

Adaptive leadership of schools in Australia during the Covid-19 pandemic: lessons for future crises

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ABSTRACT

This research reports the findings of a qualitative study conducted in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) in 2022, which examined school leadership experiences in relation to crisis leadership during the Covid-19 pandemic through the prism of an adaptive leadership model. Interviews with leaders, including school principals, assistant principals, school board members, and education administrators, were thematically analysed, resulting in four key areas leaders reflected on which were related to adaptive leadership. These were the ability to change and adapt; the important role of communication; the focus on well-being; and productive collaborations. The findings showed how school leaders and education administrators interacting in their different roles and levels achieved effective collective action in responding to crisis with a heightened awareness of the wellbeing of the school community. The need for reflection and understanding of what occurred during this period is important to understand how leaders, including education administrators, adapted their leadership to meet the collective purpose of steering school communities through the chronic (ongoing) crisis. An adaptive leadership lens was used to explore the combined perspectives of different tiers of school leaders, which can provide useful insights for other chronic crisis situations, such as the widespread, ongoing teacher shortage.

KEYWORDS

School; leadership; Covid-19; management; crisis

Introduction

The experiences of the Covid-19 crisis for school leaders have been of interest in recent years and are essential to analyse so that lessons learned can be taken forward. It is widely acknowledged that school leaders played a critical role in guiding their school communities during the crisis and had significant pressures and stresses placed on them (Harris and Jones 2022; Parveen et al. 2022). This study focuses on the experiences of school leaders in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), bringing together perspectives of different, interconnected

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leadership groups in school education as they managed an unfolding crisis. The link between school and education administrators is complex and yet crucial to understanding crisis responses during the Covid-19 pandemic, yet there are few studies that have explored how leadership was enacted from this perspective, and none from the Australian context. Adaptive leadership provides a way of conceptualising the leadership of school leaders and how these four groups operated, as all of them experienced a range of adaptive practices in coping with the shifting demands of a chronic, or ongoing, crisis situation.

The starting point for this research is the beginning of the school year in 2020 when the ACT was impacted by surrounding bushfires and toxic levels of smoke, coupled with a dramatic hailstorm that caused widescale damage (Schrimmer 2020). In March 2020, when the Covid-19 emergency was declared, the ACT Government introduced restrictions to combat the growing number of infections, some of which impacted directly the management of schools. School leaders had to act quickly to reorganise the provision of schooling and move to an online mode of delivery as the ACT was placed under lockdown and schools closed. This meant principals, assistant principals, members of school boards, education administrators and others in leadership positions had to lead their school communities and communicate information clearly and effectively in a time of considerable uncertainty and anxiety. After June, schools reopened but with restrictions placed on their operations. A second lockdown in the ACT was imposed from August to November of 2021 (Brown and Nikolai 2022). The following year saw further challenges for school leaders as Covid-19 caused staff shortages. With many teachers and students contracting the virus, there was some reversion to online learning for short periods.

The closure of schools and the transition to online learning for months in 2020 and 2021 was unprecedented in school education in Australia and leaders in schools during the Covid-19 pandemic were critical in guiding, supporting, and advocating for school communities. As ACT schools had only recently emerged from the major impacts of the pandemic, it was an opportune time for school leaders to share their understandings and experiences of this period. Capturing school leaders' reflections can lead to an informed and rich understanding of the contextual, educational, and social factors that impact on leaders and their schools during a major crisis, and the factors which influence their decision-making (Brown et al. 2023). This knowledge can also contribute to improving planning, responses, and management of schools in future crisis events (Longmuir 2023). Currently, in Australia and other countries, there are ongoing situations of crisis, some of which have their antecedence in the pandemic. One of these is teacher shortages. Many teachers left the profession during the pandemic which has left an enduring legacy in the form of teacher shortage which impacts the day-to-day planning and operation of schools for leaders (Gavin and McGrath-Champ 2024). There has also been difficulty in attracting people to join the profession and a high rate of attrition in the early career years (Gavin and McGrath-Champ 2024).

Literature review

This research draws on crisis management literature to inform the approach taken (Boin, Kuipers, and Overdijk 2013; Mutch 2015; Smith and Riley 2012). Recent work from Mutch (2020) provides an understanding of educational leadership in the context of the Covid-19 crisis and strategies school leaders can utilise to support their school communities and keep students engaged in learning. Mutch's work builds on earlier studies of leadership during the crisis from Smith and Riley (2012), who argue that leadership skills and strategies for school leaders in crisis situations must be fundamentally different from those used in a normal school operational environment. They identify essential leadership attributes that can be harnessed to foster leadership capacity in a time of crisis. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD 2020) has reported on how different education systems have responded to the Covid-19 crisis and leadership approaches that have proved to be effective in several countries (Harris and Jones 2022; OECD 2021). The Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL 2020) has also produced resources that can be utilised by school leaders in crisis situations, based on an adaptive leadership approach.

