

Responsive, adaptive, and future-centred leadership in response to crisis: findings from Australia, Fiji, and New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused major disruption to education and highlighted the importance of effective leadership during times of crisis. This paper considers the impact of the pandemic on school leaders in Australia, Fiji, and New Zealand. A secondary analysis of data from five interpretivist, qualitative studies was conducted. The aim of the study was to investigate the similarities and differences between the leaders' experiences across school settings, states/provinces, and countries. Our findings place renewed importance on understanding the role of schools within the community and the vital role school leaders play in helping schools respond to volatile and dynamic circumstances. The findings show how leaders' roles and responsibilities adapted to respond quickly and effectively to the urgency of the crisis, regardless of the context. Furthermore, common practices such as attending to wellbeing and providing clear and timely communication were revealed. The analysis also revealed some interesting nuances in the leaders' responses because of the duration of the crisis, the particular needs of the community, and government requirements. Papers like this provide insights into what leaders do and how schools and systems might prepare and support leaders to lead during times of crisis.

KEYWORDS

Crisis leadership; schools;
principals; pandemic; Asia-
Pacific

Introduction

There is no doubt the COVID-19 pandemic has caused major disruption to education (Gurr 2022a; Longmuir 2021; Striepe and Cunningham 2022). Moreover, the COVID pandemic has highlighted the key role schools play in serving their

communities, particularly during a crisis, by how State and National governments across contexts incorporated schools into their plans to manage and recover from the crisis (Striepe and Cunningham 2022). Over the course of the pandemic, school leaders have shared common experiences of implementing government mandates and health advice whilst at the same time trying to ensure the education of students continued through times of lockdowns and restrictions on movement. But there have also been significant differences in how school leaders have experienced this crisis. For example, in Bolivia and India, school leaders experienced more than 80 weeks of school closure with limited if any replacement education provision while other contexts, such as Switzerland and France had less than 20 weeks of school closure (UNESCO 2021).

We had previously conducted research set in Fiji, New Zealand, and Australia that examined the impact of the pandemic on school leaders' day-to-day work and approaches to leadership during 2020 and 2021. At an educational research conference in 2021 where we presented the findings of our individual studies, it became apparent that we could extend our understandings of how school leaders managed the crisis by conducting a secondary analysis (Heaton 2004). This paper reports the findings of that analysis, which highlights the similarities and differences between the leaders' experiences of COVID-19 crisis. This paper begins with consideration of what is known about crisis leadership in schools and considers the impact of the pandemic on education leadership broadly. We then briefly outline the study's methodology and then turn to present the findings which illustrate the leaders' experiences and how their work has changed in response to the pandemic. The findings highlight a focus on care and communication as well as ability to negotiate contextual factors that were key to how these school leaders responded and managed the crisis.

Educational leadership during times of crisis

Over the past decades, transformational leadership and instructional leadership have been instrumental in shaping school leaders' practice and their capacity to promote change and school improvement (Grissom, Egalite, and Lindsay 2021). However, leadership during times of crisis necessitates a different approach, requiring an additional set of leadership capacities, attributes, and skills (Hemmer and Elliff 2019; Mutch 2015; Smith and Riley 2012) that results in educational leaders re-framing their work (Hemmer and Elliff 2019). Given such assertions, it is interesting to note the scant attention to understanding and/or conceptualising crisis leadership in the context of schools. In the first part of this section, we consider some research which has conceptualised the notion of leadership during crisis and in the second part we consider some of the recent literature which has investigated how educational leaders have responded to the pandemic.

A scoping review of 10 years of empirical literature (2010–2020) on how school leaders manage and respond to a range of different types of crises

Table 1. Six overarching characteristics.

Characteristics	Working Definition
Providing crisis care	A distinct type of pastoral care that is provided to all community members. It involves a clear moral and ethical aspect of care that goes beyond normal day-to-day practice. It is deeply aware of the connection of the whole community's wellbeing to schools' core business of learning and its humanising purpose. It involves acting with moral courage and/or as a steward.
Adapting roles and responsibilities	The adaptation and, sometimes, an increase and/or extension of normal roles and responsibilities to deal with multiple, ongoing, additional, and often overwhelming challenges. Refers to school leaders as well as staff.
Collaboration between stakeholders	Collaboration between internal and external stakeholders to ensure the best possible response to the crisis; can entail shared decision-making and dismantling of normal leadership hierarchies.
Multidimensional communication	A reciprocal, inclusive approach to communication that draws upon different modes (e.g. SMS, formal letters, LMS) to mitigate messages being lost or misinterpreted and/or to stop rumours.
Complex decision-making	A process that rarely follows day-to-day decision-making procedures; requires a delicate balance of fast decision-making on one hand and consideration/reflection on the other; requires a recognition that some decisions could be risky but allowable during crisis and mistakes can be made.
Contextual influences	The recognition that different contextual factors such as the influence of the community, government, politics, the internal school context, and leaders' personal biography can shape and, sometimes, determine leadership approaches during a crisis. Leaders needed to be acutely aware of changing contextual factors.

identified six overarching characteristics that frame leading during crises as shown in [Table 1](#) (Striepe and Cunningham 2022). These characteristics illustrate how a crisis requires a type of leadership that is responsive, instinctive, and virtuous as leaders react, manage, and recover from the crisis and the resulting needs of the community (Striepe and Cunningham 2022).

