



Citation for published version:

Mifsud, D, Fertig, M, Torrance, D & Niesche, R 2024, 'School leadership in the pandemic: A literature review of research trends, purposes and emerging concepts in the global education response to COVID-19', *International Studies in Educational Administration*, vol. 51, no. 2, pp. 24-48.

Publication date:
2024

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

Mifsud, D, Fertig, M, Torrance, D & Niesche, R 2024, 'School leadership in the pandemic: A literature review of research trends, purposes and emerging concepts in the global education response to COVID-19', *International Studies in Educational Administration*, vol. 51, no. 2, pp. 24-48.

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International Studies in Educational Administration

Journal of the Commonwealth
Council for Educational
Administration & Management



CCEAM

Volume 51 • Number 2 • 2023

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School Leadership in the Pandemic: A Literature Review of Research Trends, Purposes and Emerging Concepts in the Global Education Response to COVID-19

Denise Mifsud, Michael Fertig, Deirdre Torrance and Richard Niesche

Abstract: *The COVID-19 pandemic has had dramatic implications for education systems across the globe, mainly due to the fact that it induced school closures worldwide as a drastic measure to curb this health crisis. School leaders had to operate in crisis mode, whilst ensuring that measures and policy directives issued by the government were effectively implemented. This article provides a review of the literature on school leadership in the pandemic through a methodical collection, documentation, scrutiny, and critical analysis of the research publications. The review seeks to map trends in what has been published in a relatively short time span, in addition to identifying gaps and silences within this new field in terms of empirical scholarship and methodological diversity, as well as geographical location via a narrative synthesis approach. The findings point to a spread of publications over a wide geographical and cultural spectrum, with the distinct focus of empirical studies being qualitative and focusing on school leaders. The three emergent themes centre around school leadership within the school context, relationships with the wider community, and engagement with policy. This literature review is significant for educational practice, policy, and scholarship in terms of identifying gaps, with implications for future research.*

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, literature review, policy directives, school leadership

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had dramatic implications for education systems across the globe, mainly since it induced school closures worldwide as a drastic measure to curb this health crisis. According to the UNICEF monitoring, nationwide closures impacted about 98.5 percent of the world's student population (UNESCO 2020). Schooling was significantly

reorganized, with COVID-19 re-delineating learning as a distant, screen-based activity restricting most learners to online teacher support, with 'the discourse around the re-opening, or indeed, the closing of schools [being] fraught, divisive, and largely inconclusive' (Harris & Jones 2020: 243). Education systems around the world had to contend with similar challenges emanating from constantly evolving circumstances, the increasing complexities within the outside community, and external narratives within their diverse contexts. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to rapid, unprecedented reform 'out of necessity rather than deliberate and thoughtful planning' (Netolicky 2020: 394), with the mass closure of schools leading to the rise of 'pandemic pedagogies' (Williamson, Eynon & Potter 2020: 108) as a global norm since the opening months of 2020. Educators the world over have been working in crisis management mode as they reconsider their ways of operating, being, leading, and the very purpose of education (Netolicky 2021).

It is within this novel disruptive scenario that school leaders had to operate, whilst ensuring that measures and policy directives issued by the government or state determining the operation of schools were effectively implemented. These new circumstances presented school leaders with new challenges, radically transforming the school leadership role (Arnold et al. 2021) and providing a test for leadership theory (Grint 2020). School leaders' priorities were altered due to the pandemic, shifting to more pressing issues such as planning for future school closures, addressing academic achievement gaps, and prioritizing student health (Trinidad 2021). Additionally, school leaders had no choice but to engage in sudden and rapid re-skilling to lead the transition to online learning (Arar, Sawalhi, Chaaban, Zohri & Alhouti 2022) while exercising school leadership to and from a hybrid online and, at times, simultaneous in situ environment. These new trials and tribulations have led to apprehension about school leaders' workloads and the compromising effects of the pandemic on their health and wellbeing (Harris & Jones 2020). Consequently, school leaders experienced a more unstable, fluid work environment due to less predictability in their work role coupled with an increasing loss in their job clarity (Arnold, Rahimi & Riley 2021).

The locus of some key decisions shifted from the local level to the national (Thomson, Greany & Martindale 2021), with considerable implications given the extreme significance allocated to local autonomy as a conductor to education reform. This was exacerbated by conflicting scrutiny of school leaders from external stakeholders, namely the media, parents and communities, and policymakers. Interpreting, translating, and implementing school guidance emanating from top-down communication at an unprecedented level of quality, quantity, and frequency proved exceptionally stressful and challenging for school leaders (Fotheringham, Harriott, Healy, Arengé & Wilson 2021). The latter had to give precedence to ever-changing government policy advice within the constraints of mostly inadequate school buildings, staff and students' wellbeing concerns, and the requirements of the surrounding communities. These are demands that increase apprehension and anxiety in a highly stressful job. Adapting a European policy perspective, Zancajo, Verger and Bolea (2022) argued that education policy responses to the COVID-19 crisis have been mainly articulated around three

areas: the digitalization of the education system, tackling educational inequalities, and promoting teachers' development. The problems emerging from these areas generated additional stress and frustration in an already highly strung scenario.

School leaders thus had to navigate tensions between accountability and autonomy; equity and excellence; the individual and the collective; and wellbeing and workload (Netolicky 2020). Headteachers navigated the multiple predicaments and situational ambiguities in a resilient manner by drawing on the strengths of pre-existing structures and teams (Beauchamp, Hulme, Clarke, Hamilton & Harvey 2021). They had to operate within an environment 'where their school communities have been dislocated and routines abandoned . . . [under] external pressures from national and local agencies, and the resultant sense of situational ambiguity, where the operational context could change overnight' (Beauchamp et al. 2021: 388). Thornton (2021) outlined the challenges and opportunities faced by school leaders in three phases: the crisis phase, the adaptation phase, and the opportunity phase. The crisis phase revolved around addressing immediate challenges and prioritizing the wellbeing and safety of staff and students. The adaptation phase involved communicating and checking in with stakeholders, adaptability and optimism, and leadership distribution. The opportunity phase centered around focused reflection and grasping opportunities from this very testing experience of leadership practice. The profound impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a reconceptualization of crises, from unexpected single events to protracted occurrences with multiple effects, thus bringing new layers of complexity for school leaders and policy makers (Hulme, Beauchamp, Clarke & Hamilton 2023). Despite enacting adaptive leadership strategies, such as bridging, brokering and buffering, in order to recalibrate education provision at pace during school closures (Hulme et al. 2023), headteachers still felt their creative agency being curbed. They spoke of 'clipped wings', 'vulnerability' and 'loneliness', and being 'over-managed and under-led' (p. 174) in their attempts to assuage undetermined risks amid relentlessly shifting guidance.

