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School leadership during disruptive change: an emotional and relational practice

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ABSTRACT

Leaders play an important role in creating suitable conditions for and leading change, and leadership is most effective when it is needed most, such as during disruptive change. We used the disruption caused by the pandemic as a case to study how school leaders responded, starting from the framework by Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins (2008. "Seven Strong Claims About Successful School Leadership." *School Leadership & Management* 28 (1): 27–42. https://doi.org/10.1080/13632430701800060). 89 school leaders in higher education completed an open-ended questionnaire. Additionally, nine of these leaders were interviewed to explore their practices in depth. The leadership practices and paths of influence defined by Leithwood and colleagues (2008. "Seven Strong Claims About Successful School Leadership." *School Leadership & Management* 28 (1): 27–42. https://doi.org/10.1080/13632430701800060) largely worked to understand leadership in times of disruption. We identified a new path of influence (relational) and refined the framework based on our insights. School leaders focused on setting directions and developing people and mainly influenced the change process through the relational and emotional path. These findings are an important next step in understanding and supporting leadership in times of disruption. This will become more and more important in a world of growing complexity and uncertainty.

KEYWORDS

Leadership for change; leadership practices; school leadership; emotions; paths of influence; relations

Introduction

Educational change is on the agenda of researchers, policymakers and practitioners worldwide (Hargreaves et al. 2014). In recent years, questions about leading disruptive change have gained more and more attention. This has been caused by complex global challenges such as forced migration, climate emergency or the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to uncertain and fast-pacing

changes in education (Campbell et al. 2020). The pandemic represented a unique and unforeseen sort of change that disrupted education practices globally. It has had a major impact on teaching and learning and the organisation of education. The need to teach and learn remotely and therefore online required significant changes from everyone involved. Learning environments needed to be designed online, communication and instructional processes had to be changed on very short notice, and, at the same time, the wellbeing and motivation of students and teachers were a big concern and priority.

Literature puts leadership forward as a crucial factor in the success or failure of fast-paced change, as for all educational innovations (Day et al. 2000; Hattie 2015; Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins 2008). It also suggests that leaders who are able to take charge of change, rather than being controlled by it, are more effective and successful at changing education (Fink and Stoll 2005). The disruptive change that leaders were faced with during the pandemic called for strong leaders who were able to lead change despite the storm they were in. Strong leadership does not mean heroic leadership. Facing adaptive challenges, leaders need to support collaboration, deepen relationships and foster ownership (Bagwell 2020). This is crucial in shaping the necessary change while guaranteeing educational quality, as well as job satisfaction of teachers and the motivation and wellbeing of students (Gougas and Malinova 2021). Leaders need to ensure a safe environment and trust in uncertain times because these are crucial conditions for change (Tschannen-Moran 2014).

School leaders were forced to respond to these changing circumstances and change their practices quickly, but there were no leadership norms, no blueprints or programmes that could lead these school leaders through a disruptive change such as the pandemic (Harris and Jones 2020). With the aim of gaining more insight into school leadership during disruption, it is therefore interesting and important to explore and understand their practices during the pandemic. Leaders could partly depend on known leadership practices but might need to experiment with new practices, too. Based on the extensive review by Leithwood and colleagues (2020), effective leaders are likely to focus on setting goals, building relationships, developing the organisation and supporting instructional practices. The influence of educational leaders on the course and outcomes of change may run through different paths, focusing on the rational, emotional, organisational or family path. With the aim of broadening our insight into educational leadership in times of disruptive change, we wanted to investigate to what extent known leadership practices would apply or what other practices or paths of influence might surface. Our research goal was to test and elaborate the framework for effective leadership developed by Leithwood and colleagues (2020), using the COVID-19 pandemic as a case where many leaders were faced with similar changes at the same time worldwide. The following research questions were posed:

RQ1. What leadership practices did school leaders use during this disruptive change?

RQ2. Which paths (rational, emotional, organizational, family) did school leaders focus on to exercise influence on the change process?

Theoretical framework

The complexity of leadership in times of change

The capacity of teachers to adapt during fast-paced change largely depends on the capacities and practices of leaders that engage others in creative thinking, that build and ensure resilience and maintain relationships and safety (Bagwell 2020). Educational change can be described as the initiation, implementation and institutionalisation of processes meant to alter teaching and learning within educational institutions (Hargreaves 2005) with the aim of improving student learning (Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins 2008). Many of the educational changes that school leaders and teachers face today are complex, as they are influenced by a multitude of factors, follow one another quickly and sometimes lack a vision or goal (Hargreaves 2005). Educational change is becoming more and more complex and dynamic, presenting great challenges for their leaders. The rapid change brought by the pandemic posed extraordinary challenges for school leaders (Bagwell 2020). School leaders were expected to take into account many different elements during the process of educational change, such as structure and culture, strategy and vision, relationships, administration and conflicting stakeholder views. This makes leadership in times of change utterly complex (Kaden 2020; Netolicky 2020).

In order to structure the multitude of factors that leaders can take into account, Leithwood and colleagues (2020) described four paths of influence leaders can focus on to drive change (i.e. rational, organisational, emotional and familial). The function of leadership practices (i.e. setting directions, developing people and the organisation and supporting the programme) is to focus on all four paths that generate and foster change, to the extent that fits the context (Fullan 2014; Leithwood Harris and Hopkins 2008). In the subsequent paragraphs, we will further explore this comprehensive framework from Leithwood and colleagues (2020), as a means to investigate both leadership practices and paths of influence during processes of complex change.