The findings from that scoping review to a certain extent are paralleled by Schechter, Da'as, and Qadach's (2022) guidelines for leading during a pandemic crisis. These guidelines, created from extant literature on leading during crisis, also note how providing care, fostering collaboration, developing effective communication channel, and utilising the expertise of a range of staff are key facets of leaders work during a pandemic (Schechter, Da'as, and Qadach 2022, 4). However, Schechter, Da'as, and Qadach's (2022) guidelines highlight how during a pandemic leaders need to manage existing processes and resources while developing new ways of working, build resilience, and find ways to reduce formal bureaucracy.

This work builds on the past research that has focused on conceptualising the idea of leadership during crisis as it applies to school. One key framework is located in the work of Smith and Riley (2012) which promotes the view that leadership in times of crisis is a part of effective school leadership, rather than a separate model, and focuses on nine key attributes. Namely, communication skills, decisive decision-making, empathy, respect, and intuition, as well as flexibility, procedural intelligence, synthesising skills, and optimism/tenacity (Smith and Riley 2012, 68). Such ideas are also present in Mutch's (2015) model consisting of three attribute sets: dispositional, relational, and contextual. This model focuses on how leaders

draw upon their experiences, personal qualities, and skills; use their relationships with staff and the community; and exercise their understanding of the context to interpret the situation and respond in the most appropriate manner at the time.

The ideas from this body of work are reflected in the growing body of international research on how leaders are managing the pandemic and the impact of the crisis on leaders' professional and personal lives. One example is Pollock's (2020) pilot study with Canadian principals which found that the crisis resulted in changing of day-to-day responsibilities, particularly around leading the move to supporting online learning and supporting health and wellbeing. Similar findings are evident in studies set in the UK and the US where the approach of school leaders was focussed on providing high level of care, delivering clear communication, and using the help of the wider staff to manage the crisis (Beauchamp et al. 2021; McLeod and Dulsky 2021).

Gurr (2020, 2022a, 2022b) explored the impact of the pandemic on education and educational leadership through four special issues involving 59 papers from more than 20 countries. During 2021, he conducted eight seminars to further explore the educational responses to the pandemic with over 1400 educators from more than 10 countries participating which are summarised in the following observations:

- (1) There is likely to be a greater focus on moral purpose and values-based leadership coupled with a greater emphasis on trust. At the same time, there is likely to be a more future focussed, responsive, crisis ready, and contextually sensitive orientation to leadership of change and improvement.
- (2) A more collective, collaborative, and dispersed work situation is more likely to become common, particularly with the adoption of new learning technologies and new ways of working. This will require more fluid and responsive leadership.
- (3) Greater involvement of more people in leadership, such as middle leaders, teachers, students, and parents will be needed. Paradoxically, senior leadership roles, such as principal, will remain important for school success.
- (4) More planned leadership development will be needed, as well as rapid professional learning support to respond to new needs and demands. A pressing need is to train current and future leaders to cope well with uncertainty and chaos.
- (5) There was little consensus about how to describe the leadership observed during the pandemic with leadership labels such as adaptive, contextually responsive, community-based, and courageous being used. Such labels illustrate the varied views on the type of leadership needed and the lack of homogenous descriptions of leadership. There is consensus, however, that existing views of leadership are not sufficient.

Such research illustrates how school leadership during a crisis is distinct from current understandings and supports Striepe and Cunningham's (2022)

assertion that the field needs to develop theoretical understandings that account for how educational leadership is used to prepare for, manage, and recover from the unpredictable nature of crises.

Methodology

As shown in Table 2, five interpretivist, qualitative studies investigated school leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia, Fiji, and New Zealand.

Table 2. Research details.

