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## COVID-19 Crisis Challenges and Management Strategies of Educational Leaders in America

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### Abstract

This research was conducted to understand how 30 American school leaders coped with the COVID-19 pandemic. A case study approach was used in the study. The researchers used convenience and snowball sampling to conduct Zoom interviews in May 2020. The research findings revealed that leaders faced numerous difficulties related to having to lead during two crises (a global pandemic and social-racial issues). The results also showed that leaders changed their style and used many strategies to lead during crises. They emphasized communication, became stress managers and cheerleaders, focused on developing a sense of belonging among teachers and students alike, and planned for the school year. This study is important because it expands leaders' understanding of how to lead schools in times of crisis. When leaders lead effectively in times of crisis, then learning, teaching, and well-being are less likely to negatively impacted. The implications of this study also challenge education stakeholders to reimagine how to lead in an increasingly technological world. The study is relevant for K-12 leaders, but the findings could also be useful for leaders in a variety of contexts.

**Keywords:** Educational leader, COVID-19 pandemic, Challenge, Crisis management, Strategy.

### Introduction

While science, technology, informatics, and social networks are rapidly increasing, countries face various crises and try to cope with them to find solutions. One of these crises is a global pandemic known as the Corona virus, COVID, or COVID-19 (Sahu, 2020). This pandemic has affected every country in the world from health to education, from the service sector to social life. It changed all lives and influenced quality of individuals' lives (Netolicky, 2020). This global pandemic began in December 2019 in Wuhan, China. The World Health Organization (WHO) declared this epidemic as a pandemic on 11<sup>th</sup> March 2020. As of April 1<sup>st</sup>, 177 countries were infected by the virus, approximately 723,000 people were sick, and more than 34,000 were dead from the COVID-19 virus (John Hopkins University, 2020). As of 16<sup>th</sup> September, 29,444,198 confirmed cases of COVID-19, including 931,321 deaths were reported to WHO (2020). This pandemic is important for all the countries, and is called a natural crisis. One of the most important features that distinguish this as crisis rather than routine situation is the imperative to respond promptly (McNamara & Sahlberg, 2020). It is imperative to respond and act quickly during a crisis (Darling-Hammond & Kini, 2020). From this point, the crisis situation can be defined as changes that require quick and fast adaptation (Smith & Riley, 2012).

Countries took some precautions because of the pandemic: Many countries had some travel restrictions (external and internal flight or other travels); people refrained from visiting their friends and relatives, shopping places, schools, universities, etc. People practiced social distancing, self-isolation, and quarantine. Many people worked at home, and rather than working in their offices did not work their job places (Bedford et al., 2020). People faced this natural crisis and it has spread all around the world. Whatever crises happen, the crises affect and change all people and organizations (Kafa & Pashiardis, 2020). Countries worldwide have experienced undeniable chaos because of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2020). Leaders played a vital role in crisis management (James & Wooten, 2005). Because the leader is key before, during, and after the crisis, and the leader's quality can determine the length, severity, and ultimate consequences of the crisis. If leaders pay attention to the components of the crisis, they can have a significant positive impact on many people and the negative weather associated with the crisis. This can reduce the negative effects and duration of the crisis in favor of the

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organization (Christensen, 2009). Whether it is an effective leader, the manager of a large company, or the head of a department, he/she tries to solve the problem as soon as possible during a crisis. Often, there is a lot of information that is not true. It is the leader's duty to discover the truth and face it by talking to the right people, listening to the most reliable voices, and going to the right places (Inan, 2008). These situations are the same for educational leaders as for other leaders. In this process it is seen that the educational leader is the most important role for the organizations. Educational leaders' role in the school at the time of the crisis (Harris & Jones, 2020) is to take a lesson from the crisis to create a shared mindset, identify the weaknesses of the organization, make rational and quick decisions, take bold steps, and manage change (Hooge & Pont, 2020), and also communicate with other organizations and people for the benefit of the students and the school (Pius-Uwhubetiyi, 2020). This study first explained the crisis and the problems faced by educational leadership during the crisis. Then the challenges faced by the education leaders working in schools in the United States of America (USA) and the strategies they developed during the crisis were examined.

### Crisis and Leadership

The crisis is “a time of great danger, difficulty or doubt when problems must be solved or important decisions must be made” (Oxford Dictionary, 2021), a sudden, unexpected event that requires immediate action. It is a situation that threatens the high-level goals of an organization, puts the organization's life in danger and requires quick response, and creates tension in which the organization's crisis prediction and prevention mechanisms are inadequate (Ritchie, 2004). A crisis can be defined as an unplanned event, situation, or series of events with an undesirable outcome (Demirtas, 2000). So, one of the most important for organizations ways to manage the crisis is that a leader who is known, respected, reassured, and listened to is in charge at the beginning of this process (Christensen, 2009). For this reason, leaders have a lot of work to do in crisis times and should use crisis management strategies (Sayin, 2008). The leaders should use the 5E stages in crisis management. It is seen in Figure 1 (Nathaniel & Van der Heyden 2020):