Harris (2020) queried whether it was a matter of school leadership being in crisis, mainly due to the forcibly altered conceptions of leadership and leadership practices brought about by the pandemic as school leaders were leading remotely and engaging with their stakeholders online while also catering for a reduced number of students in their school building. Harris (2020) made these further claims:

A new chapter in educational leadership is currently being written because of Covid-19. A changing leadership order is emerging that is more distributed, collaborative and networked. This leadership has no national standards, no guidelines, no stipulations, no rubrics, at least not for now. (p. 325)

But is it a matter of writing a new chapter or of reconceptualizing school leadership in light of the pandemic? Longmuir (2021) iterated that the COVID-19 pandemic has seen a burgeoning number of publications exploring the impact of this pandemic crisis via empirical findings (e.g., Gurr & Drysdale 2020; Huber & Helm 2020; Thornton 2021) or the provision of

commentary, viewpoints, or editorials (e.g., Harris & Jones 2020; Netolicky 2020). Specific publications have considered the evidence base of literature that emerged about education leaders and their education stakeholders in the pandemic, covering February 2020 to April 2021 (Harris 2021). The latter working article highlights seven core teams relating to leadership in the pandemic, that are: 1) under pressure; 2) emotional stress; 3) adaptive leadership; 4) personal resilience; 5) equity; 6) family and community; and 7) changing leadership practices. Besides this, another fundamental contribution was made by Commonwealth Council for Educational Administration and Management (CCEAM) through their flagship journal *International Studies in Educational Administration* (ISEA), through a call for articles addressing world-wide educational responses to the pandemic, resulting in four issues (Volume 48: 1-3; Volume 49: 1), presenting 60 articles representing 27 countries. These articles, the majority of which are conceptual in nature or opinion pieces, rather than empirical-oriented, document personal observations of local educational responses to the pandemic, encompassing the entire education sector from pre-school to tertiary education and beyond.

Consequently, Beauchamp et al. (2021) together with Brown, O'Hara, McNamara, Skerritt and Shevlin (2021) reported a dearth of literature in the form of empirical research that combined school-level educational leadership and crisis management (more specifically the pandemic). On the other hand, Thomson et al. (2021) called for more research assessing the impact of the pandemic on school leaders specifically, while Jopling and Harness (2022) declared that more research was needed on the longer-term effects of the pandemic on school culture and the potential for this to stimulate change. In response to these highlighted gaps in knowledge emerging from empirical research, as well as to recommendations for future studies by leading scholars in the field of educational leadership, this systematic review of school leadership in the pandemic maps trends in what has been published in a relatively short time span. It also identifies gaps and silences in the challenges that have been presented to the field of educational leadership in terms of empirical scholarship and methodological diversity, as well as geographical location.

The review was guided by the following research questions that helped us to map research trends (Q.1, Q.3-5) while also identifying main themes (Q.2) in this relatively new, expansive leadership issue:

1. What is the nature of the literature in terms of study type and purpose (empirical, theoretical/conceptual, review/commentary)?
2. What research topics are addressed in the pandemic school leadership publications between 2020 and 2022?
3. What methodological approaches (qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods) have been adopted and data collection tools used?
4. What is the geographic distribution of the pandemic school leadership literature published globally?

5. Which focus groups and compulsory schooling contexts have been targeted in the research?

The following section outlines the methodological approach adopted that enabled us to narrow down the ‘*canon*’ of literature on school leadership in the pandemic upon which this systematic literature review drew to identify trends in the burgeoning pandemic school leadership literature narrative.

Methodology

The main conceptual framework followed for this systematic review of literature on school leadership in the pandemic was that developed by Hallinger (2013), and that has also been adopted by other systematic reviews of educational leadership (e.g., Bellibas & Gumus 2019; Gumus, Bellibas, Esen & Gumus 2018). This was furthermore combined with aspects from Oplatka and Arar’s (2017) methodology in relation to the literature search procedure and data analysis. As the central topics guiding our research questions and goals together with the conceptual perspective guiding the review have been outlined in the preceding sections, we now delineate the sources and types of data employed; data extraction; and data evaluation, analysis, and synthesis; concluding with the major results, limitations, and implications of the review.

Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and Google Scholar were selected as the primary search engines for the electronic sourcing of publications. An advanced search for articles with all of the words ‘leadership in the pandemic’ between 2020 and 2022 anywhere within the article yielded 504,000 results. This was considered to be very broad, so given the very specific focus of the review, the search was narrowed down to key terms present only in the title of the publication, rather than anywhere within the article, yielding a total of 314 results. The following search terms were used: ‘school leadership’ AND ‘pandemic’ OR ‘COVID-19’; ‘educational leadership’ AND ‘pandemic’ OR ‘COVID-19’; ‘crisis leadership in school’; ‘crisis’ OR ‘pandemic’ AND ‘school leaders’; ‘school principals’ AND ‘pandemic’ OR ‘COVID-19’. Inclusion and exclusion criteria were then applied to further narrow the search and yield the sources and type of data satisfying the purpose of the review. The focus of empirical research had to encompass compulsory schooling from early childhood education to primary and secondary, thereby excluding both further and higher education. Journal articles and chapters were included, while theses, conference papers, and grey literature were not considered. No minimum number of citations were required for inclusion purposes. English language peer-reviewed journals and book chapters were included, thus ensuring exhaustive coverage in terms of depth and breadth in relation to researchers’ academic career stages across the widest geographical distribution possible. Two of the co-authors repeated the electronic searches for publications, comparing results at regular intervals, until they were confident that all likely sources had been exhausted, thus striving to provide a comprehensive coverage of all the works published about pandemic school leadership in compulsory schooling between 2020

and 2022. A total of 80 publications from English language journals and books made up the collection of literature for this review.¹

