Crisis leadership: Leading schools in a global pandemic

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Abstract
The global Covid-19 outbreak has disrupted schooling worldwide. Remote and limited face-to-face school management during the pandemic brought to bear the numerous challenges facing schools and principals throughout the crisis, which, in turn, gave rise to changes in their leadership practices and roles. The professional literature needs conceptual and empirical frameworks concerning the challenges facing principals, their role perceptions, and their behaviors when coping with a health crisis such as the coronavirus pandemic. This paper draws on extant literature about school leadership during diverse crisis situations to advise principals facing the current pandemic. Eight guidelines for pandemic leadership are discussed, as well as practical and research implications.

Keywords
leadership, principals, crisis, global pandemic

A crisis situation is defined as a state of urgency that requires immediate and decisive action by an organization, especially by its leaders (Coombs, 2007; Karasavidou and Alexopoulos, 2019). A crisis is an unforeseen event, which threatens stakeholder expectations and may adversely affect the organization’s performance (Coombs, 2007). Crises involving the education system can undermine the safety, stability, and well-being of the school and its community – exposing students, teachers, and families to trauma, threat, and loss (Smith and Riley, 2012). In this regard, researchers note the multiple challenges facing school principals in times of crisis, especially the need for decision-making under ambiguity, without available and reliable knowledge, as well as the need for continuing evaluation and organizational learning (e.g. Devitt and Borodzicz, 2008; Gainey, 2009). Moreover, crises may differ considerably in their characteristics and impacts, requiring school principals to prepare and respond effectively to the specific circumstances of each crisis (Karasavidou and Alexopoulos, 2019).

The Covid-19 pandemic has influenced education systems worldwide. Globally, 90% of students have been affected by the crisis, and at least 60 million educators have engaged in online distance learning to establish some semblance of schooling, leading to the claim that the pandemic is the most unprecedented disruption in the history of education (UNESCO, 2020). The pandemic’s unpredictable waves require rapid amendments of education systems’ guidelines, often on a daily basis, for example in terms of students’ return/non-return to face-to-face schooling. Schools are contending with profound changes in their day-to-day practices, including suspension of classroom teaching, transformations in learning and teaching modalities, and the provision of health and other social services to students and their families (Huang et al., 2020; Reimers and Schleicher, 2020). The effects of this global health crisis have led to students’ higher dropout rates, parents’ increased responsibilities in the education process (Azorin, 2020; Striepe & Cunningham, in press), and school principals’ enhanced concentration of focus on strengthening the school’s community and its individual members (Thornton, 2021).

Previous research on educational systems’ coping with crisis has focused on responses to discrete events and their aftermath, such as terrorist attacks (Brickman et al., 2004), natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina (Bishop et al., 2015) and Hurricane Harvey (Hemmer and Elliff, 2019), and school shootings (Connolly-Wilson and Reeves, 2013; Oredein, 2010). However, research on educational leadership during global health crises remains scarce, calling for broader empirical investigations and conceptual frameworks (Gurr, 2020; Harris, 2020). This is especially important to promote understanding of the unique dynamic in leading schools over the sustained period of a global pandemic crisis. Thus, the current paper aims to outline leaders’ challenges and responses to crisis, and to propose eight leadership guidelines that may contribute to school leaders’ knowledge, professional practice, and sense-making about their leadership role during a pandemic. Finally, future explorations in pandemic crisis leadership are discussed.

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School leaders’ challenges and responses to crisis

The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed schools’ central role in providing stability and support to students, staff, and the community during a crisis (Karasavidou and Alexopoulos, 2019). Since the pandemic’s onset, education authorities at the national and local levels have opted to shift to distance learning in order to protect students’ physical health (UNESCO, 2020). This has resulted in changes in principals’ roles, transforming school leaders’ perceptions and leadership practices (Harris, 2020). The challenge of managing the school remotely at a time of uncertainty and distress has influenced leadership areas such as communication, information sharing, and decision-making (Striepe & Cunningham, in press). Specifically, principals have had to lead educational teams from their laptops, manage processes in nearly abandoned school buildings, and communicate with the school community online. During these periods of running a school in an online world, principals are distanced and disconnected from those they lead (Harris, 2020).