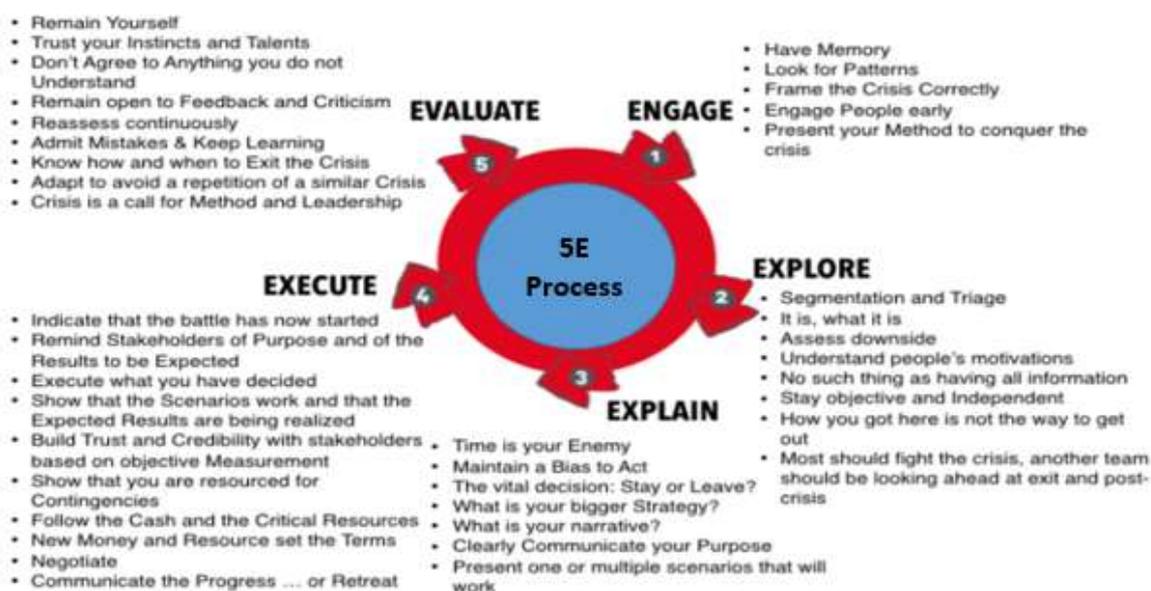


Figure 1. 5E stages in crisis management

It is shown in Figure 1, there are five stages in the time of crisis. (1) *Engage*: Engaging all in framing the crisis and get it right, identifying patterns of how crises unfold and how people respond to them, (2) *Explore*: Exploring the crisis and how to fight and deal with it (goal setting and planning), (3) *Explain*: Explaining what you have decided, why and how it will work, and then committing to action, (4) *Execute*: Executing with focus and constant monitoring, focusing and determining strategies as a leader and checking if it works, (5) *Evaluate*: Evaluating, learning and adapting efforts, as well as your leadership, as new information and feedback comes in. In times of crisis, leaders may not know these stages. They may be inexperienced and have never lived a crisis before. At this point the leadership skills of leaders become important.

During the crisis, leaders should emphasize the crisis is temporary with positive messages (Luecke, 2008) and keep the communication ways open to inform both internal and external groups and to organize various

organizations (Boin et al., 2013). This period allows leaders to keep the organization members together and increase their motivation (Powley & Taylor, 2014). Being experienced, motivating, and communicating is an important task for a leader in this process (Wang, 2007). For this reason, leaders should use communication channels effectively. Communicators should share the current crisis information in a timely and accurate manner (Boin et al., 2013). Sharing the available information openly and honestly reduces uncertainty and prevents people from turning to other sources to meet their information needs, which prevents the growth of the crisis (Veil et al., 2011). Leaders should benefit from the media, especially social media, in their information activities while maintaining the best relationship with media in the event of crisis (Arslan, 2015).

Educational leaders should also effectively use to communication channels (e-mail, mail, phone callings, etc.), media (visual and written), and social media during the crisis process. Crises in the education sector are different from others. This is because the crisis in schools also affects children for whose protection society is responsible (Damiani, 2006; Hooge & Pont, 2020). If society cannot protect the children, it feels vulnerable and there is a loss of confidence. Therefore, crises in education, the most important institution of the society, are of great importance (Damiani, 2006). Children need to be supported in various ways during the crisis to feel safe. At this point, adults have a lot of work to do. They should support and guide children. Because, as in all crises, this crisis can have various effects in terms of physical, social, emotional, psychological, educational, and economic (Mutch, 2015). It gives harms all stakeholders (children, parents, etc.). Educational leaders must give support to their communities (Pius-Uwhubetiyi, 2020). For example, Mutch's (2015) study was conducted about the natural crisis, the earthquake in New Zealand. According to the principals, they give emotional support to families and students to help them for how to cope with it. They gave the synergy of really strong relationships in their community, their focused priority education. They managed to put other people's needs before their own, and use clear communication skills. While the school leaders made decisions during the crisis, they acted calmly and decisively and used communication skills. They also constantly assessed the situation, analyzed new information, and weighed up alternatives as the situation developed.

Educational leadership in times of crisis is about dealing with events, emotions, and consequences in the immediate present in ways that minimize personal and organizational harm to the school and school community (Smith & Riley, 2012). This crisis affected and harmed all school elements particularly students, families, teachers, and leaders (McNamara & Sahlberg, 2020). In times of the COVID-19 crisis, students stopped going to schools, and education styles changed. The education system of all countries was affected by this crisis. According to UNESCO (2020), these nationwide closures impacted hundreds of millions of students. In total 1,048,817,181 students were affected, 60% of all enrolled students and 132 nationwide closures. So this crisis is significant in every state. In addition to school closures, students not being able to go to school, and educators, especially education leaders, who are the head of the school, experienced several difficulties and barriers. America is the country most influenced by the crisis, out of all the countries examined. As of 16<sup>th</sup> September, there are 6,496,246 confirmed cases and 193,494 deaths. America is the country with the highest number of cases and deaths all over the World (WHO, 2020). Due to the rapid pandemic and deaths, American schools were closed in all the states (until April 10, 2020) at least 55 million students and 124,000 schools in the 2019-2020 academic year (Coronavirus and School Closures, 2020).