Leadership practices supporting and enhancing educational change

There is a broad understanding of what successful school leaders do in times of change, all to help team members perform in the best possible way. In their 2008 review, Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins reported that successful leaders draw on the same repertoire of basic leadership practices. Based on syntheses of research (within and outside education) four domains of leadership practices were identified, which were supported and elaborated by later research (e.g.

Day, Harris, and Hadfield 2001; Liu and Hallinger 2018): (1) setting goals and directions, (2) developing supportive relations, (3) developing the organisation, (4) supporting the instructional programme. We will next elaborate on these insights.

Set goals and directions

Educational change is influenced by a multitude of (possibly conflicting) factors and stakeholders, and the road ahead is seldom straightforward. Change initiatives aim for better student learning, but that implies a clear view of what good student learning looks like. Leaders of change need to find a common understanding of how new practices will support student learning better than the old routines. Next, it is crucial that leaders build and share a vision that sets the direction for change. Shared vision brings team members together, strengthens group cohesiveness and supports the sustainability of change (Rieckhoff and Larsen 2012; Spillane 2004). Building a shared vision among team members strengthens collective efficacy and trust in school teams and supports teacher learning (Vanlommel et al. 2023).

The vision and direction also shape teachers' engagement with regard to the team. Cho, Hamilton, and Tuthill (2019) described limited commitment to change initiatives when there was a lack of shared vision among team members. When a clear direction was missing, team members found change initiatives to be confusing. Educational leaders need to set high-performance expectations even in challenging times of change and model these high goals (Day, Harris, and Hadfield 2001).

Develop people

Schools do not change unless the people within the school change (Shirley and MacDonald 2016). Especially during disruptive change, leaders should create opportunities for social connectedness and build resilience as teachers engage in collective sense-making about what is happening and build collective capacity to cope with change (Bagwell 2020). Leadership practices should focus not only on knowledge and skills but also on dispositions such as commitment, energy or resilience. Yukl, Gordon, and Taber (2002) defined different categories of leadership practices that can help develop people. Leaders can *support* teachers by helping them when they encounter difficulties and by showing consideration and expressing concern for teachers' needs and problems. Second, leaders can guide and *coach* teachers when adopting new tasks and roles and help them to develop skills and confidence. Third, through *rewards* or punishment, performance can be enhanced. Fourth, participative leadership and *empowerment* can help develop teacher agency and greater acceptance of decisions during change. Instructional and emotional support, opportunities for learning and shared decision-making and modelling values and behaviours are leadership practices focused on

developing people (Campbell, Gold, and Lunt 2003; Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins 2008). Leaders need to understand how trust, support and autonomy may increase teachers' motivation to change (Bagwell 2020; Tschannen-Moran 2014)

(Re)develop the organisation

Educational change takes place in schools with structures and cultures. Leadership practices are often focused on structuring the organisation to improve instruction or facilitate collaboration, or on allocating resources (Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins 2008). These initiatives should not be limited to diffusing change initiatives developed by leaders, nor should it be limited to facilitating the implementation of teacher ideas. Neither top-down nor bottom-up strategies for educational reform work; it requires a combination of both (Fullan 2014).

To successfully implement a change initiative, a leader must understand the complex nature and interplay of structure and culture in the organisation. Often change initiatives run into resistance because of being countered by the existing culture within the institution (Hinde 2004). Organisational culture is often hard to grasp, yet all-encompassing. For example, a culture of trust and collaboration is an important precondition for successful and sustainable change (Bryk and Schneider 2002). Without a culture of trust, organisations are often not able to improve their way of working (Hinde 2004). One way to build trust within an institution is to distribute the leadership among team members. This enhances collective responsibility and thereby increases trust in one another (Bryk and Schneider 2002; Hallam et al. 2015). Leadership practices should therefore focus on providing an organisational structure and culture that allows collaboration, trust and shared leadership.

Manage instructional practices

The ultimate goal of all educational change is improving student learning. Therefore, Leithwood and colleagues (2008) stressed that leadership practices should also focus on the improvement of the instructional programme. This refers to all kinds of support leaders can provide to their team members to improve the curriculum. For example, during the pandemic, the instructional programme needed to change because all teaching needed to be remote. An important task for leaders is to support teachers in this (Lee and Jung 2021; Xie and Rice 2021). During change, leaders should also monitor teaching and learning and develop a new course of action if needed. By collecting and analysing data about the instructional programme, leaders can make evidence-informed decisions about the next steps in the change process.

Table 1 provides an overview of the leadership practices discussed above.

Table 1. What successful leaders do (based on Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins 2008).