Among the various leadership challenges raised by the distance learning modes typifying long periods during the Covid-19 pandemic, principals have had to consider the diverse needs of students from different socioeconomic backgrounds (Van Lancker and Parolin, 2020). This may include adapting learning materials, computers, and internet access to serve students from low-income households as well as planning for the inclusion of targeted education and support materials once the pandemic recedes, to reduce learning disparities created in its wake. Yet another challenge is linked to school leaders’ tireless work to secure the well-being of learners, staff members, and the wider community by identifying their distress and stress signals (Harris, 2020).

Researchers have shown that crises present multiple, ongoing, and often critical demands, thereby requiring leaders to “don different hats,” perform a variety of roles, and respond appropriately (e.g. Harris and Jones, 2020). The literature has highlighted significant leadership responses to crises such as providing support, maintaining communication, sharing information, decision-making, team management, and more (e.g. Goswick et al., 2018; Mutch, 2015; O’Connor and Takahashi, 2014; Striepe & Cunningham, in press). Overall, six major areas of responding by school principals to various crises have been reported, as presented next.

First, throughout periods of crisis, leaders’ responsiveness to the social, emotional, and psychological needs of school staff and especially of students through support, concern, caring, and a sense of security can be considered essential (Goswick et al., 2018; Mutch, 2015). Care encompasses empathy, support, and the prioritization of the health and mental well-being of the children, staff, and the wider school community, both during and following the crisis (Brown, 2018; Fletcher and Nicholas, 2016; Mutch, 2018; O’Connor and Takahashi, 2014). Researchers note that in times of crisis, school leaders make an important transition from “caring for individuals” to “caring for the community” (O’Connor and Takahashi, 2014). Studies have highlighted how school leaders cared for their staff members’ needs during a crisis by identifying stress signals, providing appropriate support, and finding opportunities for staff to discuss their feelings and concerns (Geer and Coleman, 2014; Mutch, 2014).

Second, leaders’ rapid, clear, and accurate communication during a crisis helps build trust between the organization and those concerned (Javed and Niazi, 2015). Especially at such times, reciprocal and comprehensive communication channels are crucial to enable school leaders to convey clear messages and avoid messages based on rumors or misleading or erroneous information (Sutherland, 2017). Ineffective communication during a crisis can disrupt the fabric of relationships and affect the level of trust between key stakeholders (Howat et al., 2012). Effective communication can further assist in coping with the rapid changes accompanying crisis development (Goswick et al., 2018). Researchers note that social networks consisting of people with shared interests are considered an essential tool in promoting communication during a crisis (Alanezi, 2020).

Third, cooperation is considered a highly important component in times of crisis. Cooperation between the principal, school counselors, and assistant principals were found to positively influence responses during and immediately after a crisis (LaRoe and Corrales, 2019). Other findings indicated that cooperation and collaborative decision-making during a crisis gave rise to better relationships among the staff, students, and parents (Sutherland, 2017).

Fourth, during a crisis and its aftermath, principals make decisions on how best to mitigate adverse effects, implement supports, and then rebuild and assist in the recovery of their school community. Toward that end, principals depend heavily on obtaining high-quality information for the decision-making process; yet, such information is rarely fully available, resulting in leaders’ decisions based on their own resources or by turning to others to bridge information gaps (Helsloot and Groenendaal, 2017). Gardiner and Enomoto (2007) suggested that during a crisis, in lieu of acting as though they know all there is to know, principals need to respond quickly, while carefully examining the options, implications, and side effects of their actions for different parts of the system and for the system as a whole (Netolicky, 2020). Leadership in a crisis is inherently imperfect and involves mistakes; therefore, it is important to learn from both effective and ineffective decisions in order to weather the most challenging and uncertain periods (Harris, 2020).

