classrooms, with the number of students per teacher from one to four; thus, many special schools employ 100 or even 150 teachers. This circumstance causes organizational communication and decision-making processes to be more complex than those of regular schools. Focusing on such a large organization can reveal successful characteristics of crisis leadership and communication.
Importance of Ensuring That Students With Intellectual Disabilities Receive Safe Education

School leadership for students with intellectual disabilities is crucial because of those at high risk for COVID-19. First, students with intellectual disabilities are especially vulnerable to COVID-19 and can suffer serious clinical outcomes from the disease (Perera et al., 2020) owing to potential comorbidities accompanying their impairment. These conditions may include heart disease, cardiopulmonary issues, diabetes, or cancer, causing COVID-19 to pose a higher risk to them than to the general populations (Courtenay and Perera, 2020; Jumreornvong et al., 2020; Rose et al., 2020). Second, previous investigations have also indicated that risk is amplified by cognitive characteristics of students with intellectual disabilities. It is difficult for some populations to understand the threat or emergency caused by the virus or the requisite preventive measurements, such as physical distancing or wearing of masks (Aishworiya and Kang, 2021; Embregts et al., 2020; Eshraghi et al., 2020). Third, daily lifestyles of students with intellectual disabilities also increase their risk of contracting the disease. Many with intellectual disabilities rely on physical contact with others for their activities of daily life (Tummers et al., 2020). In Japan, students with intellectual disabilities usually attend special schools, which tend to be in crowded spaces because of the large number of teachers and students. Additionally, students gather in one place from multiple and distant areas, increasing the risk of transmitting the virus. Fourth, people with intellectual disabilities have difficulty advocating for themselves in times of crises, such as pandemics (Courtenay and Perera, 2020). Some are uncomfortable requesting help from others and cannot attain adequate mental support (Couper-Kenney and Riddell, 2021). The four factors discussed above make it hazardous for students with intellectual disabilities to venture outside their homes.

However, staying at home is also not safe for such students. First, they may face difficulties with their mental health. Loneliness stems from social distancing, and the restriction of daily activities is a risk factor and stressor for many mental disorders (Banerjee and Rai, 2020; Barnett et al., 2021; Courtenay and Perera, 2020). Any interruption of their daily routines negatively influences their mental sense of security (Colizzi et al., 2020; Courtenay and Perera, 2020). People with other intellectual disabilities may suffer from changes in their routines that compel them to confront completely unknown situations. Disruptions in habitual activities can lead to emotional and behavioral upheaval (Eshraghi et al., 2020; Page et al., 2021). Second, school closures can exacerbate the stress felt by family members of students with intellectual disabilities because, in such situations, they must exclusively shoulder the responsibility for providing support to their wards (Fontanesi et al., 2020; Navas et al., 2021). Therefore, prolonged housebound periods can simultaneously worsen the mental health of students with intellectual disabilities and that of their families. Third, school closures limit learning opportunities available to students with intellectual disabilities. Although the pandemic accelerated innovations in online learning (Ng, 2020), learning at home is relatively difficult for these students. Page et al. (2021) summarized key challenges for students with special educational needs vis-à-vis their adoption of online learning methodologies or distance education. These challenges are listed as follows: access and use of technological tools; students’ engagement and changes to routine; risk of further isolation; falling behind in their learning; and significant risk of academic and emotional disconnect. For these reasons, home-based learning does not represent the best practice for most learners with intellectual disabilities.

The studies above illustrate that, for students with intellectual disabilities, although leaving home poses a high health risk, staying at home long-term also poses psychological, physical, and learning risks. To maintain these students’ routines and sustain learning, teachers must prepare to restart school as soon as possible. Additionally, to ensure the health of this vulnerable population, infection
control measures of schools must be contemplated even more seriously than those for students without disabilities.

**Methodology**

A qualitative study was undertaken to clarify school management and leadership characteristics deemed essential in overcoming pandemic conditions and to contemplate the importance of the engagement of local teachers. Such a methodology enables a more comprehensive understanding of the pandemic as experienced by schools.

One particular school for students with intellectual disabilities in Osaka was targeted for the present study. For confidentiality reasons, the name of the school is inscribed in this study as Kansai Special School (pseudonym). This school was selected primarily because of contextual familiarity: the second, third, and fourth authors of this study worked in Osaka and were aware of the COVID-19 circumstances in the targeted area. Additionally, the third author had been previously employed in the Kansai Special School and thus was on good terms with some of the participants. A close relationship with the participants bolsters the interpretation of the data (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000).

