

EDUCATIONAL CRISIS MANAGEMENT: SCHOOL LEADERSHIP STRATEGIES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract: *The article shed lights on the COVID-19 that exposed significant vulnerabilities in education systems worldwide, particularly in countries lacking coordinated national strategies. It is mainly focused on the Israeli context, examining the ways used by the school principals to overcome the absence of comprehensive governmental guidance and to exercise critical leadership roles in managing the educational process. Through the lens of crisis management and educational leadership theory, the study analyses the challenges principals faced—including resource shortages, student disengagement, and emotional distress—and highlights their adaptive strategies in maintaining learning continuity and social support. The article concludes with policy recommendations aimed at strengthening school-based crisis preparedness and empowering educational leaders for future disruptions.*

Keywords: *Educational leadership, Crisis management, COVID-19, School principals, Israeli education system*

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought forth unprecedented challenges across economic, social, and educational domains. In Israel, as in many countries, school closures, prolonged lockdowns, and the sudden shift to remote learning severely disrupted the education system. These disruptions not only widened pre-existing educational gaps but also exposed deep-rooted inequalities among students from different socioeconomic backgrounds.

While national authorities struggled to establish a coordinated and effective response, the burden of crisis management often fell on school principals. In the absence of a comprehensive national strategy, principals were required to demonstrate initiative, flexibility, and resilience in leading their schools through uncertainty. Their role extended beyond administrative duties to include crisis navigation, emotional support for students and staff, and the implementation of adaptive teaching strategies under constantly shifting circumstances.

This paper explores the role of school principals as key actors in educational crisis management during the COVID-19 pandemic. It highlights how local leadership compensated for gaps in national policy, and presents examples of innovative, school-based strategies aimed at supporting students, maintaining engagement, and mitigating learning loss. Understanding

the actions and decisions of school principals during this period offers critical insight into the importance of school-level autonomy and preparedness in times of crisis.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN TIMES OF CRISIS

In the context of modern educational systems, school leadership plays a critical role not only in maintaining organisational structure but also in guiding institutions through times of disruption. Crisis situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic have emphasized the necessity for school principals to act as strategic leaders, capable of adapting swiftly to uncertain and rapidly evolving conditions.

Crisis Leadership in Education

Crisis leadership is defined as the ability to lead effectively under conditions of uncertainty, urgency, and complexity (Boin et al., 2005). In the educational context, this involves not only maintaining operational continuity but also addressing the academic, social, and emotional needs of students and staff. School leaders must be able to navigate unpredictability, make timely decisions, and communicate clearly and compassionately with all stakeholders.

In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, educational leaders were required to move beyond routine management and adopt a more dynamic and responsive leadership style. This included implementing health protocols, transitioning to remote learning, supporting vulnerable students, and managing increased stress levels among teachers and families (Harris & Jones, 2020).

Transformational and Distributed Leadership

Two major leadership models are particularly relevant during crises:

- ***Transformational leadership***, which emphasizes vision, motivation, and building strong relationships, enables principals to inspire their school communities and foster a sense of collective purpose (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005).
- ***Distributed leadership*** involves delegating responsibilities across a team of staff members, encouraging collaborative decision-making, and increasing institutional resilience. This model proved particularly useful during the pandemic, as principals relied on leadership teams to implement complex logistical and pedagogical changes (Spillane, 2006).

Research shows that effective school leaders during the COVID-19 crisis adopted a hybrid approach, combining these models to provide both strategic vision and operational adaptability (OECD, 2021).

Autonomy and Local Decision-Making

In countries where principals were granted greater autonomy—such as Finland or parts of Canada—schools demonstrated greater agility in responding to the pandemic. In Israel, while national guidelines were delayed or inconsistent, some principals took proactive steps to address gaps, such as redistributing staff, initiating outreach to dropouts, or establishing emotional support frameworks. These bottom-up initiatives illustrate the importance of empowering local leadership as a pillar of educational resilience.

Leading Beyond Instruction

Crisis leadership in education also involves *non-instructional roles*. During the pandemic, principals were responsible for coordinating food and device distribution, identifying students at risk of disengagement, and maintaining communication with parents and local authorities. These responsibilities underline the evolving nature of school leadership, especially in high-stakes situations where well-being is inseparable from learning outcomes.