Fifth, researchers have reasoned that an important school leader behavior during crisis is establishing a crisis leadership team, which is tasked with restoring the school to its previous balance (e.g. Williams et al., 2017). A successful crisis leadership team will develop practical and functional programs and constantly update them based on experience, research, and identification of weaknesses and imbalances, while ensuring the school community’s safety as fully as
possible. Such a team also assists in controlling the consequences of the crisis, by allocating the resources required to address them (Alawawdeh, 2016).

Sixth, studies show that, around the world, principals respond to crisis in a variety of context-dependent ways (e.g. Javed and Niazi, 2015; O’Connor and Takahashi, 2014; Virella, 2022). Geer and Coleman (2014) discussed the effects of the school’s context, particularly its location, distinguishing the functions of principals in rural schools from those in urban environments. “Context” may also be internal; for example, the level of trust between school leaders and staff has been found to impact how stakeholders cope with and manage the crisis (Sutherland, 2017). Following these reported areas of responding by school principals to situations of crisis, we next suggest eight guidelines for leading a pandemic crisis.

Eight guidelines for leading a pandemic crisis

Crises disrupt routine and introduce changes in schools’ day-to-day work. Therefore, preparing schools in general – and school principals in particular – to provide an effective response in crisis situations is of great importance. Based on the literature examining school leadership in diverse situations of crisis, we next provide eight guidelines for principals’ leadership during the crisis of dealing with a global pandemic. Although interrelated, these leadership guidelines are organized within three major clusters: (a) Promoting care, collaboration, and resilience among school stakeholders; (b) Managing organizational and information resources; and (C) Developing agile and holistic management.

Promoting care, collaboration, and resilience Among school stakeholders

1. Providing Support for and Genuine Interest in the Inner World of the Students, Staff, and Community.

The first recommended guideline for leading a pandemic crisis is for principals to be familiar with the individual needs of their students and their educational staff posed by the crisis. Principals need to understand how the pandemic is affecting the mental-emotional states of students, staff, and parents. For example, among staff, reduced mental well-being and greater anxiety and depression due to Covid-19 could stem from teachers’ possible loneliness because of social distancing or insecurity about digital literacy. Likewise, the financial strains due to lockdowns and economic instability may cause fear, stress, and insecurity among parents (Anderson et al., 2020). Many studies point to the importance of school leaders’ provision of support during a crisis, delivered through their care and attention to the social, emotional, and psychological states of students, teachers, and the school community (Bishop et al., 2015; Brown, 2018; Fletcher and Nicholas, 2016; LaRoe and Corrales, 2019; Mutch, 2018; O’Connor and Takahashi, 2014). Furthermore, school leaders’ expression of empathy to students and staff as well as provision of resources and policies to support their emotional and health needs have been indicated as important both during and after the crisis (Goswick et al., 2018; LaRoe and Corrales, 2019).

Principals’ attention and care are reflected in attempts to identify staff members’ signs of distress and to create opportunities for them to discuss their hardships in a safe space (Fletcher and Nicholas, 2016; Geer and Coleman, 2014; Mutch, 2014). Preparation of screening and training programs, which enable staff to notice students and colleagues who need emotional-social support in the work-home interface, is vital during crisis periods (Fletcher and Nicholas, 2016; Goswick et al., 2018). In this context, support may consist of providing financial and social aid for families in distress to enable them to equip their children with technological devices, financial assistance to families in which the parents lost their jobs due to the crisis, etc. Thus, during crisis, principals can expand the circles of support and attentiveness to students’ families and the school community in order to address economic, social, and emotional needs (Kaul et al., 2020; Stone-Johnson and Weiner, 2020). Principals’ ability to be empathetic, accessible, and attentive to students, teachers, and the wider community is crucial for the school’s functioning in crisis periods.