The second reason for the selection of this school concerns its representativeness. The school followed a closure and reopening (from March 2 to June 1) process similar to other schools in Japan. Further, the school applied a quarantine period after reopening (3 days at the beginning of July). Only a few schools imposed quarantines, so Kansai Special School offered important knowledge on recovery after school closure. Third, Kansai Special School was chosen for its scale: it enrolls around 300 students and employs around 150 teachers. Such a large scale is advantageous for researchers because the more teachers there are, the more important it comes to be for staff members to communicate appropriately to collaboratively combat the pandemic.

The participants were purposefully sampled to elicit varying perspectives of the impact of COVID-19. A headteacher—in Japan, headteachers are local teacher facilitators who represent teachers in communications with school managers—was asked to select 10 teachers who represented diversity in age, job profile, and teaching experience. First, because the headteacher was not in a management position, we can avoid biased sampling by one who has interest in the school’s benefit. Second, because the headteacher communicated with school managers and local teachers frequently, they could well oversee what was occurring in the school. Thus, the headteacher is in the optimal position, avoiding both bias and interest. Two school managers, a nurse–teacher, and seven local teachers, including the headteacher, were recommended. Table 1 presents the participants’ assigned pseudonyms, gender, range of age (21–30, 31–40, 41–50, and 51–60), experience, division of duties, department (elementary, junior high, or high), and grade in charge of school year 2019 and 2020 (if they taught a particular class).

The research plan was submitted to the Ethical Review Board of Osaka Kyoiku University, and approval was granted on 17 December 2020. Informed consent was obtained from 10 participants before online interviews were initiated in November when the third wave of the pandemic began in Japan. Agreement documents were sent via email, and their signed versions were received in a similar manner.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted by the first author and recorded via Zoom’s local recording; each of the interviews lasted for approximately 2 hr. Initially, the participant profiles were queried. Next, respondents were asked about their experiences and their views on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic vis-à-vis the following four periods. Term A began with the first reported case of the disease in Japan and ended the day school closures were announced by the Japanese prime minister (January 6 to February 26). Term B began with the end of term A and spanned school year
2019 (March 2 to March 31). Term C started with school year 2020 and ended with the opening of schools (April 1 to May 31). Term D started with the reopening of schools (from June 1). The interview protocols were developed using the guidelines stipulated by local and national governments and comprised six topics: (1) the preventive measures taken by the school against COVID-19; (2) collaboration with families and related organizations; (3) safety and health of students and teachers; (4) the adaptive considerations for students with specific needs; (5) student learning; and (6) the social and psychological state of students and teachers. The interview protocol aimed to stimulate intensive conversations with participants rather than inquiring about each topic. Thus, all respondents did not necessarily comment on all six issues, and the authors did not allude to missing topics in their analysis.

Inductive thematic analysis was applied (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Braun and Clarke, 2019). The first author transcribed the interview data and carefully read and reread the transcripts, coding them to clarify how staff members collaboratively handled the crisis and determining rough categories. All four authors subsequently analyzed the associations between the categories and codes and organized them by verifying the internal coherence and consistencies of the categories and ensuring they did not overlap (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The significant themes and subthemes about school-related crisis management and leadership for the benefit of students with intellectual disabilities were then extracted. Finally, the obtained themes were intensively discussed.

Findings

Outline of Emerging Themes and Subthemes

Data analysis highlighted six significant themes and subthemes, which were independent but interrelated (Table 2).

Sensemaking

Sensemaking is an effort to understand the present situation and predict the future during a confusing and uncertain situation. The school staff had difficulty predicting the future at the
beginning of the pandemic. They felt helpless because they had to wait and obey the decisions of the national and local government. Furthermore, they found administrative policies unsuitable for the school’s confusing situation:

The national government did not withdraw its policy of reopening schools in April (the beginning of the school year in Japan). I thought it was impossible. However, we had to prepare for the new year following its policy. I am in charge of the first grade, so I had to prepare for the entrance ceremony. Although we discussed the plan, I think that most teachers were suspicious of resuming during such a severe situation of the pandemic (Mr. Ban).

An unforeseeable situation is risky. Frequent policy changes by local and national governments demoralized staff. For example, the decision to extend the school closure was not announced until 1 day before the new school year. A chief teacher of the elementary department worried that their colleagues would be discouraged by the announcement of a sudden extension:

We simulated our movements for when our students would return to school and connected online with each other again and again from morning to evening. We had made a detailed plan and were keen to welcome the children. However, the closure was extended. I was not a classroom teacher, but even I was disappointed. I think that the classroom teachers were more disappointed (Mr. Oka).

