

LEADING SCHOOLS THROUGH COVID-19: A CONSTRAINT OR AN OPPORTUNITY FOR CHANGE?

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ABSTRACT

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic undermined basic routines and typical conduct of schools, introducing uncertainty and instability to an extent that schools had never encountered in the last decades. The current study focuses on leaders' coping strategies while struggling to maintain school stability and on the extent to which these extreme conditions of uncertainty and turbulence may potentially promote innovation and change, as many stakeholders argue. Interviews conducted with eleven school leaders reveal that they have invested efforts to maintain school stability and decrease teachers' and students' stress. They changed school priorities, placing more emphasis on the wellbeing of teachers and students than on academic achievements. They shifted control patterns from centralized to collaborative ones with extended autonomy to teachers. They increased the support they provided teachers and created open communication channels. Although many school leaders viewed the pandemic as an opportunity for change, all of them agreed that schools would not dramatically change. All principals shared the notion that it is more likely that schools would return to their traditional routines and modes of operation with only minor changes after the pandemic is over. Some implications of extreme turbulence on innovation-oriented planning are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Organizational systems strive to maintain stability, assumed to decrease variance among organizational members' behaviors and promote organizational effectiveness. To meet this goal, organizations set and follow routines designed to buffer internal and external pressures and create a stable course of organizational action. This also applies to the organizational behavior of public schools, shaped by routines, which are typical to the educational realm.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic undermined schools' basic routines and typical conduct, introducing uncertainty and instability to an extent they had never encountered in the last decades. This led many educational researchers and practitioners to consider this unexpected and dramatic event to be an opportunity for change and innovation of the schooling system and its inherent routines and processes.

The current study attempts to assess what measures school principals took in order to stabilize their school under the extreme uncertainty and turbulence caused by the pandemic and the extent they consider these newly created circumstances an opportunity to change school routines and organizational behavior.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholars generally agree that organizations' effectiveness is related to their stability (Andersen and Mortensen, 2009; Liang and Fiorino, 2013; O'Toole and Meier, 2003; Provan and Milward, 1995).

Research evidence provides a variety of findings supporting this claim. O'Toole and Meier (2003) find that stability among school personnel has a positive impact on organizational performance. Andersen and Mortensen (2009) show that a stable pattern of resource allocation improves organizational performance. Meier and O'Toole (2007) argue that promoting stability is among the core assignments for managers who attempt to shape and improve organizational performance. Provan and Milward (1995) demonstrate that system stability improves network effectiveness, and Liang and Fiorino (2013) show that technological innovation is influenced by stability of government funding. Hence, stability is viewed as a desired feature of organizations and a good proxy for organizational effectiveness.

However, maintaining stability may not be an easy task when organizations encounter environmental turbulence evident in an unpredictable change in the complexity of their external context. Environmental turbulence creates a major source of threat to organizational stability and is considered influential on the relationship between external change, internal change, and organizational performance (Boyne and Meier, 2009). The larger the unpredictable change brought by environmental turbulence, the larger the negative effect on organizational performance (Anderson and Tushman, 2001; Kuivalainen et al., 2004; Li and Atuahene-Gima, 2001; Lin and Germain, 2003; Power and Reid, 2005).

Organizational routines, considered to be well-known sources of inertia (Hannan and Freeman, 1984) and inflexibility (Gersick and Hackman, 1990; Weiss and Ilgen, 1985), are among the main measures organizations employ in order to promote stability and cope with unexpected and hazardous events taking place in their environment. According to the Organizational Routines Theory, every organization is composed of a variety of activities, processes and interactions organized in patterns that tend to replicate themselves while organizations strive to achieve their goals (Feldman and Pentland, 2003; Feldman and Rafaeli, 2002). The repetitive nature of organizational routines allows organizational stability to develop while, at the same time, routines promote effectiveness by enabling organizational members to introduce changes that increase the correspondence of their actions with the changing circumstances (Feldman and Rafaeli, 2002). These routines have the power to turn exceptions into rules and shape organizational and professional behaviors (Feldman and Pentland, 2003). Organizational routines are organized in clusters, each serving a different aspect of organizational goals (Kremser and Schreyögg, 2016). Every cluster contains a number of routines set to meet the complexity of a particular organizational goal, while at the same time promoting organizational ability to cope with internal and external pressures (Becker and Zirpoli, 2008; Howard-Grenville, 2005).