The next step involved reading all the publications to extract the relevant data for analysis and synthesis in response to the research questions. The following data were collected: author, title, and date of publication; journal; country where empirical research was undertaken (in the instance of the articles collecting empirical data); context (primary or secondary); key terms; main issues and topics; empirical or theoretical; methodology (if empirical); and the focus group of the publication. These data were entered in an Excel spreadsheet as raw text and the various rows were colour-coded according to the focus of the publication (focus on the institution and colleagues – yellow; focus on relationships with the community/stakeholders – green; focus on policy and/or theory – red). This coding allowed us to select and sort data, thus facilitating presentation according to focus to initiate evaluation, analysis, and synthesis. A narrative synthesis was conducted that ‘explore[d] heterogeneity descriptively rather than statistically and is appropriate for use with results from different types of empirical research’ (Booth, Papaioannou & Sutton 2012: 91). This allowed us to construct an initial framework of themes by content, according to the focus being addressed in the publication. The following section provides descriptive statistics of the variables under exploration, as outlined in the introduction section above.

Data Overview

We will now present some preliminary findings about the publications regarding school leadership in the pandemic that started emerging around May and June 2020 up to February 2022, which was the cutting point for our article search, before moving on to the narrative synthesis that explores the main emergent themes.

Based on the results of the literature review and after rigorous application of the inclusion and exclusion criteria, 80 articles were selected for detailed analysis, with a publication distribution as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Publication Distribution by Date

| Year of publication | Number of papers | % of total |
|---------------------|------------------|------------|
| 2022 | 5 | 6.25% |
| 2021 | 49 | 61.25% |
| 2020 | 26 | 32.5% |

¹ This article search was conducted between October 2021 and February 2022, hence other studies published after this timeframe have not been included. Due to the submission, peer review and publication process, in addition to the timeline involved, subsequent relevant contributions may therefore have been excluded due to reasons beyond the authors’ control.

The distribution indicates a slow build-up in 2020 of research studies on the effects of the pandemic on school leadership, with 32.5 percent ($n = 26$) of the articles analysed being published in that year. This is unsurprising given the restrictions on educational research activity which accompanied the onset of COVID-19 as well as the time-lag between submission of journal articles and acceptance and publication. Publication of articles relevant to the literature review search terms picked up in 2021, with well over 60 percent of the articles ($n = 49$) reviewed being published in that year. Our review came to an end in the early part of 2022 (more specifically, February 2022), which explains the low number of publications of 6.25 percent ($n = 5$) from that year which we analysed.

In terms of the geographical focus of the articles, 65 articles (81.25%) specified the country (or countries) which was the focus of the study. A total of 29 countries (or groups of countries (e.g., United Kingdom) were identified in these 65 articles, with the greatest number ($n = 11$) being focused within the United States, closely followed by five each for Australia, the United Kingdom, and Indonesia. The wide-ranging geographic spread is illustrated by journal articles from as far afield as Rwanda ($n = 1$), Greece ($n = 4$), and the Philippines ($n = 1$) and is indicative of the global nature of the pandemic and the all-embracing nature of its impact upon educational practices and schools. It is interesting to note the geographical spread by continent, as identified in Table 2. This shows a predominance of two areas, Asia and Europe, whilst the large number of countries within Asia which have been the focus of detailed research studies may indicate issues related to the initial spread of the pandemic from early 2020 onwards. Also noticeable is the very limited research activity which has focused upon Africa and the lack of any studies analysed which focused upon South America. This reflects longstanding concerns related to the prevalence of largely Western-centric (Harber & Davies 2003; Leithwood 2003) and ethno-centric (Dimmock 2012) perspectives in the international literature, with disproportionate influence from England, Canada, and the United States (Young 2017). And, this distribution reflects more specific concerns related to the reliance of other systems, such as those in Africa, on Western models of school leadership and management (Moorosi 2021), with subsequent implications for understandings and interpretations in non-Western contexts (Khalifa, Khalil, Marson & Halloran 2019).

Table 2: Geographical Distribution of the Empirical Research

| Continent | Countries |
|-----------|--|
| Africa | Ethiopia, Nigeria, Rwanda |
| Asia | China, India, Indonesia, Israel, Macau, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, South Korea, Thailand, Turkey, United Arab Emirates |
| Australia | Australia, New Zealand |

| | |
|---------------|---|
| Europe | Cyprus, England, Finland, Germany, Greece, Lithuania, Northern Ireland, Poland, Scotland, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom |
| North America | Canada, United States |

Whilst all the studies analysed were exploring issues related to school leadership during the pandemic, in well over 70 percent of the articles ($n = 56$), the specific focus on a stage, or stages, of education was explicit. The distribution of subject focus is shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Distribution of Papers by Focus of Study

| Focus of study | Number of papers | % of papers |
|---------------------|------------------|-------------|
| Primary | 3 | 3.8% |
| Secondary | 7 | 8.7% |
| Primary & Secondary | 46 | 56.7% |
| Not stated | 24 | 30.8% |

The possibility of in-depth, face-to-face data gathering was severely impacted by the global nature of lockdown during the pandemic, which brought with it severe restrictions on travel. Given this context, the analysis of the 80 articles revealed that well over half ($n = 58, 72.5%$) had made use of empirical data gathering methods, albeit with no clear evidence of direct face-to-face engagement. Researchers in these empirical studies made use of surveys which could be administered online, focus groups, as well as virtual interviews. This enabled them to gather a wide range of rich, qualitative and quantitative data across the range of countries studied. Twenty-two studies (27.5% of the total) were theoretical in nature, making no use of directly gathered empirical data but seeking to explore generic issues related to the nature of school leadership and the implications which the pandemic had for conceptual thinking in this area.