The schools were shifted from face-to-face to online or virtual education between March and May 2020 (UNESCO, 2020). The students had some problems with access to the necessary technology, absenteeism, nutrition, etc. in this process. School leaders and education districts tried to mitigate the disruption caused by the unprecedented closures. And they tried to solve these problems. While schools were closed, they arranged for "grab-and-go" meal bags, they gave hotspots for the internet, they changed Cromebooks, etc. They made an effort children's requirements (Goldstein, Popescu & Hannah-Jones, 2020). There are many studies about the COVID-19 pandemic in the closed process (Zhen-Dong et al., 2020; Campbell, 2020, etc.).

When the studies were examined, it was found that there was related to COVID-19 cases, physical and mental health, etc. There have also been some studies done on education. For example, a study in England (Fotheringham et al., 2020) examined pressures and influences on school leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants responded (35%) that the biggest challenges they faced were the frequent changes in updates. Others were the lack of time and clarity in the information received. So they all imply stress for the leaders.

Hamilton et al. (2020) research showed the principals said that the limitations of distance learning are to provide proper education for all students and internet access for students. The American principals also said that (83%) their primary responsibility is providing students with direct health and education guidance during pandemics. The main challenges were not to reach all of the students and families for rural and high-poverty districts. Schools faced many potential challenges to providing distance learning to students, including financial, technological, and

policy-related factors. The principals' top goals and strategies were to plan for the future. More diverse (high-poverty and more color students) schools' principals' goals were to engage with families, address disparities in academic performance, new academic curricula and initiatives. Because the pandemic made inequality and poverty more visible (Dodley et al., 2020; Dorn et al., 2020; Wright & Merritt, 2020).

Educational leaders struggle with their leadership skills with all of them. Communication, interaction, relationship, influence (Fotheringham et al., 2020; Hamilton et al., 2020; Harris, 2020, etc.), and also policy development, interpretation, and implementation, partnership, motivation, personnel and resource management (Varela & Fedynich, 2020), and time management (Kiral, 2016) are important elements of educational leadership processes (Harris & Jones, 2020). The educational leaders play a greater role in times of crisis because they know how to best practice to their communities and serve, manage the sources, make fast and rational decisions (Kiral, 2019; Netolicky, 2020). COVID-19 has changed the whole understanding of education and management (Harris & Fullan, 2020). This research is important for leaders and the educational system. Based on the findings from this research, it is thought that education leaders will guide other leaders in managing the COVID-19 crisis. This research was conducted to understand the challenges American school leaders experienced during the COVID-19 crisis and what strategies they used to lead schools during these challenges. The following questions guided this study:

1. What specific challenges have school leaders experienced during COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What specific strategies have school leaders used to manage the challenges they faced during the COVID-19 pandemic?

## Method

The researchers used a qualitative design and a case study approach for this. The researchers opted for a case study approach because it provides the ability to examine in detail a phenomenon as it manifests in everyday context (Yin, 2014). The present qualitative study, the researchers sought to understand how American school leaders led their schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, these researchers examined the strategies school leaders used to lead during times of crisis between March and May 2020.

## Participants and Data Collection

The researchers used convenience and snowball sampling for the present study (Bryman, 2012). Snowball sampling is used to describe different events from person to person and from people to various situations. Convenience sampling is used to save money, time and effort (Creswell, 2016). Snowball sampling is a particularly effective technique for identifying individuals or situations that can be a rich source of information regarding the problem of researchers. The researchers asked the research process, "Who might know the most about challenges and strategies?" They started with these questions to the research. Educational leaders are among those who experience the most difficulties in the research. In the process progressed, the leaders obtained grew like a snowball. Education leaders have also helped to grow the snowball and discuss the issue in detail by recommending other colleagues experiencing the same difficulties and strategies. For this reason, the most rational sampling method to be used for this research was thought to be the snowball sampling method. The study participants were 30 educational leaders that one of the researchers met at workshops, conferences, or meetings over a period of two years. These educational leaders worked in five school districts in Ohio. Two districts were in urban areas and three were in suburban districts. The sample, 18 women and 12 men, aging from mid-thirties to mid-sixties, included two preschool principals, 14 elementary principals, five middle school principals, six high school principals, and three superintendents. The researchers conducted 30 in-depth interviews to collect rich data.

The researchers reviewed the literature before starting the research. Following the literature review, the researchers wrote and piloted with two principals a semi-structured interview protocol. To maintain social distancing, the interviews took place in May 2020 using Zoom or Google Hangout. The interview protocol consisted of questions such as, "Can you tell me the strategies you used to lead in this time of crisis?" or "Tell me about the challenges you faced when leading your school during COVID-19." The interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes each for a total of over 30 hours of interview data and over 200 pages of transcripts. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The in-depth interview of each participant allowed the researchers to understand how the leaders adapted their leadership in the remote learning environments and to comprehend the extent to which they were able to sustain these new practices over the spring semester. The researchers gave all study participants pseudonyms to preserve their anonymity.