2. Fostering Collaborations Between Students, Teachers, Parents, the Community, and Social Bodies.

The second recommended guideline for leading a pandemic crisis is for principals to create collaborations between stakeholders within the school and beyond (LaRoe and Corrales, 2019; O’Connor and Takahashi, 2014). Research shows that school stakeholders’ cooperation and joint decision-making enable them to shape better action systems for the educational staff, the students, and their families (Sutherland, 2017). Collaborations among stakeholders within the school are based on the organization’s internal learning abilities. To navigate organizational learning to meet contemporary needs, a community is formed in the school based on the mapping of staff members’ strengths, in which teachers teach each other and share their areas of expertise (Stone-Johnson and Weiner, 2020). For example, during the global pandemic, school leaders may formalize these internal collaborations by establishing organizational mechanisms like a dedicated crisis leadership team, which has been recommended for effective crisis management (Alawawdeh, 2016; Williams et al., 2017).

Likewise, collaborations with service providers from outside the school are beneficial during crisis. Howat et al. (2012) observed that in hurricane-impacted schools, principals forged collaborations with external agencies to obtain services, counseling, and even financial resources. Relationships may be established not only with official external institutions and local governmental authorities but also with private or philanthropic organizations to obtain information and resources, such as technological infrastructure.
3. Building Resilience Among Students, Teachers, and Principals. The third recommended guideline for leading a pandemic crisis is for principals themselves to exhibit personal resilience while also building up resilience in the educational staff and students. Resilience is the ability to “bounce back” to the pre-crisis state, recover from negative situations or experiences, and overcome them to regain well-being and a sense of satisfaction (Yehuda et al., 2013). Despite a variety of disciplinary definitions of resilience, most refer to the possibility of recovering from a crisis, returning to the former state, adapting to change, embracing and implementing change, overcoming obstacles, bearing difficulty and discomfort, and facing up to challenges (Southwick et al., 2014). Research shows that principals with high resilience have a strong ability to recover from stress and crisis and are more effective leaders (Fletcher and Nicholas, 2016; Geer and Coleman, 2014). The parallel processes here are important: School principals not only endeavor to stand firm in the face of crisis themselves but also invest in building the collective-organizational resilience of their school and its stakeholders, namely students, staff, parents, and community (Urick et al., 2021).

Managing organizational and information resources

4. Preserving and Utilizing Existing Resources, While Developing and Creating New Learning-Working Processes. The fourth recommended guideline for leading a pandemic crisis is for principals to flexibly maintain a balance between preserving the school’s existing capabilities on the one hand and innovating/developing as needed to cope with the new challenges elicited by the crisis on the other hand. Preservation refers to the utilization of the organization’s current capacities and known operating patterns, to maintain stability and familiarity at times of stressful change. Innovation, improvement, and development refer to thinking outside the normal courses of action and obtaining new information from external sources, including the adoption of novel approaches. Finding this balance in the case of the Covid-19 pandemic may imply the need for principals to rely on teachers’ known pedagogical capabilities while also developing new high-level digital and online pedagogies, as well as developing novel ways for teachers to help parents effectively support their children’s distance learning. Likewise, principals may call on the existing expertise of school counselors/psychologists to help disseminate new concrete tools to help teachers perform wellness checks for students at home during periods of distance learning.

By trial-and-error in the uncertain space, principals can create an infrastructure for maintaining continuity of work and leveraging existing school programs in a way that the teaching staff can continue to perform (i.e. preservation), while also flexibly adjusting pedagogical modes (i.e. innovation) to diverse students who are now physically learning outside the school in different geographical regions (Harris and Jones, 2020). Studies have highlighted principals’ central role in pairing improvement and preservation during times of uncertainty – an ability that is highly effective in driving innovation in times of change and crisis (Schechter and Shaked, 2019; Bingham and Burch, 2019). Recent research conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic (e.g. in Germany, UK), showed that the schools whose principals quickly and flexibly combined preservation and utilization of existing capabilities, together with locating and experimenting related to new capabilities, were those who succeeded to innovate (Beauchamp et al., 2021; Harris and Jones, 2020).