Country and study code	Project Setting	Central research question	Participants	Data collection methods	Data analysis method
Australia – across 4 states (4States)	Seven metropolitan schools in Victoria, Queensland, NSW, and WA	What were the key leadership practices required to support the young people, families, and staff from Flexible Learning Option (FLO) schools during the COVID-19 pandemic?	Seven leaders from FLOs	Focus groups and follow up interviews	Thematic
Australia: Victoria (VIC)	Eight metropolitan schools in Victoria	How did the leadership work of Melbourne school leaders change during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic as schools moved to remote schooling?	Eight leaders	Online, semi-structured interviews	Thematic
Australia: Western Australia (WA)	Two metropolitan, independent, faith-based schools in Western Australia	How do school leaders manage and respond to the COVID-19 pandemic?	Eight leadership team members	In person semi-structured interviews	Grounded theory approach
Fiji (Fiji)	Two secondary schools	What are the perceptions of principals in Fiji about the perceived skills necessary for success before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic?	Two principals	Online, semi-structured interviews	Thematic
New Zealand (NZ)	Three schools in the South Island	How did COVID-19 impact leadership practice and preparation in three New Zealand schools?	Three school principals and Three members of the Senior Leadership Team	In person, semi-structured interviews	Constant comparative analysis

Notes: For all studies, an interpretivist theoretical perspective was used. For all studies, a case study research design was used. FLO is an educational organisation that supports disengaged or at-risk students.

Thirty-one school leaders from primary, secondary, and alternative school settings across three Australian states, one Division from Fiji, and New Zealand were interviewed. In each study, leaders were asked to describe their leadership before and during the pandemic, their experiences of the crisis, and/or contextual factors which influenced their practice.

We employed a secondary analysis approach (Heaton 2004) to gain an in-depth understanding of leaders' experiences and practices during the crisis and how they varied across international contexts. The adoption of secondary analysis was appropriate as it aims to generate additional knowledge and insights by 'combining data from two or more primary studies for the purpose of comparison' (Heaton 2004, 38). In the case of this study, we were building on our individual studies that focussed on understanding the experiences and practices of school leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, we aimed to investigate the similarities and differences between the leaders' experiences across contexts by re-using the data from interviews and focus groups.

A thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke 2006; Nowell et al. 2017) was used to identify the similarities, differences, and nuances of leading schools during times of crisis. Using the characteristics generated from the scoping review by Striepe and Cunningham (2022) and the observations of Gurr (2022a, 2022b) as a framework we worked across the cases to map the range of views held by the participants. Each researcher identified key sections of text and 'indexed them' to a theme or issue on a shared document (Nowell et al. 2017, 6). As a team, we documented our thoughts on the shared document, met via ZOOM to discuss the concepts that emerged and revisited the data. These procedures enabled the team of researchers to reflect, think, and interact with the data in order to define and name the final themes (Nowell et al. 2017, 5). Such process also helped to create the conditions for reflexivity and critical distance from original findings (Heaton 2019) and establish trustworthiness.

Contexts of Australia, New Zealand, and Fiji

The Federal Governments of Australia, Fiji, and New Zealand had a common approach to the COVID-19 pandemic during 2020 and 2021: to first eliminate and then to keep the virus out of the country. Given the countries' geographic location, this was not surprising. In Australia, while the Federal Government had oversight over the closure of the national border, State and Territory Governments had control over their own borders and the implementation of restrictions which resulted in contrasting approaches. This is best illustrated by describing what happened in the states of Victoria and Western Australia (WA). During 2020-2021, Victorian residents experienced continual lockdowns with Melbourne being labelled the most locked down city in the world,

experiencing almost nine months of restrictions on movement and social interaction (Duckett, Stobart, and Hunter 2021; Macreadie 2022). During the six lockdowns, most schools were physically closed and offered online learning support which varied from a daily planning session to fully timetabled online classes. Contrastingly, the WA State Government closed internal borders in March 2020 and generally kept some form of strict internal border restrictions intact for two years, essentially cutting the state off from the rest of the country and the world. Thus, WA residents, mainly those in the city of Perth and surrounding area, experienced only three short periods of lockdown (less than two weeks in total) and restrictions on movement and gatherings between February and June 2020. By the end of May 2020, schools were primarily functioning 'normally' with restrictions in place for large groups (i.e. assemblies) and visitors (i.e. parents on campus). By the start of the 2021 school year, most restrictions were lifted. Across Australia, natural disasters are also a regular occurrence, with, for example, massive devastation due to bushfire of the entire east coast of Australia from October 2019 to February 2020. The principals in the FLO schools in Queensland commented on having to respond to extensive flooding that occurred during COVID.

New Zealand went 'fast and early' with a countrywide full lockdown and border closure in March 2020 (Alert Level 4) that lasted four weeks. This was followed by Alert Level 3 (schools open to the children of essential workers only), and gradual stepping down through Alert Levels 2 and 1 (schools open with varying degrees of public healthcare measures in place). Over the next two years, levels of restriction varied on a regional basis. Initially, only 50% of New Zealand schools were prepared to teach online (Mutch 2020) so provisions were made through televised classes, packs of hard copy materials, and gradual distribution of devices for online teaching.

