A Fight to Survive in Crisis: A Qualitative Search of the Secondary School Leadership Practices During the Pandemic

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Abstract: Due to the tremendous attack of the COVID-19 pandemic worldwide, educational institutions struggled noticeably to cope with its associated predicament. In the initial stage of the pandemic attack, knowledge about Coronavirus and its socio-economic effects was scarce, and school leaders lacked adequate training on crisis management during a pandemic. Thus, the pandemic posed a dilemma and an ultimate test for educational leaders worldwide. This study aimed to explore the challenges secondary school leaders in Bangladesh encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic, and their leadership strategies to cope with the crisis. The 'measurement model of crisis leadership' was applied as the conceptual framework. Using a qualitative approach and thematic analysis framework for data analysis, the study revealed leaders' considerable academic, financial, and socio-emotional challenges. The leaders were found to apply certain crisis leadership attributes consistent with the 'measurement model of crisis leadership'. However, the study identified the absence of inclusiveness' in the framework, thereby proposing the inclusion of 'equity and social justice' in the existing framework since leaders' ability to ensure equal access to all students appeared essential during the crisis. Finally, this study brings the recommendations for policy-level reformation in school leadership training on crisis management in Bangladesh to develop leaders' competence for managing risk effectively and maximizing risk-reduction actions required during critical times.

Keywords: *COVID-19 pandemic, crisis management, secondary school leaders, crisis leadership.*

Introduction

The emergence of COVID-19 has been considered 'an unprecedented test for organizations around the world' and the framework of education has been noticeably challenged since school communities discovered themselves plunged into an emergency mode of operation in unavoidable chaos (Chatzipanagiotou & Katsarou, 2023). The disruption in the educational services caused by the global pandemic of COVID-19 unveiled the reality of school leaders' lack of readiness with crisis management skills and effective confrontation of newer challenges at organizational and instructional levels (Chatzipanagiotou & Katsarou, 2023). Leadership roles and school conditions are considered significant mediations to forward constructive changes, advancement, innovations in teaching-learning practices, and capacity building (Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Lee et al., 2019; Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2021; Schleicher, 2015). Leading schools with a sound organizational vision and institutional values improve administrators' sensemaking in uncertain conditions, directs critical decisions, facilitates effective communication, and helps them to involve others in shared meaning-making (Boin et al., 2010). In an organization, leaders collectively need to address the issues of safety, and the psychological crisis of the community members and plan for restoration and stability (Demiroz & Kapucu, 2012; Dückers et al., 2017; Marcus et al., 2006).

The COVID-19 pandemic adversely impacted education systems worldwide, leading to school closures and disrupting millions of children's education. Bangladesh was no exception, with a longer school closure of 18 months. The prolonged school closure induced by the pandemic impacted the teachers, students, and their families physically, emotionally, and economically. Students' learning loss, dropping out of school, female students' early marriage, students' moral degeneration, teachers' financial crisis, and socio-psychological issues of school members appeared to be the aftermath of COVID-19 in Bangladesh. Due to the school closures, school leaders were tasked with a multidimensional range of roles, such as rigorous communication with the school community, providing technological support for online classes,

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managing food distribution, ensuring physical health safety at school, providing socio-emotional support to students, teachers and caregivers (Urick et al., 2021). Given an abrupt shift from 'usual' to 'new normal' in the school education system, school leaders' volume of job responsibilities and stress increased tremendously. School leaders in Bangladesh faced considerable challenges since they had no preparedness, knowledge, skills, or training in school crisis management. Critical events impact adversely on the physical, mental, and psychological health of the school community and thus deregulate the academic activities of teachers and students and affect the school climate (Brock et al., 2008; Felix et al., 2010; Hatzichristiou et al., 2011; Heath et al., 2005; Starr, 2012). The World Bank, the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) provided suggestions for recovery prioritizing three issues: bringing all children back to schools safely, recovering learning losses, and preparing and supporting teachers (Ahmed, 2022). School leaders' readiness to cope with further crises appears essential in such a predicament. By exploring the participants' lived experiences during the pandemic crisis, this study aims to contribute to the emerging literature on school leadership practices during COVID-19. Additionally, given the unpredictability regarding the durability of the pandemic in different countries, leaders across the globe might find meaningful leadership messages from this study that might be helpful and actionable to confront identical crises in the future (Charumilind et al., 2022). Exploring school leadership roles and strategies in crisis management might contribute to the literature on crisis leadership in educational settings during a crisis.

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To investigate the challenges encountered and the leadership practices of secondary school leaders to confront organizational crisis during a disruptive time, this study focuses on the following research questions:

1. What challenges and complications did secondary school leaders encounter in leading the school during the COVID-19 crisis?

2. How did the school leaders withstand the challenges during the COVID-19 crisis which informs crisis leadership for confronting school crises in the future?

Literature Review

Crisis leadership is a process in which leaders act to prepare for the occurrence of unexpected crises, deal with salient implications of the crisis, and grow from the disruptive experience of crisis (Firestone, 2020). Again, Crisis management (CM) is known as the art of removing risks and uncertainty to allow institutions to achieve goals (Fink, 1986). Effective crisis management can save lives, protect infrastructure, and restore trust in public institutions (Firestone, 2020). The idea of crisis leadership was rooted in crisis management research. As a theoretical and research idea, crisis leadership has not received noticeable attention from researchers in the arena of education and it remains relatively under-researched. Investigating how school leaders dealt with crisis management during the pandemic is significant. Very few scholars studied crisis leadership to illustrate how educational leaders confront a threatening and unprecedented event that demands consistent attention (Urick et al., 2021).

Drawing on adaptive system theory, a recent qualitative study conducted by Williams and Liou (2024) explored school leaders' perspectives on crisis leadership roles and their competencies to manage a crisis. The three principal leadership roles included agile decision-maker, influencer, and coordinator which supported the school leaders in reshaping their perception of crisis leadership, and the competencies explained their actions in crisis. A difference is noticed in the study of Othman et al. (2024) that explored four leadership practices of school leaders during the COVID-19 crisis: (a) providing guidance and direction; (b) inspiring and empowering; (c) collaborative problem-solving and decision-making; (d) adopting a service-oriented approach. The findings highlight the critical importance of strategic problem-solving and decision-making in overcoming challenges and provide valuable insights for school leaders and policymakers seeking to enhance leadership effectiveness in crisis management.

