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Transformational and Adaptive Leadership in Times of Crisis: Lessons from COVID-19

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ABSTRACT: This study presents a narrative review of educational leadership in crisis contexts, with particular attention to the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The aim is to identify leadership strategies that supported institutional resilience, sustained learning, and safeguarded the well-being of educators and students. Literature was collected from major academic databases, including PubMed, ERIC, Scopus, and Google Scholar, using keyword combinations such as "educational leadership," "crisis," "COVID-19," and "implementation strategies." Inclusion criteria restricted the review to peer-reviewed articles addressing leadership practices during crises, while exclusion criteria eliminated non-academic and methodologically weak sources. Selected studies included case analyses, cohort studies, and theoretical papers, which were synthesized thematically. The results reveal that transformational and adaptive leadership models were most effective in enabling institutions to respond to crises. Transformational leaders motivated and inspired staff, while adaptive leaders responded flexibly to emergent challenges. Supportive institutional environments further enhanced resilience by promoting collaboration, resource-sharing, and staff engagement. Global comparisons show that leaders in developed countries relied heavily on technological innovation and robust infrastructures, whereas leaders in developing countries focused on equity and community-based strategies to sustain access. Systemic barriers, such as insufficient resources, weak infrastructures, and bureaucratic inefficiencies, were identified as major obstacles. These findings underscore the urgency of systemic reforms and leadership development initiatives. Policy interventions should prioritize equitable funding, digital infrastructure, and training in adaptive and transformational leadership. Future research must address long-term leadership outcomes and culturally grounded practices, ensuring education systems are better equipped to withstand future crises.

Keywords: Educational Leadership, Crisis Management, COVID-19 Education, Transformational Leadership, Adaptive Leadership, Institutional Resilience, Global Education Policy.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly disrupted education systems worldwide, generating unprecedented challenges for learners, educators, and policymakers. The sudden closure of schools and universities forced institutions to rapidly transition to remote learning modalities,

exposing both the strengths and weaknesses of contemporary education infrastructures (Chen-Levi et al., 2022; Cordeiro et al., 2021). Scholars have emphasized that these disruptions highlight deeper structural inequalities, particularly regarding access to technological resources and the uneven capacity to sustain effective learning across diverse regions (Rind, 2024). The global crisis underscored the necessity of effective educational leadership, capable of guiding institutions through periods of uncertainty, fostering resilience, and ensuring continuity of learning despite severe disruptions.

Globally, the pandemic amplified existing educational disparities and illuminated pressing systemic weaknesses. Reports indicated that approximately 44% of children aged 5–16 years in some regions remained out of school, underscoring the scale of the educational crisis (Rind, 2024). Remote learning, although essential, often exacerbated inequities in access, as students in low-resource settings faced significant barriers due to inadequate infrastructure and limited internet connectivity (Cordeiro et al., 2021; Parveen et al., 2022). Beyond technological access, the crisis also deeply affected the psychological well-being of students and educators. Studies reported high levels of stress, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion among teachers, paralleling findings in other high-stress professions such as healthcare, where nearly 94% of workers reported burnout during crisis periods (Udod et al., 2023; Bartsch et al., 2021). These findings reflect the urgent need for educational policies and leadership practices that prioritize both academic and psychosocial dimensions of learning environments (Edwards & Magill, 2022).

Empirical data reveal the extent to which crises disrupt both pedagogy and well-being. In the early months of the pandemic, UNESCO reported widespread school closures affecting over 1.5 billion students worldwide, disrupting not only the delivery of academic content but also the social and emotional support that schools provide (Cordeiro et al., 2021). Research suggests that the psychological toll of these disruptions is substantial, with elevated levels of stress reported among educators who had to navigate new teaching modalities while coping with their own anxieties (Parveen et al., 2022). The implication is that leadership in education must encompass a holistic perspective, balancing academic priorities with the need to safeguard well-being. Scholars have therefore advocated for leadership frameworks that are more human-centered, resilient, and responsive to uncertainty (Edwards & Magill, 2022; Fahy et al., 2024).