School leadership experiences and practices during the Covid-19 crisis

A recent review of the empirical research on crisis leadership in schools (Striepe and Cunningham 2022) suggests that in times of crisis, effective school leadership is more contingent on soft skills. An important change that was widely reported by school leaders during the pandemic (Chaseling, Paredes, and Boyd 2020; Flack et al. 2021; Longmuir 2023; Sum 2022; Thornton 2021b) is how their leadership roles swiftly extended beyond the school into the wider school community and involved frequent, high volumes of communication with various stakeholder groups. For example, in a survey eliciting Australian school principal perspectives on the impact of Covid-19, 93.7% of 456 respondents rated communication as the most helpful leadership skill in the crisis (Flack et al. 2021). As the crisis unfolded, school leaders reported that frequent, timely, effective communication was critical to support the safety and well-being of students, staff, and their families and was instrumental towards alleviating anxiety, confusion, and fear (Chaseling, Paredes, and Boyd 2020; Flack et al. 2021; Hayes and Derrington 2023; Longmuir 2023; McLeod and Dulsky 2021; Paredes, Chaseling, and Boyd 2020; Sum 2022; Thornton 2021a).

The highly relational nature of school leaders' work was highlighted in the Covid-19 crisis (Flack et al. 2021; Longmuir 2023; Stone-Johnson et al. 2023; Sum 2022; Thornton 2021b), which reflects findings on school leadership in other crises (Mutch 2015; Striepe and Cunningham 2022). In the early stage of the pandemic in Melbourne, for example, school leaders reported that

inter-school networks, previously under-leveraged due to the competitive structuring of government policy, became a critical resource and support (Longmuir 2023). Principals were essential lynchpins in communicating key information regarding their school communities to regional offices (Khanal, Bento, and Tagliabue 2021; Sum 2022), which also demonstrates the important role of context in leadership *practice* in crises (Striepe and Cunningham 2022). School leaders became trusted sources of information in their communities, interpreting, modifying, and contextualising the sometimes conflicting and confusing messages from government and media sources, to allay community stress about sending children to school (Longmuir 2023; Paredes, Chaseling, and Boyd 2020; Sum 2022; Thornton 2021a).

Adaptive leadership in education

An adaptive leadership approach is well suited to complex situations and contexts, especially in responding to a crisis or unexpected event and when there is no clear plan or policy in place (Heifetz and Laurie 1997). Adaptive approaches are capable of addressing unpredictability and complexity in new circumstances and initiating change processes (Dunn 2020). One of the most effective ways of adapting to change that leaders can enact is with collaboration through teams. Adaptive school leaders gather knowledge quickly, are responsive to contextual needs, and endeavour to empower staff to act, especially through teams, giving appropriate people responsibility for particular tasks (Dunn 2020). This is because in adaptive leadership approaches, leadership is a dispersed and collaborative activity; leadership is enacted through practice and observation rather than by virtue of the inherent characteristics of the leaders or their technical ability (Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky 2009).

Decision-making and adaptability

Like many countries, in Australia, key decisions regarding school closures and moving to remote or blended learning had to be made rapidly, which exponentially increased the workloads of school leaders in devising, communicating, and implementing strategies (Brown et al. 2023). These strategies which are characteristic of adaptive leadership involve practically managing the safety and well-being of staff, students, and their families, logistics, resources, professional development, and student equity challenges (Hayes, Anderson, and Carpenter 2022; Sum 2022). Rapid decisions that diverged from embedded practices and strategic plans were needed to meet the immediate needs of school communities (Sum 2022), such as taking into consideration the safety of children of essential workers who would be left home alone, and myriad other emergent challenges (Longmuir 2023). Creating a safe environment for members of the community is something Heifetz, a pioneer of adaptive leadership, emphasised

particularly in times of rapid change and distress (Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky 2009). The need for an adaptive approach to school leadership in the Covid-19 crisis is reported in several studies. Khanal, Bento, and Tagliabue's (2021) review of the empirical research found that school leaders shifted to an adaptive, more flexible approach, including communication processes, which was necessary to reach everyone in their communities. School leaders at times learned of government decisions requiring immediate action outside school hours (Arnold, Rahimi, and Riley 2021; Jopling and Harness 2022). They also needed to be open and flexible regarding feedback on their decisions. As noted by Longmuir (2023, 10), 'being prepared to act quickly and make changes later was important to the success of their lockdown responses' and involved considerable diversion from usual work processes. For example, schools needed to implement processes for delivering hard copy learning materials to families without access to technology (Paredes, Chaseling, and Boyd 2020; Parveen et al. 2022), and some delivered food packages to families in need (Chaseling, Paredes, and Boyd 2020; Paredes, Chaseling, and Boyd 2020; Thornton 2021a). These measures reflect the prioritisation of care, which in the crisis necessitated the key characteristic of *adapting roles and responsibilities*, which was also identified in Striepe and Cunningham's (2022) review of a decade of empirical research on crisis leadership in schools.