LEADERSHIP-DRIVEN STRATEGIES IN TIMES OF DISRUPTION

During the COVID-19 pandemic, school principals found themselves navigating uncharted territory, often without clear national guidelines or sufficient resources. Their ability to lead adaptively became essential to maintaining learning continuity and emotional support for students and staff. While education ministries developed general frameworks, it was the local leadership that transformed strategies into actionable plans on the ground.

1. Digital Equity Through Local Action

Faced with an urgent need for digital access, many school leaders took direct steps to close the digital divide. This included reallocating school budgets to purchase laptops and tablets, partnering with local businesses and NGOs, and organizing parent training sessions on digital tools. In systems where school leadership had greater decision-making autonomy, digital inclusion was addressed more rapidly, as principals played a key role in leveraging local partnerships and making pragmatic decisions about infrastructure and training (OECD, 2021).

2. Emotional Support and Well-being Initiatives

Recognizing the profound psychological impact of the pandemic on students, many principals created support structures including online counselling, wellness check-ins, and peer-support programs. These initiatives often emerged from collaboration with school psychologists, counselors, and community volunteers. According to CASEL (2021), school leadership played a central role in embedding social-emotional learning (SEL) into daily practices during the crisis, with the most resilient schools being those where principals gave equal priority to emotional safety and academic recovery.

3. Hybrid and Flexible Scheduling Models

Principals in Israel and worldwide introduced hybrid learning models tailored to the needs of their student populations. These included rotating attendance, flexible start times, and small-group instruction. According to the World Bank (2021), such models were most successful when implemented by agile and responsive school leaders who were attuned to the specific needs of their communities, as the effectiveness of hybrid learning largely depended on the ability of local leadership to ensure equitable access and participation.

4. Teacher Empowerment and Professional Development

In many schools, principals acted as instructional leaders, providing professional development and mentoring in real time. With limited national support, school-based training initiatives emerged, focusing on digital tools, online engagement strategies, and student monitoring systems. These efforts reflected distributed leadership practices, which during the pandemic contributed significantly to enhancing teacher confidence and fostering innovation in classroom management (Harris & Jones, 2020).

5. Community Engagement and Crisis Communication

Effective principals established strong communication channels with parents and community organizations. They regularly updated families through newsletters, messaging platforms, and virtual meetings, building trust and shared responsibility. According to ISTE (2021), this transparent and frequent communication by school leaders played a key role in creating a sense of stability during a highly unstable period and was essential to sustaining student participation in remote learning.

CHALLENGES FACED BY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed multiple layers of vulnerability within national education systems. While much attention has been given to the challenges students and teachers faced, school principals bore the primary responsibility for navigating the institutional response. Their role extended beyond instructional leadership, encompassing logistical coordination, crisis communication, and social-emotional support—all under conditions of uncertainty and limited guidance.

1. Lack of Centralized Strategy and Policy Delays

One of the most pressing challenges reported by school leaders was the lack of a clear, consistent national strategy during the early phases of the pandemic. Many principals were left waiting for updates that arrived too late or were too general to address their specific school contexts. In Israel, for example, the Ministry of Education did not provide a comprehensive long-term recovery plan, forcing principals to independently assess needs and implement support mechanisms. This absence of structured national direction reflects a broader disconnection between strategic national goals and operational priorities in crisis contexts.

As Angelov (2024) argues, national interests must be operationalized through coherent policy and effective institutional coordination. In the case of education during the pandemic,

such coordination was often missing, creating a vacuum that local leadership had to urgently fill by managing both strategic and tactical responses on their own.

2. Resource Gaps and Operational Constraints

Principals also faced significant material constraints—limited access to digital equipment, protective supplies, and mental health professionals. In many cases, they had to repurpose school budgets to provide basic technological access for disadvantaged students or to hire additional staff to implement blended learning. Some schools established improvised learning hubs for students with no internet access at home. These decisions required not only creativity but also the ability to navigate bureaucratic procedures under pressure.

3. Staff Management Under Pressure

The sudden shift to remote or hybrid models placed immense pressure on teaching staff, many of whom lacked the training to manage digital tools effectively. Principals had to provide just-in-time professional development, manage teacher burnout, and resolve conflicts related to workload distribution. Harris and Jones (2020) emphasize that the success of school operations during COVID-19 depended significantly on leadership capacity to mobilize and support teachers during constant change.

4. Student Dropouts and Engagement

The phenomenon of hidden dropouts—students who were technically enrolled but failed to engage meaningfully with learning—became widespread during lockdowns. In many low-income communities, principals reported disengagement rates of over 50%. Without national dropout-tracking mechanisms, many school leaders developed their own systems for monitoring attendance, initiating phone outreach, and coordinating with local authorities to locate at-risk students.

