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Post-COVID educational leadership: Emerging models and styles for a new era

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Abstract

Modern educational leadership is a cornerstone of institutional effectiveness, requiring a compelling vision, clear goals, and strategic planning. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted education systems worldwide, exposing significant weaknesses in leadership models and crisis preparedness. Many institutions struggled to adopt effective strategies to address the challenges of sudden shifts in teaching modalities, technological demands, and stakeholder concerns. While crisis management has been widely studied in other contexts, there is a distinct lack of empirical research focusing on educational leadership during crises. This study aims to bridge that gap by employing the PRISMA methodology to systematically review scholarly articles published between 2019 and 2022. It explores the challenges faced by educational leaders, the crisis management strategies implemented, and the personality traits that contributed to effective leadership during this disruptive period. By synthesizing these findings, the study highlights critical lessons in leadership and crisis management, offering practical recommendations for fostering resilience and adaptability in educational institutions to face future challenges.

Keywords: COVID-19 Impact on education, Crisis management, Educational leadership, Leadership Strategies, PRISMA Methodology.

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1. Introduction

When it came to the worldwide health crisis, most individuals were unprepared for the onset of COVID-19 since it was entirely unfamiliar to them [1]. It affected a lot of societal issues, including people's opinions, habits, and capacity to manage work and personal obligations. Out of all these socio-economic activities, the education system took most of the burden [2]. The decision of whether to keep offering on-campus face-to-face instruction or temporarily halt it presented a serious challenge to the administration and leadership of educational institutions [3]. When COVID-19 first emerged, universities, especially those in developing nations, mostly used in-person instruction to provide education. In flipped

classroom settings and the heuristic teaching approach, technology was used sparingly and carefully [4].

The lockdown was imposed in developing nations for specified periods that were then regularly extended [5]. With very few exceptions, colleges first decided to use whatever tools they could find to continue teaching, including homework, online courses, and audio/video recording devices. Universities have embraced online learning over time and have modified their curricula, pedagogies, and evaluation procedures accordingly [6]. They did, however, face strong opposition from the parents and students, especially when it came to the caliber of the lecture delivery techniques [7].

In this regard, leadership has been pointed out as central to crisis and as requiring adaptive and transformative modes of leadership [7]. Thus, in the context of schools, leadership becomes essential not only for the tangible intervention in the situation but for the subsequent restoration process as well [8]. Moreover, the literature shows how crisis management is both related to and influenced by contexts such as socio-cultural, economic, and political contexts of school operations. Thus, this research seeks to identify the moderating role of contextual factors on crisis management initiatives and leadership actions in schools. There is evidence from the literature in the context of the recovery phase that points out that modifications and shifts in post-crisis transformation must be strategic and involve several stakeholders including educators, administrators, parents, and policymakers. Thus, contributing to the trends identified above, the purpose of this systematic review is to provide a comprehensive overview of crisis management and school leadership in disruptive times, with a particular focus on the recovery of educational institutions in the post-COVID-19 era. By critically examining existing studies, we aim to inform and guide future research, policy development, and practical interventions to ensure the resilience and adaptability of educational institutions in the face of unforeseen challenges.

2. Methodology

2.1. Study Protocol

This systematic review of available literature was conducted according to the PRISMA guidelines (Preferred Reporting Items for Systemic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) [9].

2.2. Studies Selection

This systematic review aimed to summarize scientific evidence of post-COVID-19 educational leadership. The central question guiding this review was: What are the emerging models for post-COVID educational leadership? During the identification of the articles, duplicates were removed by exporting them to EndNote Basic (ENDNOTE, 2015). Subsequently, the studies were chosen in two stages. Reviewer 1 evaluated titles and abstracts in duplicate, separately, throughout phase 1 to find studies that qualified.