Fiji experienced four different crises during 2020–2021: COVID and three natural disasters. In March 2020 as the first cases of COVID-19 were detected the Fijian Government established a national curfew, restricted large gatherings, and closed schools and non-essential services. Later, all borders and ports were closed to non-residents. In April, these circumstances were compounded by Cyclone Harold, a category five cyclone. Due to the level of damage, schools were kept closed until June 2020. The Fiji Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts (FMoEHA) expected teachers to report to school and facilitate home-based learning. For those students who did not have access to online resources, their parents were required to collect learning materials from schools and encouraged to access additional teaching resources from the Fiji Education Management Information System (FEMIS), Facebook pages and/or the ongoing radio programmes on Radio Fiji One and Radio Fiji Two. In early July, whilst all schools opened for all students, many could not return to learning as families were still recovering from Cyclone Harold. Then in December 2020, tropical Cyclone Yasa, a category five Cyclone caused widespread destruction

to Fiji's second-largest island: Vanua Levu, and the government declared a 30-day, nationwide state of disaster. Schools opened for the 2021 academic year, but soon after opening the country was ravaged by tropical Cyclone Ana and tropical depression Bina. The resulting flooding compounded the issues of power and water disruption suffered in the aftermath of Cyclone Yasa. Schools were closed, nationwide, for a week as they were used as evacuation centres and the FMoEHA encouraged parents to engage their children in meaningful activities while they were at home. Then in March 2021, the second wave of COVID-19 resulted in the FMoEHA closing schools and implementing remote learning. Schools organised Zoom classes once a week, but it was a huge challenge for students who did not have access to a device and/or the internet. In November 2021, schools reopened for only Years 12 and 13 students to prepare them for the national examinations. In spite of a third wave of COVID-19 striking the nation, face-to-face classes for all students resumed in January 2022.

Findings

The findings illustrate the important role school leaders played within the community as they responded to evolving circumstances; particularly in how they cared for their particular needs. The findings also show how leaders' roles and responsibilities adapted as they responded to crisis, regardless of their location. Furthermore, our analysis reveals common practices, such as attending to well-being and providing clear and timely communication. The analysis also shows how the leaders' responses varied because of the duration of the crisis, the needs of the community, and government requirements. The findings are captured in the six themes generated from the data analysis: caring for the community, adapting roles and responsibilities, leveraging relationships with stakeholders, providing clear, trustworthy communication, changing approaches to decision-making, contextual influences, and moving beyond the pandemic which will be discussed next.

Caring for the community

A consistent theme emerging from the secondary analysis was the idea of care. Generally, the findings show how COVID-19 required a different level of response to care in order to meet the needs of staff, students, and families. Namely, there was a common realisation from these leaders that the ability of their school to function as learning organisations was contingent upon caring for the wellbeing of their *whole* community. This commonality is reflected in the perspectives of WA leaders, where the duration of lockdowns and online learning was short; those from Melbourne, who experienced the longest period of lockdown and online learning; and in the leaders from Fiji who experienced multiple crises.

While the intensity and urgency of the situation might have differed between contexts, it resulted in a focus on well-being. It was clear from the data in all contexts the focus on well-being, welfare, and keeping morale high were at the forefront of their decision-making and daily practice. Leaders were aware and attuned to varied needs of different community members. For example, to support well-being and maintain resilience, leaders from WA and Melbourne both discussed how a significant amount of time was spent prioritising activities such as phone calls to check on families and staff who were struggling, as well as supporting teachers as they dealt with the struggles of students. The leaders of the FLO (4States) schools shared how they delivered paper-based workbooks to homes, along with food drops. In the context of Fiji, the connections with care came from how leaders described their focus on providing moral support and a caring environment to staff, students, and their families, especially to those who were badly affected by the COVID-19 and the cyclones.

In New Zealand, while focus on wellbeing was evident in the leaders' perspectives, one principal thought carefully about implementing further change. As the principal and the staff returned from Level 4 lockdowns, the principal was excited by how students quickly adapted to online learning and the real-life connections they were making to the curriculum, and he was ready to implement significant change. However, he soon realised that view was not congruent with staff who, struggling with the day-to-day, 'were not in that headspace' for change. Instead, the principal focussed on ensuring that return to school would be manageable and he showed care and concern for his staff by providing time – for extra release, report writing, and personal needs – and he made time to ensure staff 'knew they were valued' like providing morning teas.

There is some evidence from the current research that principals (Fiji, NZ) supported their wellbeing through drawing on those close to them for support, or through focussing on the work at hand. One of the NZ principals shared how he often used his wife as a critical friend to run things past and debrief with. In Fiji, leaders shared how just focussing on doing their job as best they could help them to get through the many crises they experienced.