Again, American researchers McLeod and Dulsky (2021) explored the findings from interviews of 43 school leaders internationally on their responses to adversity during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings contributed to the research literature on crisis leadership and have potential implications for school leaders' future behavior, mindsets, and support structures in times of crisis. Another qualitative study by the American researchers Reyes-Guerra et al. (2021) captured the leadership experiences of 9 principals in Florida, USA during the COVID-19 crisis. The study framework was constituted by crisis leadership, transformative leadership, and social capital. The study found that the participants led with flexibility, creativity, and care and showed resilience under pressure, and they drew on their schools' strengths, and teachers' expertise, and made inter-school connections.

On the other hand, a UK-wide study conducted by Beauchamp et al. (2021) focused on headteachers' perspectives on leadership and management in the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants encountered multiple predicaments and situational ambiguities with resilience. They expressed how they had developed pragmatic and flexible approaches to communication with parents, pupils, staff, and a range of external agencies, all of whom were facing extraordinary circumstances with varying degrees of resilience. The study concluded by conceptualizing the key elements of headteachers' leadership and management, both inside and outside the school, during the initial stages of the crisis. In a different context, Australian scholar Longmuir's (2023) study revealed that the participants emphasized

the role of the COVID-19 pandemic in strengthening community relationships, the significance of clarity and frequency in negotiation, the necessity for compassion and care, and the potential for important transformation and changes in confrontation with the crisis.

Thus, in diverse contexts, the research studies explored multidimensional challenges and unique strategies applied by school leaders to address the situational crisis of the pandemic. However, a significant gap in the literature is noticeable regarding the school leaders' emergent leadership style during the COVID-19 crisis. Moreover, studies on crisis leadership are scarce in the Asian context, noticeably in Bangladesh. This study is an attempt to further the existing literature and address the gap in the literature on crisis leadership and crisis management. Additionally, this study attempts to make a bridge between school leadership and crisis management. By addressing this gap, the proposed research study might have potential significance for educational leaders and other stakeholders in the country and those tasked with the crisis worldwide.

Methodology

Research Design

The research design of this study began with a comprehensive literature review to understand school leaders' challenges during the pandemic crisis. The literature review bears theoretical and methodological implications and contributes to the research design of the study. It contributed to establishing the theory that would inform the development of the study, participant selection, interview protocol, data analysis, and the other components of the study.

Sample

This study used a purposeful sampling of eight headteachers from targeted secondary schools in Bangladesh. Participants were selected from the public and private secondary schools of Dhaka district. The researcher went through her professional and personal networks to identify them. To maintain gender balance, of the participants were four male and four female headteachers. All the participants were interviewed based on their availability and convenience. Each of them took part in the in-depth interview for 30-40 minutes.

Table 1. Profile of the participants

Name of participant	Age	Gender	Degree	Working Place	Experience
Headteacher 1	52 years	Female	Master of Arts	Public high school	23 years
Headteacher 2	45 years	Female	MSS, M Phil	Public high school	17 years
Headteacher 3	50 years	Male	MSC, M Ed	Private high school	20 years
Headteacher 4	47 years	Male	Master of Arts	Public high school	18 years
Headteacher 5	53 years	Female	MSC	Private high school	27 years
Headteacher 6	55 years	Male	BA, B. ED	Private high school	26 years
Headteacher 7	46 years	Female	MSC	Public High School	16 years
Headteacher 8	52 years	Male	BSC, B.ED	Private high school	20 years

Data Collection

In-depth interview was used as a research instrument to collect data. The interview protocol consisted of fifteen semi-structured questions. Each of the participants was interviewed once and the time ranged from 30 to 40 minutes. The interviews were conducted in person and audio recorded which was transcribed. The participants answered in Bengali which the researcher translated into English in the transcript. Interviews were conducted in an informal conversational style rather than in a scripted style. According to Mishler (1991), an interview is not only a means of social interaction between a researcher and participants but also a vehicle for the communication of meaning during the conversations, which establish "a mutual understanding of interview questions and responses" (p.19). The interviews were considerably inspiring, and the participants provided me with very rich data to address my research questions.

Credibility

According to Trochim and Donnelly (2006), credibility is measured by the level of participants' concord with the research result. To ensure the credibility of the findings the member checking strategy was applied. The researcher shared the study findings with all the participants to ensure the accuracy and resonance with their experiences.

Analyzing of Data

Braun and Clark's (2006) framework of 'thematic analysis' was used to analyze collected data. Thematic analysis' focuses on the experiences, meaning, and realities of research participants, and also attempts to "theorize the significance of the patterns and their broader meanings and implications" (Braun & Clark, 2006, p. 84). The six-step framework includes (a) familiarising with data, (b) generating initial codes, (c) searching for themes, (d) reviewing themes, (e) defining and naming themes, and (f) producing the report. The data from the interviews were analyzed following the six subsequent

steps. In the codification process, the data from the interviews were examined to identify common ideas and experiences of the participants for each of the research questions. After the identification, the common ideas and experiences were condensed into some codes. Later, these codes were minimized and grouped into major themes.

