



Enhancing Leadership Skills for Addressing Learning Loss and Mental Health Challenges: Insights from School Leaders in Low- and Middle-Income Countries

Dr. Elma S. Groenewald

CEO, SG Virtuosos International, Tran Phu Street, Loc Tho Ward, Nha Trang City, Khanh Hoa Province, Vietnam
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7813-2773> | elmasgroenewald@sgvirtuososinternational.com

Dr. Coenrad Adolph Groenewald

Consulting Director, SG Virtuosos International, Cape Town, South Africa
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2394-6347> | dolfgroenewald@sgvirtuososinternational.com

Dr. Francisca T. Uy

School President, ECT Excellencia Global Academy Foundation, Inc., Buanoy, Balamban, Cebu, Philippines
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2180-5874> | franzkc2015@gmail.com

Gaspar S. Cantere Jr.

SHS Teacher, Department of Education, Division of Misamis Oriental, Claveria, Misamis Oriental, Philippines
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8426-5326> | gaspar.cantere@deped.gov.ph

Osias Kit T. Kilag

Principal, PAU Excellencia Global Academy Foundation, Inc., Toledo City, Philippines
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0845-3373> | osiaskit@gmail.com

Janette C. Depoyart

Teacher III, Mahayag Elementary School, President Roxas Central District, Division of Cotabato, Philippines
<https://orcid.org/0009-0000-1137-4073> | janette.depoyart@deped.gov.ph

Abstract:

The systematic literature review explores the challenges faced by school leaders in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the strategies they employed to address them. It highlights the resilience and adaptability of school leaders in mitigating learning loss and supporting mental health within their school communities. Disparities in resource allocation and support are identified, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, underscoring the need for equitable access to resources and interventions. The review also emphasizes the significant impact of the pandemic on the mental health of students, teachers, parents, and school leaders, necessitating comprehensive mental health support initiatives within schools. Gender-specific differences in leadership approaches are observed, with female school leaders demonstrating a greater inclination towards providing targeted support. However, they also report higher stress levels, indicating the importance of gender-sensitive support mechanisms. The findings underscore the importance of supporting school leaders and prioritizing their well-being to foster resilience and ensure the continued provision of quality education in the post-pandemic era.

Keywords: school leaders, COVID-19 pandemic, challenges, resilience, adaptation, learning loss

Introduction:

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought unprecedented challenges to education systems worldwide, leading to widespread school closures and disruptions in learning. As schools gradually reopened, educational leaders faced the daunting task of addressing learning loss and supporting the mental health and well-being of students, teachers, and the broader school community. In low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), where resources are often limited, school leaders have been at the forefront of efforts to navigate these complex challenges (Anand, et al., 2023).

A survey conducted by Global School Leaders (GSL) in collaboration with 14 organizations provided valuable insights into the experiences and priorities of school leaders in LMICs ((Global School Leaders | Mobilizing School Leaders in the Global South, 2023). The Promoting Understanding of Leadership in Schools (PULS) Survey aimed to shed light on the challenges faced by school leaders, the strategies they developed to address these challenges, and key recommendations for policy and practice (Promoting Understanding of Leadership in Schools (PULS) Survey Report | Unesco IIEP Learning Portal, 2022).

The survey revealed that nearly a third of school leaders reported significant learning loss among students due to pandemic-induced school closures. This trend was particularly pronounced in government schools and in lower-middle and upper-middle-income countries. Despite the lack of government support, school leaders demonstrated



resilience and proactively implemented strategies to ensure students remained connected to learning. These strategies included offering remedial classes, collaborating with teachers to create specific plans, and leveraging technology to address learning loss.

Furthermore, the survey highlighted the significant challenges related to mental health and well-being faced by the school community. Over 60% of school leaders reported issues related to behavior, health, and mental well-being among students, with a similar proportion expressing concerns about the mental health of staff and teachers (Abrams, 2022). Despite resource constraints, school leaders developed innovative strategies to support mental health, including organizing counseling sessions, training teachers on mental health and well-being, and forming peer support groups.

Interestingly, the survey also revealed gender-specific differences in leadership approaches, with female school leaders demonstrating a greater focus on addressing learning loss and providing remedial classes to students in need. However, female leaders also reported higher stress levels compared to their male counterparts, underscoring the need for gender-sensitive support mechanisms (Graves, et al., 2021).

The findings of the PULS Survey underscore the critical role of school leaders in navigating the challenges posed by the pandemic and ensuring continuity in education. The insights gleaned from this study have important implications for policy and practice, emphasizing the need for robust support systems and capacity-building initiatives to enable school leaders to excel in their roles. As education systems continue to evolve in response to the ongoing challenges of the pandemic, further research is warranted to deepen our understanding of effective leadership strategies and their impact on education outcomes.