5. Developing Effective Information Communication Channels. The fifth recommended guideline for leading a pandemic crisis is for principals to create clear communication channels with their educational staff and with the parents (Goswick et al., 2018; Lambiase and English, 2021; LaRoe and Corrales, 2019; Sutherland, 2017). Especially during a crisis, two-way communication channels (e.g. principal-staff, principal-parent) are of particular importance to enable school leaders to dispel rumors, point out misinformation, and help build trust between the various stakeholders (Geer and Coleman, 2014; Sutherland, 2017). Gathering information, including inaccurate and incomplete information, and making sense of it, individually and collectively, requires high-functioning communication channels (Bishop et al., 2015). The need for highly effective communication is paramount during Covid-19 pandemic due to the potential impact of misconceptions, rumors, and disinformation on stakeholders’ compliance with official health guidelines and school policies.

Developing Agile and holistic management

6. “We Are All Principals Today” – Promoting Diverse and Distributed Leadership. The sixth recommended guideline for leading a pandemic crisis is for principals to implement decentralized and distributed leadership. Meeting the intense and diverse demands and expertise required during a crisis necessitates decentralization of tasks and roles among a variety of the organization’s members (Harris and Jones, 2020). Distributed leadership requires teamwork to gauge various members’ expertise and skills relevant for the new situation, encompassing a body of knowledge that may be distinct from the expertise existing among the organization’s formal officers (Bishop et al., 2015; Brown, 2018; Fletcher and Nicholas, 2016; Geer and Coleman, 2014; Goswick et al., 2018; Mutch, 2018). Access to this knowledge requires flexible organizational learning processes, which enable diverse staff members to present their views and expertise. An open and attentive learning culture may help principals overcome the new crisis-imposed obstacles and refine the needed expertise from a range of team members (Harris and Jones, 2020; Rogers and Sabarwal, 2020). For example, the principal may create a “thinking room” for the staff, in which simulations of various scenarios are conducted, allowing freedom of expression without fear of possible consequences. Such scenarios may include students’ loneliness because of social distancing, teacher burnout due to staffing shortages, various work-family conflicts, frustration
in the face of constantly changing policies for quarantining and screening testing, addressing students’ and parents’ concerns and disagreements about vaccination, and anxiety about one’s own or significant others’ Covid-19 illness.

7. Developing Systemic Thinking Leadership. The seventh recommended guideline for leading a pandemic crisis is for principals to utilize systemic thinking, which is the ability to see the whole beyond the sum of its parts, and to see the parts in the context of the whole (Schechter and Shaked, 2017). Principals whose thinking is systemic typically have a long-term vision and the ability to manage complexity (Schechter and Shaked, 2017), especially under conditions of uncertainty like those characterizing crisis periods. In other words, this type of thinking can promote principals’ grasp of the diverse components comprising the unfamiliar, uncertain managerial space of the new crisis, while “connecting the dots” to understand components’ interactions and broad effects. Principals noted that the remote school management that typified much of the Covid-19 crisis period hindered their ability to “control” processes taking place in the digital space, especially in virtual classrooms (Authors, 2021). Unlike reductionist thinking, which focuses on control and division of labor, systemic thinking allows for a holistic vision, which may aid in coping with remote management.

8. Focusing on Enabling and Flexible Bureaucracy. The eighth and last recommended guideline for leading a pandemic crisis is for principals to reduce formal bureaucracy – the system of rules and regulations that serves the school’s routine hierarchy with the aim of ensuring schools’ and teachers’ compliance. Instead, during a crisis, school leaders may wish to focus on “enabling bureaucracy” – where the hierarchy and rules are support mechanisms for teachers and the regulations serve to solve acute problems (Authors, 2021). An enabling bureaucracy encourages initiative, good communication, innovation, and efficiency (Hoy and Miskel, 2006). That is, during a crisis, principals may trim down the traditional evaluation and control routine, shifting toward more flexible management that can enable schools to develop rapid response mechanisms that are better adapted to the complex and uncertain reality (Beauchamp et al., 2021). For example, during the pandemic, principals who espoused an enabling bureaucracy reported that they postponed handling monthly pedagogical portfolios by teachers, while focusing on supporting meetings to hear staff members’ and students’ personal needs and concerns (Authors, 2021).