The next section presents a narrative synthesis of the main themes that emerged from data analysis. The three emergent themes centre around school leadership within the school context, relationships with the wider community, and engagement with policy.

Theme 1: School Leadership Within the School Context

The largest group of studies analysed, 50 out of 80 studies (62.5%), focused upon school leaders as individuals during the COVID-19 pandemic and centered on three main areas: their individual response in terms of issues such as sensemaking; self-efficacy and stress; and their relationships with other colleagues within the school during the pandemic.

Sensemaking

The all-embracing characteristics of the COVID-19 pandemic, and its wide-ranging and immediate impact across society, were mirrored within education systems and organizations worldwide. School leaders globally were positioned at crucial organizational junctures, facing Janus-like both inward, towards colleagues and pupils, and outward, acting as lightning rods and interpreters of government decisions and requirements. As such, they acted as ‘mediators of external messages’ (Hulme et al. 2023: 162), filtering information as it emerged from both central and local government; in the process, seeking to understand the messages and interpret them for members of their school community. This was especially the case in the early phase of the pandemic, when the dangers of the new situation were becoming more and more evident around the globe, reflecting the views of Smith and Riley (2012), who suggested that the first steps in response to crises in schools should be gathering information and adapting.

An in-depth study by Hulme et al. (2023) into the responses of a group of 12 school leaders across the four countries of the United Kingdom during the first lockdown from March to June 2020 illustrated the confusing nature of the context as well as the ongoing process of sensemaking undertaken by these leaders. Drawing on the work by Weick (2009), Hulme et al. (2023) presented sensemaking as ‘a process of constructing meaning to a new reality and taking action’ (p. 165). The headteachers in this study felt that the meaning-making which they attempted was increasingly hampered by what they called a ‘loss of control’, which meant that schools, and their leaders, were placed ‘in constant responsive mode, modelling and remodelling a wide range of scenarios while shielding staff from deep uncertainties’ (Hulme et al. 2023: 171). This view was also reflected in the study by Stone-Johnson and Weiner (2020), who argued that the importance of principal professionalism was downplayed as a result of the demands made upon school leaders by the political environment outside of the school, leading to ‘a general sense of being micromanaged’ (p. 370). A dominating factor in many studies (e.g., Arnold et al. 2021; Midha 2021) was the reporting by school leaders that ‘their work role was less predictable during 2020 than previous years’ (Arnold et al. 2021: 307). These studies suggest that school leaders saw sensemaking as a means of grounding their approach to the increasing demands which the pandemic made upon themselves and those within the school community.

Self-Efficacy and Stress

The unprecedented nature of the pandemic necessitated a rethinking of values and purposes for many school leaders, faced as they were by ongoing demands from central government, the need to take account of the specifics within the wider school community, and, also, an awareness of the growing fragility of the health and wellbeing of their school colleagues. These contextual factors placed increasing pressure upon school leaders and often led to degrees of self-examination and soul searching (Pedroso, Siason & Tangco-Siason 2021). As Brinkmann, Cash and Price (2021) suggested: ‘the effects of the pandemic represent a unique

opportunity to examine leader practices through reflection and coaching to adjust to, prepare for and deal with the impacts of a crisis' (p. 237).

For many school leaders, such self-reflection manifested itself in a growing sense of self-efficacy, which, as Papaioannou, Papavassiliou-Alexiou and Moutiaga (2022) indicated,

refers to specific beliefs of a leader's ability to perform necessary functions and adopt leadership behaviors. . . . It is the key to motivation, which links the individual characteristics of leaders with the roles they take on. . . . School principals' self-efficacy is associated with adaptability, flexibility, persistence in achieving goals . . . and creation of a healthy school climate. (p. 166)

Indeed, this study, using survey data from 165 principals of kindergartens and elementary public schools in Central Macedonia, Greece, suggested that leader self-efficacy was related to a sense of career resilience and the ability of school leaders to keep a focus upon their own wellbeing during periods of stress such as the pandemic.

This finding relates well to the study by Reid (2022), who explored issues of stress among school leaders during the pandemic and, using data from 16 public school principals in New Jersey, found that these school leaders managed 'increased levels of stress and anxiety by suppressing these emotions in the presence of students, parents, and colleagues' (p. 68). A similar pattern of work-related stress emerged in the survey study of 1,491 school leaders in England carried out in May 2021 by Thomson et al. (2021), who indicated that 'significant proportions of leaders in all types of schools and in all demographic groups have struggled with work-related stress, workload and change fatigue during the pandemic' (p. 298). There was also evidence of 'offloading' of stress and anxiety by these school leaders in the form of working out or sharing emotional situations with family members.

Another study by Upadyaya, Toyama and Salmela-Aro (2021), which focused primarily upon school leader stress levels during the pandemic, gathered questionnaire data from 535 school principals across Finland and found that, during the early Spring 2020 phase of COVID-19, 77 percent of respondents 'experienced high or altered levels of stress related to the school community's ability to cope with the COVID-19 crisis' (p. 8). The heightening of stress levels amongst school leaders, especially in the early phases of the pandemic, was further highlighted in a study of 57 primary and secondary principals in Greece (Spyropoulou & Koutroukis 2021), where the added factor of school leaders working from home produced a significant impact upon their wellbeing.

These studies indicate the need for self-reflection amongst school leaders faced with complex and demanding situations. This is coupled with evidence that school leaders felt that they needed to suppress the emotions which emerged from such reflective practice, with this suppression, in turn, leading to increased stress levels. These issues present clear implications for the ways in which school leaders approach their role as leaders in times of crisis.