The principal asserted that the main management tenet for mitigating the school employees’ confusion was to increase control as much as possible, even in difficult-to-forecast situations.

To expand the range of control against uncertain situations. While we cannot completely prepare ourselves prior to the government directions, it is useful to do so even if the preparations will be canceled. This kind of enthusiasm was important for sustaining our motivation (Mr. Mori).

**Emergency Responsive Organization**

Kansai Special School established two emergency response teams, Crisis Management Meeting (CMM) and Project Team (PT), to ensure seamless communication among staff members. CMM
was instituted in mid-February to take decisions regarding emergency policies and measures and quickly inform local teachers of its rulings. It was led by the principal, and its members included school managers, headteachers, a nurse–teacher, department heads, and chief directors of emergency-related divisions. PT was established in mid-March to discuss and share information about continuing education through the adoption of preventive measures. It was initiated by the chief teachers of divisions and departments, who communicated regularly with classroom teachers. PT accorded all local teachers with the opportunity of engaging in the process of decision-making and helped the school staff work in unity.

The two teams allowed school employees to make policies and plans efficiently. A teacher, responsible for school curriculum, asserted that the two teams made successful and efficient decisions during the emergency: “I think it was good that important matters were decided between a small number of people in a short time” (Mr. Nasu).

In Kansai Special School, the chief teachers of divisions and departments communicated frequently with classroom teachers. A chief teacher of the elementary department explained the importance of sharing policies to cope collaboratively with the crisis: “I thought we all had to confront the crisis together and that no one should break the rules. Therefore, I asked them to discuss matters together” (Mr. Oka).

In emergency situations, the organization needs optimal role assignment. The principal used the school’s human resources optimally to build a robust organization, saying, “I assigned important position in the organization to teachers with a strong acumen. I have also actively assigned talented young teachers as members of PT” (Mr. Mori). Additionally, the principal designated two community support coordinators as PT facilitators, and stated that this selection was successful:

I was also a coordinator when I was a local teacher. Therefore, I knew that they will be good at negotiating local teachers’ demands. I also think that they are highly motivated. Additionally, they are the local teachers, so they can discuss with other teachers on the same ground as it is not good to only command from the above. They accomplished their task very well (Mr. Mori).

Moreover, the roles were assigned to all local teachers through PT. According to a facilitator, local teachers were cooperative when they were assigned specific roles:

I appreciate the teachers’ participation in a discussion about PT and considering it as their own business. The local teachers simply did not know what to do. If they are assigned roles, they could be proactive … (abbreviation) … I also considered how all the staff would pleasantly engage with the process (Ms. Ueno).

**High Morale**

This theme illustrates the optimism sensed by staff members about confronting emergency situations. The findings revealed three principal sources of the high morales of the local teachers.

First, they trusted their managers. Local teachers were proactively involved in the process of decision-making and met the expectations of their managers. A local teacher said:

School managers paid serious attention to our opinions; they took charge of the leadership and supported us. This was challenging but ideal, and we made it (Mr. Oka).
Second, teachers complained about the delay in decision-making by the local and national governments, demonstrating the sense of resistance:

It was too late to declare a state of emergency on April 7. They did not know schools would start from April 8, did they? If they had decided some days in advance, we could have done a little more (Mr. Oka).

Third, thanks to the PT, all teachers felt involved in the decision-making process and thus gained a sense of engagement. They were connected to PT through their division of duties or departments. A classroom teacher who was a newcomer to the school said that involvement in the decision-making process was a good experience: “It was very instructive for my career to observe the school proceed in unity. They held well organized meetings and made decisions step by step. It made sense to me and I was able to understand the functioning and complexities of a learning organization” (Ms Abe).

**Planning Through Prioritization**

This theme indicates that school management during crises requires plans that reflect priorities because local teachers must share school policies to decide on-site applications for themselves.

All staff members declared that they prioritized the health and security of their students. In crises, it is vital to clarify priorities because frontline decision-making vests with the local teacher in terms of application. Educational practices and measurements that did not refer to shared policies would endanger their students. One classroom teacher said:

Although thinking among teachers may vary, our response as a school must be singular. Education cannot be maintained without sharing priorities. I think our decision-making is directly related to the consideration of students’ safety (Mr. Ban).