Leadership strategies also needed to be continually adapted in response to community feedback and for different stages of the evolving crisis (e.g. Khanal, Bento, and Tagliabue 2021; Longmuir 2023; McLeod and Dulsky 2021; Mutch 2020; Thornton 2021a). This process aligns with Heifetz's notion of 'getting on the balcony' a time even if short, for leaders to stand back and assess the situation and engage in some strategic reflection. For example, following an initial rapid response, an interim phase involved feedback processes as strategies were revised and new practices embedded for the continuation of student learning, then focusing on the way forward and learning that came from experiences (Flack et al. 2021; Longmuir 2023; Stone-Johnson et al. 2023; Thornton 2021b).

An ongoing practice through all stages of the pandemic, evident in empirical studies internationally, is education leaders' consistent focus on communication demonstrating empathy (Longmuir 2023; McLeod and Dulsky 2021; Mutch 2020; Thornton 2021a; Westberry, Hornor, and Murray 2021). This finding reflects evidence from school leadership in other crises, showing that across crisis types, locations, and stages, caring for community wellbeing is fundamental, and is well beyond typical day-to-day practices and expectations of education professionals (Hayes, Anderson, and Carpenter 2022; Striepe and Cunningham 2022).

Shifts and adjustments in processes and policies

School leaders have reported the opportunity to reflect on organisational strengths and weaknesses highlighted during the Covid-19 crisis (Chaseling,

Paredes, and Boyd 2020; Flack et al. 2021) and opportunities for change, such as leveraging the collaborative capacity that emerged among staff and the broader school community (Chaseling, Paredes, and Boyd 2020; Stone-Johnson et al. 2023). In addition to increased education delivery opportunities in the online environment, creating stronger linkages with staff, and a greater understanding of students and their families, and the wider school community, are also noted (Flack et al. 2021).

Common characteristics emerging in the research on school leadership during the pandemic offer an important opportunity for crisis leadership *preparation* (Longmuir 2023). A recommendation in this vein from findings of the 2020 Australian school principal survey (Flack et al. 2021) is that school crisis plans have processes in place for immediate activation of extra mental health support services, and crisis plans should include support for school principals (Reid 2022).

Professional support, including professional development, focused on the emotional component of leadership, is identified in numerous crisis leadership studies (Arnold, Rahimi, and Riley 2021; Heffernan, MacDonald, and Longmuir 2022; Jopling and Harness 2022; Westberry, Hornor, and Murray 2021). The opportunity to implement strategies for better supporting the well-being and retention of school leaders and teachers is a common theme across the research (e.g. Arnold, Rahimi, and Riley 2021; Flack et al. 2021; Heffernan, MacDonald, and Longmuir 2022). An urgent need for more attention to the well-being of school principals in Australia was highlighted by the Covid-19 crisis (Arnold, Rahimi, and Riley 2021).

New insights and ways forward

New insights arising from the pandemic signal an evolutionary point in time for establishing resilient education, argue Khanal, Bento, and Tagliabue (2021), education that is equitable (Chaseling, Paredes, and Boyd 2020; Flack et al. 2021; Paredes, Chaseling, and Boyd 2020; Parveen et al. 2022; Sum 2022; UNESCO, UNICEF and World Bank 2021). The findings of the 2020 Australian principal survey (Flack et al. 2021) prompted policy recommendations to ‘futureproof’ the nation by prioritising the closure of the existing education access gap which the authors argue was already ‘ten times the size of any gap caused by the pandemic’ (32) and exacerbated by the crisis. A recent review of the empirical evidence on equity in school leadership found that a highly effective practice was ‘building productive partnerships among parents, schools, and the larger community’ (Leithwood 2021, 1), which the recent Covid-19 crisis produced from necessity in countries around the world.

Most of the research on school leadership during the Covid-19 crisis is centred on school principals and assistant, or deputy, principals. There is limited research into the governance and leadership roles of school boards in

Australia (see Austen, Swepson, and Marchant 2012; Gobby and Niesche 2019; Walkley 2012). However, the limited research is not focused on the role of school boards during crises. Likewise, Australian literature on the role of administrators representing school systems and organisational bodies is mainly concerned with their role in supporting teaching and learning, curriculum, strategic planning, and specialised programmes not on enacting crisis leadership (see AITSL 2021). Studies in Australian crisis leadership categorise leaders predominantly as school principals or assistant principals and do not consider the roles of school board members or local education department leaders (e.g. see Gurr 2021; Longmuir 2023). Studies more specifically focused on the role of school boards and administrators during the pandemic tend to be larger-scale international, quantitative studies examining school administration roles (see Akbaba Altun and Bulut 2023; Wharton-Beck et al. 2024). The literature lacks in-depth qualitative research incorporating the experiences and perspectives of different school leaders whose roles intersect. The present study addresses this gap in the literature through the novel approach of synthesising perspectives of the different intersecting leadership roles of principals, assistant principals, school board members, and external education administrators that interacted to manage an unfolding crisis. It shows how the effective collective action of these leaders enabled them to support their school communities during the pandemic crisis. The research question for this study is:

What knowledge and understandings are revealed through examining the experiences, and collective action across different leader groups about crisis leadership in schools during the Covid-19 pandemic, and how can these insights inform leaders facing current crisis situations in schools?

Methodology

This study is exploratory, using qualitative thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews to investigate the experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic in schools and school systems as reported by education leaders in the ACT.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews investigated understandings and perceptions of leadership experiences and responses to crisis management of schools during 2020–2022. The intention was not to produce generalisable findings which can be aligned to a broad range of schools, systems and contexts. Rather, the interviews were used to provide a vehicle for deep exploration of viewpoints, and the flexibility of generating a dynamic dialogue for a nuanced understanding of education leadership during the Covid-19 crisis (Creswell 2018). Interviews were conducted online from May to November 2022 and were

between 35 and 50 min in duration. The interviews had twelve open-ended questions. The questions explored the perspectives of the participants based on their context and roles in education. Interview questions were grouped into the categories: context information, strategic responses and decision-making, experiences of the challenges during the pandemic, level of preparation for the crisis, leadership qualities and changes in approaches, crisis policy responses, and lessons learned for future crisis events.

Selection of participants

Participants were drawn from three schools, from each school, a principal, an assistant principal, and a school board member. Three education administrators associated with external organisations also participated in the research. Participants were selected to achieve representation from primary and secondary school contexts and from the public and private school sectors. The clustering of four types of school leaders who are positioned in different leadership roles, allowed us to build a broader understanding of the enactment of school leadership during the crisis. By having two participant groups – principals and assistant principals, who bring an intimate knowledge and experience of the internal workings of school life, and two groups – school board members and administrators, who offer a strategic and administrative perspective on school governance, we leveraged a range of distinct perspectives to inform the study. This clustering of leadership groups provides scope for a more holistic understanding of the operation of school leadership at this time.

Research participants description and pseudonym (code)

Participant	Code	School type and sector
Principal	P1	Public primary school (school one)
Principal	P2	Private school: early childhood, primary and secondary (school two)
Principal	P3	Private school: early childhood, primary and secondary (school three)
Assistant Principal	AP1	Public primary school (school one)
Assistant Principal	AP2	Private school: early childhood, primary and secondary (school two)
Assistant Principal	AP3	Private school: early childhood, primary and secondary (school three)
School board Member	SB1	Public primary school (school one)
School board member	SB2	Private school: early childhood, primary and secondary (school two)
School board member	SB3	Private school: early childhood, primary and secondary (school three)
Education administrator	SEA1	Public education system
Education administrator	SEA2	Independent school system
Education administrator (and in the role of school principal)	SEA3	Public and Private school principals' association

Ethical considerations

The study was approved by the University of Canberra's Human Research Ethics Committee and the ACT Education Directorate, and permission from the school principals. The research was undertaken in accordance with the national research code of conduct for human research. Pseudonyms of school names and codes for participants have been used for confidentiality. The research protocols were established to protect the privacy, anonymity and confidentiality of the organisations and participants in the research.

Data analysis

The analysis of the semi-structured interviews was aimed at examining the unique circumstances faced by school leaders during periods of crisis. The unique nature of each crisis situation makes crisis leadership challenging to understand. Therefore, we employed an inductive approach to seek responses from school leaders that could inform the study's aim. We constructed our understanding of the experiences of school leaders from the analysis of the interviews and through the integration of concepts from the academic literature in the field. In this sense, the analytic process employed is also constructivist as we formulated interpretations through the prism of an adaptive leadership framework (Creswell 2018; Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky 2009).

The study was guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, which was a useful methodology with which to identify meaningful patterns across the four school leader groups through an inductive process. This involved six iterative analytical phases undertaken by the authors. Patterns in the data were noted and then reflected on, from which themes were generated and refined over the phases of the analysis. The analytical phases involved: (1) reading interview transcripts and making notes of points of interest, including similarities, patterns, and differences; (2) systematic coding of transcripts; (3) generating initial themes; (4) reviewing themes for their fit with the coded extracts; (5) refining and defining themes through ongoing analysis. (6) selecting and analysing data extracts and reporting the analysis.