Relationships With Other Colleagues Within the School

As the duration of the pandemic extended, the initial demands made upon school leaders from March 2020 solidified and produced new, and ongoing, challenges for school leader relationships with other colleagues within the school community. This was especially influenced by the changing narrative across countries related to school re-openings. This new, and seemingly endless, context provided an environment in which school leaders were able both to extend their current leadership practices and also bring forward new ways of working with school colleagues. As Chaseling, Paredes and Boyd (2020) suggested in their early study of secondary school principals in New South Wales, staff wellbeing became an increasingly important focus for school leaders. This involved, for example, adjusting staff timetables to allow those who were able to work at school to teach any pupils who were in attendance, as well as arranging for staff who felt vulnerable to work from home.

Given the variable nature of staff presence at school, as well as the increased significance of online contacts, a key factor for many principals was the need for effective communication (Chaseling et al. 2020; Karakose, Polat & Papadakis 2021; Thornton 2021). This was well-illustrated in the study by Thornton (2021), who interviewed 18 secondary school principals in New Zealand between late June and mid-July 2020, about 6 weeks after schools had reopened in the country. This investigation found that ‘frequent and clear communication with stakeholders, including students, their parents, and staff, as well as colleagues in other schools, was seen as an important crisis leadership strategy by all participants’ (Thornton 2021: 400). A study of over 1,200 senior leaders in primary and secondary schools in England (Walker, Sharp & Sims 2020) reiterated this point, with ‘42% of responding senior leaders say[ing] that the single most useful form of support for maintaining their health, resilience and well-being, and that of their staff, [was] regular keep in touch (KIT) meetings with individuals or groups of staff’ (p. 18). This illustrates the two-way significance of clear communication channels during the pandemic as a means of both enhancing the policy-filtering nature of leadership at that time as well as providing opportunities for supportive validation of leadership actions by colleagues. A further element of importance in communication relates to the expanded role of the communication process, as seen in the study by Beauchamp et al. (2021), whose respondents noted that ‘the spirit and tone of communication was expanded. Communications no longer just served instrumental purposes but were essential to help staff continue to support each other, their pupils and parents’ (p. 385). In essence, the nature of institutional communication between school leaders and their colleagues and the wider community changed, so that it became ‘indispensable for maintaining a virtual image of the school as a community’ (Beauchamp et al. 2021: 385).

The immediate, almost global, closure of schools, as well as the intermittent reopening and subsequent closing of schools at different times in different locations, led to the increased significance of online and remote teaching and learning. This, in turn, brought to the surface for school leaders institutional issues related to the variability of technical competence amongst school staff previously sometimes seen as not significant or even, in some cases,

submerged within the organisation. A study of Greek school leadership practice during the spring semester of 2020 by Argyropoulou, Syka and Papaioannou (2021) identified ‘computer illiteracy and difficulties with digital learning. Not all teachers were familiar with distant learning platforms and tools’ (p. 23). Research on school responses to COVID-19 in England during mid-2020 by Walker et al. (2020) illuminated a further factor impacting upon the development of effective online teaching and learning: the need to arrange staff teaching rotas so as to take account of the ‘need [for] extra staff while the pandemic continues, to teach and supervise pupils in split classes while on site, provide distance learning for pupils at home and/or cover for absent staff’ (p. 7). Similar concerns about the demands of online learning in providing support for pupils emerged in the phone survey study of school leaders and teachers in Ethiopia (Yorke, Rose, Woldehanna & Hagos 2021), where the difficulties of supporting student learning during lockdown were highlighted, and also in a focus group study of school leaders in Northern Ireland (Brown et al. 2021), which identified the need for school leaders (and teachers) to have online proficiency to meet the demands of virtual learning.

The clear focus emerging from research studies which explored the relationship between school leaders and their institutional colleagues is what Beauchamp et al. (2021) identified as ‘key internal dimensions of leadership and management which came to the fore in times of crisis: pre-existing models of leadership; change leadership; resilience; and an ethos of care and moral leadership, equity and social justice’ (p. 377). There were mixed responses to the ways in which school leaders viewed the impact of the pandemic upon their leadership of school colleagues, with some taking the view that ‘the delegation and distribution of leadership tasks and responsibilities were no longer viable due to the increased workloads of their staff’ (Brown et al. 2021: 154).

Other studies revealed different responses amongst school leaders. Chaseling et al. (2020), in their study of school leaders in New South Wales, found that amongst their respondents ‘principals drew on both proactive and reactive skills and approaches, prioritised open communication, proactively triaged and managed threats to their community, leveraged expertise and experience to support transition out of the crisis, and worked collaboratively’ (p. 167), a view also supported by 43 school leaders in the United States (McLeod & Dulsky 2021). Contextual and political factors during the pandemic often played upon the nature of leadership and affected the way leaders were able to lead their schools. This is seen, for example, in the study by Hulme et al. (2023), where respondents identified the pressures on their leadership exerted by the decision to re-open all schools in England for some pupils in June 2020. Hulme et al. (2023) reported that experienced headteachers ‘reported a sense of professional exposure and isolation’ (p. 171) and identified a mismatch between ‘high levels of notional empowerment . . . and high levels of professional trust in school leaders and teachers’ (p. 174).

Overall, the studies which focus upon the relationship between school leaders and their institutional colleagues suggest an alignment with the ‘relational’ approach to leadership in

times of crisis. This suggests clear implications for the ways in which school leaders operating in times of crisis moved on from initial sensemaking towards working with others to bring about solutions to the problems emerging from the complexities of the crisis.

Theme 2: Relationships With the Wider Community

The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged how schools and school leaders engage with their local communities and other stakeholders. While school leaders have always been concerned with developing positive and productive relationships with their communities, the pandemic has exacerbated some existing issues and highlighted new and different concerns. In this section, we explore two main themes, namely those of communication and wellbeing, with a third, equity, underpinning most elements of school community relations. Therefore, this section is divided into the two main themes as they became prominent throughout the literature gathered under the theme of relationships with community and stakeholders.

