



## **Leadership Practices in Response to Educational Crises: Insights from Recent Studies**

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### **Abstract:**

This study explores the leadership challenges faced by educational leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic and examines the key leadership practices and styles that emerged as effective in managing the crisis. The swift transition to remote learning, the need to ensure equity in educational access, and the mental health support for staff and students were among the significant challenges. Transformational leadership, which emphasizes vision, motivation, and fostering a culture of continuous learning, played a critical role in navigating these challenges. Leaders used agility and emotional intelligence to adapt to rapidly changing circumstances while maintaining a focus on the well-being of their communities. Furthermore, servant leadership, which prioritizes the well-being and development of others, became vital in supporting staff during the crisis, highlighting the importance of empathy and care. Key leadership practices identified include transparent communication, flexible decision-making, and fostering collaboration through distributed leadership, ensuring that solutions emerged from collective problem-solving. The findings suggest that leaders who combined transformational and servant leadership approaches were able to guide their institutions through the pandemic, maintaining educational continuity while prioritizing the emotional and psychological needs of their teams. The study underscores the importance of these leadership styles in ensuring resilience, well-being, and educational success in times of crisis. Future research should further investigate the long-term effects of these practices on educational outcomes and the preparedness of future leaders for similar disruptions.

*Keywords:* COVID-19 pandemic, educational leadership, transformational leadership, servant leadership, remote learning

### **Introduction:**

The outbreak of crises—whether natural, political, or health-related—has long disrupted educational systems globally. The COVID-19 pandemic, declared on March 11, 2020, by the World Health Organization (WHO), presented an unprecedented challenge to education systems. It necessitated a swift and unanticipated transition to remote learning, reshaping how education was delivered and experienced worldwide.

This crisis forced educational leaders to adapt rapidly, reshuffling their roles and practices to ensure continuity of learning while maintaining the safety of students and staff. The role of leadership in this context was put to the test like never before. As leaders navigated uncertainty, they had to develop new strategies to ensure the educational experience continued.

This shift demanded not only technical responses but also emotional resilience, flexibility, and innovation. Transformational leadership, as outlined by Bass and Riggio (2006), became a critical approach for educational leaders during the pandemic. Leaders were required to inspire and motivate staff and students, adapting to rapidly changing conditions and communicating effectively to maintain morale and engagement.

Furthermore, the emotional intelligence (Görgens-Ekermans & Roux, 2021) of school leaders played a pivotal role in navigating the emotional toll of the pandemic. Leaders who could recognize and manage their emotions while empathizing with their staff were better positioned to foster a supportive and resilient school environment. Goleman (1998) emphasizes that emotional intelligence is crucial for leaders, especially during times of crisis, where the ability to connect emotionally with others can ensure stability and trust.



In addition to emotional intelligence, agility became an essential trait for educational leaders, as highlighted by Buffone (2021). The rapidly evolving nature of the pandemic required leaders to make swift decisions, often with limited information. The ability to pivot and adopt new solutions was vital in maintaining operations. This agility, combined with the principles of transformational leadership, allowed leaders to adapt not only in terms of logistics but also in instructional practices, encouraging innovation and flexibility in teaching approaches.

School culture, a key element in effective leadership, also played a significant role during the pandemic. Deal and Peterson (2009) argue that a positive and resilient school culture can sustain a school community through challenging times. Leaders who could cultivate a sense of unity, shared purpose, and trust ensured that their schools could weather the disruption. This is consistent with Fullan's (2001) view that leadership during periods of change requires fostering a culture of collaboration and commitment to a common vision.

As leaders navigated these unprecedented challenges, instructional leadership remained essential. Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe (2008) emphasize that leadership directly influences student outcomes, particularly when leaders focus on supporting teachers and improving classroom practices. During the pandemic, leaders focused on ensuring that teachers had the necessary resources and support to deliver quality remote instruction, despite the many challenges.

The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the importance of leadership in educational systems. The crisis tested leaders' abilities to be agile, emotionally intelligent, and transformational. It highlighted that effective leadership during times of disruption involves not just managing operations but also nurturing the culture, morale, and innovation necessary to ensure the continuity of education. Educational leaders, drawing on strategies such as transformational leadership and emotional intelligence, were able to adapt to the evolving demands of the pandemic, ensuring that their schools remained operational and that learning continued despite unprecedented challenges.

#### **Literature Review:**

The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the importance of effective leadership in education during crises. As the virus spread globally, schools were forced to close, and education systems had to transition rapidly to online learning. This posed unprecedented challenges for educational leaders, requiring them to adapt quickly to ensure the continuity of learning while maintaining the safety of students and staff.