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Conceptual Framework

A measurement model of crisis leadership (Balasubramanian & Fernandes, 2022) that comprises seven constructs (compassion and care, openness and communication, adaptiveness, resilience and courage, decisiveness, consultation and collaboration, and empowerment) was applied to investigate the crisis leadership practices of the eight participants in this study. The data collected from the participants had been guided by this model. The crisis leadership model proposed by Balasubramanian and Fernandes (2022) has been found effective, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic that posed unprecedented multifaceted challenges for school leaders. The seven constructs collectively form a comprehensive framework for assessing crisis leadership.
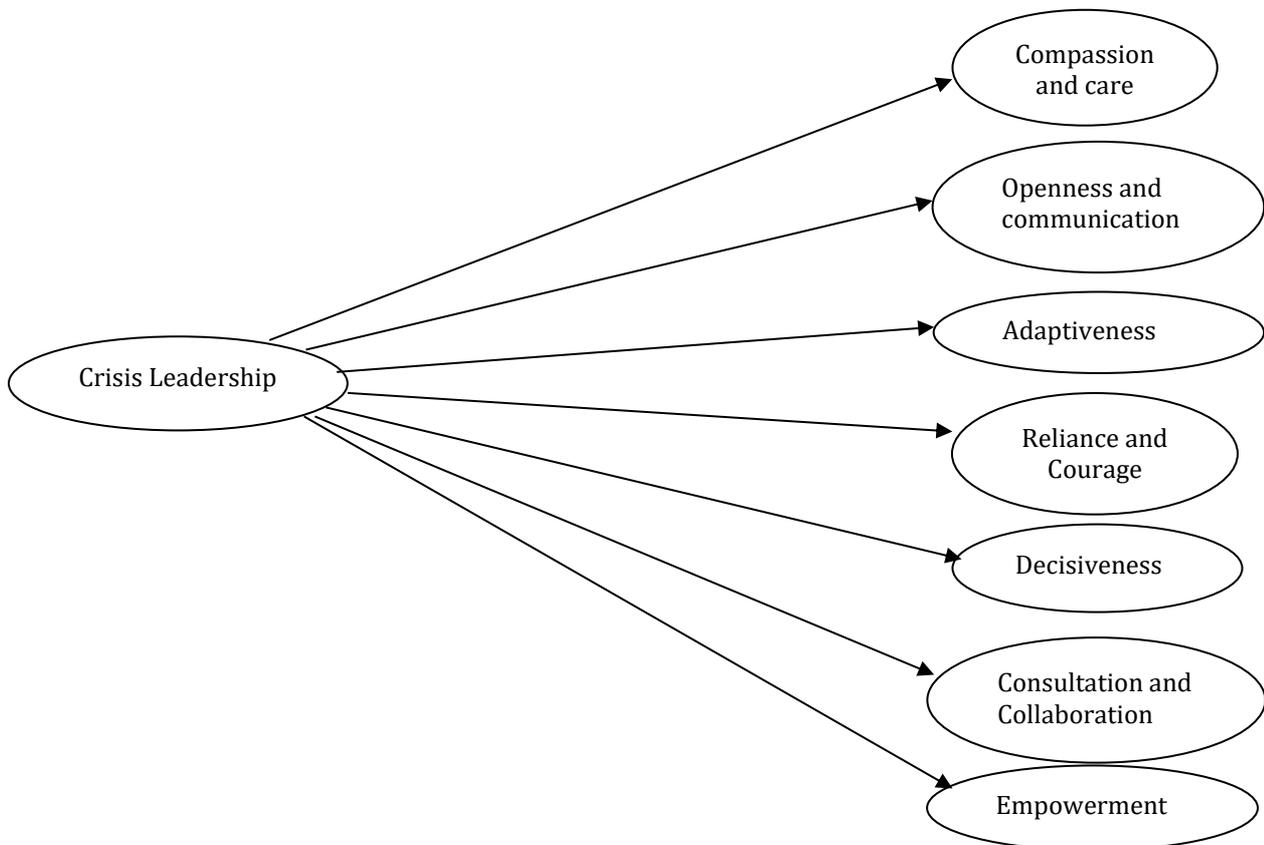
Figure 1. Crisis Leadership Measurement Model (Balasubramanian & Fernandes, 2022)

Table 2. Constructs of Crisis Leadership Measurement Model (Balasubramanian & Fernandes, 2022)

Constructs	Items of the construct
Compassion and Care	Leader being an active listener to employees' concerns during the crisis
	Leaders' being empathetic to employees' concerns
	Leaders' decisions centered on employees' needs and concerns
	Employees' expressions of their concerns are encouraged
Openness and Communication	Employees being informed regularly of the crisis
	Leaders' demonstration of transparency extensively
Adaptiveness	Leaders' ability to assess the evolving/ changing crisis and set priorities
	Bringing drastic organizational changes to overcome the crisis
	Attempt of new and unconventional measures to overcome the crisis

Table 2. Continued

Constructs	Items of the construct
Resilience and Courage	Ability to deal with crisis-induced stress
	Ability to get bounced back from the setbacks faced during the crisis
	Demonstration of courage in dealing with the crisis
	Shouldering the responsibility/accountability for the crisis
Decisiveness	Being resolute in decision making
	Demonstration of a sense of urgency in dealing with crisis
	Ability to make quick decision
	Providing clear directions for employees to deal with crisis
	Having clear expectations from the employees in a crisis
Consultation and Collaboration	Consultation with others in decision-making during a crisis
	Relying on internal specialists/ experts to navigate a crisis
	Relying on external specialists/ experts to navigate a crisis
Empowerment	Encouraging creativity/ innovativeness of employees during a crisis
	Flexibility about employees' freedom/ independence to handle a crisis
	Ensure recognition of employees' contribution during a crisis

Findings

Following the codification process of thematic analysis, the data from the interviews were examined to identify common ideas and experiences of the participants for each of the research questions that were condensed into some codes. Later, these codes were minimized and grouped into different subthemes which were examined in light of the theoretical framework of the Crisis Leadership Measurement Model (Balasubramanian & Fernandes, 2022) to find out the main themes. The main themes were then explained with the support of excerpts from the data sources. The relevance to theory was a concern for research question 2.

Research Question 1: What challenges did secondary school leaders encounter in leading the school during the COVID-19 crisis?