When facing a turbulent and unpredictable environment, organizations may choose to stick to their existing structure and routines, hoping that this will enable them to maintain their internal stability and overcome environmental instability. Such a reaction is supported by the Structural Inertia Theory (Hannan and Freeman, 1977, 1984), arguing that strong internal stability is the best response to a dynamic environment. Any structural change is likely to generate internal turbulence, which in turn adds to the negative effect of external turbulence. Therefore, "organizations that attempt to adapt to each environmental outcome will spend most of their time adjusting structure and very little time in organizational action directed at other ends" (Hannan and Freeman, 1977, p. 958).

Alternatively, the Structural Contingency Theory advocates for an opposite reaction, arguing that organizations are likely to perform better if they adapt their internal characteristics to the features of their external environment (Pennings, 1992). According to this theory, organizational effectiveness

may be maintained only if organizations change and adjust their internal routines and increase their fit to the newly created circumstances. When experiencing a major environmental change, therefore, survival depends heavily on an organizations' ability to adjust (Gordon et al., 2000). Hence, routines are viewed as a source of both stability and change (Farjoun, 2010; Feldman, 2000; van der Steen, 2011).

While routines guide and stabilize organizational behavior in all organizations, in some sectors routines may have a more traditional and widespread nature in the sense that similar routines shape organizations operating in different organizational settings. This seems to be the case of public schools, which have maintained their basic routines unchanged for decades. Similar routine patterns may be evident in various schooling systems worldwide such as the school timetable and curriculum, the division into classes, the examination and evaluation system and the learning tracks that schools offer to students (Elmore, 2004). Routines also shape teaching and learning activities and enable the advancement of students' achievements by allowing educators to better identify problems and change teaching processes accordingly (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009).

The stable nature of public school routines seems to be related to the stability of the organizational environment in which they operate. Traditionally, public schools have served as one prominent example of organizations operating in a rather stable environment. State sponsorship and laws are among the key factors contributing to the stable environment in which public schools operate (Eyal and Inbar, 2003; Mayer and Rowan, 1977). In addition, public schools are domesticated organizations protected by the state. This means that their continuation and funding is rarely determined by the quality of their performance and outcomes (Carlson et al., 1965). Therefore, public schools have served for many years as a prominent example of organizations operating in a rather stable organizational environment. An indication to their stability and unchanging nature may be found in the relatively limited number of significant changes that have shaped public schools over the years. Although many attempts have been made in various educational systems to transform traditional teaching practices, few changes may be found within classrooms (Cuban, 1990). It appears that educational reforms have most often led to first order classroom changes, represented by the development of hybrids of old and new teaching practices. Second order changes at the classroom level have proven elusive (Cuban, 2013).

While most change initiatives in education follow intended efforts for innovation, the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 created vastly different circumstances as it forced change that no one could resist. Creating an extremely turbulent environment for public schools, it produced a unique challenge for school leaders as it has undermined stability and the core routines that have traditionally shaped the daily conduct of schools. Although schools have remained domesticated organizations, they have not been able to maintain their typical patterns and processes since governments in many countries initiated lockdowns leading to school shutdowns. As a result, students and teachers stayed at home and teaching became virtual. This has led to changes in key issues inherent to school conduct, such as teachers' roles, the design and conduct of lessons, or social interactions between students and adults. It has also increased social gaps between students who have computers connected to the web and those who do not (Andrew et al., 2020; Bol, 2020; Jaeger and Blaabaek, 2020). School leaders who were accustomed to operating in a stable organizational environment characterized by little uncertainty have found themselves in a situation in which they had to constantly adjust their school routines and processes (Grooms and Childs, 2021; Harris, 2020) based on government decisions, which in certain national contexts, such as the Israeli one, have changed rapidly and unexpectedly. Their ability to control and monitor teaching and learning that

has always been constrained due to the loose-coupled nature of school (Weick, 1976) has become even more limited. Rather than dealing with pedagogical considerations, the main concern of school leaders has become the safety and health of their students and educational staff (Weiner, Francois, Stone-Johnson and Childs, 2021) and the need to support them (Metcalf and Perez, 2020).

Since there was no way of knowing what the course of the pandemic would be, policy makers as well as school level educators have continuously experienced uncertainty undermining stability and planning for the future. These circumstances were new and unique for school leaders who have little training or experience they can rely on while leading their schools in these highly turbulent circumstances.