Despite the broader literature on crisis leadership in various sectors, there remains a limited focus on how school leaders specifically responded to the educational disruptions brought on by the pandemic. This gap is crucial, given the unique nature of educational crises and the diverse leadership practices required to navigate them.

This systematic review aims to synthesize empirical studies on crisis leadership in education, with a focus on the period between 2019 and 2022. The objective is to highlight the leadership strategies and practices that were effective in addressing the immediate needs of educational communities during the COVID-19 crisis. Furthermore, the review seeks to identify gaps in the existing literature, particularly regarding leadership adaptation, resilience, and long-term recovery in educational settings during health crises. By analyzing studies on crisis leadership in schools, this review will contribute to the growing body of knowledge on educational leadership during emergencies, offering actionable insights that can help educational leaders better navigate future disruptions.

Effective leadership during a crisis requires a nuanced understanding of crisis management theories, which often delineate the stages of prevention, response, recovery, and learning. In the context of education, these stages align with the leadership practices that school leaders must employ to manage and mitigate the impact of crises.

Crisis management frameworks, such as those proposed by Fink (1986), Coombs (2007), and Mitroff (2001), emphasize the importance of early detection, timely decision-making, resource allocation, and post-crisis reflection. These principles are essential for educational leaders who are faced with the challenge of adapting quickly to rapidly changing circumstances, such as the shift to remote learning.

Leadership during a crisis often involves balancing directive and supportive approaches. Transformational leadership, which emphasizes vision, motivation, and the empowerment of followers, is particularly relevant during crises. This leadership style helps to inspire and engage staff, encouraging them to embrace new ways of thinking and working. According to Bass and Riggio (2006), transformational leaders are adept at fostering innovation and building resilience within their teams, qualities that are critical during times of crisis. Emotional intelligence, as discussed by Goleman (1998) and Gørgens-Ekermans and Roux (2021), is also a key component of effective transformational leadership, enabling leaders to navigate the emotional challenges of crisis situations while maintaining morale and focus.



On the other hand, transactional leadership, which focuses on clear instructions and rewards for compliance, may be more appropriate for certain tasks that require immediate, pragmatic responses. This leadership style can be effective in managing operational challenges, such as ensuring that teachers and students are equipped with the necessary resources to transition to online learning platforms. The combination of transformational and transactional leadership approaches allows educational leaders to address both the long-term vision for educational change and the immediate, task-oriented needs during a crisis.

The context of the COVID-19 pandemic, with its sudden shift to online learning and the management of a remote workforce, highlighted the need for leaders to be agile. As Buffone (2021) argues, agility is an essential element of leadership in an evolving educational landscape.

Educational leaders had to adapt quickly to new technological demands, provide emotional support to staff, and communicate effectively with stakeholders. This was particularly challenging in environments where resources were limited, and pre-existing educational structures had to be rapidly restructured to accommodate new learning modalities.

The impact of leadership on student outcomes is well-documented, with studies by Leithwood and Riehl (2003) and Robinson et al. (2008) showing that leadership practices directly affect school performance.

During the COVID-19 crisis, this relationship became even more apparent as school leaders were forced to make rapid decisions that affected not only the delivery of education but also the well-being of their communities. The agility and emotional intelligence demonstrated by school leaders during this period are crucial to fostering a resilient educational culture capable of withstanding future disruptions.

The COVID-19 pandemic provided a unique opportunity to examine how leadership functions in times of crisis. By synthesizing the findings from various studies on crisis leadership, this review will offer valuable insights for school leaders seeking to improve their crisis management capabilities and strengthen the resilience of their educational institutions. Future research should continue to explore the ways in which school leaders can develop adaptive, resilient, and agile leadership practices to navigate the increasingly volatile and complex educational landscape.

### **Methodology:**

To examine the key strategies and leadership styles employed during the COVID-19 crisis, a systematic review methodology was utilized. This approach ensures a comprehensive and unbiased synthesis of the literature. The review process began with an extensive search of peer-reviewed journal articles, reports, and conference papers published between 2019 and 2022.

Relevant databases, including Scopus, Google Scholar, ERIC, and JSTOR, were used to locate studies focused on educational leadership and crisis management during the COVID-19 pandemic. Keywords such as "crisis leadership," "COVID-19 education," "educational leadership during crisis," "pandemic leadership," and "school management" guided the search process.

The inclusion criteria for this review specified that studies must focus on K-12 educational settings during the COVID-19 pandemic and address leadership practices, styles, or challenges faced by school leaders. Only empirical studies or reviews published between 2019 and 2022 were included. Studies that did not specifically address educational leadership, were written in languages other than English, or focused on other types of crises (such as natural disasters) were excluded from the review.