The first question focused on understanding the leaders' major challenges during the pandemic. The participants reflected on their lived experiences and the thematic analysis of the data elicited several major themes:

Table 3. School leaders' major challenges during the pandemic

Major themes	Codes
Lack of Readiness for the Unprecedented Crisis	School leaders' lack of training in crisis management
	Teachers' lack of preparation for online classes
	infrastructural limitations for digital education
	Having no preconception of the pandemic crisis
	Lack of uninterrupted internet connection
	School closure
Financial Problem	Insufficient government fund allocation
	Socio-economically disadvantaged students
	Needy teachers and staff members
	Insufficient tuition fee collection from students
Academic Challenges	Untrained teachers
	Drop-out of students
	Limitations in school infrastructure for online teaching
	Prolonged School closure
	Learning loss of students
Mental Health and Psychological Crisis of School Members	Anxiety, stress, and fear of health
	Lack of communication
	Death of students and family members
	Financial crisis
	Physical and psychological isolation
Issue of Equality in Access and Social Justice	Equality of access to education not ensured
	Less access to the internet
	Discrimination in educational opportunity
	Drop-out of poor students

Lack of Readiness for the Unprecedented Crisis

Research findings demonstrate that all the participants encountered considerable challenges in organizational management and ensuring a positive school climate with physical and psychological safety. At the initial stage of the pandemic, headteachers were bound to follow a new form of policy enactment that prioritized students' welfare and involved moral and ethical decision-making within the limited resources and local priorities. Most of the schools did not have adequate infrastructural support to implement the government's decision. Headteacher 7 reported that the governmental decision to take online classes appeared as a new idea for which they had no preparedness. He said, "My teacher had no training in online teaching, they started without any preparation. Some of my teachers were not using smartphones, let alone personal laptops. I couldn't understand it and it took time to realize what to do" (Headteacher 7).

The abruptness of the crisis was reported by Headmaster 5, "It came suddenly. Schools were declared to be closed by the government on 17th March 2020. I was in a fix as it was a matter of 2000 students in my school. It was an utter confusion for all of us" (Headmaster 5).

Again headteacher 3 said, "Not only me, but all the headteachers were in an utter dilemma. We were in a lockdown for an unlimited time. We had no plan or preparation since we had never faced it. We were waiting for the govt decision to move." Moreover, headteacher 4 reported about his confused steps in times of crisis:

After the government declaration of taking online classes, I was confused about the way of implementing it. My school is located in an industrial area where most of the students are from industry workers' families. They can barely maintain internet service for online classes. I had to make a mind map collaborating with my staff members and managing committee members. I thought of plan A plan B plan C etc. without being definite and confident. (Headteacher 4)

Thus, the participants expressed their frustration and feeling of uncertainty regarding the absence of a steady action plan from the government. They emphasized robust guidelines and training facilities to boost their readiness for decision-making about crisis management in organizations.

Financial Problem

Study findings explored that though teachers and staff members in government-funded schools could receive their monthly salaries in due time, teachers and staff members from Non-MPO (teachers and employees of non-government educational institutions who are not included in the Monthly Pay Order or MPO scheme). schools had to face substantial financial hardship primarily due to insufficient funds which were usually extracted from students' tuition fees. They could not collect students' tuition fees on time since a considerable number of students dropped out, and their parents left the city jobless. These issues adversely impacted school leaders' decision to cut off teachers' incentives, festival bonuses, and other allowances which eventually resulted in staff's professional demotivation and a decline in living status.

Though we received salaries timely, I faced a funding crisis for providing infrastructural support to arrange online teaching in school. My school did not have sufficient laptops, a projector, or a microphone to operate smooth teaching-learning activities. Moreover, we collectively raised funds to help the needy guardians since they lost their jobs due to the lockdown. (Headteacher 7)

Another Headteacher from a private school reported her financial challenges," Only twenty-nine teachers are receiving government benefits and thirty-one (31) are non-MPO (teachers and employees of non-government educational institutions who are not included in the Monthly Pay Order or MPO scheme). I had to struggle to manage 31 teachers' salaries since students' tuition fees could not be collected on time for their absence. Parents could not be contacted" (Headteacher 5).

Again, another Headteacher informed the researcher about the inadequacy of government help and the financial challenges that the school community encountered "Government help was insufficient. I could not provide my staff with the incentives for two years" (Headteacher 8).

School funds and internal resources were not sufficient to manage staff salaries. During the pandemic, we had to buy health-safety goods, which required additional expenses. In addition, donations from different sources stopped. I sought help from a local councilor and an NGO. An NGO named 'Plan' provided some health safety goods (soap, sanitizer, basin, mask, etc) which helped us considerably. (Headteacher 3)

Thus, the study found that Non-MPO school headteachers encountered considerable fund limitations in the smooth operation of school functions, academic and administrative as well and this resulted in their psychological stress and agony that impacted their physical and mental wellbeing during the crisis period. On the contrary, headteachers from public schools reported their experiences of lack of financial and administrative autonomy in school management during the disruptive time.

Academic Challenges

Investigation in the study explored that school leaders both from private and public high schools had to encounter multiple challenges in ensuring coherent academic activities. For example, headteacher 1 from a public high school reported that:

On the 18th day after the school closure, the Minister of Education declared to start online classes in schools. I never heard about online classes, so, it was too confusing. In the early period, we did not know about ZOOM or Google MEET platform, these came later. I discussed this with my teachers initially and they were not motivated but felt compelled to follow government order (Headteacher 1).

Managing the teachers and staff members became a considerable challenge for some of the headteachers in the study. "Some of my teachers living in remote areas could not come for lockdown. I bought whiteboards for my teachers to take classes from home. We had a limited budget barely enough to buy an adequate number of laptops "(Headteacher 7). The pandemic hampers students' academic achievement noticeably. Schools could not conduct examinations for safety issues. As the Headteacher 2 said:

Students were allowed to complete worksheets from home and this indulged some students. Their parents were not educated and conscious and thus we somehow failed to ensure proper monitoring of students' performances. Moreover, the Ministry of Education decided to concise syllabus and provide students with auto-promoted which caused learning loss to a greater extent. (Headteacher 2)

Again Headteachers 3 and 5 reported the challenge regarding the disadvantaged students in their schools who dropped out of school education and got demoralized during the pandemic:

My school is in an industrial area and many students were from industry workers family. School closure due to COVID-19 caused many of my students to become demoralized. Lack of involvement in academic activities, and isolation from teachers and friends let them get indulged. We did not have much to care about in this regard. Many dropped out, and we got the news that some of our female students were married off during this pandemic time. (Headteacher 3)

Most of my students are from lower-middle-class families and have only one mobile phone belonging to their father. Since their fathers worked outside, students couldn't avail themselves of online classes conducted in the daytime. Teachers took classes at night just to ensure students' attendance, but still, the number of attendees was not satisfactory. (Headteacher 5)

Thus, school leaders had to undergo major challenges associated with online teaching to keep academic functions operational during the pandemic. Lack of suitable school infrastructure, technological devices, inaccessibility to uninterrupted internet facilities, teachers' incompetencies in digital teaching methods, students' lack of motivation in online learning from home, lack of parental care and support, inability to monitor and assess students' learning outcome, dropout of students from school, students' demoralization appeared as major issues. The absence of unified guidelines from the government intensified school leaders' ambiguities and challenges in maintaining coherent academic functions.