Domains of practice	Specific leadership practices
Set goals and directions	• Build shared vision • Identify goals • Communicate vision and goals
Develop people	• Support teachers' instruction and emotions • Guide and coach • Reward • Empower • Model
Develop the organisation	• Build culture of collaboration and trust • Distribute leadership • Structure the organisation that facilitates collaboration • Allocate resources in support of the school's vision and goals
Manage instructional practices	• Provide instructional support • Monitor student learning and school improvement process

Paths of influence that drive change

When the context changes, as was the case during the pandemic, the organisation and the people in the organisation need to change, too. Changing behaviour is not easy, especially in education, where routines are deeply rooted in daily practice (Shirley and MacDonald 2016). School leaders are crucial in enhancing behavioural change, providing direction, building organisations and people and supporting instructional practices. According to Bush and Glover (2014) leadership is a process of influence leading to the achievement of desired purpose. Through their leadership practices, leaders can exercise influence through four distinct paths, each offering different sets of variables (Leithwood et al. 2010). Effective school leaders are able to select the most promising or needed variables, and they can move between the different paths. We aimed to investigate to what extent leaders focused on these paths of influence, which will be further discussed in the next paragraphs.

Rational

The first path of influence that drives educational change concerns the knowledge and skills educational professionals need about teaching, learning, and the curriculum. Influencing these factors calls on school leaders' knowledge about the 'technical core' of teaching and learning, their knowledge of leadership practices and their problem solving-capacities (Leithwood et al. 2010). The rational path includes variables at both the class and the school level. In the case of change during the pandemic, for example, leaders needed to make decisions about the core of the curriculum (which parts of the curriculum were essential, which could be set aside?), about priorities for instructional time in online classes, or the possibilities and pitfalls of online assessment.

Education during the pandemic required teachers to have the knowledge and skills needed to adapt teaching to the new situation. For example, they needed to figure out how to teach in online learning environments, or how to coach and motivate students who were at home. The challenge for school

leaders was to understand, lead, support and build the knowledge and skills required to adapt to the changed situation. Focusing on these elements is influencing change through the rational path (Leithwood et al. 2010).

Emotional

Greatly important, but often neglected in processes of change, is the emotional path (Hargreaves 2005). The emotional path reflects the feelings and affective states of educational professionals that arise during the daily course of work in general, but especially during processes of change (Leithwood et al. 2020). This includes both individual and collective feelings and affective states. The rational and emotional paths are more tightly connected than many leaders believe (Leithwood et al. 2010). Emotions direct cognition and attention and influence judgment (Datnow, 2018; Vanlommel and Schildkamp 2019). Emotional resilience makes teachers more resourceful, adaptive and stable (Bagwell 2020). The review by Leithwood and colleagues (2010) pointed to factors within the emotional path that have significant effects on teaching and learning, such as individual and collective teacher efficacy, teacher commitment and teacher trust. In times of disruptive change, collective teacher efficacy is important. It is defined as a group's shared belief in its joint capability to organise and execute the courses of action needed to reach certain results (Bandura 2006). Collective teacher efficacy proved to be an important condition for teacher learning during the pandemic (Vanlommel et al. 2023). It strengthens teacher commitment and trust, both crucial contributors to the success of educational institutions (Mart 2013). Leaders will need social skills and emotional intelligence to influence these aspects of the emotional dimension (Leithwood et al. 2010).

Organisational

Educational change is not just affected by the knowledge, skills or emotions of the people involved. Structures, cultures and procedures that are part of the organisational dimension may hinder motivated teachers and leaders in their plans (Hallinger and Leithwood 1998). For example, teachers who were trying to reduce the number of elements in the curriculum during the pandemic might be confronted with strict examination programmes. Leaders trying to organise a daily online meeting before the start of the lessons might be hindered by a strong cultural norm that work starts when the lessons start. Leaders focusing on the organisational path define the working conditions for teachers, which in turn is likely to influence and be influenced by both emotions and knowledge.

Familial

The rational, emotional and organisational paths are aspects within the school environment. Research has shown that everything schools do accounts for only a part of student learning and that great influence is exerted through

the home environment (e.g. Kyriakides and Creemers 2008). The family dimension therefore includes variables such as home environment or parent involvement. For example, during the pandemic, students were following classes at home. More than in times before the pandemic, student learning was influenced by the extent to which parents provided a quiet and safe place to follow lessons and to study (Sepulveda-Escobar and Morrison 2020). Leaders can also try to influence this home environment and parental support. The 4-path model of Leithwood and colleagues (2010) was developed for K-12 contexts where teachers are likely to have more influence on parents and the home environment. In our research, especially given the unique context of the pandemic, we want to investigate how and to what extent the Familial path matters.

Table 2 provides an overview of the different paths of influence.

Context of this study

The sudden and unforeseen outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic forced education to respond and change rapidly. Many countries were in a lockdown, where education was forced to become online instead of face-to-face. This was the case in higher education in the Netherlands. We describe a case study in higher education in the Netherlands where a university of applied sciences (Utrecht) was temporarily closed, and shifted to remote, online teaching. All students followed lessons online and had examinations online, forcing teachers to adapt their teaching immediately. We investigated how leaders (higher and middle managers with formal leadership roles) led this unforeseen and unpredictable change. At the start, no one knew how long this online teaching would continue or how students would respond, and teachers had little to no experience in online teaching and assessment. There was no existing vision for remote teaching and evaluation and no readily developed structures or instruments for online collaboration. School leaders experienced high pressure, working in these demanding circumstances. In this context, we investigated what leadership practices leaders used to cope with this change and on which paths of influence they focused. Although the model of Leithwood and colleagues (2010) was primarily developed for K-12 education in the US, the constructs measured by the model, such as influencing practice by focusing on rational or emotional aspects, are relevant dimensions of leadership across

Table 2. Four dimensions of change (based on Leithwood et al. 2010).