Adapting roles and responsibilities

Given the level of uncertainty, it is not surprising how all leaders commented on how quickly their usual roles and work changed. A WA principal commented: 'part of my role included connecting with the kids throughout the day and dealing with any behaviour management issues. Well, that was gone ...' Comments from one of the Fiji principals shared how they were used to 'calling the shots' from a position that they knew well and which they were comfortable with and that quickly changed. Instead, principals were confronted with new work, and, initially at least, solely concentrated on planning for and dealing with COVID.

Fijian principals described actively engaging in dealing with COVID-19 cases in their schools and ensuring that the COVID-19 protocols were strictly adhered to by all moving in their schools. The WA leaders described how the leadership teams became a 'war cabinet' or a 'emergency response team'. Accurate, frequent, and timely information about pandemic responses was an important leadership function in all jurisdictions. As leadership roles and responsibilities changed, a major consideration for New Zealand principals was removing extraneous responsibilities from the senior leadership team so they could get on with adapting curriculum delivery. In Melbourne, principals noted how they sought and responded quickly to feedback about what the school was doing.

Dealing with inequitable access to online learning was a major concern. A New Zealand principal said that he could not wait for the Ministry of Education to supply the technology, so he decided the school would support the families that needed online access or devices. However, delivery by couriers was slow in their semi-rural area, so despite lockdowns, staff walked the neighbourhood and delivered the devices themselves, following up with troubleshooting as needed. In Australia, FLO (4States) leaders found themselves facing the need to bridge the digital divide for so many of their young people who – while having almost ubiquitous access to mobile phones – had very limited access to PC devices in their homes and the accompanying internet access plans necessary to allow for remote learning so typically adopted in other Australian lockdown settings. The FLO (4States) leaders often provided daily home visits to drop off paper-based work packs. In Fiji, principals reported that they personally had to deliver learning resources to the most affected students who did not have access to online learning. In contrast, the two WA schools were high-fee independent schools that had advantage in terms of access to technology and internet resources, and which served families with similar advantages,

As noted above, focussing on health and welfare needs of students and the school community often became a priority. Examples from the New Zealand, Victorian and 4States studies include school staff in New Zealand and Melbourne delivering food parcels to families, and an emphasis across all jurisdictions on increased communication with staff, students, and families to see how people were travelling during the pandemic. The increased prevalence of home visits by educators to support student learning had a dual benefit in that it also enabled support for student health and welfare. Such perspectives are tied to how leaders relied on the relationships with the school's community to help manage the crisis which is discussed next.

Leveraging relationships with stakeholders

The findings show how leaders across these contexts noticed that the relationships with stakeholders became more focussed on care, support, and

expediency. Within the rapidly changing and disruptive times, the leaders leveraged relationships with internal and external stakeholders to enable efficient and timely responses. Notably, they bridged the external divides between neighbouring schools that in Australia for example, can be a result of local competition for enrolments. Leaders in Fiji worked very closely with neighbouring schools to maximise their capacity to respond effectively and in one WA school, the leaders looked to other network schools to see what approaches were working and how they could be adapted for their context. In Melbourne, the school leaders noted the amplified value of their local networks and one school leader explained,

It's been a really great collegiate approach ... [we've] taken the competition off and are willing to share resources and share best practice, share a guiding policy or share what works in their school as it might work in another setting. It's been a really big positive.

Relationships within the school communities were also altered with schools becoming a more central hub where school community members could connect and turn to for support. In Melbourne (VIC; 4States), some leaders facilitated community support actions, such as food packages for struggling families and principals in NZ observed that members of their communities used school channels to offer support to others who were struggling with the circumstances. Such actions provided the basis for improved relationships and communication with families and a better understanding by families of teachers' work.

Within their schools, the analysis showed how all leaders reconfigured the ways that they worked with teachers and other school staff to ensure the best responses within the constraints of the times. In WA leaders shared how they arranged collaboration to distribute responsibilities and ensure that 'we were not tripping each other up'; exemplified by the comment: 'while others were focusing on the online learning, we were focusing on the pastoral care at home ...'. With most staff working from their homes throughout lockdowns, the Melbourne leaders (VIC; 4States) were less able to interact daily and felt less able to have oversight of the work of their teaching staff. This distance required an increased trust that agreed expectations and processes were being adhered to in the online learning environments. Melbourne leaders described how their trust in staff was actually increased because of the more isolated working arrangements.

An important observation made by leaders about their work at this time was the need for them to project certain demeanours to stakeholders. In efforts to negate the atmosphere of uncertainty and concern they felt the need to maintain an appearance of calmness, positivity, and resilience in their interactions with others. Best illustrated through the comments of a NZ principal who likened his role to a duck gliding serenely along the surface of the water but paddling furiously underneath. This amplification of the community focus of the role and the management of the emotional aspects of the work was

highlighted by this leader from Melbourne, 'My role is as a community leader, and [I am] reminding myself that I'm leading a community of people: the families, the staff and their families, and ensuring that I'm doing the best to spread a positive attitude. The glass is half full. We will get through this'. As such, these perspectives illustrate the importance of collaborating and working with stakeholders in a manner that helps the community members cope with the uncertain circumstances.

