



## School Principal Roles During the COVID-19 Pandemic: New Challenges in Sudden Disruption



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**Abstract**

School principal leadership has a vital role in school performance. The COVID-19 pandemic brings new challenges for the school principal leadership in developing countries. Thus, this study aimed to identify those new challenges. Specifically, this article explains the role of School Principal Leadership in facing those challenges in maintaining teachers' and students' performances, building parents' support, and applying government regulations. This study was conducted by following a systematic literature review approach. There were four steps conducted in this study: designing the review, conducting the review, analyzing, and writing the review. The researchers collected the data from the articles published in international journals indexed by Scopus. Then, the collected data were analyzed qualitatively using an interactive data analysis model. This study found that school principal leadership faces new challenges in maintaining the teachers' motivation to teach and students' motivation to study through online learning. Besides, the school principals also have to educate the parents to monitor their children's learning. At the same time, the school principals also need to ensure that the schools follow the government regulation on preventing the spread of COVID-19. The detailed findings and suggestions for further research are presented in this article.

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## Contents

Abstract.....	797
1 Introduction.....	798
2 Materials and Methods.....	799
3 Results and Discussions.....	799
4 Conclusion.....	801
Acknowledgments.....	801
References.....	802
Biography of Authors.....	805

## 1 Introduction

The sudden transformation brought by the COVID-19 pandemic has turned the world upside down (Oyedotun, 2020). Since its declaration as a pandemic in 2020, COVID-19 has affects not only one but also almost all global sectors. Major victims of the pandemic are from the economic sector of enterprises, the international environmental change sector, psychological distress, and mainly the education sector (Aguilera-Hermida, 2020; Barouki et al., 2021; Bradley & Sellars, 2020; Chaturvedi et al., 2021; Frame & Hemmings, 2020; Herat, 2020; Iivari et al., 2020; Jan, 2020a; Jean-Baptiste et al., 2020; T. Khan & Mikuska, 2021; Muthuprasad et al., 2021; Olaseni et al., 2020; Camacho-Zuñiga et al., 2021; Sevilla Vallejo & Ceballos Marón, 2020; Shafi et al., 2020; Sharma & Mahendru, 2020). Besides, some vital transformations happened in the education system during the pandemic. The condition radically changes the education structure (Hanafi et al., 2021). By the 10<sup>th</sup> of March, 2021, schools and universities were closed globally due to social distancing (Muthuprasad et al., 2021). As a result, all the learning process was transferred into online learning, and the digitalization of each generation is a must. Additionally, various financial, physical, and mental struggles also happened within the institutions (Vu et al., 2020).

These phenomena lead the principal into the importance of its decisive and crucial roles, especially its strong leadership role. The role is needed to develop the school's quality during the pandemic. There is more than one definition of leadership. Arnold (2007), state that leadership is connected to a person's character, attitude, interaction, and relation (Fitriatia et al., 2014). Leithwood (2006), also states that everything is related to organizational improvement and conducting any kind of support for the betterment of people. NCSL (2003), as cited in (Fitriatia et al., 2014), also contributes a definition of leadership correlated to the social influence of the movement process, which includes more than one person building a relationship between the group or organization. Based on the leadership definition presented, we can draw a red line that leadership, in this context, is the school principal, who can move, motivate, and inspire people to walk on the same path as the leader or even to reach specific goals. A school principal must also be a problem solver before guiding his followers to become ones.

Literature also mentions the role of the school principal on school performance. Huang (2011), states that a leader greatly influences commitment rise and maintenance. Based on Bass & Riggo's (2006) statement, as cited in Arokiasamy et al. (2016), about transformational leadership, the leader focuses on sharing visions and goals and must be a coach for the followers to be problem solvers in any kind of challenges faced. Besides, based on Hallinger & Murphy's (1987) and Murphy's (1993), dimensions of instructional leadership, as cited in Abdullah & Md. Kassim (2011), principals must establish school goals, manage the instructional program, promote a learning environment, and create a friendly and cooperative school environment. Since the school principal is the most dominant part of the "change agent" in the school system (Cohen, 2015), a good leadership manner must be owned and implemented by school principals. Leithwood (1994), cited in Arokiasamy et al. (2016), explains the four I's in transformational leadership practice: individual consideration, intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation, and idealized influence. Arokiasamy et al. (2016), strengthen that the four I's must become a model in the school principal leadership implementation in evoking positive transformation in education. Moreover, the principal leadership values are crucially needed, especially during COVID-19, where the whole education system, from elementary to higher levels of education, has collapsed since the lockdown period (Mishra et al., 2020). Looking at the status quo right now,

principals, as leaders of the school, must have these leadership values to maintain and even develop the quality of the schools.