Hence, the purpose of the current study is to assess what courses of action school leaders have taken following the extreme uncertainty and turbulence caused by the pandemic. Specifically, it attempts to assess: (1) What were school leaders' preferred coping strategies while attempting to establish stability for their school communities, and (2) How do extreme conditions of uncertainty and turbulence influence the willingness of school leaders to conduct planning activities, which are change-oriented.

METHOD

Participants

This study is based on a qualitative analysis of eleven interviews conducted with eight elementary and three high school principals leading schools in the Israeli public educational system. Two principals lead schools in the Jewish religious stream, one in the Arab sector and eight in the Jewish secular stream. Three principals are male and eight are female. Ages ranged between 35 and 55.

Data Collection

Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. Some of the interviews were conducted virtually through Zoom software while others were conducted over the phone. Interviews were chosen as the major data collection method to enable large amounts of data about interviewees' perspectives to be collected relatively quickly and the immediate follow-up and clarification of equivocal issues to be accomplished (Taylor et al., 2015). The interviews were conducted as "in depth," open conversations to "allow the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic" (Merriam, 2009, p. 90). At the beginning of each interview, school leaders were asked to talk about their daily reality during the pandemic and its impact on their thoughts and feelings. Towards the end of each interview, the researcher asked the interviewees two questions referring to the core issues of the current study:

- a) What measures did you take in order to maintain stability in your school; and
- b) Following your experiences during the pandemic, are you going to introduce changes in school plans for next year and, if so, what will be their nature?

The use of open-ended questions enabled better exposure of interviewees' personal perspectives, their deeper thoughts, emotions and ambitions (Marshall and Rossman, 2011; Patton, 2002; Rossman and Rallis, 2012). This semi-structured approach allowed the interviews to be much more like conversations than formal events with predetermined response categories, permitting the respondents' views to unfold, rather than the predisposition of the researcher (Marshall and Rossman, 2011). All interviews were transcribed onto text files, which eventually formed the data set.

Data Analysis

Based on the classification of various issues mentioned by the interviewees, a set of themes was identified (Luborsky, 1994). This stage was data-driven and not theory-driven to allow direct examination of the perspectives articulated by the interviewees (Flick, 2009; Marshall and Rossman, 2011; Rossman and Rallis, 2012). Using the perspective of Marshall and Rossman (2011), who see qualitative data analysis “as a search for general statements among categories of data” (p. 111), and the procedures outlined by Marton (1988) and Forster (1994), comments were brought together on the basis of their similarities into categories that differed from one another in terms of the subject matter and meaning that each category represented. This process allowed the generation of common themes and elucidation of the differences between the voices (Cohen et al., 2000; Merriam, 2009). To ensure interviewees' anonymity, pseudo names are used. For every theme, a few representative vignettes are presented.

Context

This study was conducted in the Israeli educational system, which in spite of various decentralization efforts introduced in the last decades maintains its centralized nature (Nir, 2006; Nir, Kondakci and Emil, 2017). To provide readers an idea of the inconsistency of governmental decisions and the turbulent atmosphere that school leaders encountered, the following is an overview of the main shifts in the national educational policy since the outbreak of the pandemic: First cases of COVID-19 were detected in Israel on March 13th, 2020. The government initiated a lockdown and all schools excluding kindergartens and special education institutions were closed. By the end of April, 1-3 and 11-12 grade students returned to schools for five days per week. Classes were divided and students studied in groups of 15. The rest of the students studied virtually from their homes. On May 11th, the Ministry of Education initiated new instructions which stated that starting on May 17th, 4-6 and 7-10 grade students would attend school once a week. During the rest of the week, they and all the others would study virtually. However, the Heads of the local authorities objected to this decision and declared that they were not going to open schools. On May 14th, the government decided that all students would return to schools. Following the high illness rate among students and teachers, many local authorities decided to close schools operating under their jurisdiction. At the beginning of July, the summer break began. All school principals received new instructions from the Ministry of Education specifying what preparations schools were required to make for the upcoming school year. A few days before the new school year began on September 1st, these regulations were replaced by new ones which specified that students in grades 1-2 would study in their original classrooms, while students in grades 3-4 and 11-12 would be divided into groups of 18 and would attend school three days a week. All the rest of the students would continue to study virtually. On September 25th, the government initiated a second lockdown and the schooling system, excluding special education institutions, was closed. On November 1st, 1-4 grade students returned to schools; 5-6 grade students returned to school on November 24th. Five days later, 10-12 grade students returned to school for two days a week, studying via Zoom the rest of the week. On December 6th all students returned to school. However, due to an increase of illness rate, the government initiated a third lockdown at the beginning of January 2021 and all schools were closed again. As I write these lines, the government decided to open all schools although the illness rate is mounting. It seems that this decision is mostly influenced by political considerations, as elections are due in March 23rd, for the fourth time in the last two years.