Paths of Influence	Variables
Rational	• Knowledge and skills related to curriculum, teaching and learning, learning environment
Emotional	• Individual and collective feelings, dispositions or affective states
Organisational	• Structures, cultures and procedures
Familial	• Home environment and parental involvement

educational levels and contexts. We adjusted terms, for example, leader instead of school leader and faculty instead of school.

Method

Context and participants

We administered a web-based survey at a University of Applied Sciences in the Netherlands within 22 faculties that provide education at bachelor's and master's level. First, we contacted the faculty director, explaining the goal of our research. Eight out of 22 institutions agreed to participate in this study. Three were institutes with an educational programme, two with a business programme, one with a programme in natural and applied sciences and two with programmes in humanities.

The target population consisted of 176 leaders (i.e. educators with formal leadership roles in the 8 institutions involved in this study). A total of 89 leaders (51%) participated in this study (42-63 years old; 12–30 years of experience in a leadership role). Nine leaders agreed to semi-structured interviews afterwards. Four of the participants in the interviews were female (44%), and five were male (56%).

Instruments

Questionnaire

We developed the instrument based on the theoretical framework of Leithwood and colleagues (2008, 2010) and tested the instrument in a pilot with three leaders not involved in the study. No difficulties were reported. Open-ended questions were presented in an online survey in Dutch. All respondents gave written informed consent guaranteeing confidentiality. At the start of the survey, the case was explained:

> Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, all the teaching became online from one day to the next. New ways of teaching, assessment, communication and management needed to be found to cope with this shift to remote, online teaching and learning. As a leader, you had an important role in leading this change. We are interested in how you did that. All questions should be answered with leading this change in mind.

Open-ended questions asked what they did as a leader to lead this change and what problems and possibilities they encountered.

Interview protocol

A semi-structured interview protocol was used to conduct 9 interviews. All interviews were one-on-one interviews, conducted by one researcher. We started with their questionnaire responses, this allowed us to gain a richer and deeper insight into the practices they reported in the open-ended questions

Table 3. Descriptive overview of participants.

Leader	Gender	Department
L1	Female	Economics and Management
L2	Female	Teacher Education
L3	Female	Teacher Education
L4	Female	Human Resources
L5	Male	Communication Sciences
L6	Male	Educational Sciences
L7	Male	Educational Sciences
L8	Male	Teacher Education
L9	Male	Teacher Education

on the survey. The interviews ranged in duration from 35 to 60 minutes. Some interviews were conducted online because of practical limitations (leaders worked from home a lot), while others were conducted face-to-face at the University of Applied Sciences (Table 3).

Analyses

First, two authors separately analysed and coded the open-ended questions from three surveys and two interviews using a deductive approach, based on the framework of Leithwood and colleagues (2008). Leadership practices (setting directions, developing people and the organisation, managing instructional practices) and the paths of influence (rational, emotional, organisational, familial) served as sensitising concepts by means of which a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching our data was provided (Bowen 2006). These sensitising concepts were used as main code categories.

Second, the two authors separately analysed the same surveys and interviews using an inductive approach. They read the text and allowed new codes to emerge from the data.

Third, the authors discussed similarities and differences in their coding, leading to a refinement of the framework. For example, it was agreed that the Family Path only referred to influencing relations with the parents and the home environment, and did not refer to relations between teachers and students or between teachers and teachers. The inductive approach led to a cluster of fragments that referred to leaders trying to influence 'relations between leader and teacher', 'relations between teachers', 'relations between teachers and student.' Only one fragment was coded 'relation between students'. The research team jointly decided to add a code for 'Relational Path.' Further, the data indicated that the paths of influence were either discussed as problems (focusing on the negative side of path variables) or as possibilities (focusing on the positive side of path variables). It was decided to use this distinction as a refinement of the framework. The research team also discussed the remaining codes that could not be clustered in a clear category. The main reason was that the fragments were too vague. The researchers reviewed the remaining fragments together and agreed to exclude them. An example is, 'I focused on involvement and efficiency.' Because

Table 4. Coding scheme paths of influence.

Main Code	Subcodes	Example
Paths of Influence		
Rational	Knowledge and skill about the curriculum	'There were few teachers who really knew how to make good movie clips. I tried to bring that knowledge together.'
	Teaching and learning	'This has to do with the fact that the core of the teaching profession does not work online, but I had to make it work.'
	Learning environment	'One part of your curriculum can easily be done online. While the other part absolutely not. It was my job to assure that the right choices were made.'
Emotional	Individual feelings, dispositions, or affective states	'People who were almost depressed, they had so much weight on their shoulders. I had to carry them, although I was tired too.'
	Collective feelings, dispositions, or affective states	'Yes, yes, exactly, so the culture has really become more open to change because of this. I have to make this sustainable.'
	Collective teacher efficacy	'I think perseverance is really great when I see what colleagues have done, because their involvement with the students. I think, and hope, I had a part in this.'
	Student engagement	'Teachers worked hard with their good intentions, but the engagement of students was really low. I tried to find solutions.'
Organisational	Change	'So you get a kind of hybrid education which in turn brings new logistical problems that I had to solve.'
	Time and resources	'You don't have a lot of resources in a crisis. So you become very aware of where the flaws are and you have to deal with that.'
	Collaboration within organisation	'But are you talking about clarity, about where, and who is responsible for what in the larger organization? I spend a lot of time searching for answers in the organization.'
Relational	Relations and interactions among staff members	'That was the hardest thing that teachers experienced, yes, they really needed to see colleagues and speak to them. Most of my time and effort was listening to teachers and finding ways to keep the team connected.'
	Relations and interactions among teachers and students	'We lost students, especially vulnerable students. Our teachers tried so hard to keep them connected, and I did what I could to help them with that.'