## Data Analysis

To maintain the confidentiality and anonymity of the schools and participants, the researchers used pseudonyms during the transcription and coding process. All documents were coded using qualitative software called Atlas.ti. Coding served as the base of the analysis since it is the interpretation of the data (Saldaña, 2009). Coding began immediately after the interviews and after preliminary field notes and diary entries were written. The researchers first listened to each of the recordings twice and pre-coded the data by highlighting memorable passages and quotes (Saldaña, 2009). Then, the researchers read through the journals, field notes, and transcripts to make notes on them as if we were “conversing with the data” (Merriam, 1988). The researchers then used thematic coding. Thematic coding is a method of analyzing qualitative data. It is applied to a set of texts, such as interview transcripts, and involves recording or identifying passages of text or images that are linked by a common theme or idea. This allows the coders to index the text into categories and establish thematic ideas (Gibbs, 2007). Examples of codes were as follows: Communication, stress managers and cheer leaders, etc.

## Trustworthiness and Validity

To enhance the present study’s internal validity, the researchers included four particular strategies into the design of the study. First, the sample of 30 leaders in urban and suburban districts allowed to gain a wide array of perspectives and understand the various strategies used by leaders (Patton, 2002). Second, the investigators applied member checking (Mero-Jaffe, 2011). Following data analysis, these researchers contacted the participants to share the results section of the present study with them. The participants confirmed that the findings reflected their own perspectives. Third, this research team created a data trail (Rodgers, 2008). This is a qualitative research practice where copied the participants’ quotes from this present study’s transcripts data and pasted them under each theme that emerged from the data analysis. This strategy helped ensure that sufficient transcript data supported the results that were reported in the present study. Following this process also ensured that the researchers were not sharing the viewpoint, but rather the perspectives of the participants. Fourth, the researchers used low-inference descriptors (Chenail, 2012). In this qualitative protocol, the researchers used participants’ quotes from various transcripts to ensure that their perspectives are reported accurately. To summarize, the researchers used robust qualitative strategies in order to enhance the internal validity and trustworthiness of the present study’s findings.

## Researchers’ Roles

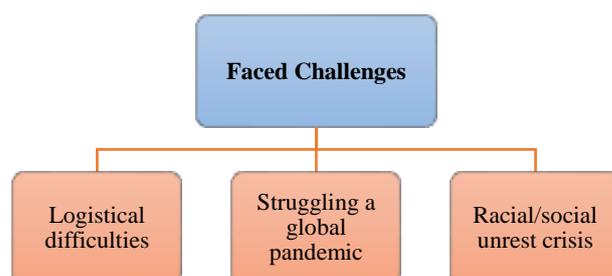
To remain unbiased, the researchers individually wrote journals and analytical memos. They obeyed the ethics and scientific principals; they behaved objectively all the research (interviews, transcriptions and writing the article). In addition, expressions that would reveal the identities of the participants were avoided. And the researchers used code names for all the participants. Code names such as Sarah, Barry, Katie, Michael were used.

## Findings

In this section, there are three categories: Faced challenges, crisis management strategies and experiences. What the participants said was quoted verbatim.

### Faced Challenges

Leaders shared some challenges as seen in Figure 2. These are logistical difficulties and struggling a global pandemic and racial/social unrest crisis. These are given in direct quotations.



**Figure 2.** Faced challenges

### **Logistical Difficulties**

The challenges pertaining to the lack of funding required leaders to be more creative and offer more professional development for teachers who did not know how to use an online platform and needed some more social emotional strategies. Leaders also had to manage parents' frustrations with having to be teachers, pick up food at designated locations, while also working and maintaining a household. Heather expressed:

- *Parents were frustrated because they did not have enough devices for all their children or did not know how to support their children and how the platform worked.*

Similar to face-to-face teaching, online learning is an infrastructure that demands routines and procedures. Online learning has its own culture because principals and teachers do not see students daily. As a result, clear expectations are needed. At the outset of COVID-19, participants reported being

- *overwhelmed with directives, information, and orders that would change hour by hour.*

Larry spoke about the confusion and chaos

- *to add to an already confusing and overwhelming time, all schools in our district did things differently, so none of our buildings had a uniform and consistent approach to follow, which delayed us in our ability to provide effective remote learning.*

Other leaders shared that they needed an adaptation period during which they were able to

- *filter the information from the state's department of education and their districts.*

Mary shared the feeling of the group when she said:

- *This adaptation period lasted approximately three weeks. After that, we started to have a rhythm and we worked out some of the kinks.*

In the first three weeks of remote instruction, leaders faced several challenges. First, they had to ensure that everyone had access to a mobile device or a computer and could connect to WIFI. This proved to be difficult for schools that did not have one-to-one devices. Although leaders tried to reach everyone, some students were not accounted for, as Dona explained:

- *Even when schools printed some packets for students without a device or WIFI, parents would not always pick up the packets at school because they worked, they may have been worried to come to school, or may not have had transportation.*

Another difficulty involved families. Even when the family had computer(s) or a mobile device and WIFI, caregivers did not necessarily know how to use the devices, as exemplified by Peter:

- *I received many calls daily of parents who were asking for guidance and tutoring on how to operate and navigate the device so that they could assist their child(ren).*