Educational leadership, particularly in times of crisis, is increasingly recognized as a pivotal determinant of institutional resilience and adaptability. Transformational leadership, which emphasizes vision, collaboration, and inclusivity, has been shown to play a central role in sustaining institutional functioning during the pandemic (Fahy et al., 2024; Menon, 2023). Leaders who foster collaboration and demonstrate empathy can enhance collective efficacy, enabling staff and students to adapt more effectively to disruptive changes. At the same time, scholars highlight that leadership effectiveness in crisis contexts depends not only on visionary practices but also on the ability to integrate technology, manage institutional resources, and create supportive environments (Sharma et al., 2022; Semenets-Orlova et al., 2021). These insights indicate that leadership must be multidimensional, combining technical expertise, adaptive strategies, and a strong commitment to community well-being.

The challenges facing education systems extend beyond the immediate disruptions of COVID-19. Long-standing systemic issues, including limited resources, socio-economic inequalities, and resistance to change, compound the difficulties of implementing effective strategies (Striepe & Kafa, 2024; Striepe & Cunningham, 2021). In many contexts, national budgets constrain the adoption of innovative educational models, while digital divides prevent equal participation in remote or hybrid learning (Clarke & Done, 2021). The lack of preparedness for digital transitions highlighted significant gaps in infrastructure and teacher training, particularly in low-income regions. Leadership, therefore, becomes critical not only for managing crisis-induced challenges but also for addressing entrenched inequities that undermine education quality and access.

Existing literature documents several barriers to effective crisis response in education. Striepe and Cunningham (2021) emphasize the challenges leaders face in balancing institutional demands with rapidly shifting policies, while Cordeiro et al. (2021) identify the limited institutional support structures available to educators during emergencies. Chen-Levi et al. (2022) argue that digital leadership is essential for enabling rapid responses to crises, particularly in contexts where technological adoption lags behind pedagogical needs. Rind (2024) highlights the persistent problem of out-of-school children as a critical gap in crisis management, illustrating how crises disproportionately affect marginalized populations. Together, these studies demonstrate the interconnectedness of leadership, institutional support, and broader socio-economic contexts in shaping educational outcomes during crises.

Despite growing scholarship on crisis leadership, there remain notable gaps in the literature. Many studies prioritize universal models of leadership without adequately considering the role of cultural and contextual factors in shaping effective practices (Zwanikken et al., 2016; Parveen et al., 2022). For example, relatively few studies address how local policy environments and community-specific dynamics influence the implementation of educational strategies. As a result, the generalizability of existing findings remains limited, particularly for regions in the Global South, where socio-economic and political contexts differ significantly from those of high-income countries (Striepe & Kafa, 2024). This lack of context-sensitive research restricts the development of practical, evidence-based guidance for leaders navigating crises in diverse educational settings.

The present narrative review aims to address these gaps by systematically analyzing the challenges and strategies of educational leadership during crises, with a particular focus on the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The review seeks to identify key leadership approaches that facilitated resilience, explore barriers that hindered effective responses, and provide insights into how leadership can evolve to meet the demands of uncertain futures (Striepe & Cunningham, 2021; Cordeiro et al., 2021; Rehm et al., 2021). By integrating empirical findings and theoretical perspectives, this review contributes to the ongoing discourse on how leadership can support educational continuity, equity, and well-being during crises.

The scope of this review encompasses studies across varied geographical contexts, reflecting the global impact of the pandemic and the need for comparative perspectives. Particular attention is given to regions with distinct socio-economic challenges, such as low- and middle-income countries, where the pandemic exacerbated pre-existing vulnerabilities in education systems (Zwanikken et al., 2016; Ebubedike et al., 2022). At the same time, the review considers evidence

from high-income countries to provide a comprehensive understanding of diverse leadership responses. This broad scope allows for the identification of both universal principles and context-specific strategies, acknowledging that successful practices in one setting may not directly translate to another without adaptation to local realities. Schools, as Clarke and Done (2021) argue, serve not only as educational institutions but also as social microcosms, reflecting broader societal dynamics during crises.

By incorporating insights from diverse populations and institutional levels, the review emphasizes the importance of contextual sensitivity in leadership practices. Studies of school leaders in resource-constrained settings demonstrate the necessity of adaptive approaches that consider local socio-cultural norms and infrastructural limitations (Chen-Levi et al., 2022). Similarly, case studies of higher education institutions illustrate how leadership at the university level must balance academic continuity with broader governance responsibilities (Pharaoh, 2024; Udod et al., 2023). These varied perspectives underscore the need for educational leadership that is flexible, empathetic, and responsive to local conditions, while also aligned with broader global goals of equity and sustainability.