Literature Review:

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed unprecedented challenges to education systems worldwide, disrupting learning trajectories and exacerbating existing inequalities (UNESCO, 2020). As schools grappled with prolonged closures and transitioned to remote learning modalities, educational leaders emerged as key actors in navigating the complexities of the crisis (OECD, 2020). In low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), where resources are often scarce, the role of school leaders in addressing learning loss and supporting the mental health and well-being of students has been particularly vital (World Bank, 2021).

The impact of the pandemic on education has been profound, with UNESCO estimating that over 1.6 billion learners worldwide were affected by school closures at the peak of the crisis (UNESCO, 2020). The disruption to traditional modes of instruction has led to widespread learning loss, particularly among vulnerable populations in LMICs (World Bank, 2021). Research indicates that prolonged school closures have disproportionately affected students from low-income households, exacerbating pre-existing disparities in educational attainment (Chetty et al., 2020).

Role of School Leaders in Addressing Learning Loss

School leaders play a critical role in mitigating the impact of learning loss and ensuring continuity in education during times of crisis (Chatzipanagiotou & Katsarou, 2023). Studies have shown that effective leadership at the school level is associated with improved academic outcomes and greater resilience in the face of adversity (Leithwood et al., 2020). In LMICs, where educational resources are limited, the leadership practices of school principals and administrators can significantly influence the ability of schools to adapt and innovate in response to challenges (Fullan, 2015).

School leaders employ a variety of strategies to address learning loss and support student learning during periods of disruption (OECD, 2020). These may include offering remedial classes, implementing targeted interventions for struggling students, and leveraging technology to facilitate remote learning (UNESCO, 2021). Research suggests that personalized learning approaches, such as differentiated instruction and small-group tutoring, can be effective in addressing the diverse learning needs of students affected by school closures (Sánchez-Pérez, et al., 2021).

In addition to learning loss, the COVID-19 pandemic has had significant implications for the mental health and well-being of students, teachers, and school leaders (Wang et al., 2020). Studies have documented increased rates of anxiety, depression, and stress among school-aged children, as well as elevated levels of burnout and job-related stress among educators (Loades et al., 2020). The disruption to social connections and routines, coupled with heightened uncertainty and fear, has contributed to a mental health crisis within the education sector (Pfefferbaum & North, 2020).

Role of School Leaders in Supporting Mental Health

School leaders play a crucial role in promoting mental health and well-being within the school community (Greenberg et al., 2006). By creating a supportive and inclusive school environment, fostering positive relationships, and providing access to resources and services, leaders can help mitigate the negative effects of stress and adversity on students and staff (Sklad et al., 2012). Research suggests that schools that prioritize

mental health promotion and prevention are better equipped to address the diverse needs of their students and foster a culture of resilience and well-being (Weare & Nind, 2011).

Gender has been found to influence leadership approaches and priorities, with studies suggesting that female leaders may demonstrate greater empathy, collaboration, and relationship-building skills compared to their male counterparts (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Research in the context of education leadership has shown that female school leaders are more likely to prioritize student well-being and emotional support, while male leaders may focus more on administrative tasks and academic achievement (Petersen et al., 2020). Understanding these gender differences is essential for designing effective support mechanisms and professional development programs for school leaders (Li, 2016).

The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the critical role of school leaders in addressing the multifaceted challenges facing education systems worldwide. From mitigating learning loss to supporting mental health and well-being, educational leaders play a pivotal role in shaping the future of education in LMICs and beyond (Abella, et al., 2024). By leveraging evidence-based strategies, fostering collaboration, and promoting gender-responsive leadership practices, school leaders can help build more resilient and inclusive education systems that prioritize the needs of all learners.

Methodology:

A systematic literature review was conducted to synthesize existing research on the role of school leaders in addressing the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic in education, with a focus on learning loss and mental health support. The review followed established guidelines for conducting systematic literature reviews, including comprehensive search strategies, transparent selection criteria, and rigorous data extraction processes (Tricco et al., 2018).

A systematic search of electronic databases, including PubMed, ERIC, PsycINFO, and Web of Science, was conducted to identify relevant studies published between January 2020 and December 2022. The search strategy utilized a combination of keywords and Boolean operators, including terms related to "COVID-19," "school leadership," "learning loss," and "mental health." The search was supplemented by manual searches of reference lists and citation tracking to ensure comprehensive coverage of the literature.

Studies were included in the review if they met the following criteria: (1) focused on the role of school leaders in addressing challenges related to COVID-19 in education; (2) examined strategies for mitigating learning loss and supporting mental health and well-being; (3) employed qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods research designs; and (4) were published in peer-reviewed journals or academic repositories. Studies were excluded if they were not available in English or did not meet the specified criteria.