Providing clear, trustworthy communication

Another theme which emerged from our analysis is how clear, simple, and direct communication enabled trust within the school communities and frequently led to schools becoming information hubs. The New Zealand principals recalled the frantic nature of the last week before lockdown as their schools were inundated with information from different sources. They saw their roles as disseminating information and putting clear protocols in place. One principal said it was very important to be 'open and honest' with the community, providing them with information as soon as possible and maintaining positivity. Likewise, the Melbourne (VIC; XState) school leaders explained that their communication efforts required the prioritisation of information, interpreting the various (and at times contradictory) messages, and communicating what they knew and understood about the situation to their communities. In Fiji, the leaders demonstrated a high degree of responsiveness by being authentic and reliable so that no one was misguided with unnecessary information. Here, the focus was on providing trustworthy information.

A variety of strategies were used to get information across to families. For the FLO contexts (4States), the daily home visits to drop off paper-based work packs provided an opportunity for direct person-to-person communication that resulted in more direct contact with families than pre-pandemic. In Fiji, the leaders also found that communication increased during and after the COVID-19 pandemic with all relevant stakeholders. In New Zealand schools, online platforms were used, although numerous phone calls were made initially to ensure everyone had online access. Email was chosen for communication so parents could access messages at a time that worked for them. The aim was to communicate well without overwhelming families. One New Zealand principal said of his families: 'They let us into their homes. We know so much more about them. They felt supported. They felt the communication was better. So why isn't it always like that?' In these initial stages of the pandemic, the principals interviewed felt communication had changed for the better and that relationships were improved.

Meeting the need for urgent response was key. In Fiji, the leaders responded to rapid change with clarity, ensuring that accurate information was always communicated to the school community. In Melbourne (VIC), the leaders had

to balance being confident, optimistic, and clear, with also being honest when they were not sure about something. They had to demonstrate willingness to be flexible and make corrections in the rapidly changing circumstances. In WA, one principal told how his executive prompted him to get information out quickly to meet parental expectations. He said they ended up 'rushing it through' but noted that he thought the parents found it comforting to know what was coming up.

Altogether, the findings illustrate how principals in each of these contexts worked hard to enhance communication by responding with urgency, clarity, simplicity, and timeliness. The aim was not to overwhelm and confuse families, thus demonstrating an ethic of care. Trust was increased and many families felt they had better and more frequent contact with their schools than in pre-COVID times.

Changing approaches to decision-making

Another theme which emerged shows how leaders in each context realised that the decision-making process in their schools changed immediately during the crisis. All the school leaders noted that the decision-making was not a consultative process as it used to be before the crisis. For these school leaders the pace of decision-making was rapid and there was need to prioritise what was important to guide the decision-making. As a New Zealand principal comment illustrates: 'We just had one focus – look after our students as best we can. That was it ... None of the extra stuff'. A comment from the Fijian principal captured the hypervigilance required when making decisions in this demanding situation, 'I have to be very attentive ... it's a nightmare because the correct information is not readily available'. Sorting through the information and prioritising what was important while under urgency was challenging for the school leaders.

Across all contexts, school leaders' decision-making depended heavily on feedback from the school community. For example, in Melbourne, the school leaders explained that they tended to be more reflexive and responsive to feedback. A similar approach was adopted by the school leaders in New Zealand. However, firm expectations had to be set in response to parents' questions about school events, and assessment and reporting. It was not business as usual. In NZ, Fiji, and WA, the principals revealed that the rapid decision-making in schools was also influenced by the directives from the respective country's government agencies. The leaders understood that in order to make sound decisions they need to be engaged with the school community and consider the information from the government.

Overall, decision-making sometimes became a challenging task for the school leaders during the crisis. All leaders were making fast decisions that dealt with the short-term or pressing need to ensure that the operations of

their schools, mainly student learning, were not affected. This was particularly evident in decisions regarding upskilling teachers in the use of technology. For example, in a New Zealand school, while teachers demonstrated different levels of competency in technology, the principal made the decision not to upskill teachers at a time of considerable stress. While in Fiji, most teachers lacked technological skills but, in this case, principals believed that upskilling leaders and teachers with technological skills were mandatory.