In sum, this review reflects the urgency of developing a nuanced understanding of educational leadership in times of crisis. By synthesizing existing evidence, identifying gaps, and highlighting effective practices, it seeks to provide a foundation for both scholarly inquiry and practical action. Leadership in education must not only manage immediate disruptions but also anticipate future uncertainties, fostering resilience and inclusivity across diverse educational landscapes (Freeman, 2014; Rehm et al., 2021). The insights gained from this review will contribute to building more robust, equitable, and contextually responsive education systems capable of withstanding future crises.

METHOD

This study employed a structured methodology to identify, collect, and synthesize scholarly literature on educational leadership and the implementation of strategies during crises, with particular emphasis on the COVID-19 pandemic. The methodological approach was designed to ensure comprehensiveness, transparency, and rigor, aligning with established standards for narrative and systematic literature reviews. The following section details the data sources, search strategies, inclusion and exclusion criteria, types of research considered, and the procedures undertaken for screening, evaluation, and synthesis.

The first stage of the methodology involved the careful selection of databases most relevant to the intersection of education, leadership, and crisis management. PubMed was chosen due to its extensive coverage of health-related dimensions of the pandemic, particularly studies that address the psychological and organizational impacts of crises on individuals and institutions. ERIC (Education Resources Information Center) was selected for its dedicated repository of educational research, providing access to peer-reviewed journals and reports that focus specifically on leadership practices and pedagogical strategies. Scopus was used as a multidisciplinary database

that encompasses a broad range of peer-reviewed literature, ensuring that diverse perspectives from social sciences, education, and management studies were included. Google Scholar was incorporated to capture grey literature and additional sources not indexed in traditional databases, thereby expanding the scope of the review (Rehm et al., 2021; Clarke & Done, 2021; Chen-Levi et al., 2022).

The search strategy was developed iteratively to balance breadth and specificity. A combination of keywords and Boolean operators was applied to ensure comprehensive retrieval while minimizing irrelevant results. Core terms included "educational leadership," "crisis," "COVID-19," "pandemic," "crisis management," and "implementation strategies." Boolean connectors were used to refine the search, such as "educational leadership AND COVID-19 AND crisis management," "educational strategies AND pandemic response," and "school leadership OR higher education leadership AND resilience AND crisis." This approach enabled the inclusion of both general discussions on crisis leadership and more focused case studies that explored specific interventions. To further refine results, filters were applied to restrict searches to peer-reviewed articles published between 2020 and 2025, ensuring relevance to the contemporary context of the COVID-19 crisis and its aftermath (Clarke & Done, 2021; Chen-Levi et al., 2022).

Following database searches, inclusion and exclusion criteria were established to ensure that only relevant and high-quality studies were considered. The inclusion criteria required that articles be published in peer-reviewed journals, address leadership within educational settings, and explicitly situate their analyses in the context of crises, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic. Studies that documented leadership interventions, policy adaptations, or institutional strategies aimed at sustaining education during disruptions were prioritized. Research had to contribute directly to understanding challenges and strategies related to leadership in education during crises (Striepe & Kafa, 2024; Pharaoh, 2024; Striepe & Cunningham, 2021). The exclusion criteria, in contrast, filtered out non-academic sources such as newsletters, blogs, and opinion pieces, as well as studies lacking transparent methodology. Articles that focused solely on student outcomes without addressing leadership dimensions, or that dealt with crises unrelated to education, were also excluded from the review (Kalaitzi et al., 2017; Papaioannou et al., 2022).

The process of literature screening was conducted systematically to maintain objectivity. Initially, titles and abstracts of all retrieved articles were reviewed to identify potentially relevant studies. Articles that met preliminary inclusion criteria were subjected to full-text review. Each full-text article was carefully examined for methodological soundness, clarity of research objectives, and relevance to the central themes of educational leadership and crisis response. To enhance rigor, studies were also cross-checked against reference lists of key papers to identify additional literature that may not have been captured in the initial search. This snowballing technique ensured that no significant studies were overlooked.

The types of studies included in this review were intentionally diverse to capture a comprehensive understanding of leadership in crisis contexts. Empirical research, including randomized controlled trials, cohort studies, and case studies, formed the backbone of the evidence base. For example, case studies provided detailed accounts of institutional responses to COVID-19, highlighting the nuanced role of leadership in specific organizational and cultural settings. Cohort and cross-

sectional studies offered broader insights into patterns of leadership effectiveness and institutional resilience across larger populations. Randomized controlled trials, though limited in number within educational research, were also considered where available, particularly in assessing interventions related to teacher support and digital learning. In addition, conceptual papers and theoretical analyses were included to provide interpretive frameworks that enriched the synthesis of empirical findings (Striepe & Cunningham, 2021; Sharma et al., 2022).