Other difficulties included the lack of bandwidth in households with several children and parents having to use WIFI, the instruction for special education, and English Learner. Leaders constantly spoke about challenges related to

- *bringing the students with individual educational plans online and giving them the services they needed.*

In particular, Brad stated that

- *it was hard to motivate 8<sup>th</sup> graders because they thought they were on holidays since the testing was suspended and they were easily disengaged.*

Lastly, leaders spoke about the importance of having uniform guidelines with Google classroom, so that all teachers organize their materials a certain way on the platform to make it user friendly and consistent for parents with multiple children. Specifically, Amy shared:

- *I have two children in my own school. One teacher organized his Google classroom by date and the other by assignment. It took me weeks to understand what was needed for whom and to get into a rhythm. As the principal, I saw that we needed to do better and have a consistent way of organizing our online classrooms.*

Besides, these logistical challenges, leaders spoke about the difficulty leading during two crises presented. Leaders felt that they were not only leading during COVID-19, but also during an unprecedented time of social unrest across the nation.

### **Struggling a Global Pandemic and Racial/Social Unrest Crisis**

Principals expressed their difficulty in leading in two pandemics: COVID-19 and the racial and social unrest following the death of George Floyd. Sarah expressed:

- *It is like we have to deal with two pandemics: COVID-19 and the racial unrest that is going on because we have to take a stand on racial inequities and speak about it with our teachers, staff, and students and it is very hard in a time of remote learning and a pandemic.*

Mary concurred and said:

- *I was not ready and prepared to lead in a pandemic and I have learned a lot from it, like being more flexible and focusing on the people first. I was also not prepared to have discussions about race. I feel very uncomfortable with that, yet as a leader I need to model that with my teachers and others.*

Marc agreed with Mary about not being prepared to lead in these conditions and said:

- *We can never be fully prepared anyway so my attitude is to be positive and to take these crises as opportunities to learn and teach some valuable lessons and tools for life to our children and students.*

Marc continued

- *that being said, I need help because it is an overwhelming task to discuss issues of races remotely...and with people who may be resistant.*

John also found it challenging to support teachers to talk to their classes about race and equity, he said:

- *How do you do that with small kids and remotely? It is clear that we were not prepared for none of these two crises.*

Due to the social unrest, leaders started to join Facebook groups, reach out to their university professors, and have discussions among themselves and their teachers on how to address issues of social justice in their schools. Maria said:

- *I reached out to my professor because she had taught a class during my licensure program on equity, diversity, and inclusion. I texted her and she recommended books and such. We had an hour-long exchange. I guess I needed to vent and also continue my learning so I can address these issues in my school.*

### Leaders' Crisis Management Strategies and Experiences

Leaders indicated using various strategies to lead their schools during the COVID-19 crisis as seen in Figure 3. These included spending ample time communicating and taking the role of stress managers and cheer leaders, planning, developing sense of belonging and leading with grace and equity. And also leaders shared management experiences with their leadership styles to lead with grace and equity. These are given in direct quotations.



Figure 3. Crisis management strategies

#### Communication

Leaders stated using a direct communication style because of the urgency to promptly react to the crisis. They communicated often and with transparency. They used various communication channels including social media, website, newsletter, emails, calls, texts, and their districts' automatic calling systems. All leaders emphasized the need to constantly update stakeholders and making intentional efforts to check in with teachers, students, and parents daily.

Principals often communicated the importance of care, patience, safety and giving up perfection. Michael said:

- *Community is bigger than test scores and I want to be one of these leaders who model good listening, care, and grace because we must think of Maslow before Bloom.*

These principals also translated communications whenever possible for their English learners' population. Other leaders said they made sure they were reassuring and encouraging in their messages and online presence. In addition to communicating often, all leaders agreed that they purposefully listened more. Part of their communication strategy was to spend time listening to teachers, students, and parents to better support them. One elementary school principal named Katie shared:

- *I listened more during COVID-19 than ever before because that is what was needed of me.*

As a result of all the listening, leaders saw a need to survey parents regularly and made surveying an integral part of their communication plan. As part of their non-verbal communication, leaders increased their efforts to be more visible. Michael, Katie, Sarah and Mark made themselves visible by

- *visiting classrooms every day, conducting virtual classroom observations and evaluation, respond to calls and emails promptly, keep an updated schedule and conduct weekly mental checks on Zoom with teachers and stakeholders.*

Leaders also read aloud to students, conducted online assemblies, or were secret guests in classes. They taught classes to remain visible. Leaders also took the role of stress managers.

### ***Stress Managers and Cheer Leaders***

Leaders spoke about having to manage their own stress and the stress of teachers and students. They stated that they researched and attended workshops to learn more about social-emotional learning (SEL) tools for adults because teachers were feeling anxious and stressed about COVID-19 and the new and sudden online environment. John, one of the vice principals shared:

- *We quickly realized that our teachers needed a different kind of support because they were juggling their own children and their work, and they were very stressed. As a result, I researched SEL for adults and implemented some activities on Zoom to help teachers voice their stress. Such activities included venting sessions, yoga classes, and happy hours.*

Other leaders had their school guidance counselors open their own Google classroom to hold meetings with parents and families. Barry shared:

- *After reflection, I would have liked the counselor to also focus more on teachers because they were also juggling their own children and their classroom.*