In phase one, interview transcripts were read to check their accuracy. The authors then (independently) undertook an initial analysis of the interview transcripts, noting patterns, recurrent themes, and points of difference, which were then shared and discussed. Next, (phase 2), some initial codes were generated which were based on keywords/topics appearing in the interviews (e.g. communication, policy, crisis, leadership). The coding in this phase was undertaken with an open, collaboratively recursive, flexible approach, sharing notes and thoughts. In the third phase of analysis, themes were generated to represent meaningful patterns that featured across the entire dataset, and the coded text was collated into four main themes. The fourth phase involved checking

the collated coded data within each theme, and assessing whether the themes were representative across the whole dataset. From here, themes were refined (i.e. merged or separated), defined, and labelled (phase 5). The final phase involved preparing the thematic analysis results, analysing, and selecting illustrative examples from the data in relation to the themes and then integrating relevant literature. The themes were also considered through the lens of adaptive leadership and synergies that could be identified to help understand the responses of the participants.

The selection of the key themes was based on the frequency of responses and their prevalence across the dataset (i.e. all four participant groups). These themes also largely corresponded to those already identified in the literature on school leadership in the pandemic.

Four themes were thus selected to inform the analysis:

- 1) The ability to change and adapt
- 2) The importance of communication
- 3) Focus on wellbeing
- 4) Productive collaborations

Findings

Findings are presented under the four themes in order of prevalence across the dataset. Each theme is described, and its main insights are illustrated with interview extracts.

Ability to change and adapt

This theme was the most prevalent, in all four participant groups, and highlights the unprecedented change in the way schools operated in the pandemic, and how rapid, widescale change was facilitated. To meet community needs, flexibility became an essential characteristic of the education system. This flexibility included, for example, accommodating students who needed to attend school during lockdowns, and supporting others to continue learning remotely when schools reopened. This theme also highlights changes in leadership style, which became more empathic and involved more communication with parents, and staff. Decision-making processes also changed as, particularly early in the pandemic, principals often needed to make rapid decisions with minimal consultation. Decision-making in the uncertainty of the crisis is captured by this reflection: '... in the first lockdown I remember, making that decision into the void' [P2]. There were also times when school boards could not be consulted about key decisions, '[in] an ideal world the board probably would have liked to have been brought in earlier, but pragmatism means the decision had to be made before the board could reasonably meet' [SB1].

A high level of authentic, and empathic communication was reported by leaders as crucial in cultivating the climate of trust needed for their school community to widely have confidence in their decisions, (as elaborated in the next theme). Taking an empathetic approach was an important crisis leadership disposition that informed decision-making, it was critical in keeping school communities connected and underpinned the flexibility that was needed to accommodate community needs.

As schools reopened there remained high anxiety about the virus, and across the different leader groups, participants reflected that it was important to be 'gentle with families to allow for that anxiety ... there was ... a lot of fear in the community' [SEA2]. It was also critical to listen to feedback, and at times, decision-making processes evolved to be even more widely consultative than previously was typical: '... we did make decisions in a different way ... we elicited more information from more people than we had before, because the decisions effected our entire community' [AP2].

Being adaptable to changing circumstances also involved new dimensions of learning for school leaders, exemplified in this principal's comments:

... there are ... new things we had to work out how to do. Like everybody, we had to work out how to do everything online, we had to work out how to maintain those relationships online [P2].

Governance also changed as leaders engaged in new ways of operating, including regular executive meetings online, and negotiating the relationship between government regulations in guiding school community responses to the evolving crisis. As one school board member commented 'I think the school has learnt enormous amounts about firstly the role of government in a pandemic how critical it is to use regulations ... from the government' [SB2]. Leaders were also cognisant of not losing knowledge gained, as the following quote exemplifies:

One of the worst things I can hear is 'I just want to go back to normal' because there isn't any normal and looking to go back to what was is throwing away what we have probably learned [SEA1].

The breadth and scope of the changes that leaders had to undertake were seen by some as being a paradigm shift in education. In the view of one education administrator 'It was remarkable as it was undertaken to basically reshape the model for schooling almost overnight' [SEA3] and the experience 'has fundamentally changed the way we are thinking about the purpose of education in schools and the conversations' [AP1].

Important role of communication

The second theme reflects the exponential increase in the communication that was required of school leaders during the pandemic. Two key characteristics regarding leaders' communication are highlighted through this theme. First,

communication needed to convey empathy and care, which involved listening, and understanding concerns in the school community. Second, leaders believed messages needed to be structured and communicated deliberately and come from a consistent source.

Regarding the first communication characteristic of empathy and care, these were considered important to keep people informed and connected and to reduce community anxiety. These approaches helped to build trust in the early phase of the crisis. The following comment reflects the views of leaders across the four leadership groups: 'Being open, being a good listener ... was really, really, important. That helped with that trust and that collaboration too' [SEA2]. Board members reflected likewise: 'the Board does a pretty good job at listening, but I think during that period of crisis it becomes more succinct and more prioritised frankly' [SB2]. A strong focus on timely, empathic communication was essential, particularly in the early phases of the crisis as 'every hour that the parents didn't get a message from the school ... is an hour of anxiety and doubt' [SB3].