However, the reviewers gave their approval before any research was chosen. When necessary, a second reviewer was invited in to help resolve any disagreements through group discussion. Therefore, abstracts and titles mentioning two things were considered acceptable: Adams [1] the educational leadership model; and Ahmad, et al. [2] in the post-COVID era. To determine whether the publications had the relevant data for the systematic review, the articles were fully examined during the second evaluation step. We considered the following inclusion & exclusion criteria:

2.3. Inclusion Criteria

- Studies published from 2020 onwards, to ensure the focus is on post-COVID studies. Studies published in the English language.
- Studies specifically focus on educational leadership models and styles that emerged or evolved due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Peer-reviewed journal articles, conference papers, and reputable reports from educational organisations.
- Studies from diverse geographical regions provide a global perspective on post-COVID educational leadership.

2.4. Exclusion Criteria

- Research conducted before 2020 does not address changes or developments influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Articles not written in English, to maintain consistency in language and accessibility.
- Studies that do not specifically address educational leadership models or styles, such as those focusing solely on student outcomes or unrelated educational policies.
- Case reports, systematic reviews and blogs will not be included.
- Duplicate studies or those with substantially similar findings to ensure a wide range of insights and avoid repetitive content.

A Microsoft® Excel Spreadsheet was used to extract and store data and records (Microsoft, Inc., Redmond, Wash., USA).

2.5. Search Strategy

A systematic search was done for the relevant literature on the following four databases to retrieve relevant studies: Scopus: ("Post-COVID" OR "Post-pandemic") AND ("Educational Leadership" OR "Leadership in Education" OR "Educational Administration") AND ("Emerging Models" OR "New Styles" OR "Innovative Approaches"), Web of Science: TS= ("Post-COVID" OR "Post-pandemic") AND TS= ("Educational Leadership" OR "Leadership in Education" OR "Educational Administration") AND TS= ("Emerging Models" OR "New Styles" OR "Innovative Approaches"), Google Scholar: "Post-COVID" OR "Post-pandemic" AND "Educational Leadership" OR "Leadership in Education" OR

"Educational Administration" AND "Emerging Models" OR "New Styles" OR "Innovative Approaches", JSTOR: ("Post-COVID" OR "Post-pandemic") AND ("Educational Leadership" OR "Leadership in Education" OR "Educational Administration") AND ("Emerging Models" OR "New Styles" OR "Innovative Approaches"), ("Post-COVID" OR "Post-pandemic") AND ("Educational Leadership" OR "Leadership in Education" OR "Educational Administration") AND ("Emerging Models" OR "New Styles" OR "Innovative Approaches"), Cochrane Library: ("Post-COVID" OR "Post-Pandemic") AND ("Educational Leadership" OR "Leadership in Education" OR "Educational Administration") AND ("Emerging Models" OR "New Styles" OR "Innovative Approaches"). Databases were also searched for published systematic reviews or ongoing systematic reviews on the same topic. Relevant studies were retrieved and stored on ENDNOTE to discard the repeated results.

2.6. Data Collection

Data was extracted by the same reviewer from the chosen articles. Title, authors, source, methodology, sample size, educational context, and country of study were noted for each included study.

2.7. Assessment of Risk Bias

Data extractions were conducted using a standard form, and the full-text articles were assessed according to the New Ottawa scale (NOS) criteria. Publications were given scores on a low, medium, or high scale as a methodological quality indicator based on several variables such as reporting bias, performance, and selection. The inclusion and randomisation criterion descriptions were used to score preference for selection. Allocation concealment and descriptions of a control arm were taken into consideration when evaluating performance bias. Biased reporting, industrial sponsorship, partial data management, and selective reporting received different rankings. During several teleconferences, the topics of eligibility limitations and reporting uniformity were covered. A second author considered gaps in the reviewers' scores before selecting a study.

3. Results

3.1. Search Results

Six different databases (Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, JSTOR, EconLit., and Cochrane Library) were searched to collect articles [2, 7]. A total of 723 studies were retrieved and entered the EndNote software [10] in which 493 duplicates were removed. A total of 230 studies were screened according to PRISMA guidelines [11] of which 159 studies were excluded because these studies were not relevant to our topic. Seventy-one different studies were sought for retrieval, of which 27 were not retrieved. A total of 44 studies were assessed for eligibility, of which 2 studies were excluded because these were in-progress studies and did not provide complete data. In the end, a total of 42 studies were included in this study.