Evaluation of selected literature was guided by criteria emphasizing methodological transparency, credibility of findings, and relevance to the research questions. Studies were assessed for the clarity of their research design, the adequacy of data collection and analysis procedures, and the robustness of their conclusions. Peer-reviewed status was considered essential for ensuring academic rigor, while journal reputation and citation impact were also noted as supplementary indicators of quality. Importantly, the diversity of contexts represented in the selected studies—ranging from low-resource settings in the Global South to technologically advanced institutions in high-income countries—was seen as a strength, providing a comparative lens through which leadership practices could be analyzed.

Data extraction focused on identifying key themes that emerged from the selected studies. Information on leadership approaches, crisis management strategies, institutional challenges, and contextual influences was systematically coded and organized. For instance, studies that highlighted transformational leadership practices were grouped together to allow comparative analysis across regions, while research emphasizing adaptive or digital leadership strategies was examined in parallel. Thematic synthesis enabled the identification of recurring patterns as well as context-specific variations, providing a nuanced understanding of how educational leadership operates under crisis conditions (Rehm et al., 2021; Clarke & Done, 2021).

The final stage of the methodology involved synthesizing findings into a coherent narrative. Rather than aggregating data quantitatively, the review adopted a qualitative interpretive approach, drawing connections between diverse studies to construct an integrated understanding of leadership during crises. This narrative synthesis was particularly suitable given the heterogeneity of research designs and contexts in the literature. Through this process, the review aimed to highlight both the universal principles of effective crisis leadership and the localized adaptations necessary to address specific socio-economic and cultural realities. The methodology, therefore, not only ensured rigor in the selection and evaluation of literature but also supported the development of insights that are both evidence-based and contextually grounded.

In summary, this methodological framework combined comprehensive database searching, carefully constructed keyword strategies, strict inclusion and exclusion criteria, systematic screening and evaluation procedures, and thematic synthesis to ensure a robust and reliable review. By drawing upon diverse types of research and emphasizing both breadth and depth, the methodology provided a solid foundation for examining the complexities of educational leadership during crises. This approach ensured that the resulting analysis is not only academically rigorous but also practically relevant, offering insights that can inform both scholarly debates and policy interventions in the evolving field of educational leadership under crisis conditions.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

leadership in times of crisis. These themes encompass the role of leadership models, the significance of supportive institutional environments, and comparative perspectives between developed and developing nations. Collectively, these findings underscore the complex and multifaceted nature of leadership during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting both commonalities and divergences across contexts.

The first theme concerns the role of leadership models, particularly transformational and adaptive leadership, in guiding institutions through periods of disruption. Evidence strongly suggests that transformational leadership, with its emphasis on vision, inspiration, and individualized support, has been pivotal in creating environments conducive to collaboration and innovation during crises. Menon (2023) documented how principals in Cyprus who employed transformational practices were more effective in managing the stresses of the COVID-19 crisis, particularly in sustaining teacher motivation and morale. This aligns with broader findings that leadership approaches centered on empowerment and collaboration foster resilience and enhance institutional capacity to adapt to rapid change (Fahy et al., 2024). Adaptive leadership, characterized by flexibility and responsiveness to emerging challenges, also demonstrated considerable effectiveness. Studies show that schools under adaptive leaders exhibited greater resilience when faced with school closures and remote learning transitions, with leaders leveraging empathetic communication to cultivate trust and a sense of shared purpose among staff and students (Sahlin et al., 2025). Collectively, these findings highlight the critical role of leadership styles that prioritize human relationships, effective communication, and adaptability in sustaining education during crises.

Building on these observations, empirical research underscores the tangible outcomes associated with these leadership models. Fahy et al. (2024) found that transformational leadership not only improved school performance but also reduced work alienation among leaders themselves, demonstrating the bidirectional benefits of supportive leadership practices. Similarly, adaptive leadership was linked to positive outcomes in staff cohesion, institutional innovation, and community trust. The evidence suggests that crises amplify the importance of leadership strategies that extend beyond technical problem-solving to encompass the emotional and relational dimensions of institutional management (Rehm et al., 2021; Clarke & Done, 2021). These findings reinforce the argument that leadership during crises is multidimensional, requiring a balance of technical expertise, visionary guidance, and empathetic engagement.