During school closure, the highest priority was to care for children in vulnerable families. Many students were sent to daycare services during the school closure period to substitute for schools and maintain the routines and health of the children. However, some students had not registered for any daycare services, and their parents found it difficult to care for them at home. The school decided to enable them to come to school even during school closure: “We prioritized securing a place for students. Many students receive daycare services. However, for those who did not, we decided to take care of them at school” (Ms Seki).

The school also prioritized the preparation of a reopening plan with appropriate preventive measures, simulating reopening plans numerous times. The plans encompassed primary methods such as wearing face masks, hand washing and disinfection, and avoiding the three Cs (closed spaces with poor ventilation, crowded places with many people nearby, and close contact settings such as close-range conversations), the flow of boarding and disembarking from school buses, changing clothes, lunchtime rules, and pedagogy based on the measures to be applied. Participation in the decision-making process and repeated simulations increase the understanding and confidence of local teachers in their ability to institute preventive actions. The vice principal said, “I think it is important for everyone to share a sense of crises. All teachers have to think of the crisis as their own problem. I believe all teachers could think in this manner” (Mr. Hara).

Prioritizing health and security implied that student learning was accorded a lower significance. Most students did not learn during the school closure except for a few capable of self-learning at home. According to the principal, “In terms of students’ learning, we could not provide sufficient
support. This was the task that we focused on after reopening” (Mr. Mori). This does not mean that teachers neglected teaching. For their students, staying at home for a long time is risky, as stated in previous studies. Thus, instituting measures to prevent long-term school closure from reoccurring was important.

**Risk Management**

This theme denotes that educational practices during the COVID-19 pandemic were based on risk management and transformed to activities that presupposed preventive measures.

Reducing the risk of infection was crucial for students with intellectual disabilities. Thus, the nurse–teacher became the core of school management in pandemic conditions. The nurse–teacher of Kansai Special School expressed her greatest concern saying, “Because of the repeated and unpredictable extension of school closures, medical examination could not be scheduled. I was worried about the health of students, especially those who suffer from chronic diseases” (Ms Tsuji).

Preventive measures recorded in national and local government guidelines prohibited activities such as singing songs and sports and other actions entailing physical contact with others. Such mandates are sometimes problematic for students with intellectual disabilities. A classroom teacher lamented the declining quality and quantum of lessons:

> The time for lessons has been reduced considerably. This is because it is time consuming to make each student aware of the preventive measures against the infection. The content of the lesson is the same as before; however, the lessons decreased in terms of variety because we also teach preventive measures and cannot share adequate teaching materials along with it (Ms Koga).

Some measures stipulated by local or national government were difficult to achieve, particularly in the pedagogy of students with intellectual disabilities. One teacher reported a conflict:

> I think we cannot help some forms of physical contact. For example, some students unintentionally offend other students by their aggressive behavior, so we have to stop it. However, we do bear in mind the practice of washing hands, disinfecting, and continuing our effort to minimize the risk of infection (Ms Abe).

However, the school managers encouraged local teachers to endeavor to minimize risk even when it was difficult to follow the stipulated conditions in full with some students. The vice principal asserted:

> I know following the preventive measures are difficult for some students, but I always advice teachers saying, “Let’s try to change.” For example, some students are not good at wearing masks. Even in such cases, I tell the teachers not to give up and continue supporting their students in learning to wear masks. (Mr. Hara).

**Recovery From Adverse Incidents**

School leaders must be resilient in recovering from the worst situations. Some adverse incidents are inevitable in crisis conditions, regardless of how well prepared staff members are or how much care they take. After such an occurrence, school leaders must make urgent decisions, and local teachers must support the rulings because their actions are directly connected to the survival of students, staff
members, and parents. During the pandemic, incorrect responses or misalignment and misunderstandings could lead to panic.

School employees claimed that the outbreak of infections in school heightened their sense of crisis. The headteacher articulated her change of viewpoint, saying, “We had been working thinking about how to prevent the infection before the quarantine. It was not about how we treated the incident. After the incident actually took place, we realized the severity of the infection and understood its implications for the very first time” (Ms Seki).

Privacy and discrimination become problematic during the outbreak of infection. A teacher bemoaned that when one student became infected, some other students tried to identify the infected person: “I was shocked to find that children searched affected persons as if they were hunting a criminal. Additionally, the parents did it the same too” (Mr. Nasu).