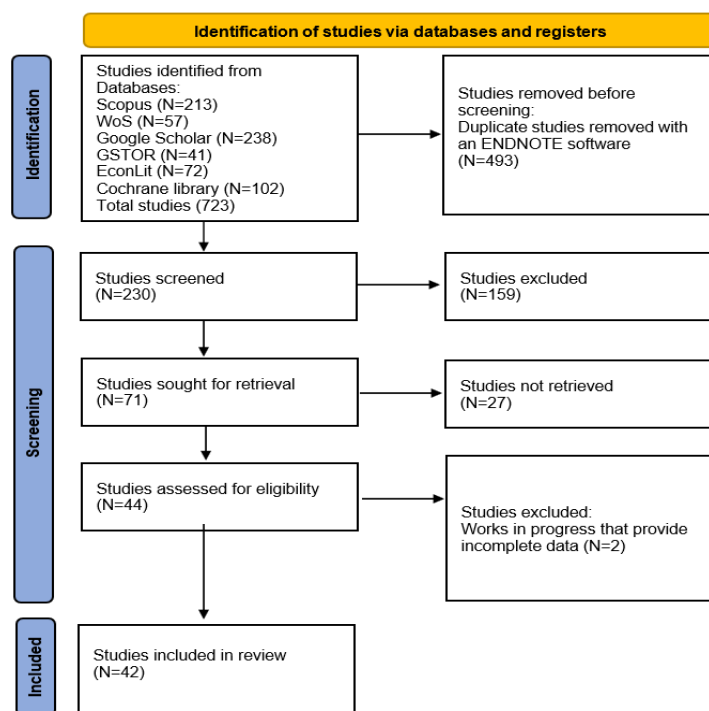


Figure 1.
Included studies flow chart according to PRISMA guidelines.

3.2. Risk of Assessment Bias

The methodological quality of the included studies was assessed using the New Ottawa Scale (NOS) criteria [12, 13]. The results of the risk assessment bias are presented in Table 1A. Most studies scored low for performance and selection

bias but achieved high scores for reporting consistency [14, 15]. Randomization was explicitly stated in 85% of the studies, while 65% demonstrated adequate allocation concealment. Industrial sponsorship bias was identified in 5 studies, highlighting a potential limitation [5, 7].

Table 1A.

Risk of bias assessment in the studies included in the systematic review using the Newcastle - Ottawa scale for case-control studies.

Study	Selection				Comparability	Exposure		
	1.	2.	3.	4.	1.	1.	2.	3.
(11)	★	★			★★	★		★
(12)	★	★			★	★	★	
(13)	★	★				★	★	★
(14)	★	★	★		★★	★	★	★
(15)	★	★			★★	★	★	★
(16)	★	★			★	★	★	★
(17)	★	★			★★		★	★
(18)	★	★		★	★★	★	★	★
(19)	★	★	★		★		★	★
(20)	★	★			★★	★	★	★
(21)	★	★					★	
(22)	★	★				★	★	★
(23)	★	★	★		★★	★	★	★
(24)	★	★	★		★	★	★	
(25)	★	★				★	★	
(26)	★	★			★★	★	★	★
(27)	★	★			★	★	★	★
(28)	★	★		★		★	★	★
(29)	★	★	★		★★	★	★	★
(30)	★	★			★★	★	★	★
(31)	★	★		★	★	★	★	★
(32)	★	★				★	★	★
(33)	★	★	★			★	★	★
(34)	★	★	★			★	★	★
(35)	★	★				★	★	★
(36)	★	★			★★	★	★	★
(37)	★	★			★	★	★	★
(8)	★	★		★			★	★
(38)	★	★	★		★★		★	★
(39)	★	★			★★		★	★
(40)	★	★		★	★		★	★
(41)	★	★			★★	★	★	★
(42)	★	★	★		★★	★	★	★
(43)	★	★	★		★★	★	★	★
(44)	★	★			★		★	
(45, 46)	★	★			★	★	★	★
(46)	★	★			★★		★	★
(47)	★	★	★		★★	★	★	
(48)	★	★			★★	★		
(49)	★	★		★	★	★	★	
(50)	★	★			★★	★	★	
(51)	★	★	★		★		★	★

Source: Rating scale: 7 to 9 stars = low risk of bias; 4 to 6 stars = moderate risk of bias; 0 to 3 stars = high risk of bias.