Table 5. Coding scheme leadership practices.

Main Code	Example
Leadership practices	
Set goals and directions	'I didn't work to prescribe what they needed to do, but as a leader it is important to make clear what the main goal and direction is.'
Develop people	'Personally, I stopped sending emails at some point. I called people, to make them feel that I care.'
Develop the organisation	'We really needed to organize ourselves radically different. And then I said that I think we should start an online master.'
Support instructional practices	'I insisted in putting the new procedures and scripts on paper so that we can take them out of the drawer on a later moment and learn from it to adjust our program.'

the answer in the questionnaire did not elaborate on the kind of involvement or efficiency, or the people involved, we excluded this kind of answer.

After this initial round of coding, peer discussion and redefining of the coding scheme, in the last step, the second author coded the remaining data in the final phase (for the final coding scheme, see Tables 4 and 5).

Results

Previous research has identified leadership practices leaders use to guide change and paths through which they exert their influence (Leithwood et al. 2010; Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins 2008). In this study, we wanted to investigate to what extent the same practices and paths apply in times of unforeseen, disruptive change. We used the sudden, unplanned change to remote online teaching and learning during the pandemic as a case. The subsequent section discusses the results in depth.

What leadership practices do leaders use in times of change? (RQ1)

Setting goals and directions was mentioned by all leaders in our study as an important practice during the change to online teaching and learning. All leaders reported that providing direction and guidance was important during the pandemic. Most leaders reported that the existing goals within the larger organisation were too broad and vague to lead them through the fast-paced change. Most leaders in our research translated the wider organisational goals into more practical goals that provided concrete, practical direction. Some leaders said they struggled with finding a balance between short-term and long-term goals: 'Everything was focused on the short-term to make sure that education (…) could be provided tomorrow. (Leader 2)' One of them did this in an incremental way by 'continually and clearly communicating the larger picture of the change … and the smaller steps that are necessary to get there (Leader 5).' Most leaders reported a tension between the teachers' need to receive clear instructions immediately and the slow flow of information from the larger organisation that waited for official measures from the government. According to the leaders in our study, they coped with this tension by relying on the team's vision and values. Most of the leaders described how they developed a stronger vision and shared goals within the team, but thereby lost connection with the broader organisation. These leaders described how their practices focused more on setting a direction and finding alignment with the team than before the pandemic. They spent much time asking questions such as: 'Do you agree that this is what we find important for teaching and learning?' Especially in a situation where there was little personal contact, communication and constant alignment were found to be one of the most important parts of leadership practice. This was complicated. More than half of the leaders stressed that it is almost impossible to develop a shared vision via online contact. Goal development also could not keep up with the fast-paced changes during the pandemic. Another tension was reported between the constant development of a 'practical team vision' and a 'holistic organizational vision'. Almost all leaders found themselves balancing between the (conflicting) slowly changing, vague direction of the organisation and the fast-changing, concrete direction of the team.

Further, most leaders reported setting boundaries and prioritising as important practices during the pandemic. The teacher team as well as the students were under great pressure. With the aim of guarding the wellbeing of teachers and students, it was important for school leaders to make choices about the curriculum, activities and meetings. At the same time, it was important to respect the autonomy of teachers in this regard. In sum, leadership practices during the pandemic were strongly focused on setting directions. Leaders experienced different tensions and found themselves balancing between short-term and long-term goals, between the agility and practicality of the team's vision and the slower, more abstract vision of the organisation, and between making choices to guard teachers' resilience while respecting their autonomy.

Developing people was also said to be an important part of leadership practices during the pandemic. All leaders reported spending a lot of time and effort keeping in touch with teachers on a regular basis to provide instructional and emotional support. According to them, sending emails did not work; they needed to invest in personal contact with and between teachers. The leaders in our research expressed their appreciation for 'the exceptional work teachers were doing (Leader 9).' Some leaders mentioned the use of social media, such as WhatsApp groups, that enabled them to express their concerns about pressure on teachers from time to time or for fast problem-solving. Further, some leaders organised many one-on-one meetings with teachers for coaching or to ask how things were going. We also heard examples of online 'coffee gatherings' or 'campfire talks': 'I put a big picture of a campfire in the back of my background, and made a grid and I invited all the teachers in groups of four (Leader 3).' Leaders considered themselves to be role models in 'uphold[ing] the morale.' It was also mentioned that teachers were given more autonomy to decide how to allocate their energy, time and resources 'Teachers worked extremely hard. So that means, for example, that you have to give them more space to do their thing (Leader 7).' All agreed that developing people required more time and deliberate attention than before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Developing the organisation was also mentioned as part of leadership practices during the rapid change, although it was mentioned less often than setting directions and building relationships. Mostly, the leaders in our research mentioned practical elements of organisational development, such as setting up platforms for online teaching or meetings. The structure was adapted in some teams. For example, one leader mentioned a reorganisation into smaller teams in which one person from every team had the responsibility for constructing the curriculum. In this way, the responsibility for (ad hoc) decisions was spread across the team, there was more clarity about who was responsible and decisions could be made faster.

