

INFLUENCE OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN SCHOOL LEADERSHIP AND CRISIS MANAGEMENT IN THE EDUCATIONAL SECTOR

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Abstract: The Coronavirus (Covid-19) emerged as a health crisis in China, but shortly after it resulted in a global outbreak with severe global economic crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic global outbreak caused disruptions almost in every area: stock market, transport, supply chain, production, increase in shut down of shops and plants, inflation, tourism as well as the education. Extraordinary challenges for the educational systems and school leaders were created by the pandemic. Since march 2020 and 2021 in many countries worldwide the school were closed as part of health measures for physical and social distancing policy. This measurement aimed to protect the students and the teaching staff, but the closure affected the education of more than 1.6 billion school children worldwide. The aim of this paper was to review the published papers with particular focus on primary and secondary school leadership practices in the period 2020-2021 and to investigate the influence of COVID-19 crisis on the Macedonian schools. In our study, 24 school leaders were interviewed, from which 8 were males and 16 were females. The interviewees answered to a semi-structured interview, in which they shared how they managed the education of the students, the consequences of the crisis, the personal and professional growth they experienced as well as what were the lessons-learned from this era. Our findings revealed that the school's leader addressed the threats and challenges associated with the crisis and lockdowns. Majority of the school leaders identified five common key attributes: communication skills, decisive decision making, empathy, flexibility and creative thinking. As major challenges in providing the educational services in primary and secondary school that the school leaders encountered were in first line associated with the e-learning, *i.e.* the technical equipment from both parties (students and teaching staff), funding, followed by the academic challenges during the transition to distance learning and its quality. The alternate strategies and digital education provided opportunity for school leaders to advance their managerial skills and encourage the school community to respond positively to all the changes. Lastly, the school leaders fought to maintain the positive working atmosphere and to encourage the teaching staff, parents and students. After 2021 and slowly continuing with the pre-COVID-19 life, the school leadership have started to set a recovery plan. Further studies are needed in order to overcome the limitations of this study, to deduct more generalizable findings by wider sample, performing multivariant statistical analysis and concluding relationships among investigated variables. The school leaders have managed the educational crisis as a result of the COVID-19 economic crisis in the Macedonian schools, but better reflection and adjusted programs may provide better future response in managing a new crisis in the educational sector in the future.

Keywords: covid-19 pandemic crisis, school leadership, education-crisis management, emotional support

1. INTRODUCTION

As the COVID-19 pandemic continued to spread globally, it caused widespread disruptions in the education system. Educational institutions were among the first to be affected, as governments worldwide implemented lockdowns and social distancing measures to slow down the virus transmission (Wajdi *et al.*, 2020). In the first quartal in 2020, many countries closed the schools and universities that led to an educational crisis of unprecedented scale. According to UNESCO, more than 1.5 billion students in over 190 countries experienced some form of school closure at the height of the pandemic, dramatically altering traditional learning environments. From the studies, the following questions and themes emerged: how school leaders faced with the need of decision-making in emergency, which challenges and issues they encountered and which adaptation they made as well as addressing the future perspectives in context of educational leadership.

The widespread affected the schools in North Macedonia, which were closed on March 10 2020 (UNICEF, 2020). The decision was part of the broader set of measures taken by the government to reduce the virus spread. The closure has affected around 300 000 students across the country in schools of all levels and universities. The

students and parents experienced greatly the technological divide, even in big cities like the main city Skopje due to the low life-standard. No research studies were identified in Macedonian context, though Tadesse and Muluye (2020) have investigated the impact of the pandemic on developing countries and Caputo *et al* (2023) have conducted a study on a sample of Italian schools.

Enormous changes have occurred in the world economy and social relationships that required redesign of the working style worldwide. In the human history many pandemics have occurred that affected the everyday's life, education system, economy and transport (Editors, 2020). This abrupt shift to remote learning exposed deep inequalities within the educational system, particularly in access to digital technologies and the internet that is strongly noticeable among developing and developed countries. While some students were able to transite to online learning seamlessly, others—especially those from low-income households or rural areas—faced significant challenges. In addition to the technological divide, the closure of schools highlighted the critical role that educational institutions play beyond academic learning. Schools provide a safe space for children, offer nutritional programs, and support the social, emotional, and mental well-being of pupils and students, all of which were compromised during the prolonged closures (Chaabane, 2021).