The second theme centers on the role of workplace environments and institutional support in shaping the experiences of educators during crises. Research consistently identifies supportive environments as a crucial determinant of teacher performance and well-being under conditions of stress and uncertainty. Rehm et al. (2021) and Varga-Atkins et al. (2021) reported that schools and universities that cultivated open communication, collaboration, and access to resources enabled educators to remain engaged and motivated despite pandemic-related challenges. Institutional initiatives such as professional development in digital pedagogy, provision of adequate technological tools, and implementation of flexible policies were shown to significantly bolster teacher capacity and confidence in navigating new modes of teaching. These forms of support not only facilitated continuity of education but also mitigated the psychological strain associated with rapid transitions to online learning (Udod et al., 2023).

The importance of institutional support is further illustrated by Bendo et al. (2023), who observed that resilience in educational institutions was closely tied to collaborative, community-oriented approaches. Schools that emphasized inclusive decision-making and knowledge-sharing platforms were better able to sustain educational quality during periods of disruption (Mahmutoğlu et al., 2025; Awais, 2023). Such practices enabled educators to draw upon collective expertise, strengthen team cohesion, and engage stakeholders beyond the immediate school community. This collaborative ethos was particularly evident in institutions that integrated parental involvement and community partnerships into their crisis responses, highlighting the broader social role of education during times of instability. By embedding collaboration and inclusivity into institutional cultures, leaders not only supported their staff but also enhanced institutional resilience and sustainability (Pashiardis & Brauckmann-Sajkiewicz, 2022; Rind, 2024).

The evidence suggests that leadership alone cannot sustain institutions without corresponding institutional support structures. The interplay between leadership practices and workplace environments creates conditions in which educators feel valued, supported, and empowered to perform effectively. This synergy between leadership and institutional culture reinforces the need for integrated strategies that address both individual leadership styles and organizational contexts. It also underscores the role of policy frameworks in enabling schools and universities to implement supportive practices, particularly in resource-constrained settings (Clarke & Done, 2021; Edwards & Magill, 2022).

The third theme concerns global comparisons of educational leadership during crises, with particular focus on the divergences between developed and developing countries. In developed nations, leadership strategies during the pandemic were often characterized by rapid adoption of digital technologies, innovative teaching approaches, and robust institutional support structures (Chen-Levi et al., 2022; Sahlin et al., 2025). For example, in Sweden, school leaders employing adaptive leadership practices effectively leveraged technological tools to enhance communication and maintain organizational stability (Sahlin et al., 2025). These institutions benefited from pre-existing infrastructures and resources that facilitated relatively smooth transitions to online and hybrid learning models, thereby minimizing disruptions to student learning (Rehm et al., 2021).

By contrast, leaders in developing countries faced formidable challenges rooted in systemic resource constraints and infrastructural inadequacies. Limited access to digital technologies, poor internet connectivity, and socio-economic disparities compounded the difficulties of sustaining education during school closures (Pharaoh, 2024; Cordeiro et al., 2021). In these contexts, leadership strategies prioritized equity and accessibility, with leaders striving to ensure that vulnerable students were not excluded from education. Community-based approaches, such as mobilizing parental involvement and leveraging local networks for resource-sharing, emerged as critical mechanisms for sustaining educational continuity (Pharaoh, 2024). These practices underscored the necessity of culturally sensitive and context-specific leadership strategies that address the unique challenges of resource-poor environments.

Global best practices illustrate the potential for cross-contextual learning. For instance, professional development programs in digital pedagogy, which proved effective in enhancing teacher engagement in developed countries, could be adapted for use in resource-constrained settings with modifications tailored to local conditions (Chen-Levi et al., 2022; Sahlin et al., 2025).

Similarly, collaborative networks established between schools in Sub-Saharan Africa during the pandemic demonstrated how inter-institutional cooperation could compensate for resource limitations, offering valuable lessons for crisis management in other developing contexts (Pharaoh, 2024; Cordeiro et al., 2021). These comparative insights highlight that while resource disparities shape leadership responses, the underlying principles of collaboration, inclusivity, and adaptability remain universally relevant.