Two independent reviewers screened the titles and abstracts of identified studies to assess their eligibility for inclusion. Full-text articles were then retrieved and assessed against the inclusion criteria. Any discrepancies or disagreements were resolved through consensus or consultation with a third reviewer. The PRISMA flowchart was used to document the study selection process and provide transparency in reporting (Page et al., 2021).

Data extraction was performed using a standardized form to capture relevant information from included studies, including study characteristics, methodology, key findings, and implications for school leadership practice. The extracted data were synthesized using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes, patterns, and insights related to the role of school leaders in addressing learning loss and supporting mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The methodological quality of included studies was assessed using established criteria appropriate to the study design, such as the Newcastle-Ottawa Scale for observational studies or the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist for qualitative research. Studies were rated based on their risk of bias, methodological rigour, and relevance to the research questions.

Findings and Discussion:

Adaptive Strategies:

During the unprecedented challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, school leaders worldwide demonstrated remarkable resilience and adaptability in navigating the complexities of education. A systematic literature review revealed that these leaders employed a range of adaptive strategies to address the dual challenges of mitigating learning loss and supporting the mental health of students, teachers, and the broader school community (Andrin, et al., 2023).

One notable adaptive strategy adopted by school leaders was the implementation of remedial classes. These classes were tailored to provide targeted support to students who had experienced significant learning loss due to



pandemic-induced disruptions. By offering additional instructional time and personalized assistance, school leaders aimed to bridge the gaps in learning and ensure that no student was left behind (Chu et al., 2021).

Furthermore, school leaders collaborated closely with teachers to develop specific plans tailored to the unique needs of their students. This collaborative approach involved identifying areas of concern, setting learning objectives, and designing instructional strategies to address learning gaps effectively. By leveraging the expertise of teachers and fostering a culture of collaboration, school leaders empowered their teams to deliver high-quality education amidst challenging circumstances (Soipimai & Sanrattana, 2023).

In addition to traditional teaching methods, school leaders embraced technology as a powerful tool for enhancing learning outcomes. By leveraging digital platforms and educational resources, they facilitated remote learning, interactive lessons, and virtual classrooms. Technology-enabled learning not only provided students with access to educational content but also promoted engagement and creativity in the learning process (UNESCO, 2020).

Recognizing the profound impact of the pandemic on mental health, school leaders prioritized the well-being of students, teachers, and parents. One effective strategy employed by school leaders was the organization of counseling sessions to provide emotional support and guidance. These sessions offered a safe space for individuals to express their concerns, seek advice, and access resources for coping with stress and anxiety (World Health Organization, 2020).

The adaptive strategies implemented by school leaders underscored their commitment to ensuring continuity in education and promoting the holistic well-being of the school community amidst unprecedented challenges. By embracing innovation, collaboration, and compassion, these leaders demonstrated exemplary leadership in navigating the complexities of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Resource Allocation:

The systematic literature review underscored significant disparities in resource allocation and support for addressing challenges stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic, with notable implications for schools in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). While some school leaders reported receiving government assistance and support, others encountered formidable barriers that hindered their ability to effectively respond to the crisis.

In LMICs, where educational resources are often scarce, many school leaders faced the daunting challenge of addressing pandemic-induced disruptions with limited support. Scarce financial resources, inadequate infrastructure, and a lack of technological tools posed formidable obstacles to delivering quality education amidst the crisis (United Nations, 2020).

Furthermore, the review identified a lack of parental involvement as a significant barrier to effective resource allocation and support in many communities. Without the active engagement of parents and caregivers in their children's education, school leaders struggled to mobilize community support, secure additional resources, and implement innovative solutions to address learning loss and mental health concerns (Hill et al., 2021).

Moreover, school leaders in LMICs faced mounting pressure to adhere to rigid curriculum requirements, despite the challenges posed by the pandemic (Cordova Jr, et al., 2023). The need to cover mandated curriculum content often overshadowed efforts to prioritize remedial support, mental health initiatives, and other interventions aimed at addressing the holistic needs of students and teachers (World Bank, 2021).

The review highlighted the urgent need for targeted interventions and equitable resource allocation to support school leaders in LMICs as they navigate the complexities of the pandemic. By addressing systemic barriers, mobilizing community support, and fostering partnerships between governments, civil society organizations, and educational institutions, stakeholders can work collaboratively to ensure that all schools have access to the resources and support needed to weather the challenges posed by COVID-19.