As educational systems fought to adapt, school leaders and administrators, teachers, and policymakers were confronted with the need to rethink and redesign their approaches to teaching, learning, and management. Zhang *et al* (2020) indicates that the alignment between pedagogy, assessment, content and the usage of technologies was quite challenging for distance education. This pandemic effect forced the school leaders and policymakers to address questions related to digital literacy, curriculum flexibility, and the mental health of both students and staff. Longmuir (2023) reports that the school leaders felt that they need to be a reference point for their community, which emphasizes a more humane attitude than managerial. According to Bajaba *et al* (2021), during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis new leadership styles gained more prominence, for example the adaptive leadership, being more receptive to changes and flexible. According to McLeod and Dulskey (2021), the school leaders highlighted the opportunity that emerged by the pandemic crisis to consider the necessary changes in the education sector, including the technology integration and improving the infrastructure. Moreover, the pandemic accelerated the integration of technology in education, which, while initially seen as a temporary solution, now appears to be a lasting transformation in how education is delivered.

This paper contributes to knowledge about leading the schools and overcoming the challenges in educational sector under crisis circumstances that emerged due to COVID-19 pandemic. In this study, a sample of school leaders from schools in North Macedonia was selected. It was investigated how the pandemic circumstances affected their role as leaders, the challenges they faced and overcome and adaptation they have made to continue providing the educational services. By exploring these dynamics, we can better understand the pandemic's long-term impact on education, school leaders and develop strategies to create more resilient and inclusive systems for the future.

2. METHOD

With 24 school leaders (8 males and 16 females) from primary and secondary school, semi-structured individual interviews were conducted between January and April 2024, i.e. post COVID-19 pandemic in North Macedonia. The interviews consisted from COVID-19 crisis management-related-questions and consequences (Table 1).

Table 1. Interview questions

COVID-19 crisis management	How did you work during the pandemic?
	What was your most exhausting, scary and challenging experience?
	Which experience left you with a positive lesson-learnt, and which one with a negative lesson-learnt?
	What did you identify as major challenges in perusing with the educational services?
	What activities did you carry out? Did you take over new activities? What type of interaction did you have between families and colleagues and the parents of the pupils?
	What would you improve in the educational services after the gained experience with the COVID-19 crisis?
	Would you retain anything (if yes, what is it) in the organization of the educational services within your school that you practiced, learned or experienced during the pandemic?

Source: Author's research

The participants are middle management working in primary and secondary school in larger cities in North Macedonia (Skopje, Ohrid and Bitola). Their work experience at a management position in an educational sector ranged from 11 months up to 7 years.

The study respected the Declaration of the Helsinki (2013), since the participants were informed regarding the research goals and its outcomes. The anonymity of the interviewees was ensured and the participation in the study was on a voluntarily basis by providing their consent prior commencing the interviews.

3. RESULTS

The obtained results from the semi-structured interviews (Table 2) provided insight into the COVID-19 crisis management in the Macedonian schools. Based on the responses, two areas were identified in the COVID-19 crisis managements: threats and opportunities. The categories (column section) with their respective elements (column themes/elements) are summarized below (Table 2) including the number of respondents. Certain transcriptions from interviewees are quoted anonymously.

Table 2. Obtained results on main themes and elements from the analyzed interviews

Area of COVID-19 crisis management	Themes/ Elements	Number (N)
Threats	Technology use (forced)	19
	Teacher presence	3
	Quality of e-learning	15
	Passive students	13
	Dishonesty of students	9
	Lack of preparedness of teachers	11
	Work-life disbalance	16
Opportunities	Better relationship with families	14
	Online training	18
	Emotional support	12
	E-leadership skills	15
	Communication skill	6
	Creative thinking	8
	Decision-making skills	9
	Technology use	20