Managing instructional practices was also a type of leadership practice that we found in our study; that is, leaders discussed ensuring continuation of the instructional programme rather than improving it. For example, when the larger organisation and the government were slow in their communication about the consequences of their health measures for education, leaders found themselves responsible for ensuring the continuity of the instructional programme. That meant, for example, '(…) working on teaching schedules during weekends just to make sure we could have our classes on Mondays (Leader 1).' Leaders were thinking one step ahead, creating scripts, scenarios and plan Bs that allowed them to be agile and responsive. The continuation of the programme for students was always a priority. Some leaders also mentioned that they tried to provide extra instructional support for teachers, in some cases hiring support from outside the organisation.

Paths of influence leaders focused on during change (RQ2)

In our study, we found evidence of three out of four paths of influence discussed in the framework of Leithwood and colleagues (2010): the rational, emotional, and organisational paths. As discussed in the Method section, we also identified a fifth path of influence: the relational. In our analyses, we found that leaders exerted their influence by trying either to solve problems or create possibilities. In the next paragraphs, we discuss our results, organised around these two dimensions.

Rational

Leaders can exert influence on the process of change by focusing on the knowledge and skills that are needed to drive change. For this path, the leaders in our study reported three times as many possibilities as problems. Leaders reported that they were able to drive a growing flexibility in the curriculum in order to support a rapid digitalisation of teaching and learning – things that were beyond imagination before the pandemic. The leaders in our study were able to support experiments in teaching, such as recording small videos for different levels of mastery of the content to support student learning in a differentiated way. Further, leaders stimulated joint reflection on the curriculum. Teachers were willing to question which content was mandatory, and which was optional. Furthermore, leaders reported many possibilities for developing teachers' knowledge and skills for teaching in online learning environments. Digital (teaching) skills improved quickly, but not to the same extent for everyone. Leaders saw teachers who experimented and tried to find innovative ways of teaching through online methods, while others merely delivered the old content through online means. Leaders noted that some teachers lacked the competences that were needed to cope with the shift to online teaching. They found it hard to exert influence on the development and growth of

teacher competences, because teachers were already overwhelmed and stressed. Further, most leaders in our study mentioned that it was almost impossible for specific parts of the curriculum to be taught online (e.g. internships and hands-on exercises in laboratories).

Emotional

When trying to exert influence through the emotional path, leaders experience a similar number of problems and possibilities. Most problems referred to feelings of disconnection, for example, lacking interaction with colleagues, junior teachers who felt unsupported, and the growth of 'separate islands' in the team. Due to the stressful times, teachers fell back on themselves and a small group of colleagues. Individual feelings and affective states such as 'lower job satisfaction' and 'lower energy' were mentioned. Diminished job satisfaction was partly explained by the loss of personal connection with students. According to the leaders in our study, teachers find themselves fuelled by working with students. Sitting behind a computer screen all day, without direct, personal contact was demotivating for many teachers. All leaders wanted to influence these emotional states, but they found few instruments for doing so in the given situation. They stressed that it was almost impossible to establish feelings of connection through online means. As the pandemic continued, both teacher and student engagement declined in many cases. Many leaders put a lot of time and effort into trying to change that but said it was really difficult.

Possibilities related to collective feelings were, for example, (more) 'trust in each other,' 'cohesion' and 'perseverance,' as well as 'the willingness to change teaching practices.' The feeling of 'satisfaction with the new practices' was also put forward. Leaders saw an emerging feeling of trust and collective efficacy between teachers. They tried to strengthen and support this emotional state, which many leaders said was critically important for successful change.

Organisational

When leaders also tried to influence change through the organisational path, they almost exclusively experienced problems. One of the leaders mentioned the organisation's lack of clarity 'about [their] vision during the change,' as well as 'about who is responsible for decision-making and implementation.' Leaders also mentioned a lack of communication that caused problems, for example, late communication of national health measures. They also mentioned that the complex structure of the organisation did not stimulate efficient change. Leaders mentioned a new way of organising and structuring meetings online and new measures for working from home. The only possibilities were seen in easier ways to meet online. Teachers or students did not have to travel or switch between venues. In some cases, these quick, short meetings were an easy way to bring people together.

Relational

Leaders mostly mentioned aspects related to the relational path, almost predominantly defined as problems. All leaders tried to influence the course and outcomes of change by solving problems related to relations and interactions between team members. They tried to stimulate contacts between teachers, and between themselves and teachers, to strengthen the resilience of the team. They wanted teachers to help each other, to share materials and insights. In the organisational path, we described how leadership practices focused on practical organisation. Those efforts were instrumental, as they described how the time and place were organised. In our study, leaders spent a considerable amount of time and effort trying to influence the nature of relations and interactions. Leaders tried to encourage collaboration, strengthen teachers' intrinsic motivation for joint work and being a role model by sharing feelings and emotions themselves.