Community residents panicked after viewing television reports of the incident, and Kansai Special School was inundated with inquiries. The vice principal stated he was worried about the impact of the media’s quarantine reports on the students:

After TV and newspapers featured the incident, parents’ anxiety increased. I was worried about this because it might have a big impact on students who could understand the news. Immediately after the quarantine period was over, we sent letters and emails to parents stating that there were no close contacts with affected individuals and that our school was safe (Mr. Hara).

Class teachers faced difficulty in explaining the situation to parents who came to pick up students during the day. They wanted to reduce the parents’ anxiety but could not because it was not possible to divulge details. A classroom teacher stated:

Some parents asked me to at least reveal whether their child was a close contact. However, I could not disclose this information because of the principal’s orders. All I could do was vaguely say that everything would be okay. I was very afflicted by it (Ms Abe).

The protection of information links is vital even when it leads to other forms of discrimination. The outbreak in Kansai Special School caused a daycare service to reject students enrolled in that institution. A teacher explained the necessity as follows:

We could not say which department the infected student belonged to because reporting it would lead to the risk of identifying the student. However, a daycare service rejected all students from Kansai Special School. The managers quickly contacted the local administration and asked to stop the discrimination (Mr. Oka).

Discussion

Themes extracted from the current research align with studies on leadership in crisis. However, the specific context—the COVID-19 pandemic in Japan, characteristics of schools for students with intellectual disabilities, and targeted school’s large number of staff members—influences the structure of findings. Moreover, by paying attention not only to a few school managers’ decision-making but also to local teachers’ engagement and communication, our findings represent how, as an organization, the targeted school confronted and managed the unprecedented pandemic. We discuss the characteristics of distributed leadership in the targeted school, connecting knowledge from literature and special context.
The first theme, sensemaking, is a crisis management strategy “to arrive at a collective understanding of the nature, characteristics, consequences, and potential scope and effects of an evolving threat (Boin et al., 2013: p. 82).” The pandemic presented an unprecedented circumstance of lack of knowledge, even in the scientific community (Shonkoff, 2020). Our finding supports previous studies emphasizing sensemaking’s importance during the early phases of crisis (Thornton, 2021; Wooten and James, 2008). Additionally, the empirical study adds knowledge as to why sensemaking is important. As the principal of targeted school states, teachers desire to gain control of the situation. As local and national governments frequently modified policies and guidelines, the staff became depressed when their plans and schedules were repeatedly canceled. Workers become discouraged as they were unaware of how long the situation would persist (Harris, 2020). Instead, envisioning possible futures and sharing projections can reinvigorate school personnel, allowing the school as an organization to maintain agency in coping with the crisis.

The second theme, an emergency responsive organization, may not be essential for all schools to overcome the crisis, but it is crucial for large scale schools, such as the one in this research, which employed approximately 150 staff members. Previous studies of school leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic highlight the importance of communication (Beauchamp et al., 2021; Fernandez and Shaw, 2020; McLeod and Dulsky, 2021; Thornton, 2021). However, constant and close communication was difficult with increasing staff members. The targeted school’s principal enacted organizational capacity-building (McLeod and Dulsky, 2021) and established two teams to surmount challenging circumstances: top-down authority (CMM) and communicative brief (PT). These two teams can discharge complementary functions in a crisis. Although CMM enabled school managers to make decisions and policies and convey information smoothly, organizations refused to work without local teachers engagement, who, as empirical research shows, were actively involved in communication through roles assigned in PT by the principal and team leaders.

Third, school members faced various situations with high morale. Previous literature suggested the importance of emotional leadership during crisis (Beauchamp et al., 2021), which enhances staff motivation and comfort. However, how school staff maintained high morale was unclear as few previous studies have focused on local teachers. Conversely, our empirical study that interviewed school managers and local teachers suggests three sources of staff motivation. First, local teachers attempted to contribute to the organization by trusting school managers. Previously conducted studies indicate a link between teacher trust and distributed leadership or collaborative school culture (Beycioğlu et al., 2012; Combs et al., 2018; Prasertratana et al., 2014). Local teachers tend to work proactively when attempting to meet school managers’ expectations. Second, resistance to decisions of local and national governments appeared to motivate the staff. Studies have reported that school autonomy is amplified through administrative complaints (Palau et al., 2020). Third, local teachers’ motivation was strengthened by their commitment to the emergency response team and clear role assignment. This collaborative environment contributed to sustaining members’ morale (Sheppard et al., 2010).