Regarding the second characteristic of crisis communication, messages needed to be structured, deliberate, and from a consistent source, this involved leaders making sense of information from different government, and media sources and then efficiently clarifying for their school community, what action was needed. As one leader reflected, 'I don't know if I have ever had to do quite so much sensemaking for people, and debriefing, and talking through ...' [AP1].

The following comment reflects reports across all four participant groups regarding the importance of clear communication:

I think the first [strategy] was a consistent line of communication. We started all over the place and realised very quickly that we needed one channel that was consistent, that had the same message [AP2].

School leaders also felt a strong responsibility to interpret health department edicts and policies and communicate them in a way that made sense for staff, students, parents, and families, while not changing their essential health-related meanings.

The volume and detail of the information that school leaders had to digest was a major challenge as they then had to clearly communicate that information across school communities in ways that would not further exacerbate community anxiety and ensure that different cultural groups also understood messages. As one school board member reflected,

I think there was a real uplift in communication, certainly from the school to its community and I suspect there was probably enough communication from the central office to schools as well [SB1].

Principals also relayed the needs of their school communities to education administrators, who reported relying on their feedback. Leaders adapted their

communication and action plans according to the context and needs of their own school communities, as a school board member recounted:

... the role of the principal in terms of navigating and adapting and using the advice from the central office and making it relevant to the school community is central ... the principal ... applied the localised lens, the school leadership lens [SB1].

Focus on wellbeing

All four participant groups recounted that their decisions and action plans were underpinned by the intent of community well-being. 'Wellbeing certainly came to the fore ... I think that is something that became really clear, without well-being influencing everything that we do ... we may as well pack up ...' [AP3]. As aforementioned, part of the adaptation process was the need for school leaders to be (more) empathic and listen to the needs of the school community as school leaders found themselves 'dealing with a very different scenario ... the big difference ... [the] intensity of emotion, that I don't know that we've had in the past' [AP1]. Leaders reported the need to attune to the high levels of fear and anxiety in the community, and respond compassionately, as reflected in the following comment: 'We had to be compassionate, emotionally intelligent ... we had to ... recognise ... there was immense human emotional dimension to this and that we had to manage the mood' [P2].

Leaders reported being aware of students and staff who felt very isolated in lockdowns, and there were extreme workload pressures as people worked from home while needing to also oversee their own children's learning. Listening to the needs of teachers too was critical, to attune with staff well-being, captured by the following comment 'it made us more aware that listening was really important' [AP2]. There was a heightened awareness of the importance of recognising and supporting school community members who were not coping, '... we just want you to make sure that everyone is feeling supported and making sure that you keep your eyes and ears open to anyone who sounds like they are not coping as well' [P2]. Students' online safety was also of concern, and processes needed to be rapidly established for well-being monitoring online, such as daily check-ins at log-in, with response teams to call students and staff, and leaders needed to increase school pastoral care services.

School leaders themselves also reported experiencing work pressures, and other stresses, and the need to maintain a positive outlook in the face of challenges. For example:

The intensity was very hard. The whole idea of leading the culture in the school, it was our job to not heighten the issues that we faced ... to try to manage our staff as to moving forward ... that was a fulltime job of the positivity, the communication ... It became quite exhausting mentally [AP2].

Board members were very conscious of the mental health impact of the pandemic on school members, as one board member reflected,

prior to those challenging years, the Board's deliberation would have covered fairly normal areas such as curriculum, governance, strategic vision, but when that period (the crisis) hit you had this huge emphasis on health, mental welfare [SB2].

Education administrators were also mindful of the wellbeing of school staff as the pandemic progressed and the need for 'strategies putting the personal wellbeing of the teachers and staff first and being flexible with them about what they could and couldn't manage' [SEA3].

Productive collaborations

This theme highlights the importance of creating conditions that foster collaborative relationships in organisational and social structures. Productive collaborations included across the four school leader groups and with teachers and school staff; collaboration across local schools; the close collaboration of schools with students and their families, and collaborations formed across the wider school community (i.e. with local organisations). In the four participant groups, leaders spoke about the efficacy of teamwork in their school communities, and how productive collaborations were cultivated in response to the crisis. For example: 'We had to be compassionate, empathetic, we had to be collaborative, we had to really work out how to really work together, all the more when we couldn't physically work together ...' [P2].