Leaders emphasized the importance of intentionally keeping morale high, particularly in the first few weeks of the crisis. Sarah explained:

- *I cannot control COVID-19 but I need to be a cheer leader.” Meagan also asserted: “I constantly tell teachers, students, and parents them that I am there to support them, they all have my cell phone and use it when needed.*

Another leader shared that

- *they celebrated small wins often with teachers by organizing zoom events such as happy hours, birthday celebrations, or wins in the remote classroom. Other strategies used by leaders included writing cards, emails, or text messages to teachers and checking in about the teachers’ emotional health regularly. Being a cheer leader also meant understanding the need to find a balance between work and family responsibilities.*

Leaders supported their teachers by purposefully modeling balance between their professional and personal lives. One high school leader with his two children on his lap, said,

- *Now that my home office is the main office of the school, I usually have my children during my staff meeting. This way teachers see that it is ok, I understand and that I am in the same boat as they are.*

Other leaders indicated that

- *they told their teachers to stop working when they realized that their teachers were working 12 hours’ day or more.*

All leaders spoke about the importance of modeling physical and mental health. Marty in particular sent reminders via text message to their teachers asking,

- *tell me two things that you are grateful for today and who did you talk to today? Or when is the last time you moved your body today?*

Leaders also communicated the importance to collaborate. School leaders had to learn how to lead virtually and from home. They had to learn from other schools and colleagues. Many of them joined groups on social media and learned how to use technology to interact with their teachers and students better. All leaders spoke about conducting classroom virtual tours and giving regular feedback, as well as providing professional development on how to foster engagement in a remote learning environment. Leaders also prioritized collaboration. Mary illustrated this feeling when she said:

- *I encouraged them to be in communication with one another. It is interesting but I saw more collaboration in the virtual model during COVID-19 than when we were face-to-face. They collaborated more on lesson planning during remote learning than ever before.*

Michael reported:

- *I saw teachers who did not use to be team players suddenly meet colleagues on Google Hangout to check in on their classes, students and share ideas.*

When speaking about their leadership style, principals and assistant principals also referred to

- *leading with grace and for equity.*

### **Planning and Developing Sense of Belonging**

In terms of planning, principals asserted having a hard time planning for the long-term because they received new guidelines and mandates every day from the state, the district, and their colleagues. These leaders, however, planned day by day. They planned meals and cromebooks deliveries for the students who needed them, they coordinated additional resources for families in need, and they always made time to create a sense of belonging for all stakeholders. Mary exemplified this when she said:

- *My role changed. The good thing is that I had less discipline to do. I spent more time planning deliveries, reading about health protective measures, and providing academic support to teachers and families so that they felt they still belonged to the school, even remotely.*

John added:

- *My role became much more one of damage control, if I can say this. Instead of being test driven, I became people driven. I planned my day around meeting with teachers, calling parents, visiting classrooms to make sure everyone felt they were still part of our school community, a now remote community.*

These leaders also used creative ways to continue celebrating important events and accomplishments among students, teachers, and families. In all instances, leaders found a way to celebrate birthdays, graduations, and other important events. Peter said:

- *I started to send handwriting notes to my teachers when I saw they were doing something great in their google classrooms. I never anticipated the impact these hand-written notes would have on the teachers receiving my notes, but they talk to me about it all the time saying that it meant a lot to them that I took the time to notice their work and writing to them on a good old fashion paper.*

Shelly sent daily inspirational texts messages to her teachers

- *to boost their morale.*

She explained:

- *I know the teachers were working around the clock and many had their own children at home. I started to read these inspirational messages for myself and then decided to send them to the teachers. I was surprised how many of them thanked me for those and said that it helped them frame their day more positively.*

Jack shared another way he celebrated and encouraged his teachers. He continued celebrating birthdays virtually. He would set up a Zoom meeting and take time to celebrate his teachers' birthdays. Andrew celebrated his teachers in various ways and sent emails, used humorous pictures and attachments, and cancelled all faculty meetings. He shared:

- *To me that is a way to make the teachers feel heard and cared for, because I knew they could not handle one more meeting, so I just cancelled them to relieve the teachers. Many thanked me for it.*

He added:

- *I also let the teachers go early if they need because I know they put long hours anyway, so I am extra flexible, and extra aware of the need to care for them because they care for our students' day after day.*

Leaders also found creative ways to create a sense of belonging among students. All leaders shared that they adapted and used various strategies to make students feel welcomed, cared for, and part of the school community. For instance, leaders celebrated students' birthdays and they hosted virtual graduation ceremonies. Mary shared:

- *I write a birthday card to each student. I put it in the mail with a couple of small gifts, like a small gift card and a candy. I mail those.*

Jack chose to celebrate the birthdays virtually by sending a video to students. He stated:

- *I have a large school, so it is easier, and these students are on their device all day long anyway. I send the birthday student a video and I get together with their teachers, so I know more about the students' needs and interests. This allows me to personalize my birthday wishes.*

Other principals celebrated birthdays in morning assemblies, as they would have done it face-to-face. In terms of long-term planning, Sam recalled

- *planning the fall when schools would hopefully be face-to-face and learned from the Spring semester to ease the transition back to school.*

He said:

- *we spent a fair amount of time discussing scenarios around the end of the school year trying to anticipate what school could look like, re-imagining our services.*

Overall, leaders indicated that they spent their days on the phone, on the road delivering items, and creating a sense of belonging for teachers and students alike while also trying to plan for the future.