Communication

During the COVID-19 pandemic, headteachers and school leaders turned their attention more closely to their communities, particularly during the lockdown periods. Issues of equity and wellbeing came to the fore in new and complex ways, and issues of parental expectations of home learning became a prescient issue for school leaders. For instance, Longmuir's (2021) Australian-based study focused on the importance school leaders placed on the wellbeing of their school and local communities through the COVID-19 pandemic. Longmuir's qualitative study consisted of interviews with eight school leaders through 2020 where leaders reported an increased workload associated with the school-community relationship aspect of their role. Specifically, this included the need for school leaders to increase their 'presence' in their communities and become more attuned to what was happening outside the physical school walls. Important here was the notion of having a stable, calm and resilient demeanour (Longmuir 2021) in the face of the constant enquiries from parents about what was happening with the transition to online platforms and how the school was responding to the pandemic. Communication with parents and communities also needed to be clear, with new processes set up via 'check-in protocols'. Leaders undertook personal check-ins, dropped into online classes, ran online assemblies, and scheduled online events, signalling their care and compassion as a primary concern of their leadership.

Other studies (Al Fadala et al. 2021; Doll et al. 2021; Okilwa & Barnett 2021) found similar shifts in the role of school leaders in communicating with their school communities. For example, Okilwa and Barnett (2021), in their US-based study, found that some parents and students disconnected from schools as they struggled to balance their own lives with schooling expectations and responsibilities of learning from home. In response, some schools provided resources for parents and some districts provided 'hot spots' to allow students to submit work and access lessons and content. Further to this, and similar to the school leaders

in Longmuir's (2021) study, Okilwa and Barnett also found school leaders both increasing the amount of regular and timely communication with parents and school communities through a range of avenues, including moving newsletters from monthly to weekly, documenting parents and families' access to the internet and other resources, and increased communication and administration via Google classrooms.

Al Fadala et al.'s (2021) research in Rwanda also focused one of its themes specifically on the community around the school, seeking to understand how leaders worked to address issues of equity exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on their survey with 100 school leaders and 21 district and sector education officers along with interviews with senior education officials and 13 school leaders, teachers, students, and caregivers as a part of a series of school case studies, two issues arose within this overall theme: (a) the reaching out of leaders to families and caregivers and (b) the leveraging of communities and professionals from other sectors. Al Fadala et al. observed that a number of school leaders found innovative ways to reach out to families and worked closely with families to guide them in their children's learning. However, specific challenges involved students explaining they had limited parental support for learning, few clear expectations for engaging with families and caregivers, resourcing issues for reaching out to parents, the heavy domestic demands of teachers and school staff themselves, and access to parents in remote and rural areas. The inconsistency of approaches and responses indicated a need for support to facilitate engagement with local communities along with the role of other external stakeholders in this process, as well as setting up consistent guidelines and structures for these practices.

Across China, Korea, and South-East Asia, similar themes emerged in relation to the findings on school-community communication, typified by the findings of Doll, Ragan, Calnin, Mason and House (2021). For instance, the technological challenges were exacerbated in terms of both the shift to online learning platforms as well as different forms of communication required to engage parents and the local community, the inconsistency of responses and approaches by school leaders, and the vastly different parent and student experiences of the transition to online learning. Cottingham and Gallagher (2021) examined these issues from the level of the superintendency in the United States providing a look at the higher level of leadership and how superintendents were not particularly well placed to deal with a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. This research has clear implications for managing crises in complex political conditions as communications with different levels of government and communities were paramount during the early stages of COVID-19.

Managing Wellbeing

The wellbeing of school staff and communities was a huge issue for school leaders early in the COVID-19 pandemic and continues up to the present. Flack, Walker, Bickerstaff, Earle and Johnson (2021) conducted a large survey of primary and secondary principals in Australia (456 responses), with findings revealing how school communities overwhelmingly rallied together through the pandemic. In addition, school heads reported positive impacts

on teachers' professional practice – but negative impacts on their wellbeing. When it came to students, principals cited social isolation, a lack of routine and physical activity, with limited availability of in-home support for remote learning as big challenges. Finally, the survey revealed the critical dependence of schools on strong, effective leadership from their principals during a crisis. The pandemic forced principals to work harder, use existing resources in new ways, honing important skills.

Resilience was a key theme to emerge in some studies (e.g., Bagwell 2020; Flack et al. 2021; Reyes-Guerra et al. 2021), with Flack et al. (2021) finding powerful sources of resilience in school communities. Of note was the expansion of mental health services to school communities, a feeling of school communities becoming close as a result of the pandemic, a focus on culturally responsive communication to Indigenous communities in appropriate settings, and significant disparities in learning in low socio-economic status schools and communities. However, student and staff mental health was reported to suffer significantly because of the pandemic. The study by Reyes-Guerra, Maslin-Ostrowski, Barakat and Stefanovic (2021), while focused on leadership practices in the United States, also found the need for leading with flexibility, creativity, and care to help negotiate wellbeing and support issues. Other findings included how school leaders drew upon their individual reservoirs of shared leader qualities, such as personalized and pragmatic communication; showing resilience under pressure by tapping into their schools' strengths, including school context and in-house expertise; and making inter-school connections to develop structures and build social capital.

As a result of these challenges, some scholars have already called for solutions and different types of leadership approaches. For example, Bagwell (2020) has called for forms of adaptive leadership in the need to build resilience and forms of distributed leadership (also see Coquyt 2021). Perkins (2020) drew on research with Multi-Academy Trusts in the United Kingdom to make a case for recommendations specifically related to the use and implementation of technology in the form of 'technology leadership' and different leadership styles to support student learning at home. Sahito and Chachar (2021) discussed effective strategies to cope with these challenges and highlight the role of different stakeholders for managing educational sites effectively. Hollweck and Doucet (2020) made a case for the role of the pracademic as a way to rethink the future of schooling via a focus on professional capital, finding ways to develop teachers' individual knowledge and skills and supporting effective collaborative networks that include parents and the larger school community. Finally, Azorin (2020), drawing on the broader education system in Spain, argued that the pandemic offered an opportunity to refashion education: 'This is a unique opportunity to test the effectiveness of remote learning on a large scale' (p. 382) and to embed collaborative networks that have emerged through the pandemic.