Leaders engaged in greater collaboration both within and across schools, which included leveraging the capacity of already established teams such as school boards, school executives, and parent and carer bodies, which quickly adapted to be more efficient in response to the pandemic. As one principal reported,

we very rapidly set up a daily online covid response meeting which we have maintained virtually ... It was quite a focused, quite an efficient, quite a stable team, scaled up and down as need be [P2].

Some participants reported that already having established collaborative teams in their organisational structures provided a solid basis for their crisis response and enabled further deepening of collaborative relationships. For example:

We had really strong professional relationships with our heads of department ... we had been building their knowledge and understanding about the importance of relationships with their team members ... [AP3].

Across the four leader groups, two main characteristics appeared to help establish the conditions for productive collaboration, which were the presence of trust, and a clear idea of the shared purpose. As one administrator explained:

For this team to function, we had to have a culture that was really, strongly based on trust. People really felt they were a valued member ... They all had a voice. There was no stupid idea ... particularly in this case, it was like we're all in this [SEA2].

The notion of a collective purpose was described in each of the four groups' interviews, as having a clear shared intent, or vision, and acting on core values (i.e. prioritising wellbeing). It became important for leaders to consistently communicate the shared intent to the school community, and this helped working teams avoid becoming embroiled in details and administration, stay focused around their collective goal, and aided decision-making.

Systems for ensuring continuity of leadership were also established. For example, one principal reported that even during lockdowns two operating teams functioned deliberately to avoid cross-infecting one another so that there would always be a fully operational team functioning.

Leaders also expressed the value of connecting with and collaboration between schools for information and resource sharing, for example:

[the] school has become closer to its counterpart schools and its communications sometimes there can be you know people get busy and there might be distance from different schools but when you are in a crisis ... they were all talking to each other ... [SB2].

Strengthening of school communities was evident in school leaders' minds as a key opportunity that arose from the crisis, that should be sustained going forward, as the following reflection captures:

what the last few years has shown us is we've actually had ... to work in partnership with families [to] deliver the education because we were literally doing it together, and so ... I've noticed a strengthening of the connections we have with community ... [AP1].

Discussion

A strong message in the reflections of school leaders on the first theme, *the ability to change and adapt* is that the advances, innovations, and learnings from the crisis should be integrated rather than forgotten. This is an important point in relation to leaders being able to utilise these experiences and knowledge to deal with ongoing crises in schools, which although no longer in the pandemic context, nevertheless have many of the same features of unpredictability, urgency, and in the case of teacher shortages, this is also a widespread and chronic crisis. Across interviews with the principals, assistant principals, school board members, and education administrators, the need for greater flexibility in education delivery that the pandemic created was recognised as an ongoing need. This sentiment links to research that highlighted the global pandemic as a watershed moment in history (Khanal, Bento, and Tagliabue 2021), as an important opportunity for education to be reshaped for the needs of the global community in twenty-first century (Harris and Jones 2020).

Understanding leadership responses in periods of crisis is complex and challenging, as 'normal' modes of operation are replaced by a range of

contingencies that require quick, adaptive, and sometimes unprecedented reactions under duress. This is reflected in the leadership crisis literature, for example, Smith and Riley (2012) argue that leadership approaches must take a different orientation in periods of crisis. During the Covid-19 crisis the scale, intensity, and duration of responses were heightened, necessitating an adaptive, flexible approach among the different interacting leader groups for effective ongoing collective action. Having led through two years of relentless pressure, change and unpredictability school leaders are positioned to draw upon a repertoire of adaptive strategies for innovative solutions in response to ongoing teacher shortages.

The importance of communication that was timely, empathetic and effective, underpinned collaboration among education leaders at different levels inside and outside of schools. The increased volume and range of information leaders had to deal with and the requirement to communicate information rapidly and extensively was evident in this study and has been highlighted in the literature as a challenge school leaders faced (Chaseling, Paredes, and Boyd 2020; Flack et al. 2021; Longmuir 2023; McLeod and Dulsky 2021; Paredes, Chaseling, and Boyd 2020; Sum 2022; Thornton 2021a). Combining the perspectives of the four leader groups highlighted the type of sense-making and coherence-building leaders had to engage in (Longmuir 2023). The way in which education leaders had to interpret and communicate crucial information and policy to their school communities was also anchored in flexible, collaborative, and contextually relevant decision-making across the four leader groups. These aspects of leadership are trademark elements of an adaptive approach to a crisis situation and can empower leaders to more effectively lead and address the challenges their school communities face.

A continued *focus on well-being* was identified as a need going forward, by the four leadership groups, and is prevalent in the literature (Striepe and Cunningham 2022). The strategy of leading with empathy that featured in the pandemic was viewed as an important leadership attribute for a healthy working environment and wider school community well-being. The increased empathy and compassion that education leaders demonstrated in the crisis also helped to cultivate the trust needed for effective collaboration, among the leader groups and their wider school communities, in the pandemic. This finding is supported by several studies that identified empathy as a key leadership priority and orientation during the pandemic (Longmuir 2023; McLeod and Dulsky 2021; Mutch 2020; Thornton 2021b). Being attentive to distress and reflecting on the needs of staff is fundamentally aligned with an adaptive leadership orientation and must underpin crisis responses including the widespread and ongoing crisis of a teacher shortage to retain and attract teachers going forward.