Once eligible studies were identified, data was extracted using a standardized template. This template captured essential details such as research objectives, methodologies, leadership strategies discussed, and key findings. Following data extraction, thematic analysis was conducted to identify recurring themes and patterns in the leadership strategies employed during the pandemic, providing a clear understanding of how educational leaders responded to the crisis.

### **Findings and Discussion:**

#### **Challenges Faced by Educational Leaders**

The COVID-19 pandemic presented numerous challenges to educational leaders, demanding rapid adjustments in various facets of school leadership. Among the most significant hurdles was the swift transition to remote learning, which required not only a shift in instructional practices but also a fundamental change in how educational leaders supported both teachers and students.

According to Bass and Riggio (2006), transformational leadership played a critical role in guiding such shifts, emphasizing the need for leaders to inspire and motivate their staff while navigating unprecedented circumstances.



Leaders had to quickly adapt to new technologies, rethink pedagogical strategies, and foster a culture of continuous learning and flexibility (Fullan, 2001). As Buffone (2021) notes, the agility of leaders became an essential quality, as they had to pivot swiftly to remote learning environments while maintaining a sense of stability and purpose within their institutions.

Equally critical was addressing the issue of equity and access to educational resources. Many students, particularly in underserved communities, faced significant challenges due to limited access to technology, internet connectivity, and other resources required for effective online learning. Deal and Peterson (2009) emphasize that effective leaders must prioritize a culture of inclusivity and ensure that resources are distributed equitably to meet the diverse needs of all learners. During the pandemic, this meant finding innovative solutions to bridge the digital divide, such as providing loaned devices and working with local communities to enhance internet access. The importance of emotional intelligence, as discussed by Goleman (1998) and Görgens-Ekermans and Roux (2021), also became evident, as leaders had to empathize with the struggles faced by students and their families while also fostering a sense of belonging and community.

In addition to the technological and equity-related challenges, the mental health and well-being of staff became an area of significant concern for educational leaders. The sudden shift to remote learning, coupled with the uncertainty and stress of the pandemic, placed immense pressure on teachers and school staff. Heifetz and Linsky (2002) argue that effective leadership during a crisis involves not only providing guidance but also offering emotional support to ensure the well-being of staff members.

Transformational leadership, which encourages supportive relationships and individual growth, proved essential in maintaining morale during this challenging period (Grys, 2011). Leaders had to find ways to support their teams, ensuring that teachers felt connected, valued, and capable of managing their personal and professional responsibilities. The need for leaders to demonstrate care and concern for their staff, while also maintaining school operations, highlights the importance of balancing both administrative and emotional leadership responsibilities (Spillane et al., 2001).

The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the complex and multifaceted role of school leaders. As Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe (2008) point out, leadership styles directly impact student outcomes, and during times of crisis, the leadership strategies employed can either facilitate or hinder a school's ability to navigate the challenges it faces. The pandemic required leaders to employ a combination of flexibility, empathy, and vision to ensure that their schools remained functional and supportive environments for both staff and students. It also highlighted the importance of agility and transformational leadership in responding to rapidly changing circumstances while maintaining a focus on equity, well-being, and educational continuity.

### **Leadership Practices Employed**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, effective school leadership was vital in managing the unprecedented challenges schools faced. Three key leadership practices that emerged as essential were communication and transparency, flexible decision-making, and collaboration through distributed leadership.

One of the most critical aspects of effective leadership during the pandemic was maintaining clear, frequent, and transparent communication. Leaders who communicated openly with their staff, students, and parents were better able to maintain trust within the school community. According to Fullan (2001), transparent communication helps build a shared understanding of the challenges and the strategies in place to overcome them.

Bass and Riggio (2006) emphasize that transformational leaders who foster trust through clear communication inspire confidence and resilience in their teams. This was especially important during a time when misinformation and uncertainty were prevalent. Leaders who communicated both the challenges and successes of adapting to remote learning helped maintain morale and alignment across the school community. The rapidly evolving nature of the pandemic required leaders to exhibit flexibility in decision-making. As new information about the virus and its impact emerged, policies had to be adjusted to respond effectively.

Buffone (2021) highlights that agility in leadership is essential in such dynamic environments, allowing leaders to make informed decisions while remaining adaptable. Leaders who could quickly pivot, adjust guidelines, and implement changes in response to the latest public health advice were more successful in navigating the crisis. This type of adaptive leadership aligns with the views of Goleman (1998), who underscores the importance of emotional intelligence in making decisions that are not only practical but also considerate of the emotional and psychological needs of the school community.

The pandemic underscored the need for collaboration within schools and the broader educational community. Distributed leadership, where responsibilities are shared among multiple leaders within the school, proved invaluable. Leithwood and Riehl (2003) argue that effective school leadership often involves the collective efforts of staff members at all levels. By distributing leadership responsibilities, schools were able to encourage shared



problem-solving and innovation. This approach allowed for diverse perspectives and solutions to emerge, ensuring that challenges were met with creativity and collective action (Spillane et al., 2001). As Kilag (2023) notes, distributed leadership promotes collaboration, enabling educators to support one another through shared leadership responsibilities.