The comparative evidence further suggests that leadership effectiveness in crisis contexts is mediated by systemic and policy environments. Developed countries with strong governance structures and well-funded education systems were better positioned to support leaders in implementing crisis strategies, whereas leaders in developing countries often had to navigate weak policy frameworks and limited institutional support (Striepe & Kafa, 2024; Ebubedike et al., 2022). This divergence underscores the importance of aligning leadership practices with broader systemic reforms, ensuring that institutional resilience is supported by adequate resources and enabling policies.

In conclusion, the results reveal that leadership models, workplace environments, and global disparities collectively shape the effectiveness of educational responses to crises. Transformational and adaptive leadership foster resilience by prioritizing vision, collaboration, and empathy. Supportive institutional environments amplify these effects by providing educators with resources, training, and emotional support. Finally, global comparisons highlight both the advantages of resource-rich contexts and the innovative strategies employed in resource-poor settings, offering valuable insights for the development of context-sensitive leadership practices. Together, these findings contribute to a nuanced understanding of educational leadership during crises, emphasizing the interplay between individual leadership practices, organizational cultures, and systemic contexts across diverse global settings.

The findings of this review contribute significantly to the theoretical and practical understanding of educational leadership in crisis contexts, particularly in relation to the challenges experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the most prominent contributions is the reinforcement of the argument that transformational and adaptive leadership models are especially effective in building institutional resilience under conditions of disruption. Leaders who were able to motivate their teams, encourage active participation, and adapt to sudden changes were more successful in sustaining educational quality and ensuring the well-being of both staff and students (Chen-Levi et al., 2022; Parveen et al., 2022). These results not only affirm the applicability of existing leadership theories in times of crisis but also extend their relevance by highlighting how crisis contexts amplify the need for empathetic, flexible, and collaborative leadership approaches.

Transformational leadership, characterized by its emphasis on vision and inspiration, aligns well with the demands of crises where uncertainty and stress are pervasive. Menon (2023) and Fahy et al. (2024) observed that leaders practicing transformational strategies could effectively manage teacher stress and enhance institutional cohesion. Adaptive leadership, meanwhile, allowed leaders to adjust swiftly to unforeseen challenges, such as the sudden shift to remote learning, thereby reducing the alienation of both staff and administrators. This dual effectiveness suggests that theories of leadership must integrate transformational and adaptive dimensions to fully account for the complexities of crisis management. Such integration advances theoretical development by

emphasizing leadership as both visionary and pragmatic, capable of addressing immediate operational challenges while nurturing long-term resilience.

The role of institutional environments further expands our understanding of effective crisis leadership. Collaborative and supportive workplace cultures were consistently linked to higher levels of staff engagement and motivation during the pandemic (Rehm et al., 2021; Varga-Atkins et al., 2021). These findings suggest that leadership effectiveness cannot be disentangled from organizational context. Clarke and Done (2021) emphasized that institutions with cultures of collaboration and innovation were better positioned to respond to disruptions, indicating that leadership theories must account for the interplay between individual leaders and institutional systems. Moreover, the integration of digital technologies into leadership practices has emerged as essential for effective crisis responses, pointing to the need for theoretical frameworks that explicitly address technological dimensions of leadership (Striepe & Cunningham, 2021).

Systemic barriers were consistently identified as impediments to the effective implementation of educational policies during crises. Resource limitations, inadequate technical infrastructure, and bureaucratic obstacles were among the most frequently cited challenges, particularly in developing countries (Rehm et al., 2021; Freeman, 2014). These systemic constraints constrained leaders' capacity to enact adaptive strategies, often leaving institutions unable to provide equitable access to education. Boet et al. (2018) highlighted how insufficient teacher training and limited technological access hindered effective crisis responses, particularly in contexts where national budgets for education were already constrained. These insights underscore that while leadership practices are critical, they are ultimately bounded by systemic factors that shape the possibilities for institutional resilience.

To address these systemic barriers, future policy initiatives must prioritize equitable resource allocation, investment in educational infrastructure, and the simplification of administrative processes. Striepe and Kafa (2024) argued that collaborative networks between schools provide a mechanism for resource sharing and knowledge exchange, reducing the impact of resource scarcity during crises. Such networks also create opportunities for collective problem-solving and innovation, enabling institutions to overcome systemic constraints through cooperative strategies. This indicates that leadership effectiveness is enhanced when supported by policy frameworks that enable institutional collaboration and resource mobilization at scale.