The efficacy of *productive collaborations* through working in teams was reported across the four participant groups, reflecting the kinds of

strengthening of connections that have been the focus of education departments and schools for decades. Furthermore, findings of Leithwood's (2021) review of equity in school leadership found that building productive collaborations in school communities was an effective strategy towards addressing the significant global challenge of equity in education access that was emphasised and exacerbated by the pandemic (Flack et al. 2021; Harris and Jones 2022; Longmuir 2023).

The collective efficacy and reciprocal understanding that was enabled across the different leadership roles, as highlighted by this study, were important features, and resonate with the AITSL (2020) statement that 'a collective approach to leadership is essential for the sustainability and wellbeing of leaders, teachers, schools and the broader education system'. Engendering a collaborative approach has ongoing applicability in the periods of crisis where leaders need to establish teams to cooperate and share responsibilities, sometimes take each other's classes and act in each other's roles for periods of time.

Conclusion

This study is limited to a local context, and is small, being in-depth and qualitative in nature. A study encompassing a broader number of leaders and schools would have revealed a more representative sample of views and would have likely revealed more differences between approaches in public and private schools, and secondary and primary schools. In private schools, boards often have more power and influence in decision-making regarding the strategic management of the school. The study is also limited as it does not incorporate the views of mid-level leaders in the schools. Nevertheless, the findings contribute to contextualised understanding of the disruption leaders faced during the pandemic and the personal and collective capital they harnessed to guide their school communities. Other areas pertaining to school leadership also warrant better understanding, including the mental health impacts on school leaders, the way their leadership impacted on equity and social justice issues, the influence of gender, and online learning. International school leadership research, qualitative and quantitative, that enables comparison across contexts, would be fruitful to advance knowledge in these domains.

While there is now a rapidly growing body of research concerning school leadership in the pandemic, further theorising and conceptualisation are required to re-evaluate existing models of leadership enactment, such as distributed and adaptive team leadership. More work is also required to embed the analysis of the Covid-19 crisis responses in schools into the broader literature of crisis leadership. This paper has argued that there is considerable potential to understand these experiences and from these harness insights and strategies for school leaders, administrators and board members to continue to adapt to new chronic (i.e. ongoing) crisis situations, some of which have been

exacerbated by the pandemic. These strategic leadership capacities include: quick and agile decision-making which is highly attuned to the context and needs of the school community/communities; clear and effective communication of key decisions and policies through multiple sources, especially digital ones; recognition and responsiveness to the social and emotional state of the school community/communities in peak periods of crisis; and building and empowering teams that can work collaboratively under pressure and are adaptive to changing circumstances, especially those which occur as a result of teacher shortages day-to-day, week-to-week and lengthier periods. Further research may also shed light on Harris and Jones' claim, made in 2020, that due to the pandemic 'school leadership has shifted on its axis and is unlikely to return to 'normal' anytime soon, if ever' (245) creating a so-called 'new order' in leadership. Indeed, twenty-first-century conditions in education to date suggest that agile, collaborative leadership is increasingly essential.

Combining perspectives from different, interacting positions of school leadership, provided insights into how crisis leadership challenges were supported through collective action. Principals especially were in a pivotal role, as they communicated and consulted more frequently with the other groups of leaders, which gave them both an inward-facing and outward-facing perspective of crisis leadership at this time. Given extensive literature concerning school principals' and staff's well-being and support going forward, findings from this in-depth qualitative study suggest school boards may be a useful practical resource in future crisis situations, and the important role of education administrators' flexible, context-specific responsiveness. Centred on concepts stemming from adaptive leadership this study has provided a lens into how different leadership roles can function in schools in concert and independently to support school communities when quick and effective changes and decisions must be made.

Finally, this study recognises the stories of struggles, opportunities, and resilience these leaders have shared and how they help co-construct meaningful understandings of school leadership during the Covid-19 pandemic, and the criticality of documenting and reflecting on lessons learned in moving forward as schools, school leaders and administrators struggle to deal with legacies of this period, which require continual adaptation, resilience and strong collaboration.

Disclosure statement

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

Funding

This paper received funding from the Early Career Academic Research Development Fund (ECARD) at the University of Canberra in 2023.

Notes on Contributors

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Cheryl Jones has a background in sociology, culture studies, and educational psychology, and has an interest in undertaking research that is interdisciplinary. Research interests include the social nature of emotions, the social function of affect in teamwork, and social interaction in collaborative learning contexts.

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