### **Leading with Grace and Equity**

Some leaders indicated grace and equity. As Marty illustrated in this title, leaders led with grace. When asked what they meant by that, Marty shared:

- *We cannot control the virus, but we can control how we respond, and I chose to respond with grace. By that I mean being patient, compassionate, and humble.*

Understandings of leading with grace varied among participants. Sam, Mary, Michael, Sarah and Molly stated that,

- *leading with grace meant that they encouraged creativity rather than typical classroom assignments.*

These leaders also

- *became more flexible with teachers because they also had family obligations at home and understood what teachers were going through.*

In her journal, the researchers wrote: In half of the interviews, the leaders, both men and women were feeding their children or playing with them while we were talking. They mentioned that school meetings were held with children around because everyone was juggling schedules and responsibilities. Those leaders who were parents were challenged by the lack of time, freedom, and quiet. Mary, John, Kurt, Joseph, and Molly who did not have a family

- *enjoyed the online learning because there were very few discipline issues and could then focus on supporting teaching and learning instead of discipline.*

In both cases leaders recognized the need for grace and adjusted their leadership style to be more equitable with teachers and students during these unprecedented times. Leaders, such as Mary, Sam, Zoe, and Sarah who served underprivileged students were aware of the need to

- *advocate for equity because COVID-19 affected a lot more those who live in poverty.*

These leaders indicated that beyond instructional materials, families needed additional food, clothing, and medical items. To meet this need, one of the principals formed a partnership with a company and received half a million dollars in food items that her community distributed weekly to families. Other leaders organized barbecues with donated items, drove foods to homes, or arranged for district buses to drop out foods, clothes, and medication. Again, principals and assistant principals often stated,

- *Maslow comes before Bloom, and instruction is important but staying healthy takes precedence.*

Leaders also realized that they needed to be more equitable in their communications, so they enlisted the help of interpreters and translating systems to make sure families stayed informed.

## Conclusion and Discussion

This research was conducted to understand how 30 American educational leaders led during the COVID-19 pandemic. Leaders struggled with crisis difficulties the COVID-19 pandemic, social unrest over racial issues, and logistical difficulties. Both the pandemic and social crisis showed the difficulty of real life. Both this study and others (Dodley et al., 2020; Dorn et al., 2020; Wright & Merritt, 2020) showed that COVID-19 has exacerbated financial problems and demonstrated how education inequalities deeply affect society (Harris & Jones, 2020). The pandemic highlighted inequalities in access to digital devices and the internet (Pius-Uwhubetiyi, 2020). When schools were closed, fifteen percent of America's households and thirty-five percent of low-income households with school-age children did not have high-speed internet connectivity at home. As of early April, more than half of leaders in high-poverty areas reported that the basic lack of technology was a "big" problem (Darling-Hammond & Kini, 2020). According to Wright and Merritt (2020) COVID-19 affected several areas of life in America. These areas were inequality in health care; segregation, overall health, and food insecurity; underrepresentation in government and the medical profession, and inequalities in participatory democracy and public engagement (Dodley et al., 2020). According to this study, education leaders faced many difficulties. Poverty, nutrition, medical information, democracy, inequality in social development, cleaning, disinfection, preparation of schools, creating conditions for schools were the responsibility of education leaders. And also Fotheringham et al. (2020), Hamilton (2020), and McNamara & Sahlberg (2020) found similar difficulties like this research. Netolicky (2020) stated that these situations have always existed, but COVID-19 made them visible.

Varela and Fedynich's (2020) research showed that education leaders were not confident in serving students, staff, and parents. They felt a lack of resources and they saw students' inequalities as complicating this situation. Leaders tried to solve all the crisis time, atypical conditions. Education leaders grappled with the inevitable challenge of planning school reopening after the COVID-19 pandemic closes (such as Harris, 2020; Kafa and Pashiardis, 2020; Varela and Fedynich's, 2020 study). In this study, leaders initially felt unconfident just like others. However, they tried to manage the crisis well with their leadership skills.

America, which helped students in the pre-pandemic period, increased these aids even more during the pandemic period. In America, various legal texts include the support of students in various aspects. For example, the No Child Left Behind Act was signed in 2002 and President Barack Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act in 2015. In these laws; particular emphasis has been placed on some subgroups, such as students who are disadvantaged in various aspects and have economic problems. For this reason, it was concluded that

administrators should increase the effectiveness of their schools (US Department of Education, 2002). In addition, the Convention on Children Rights (1989), which accepts individuals as children up to the age of 18, supports these aids. These are all legal texts taken into consideration of the principle of the best interests of the child. Based on these legal texts, America has tried to help children as a priority. Education leaders have also applied this as a primary principle in the pandemic crisis.

During the pandemic period, America provided various aid to its citizens. For example, food packages were prepared for the students' families whose financial situation was insufficient, and daily hot meals were distributed. For this, school buses brought daily meals to the closest points to their children's addresses or student families received food packages from their schools (US Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service, 2021). Despite this, the leaders experienced various logistical difficulties. In addition, for students to access education when the courses are online, they offered hotspot passwords for internet access to their citizens. They endeavored for all students to access online and digital education tools (The World Bank, 2020). They used communication channels effectively for this problem. The lack of existing research on how school leaders responded and struggled to the COVID-19 crisis and their implementation strategy is important. It has revealed both this study and other leadership studies the importance of strategies of education leaders such as having a vision, developing others, managing people, capacity building, planning, time management, equality, and effective use of communication channels (Leithwood et al., 2020; Harris, 2020).