3.3. Characteristics of Included Studies

The included studies represented diverse methodologies, including qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches. These studies explored various educational contexts across multiple geographical regions [3, 16]. The sample sizes ranged from small cohorts of 10 participants to large-scale studies with thousands of participants [2, 17]. Furthermore, the studies covered a wide range of educational settings, including primary schools, secondary schools, and higher education institutions [18]. Many of the included studies highlighted unique challenges and strategies within their respective educational contexts. The detailed characteristics of these studies are summarised in Table 1B.

Table 1B.

Characteristics of studies included in this review.

No	Study Citation	Study Type	Methodology of the study	Sample Size	The study was based on	Country of the study
1.	(11)	Journal article	Qualitative study and was based on a questionnaire-based survey	32 school principals	Higher secondary education	Malaysia
2.	(12)	Journal article	Qualitative study and was based on a questionnaire-based survey	316 school principals	Secondary and primary education	Sweden
3.	(13)	Journal article	Qualitative study and was based on a questionnaire-based survey	57 school principals	Secondary and primary education	Philippines
4.	(14)	Journal article	Qualitative study and was using a multiple-case design based on rigorous interviews	Not mentioned	Secondary, primary, and higher education	United States and India
5.	(15)	Journal article	Small-scale qualitative study and was based on interviews	12 school principals	Secondary and primary education	United Kingdom
6.	(16)	Journal article	Implementation of qualitative study and was based on SWOT analysis and interviews	7 school leaders	Only primary education	Jamaica
7.	(17)	Dissertation	Exploratory qualitative case study and was based on interviews	12 school principals	Only secondary education	United state
8.	(18)	Dissertation	Qualitative study and was based on electronic survey questionnaire and structured interviews	15 (questionnaire) 10 school principals (interview)	Secondary and primary education	United state
9.	(19)	Dissertation	Qualitative phenomenological study and was based on interviews	11 International School Heads (ISH)	English-medium NGO international schools	around the globe
10.	(20)	Journal article	Qualitative research projects and were based on interviews	66 school principals	Only primary education	United Kingdom
11.	(21)	Journal article	Qualitative case study and was based on interviews	30 K-12 leaders	primary education	United state

12.	(22)	Journal article	Phenomenological qualitative study and was based on interviews	12 school principals	primary education	Philippines
13.	(23)	Journal article	Qualitative study based on a survey questionnaire	93 teachers and 5 school principals	Secondary and primary education	North Cyprus
14.	(24)	Journal article	Qualitative case study and was based on interviews	11 school principals	primary education	Canada
15.	(25)	Dissertation	Qualitative study and was based on semi-structured interviews	11 school principals	primary education	United state
16.	(26)	Journal article	Qualitative case study and was based on semi-structured interviews	8 superintendents	public mainstream education	United state
17.	(27)	Dissertation	Phenomenological qualitative study and was based on interviews	4 high school principals	Only secondary education	United state
18.	(28)	Journal article	Quantitative study and was based on a survey questionnaire	27 school principals	Only secondary education	Philippines
19.	(29)	Journal article	Phenomenological qualitative study and was based on interviews	93 school principals	Secondary and primary education	Turkey
20.	(30)	Journal article	Qualitative study and was based on project management reports and interviews	6 school principals	Only secondary education	Italy
21.	(31)	Journal article	Phenomenological qualitative study and was based on semi-structured interviews	17 teachers and 2 school principals	Only primary education	Indonesia
22.	(32)	Journal article	Qualitative study was based on interviews	10 school principals	Secondary and primary education	United state
	(33)		Qualitative study and was	11 school	Secondary and	