Contextual influences

There were a few interesting similarities and differences in the observed contextual influences and how this impacted on the way in which leaders could lead in their schools. The role of governments and governing bodies (such as the Ministry of Education) provided overarching directives that schools were required to follow. These directives often changed at a moment's notice which meant the school leaders had to make quick changes to what was planned, and this significantly impacted their work. This was typified by a comment from WA leader who stated:

We would set up our plans for something to happen and by Friday we felt this is what we are going to do. But over the weekend the Premier or the Prime Minister would make a decision and that would put everything we had planned out of whack. So, we would come back on Monday, roll up our sleeves and have to start again (WA)

Leaders in Fiji noted that they worked with very limited autonomy and were compelled to comply with all directives. These leaders voiced a sense of being frustrated, uninterested, and lacking confidence in their role as they were not able to respond in a way which was nuanced to their context. Similarly, in New Zealand, directives to schools came from the Ministry of Health through the Ministry of Education. In the initial stages, principals had little autonomy, and this was a source of frustration for some in that they were not trusted to make the right decisions themselves. One principal noted there was some preparation in that his school had communicable diseases procedures to provide a starting point. Reopening in Level 3 when only the children of essential workers could return was most difficult for planning staffing. With few specific guidelines as to who was categorised as an essential worker, the principals reported taking classes themselves to avoid staff coming in unnecessarily. On the other hand, the WA leaders noted how the autonomy they had as leaders of independent schools enabled them to make quick decisions relevant for their context and the needs of their school:

Very early on we said that we would never ask teachers to teach online and face to face at the same time. In hindsight, that was one of the best decisions we made. I've heard of other schools who absolutely bleed their staff's well-being by asking them to do both (WA)

Moving beyond the pandemic

Despite the challenges the leaders faced over time, there was a sense of optimism and hope from the principals in terms of what had been achieved by schools and their communities. In Fiji, principals acknowledged the teamwork of staff, and Melbourne (VIC; 4States) principals appreciated the achievements of their communities, describing the quality of the rapid changes that had been achieved. They were optimistic about the learnings that had been generated during that time, such as the significant upskilling of staff and students in using learning technology platforms and they were enthusiastic about how these transformations might be incorporated beyond remote learning. The leaders felt they were attuned to their communities in deeper ways than they had been prior to the pandemic crisis. They had greater understanding of both the vulnerabilities and the strengths of the communities that they served.

Leaders were excited about the possibilities for new learnings to be taken forward. In the rural and remote FLO (4States) school networks in Australia, it was felt that the newly available digital tools and newly acquired digital staff skills should ensure better networking with colleagues across schools in the future. In New Zealand, where schools can adapt curriculum to meet the needs of their local community, one principal was excited that the school community was taking greater interest in development of curriculum, and that there was potential to develop digital skills even in very young children. In general, the findings provide evidence of schools and communities pulling together to support teaching, learning, and student welfare, and a widespread desire to see this continue.

The insights from these studies revealed a need for professional development in teaching and leadership. The intense and complex environments in which FLO (4States) special assistance school leaders work placed them to lead well through the COVID crisis and the Queensland floods. They demonstrated ability to triage need, and not make every issue a priority; ability to be agile and creative; and attention to the needs of their staff who, in turn, attend to young people. Not all school staff were as well prepared. Principals in Fiji reported that teachers need to be upskilled with relevant technical skills to teach online because it became highly visible during the crisis that most of them lack these skills. Leaders noted that professional development in crisis leadership was needed as a result of the challenges encountered during COVID-19 and natural disasters.

The analysis also highlighted concerns in some cases about recruitment into the teaching and leadership positions. The leaders in the FLO (4States) schools reported that the disruption and collective community anxiety produced by the pandemic had led to an increase in young people seeking a place in their schools, as a smaller and safer environment. This required further recruitment and upskilling of staff, already an ongoing challenge for leaders in these schools. During the pandemic, this became more difficult as several staff chose

not to vaccinate and so were unable to be employed because of Government requirements. Although the school leaders were excited about possibilities moving forward, one New Zealand principal sounded a note of caution, saying some discussion and reflection about the pandemic experience is necessary now so as to evolve and move forward, otherwise, any new learnings from the pandemic will be overlooked. He suggested 'a specific focus on relationships and wellbeing might be quite useful' (NZ). Moving forward, the New Zealand principals shared concerns about the preparation and career paths of aspiring school leaders especially in terms of recruitment and maintaining wellbeing.

Discussion

It has been asserted that the ways educational leadership is practiced and the nature of leadership roles during a crisis is different to leadership practice and roles during 'normal times' (Hemmer and Elliff 2019; Striepe and Cunningham 2022). The findings from this secondary analysis suggests that regardless of context and whether school disruptions have been short or long in duration, principals' typical approach to leadership over the past two years has been altered and their day-to-day work has intensified because of this crisis. What is interesting is that despite the differences in context, generally, what leaders did to respond and manage the crisis was similar in nature, adapting their practice to support students and colleagues across technical, professional, and personal dimensions (Harris and Jones 2022). This is exemplified by the school leaders from across Australia, Fiji, and New Zealand as they leveraged their relationships with stakeholders in new ways, adjusted their approaches to communication and decision-making, and modified their approaches to care. Having said that, there are variances in how they responded and managed the crisis, in that, how they leveraged relationships, how they communicated and the extent they provided care was influenced by contextual factors, mainly the needs of the school community.