RESULTS

When school principals were asked to reflect about the outbreak of COVID-19 and its impact on their schools, uncertainty, frustration and shock were frequently mentioned:

"At the beginning it was a huge mess; it was unclear where we were heading" (Tamar).

"Confusion and vagueness were our starting point: What is happening? How can we transform classroom teaching to distance learning in a single day? For some of the teachers this change was like teaching a baby to walk" (Yusef).

"I experienced frustration as I actually lost control: It was impossible to fully understand what was going on. In practice, the traditional school ceased to exist" (Aya).

While COVID-19 was the main reason and source for the uncertainty school principals experienced, many considered the inconsistent regulations set by policy makers to be a main source for their daily instability and turbulence:

"I tried to create an island of sanity in these crazy and unstable circumstances; this was my main goal although no matter how hard I tried, every morning I woke up and found different regulations which created a different reality" (Einat).

"Consistency and planning were out of the question because every day we received new instructions which cancelled the previous ones" (Ronit).

"Uncertainty. Part of it I can understand because COVID-19 introduced a crisis that nobody had experienced in the past. However, it is more difficult for me to accept and cope with uncertainty which follows the malpractice of decision makers evident in contradictory instructions, and unreasonable expectations pointed towards school leaders" (Asaf).

Although public schools are often viewed as traditional and domesticated institutions, these newly created circumstances undermined their core routines and stability. The typical routines of schools became abruptly irrelevant while the inconsistent regulations initiated by policy makers increased rather than decreased their daily uncertainty.

Bridging over Stormy Water

The contextual turbulence following the outbreak of the pandemic on the one hand and the need to maintain schools' organizational stability on the other hand represent two opposing forces. What measures and strategies did school leaders employ in order to maintain organizational stability and promote clarity for students, teachers and parents?

The analysis of interview data shows that school leaders tended to focus their efforts on three core domains while attempting to promote their schools' stability.

Changing school priorities

In the circumstances that followed the outbreak of COVID-19 it was clear to all school leaders that the safety and health of teachers and students should be their first priority and that pedagogical considerations should come second:

"We no longer map students' achievements and we place less emphasis on teaching" (Lidor).

"Health is above all. Pedagogy can wait" (Aya).

"We changed our priorities. In teachers' meetings we don't discuss teaching, rather teachers' feelings and how we can better cope with this crazy situation" (Mira).

"Our school's priorities completely changed. Pedagogy is left behind. Most our efforts are dedicated to maintain and promote teachers' and students' wellbeing" (Asaf).

Promoting individual wellbeing is a notion shared by all school principals. In some schools, this led to the development of humoristic slogans intended to allow better coping with the situation, as Yusef describes:

"Our students came up with a new slogan which replaced the motto of our school: We cannot control the situation but we can control our mood."

In spite of the complicated, troubling and unstable situation, pedagogy was not totally neglected, as Ronit explains:

"Although the Ministry of Education changes its instructions on a daily basis, we decided to focus teaching on two core issues: language skills and mathematics. All the rest can wait. We are aware that the current situation leads to significant pedagogical discrepancies, but at the moment, there is little we can do about it."

Aya emphasizes:

"Very quickly I realized that we need to change our priorities. First, we need to take care of individual wellbeing, make sure that all students have computers and the basic conditions required to participate in hybrid lessons. I instructed teachers to talk with students about their anxieties and to calm them as much as possible. When things began to stabilize, we began to teach mostly Hebrew, English and mathematics."

Nevertheless, pedagogical emphasis and efforts were mostly placed on students in higher grades:

"Our main concern is to prepare sixth-grade students for their transition to the junior high school. We try to teach them the relevant curriculum so that the transition from elementary school to the junior high school will be smooth as much as possible" (Mira).