Theme 3: School Leadership and Policy Engagement

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the COVID-19 pandemic spurred a plethora of articles on the international policy response. In the initial phase, these reported on immediate responses by governments and schools across the globe, including specific focus on addressing short-term policy challenges. More recently, attention has turned to longer-term crisis management responses, including identification of policy opportunities.

Short-Term Responses, Addressing Policy Challenges

Short-term government policy crisis management responses saw most governments and government departments relying heavily on advice from medical experts, including when it was considered safe to reopen schools, with educational professionals having much less influence on aspects such as alternative arrangements for learning (Sahlberg 2020). As governments made unprecedented health, welfare, and education policy decisions, some key decision-making processes transferred from local level to national level (Thomson et al. 2021).

Learning from home during periods of school closure led to a significant acceleration in procedures and practice for digital learning. A review of international and European countries' policy documents by Zancajo et al. (2022) highlighted that whilst policy did not substantially differ from the pre-pandemic digitalization push, the implementation timeframe certainly did. COVID-19 was 'a catalyst to accelerate preexisting digitization policies in education systems' (Zancajo et al. 2022: 119). No government timeframe would have accounted for that policy implementation in normal times. Strategies for remote education were prioritized with support for digital learning platforms and digital pedagogy made available like never before; digital assessment posing 'a real challenge to educational institutions' (Babbar & Gupta 2021: 476).

In addressing the short-term policy challenges, school leaders were charged with navigating tensions between accountability and autonomy; equity and excellence; the individual and the collective; and wellbeing and workload (Netolicky 2020). Digitalization exposed educational inequalities (Zancajo et al. 2022), leading to disproportionate learning loss (Chapman & Bell 2020). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD 2020a, 2020b) – in its *Trends Shaping Education Spotlight 21* – highlighted inequity, challenging governments to hold disadvantage at the heart of policies devised for 'a revised adaptive and responsive system' (Chapman & Bell 2020: 229). The World Bank – in its *COVID-19 Pandemic Shocks to Education and Policy Response Infographic* – identified learning poverty as one of the social costs impacting long-term, identifying three intersecting phases of coping, managing continuity, improving and accelerating which included a focus on building back better education systems (Chapman & Bell 2020). In such efforts, community involvement has been promoted, along with measures to address the specific needs of disadvantaged pupils and the disproportionate learning loss they have experienced. Governments will need to take care that the interests of

the Ed-Tech industry do not dominate future policy development or enactment (Zancajo et al. 2022).

Longer-Term Responses, Recognising Policy Opportunities

As reported by Ansell, Sørensen and Torfing (2020), longer-term government policy crisis management responses posed a different set of challenges to governments and government departments, who did have a body of research to draw from in relation to how to cope with complex problems, but which lacked a specific focus on turbulent problems and their impact on governance. They pointed out that COVID-19 challenged established bureaucratic systems and ways of working, any reliance on organizational stability, and the pre-ordained benefits of hierarchy and standardized practice. Ansell et al. (2020) also observed that strategic government and policy responses had to develop ‘dynamic resilience’, whilst finding new ways of working: embracing agility, creativity and adaptability; adapting through ‘building networks and partnerships with the private sector and civil society’ (p. 952). The longer-term governance challenge is how to ensure that the system is robust (rather than previous notions of being stable), so that it can ‘transform itself to achieve an agenda, function, or value’ (Ansell et al. 2020: 952).

Amongst the plethora of COVID-19 articles on long-term policy responses is a body of work focused specifically on education. Zancajo et al. (2022) provided a good example within the European context, extending their analysis beyond a singular focus on policy response to also analyse the types and patterns of change within policy responses, as well as the variation between countries’ policy responses. The interest of Zancajo et al. (2022) was in the different ways in which the COVID-19 crisis has been problematized, as well as how the characteristics of different education systems have affected the policy responses within each country’s system, finding ‘fewer between-countries variation than initially expected’ (p. 124).

Despite the challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic has posed, it has also brought with it the potential for long-term policy opportunities. The world cannot return to how it was before the pandemic and the decisions which governments make now ‘will have long-term consequences for the future of education’ (UNESCO 2020: 5). However, rather than embracing the opportunity for radical change, to date, the pandemic response has been to redefine existing rather than define new policy priorities, at best accelerating policy implementation. Moreover, the pre-COVID incremental policy implementation seems only to have been challenged on a short-term crisis-basis. According to Zancajo et al. (2022), three post-COVID priorities continue to dominate long-term national and international education policy priorities, with their policy implementation following established rather than new practice: (a) digitalization, which ‘almost monopolizes the focus of attention on education policy’ (p. 123), provides a good example of the way in which education systems have utilised pandemic responses to accelerate the implementation of an existing policy priority; (b) the equalities agenda has been highlighted through the inequality divide in educational

opportunities, although a paradigm shift in policy response has been lacking; and (c) upskilling the teaching profession continues, including the area of developing digital skills.

However, in overcoming the complexities of the pandemic, COVID-19 ‘has shown us that complexity also generates potent dynamism and multiple possibilities’ (UNESCO 2020: 22). Indeed, there are calls in the literature for a reimagining of education to address long-acknowledged issues, which would require significant change to policies and a renewal of organizations, with corresponding ‘bold and brave shifts in mindset’ (Sahlberg 2020: 359). It remains to be seen if radical long-term policy solutions – and their implementation budgets – will follow, such as with the redistribution of resources within and between countries to tackle inequalities. This seems unlikely, given the fiscal restraints that are already following the pandemic budget overspends: ‘Governments will need to resist pressures to constrain education expenditures in the future. . . . The pandemic has the power to undermine education for years to come, particularly in the most vulnerable communities, regions and countries’ (UNESCO 2020: 19). Moreover, governments appear to be following the pattern of previous crisis, with policy continuity or incremental policy change, neither of which lead to radical change: ‘The institutional characteristics of national education systems strategically mediate external pressures in the production of policy change’ (Zancajo et al. 2022: 114).