Mental Health and Psychological Crisis of School Members

During the pandemic, the mental health of the school leaders and others around them was explored as a crucial factor experienced by the participants. The participants' experiences of identical problems were revealed during the interviews.

We did never undergo such a critical time. Coronavirus infected our mental health besides our physical health. One of my staff members died and we all were broken, terrified, and frustrated. There is no certainty about our healthy state of being. News of innumerable deaths around us was terrifying. Nothing went normal. (Headteacher 1)

You know, as the head of the institution, I had to stay positive, courageous, and confident. It was not easy. Every day, thousands of people die, so many are affected. In such a disaster, we had to work constantly. All of my students, teachers, and staff members were frustrated, no one could stay happy. (Headteacher 7)

Thus, the leaders had to strive ceaselessly to minimize the fear and anxieties of others to attend school physically. Lack of proper knowledge and guidelines about health safety contributed to the increased stress level of the school community. School leaders were concerned about the socio-emotional and psychological state of being of their staff members.

Issue of Equality in Access and Social Justice

The deprivation of the vulnerable and underprivileged students was revealed as a major concern of all the participants in this study. Those students eventually ran the risk of getting dropped out of education.

The discrepancies in educational opportunities appeared as a constant concern for the headteachers from both private and public schools in the study." Only 10-15% of students had smartphones to attend online classes. Most of the students did not join online classes, parents did not attend ZOOM meetings and thus we could not convey messages" (Headteacher 2).

We could not make it up. There were many and I did not have government fund allocated for helping the disadvantaged. Those families barely had survival food, let alone smart devices. Students were advised to borrow phones from their neighbors to attend classes only (Headteacher 1).

Due to the inaccessibility to internet facilities, disadvantaged students left school education. Headteacher 3 reported on the learning loss of socially underprivileged students due to the online education method.

In my school, there are records that 15-20% of students left Dhaka city since their fathers became unemployed or lost their business. They could not pay house rent or maintain food and therefore, moved to the village area. It was disappointing that these students did not come back to school after the crisis period. Probably, they left school education forever. (Headteacher 3)

Discrimination in students' socio-economic status consequently leads to the widening of educational differences regarding students' academic achievement. Thus, the pandemic brought the issue of equity of access and social justice before the school leaders and all the participants confessed their inability to ensure equal access and social justice in providing educational opportunities during the pandemic.

2. How did the school leaders withstand the challenges during the COVID-19 crisis that inform crisis leadership to confront school crises in the future?

The second question focused on understanding the strategies and skills the leaders applied to address the crisis during the pandemic. The participants reflected on their lived experiences which have been analyzed in the light of the Crisis Leadership Measurement Model (Balasubramanian & Fernandes, 2022) to identify the attributes of Crisis Leadership practiced by the participants. The seven crisis leadership constructs in the model were used as the priori codes (Table 2) and the major themes elicited from the data analysis were consistent with the constructs. The major themes included:

(a) Compassion and care

(b) Openness and Communication

(c) Adaptiveness

(d) Resilience and Courage

(e) Decisiveness

(f) Consultation and Collaboration

(g) Empowerment

Compassion and Care

Crisis leadership is required to pay heed to employees' concerns and show empathy for them (Balasubramanian & Fernandes, 2022). Accordingly, school leaders are empathetic to school members' crises and take the initiative to address their concerns. "Every member of my school community was important to me, trust me. When I would get information about any students' illnesses, such as their fever and cold, I panicked since fever at that time was the most terrifying" (Headteacher 3). Headteachers 5 and 6 were found to care for their teachers and staff considerably. They said:

As I told you, I spend 50% of students' tuition fees to provide salaries to my non-MPO teachers. I was having serious concerns for my 31 non-MPO teachers who do not receive any government salary. Since COVID-19 isolated students from school, their tuition fee collection was not satisfactory. I raised funds from capable teachers, the local council, and Ex-students who live in foreign countries to help my distressed teachers and staff members. (Headteacher 5)

I came to school every day. I had the concern for office staff who had to come for school administrative and financial purposes. If I can't overcome fear, how can I expect that other teachers and staff will come? By God, I was not infected. (Headteacher 6)

Again headteacher 8 reported on the school initiatives taken to address the financial issues of the students' parents during the pandemic crisis:

Many of our students' guardians became jobless during the pandemic crisis. They could not buy food, or pay their house rent. They came to me. I could not escape my responsibilities since they belong to my school community. I formed a committee to collect money to help the disadvantaged guardians. (Headteacher 8)

Thus, the school leaders' diverse initiatives for the disadvantaged reflected their empathy, concerns, and decisions addressing the employees' needs which appeared consistent with the 'Compassion and Care' construct in the measurement model.

Openness and Communication

All the participants reported on their rigorous communication during the crisis to keep schools operational. Headteacher 6 mentioned the privileges of online communication methods that helped the school community stay connected during the crisis:

There was no way other than getting connected with all stakeholders. In the early period, we were not concerned about ZOOM or GOOGLE MEET and so, we used our mobile contact to convey messages. However, since we were introduced to those mediums, we utilized the sources to maintain rigorous communication. We were together as we felt. (Headteacher 6)

Headteacher 5 informed of his effort to ensure communication with the local communities during the crisis period, "Our local community also were connected with us and they helped in different ways. The local hospitals and mosques helped. The local mosque announced the school closure and opening messages" (Headteacher 5).

We received many health safety goods from UNICEF and the 'Save the Children' project for my school. They gave us soap, hand sanitizer, and set basin on the school campus for hand wash, a face mask, a temperature measuring machine, etc. I concerned all the governing body members and tried to utilize these properly (Headteacher 1).

Thus, all the leaders appeared transparent in their actions during the crisis and stayed connected with the school community throughout the crisis which align with the construct 'Openness and Communication' in the model.