5. Mental Health and Emotional Crisis

The psychological toll of the pandemic on students was profound. Principals were often the first to recognize signs of emotional distress among students and staff. They faced the challenge of responding to mental health needs in systems where access to professional support was extremely limited. Some schools created informal support groups, peer-counseling circles, or partnered with NGOs to offer tele-counseling services.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE

CRISIS PREPAREDNESS

The COVID-19 pandemic has served as a stress test for education systems around the world, and in Israel, it exposed the fragility of top-down coordination in moments of acute disruption. Despite the absence of a comprehensive national strategy, many school principals

stepped into leadership voids with courage and innovation. However, the success of individual schools cannot be left to chance or personal initiative alone.

For Israel's education system to be better prepared for future emergencies, systemic reforms are needed to reinforce the resilience, autonomy, and support structures for school-level leadership.

1. Strengthening School Leadership Autonomy with Accountability

Principals need clearly defined autonomy in budget allocation, staffing flexibility, and instructional innovation—especially during emergencies. However, this autonomy must be accompanied by robust support mechanisms and data-driven accountability frameworks. As shown during COVID-19, many principals succeeded not because of the system, but in spite of it. Future policy should formalize the space for local decision-making, including contingency planning at the school level, by institutionalizing the ability of school leaders to act independently and strategically rather than relying on improvised responses (OECD, 2021).

2. Institutionalizing Emergency Preparedness Protocols

At present, Israeli schools lack standardized emergency plans specific to education. While some have general safety procedures for earthquakes or fire, few were prepared for the pedagogical, psychological, and logistical upheaval caused by COVID-19. The Ministry of Education should mandate the development of school-based crisis protocols, including plans for hybrid learning transitions, student outreach, and community coordination.

Angelov (2024) emphasizes that national strategies must link idealistic goals with executable frameworks:

“Without an operational framework aligned with national priorities, strategic goals remain aspirational and disconnected from institutional practice” (Angelov, 2024, p. 529).

3. Investing in Crisis-Oriented Professional Development

Leadership during a crisis requires distinct competencies—emotional intelligence, strategic communication, adaptive thinking, and systems management. Policymakers must develop training programmes specifically focused on crisis leadership in education. These should include scenario planning, media engagement, trauma-informed practices, and digital transformation skills.

ISTE (2021) and Harris & Jones (2020) both highlight how well-prepared leaders navigated the COVID-19 crisis more effectively than their peers.

4. Equity-Driven Funding Models

The pandemic disproportionately impacted students in peripheral areas and from low-income backgrounds. To correct and prevent deepening educational inequalities, Israel must accelerate the implementation of **differential budgeting** policies. These should include flexible school-level funding that empowers principals to respond dynamically to emerging needs—be it hiring social workers, purchasing equipment, or running supplementary programmes.

As the World Bank (2021) notes, recovery without targeted investment will reproduce, rather than repair, systemic inequities.

5. Data Systems for Real-Time Monitoring

Principals frequently reported a lack of relevant data on dropout trends, student engagement, and household digital access. Establishing real-time, school-level monitoring systems would allow faster interventions and more accurate targeting of support measures. These systems must be user-friendly, accessible at the school level, and integrated with community and municipal social services.

Conclusion of the Analytical Section

In preparing for future disruptions—whether pandemics, wars, or environmental crises—Israel’s education system must embed crisis readiness into its strategic DNA. This includes empowering school leaders with both autonomy and tools, ensuring flexible resource allocation, and viewing schools not only as sites of learning, but as pillars of community resilience.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly transformed the educational experience for students, teachers, and school leaders alike. In Israel, the crisis magnified existing inequalities and placed enormous demands on the shoulders of school principals, who were often left to navigate complex challenges with limited support.

This article has explored the multifaceted role of school leadership during the pandemic, revealing the critical importance of flexibility, initiative, and community engagement. Principals became not only managers, but also crisis coordinators, emotional supporters, and advocates for their students and staff.

The lessons learned during this period must not be forgotten. School leadership must be positioned at the heart of educational resilience. Preparing for future disruptions requires intentional policy reform, meaningful professional development, and structural empowerment at the school level.

Ultimately, strong and responsive leadership is the key to sustaining educational equity and continuity during times of uncertainty. As education systems continue to evolve, the ability to lead with vision, empathy, and adaptability will remain essential for navigating both crises and opportunities for renewal.

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