The findings of this review also generate practical, evidence-based recommendations for strengthening educational leadership in anticipation of future crises. One key recommendation is the development of leadership training programs that emphasize adaptive and transformational skills. Training focused on crisis management, effective communication, and digital integration can better prepare leaders to address unforeseen disruptions (Chen-Levi et al., 2022; Striepe & Cunningham, 2021). By cultivating leadership competencies in these areas, institutions can ensure a cadre of leaders capable of navigating both present and future challenges.

Another practical recommendation concerns the fostering of collaboration and knowledge exchange across schools and educational systems. Rehm et al. (2021) and Zwanikken et al. (2016) highlight how local and international collaboration can strengthen resilience by enabling institutions to share best practices and lessons learned. Collaborative structures also foster innovation, ensuring that institutions can adapt strategies developed elsewhere to their own unique

contexts. In this regard, international networks become vital for supporting developing countries, where systemic resource constraints often limit the capacity for innovation.

The integration of technology into education emerges as a further critical area for leadership development. Striepe and Cunningham (2021) emphasized that digital platforms not only facilitate continuity of learning during disruptions but also enable more inclusive access for marginalized groups. Leaders who effectively integrate technology into their strategies create opportunities for flexible learning and ensure that education can transcend physical barriers. The pandemic demonstrated the necessity of digital preparedness, suggesting that leadership frameworks must evolve to include technological literacy and digital strategy as core competencies for educational leaders.

Support networks that include teachers, parents, and community members are equally important for effective crisis leadership. Shroff et al. (2023) highlighted how collaborative engagement between schools and communities creates environments of inclusivity and support, which are essential during crises. Leaders who build these networks are better able to mobilize resources, address local needs, and sustain trust within their communities. This evidence indicates that effective crisis leadership extends beyond institutional boundaries, requiring the cultivation of broad networks of support that encompass diverse stakeholders.

Although the findings provide valuable insights, several limitations in the existing literature remain. Many studies adopt context-specific approaches that, while informative, limit the generalizability of findings across different educational systems. Zwanikken et al. (2016) and Parveen et al. (2022) observed that cultural and contextual factors significantly influence leadership effectiveness, yet relatively few studies explicitly analyze these dimensions. The predominance of research from developed countries further restricts the applicability of findings to resource-constrained contexts, where challenges are distinct and often more severe (Striepe & Kafa, 2024). Moreover, the methodological diversity of the studies included in this review, ranging from case studies to theoretical analyses, complicates direct comparisons and synthesis. These limitations suggest the need for further research that systematically examines leadership practices in diverse cultural and socio-economic contexts, with particular attention to the Global South.

Future research should also explore the long-term impacts of crisis leadership on educational outcomes. While much of the current literature focuses on immediate responses to the pandemic, there is limited evidence regarding how leadership practices influence institutional resilience, equity, and innovation over time. Longitudinal studies could provide insights into how leadership during crises shapes educational trajectories and policy reforms in the years that follow. In addition, comparative studies that analyze leadership practices across countries with varying levels of resources and governance structures could illuminate universal principles of effective leadership while identifying context-specific adaptations. This would enhance both theoretical understanding and practical applicability, ensuring that leadership strategies are grounded in diverse realities.

CONCLUSION

This narrative review has highlighted the central role of educational leadership in navigating crises, with a specific focus on the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings demonstrate that transformational

and adaptive leadership models are particularly effective in fostering institutional resilience, sustaining educational quality, and supporting the well-being of staff and students during periods of disruption. Leaders who emphasized vision, empathy, and collaborative engagement were better equipped to manage stress, build trust, and guide institutions through rapid transitions. Moreover, supportive institutional environments—characterized by open communication, collaborative cultures, and access to resources—proved essential in enhancing staff motivation and enabling continuity of learning.

Global comparisons reveal sharp contrasts between developed and developing countries. Leaders in resource-rich contexts were able to leverage technological innovation and robust infrastructures to sustain education, while leaders in resource-constrained environments prioritized equity and access through community-based approaches. These differences underscore the urgent need for context-sensitive policies and systemic reforms that address persistent resource disparities. Systemic barriers, including limited funding, inadequate infrastructure, and bureaucratic inefficiencies, remain significant obstacles to effective crisis leadership.

Policy interventions should prioritize equitable resource allocation, investment in digital infrastructure, and leadership training programs, with clear responsibilities assigned to governments, ministries of education, and universities to ensure accountability.

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