Adaptiveness

In this study, adaptiveness indicates the skill to adjust to different circumstances. All eight participants focused on their efforts to adapt by coping with the never-experienced crisis and situational ambiguities in their respective organizations. Headteacher 2 said:

I started online classes in my school ahead of the governmental declaration. You know, necessity is the mother of invention. We did never think of this type of teaching system but the situation made us creative and it worked as an alternative to manage the situation. Our initiatives became exemplary for other schools in my area. (Headteacher 2)

Headteacher 7 stated about the alternative academic method of assessing learners' learning outcomes. During the pandemic, the Ministry of Education monitored the schools' activities regarding assignments:

During the pandemic, we could not take exams since they could not attend school in person. However, we found an alternative method of assessing students' learning. We gave them the assignment to prepare and submit to school. Though this system could not ensure all students' sincerity satisfactorily, it stood as an alternative to run the system of assessment. (Headteacher 7)

On the other hand, Headteacher 5 from a private school reported, "Our classroom size was not large enough to accommodate students maintaining health safety and social distance. I managed to take classes in my school field and thus maintained the social distance of the learners" (Headteacher 5).

In this way, the leaders' report indicated their effort to cope with the situational ambiguities and being innovative to address the challenges. Not only leaders but also teachers were reported to be innovative in their application of pedagogical strategies in the changed situation. Therefore, school leaders' noticeable organizational changes and attempts at new and unconventional measures to overcome the crisis align with the construct of 'Adaptiveness'.

Resilience and Courage

According to the Crisis leadership Model, crisis leadership possesses resilience and courage providing that leaders have the potential to handle stress, bounce back from setbacks during a crisis, stay courageous, and shoulder the responsibility for the crisis. School leaders in this study demonstrated courage to stand against the crisis though the level of confidence and courage appeared different. Of all, headteacher 5 from a private school proved to be more self-confident and responsible in dealing with the crisis. She said:

I trusted myself with my courage and strong willpower to overcome the crisis. My religious belief strengthens me within. I decided to attend the school daily. I used to come in the afternoon when no one was attending. I was taking care of the belongings of my school. We had laptops and other necessary things and we needed to keep them safe. (Headteacher 5)

Again, Headteacher 1 from a public school shared her experience of being resilient during the crisis, She said, "I visited the hospital to attend to one of my colleagues affected by the Coronavirus. My family members refrained me from going to the hospital but I stood on my responsibility which I could not ignore as the headteacher" (Headteacher 1). Besides, headteacher 8 expressed the ways how he handled the financial issues of school members staying strong. He reported:

In my school, we faced financial crises noticeably. I could not manage to provide staff members including teachers with monthly salaries in time since the tuition fees collection was not good. However, I needed to communicate with all

Governing Body members to decide about fundraising. We categorized the needy teachers and staff members and provided financial support. (Headteacher 8)

Thus, school leaders' demonstration of resilience and courage is consistent with the crisis leadership measurement model by Balasubramanian and Fernandes (2022).

Decisiveness

Decisiveness, according to the model suggests the situation when leaders are not hesitant in making difficult decisions in crisis, demonstrate a sense of urgency in dealing with a crisis, make quick decisions, provide clear instructions, and have clear expectations from the employees. Accordingly, participants in this study expressed their decisiveness by making quick decisions as required in the crisis. Headteacher 2 appeared to be quicker and more resolute in making decisions ; she reported: "I started online classes in my school ahead of the governmental declaration. When I saw students sitting idle at home, I did not waste time and instructed my teachers to conduct online classes" (Headteacher 2). Again, headteacher 8 reported:

In February 2021, the government declared for school reopening. There was no further specific instruction on how to conduct classes while maintaining the health and safety of all. We decided to conduct a class with 15 students in a classroom where each would sit on a single bench. (Headteacher 8)

Headteacher 5, who was found to be more proactive during the interview reported on her decisiveness in addressing the situational crisis:

We could not manage to buy sufficient materials for health safety. I along with my staff members decided to seek help from the nearby hospital and it worked well. We received help from the hospital that provided us with soap, masks, and sanitizers, and additionally, our infected staff members or guardians received hospital service at a reduced price. (Headteacher 5)

Though at different levels, all the participants had to make instant decisions to navigate through the crisis. Headteacher 6 reported: "I involved parents, teachers, and the local community sometimes to come to a decision. ZOOM platform helped us to get connected always. This online networking was a blessing at that time" (Headteacher 6). Thus, participants demonstrated decisiveness at different levels in this study.

Thus, all the school leaders' abilities to make quick decisions, and direct their employees with clear directions appeared consistent with the construct 'decisiveness' in the model.

Consultation and Collaboration

Crisis leadership requires ensuring rigorous consultation with school members and relying on internal and external subject specialists to handle the crisis. The participants were found to ensure consultation with the school community rigorously. However, all of them were not found to rely on external subject experts to confront the crisis though they relied on their internal subject expert teachers. For example, headteacher 3 stated, "Very often I conducted meetings with our stakeholders because I could not move alone even for a single decision in a crisis. For vital issues, I needed to consult with my stakeholders." Again, Headteacher 6 said:

It will surprise you; we took help from the local community and the mosques during the Coronavirus crisis. The Mosque Imam (the chief of a mosque) helped by announcing the school's message to the students and their parents. They were expected to come and collect examination papers to take to their homes. (Headteacher 6)

The online communication platforms helped the leaders to continue their collaboration with the school members. Similarly, headteacher 8 informed, "I conducted rigorous ZOOM meetings with my colleagues and other staff members separately. Usually, we have monthly academic council meetings, meeting with administrative members and parents" (Headteacher 8).

All the school leaders were responsible for negotiation with the Ministry of Education or the Directorates since they had to follow the newer instructions during the pandemic. Headteacher 5 reported, "We always had concerns about DSHE (The Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education) instructions for teaching-learning during the pandemic. I had to make constant negotiations with the DSHE authority since it followed up the schools' academic activities during the crisis" (Headteacher 5).

Again, leaders' collaboration with different national and international organizations contributed to their crisis management. Besides government grants, several non-government organization (NGO) rendered help and support to the schools during the pandemic.