Managerial orientation

All school leaders share the notion that it is impossible to maintain their typical leadership patterns in the newly created circumstances. All of them introduced various changes in their managerial orientation and focus which are evident, in particular, in four areas:

- a) *Emphasis on stress and pressure reduction:* The uncertainty brought about by the pandemic created a lot of stress for teachers, students and parents. Stress followed

fear from the Corona virus and the difficulty to predict what would happen next. Therefore, reducing stress became a top priority and a main goal for school leaders even at the expense of pedagogical assignments and academic achievements:

"Initially, we mapped our teachers' personal circumstances to better understand who can come to school and who must stay at home with his own children. Next, we told the teachers not to worry about meeting curricular goals since it was clear to us that teaching cannot be effective. This message enabled us to reduce pressure" (Lidor).

"I followed my own logic and told the teachers to do what seemed to be reasonable at the time. My professional experience taught me that my main contribution would be in reducing the stress which was already high" (Sara).

- b) *Decreasing centralized management:* A second shift in school leaders' managerial orientation is evident in their tendency to become less centralized. The distance teaching that teachers conducted from their homes and leaders' difficulty to monitor the lessons encouraged leadership patterns that increase teachers' empowerment, autonomy and collaboration.

"After a while, I realized that I must loosen my control. Although I tend to be very dominant, I learned to become more flexible, and allow teachers more freedom within the boundaries I defined" (Dan).

"I am less centralized and more collaborative: I share everything with my teachers. This allows teachers to become more involved" (Yusef).

"I set some basic guidelines which allow teachers a lot of freedom and individual discretion. Teachers know what they are expected to do but each one may decide what, how and when to act" (Lidor).

Sara summarizes:

"My control is limited. It is difficult to monitor teachers' lessons. I don't know how much time is dedicated to learning and what is the nature of interactions between teachers and students. I must trust my teachers. I have no other option."

- c) *Support, concern and criticism-free discourse:* A third expression of leaders' changed orientation is evident in their attitude towards teachers and typical discourse. Since the newly created circumstances demanded fundamental changes in teachers' teaching and interaction with students and parents, which in turn contributed to teachers' stress, school leaders realized they needed to support their teachers and encourage them:

"My most important assignment was to support my teachers. They also support each other and I am there for them to assist in any difficulty they encounter" (Sara).

"I constantly send the teachers messages that they are wonderful and that I completely trust them" (Ronit).

Asaf emphasizes:

"Now is not the time for criticism. My main concern is to establish stability and support my teachers. I try to speak with every teacher at least once a week and ask how she is doing, and how I can help. Teachers' wellbeing is our most significant asset."

- d) *Communication*: The ambiguity and uncertainty which followed the pandemic created a lot of stress. Avoiding rumors and establishing a clear and reliable source of information for teachers, students and parents were among school leaders' main actions while attempting to reduce stress and promote school stability:

"There was constantly a lot of false or contradictory information that came from various sources: the media, the Ministry, parents, teachers' unions....So I informed the teachers that they should only refer to information coming from me – all the rest they should ignore" (Aya).

"I scheduled and planned ahead Zoom meetings with parents so that I would be able to provide the most updated information and avoid misinformation as much as possible" (Mira).

Yusef described the systematic measures he initiated to reduce stress through reliable communication:

"Transparency of information was the first step: We shared our dilemmas with students and parents. Next, we focused on personal contacts between teachers, students and parents. In many lessons, teachers encouraged students to talk and share their fears and even practiced various relaxation techniques."

A critical element in establishing stability and reliable communication is transparency. All principals emphasized that sharing all information with teachers, students and parents is key for stability:

"We experienced a lot of instability. The key for success was open and direct communication with everyone" (Einat).

"Teachers who succeeded to create stability in their classroom were those who created and maintained open communication channels with students and parents" (Lidor).

"Transparency was critical: I made sure that all information is shared with parents and that they see the big picture. We created a communication channel, which enabled everyone to ask questions or share information. I realized that the greater the transparency, the higher individual involvement and willingness to assist" (Yusef).

Future orientation

Unlike other planned change initiatives, which often promote the resistance of school level educators, the pandemic created circumstances that school level educators could not ignore. Therefore, various stakeholders consider the pandemic a significant catalyst for educational innovation and change. Such expectations require educators to introduce significant modifications in their teaching and coping strategies that may set a foundation for new organizational and instructional routines.

The perception of the pandemic as an opportunity for change and innovation was also expressed by school leaders:

"The pandemic throw everyone into the water. We had no choice but to adapt. The classroom door is breached now and parents are exposed to everything that takes place during lessons. These circumstances help me to advance various ideas. Even veteran teachers who are accustomed to resisting any change initiative realize they must be cooperative" (Mira).