Source: Author's research

One of the first threats was the forced technology use, which was not commonly used in the everyday's work atmosphere. For example, one school leader said that meetings with the teaching staff, the parent's meetings and any other business meeting had to take place on online platforms, like Zoom, Webex, MS Teams. Such platforms became essential in order to continue working. On the other hand, embracing the new era and integrating the technology in everyday work life offered other advantages. For example, the travel time to work and the morning tensions in traffic jam were replaced with a slightly prolonged sleeping time, less travel expenses, lowered environmental pollution, whereas the exchanging information was faster by using chat tools. On this matter, one school leader said "We weren't aware before to which extent the online working can go. I think it was unimaginable that the meeting will take place online, that face-to-face conversations will be replaced by typing (chatting) or video/audio calls. And how all the providers of such services advanced their software infrastructure[...] If until yesterday we were using our notebooks and emails, and the very next day we were intensively learning and using Google-related tools like Drive, Calendar, Forms, then Microsoft-related systems, like MS Teams. I believe many will agree that we benefit of this forced integration of technology as it brought closer and eased the collaboration among educators of different countries".

In this context, the online training posed an opportunity for continuously learning from webinars. This trend continued even post-COVID-19 crisis. People including the leaders have continued to learn online from home.

On contrary, the formal education on distance proved to be hard for both the teachers and students. Their direct relationship that persisted in the classroom was lost. This may be identified as the greatest threat in the education management sector by majority of the population. It is indisputably that the quality of the teaching was reduced unwillingly, as well as the children care. Very young children, first years, who couldn't write and read properly, yet, were faced with the challenge to use digital tools for their education. As the leaders said "We all were impatient, scared, but the parents were even angry. Not only did they were parents but they were now teachers as well. The children in primary school had only their parents as closest replacement for the classroom teaching". This produced passive students who wouldn't take part in the discussion during the class, didn't come prepared to the class as they

could read from the books in front of them, without being noticed by the teachers. While this increased the dishonesty among the students, it discouraged the teachers to try hard to teach in such conditions.

“Staying and working at home proved that the school leaders had no more working hours, as we did in the office. This caused a distortion in the work-private life balance as we were constantly online due to the technology use, our working hours were increased” complained a school leader. But many of his colleagues shared the same impression. Majority of them (22 out of 24) agreed that drawing a boundary between the work hours and private life had become impossible to practice.

The leaders had faced with a new challenge from the teachers. According to the teacher’s and leader’s saying it looked like the crisis have provoked the staff to be more selfish and to share less. The teachers had to spent considerable amount of time to familiarize with the online teaching environments, employing new teaching pedagogies when delivering the instruction in the distance learning, to group discussion or to explain the theories from natural sciences (math, physics, chemistry), which were harder to be taught online. One leader said “[...] it is the teacher’s digital competence that caused a segregation among the staff. Those who were more experienced, now weren’t prepared to help the other staff members as they feared they might have to take over their teaching group, get more tasks”. Nevertheless, the technological competence is aligned with teacher’s pedagogy, and the teachers had to self-develop on fast track, which caused an impoverished school leader-teaching staff relationship.

Nevertheless, staying at home during the lockdowns and learning from distance enabled stronger relationships among the family, teaching staff and collaboratives. Like one leader said “The teaching classes were held online via video meetings and the teaching staff was able to see the children’s home surrounding, have a brief chat with their parents, grandparents or siblings. The family mainly was included in the conversations with the teachers in the lower classes of primary school. We, the school leaders experienced similar day-to-day situations with the family members of our staff or collaboratives”. Several schools’ leaders emphasized that the aforementioned opportunity strengthened the team bond, the care among them and encourage a more humane behavior.

In addition, the leaders guided their staff and provided emotional support. Some interviewees have scheduled meetings every two weeks, other on weekly or daily basis, to discuss, support each other and exchange experiences. This provided the emotional support and a reference point to address to. However, from the crisis emerged the e-leadership. Certain leaders had Monday collaborative email with their staff, other had Monday morning meetings prior lessons, and on Friday after classes some had closing meetings to follow up. One leader held red-flag meetings upon request that took place during the period with highest number of reported covid cases. Its purpose was to point new replacement staff in case of coronavirus-ill personal, to address changes in the class schedule or any other urgent decisions that challenged the leader’s creative thinking. Thus, this proved to sharpen the school leadership’s decision-making skills, as well.