You know, the government fund is good in public schools but not my school. Teachers get their salary timely but my school does not receive any govt funds. We were in crisis. I sought help from a local NGO named 'Plan' and it helped significantly. Moreover, I received help and support from UNICEF. In crisis time 'Plan' provided my school with teachers for temporary times since we had a scarcity of teachers. (Headteacher 3)

Thus, the participants' consultation with others in decision-making, relying on external sources to navigate the crisis, resonates with the construct 'Consultation and Collaboration'.

Empowerment

Crisis leadership requires encouraging employees' creativity, allowing them freedom, and recognizing their contribution to handling the crisis. None of the school leaders in this study was found autocratic; rather, they set the teachers at liberty to think and act on their own regarding their pedagogical approach to involve students in online classes throughout the pandemic. Headteacher 3 said, "Though teachers in our country do not exercise autonomy in making decisions, during the pandemic, my teachers worked on their own. They were innovative and managed the situation to attract students."

Teachers' innovative approaches to teaching pedagogy were appreciated by all the headteachers in this study. Headteacher 1 said, "My teacher staff had to plan, organize, and implement their teaching strategy in the unknown world. They did and sometimes I wondered" (Headteacher 1).

Again Headteacher 4 reported, "I distributed the tasks among my fellow teachers and set them free to decide. I sometimes got confused and my teachers provided their suggestions." Similarly, Headteacher 7 said,

Probably, you never heard of what we have done. Our teachers selected several mothers who were educated and assigned them to teach other students at our school living in the same locality. This method helped us a lot to reach those students who could not attend online classes due to their inaccessibility to the internet or smart devices. Those mothers felt free to do for us and we were grateful. (Headteacher 7)

Thus, the study found that the participants encouraged and gave the teachers freedom and appreciated their contribution. They were found to inform the higher authorities of the teachers' innovative contributions to address the crises as well.

Discussions

Major Challenges Encountered by the School Leaders During the Crisis

COVID-19 appeared as a crisis that necessitated prioritization and prompt response to ensure effective school crisis management (Chatzipanagiotou & Katsarou, 2023). The major challenges the school leaders encountered during the pandemic period prioritize a planned and immediate response to ensure effective leading with a motivation to provide uninterrupted educational services, ensuring equity and social justice. However, the leaders exhibited minimal preparedness to encounter the uncertainties associated with the pandemic. All eight school leaders expressed their individual, organizational, and governmental unpreparedness for the crisis. The leaders' incapabilities to address the uncertainties coupled with a lack of planning for the health pandemic were reported similarly by Turkish school principals in the study of Erol and Altunay (2022). They all emphasized organizing relevant crisis management training from the state education authority.

The crucial challenges in operating smooth academic activities faced by the leaders include (a) lack of teachers' training on digital teaching, (b) students' inaccessibility to smart devices and uninterrupted internet facilities, (c) inadequate school infrastructure for digital teaching-learning, (d) drop out of students, (e) lack of teachers' and parental monitoring of students' learning outcome, (f) lack of proper assessment and evaluation. Both public and most private schools suffer from the paucity of funds for proper infrastructural and teaching learning materials (Ahmed, 2022). The lack of appropriate instruction about class time in case of distance learning resulting from teachers' inadequate skills and familiarity with ICT equipment and also students' inability to manage smart devices with internet connection contributed to the dissatisfactory consequences of digital education in Bangladesh. A similar situation has been explored in a study by Constantia et al. (2021).

Lack of funds constitutes another vital challenge encountered by the school leaders in this study. Similar to the study (Brion & Kiral, 2021) school leaders search for an alternative means of managing finances for the staff members. The lack of government funds for the public as well as private schools, posed considerable difficulties in managing staff members' salaries, infrastructural support for digital teaching, and buying adequate health safety goods. Additionally, the head teachers from the private schools encountered this problem more intensely because of the insufficient students' tuition fee collection. A study by Neelakantan et al. (2022) in the context of India found a substantial fund crisis reported by the school leaders and this limitation impacted adversely on the leaders' decisions about pay cuts which resulted in staff' demotivation and dissatisfaction.

The study result demonstrates that the leaders' challenges intensified with the additional task of providing mental and psychological support to the members of the schools due to the uncertainties of the time associated with the pandemic attack (Chatzipanagiotou & Katsarou, 2023). As reported by most of the participants, many of their staff members were distressed out of their fear, anxiety, and feelings of uncertainty. School leaders appeared to be the principal source of mental and emotional support for their school members during the pandemic through their processing of the anxiety and stress of the pandemic (Bogans et al., 2022). However, the leaders themselves had to confront their agonies and stress in

de-escalating staff' and parents' fear and supporting students' economic and health-related problems (Chatzipanagiotou & Katsarou, 2023).

The issue of equality of access and social justice was explored as a vital challenge for public and private school leaders in this study. Similarly, as Chatzipanagiotou and Katsarou (2023) mentioned "The exacerbated unequal power relations afflicting marginalized student minorities due to their limited access to online education also emerged prominently in principals' narratives as a constant source of concern" (P. 14). The disadvantaged state of students affecting their access to digital education in Turkey inevitably led to the widening the educational disparities regarding academic performances throughout the pandemic (Kavrayici & Kesim, 2021). In Norwegian schools, students with special needs had to bear the risk of abuse and neglect at home which affected their academic performances (Betancur, 2022). Headteachers were found to take the initiative for fundraising to help their disadvantaged guardians as well as teachers. However, these measures could not ensure equal access of students to education and the school leaders' frustration regarding their failure in the concern was conspicuous.

Leadership Practices of the School Leaders During the Crisis

The COVID-19 crisis appeared as a global disaster impacting detrimentally not only human health but also their mental, emotional, and psychological state of being. School leaders in this study were found to be responsive to the physical, emotional, social, and psychological needs of the school members by exercising empathy, care, and fellow feeling. They were found to report their attempts to be connected with the school community with a feeling of togetherness during the critical period. The school leaders played the role of caretaker for their students, teachers, parents, and staff members addressing their socio-psychological needs and thus their role of 'caring for individuals' was shifted to 'caring for the community' (Mutch, 2018)

Collaboration and networking among the stakeholders of a school are considered a significant component of a leadership crisis (LaRoe & Corrales, 2019). Communication and networking were embraced extensively by the school leaders in this study as an alternative way to alleviate the psychological alienation of teachers and staff members caused by the pandemic crisis. When a school community is inspired by a strong collaborative bond, reciprocity, and mutual trustworthiness, school leaders were found to be more resilient against the situational ambiguities of the COVID-19 crisis since they relied on the mobilization of the skill, knowledge, and strength of the school members (Neelakantan et al., 2022).