Research and practical explorations

Drawing from prior literature on school leadership in various crisis situations, we examined applications to the global Covid-19 pandemic, aiming to contribute to the knowledge and professional practice of school leaders who may struggle while making sense of their own crisis leadership. The current recommended guidelines call for future empirical validation, as the pandemic unfolds.

Specifically, we acknowledge several issues that this paper could not address. First, crisis management refers to vigilance in anticipating crisis precursors; management, coordination, and organization during the crisis; and supervision of post-crisis processes (Chafjiri and Mahmoudabadi, 2018). Grissem and Condon (2021) outlined the following crisis management phases: mitigation/prevention, preparedness, response, recovery, and learning. Further research would do well to examine how the pandemic leadership guidelines outlined above come into play across the major phases of crisis management. Such inquiry could investigate the dynamics, relations, and temporalities between crisis management and crisis leadership to assess how these constructs may interrelate conceptually and practically in the context of the global pandemic.

For example, it may be that at the mitigation and prevention phases, it is important for principals to prepare for global health crises methodically, in order to maximally reduce potential damage, while at the response, recovery, and learning phases during the ensuing periods of instability and uncertainty, principals may even promote the organization’s further development (Bilgin and Oznazar, 2017). In other words, despite the relatively short-term focus characterizing times of crisis – with the goal of minimizing damage to individuals, the organization, and the community – principals can also view a sustained health crisis period as a unique opportunity for introducing long-term changes that had been previously met with avoidance or resistance in the school. Thus, principals can view the new uncertain environment of the pandemic as a possible catalyst for driving long-term organizational processes, such as initiatives to move some classes to distance learning that were formerly stalled.

Crisis affect diverse communities differently, requiring leadership responses to critical localized needs. Hence, at the wider socio-cultural and political level, school leaders need to consider how and to what extent the global pandemic is influenced and managed by governments and national organizations. Policy changes during a crisis may exacerbate global health and economic inequalities. For example, in the U.S., where schools are a central part in students’ social safety net, principals had to ensure that schools continued to provide essential services such as food for students (and their families) during the Covid-19 lockdowns. In other, more generous welfare regimes (i.e. Scandinavia), schools are not responsible for addressing hunger and poverty. Similarly, Covid-19 lockdowns have exposed the already-existing digital divides and socioeconomic inequalities between countries (UNESCO, 2021). Schools in low- and lower-middle-income countries are still struggling to sustain student learning and deliver quality remote learning programs due to limitations of facilities, technological infrastructure, and additional resources (Khlaif and Salha, 2020). Thus, the guidelines suggested here should be extended to discuss how social, national, and economic contexts shape crisis leadership. As the pandemic crisis continues to evolve, empirical research is needed on how crisis leadership is enacted and understood across a range of international contexts and cultures and
over longer periods of time (Strieple & Cunningham, in press).

Moreover, inasmuch as crisis is content-specific, it is important to compare and contrast school leadership in the current global pandemic with other crises such as terrorist attacks, local natural disasters, or school shootings. Although both types of crisis have direct implications for school stakeholders’ behavior, the pandemic requires principals to lead a sustained period of epidemiological uncertainty, whereas self-contained acts of violence and natural disasters require much shorter leadership adaptations. Finally, future research should examine principals’ possible variation in applying the eight pandemic crisis leadership guidelines in diverse contexts such as urban versus rural schools (Virella, 2022) or schools with varying levels of principal-staff trust (Sutherland, 2017).

Overall, at a practical level, school leaders come to their job without sufficient preservice or inservice preparation for leading their school in uncertain and turbulent times (Grissom and Condon, 2021). Thus, we recommend that crisis leadership be implemented as a core component of national standards for educational leadership, to be incorporated into leaders’ preparation and professional experiences.

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