School Leadership in a Post-Pandemic World: Limitations, Recommendations, and Conclusions

This review study makes an important contribution to understanding educational leadership through the COVID-19 pandemic. However, this study has some limitations, as all review studies do. Given the limited publication timeframe included since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, this review has a substantial database of 80 publications. It should also be noted that a number of these articles did not draw on empirical research, especially those published in the early days of the pandemic, arguably capitalizing on the opportunity and a captive readership. This raises an issue for the field of educational leadership more generally, as there is a tendency to ‘jump’ onto the latest fad and trends, of which the COVID-19 pandemic appears to be another for opportune scholars. Furthermore, the attempt to ascribe a new ‘adjectival’ approach to educational leadership (Eacott 2013; Gunter 2012) via terms such as *crisis* leadership and *pandemic* leadership only serves to further weaken the profile of educational leadership research (Gorard 2005), especially when there remain serious questions to be asked whether education systems have genuinely changed as a result of the pandemic, or whether they are tending to revert back to pre-pandemic conditions and practices.

In this review, there is a mixture of articles from both professional magazines and reports as well as peer-reviewed articles, indicating a lack of a reliable knowledge base of evidence and research. There has since begun to emerge in recent months more research based on rigorous research methods. Notwithstanding the article search having been conducted by two

members of the research team to ensure reliability, we are aware, however, that even the most meticulous review may sometimes fail to cover the entire scope of studies on the most specific topics. Additionally, while we spent significant time and effort to minimize slip-ups, such as missing information or incorrect categorization during the research process, there could still potentially be some minor mistakes given the high volume of publications used in the analysis.

Notwithstanding the rapid development of school pandemic leadership scholarship in the past 2 years, which is practically following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the initial school closures worldwide in March 2020, this literature review has identified blank spots that need to be addressed, as well as areas that would benefit from further in-depth, empirical study. More empirical research is needed combining school-level educational leadership and crisis management, more specifically, the pandemic. A potentially useful line of inquiry might be to undertake a comparative analysis with pre-pandemic educational leadership literature to assess the validity of claims by the writers included in this review that advocate for a distinctiveness or 'newness' of educational leadership as a result of the pandemic. These claims need to be critically analyzed in relation to what has previously been written, for, at face value, it appears as though there are questions to be answered about whether this 'crisis' scholarship points to something new or different post-pandemic, or whether it is yet another a further de-contextualising account of leadership.

Although there is no single leadership style or practice that can be related to a crisis, in this case, a pandemic, there is also the need for both practitioners and policy makers to focus on and raise the awareness of contingency leadership. There is also the need for more research assessing the impact of the pandemic on school leaders, specifically for continuous professional development provision in terms of both professional and personal (i.e., mental health and wellbeing) needs in order to address the issue of headteacher retention and attrition in these turbulent times. Exploring the longer-term effects of the pandemic on school culture would also bring to light any potential 'positive' pandemic leadership practices that would stimulate education reform. An in-depth analysis of policy responses related to education provision at supranational, national, and regional levels is also needed in relation to its reception and enactment by the policy actors and subjects in schools. A further area of need is more comparative work across countries and contexts in addition to the in-depth studies and focus of particular countries and regions. Specifically, greater recognition needs to be given to the culturally situated nature of leadership practice – with a specific focus on the Global South – as we are still far from having a knowledge base from which to draw comparative understandings (Dimmock 2012). Moreover, in terms of methodological design, more methodological innovation can be employed via the application of mixed methods research, and also by moving away from the sole focus of interview and focus groups as the main data collection tools for empirical qualitative research.

COVID-19 has challenged school leadership: its practice within and beyond the school context; its relationships with the wider community and external stakeholders; and its reliance on established bureaucratic systems and ways of working. According to Gurr (2023),

it may well be that as the world is coming out of the pandemic, we might, for a short period, need to revert to a more comfortable time – our pre-pandemic way of doing things – so we can recuperate before we begin major change. (p. 13)

School leaders' reliance on organizational stability, hierarchy, and standardized practice was also challenged. Reflective practice was needed whilst responding to complex and demanding situations. The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged how schools and school leaders engage with their communities and wider stakeholders, exacerbating existing issues, highlighting new concerns. The literature in this review has highlighted how school leadership in such times of crisis relies heavily on communication, care, and compassion, facilitating engagement underpinned by clear guidelines and structures. The transition to online learning platforms provided a clear illustration of this, and of significant inequalities in provision and experience within and across countries around the globe. Resilience was a key theme to emerge from this literature review, with student and staff mental health suffering significantly through the pandemic.

COVID-19 has challenged established bureaucratic systems and ways of working. Such adaptive leadership requires resilience and a distributed leadership perspective. The pandemic offers an opportunity to reconsider what we hold dear in education and what kinds of educational leadership we need today and in the future. This will require brave and innovative policy at national and supranational levels. There are also clear implications for leadership development, in the ways in which school leaders approach their role as leaders in times of crisis. The relational approach to leadership highlighted in this study challenges some perspectives on leadership preparation, requiring leaders capable of moving from initial sensemaking to working with others to bring about solutions to problems emerging from the complexities of crisis. We plan to contribute to such discussions and look forward to the contributions of others in the field.

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International Studies in Educational Administration

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Book chapter

Gurr, D. M., & Drysdale, L. G. (2016). Australia: The Principal as Leader – A Review of Australian Principal Research, 2006–2013. In H. Ärlestig, C. Day & O. Johansson (Eds.), *A Decade of Research on School Principals: Cases from 24 countries* (pp. 187-209). Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer.

Conference paper/presentation

Gurr, D., & Nicolazzo, M. (2014). Leading Improvement in Literacy. Presentation at the Commonwealth Council for Educational Administration and Management Conference, Fredericton, Canada.

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