Fourth is planning through prioritization. During a crisis, leadership must institute plans through prioritization. As noted in previous research about leadership during the pandemic (Moss et al., 2020; O’Keefe and McNally, 2021; Thornton, 2021; McLeod and Dulsky, 2021), students’ health and security had to be prioritized in targeted schools. According to current study, all staff shared core values for making appropriate on-site decisions. Even during the school’s closure, the principal decided that students from low-income or single-parent families could attend school, because for some students, staying at home was a higher risk than leaving home. Additionally, some studies claim that schools should promote online lessons under the lockdown (Ng, 2020; Zhao, 2020). However, for students with intellectual disabilities, online or isolated learning is not optimal.
When schools were closed, the principal dared to lower teaching’s priority but raised the priority of planning and simulation for safe lessons after reopening. This finding coincides with many previous studies reporting that learning opportunities for students with special needs were severely restricted due to school closure (Barnett et al., 2021; Navas et al., 2021). Fortunately, in Japan, daycare services substituted for schools during lockdown, and most students’ routines were guaranteed by daycare service, enabling the school to focus on planning and simulation for reopening.

Fifth is risk management. Pedagogical practices after reopening differ from those in normal periods. At targeted schools, risk management can be divided into two steps: application of established measures and maximizing risk-reduction actions when guidelines cannot be applied. First, the educational practices came to presuppose and incorporate local and national government guidelines to reduce risk. Because the guidelines prohibited some educational activities as preventive measures, the potential of lessons tailored for individual students was curtailed. However, local teachers strived to maintain the quality and quantity of lessons. The second step is maximizing risk-reduction actions in certain contexts when guidelines cannot be applied. As previous studies declare, successful crisis leadership entails adaptability, flexibility, and tolerance of ambiguity and problems (Thornton, 2021; McLeod and Dulsky, 2021; Smith and Riley, 2012). In this study, school managers and local teachers managed to do their best for students, although they found it difficult to apply preventive measures completely.

Finally, recovery from adverse incidents is important. Although previous studies have emphasized the significant of resilience (Beauchamp et al., 2021), limited research is done on how to recover. Previous empirical interviews focused on principals’ beliefs and policies rather than on what actually happened in their schools. This study’s findings suggest that adverse incidents involved with the quarantine caused panic and that school staff should protect the infected person’s privacy and avoid discrimination. Because of Japan’s cultural characteristics, discrimination against infected persons has been widely reported; peer pressure is so strong that infection is accused of causing others trouble (Suzuki et al., 2021). Media coverage can also amplify stakeholders’ anxieties. School staff had to maintain privacy under the principal’s command although information coverage aroused parents’ dissatisfaction. Every decision and action during adverse incidents more severely influenced the lives and safety of students, staff, and parents; thus, schools, as a united organization, were required to manage emergencies.

**Conclusion**

The themes extracted from our research characterize successful distributed leadership in a school for students with intellectual disabilities in Japan during the COVID-19 pandemic. In congruence with results of previous investigations, the study findings endorsed the efficacy of distributed leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic when the purpose of schooling changed from improving educational outcomes to sustaining security in educational practices.

While findings show transferability to other cases (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), they are also unique to this research’s context. Of course, the COVID-19 pandemic’s impact differs according to countries or regions. Special schools for intellectual disabilities, in particular, emphasize preventing infection risk and overcoming difficulties of alternative online education. Additionally, the targeted school’s large scale population and staff underscore the importance of emergency response teams for seamless and close communication. The empirical study—interviews with local teachers and school managers—indicates that the school is confronting the pandemic as a united organization led by diverse actors.
The 3-month school closure in Japan was advantageous in some respects. In April, teachers in the targeted school did not share priorities, had not prepared plans or established well organized teams, and the staff morale was not high. Reopening too quickly could have overextended school systems and endangered the lives of students. The short school closure from March to May transformed the school into a strong organization and converted the teachers into highly motivated agents, helping the school survive the crisis, reopening, and overcoming adverse incidents. Thus, the short school closure served as a significant preparatory period for organizational reformation to combat the ongoing pandemic and future chronic disasters.

This study’s results cannot be fully generalized because the impact of COVID-19 differs by region and country. However, the processes established and decisions taken by one Japanese school in the early stage of the COVID-19 pandemic are significant as signposts that display how schools and their personnel can surmount the current pandemic and handle future disasters.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the JSPS KAKENHI (Grant Number 20K03046).

Ethical Approval
The research plan was submitted to the Ethical Review Board of Osaka Kyoiku University, and approval (approval number—20,057) was granted in October.

Data Availability
The interviews were conducted in Japanese. We have only translated the quoted data into English. Upon a reasonable request, we will be more than happy to share the raw data in either language.

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