Mostly, leaders experienced relational problems that hindered change. One leader used the metaphor of 'an orchestra that does not know how to play in tune anymore (Leader 5).' The lack of personal contact because of the online teaching and online meetings made it extremely difficult to find solutions. Teams lost informal conversations, nonverbal signs, laughing or complaining together, quick advice at the coffee maker, a joke or friendly gesture that changed the course of the day or conversations with students between lessons. Some leaders mentioned that they were no longer able to influence relations in their team intuitively, because they did not have the cues from daily practice.

Overview of our results

Bringing our results together, Figure 1 provides a concise overview that answers our research questions. During the pandemic, leaders in our study focused on

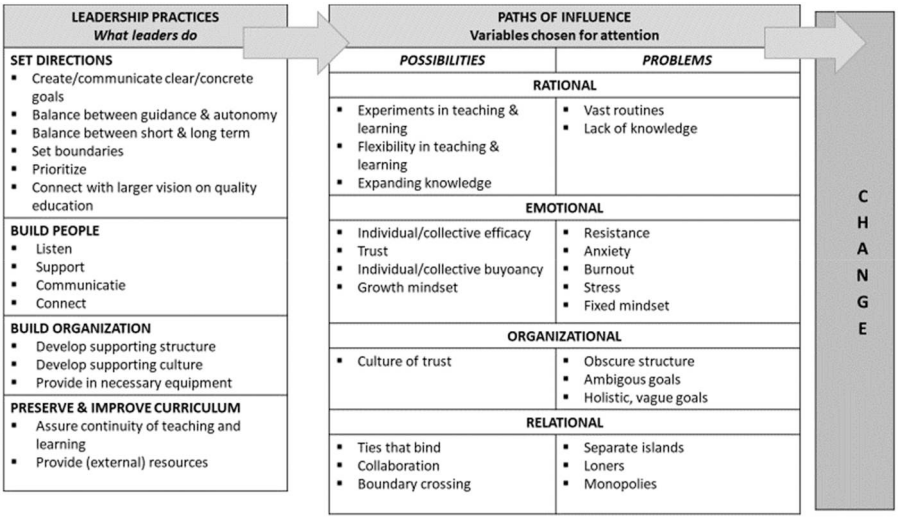

Figure 1. Framework for 'Leadership in Times of Disruptive Change'.

different practices through which they tried to influence rational, emotional, organisational and relational variables. Leaders paid attention to these variables because they saw them as possibilities to drive the necessary change, or because they expected this variable to hinder change.

Conclusion and discussion

School leaders have a crucial role in the success and sustainability of educational change, and the impact of educational leadership is the biggest when the circumstances are the most challenging (Leithwood et al. 2010). The COVID-19 pandemic challenged education worldwide to adapt to new circumstances rapidly, confronting leaders with an enormous task to guide, lead and support change. Our goal was to gain a deep understanding of leadership practices used during disruption and the paths of influence through which leaders tried to influence practice. We used and elaborated on the framework of Leithwood and colleagues (2020). Our larger aim is to understand and explain leadership in times of challenging educational changes, so that we can help school leaders, researchers and policymakers take the next step.

First, we found that leaders spend a great deal of time trying to *set directions*. School leaders experienced great challenges in trying to balance between short-term and long-term goals, between the slowly evolving and vague direction of the organisation and rapid, practical evolutions in the team, between making choices to guard teachers' resilience while respecting their autonomy. Paradoxes are part of educational change, and they induce tensions that complicate leadership (Schaap and Vanlommel 2024). Understanding and strengthening leadership in times of change requires more insight into the leadership practices that help leaders to see, acknowledge and understand existing paradoxes and to manage these tensions in a constructive manner. Leadership practices also focused on *developing people*, mainly trying to guide them through the storm, show consideration for their (personal) difficulties and stress and answer their practical questions. Leaders in our research were less occupied with *improving* the instructional programme; instead, they focused on *securing* the quality and continuity of the existing programme. Other scholars have stressed that the quality and equity of education is a main concern in times of crises (Chapman and Bell 2020). We argue that sufficient and deliberate attention to quality assurance and stability needs to be explicitly included in 'setting goals and directions.' For the continuity and the quality of education, stability and change, securing and improving are equally important. Leadership practices should also be focused on deliberate efforts to secure practices that work and that have proven to be good. In sum, carrying out one single leadership practice in a good way is not enough; an interplay of different kinds of leadership practices is necessary to lead successful change (Brown and Flood 2019; Vanlommel et al. 2023)

Second, we explored the *paths of influence* and elaborated on the framework of Leithwood and colleagues (2020) by adding a fifth path: the relational. This path focuses on the ties that bind, on the nature of connections and interactions between people. Leaders largely tried to influence and support change during the pandemic through the relational path and encountered many problems in doing so. They invested a lot of time and effort in listening to teachers, searching for new ways to keep the team connected and supporting the bond between teachers and students. Our study positions the relational path as the most important path of influence during disruptive change. Leaders who chose to focus their practices on influencing relations reported higher satisfaction with the course and the outcomes of change. We found that strong ties between team members were felt to strengthen teachers' individual resilience to a great extent. Further, leaders experienced possibilities on the emotional path, with a great accent on strengthened collective teacher efficacy. In times of unimagined, disruptive change that the pandemic brought, the shared emotion within teacher teams that together they were able to keep delivering high-quality education for their students was an enormous driver for change. The emotional path can thus be seen to be strongly intertwined with the relational path, as the quality of relations and interactions in the team is an important precondition for collective teacher efficacy.