"The continuation of the circumstances which followed the pandemic is an opportunity for change" (Asaf).

However, when asked to what extent the pandemic is likely to change their school's plans and promote changes, they all assessed that schools would return to their typical modes of operation that existed before the pandemic:

"Teachers, students and parents are all longing to return to our typical routine. Although the pandemic is an historical event, the organizational behavior of schools is not likely to change dramatically. Schools will look the same before and after the pandemic" (Sara).

"Teachers are used to certain routines that are hard to break. They want to maintain these routines because they are familiar with them and familiarity decreases uncertainty and stress" (Ronit).

"I have no doubt: previous organizational patterns will prevail regardless of the impact of the pandemic" (Lidor).

All school leaders shared the notion that future changes are likely to be minor as a result of the system's impositions or because of educators' past habits:

"The basic structure and patterns of schools will not change. We might consider some minor changes: we might cancel the ringing of the bell to indicate when lessons begin or end; we may conduct some of the teachers' meetings via Zoom software, and maybe a little bit more autonomy and flexibility will be granted to teachers. We are nostalgic and, therefore, want to return to our previous habits. The Ministry is conservative and will also encourage schools to reconstruct organizational patterns which existed before the pandemic" (Dan).

"After the pandemic is over, I assume parental involvement in school will increase. We will not be able to return to previous patterns of involvement" (Yusef).

"The only changes will be those we already began to introduce before the pandemic. I hope that now teachers will be more collaborative. I don't think we can totally abandon previous routines and habits" (Aya).

"I am not sure that the Ministry will allow us to perform major changes. For example, I don't believe they will abandon matriculation exams" (Asaf).

Tamar says sadly:

"Teachers' unions have a significant impact on the educational system. I don't

believe they will allow significant alterations to the routines that have traditionally dictated the schooling system."

Hence, it appears that in spite of the pandemic and its dramatic impact on school routines and typical organizational patterns, school leaders predict the pandemic will only lead to minor changes and will not have a significant effect on their school plans.

DISCUSSION

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic introduced uncertainty and instability to an extent that public schools never encountered in the last decades. This dramatic occurrence undermined their typical routines, while introducing intensive stress among principals, teachers, students and parents. Our findings indicate that after an initial shock, school leaders dedicated their efforts to create an island of stability in an ocean of turbulence for their school community.

The tendency to promote stability encouraged school leaders to change school priorities and place more emphasis on the wellbeing of teachers and students than on academic achievements. They dedicated efforts to decrease teachers' stress and shifted control patterns from centralized to collaborative ones, granting extended autonomy to teachers. They increased the concern and support they provided teachers and created open communication channels. Although many school leaders indicated they consider the pandemic an opportunity for change, all of them agreed that it would not dramatically change schools. Rather, they anticipated that most future changes would be minor. They all shared the view that it is more likely that schools would return to their traditional routines and modes of operation after the pandemic is over.

This orientation, which follows the drastic turbulence, instability and uncertainty educators have experienced in the last year, seems to limit change-oriented planning and foster stability-oriented measures. Practically, this orientation leads to rigid thinking, to unwillingness to alter existing routines and, therefore, is likely to undermine change-oriented planning. Although the pandemic created an opportunity for change, the extreme conditions that followed its onset have encouraged educational leaders to stick to the routines and typical modes of operation that have traditionally characterized schools.

Although the Structural Contingency Theory views routines as a source of both stability and change (Farjoun, 2010; Feldman, 2000; van der Steen, 2011), arguing that organizations need to adjust internal characteristics to the external environment (Gordon et al., 2000; Pennings, 1992), our findings reinforce an opposite perspective. It appears that under extreme turbulence and uncertainty, school leaders tend to act according to the Structural Inertia Theory (Hannan and Freeman, 1977, 1984), arguing that any change in organizational structural is likely to generate internal turbulence, which in turn adds to the negative effect of the external turbulence. They strive, consequently, to promote schools' internal stability by preserving their traditional routines and modes of operation and by limiting planning activities that are change-oriented.

It appears, as a result, that in order to shift from preservation-oriented to change-oriented planning, turbulence, instability and uncertainty should not be extreme if school leaders are to adopt different planning assumptions and plan for innovation. Extreme turbulence is likely to encourage school leaders to prefer conservative modes of operation and maintain schools' traditional routines. Hence, limited changes in instruction and other core educational issues are likely to occur.

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