The findings build on past claims related to school leadership during crisis and emerging themes stemming from empirical research on this pandemic (Harris 2021; Harris and Jones 2022; Gurr 2022a, 2022b). The leaders' actions and approaches show how a significant amount of their work focussed on providing a level of care that exceeds typical approaches, and, notably, a shift from caring *about*, to caring *for* (O'Connor and Takahashi 2014). The leaders' pastoral, humanist approach is closely tied to how the leaders worked more closely with families to navigate the challenges; particularly when dealing with disadvantaged or those who had experience multiple crises (Harris and Jones 2022). As such, the findings provide empirical evidence to support the idea that in times of crisis leaders' work focuses on helping people to cope, utilising the partnerships and connections with the school and wider community, providing frequent communications, and understanding people and their individual needs

(Schechter, Da'as, and Qadach 2022; Smith and Riley 2012). There is also some evidence that supports Notman's (2015) claims that in times of crisis leaders also need to be able to look after and care for themselves. Additionally, these perspectives align with how crisis requires leaders to take on new and often unexpected roles that exceed their normal responsibilities (Striepe and Cunningham 2022). Providing evidence on how crisis changes the nature of roles and responsibilities as leaders respond quickly, efficiently, and as accurately as possible to government mandates and community needs (Harris and Jones 2022; Smith and Riley 2012). The way crisis alters normal, day-to-day practices and routines is also evident in their decisions making processes. For these leaders, they attempted to balance the need for a quick decision based on immediate or urgent advice with considering the feedback and reaction of key stakeholders, often without the usual input from their leadership team. As such these perspectives highlight how principals make decisions based on how they can mitigate adverse effects, implement support, and then rebuild and assist in the recovery of their school community during a crisis and its aftermath (Schechter, Da'as, and Qadach 2022; Smith and Riley 2012). And even amid uncertainty, the findings illustrate a focus on the future, as some leaders considered how changes could be made to school operations during the crisis as well as aspects that would need to be considered over the longer term. Surprisingly, there was little evidence in our research on the more distributed approach to leadership noted in other reviews of pandemic research (Harris 2021; Harris and Jones 2022; Gurr 2022a, 2022b); it seemed that our school leaders were central to how the schools responded to the pandemic.

The evidence that draws comparisons between how leaders across international contexts have dealt with crisis is still at an emerging stage (Harris 2021; Harris and Jones 2022; Gurr 2022a, 2022b), The findings from this study also provide important empirical evidence on how leading during crisis can vary because of contextual factors. While the findings point to many similarities between these contexts, particular school, community, political, and economic contexts had a clear effect on these leaders' approaches. Regarding the school and the community, findings show how the personal backgrounds of students, staff, and families shaped the ways leaders provided support and care during the crisis. Particularly in how they highlight the ways high needs and limited resources can drive leaders' responses. Such responses were also influenced by economic factors where families who were out of work or not able to work due to lockdown and/or restrictions required assistance to access basic necessities; addressing inequalities has been an important feature of the work of school leaders across the world (Harris 2021; Harris and Jones 2022; Gurr 2022a, 2022b). Further, is the influence of the political context where leaders were implementing government directives with little notice and in some cases working in untenable situations but still expected to ensure teaching and learning continue in some form. As such, one could argue that personal

factors, such as characteristics of moral purpose, empathy, resilience, calmness, strategic thinking, and innovation are important in leading during a crisis (Harris 2021; Harris and Jones 2022; Gurr 2022a).

Conclusion

This research conducted a secondary analysis of data from five studies across three countries to more closely examine how school leaders managed and dealt with the COVID-19 pandemic and to determine how their experiences varied across different contexts. Our findings place renewed importance on understanding schools as part of communities and the vital role school leaders play in helping schools respond to volatile and dynamic circumstances. The study also revealed common practices, and most significantly, how leaders supported wellbeing and provided clear and timely communication. Additionally, the study highlighted the importance of partnering and connecting with families. Our research reinforces the complexity of the relationship between leadership and context as revealed in the nuanced responses by school leaders to the contextual forces they experienced during the pandemic. Subsequently, our study advances current understandings on the extent to which principals were able to respond and adapt to situations they could not have anticipated and which they were not well prepared for. Given the increasing chances that school leaders will face a crisis sometime during their career, reflecting on the responses of school leaders during crises is crucial in developing understandings that can help schools and school systems better prepare and support leaders for future crises.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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