Resilience in school leadership practice has been reported as a significant determinant of leadership strategy based on planning, concrete actions, coordination, management process, and the choice of practices appropriate to the context of the pandemic (Harahap et al., 2022). Eight of the participants expressed their endeavors at different levels to cope with the organizational crisis. Building teamwork with a sense of connectedness with the school community has been considered a vital aspect of school resilience (Kavrayici & Kesim, 2021). School leaders in this study were found to maintain strong connectedness with the school community through digital communication methods. Leaders' positive influence motivated staff members to feel a sense of belonging and togetherness which contributed to the enhancement of a positive school culture (Kusumi et al., 2023).

Decisiveness is significant for leadership during a crisis to act promptly (Forster et al., 2020). School leaders in this study appeared to collaborate with school members. However, they reported their confusion and anxieties regarding the ambiguities of governmental decisions about managing class schedules and taking assessments to measure students' performances. Study findings of Othman et al., (2024) highlighted the critical importance of leaders' strategic problem-solving and decision-making in overcoming challenges faced by schools. Another study conducted by Caringal-Go et al. (2021) revealed that leaders' decisiveness received employee support since they needed to act quickly and demonstrate a sense of urgency to withstand the abrupt crisis posed by the pandemic. Similarly, school leaders were found to be decisive in this study in addressing abrupt crises throughout the pandemic regarding teachers' financial crises or issues of ICT equipment when meeting with school members was not possible.

The school leaders invested in strengthening interpersonal relations and collective trust with the school community to achieve organizational goals and stability during the crisis (Lien et al., 2023). Investment in interpersonal relationships turns into social capital (Glanville & Bienenstock, 2009), and "there are three components- network structure, trust and reciprocity, and resources- common to definitions of social capital" (Glanville & Bienenstock, 2009, p. 1508). The conception of social capital, according to Bourdieu (1986), is centered on the idea that social and personal capital develops when the existing and potential resources are lifted by the individual, and it springs from the network of interpersonal and organizational relationships. The data from the interviews projects on the leaders' effort to maintain interconnectedness with school communities based on their mutual trust, help, and collaboration during the crisis.

Most of the participants in this study delegated power and responsibilities to the teachers during the pandemic. Teachers also proved innovative in their teaching pedagogy to improve students' engagement in online classes. However, the leaders' opinions in the interviews echoed the essentiality of providing teachers with training to enhance their professional competence and technological skills. Again, the recognition and encouragement of employees' good work, ethical values, and satisfactory behavior during crisis time appeared important since it generated a feeling of importance

among them which made them optimistic and positive (Balasubramanian & Fernandes, 2022). Study findings support that leaders need to ensure employees' empowerment with freedom, autonomy, and flexibility in work in a corporation with the recognition and appreciation of their contributions (Dirani et al., 2020; Stoller, 2020).

Conclusion

A famous say by Winston Churchill, "Never let a good crisis go to waste". Churchill's suggestion probably resonates with what the participants realized from their struggle to cope with the pandemic as they opined that the COVID-19 crisis not only took from us but also conveyed actionable messages. This study stands unique with the exploration of the emergent crisis leadership characteristics among school leaders and its emphasis on ensuring equity and social justice in education. This study also implies the necessity of preparing our school leaders to confront any further compound, unpredictable, and unfamiliar crises. No textbook can offer instructions on what to do in this regard (Reyes-Guerra et al., 2021). They are required to develop the capacity to establish strong relationships, and a collaborative school culture and demonstrate courage and resilience to confront identical crises in schools, ensuring equity and social justice in education. Given the disruption in school education posed by COVID-19, school leaders' preparedness appears no more an option, but an emergency.

Recommendations

The study findings contribute to understanding the theoretical and practical implications of crisis leadership practices in the secondary school context in Bangladesh. Theoretically, this study is consistent with 'the crisis leadership model' proposed by Balasubramanian and Fernandes (2022), but it identified the absence of 'inclusiveness' in 'the crisis leadership model' and thus it brings the proposition of the addition of "Equity and Social justice' in the existing framework.

Additionally, for school leaders, researchers, and education policymakers, this study proposes policy-level reformations in school leadership training on crisis management to develop leaders' competence for managing risk effectively and maximizing risk-reduction actions required during critical times. Further empirical research on school leaders' resilience toward ensuring equity and social justice in crisis is recommended.

Limitations

This study is subject to limitations regarding its sample size and the limited setting. For this, the study recommends future research with a larger sample size from an extended research setting.

Ethics Statements

All the participants were informed of the objectives of the study ahead of obtaining their consent. They were confirmed that their responses would remain completely confidential and their identity would remain anonymous. The researcher used pseudonyms for all the participants. Participants signed informed consent documents.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no potential conflict of interest concerning this research.

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Appendix

Interview Protocol

Research Topic: A Fight to Survive in Crisis: A Qualitative Search of the Secondary School Leadership Practices in Bangladesh During the Pandemic

Name:

Age:

Gender:

Years of Experience:

1. What motivated you to be a school leader?
2. What are the main areas of your organizational management?
3. What is your decision-making process?
4. What challenges did you encounter in addressing students' educational needs during the crisis period?
5. Did you receive any training in crisis management?
6. Did your teachers receive any training on online class management before or after the pandemic?
7. What are the major challenges your students faced during the crisis?

   (Communication Learning material, internet facilities, food, health safety, etc.)
8. How did you address these issues?
9. Was there any crisis in your organizational management at that time?
10. What were the problems faced by your staff members (teachers and others) during the crisis?

    (Communication, internet facilities, health safety, psychology etc.
11. What strategies did you apply to solve these issues?
12. Was there any issues regarding social justice in providing educational and other facilities to the students?
13. How did you protect the underprivileged students?
14. Did you undergo any stress at that time? How did you encounter it?
15. Was there any source of inspiration for you to address all challenges?