4. DISCUSSION

As outlined in the results section, the responses of the semi-structured interviews provided a comprehensive view of the COVID-19 crisis management in Macedonian schools, highlighting two major areas: **threats** and **opportunities**. Throughout the responses of the leaders it is evident that clear communication, humane behavior and empathy were dominant key features of the leaders. Our finding is in line with the results of the review by Brown and colleagues (2023), which have divided the crisis management in three phases and all phases required communication and empathy by the school leaders. Moreover, some features of the school leaders are in line with the findings from the review by Wu and colleagues (2021). Similar findings are reported by Caputo and colleagues (2023) in their sample of Italian schools.

The COVID-19 pandemic affected the educational system both in developing and developed countries (Tadesse, Muluye, 2021). North Macedonia is a developing country, but compared to the findings in the sample of Italian schools (Caputo *et al*, 2023), the challenges and threats are the same that differ only in the extent. Distance learning was more challenging in North Macedonia, because of lack of Information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructures, computers, Internet or lower education level of the parents.

The forced shift to digital tools and platforms like Zoom, Webex, and MS Teams was one of the first significant threats identified. Many schools lacked experience with online technologies, and this sudden transition disrupted the traditional working atmosphere. More technologically skilled teachers were hesitant to assist their less-experienced colleagues, fearing additional workloads that could affect their work-private life balance additionally. This strained relationships between teachers and school leaders, as staff were expected to quickly adapt to new methods of instruction, often with limited support. Leaders observed that the crisis had fostered a degree of selfishness among staff, as individuals focused on managing their own tasks and responsibilities. This reflects how the pandemic not only tested schools’ technological capabilities but also the social dynamics within them.

The leaders coped with the teacher's complains on aligning the pedagogy with appropriate use of technology, content and assessment in distance educations (Zhang *et al*, 2020). Even more challenging was the students and pupils assessing during the pandemic, when dishonesty and irrespective behavior towards the teacher was observed. Unfortunately, little could have been done by the school leaders on this issue, as it is closely related to domestic upbringing. This contributed to the impoverishment of school leader-teacher relationship. Similar observations were noticed in the study by Caputo *et al* (2023).

School leaders had to reinvent their management styles, using virtual meetings and collaborative email chains to maintain communication and oversight of the teacher's work from home. Initially the techno-stress caused great inconvenience and challenge for all affected parties in the education sector (Molino *et al*, 2020). Still, by using the new tech-tools and platforms, the school's leaders were able to track the teacher's performance, to follow up on their results and behavior with the parents, students and colleagues. Some school leaders adopted new strategies, such as scheduling "red-flag meetings" to address urgent issues like staffing shortages due to illness. These practices sharpened decision-making skills and increased leaders' ability to manage unexpected challenges. A notable outcome of the COVID-19 crisis was the development of **e-leadership that was** greatly adopted worldwide in almost every sector, including the education system.

The leaders stopped long-term planning and were short-term-planning-orientated, even on certain occasions they planned just daily. This shift promoted the flexibility and working under pressure. The need to decide on a short notice advanced the decision-making skills, but also stimulated the creative thinking of the leaders.

Another significant issue raised was the **work-life balance**. Many school leaders found themselves constantly online, with no clear boundary between work hours and personal time. This overwork was cited as a major source of stress. However, despite these difficulties, the crisis also created a sense of **solidarity and support among staff members**. Online meetings became a space not only for work but also for providing emotional support. These interactions helped maintain team morale, build stronger relationships, and provide opportunities for reflection during the crisis.

The fatigue is another threat caused by the crisis that mainly has negative consequences on the health, well-being and the performance. The chronic fatigue of the school leaders was a result of a disturbed work-private life balance, technology difficulties, enforcement of health measures and being an emotional support

5. CONCLUSIONS

It is evident that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought challenges in educational sector all across the world including North Macedonia. The newly developed crisis required that the school leaders adapt really quickly and manage multiple aspects of the education under such conditions. As the school leaders addressed the threats and challenges from the crisis, they identified five common key attributes: communication skills, decisive decision making, empathy, flexibility and creative thinking. In providing the educational services in Macedonian schools, the technical equipment, funding and academic transition to online learning were recognized as major challenges. During this crisis, the school leaders have advanced their managerial skills. Further studies are needed in order to overcome the limitations of this study by wider sample, performing multivariant statistical analysis and establishing relationships among the investigated variables. The gained experience during this period reinforced the need for a more resilient, equitable and flexible educational system, in which the pupils and students can continue to learn and study in spite of external disruptions.

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