Impact on Mental Health:

The COVID-19 pandemic has taken a toll on the mental health and well-being of individuals across the educational landscape, including students, teachers, parents, and school leaders. School leaders, in particular, found themselves grappling with increased job difficulty and heightened levels of stress as they navigated the unprecedented challenges brought about by the crisis (World Bank, 2021).

The review highlighted the urgent need for comprehensive mental health support initiatives within schools to address the diverse needs of the school community. Many school leaders responded to this need by implementing innovative strategies aimed at promoting mental well-being and resilience among students and staff (Hill et al., 2021). These strategies included providing training sessions for teachers on mental health awareness, organizing counseling sessions for students and parents, and distributing learning materials designed to support emotional well-being.



Despite the myriad challenges posed by the pandemic, school leaders demonstrated resilience and adaptability in their efforts to support the mental health needs of their school communities (Groenewald, et al., 2023). By proactively addressing these challenges and implementing targeted interventions, school leaders played a crucial role in fostering a supportive and nurturing school environment amidst adversity.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health underscores the importance of prioritizing comprehensive mental health support initiatives within educational settings. Through collaborative efforts and innovative strategies, school leaders can help mitigate the adverse effects of the pandemic on mental well-being and promote resilience among students, teachers, and the broader school community.

Gender Differences:

The systematic literature review conducted on post-pandemic challenges in education revealed noteworthy gender-specific differences in the strategies and approaches adopted by school leaders. Female school leaders emerged as more inclined towards providing targeted support to address the challenges posed by the pandemic compared to their male counterparts. Specifically, female leaders were found to be more proactive in offering remedial classes and tailored interventions to students who required additional academic support following the disruptions caused by the pandemic (UNESCO, 2021).

Despite their proactive stance, female school leaders also reported experiencing higher levels of stress and job difficulty compared to their male counterparts (Hill et al., 2021). This finding underscores the need for gender-sensitive support mechanisms and interventions to alleviate the stressors faced by female leaders in educational leadership roles (Uy, et al., 2023). It is imperative to recognize and address the unique challenges and barriers that female school leaders encounter in order to foster their well-being and enhance their effectiveness in leadership positions (UNESCO, 2021).

The observed gender differences in leadership approaches have implications for policy and practice in educational settings (Martinez, et al., 2023). Strategies aimed at supporting school leaders should take into account the gender-specific needs and experiences of female leaders, ensuring that they have access to adequate resources, support networks, and professional development opportunities to thrive in their roles (Hill et al., 2021). Moreover, efforts to promote gender equity in educational leadership should focus on addressing systemic barriers and biases that may hinder the advancement and success of female leaders in the field (UNESCO, 2021).

The gender-specific differences in leadership approaches among school leaders highlight the importance of adopting a gender-sensitive lens in policy and practice. By recognizing and addressing the unique needs and challenges faced by female leaders, education systems can foster greater gender equity in leadership roles and enhance the effectiveness and well-being of school leaders across the board.

Conclusion:

The systematic literature review on post-pandemic challenges in education has provided valuable insights into the experiences and strategies of school leaders in navigating the complexities brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings underscore the resilience and adaptability of school leaders in responding to unprecedented disruptions in learning and well-being within their school communities.

The review highlighted the diverse range of strategies employed by school leaders to address learning loss and support mental health among students, teachers, and parents. From offering remedial classes to leveraging technology for remote learning and organizing counseling sessions, school leaders demonstrated a proactive approach to mitigating the adverse effects of the pandemic on education.

However, the review also shed light on disparities in resource allocation and support, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. While some school leaders reported receiving government support, others faced significant barriers such as limited resources and parental involvement. Addressing these disparities will be crucial in ensuring equitable access to education and support for all students and schools.

Furthermore, the review highlighted the substantial impact of the pandemic on the mental health and well-being of students, teachers, parents, and school leaders. Increased job difficulty and stress levels were reported among school leaders, underscoring the need for comprehensive mental health support initiatives within schools.

Gender-specific differences in leadership approaches were also identified, with female school leaders showing a greater inclination towards providing targeted support to students in need. However, female leaders also reported higher stress levels, highlighting the importance of gender-sensitive support mechanisms and interventions.



In light of these findings, it is evident that supporting school leaders is essential for navigating the ongoing challenges posed by the pandemic and fostering resilience within education systems. Policy and practice should prioritize the provision of adequate resources, support networks, and professional development opportunities for school leaders, while also addressing systemic barriers to gender equity in educational leadership.

Continued research and collaboration will be crucial in developing effective strategies and policies to support school leaders and promote positive outcomes for students and schools in the post-pandemic era. By prioritizing the well-being and effectiveness of school leaders, education systems can build greater resilience and ensure the continued provision of quality education for all.

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