23.		Journal article	based on interviews	principals and 2 faculty heads	primary education	around the globe
24.	(34)	Journal article	Qualitative case study and was based on semi-structured interviews	15 school principals	Secondary and primary education	Turkey
25.	(35)	Journal article	Qualitative case study and was based on semi-structured interviews	2 school principals and 8 teachers	Only special education	Japan
26.	(36)	Journal article	Qualitative study and was based on interviews	15 school principals	Only primary education	Norway
27.	(37)	Journal article	Qualitative study and was based on semi-structured interviews and survey questionnaires	10 school principals	Only secondary education	S. Africa
28.	(8)	Journal article	Qualitative study and was based on semi-structured interviews	55 school principals from 43 schools organisations around the world	Only secondary education	International Schools, United States and China
29.	(38)	Dissertation	Qualitative study and was based on semi-structured interviews	9 school principals	Secondary and primary education	around the globe
30.	(39)	Journal article	Qualitative study and was based on semi-structured interviews	8 school principals	Secondary and primary education	India
31.	(40)	Journal article	Qualitative study and was based semi-structured interviews and note-taking	Not mentioned	Secondary and primary education	Philippines
32.	(41)	Journal article	Pilot qualitative study and was based semi-structured interviews	17 school principals	Only secondary education	Canada
33.	(42)	Journal article	Quantitative study and was based on a survey questionnaire	204 school principals	Only primary education	Spain
34.	(43)	Dissertation	Quantitative study and was based on autobiographical data from case studies	4 school principals	Primary and secondary education	United state

35.	(44)	Dissertation	The qualitative multi-case study was based on a survey questionnaire and interviews	6 school principals	vate primary education	United state
36.	(45)	Journal article	Qualitative study was based on structured interviews	9 school principals	secondary and primary education	United state
37.	(46)	Journal article	Qualitative study and was based on interviews	5000 school principals working in special education	Only special education	Canada
38.	(47)	Journal article	A qualitative study and was based on a questionnaire with open-ended questions	57 school principals	Primary and secondary education	Greece
39.	(48)	Journal article	Qualitative study was based on interviews	18 school principals	secondary education	New-Zeland
40.	(49)	Journal article	Quantitative study and was based on a survey questionnaire	30 school principals	K-12 education	United state
41.	(50)	Journal article	Mixed methods study and was based on a survey questionnaire with closed and open-ended questions	251 school principals, heads, and managers	Primary and secondary education	Austria
42.	(51)	Journal article	Case study	1 school principal	Secondary education	United State

4. Discussion

Out of the 42 studies included in this review, 21 (or 50%) provide evidence regarding the major challenges faced by school leaders during the COVID-19 era that require prioritization and an immediate response to ensure the continued provision of educational services and to lead effectively. The issues that have been identified are divided into three main categories: (a) logistical difficulties brought on by a lack of technical tools, infrastructure, funding, and effective planning in schools that make it difficult for administrators to assess the true impact of the pandemic on day-to-day operations by handling conflicting information and implementing a successful response plan: The challenges that school leaders face is divided into two categories:

(b) academic, which are related to the difficulties they face in helping staff and students adjust to emergency remote online learning. These challenges include cognitive and emotional support, guidance on online teaching practices, help with technical issues, and morale-boosting during the transition. (c) Organisational, which are related to the difficulties school leaders face in ensuring a positive school climate by protecting the physical and psychological safety of all school members and involving all stakeholders in the common effort.

The quick switch to remote online learning that school communities were forced to make in response to COVID-19's stringent regulations regarding social distancing and self-isolation exposed several equipment and technical infrastructure shortcomings that seriously hampered the ability of school administrators to plan and coordinate the continuous delivery of educational services to all students worldwide. School principals reported in studies by [Adams \[1\]](#) and [Neelakantan, et al. \[19\]](#) that a lack of technological tools to support students' learning made it more difficult for them to find ways to ensure that teaching and learning continued remotely and satisfactorily. However, their efforts were not entirely successful, as only a small percentage of these principals went above and beyond to encourage their teachers to create better online content and to use different communication platforms when appropriate.

Similar findings were found in two related studies that were conducted in the educational contexts of Turkey [\[15\]](#) and the USA [\[7\]](#) respectively. In the former case, school leaders elaborated on the technical challenges they faced in the following areas: using virtual online learning platforms for instruction and communication, as well as managing them; in the second, they discussed the quality of the internet infrastructure in schools and mentioned challenges related to Wi-fi connectivity and bandwidth shortages in households with multiple students.