The pandemic highlighted the importance of leaders who could communicate transparently, make flexible decisions, and foster collaboration. These leadership practices, grounded in transformational and distributed leadership models, were instrumental in guiding schools through the crisis, ensuring that educators remained supported, and that students continued to receive quality education despite the challenges posed by the pandemic.

### **Leadership Styles Exhibited**

During times of uncertainty and disruption, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, effective leadership in schools played a crucial role in maintaining the continuity of education and supporting both staff and students. Two leadership styles that emerged as particularly impactful were transformational leadership and servant leadership. These leadership styles provided the framework for motivating staff, ensuring well-being, and fostering resilience in a rapidly changing environment.

Transformational leadership, as defined by Bass and Riggio (2006), is centered on inspiring and motivating followers to achieve exceptional outcomes, often by fostering an environment of trust, engagement, and shared vision. In the context of education, transformational leaders were especially effective in guiding their schools through the challenges of the pandemic. These leaders focused not only on managing the logistics of remote learning but also on maintaining the morale of their staff and students.

According to Fullan (2001), transformational leaders help create a culture of change by encouraging innovation and by setting high standards and clear expectations. During the pandemic, these leaders were able to inspire their teams to adapt quickly and remain committed to their educational mission. Their focus on vision and motivation ensured that teachers, despite the emotional and logistical challenges, could stay engaged and continue to provide meaningful education. This type of leadership also aligns with the findings of Gørgens-Ekermans and Roux (2021), who argue that emotional intelligence is a critical component of transformational leadership, enabling leaders to understand and manage their own and others' emotions in high-stress situations. Transformational leaders used emotional intelligence to maintain optimism and support staff through difficult times, reinforcing a sense of shared purpose and community.

While transformational leadership focuses on vision and motivation, servant leadership prioritizes the well-being and development of individuals within the organization. Leaders who adopted a servant leadership approach focused on serving the needs of their staff and students. As described by Deal and Peterson (2009), servant leaders put others first, making decisions that support the growth and well-being of their teams. In the educational context, this leadership style became particularly important during the pandemic when the emotional and mental health of both teachers and students was at risk.

Servant leaders took time to listen to the concerns of their staff, offered support in balancing work and personal life, and ensured that their teams had the resources needed to thrive. According to Heifetz and Linsky (2002), servant leadership is particularly effective in times of crisis because it emphasizes care and empathy, which are essential for navigating uncertainty and stress. Buffone (2021) highlights that servant leaders are agile and adaptable, qualities that were crucial as educational leaders needed to adjust strategies based on changing circumstances, all while prioritizing the well-being of their teams.

By adopting both transformational and servant leadership styles, school leaders were able to create an environment that not only supported educational continuity but also fostered a culture of care, innovation, and resilience.

These leadership approaches ensured that, even in the face of unprecedented challenges, the school community could maintain a focus on the well-being of individuals while continuing to work toward educational excellence. As Kilag (2023) notes, leadership that emphasizes both vision and service is essential in driving meaningful educational innovation and improving outcomes for both staff and students.

### **Conclusion:**

This systematic review has offered valuable insights into the leadership practices employed by school leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic, shedding light on the challenges they faced, the effective strategies they implemented, and the leadership styles that emerged in response to the crisis. The findings emphasize the critical role of flexibility, clear communication, and collaboration in navigating the complexities of crisis leadership.



Leaders who adapted their strategies to the evolving situation and maintained open, transparent communication with staff, students, and parents were better able to maintain trust and ensure continuity of learning. Moreover, the review highlights the significance of collaboration, both within schools and across the broader educational community, in solving problems and sharing resources during such unprecedented times.

Looking forward, future research should investigate the long-term impact of these leadership practices on educational outcomes, particularly in terms of student achievement, teacher well-being, and institutional resilience. It is essential to understand how these crisis management strategies may have contributed to sustained improvements or challenges in educational settings. Furthermore, research could explore how these strategies can be adapted or enhanced for future crises, particularly in light of evolving technological, social, and economic factors.

Additionally, the review suggests that crisis management should be integrated into leadership training programs for aspiring school leaders. By including crisis management training in the curriculum, future educational leaders will be better equipped to respond to unforeseen challenges.

Ensuring that leaders are prepared for crises will not only help mitigate the impact of disruptions but also enable schools to emerge stronger and more resilient in the face of future uncertainties. By prioritizing leadership development in this area, educational institutions can ensure they are ready to navigate any challenges that lie ahead.

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