Something that also surfaced during the interviews is that leaders found it hard to align their practices with teachers' needs because they were working remotely and online. According to our respondents, educational leadership is much an intuitive and relational practice, where they respond to cues and direct interactions with their teachers. When they could not rely on the direct cues that inform intuitive practices, they lacked guidelines, frameworks or checkpoints to fall back on. This result stresses the importance of well-trained educational leaders who are armed with guiding frameworks to support their practices. In particular for the emotional and relational aspects. Especially in times of change, when implicit experiential knowledge is not sufficient for recognising or understanding new cues and leading change effectively. These findings coincide with theories describing 'leadership as practice,' putting everyday practices of leadership and social interactions central (e.g. Raelin 2011). Emotional and relational aspects of leadership practices are found to be crucial, rather than rational ones (Campbell, Klein, and Sawalhi 2023). Leadership during disruption is explored through activities and social interactions, rather than through the traits and heroics of individual leaders.

In sum, our research contributes to the understanding of leadership in times of change by proposing an elaborated framework with concrete examples and insight into leadership practices and paths of influence. The course and outcomes of change are greatly influenced by the relations, interactions and emotions in the team, making leadership a social practice that emerges through interactions. Leadership practices are largely intuitive, driven by cues

in daily interactions. However, in times of change cues may be missing (as is the case in remote or online contact), or leaders might search for old cues to drive new practices. When leaders cannot rely on their implicit experiential knowledge, they seek support. In our research, leaders reported that they were the ones supporting, listening and guiding, but they lacked support and guidance themselves. This has implications for practice and policy. Too often, professional development and support are targeted for teachers, while there are less supportive structures for school leaders. For theory, more insight into leadership as a practice, especially in times of uncertainty and change, can provide valuable frameworks that support policy and practice.

Although we feel that our work has contributed to the field, we must mention some limitations. The interviews showed that leadership practices were influenced by the extent of the support that leaders were given from higher management or their peers. As this was not part of our research goal and research questions, we did not research that further. Future research can gain more insight into the relationship between support for leaders and their leadership practices in times of change. Second, although this case-study design allowed us to get a deep and rich picture, findings gathered in the specific context of one university of applied sciences may differ from other contexts so generalisability is limited. This is also due to the qualitative design and the convenience sampling. We also focused on the change to remote online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic as a specific case. This provided an interesting research context to study a large number of school leaders who were confronted with a similar process of change. The context of the pandemic is a very specific case, so generalisability to other change processes might be limited. However, it is likely that educational leaders all over the world will encounter new, unforeseen and disruptive challenges in the future. Our results can be used to broaden our knowledge base to this end.

The disruption that resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic was not the first, nor will it be the last disruption to affect teachers and students in schools and calls for strong leadership. We found that, during the disruptive changes in schools, caused by the pandemic, school leaders mainly invested in solving relational problems and supporting emotional states to guard the team's individual and collective resilience, and they spent a large amount of time and energy in setting concrete directions for change, one small step at a time. Leaders struggled with tensions and with being unable to rely on old routines. Support for school leaders was almost non-existent. Our research supports the idea that educational leadership is a social practice that exists and emerges through relations and interactions (e.g. Hargreaves and Shirley 2008). As a consequence, leadership cannot only be taught in individual courses. Future leaders must be able to learn and reflect on real practices occurring in their work environments with attention to their contexts (Bryk et al. 2015). School leaders should learn with those they lead (Chadwick,

Patel, and Lindblom 2018). Networks can provide the necessary conditions for constructing, sharing and combining knowledge. For research, this also means that participatory or design-based research can help identify and understand what happens, and what is needed in practice. Alternative methods, such as social network analysis, can provide the necessary insight into the social ties that form the context in which leadership occurs. For policy, our findings highlight the importance of well-trained educational leaders who are equipped to drive change, even in disruptive and uncertain circumstances. Our findings suggest that emotional and relational support might also be important in the case of school leaders themselves. Leaders have proven to be crucial for the success of change, but in many places in the world, educational leadership is largely something you grow into (Johnson and Voelkel 2019). Pre-service and in-service training is rather limited, and a high-standard professional profile for school leaders is often lacking.

Implications

Understanding what school leaders can do to guide change successfully is important for providing tailored support, professional development and policy measures. Previous (review) studies have identified common leadership practices and paths of influence leaders can focus on in a general sense. Given the pivotal role of school leaders during change, we aimed to understand what leaders do during disruptive change, using the COVID-19 pandemic as a case that posed similar challenges all over the world. Our research highlighted the great power and perseverance school leaders showed. They kept seeing possibilities for developing their schools. As role models, they set directions, invested in relations and tied the team together. Although they lacked a clear vision as a backbone and struggled with overcoming relational and emotional problems, they were also able to see new possibilities. The most important lesson that was learned is that leading teaching and learning during times of (disruptive) change is less a rational than a relational and emotional practice.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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