In [Varela and Fedynich \[16\]](#) where 63% of US school principals identified as major factors that complicated the instructional experience during the COVID-19 period, the lack of technological resources, coupled with a dearth of online education training for teachers and a preponderance of student inequities, underscored the critical role of technological infrastructure for the successful execution of online learning practices all through the pandemic period.

Insufficient financing has been identified as a significant barrier to effective crisis leadership in schools across the globe during the COVID-19 pandemic. As demonstrated in [Spyropoulou and Koutroukis \[15\]](#) the main cause of secondary school administrators' increased resourcefulness and search for alternate sources of funding to provide staff training on online platform usage and socio-emotional planning in the context of online learning was a lack of funding. Principals running schools in the financially impoverished Philippines have expressed to us their agony over not having enough money to invest in smooth school operations procedures and the acquisition of the required technological infrastructure. This is well illustrated by [Guardiola \[20\]](#). Greek principals who participated in the study cited the lack of administrative and financial autonomy of schools as a significant barrier that prevented the adoption of a more effective crisis management approach [\[4\]](#). This was demonstrated by issues with improperly sized classrooms, inadequate building maintenance, outdated technology and supplies, or even a shortage of auxiliary staff. In two surveys, administrators of private schools also reported significant financial difficulties, which they attributed mostly to a decline in revenue from COVID-19 fees and donations to the school, the student cafeteria, and parking lot charges [\[21\]](#). This had a significant influence on the decisions made by school administrators on how to continue operating the institution, including salary reductions and staff layoffs that resulted in a decline in morale among professionals [\[22\]](#).

In the early stages of the pandemic, ambiguity, contradiction, hypervigilance, and crisis planning became daily challenges that required multitasking and the principals' readiness to respond to and filter newly incoming information, to adapt their leadership practices accordingly, and to respond to changing orders and directives supplied to the media via central platforms without providing any prior notice to schools [\[9\]](#). School principals who participated in the study attested to the overwhelming and difficult situational ambiguity surrounding the pandemic period, which forced principals to adopt more directive leadership styles in place of their more traditional ones [\[23\]](#). This was because the situation called for immediate action, planning, decision-making, and foresight across several domains. In the early stages of the pandemic, ambiguity, contradiction, hypervigilance, and crisis planning became daily challenges that required multitasking and the principals' readiness to respond to and filter newly incoming data, to adapt their methods of leadership accordingly, and respond to changing orders and directives supplied to the media via central platforms without providing any prior notice to schools. School principals who participated in the study attested to the overwhelming and difficult situational ambiguity surrounding the pandemic period, which forced principals to adopt more directive leadership styles in place of their more traditional ones. This was because the situation called for immediate action, planning, decision-making, and foresight across several domains (41).

Establishing and upholding safety protocols within educational institutions to safeguard the physical well-being of all parties involved proved to be an extraordinarily challenging task for school administrators, who frequently had to adjust the schedule and the school's established routine to organise their units by pre-established health protocols and contingency plans. According to [Fletcher and Nicholas \[8\]](#) the way that school classes are run—including the inclusion of breaks, extended teaching hours, a rise in teachers' on-call time while social distancing, student use of masks, and over-

sized classrooms—makes it more difficult to apply protocols effectively. This process frequently comes at the expense of education. Furthermore, the work of the administrators was made more difficult by the skepticism of certain parents and teachers regarding the containment measures and the existence of refusals to comply with them, which occasionally caused stress in these relationships [5].

5. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic affected the operations of educational institutions and interrupted normalcy in a way that unveiled and magnified the challenges of educational leadership. The present systematic review paper reviews 42 empirical works that capture the crisis leadership of school principals during the pandemic. Some of the hardest skills were the phenomena of insufficient infrastructure and technology, inadequate funding, and poor crisis readiness. The strategies for crisis leadership determined were the use of adaptive decision-making, ensuring safe and inviting schooling, building and enhancing resilience and collaboration in schooling, ensuring communication in schooling and addressing the socio-psychological concerns of the school community. These findings stress the need for a pragmatic approach for the improvement of crisis management skills together with the need for the enhancement of educational governance reforms.

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