Following this research, the interviews with educational leaders identified four basic strategies for coping with the crisis. It was found that the education leaders used strategies such as communication, stress management, creating a sense of belonging among teachers and students, and planning, leading with grace and equity. It was determined through the research that educational leaders used all the communication channels, eg. social media, website, newsletter, emails, calls, texts, and their districts' automatic calling systems during COVID-19 crisis time. Thus, the most important strategy was communication. They communicated with parents, guardians, teachers, and students. They had to share information about reopening schools, school supplies, repairing of chrome books, food, clothing, and medical items, and other information. If the parents or guardians did not have internet, they also gave information about hotspot. They also gave information about specific classes, listening or teachers, etc. The education leaders wanted to reach all their parents/guardians and students. The other strategy was to act as stress managers and cheer leaders. All teachers, parents/guardians, and students had some stressful days because there were some limitations. They had to socially and physically distance themselves from all their friends, relatives, etc. They organized some activities on Zoom such as yoga, counseling, sent postcards, birthday celebration with Zoom or videos, etc. The third strategy was to lead with grace and for equity. They tried to create equality between everyone. The leaders behaved patiently, compassionately, and humbly. They tried to take care of national, spiritual, universal, and religious values. They emphasized the importance of overcoming this crisis as one. For this reason, they chose a more loving, understanding, and just management approach. The last two strategies were planning and developing a sense of belonging. Leaders did not plan for the long term, but from day by day. They tried to instill to sense of belonging in school communities. And they visited and observed online classes, met with teachers who were struggling with this crisis. They struggled to manage this situation and helped to manage the teachers.

All of the education leaders in this study have experienced similar problems and have tried to cope with the pandemic, inequity, education, poverty, and other crisis problems and coping strategies. In times of crisis leaders are the key. Crisis management is more important than anything else. Like all leaders of organizations, education leaders also have a lot of work to do. In a times of crisis, education leaders must act quickly and with foresight, while also carefully considering the options, outcomes, and the side effects of the actions taken. It can be noted that educational leaders have played an important role in managing this crisis, despite the challenges, obstacles, unpredictability, and uncertainty as shown by other researches (Fotheringham et al., 2020; Hamilton et al., 2020; Hooge & Pont, 2020, etc.). As a result of this research, it was found that they created new pathways for all students with determination, continuity, and composure using different strategies. It was also found that communication was one of the most effective of all the strategies. They did everything, could with determination and hope for the students to learn, and they stated that they will continue to do so in the future, including for their teachers and schools. It can be said that it is one of the indicators of educational leadership. So, the educational leaders should play their part in overcoming the crisis in the school with their attitudes, constructive behaviors, and necessary interventions. Similarly, Demirtas (2000) in his research mentioned the importance of leadership competencies in crisis management. The leader should manage the crisis by taking a holistic view of the events in resolving the crisis and evaluating them according to the culture of the organization, management structure, and the use of resources. Moreover, for effective crisis management and plan, joint studies should be conducted with internal and external stakeholders (Ritchie, 2004). Sayin (2008) in his study stated that the attitudes of education leaders are important for crisis intervention management.

Crisis situations are situations that threaten the goals of organizations. Schools with an organizational structure are negatively affected by crisis situations, and this situation is negatively reflected in and around the school. For this reason, it is important to learn from crises. The greatest responsibility in crisis management in schools lies with educational leaders. Considering this situation, education leaders should determine in advance the methods they will use to get out of the crisis situation and ensure that they minimize the possible damages of the crisis. The most important task of the leaders is to anticipate and solve the crisis.

## Limitations and Recommendations

This is a qualitative study conducted with a group of educational leaders working in public schools in five Ohio school districts. Therefore, the results may not be applicable for private schools. It can be recommended that future studies are conducted with private schools. Samples from different school districts of different sizes can be selected for such studies. Studies conducted on private schools may also reveal the challenges and strategies in this process in these organizations. This topic should be explored with quantitative research in both private and public schools and the results should be compared.

Since educational leaders inevitably use communication and communication channels, online and face-to-face communication trainings can be provided to leaders in consultation with the university faculty members. Since education leaders are doing various supportive activities, they can be given reading suggestions on this subject. Online orientation studies can be more frequent, especially for students in the first school year. By being more sensitive when speaking, they can talk to parents and students about values such as equality, justice, non-discrimination, and non-racism. Educational support such as video using and preparation can be planned by leaders for teachers who have insufficient use of technology. The number of online classes for families can be increased. Online postcards and mails can be sent more frequently to students on topics such as equality and non-racism. Leaders can be encouraged by teachers to have students watch movies on these topics. Leaders can participate in a variety of online activities to improve themselves in crisis management. This research was with education leaders. Similar research can be conducted with parents, teachers, and students.

Contingency plans should be prepared for possible crises that may occur in the future. Because, the crisis management plan can save, minimize the damages of a possible crisis, and can play an important role in achieving these goals. Conducting a study with broad participation in the development of school crisis plans, involving teachers, students, parents, principals, and other school members in the planning will play a very important role in terms of consistency, high foresight, and clarity of the plan. Therefore, it is important for schools to have a plan for the crisis and this plan can be achieved through meetings with broad participation.

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