Before the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020, the previous studies of the school principal leadership focused on teachers' performance (Ariatana et al., 2015; Arokiasamy et al., 2016; Cohen, 2015; Huang, 2011; Pina et al., 2015). Hence, this study aimed at identifying the challenges of principal leadership in facing COVID-19 disruption, specifically for schools in developing countries.

## 2 Materials and Methods

This study was conducted using a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach. According to Snyder (2019), there are four steps in conducting an SLR. Those steps are designing the review, conducting the review, analyzing, and writing the review. During the design of the review process, the researchers specified the review's objective and decided the scope and research questions. The researchers also identified the proper resources to get the needed data to achieve the study's aim. Besides, the researchers also determined the targeted readers in the designing process. Then, when the designing process had been done, the researchers continued to the next step, which was conducting the review. The review process was done by collecting the needed data. The researchers collected various articles from different journals. Those articles were published in Scopus indexed journals in 2020 and 2021. The articles were collected using the keywords searching technique. The articles were collected from ScienceDirect, Hindawi, MDPI, and NCBI websites.

The collected data were analyzed qualitatively using an interactive data analysis model consisting of three steps: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification (Miles & Huberman, 2018). The researchers worked together to select the appropriate information from the articles and excluded the articles, not in line with the study's objective. Then, the researchers classified the data based on the research questions. Finally, the researchers made conclusions based on the available data.

## 3 Results and Discussions

During COVID-19, schools are forced to transfer the learning activities online. Online learning requires great commitments from different parties. Principals, teachers, students, parents, and government must participate in every process. Yet, there are many challenges found regarding the shift of the educational system during the pandemic, especially in developing countries.

### *School principal leadership and teachers' performance*

To begin, Vallejo & Marón (2020) investigated the essential relationship between emotional regulation and reading comprehension in primary school students in Argentina. The researchers studied the effect of lockdown on the two processes. The research aimed to identify the preliminary information regarding challenges faced in the current outbreak. From the teachers' perspective, it was known that they were facing difficulties in handling the students' emotional issues because of their lack of adaptation. Many students were not ready to have online learning, which led them to suffer from psychological distress (AlAteeq et al., 2020; Hossain et al., 2021). Even the teachers themselves also faced psychological problems, including stress, anxiety, and depression (Ali et al., 2021; Wong et al., 2021).

Khan et al. (2021), conducted a study of a medical college in North India investigating the practical learning activity they have conducted online during COVID-19. There were several positive effects that the teacher found, such as better planning and control when conducting teaching online, less classroom disturbance, the efficiency of a resource, and a privilege to record and re-watch the session to improve the teaching skills. Yet, along with the advantages, there were disadvantages or challenges the teacher should face. A lot of time should be wasted on technical issues. Sometimes, the internet was not working correctly. The teacher could not see the expression of the students who were not paying attention. The offline class allows the teacher to see the students' expressions and help them directly. Yet, an online class cannot give the teachers such

luxuries. Some teachers also had difficulty adjusting to the new technology (Le et al., 2022; Lemay et al., 2021; Noori, 2021). Not all teachers in developing countries are fluent in using technology. The shift of the platforms used in learning activities made them difficult to adjust. The non-experimenting class made the teacher feel difficult in doing practical teaching since watching a video was not enough (Nina et al., 2022). Medical school, especially, needs practical learning to understand the material and its practice. Yet, online learning made it difficult to conduct since they cannot touch the object and only watch through videos.

An in-depth study was conducted in India concerning the primary private school teachers' experiences in the virtual teaching sessions during the COVID-19 outbreak. The result shows that whether the teachers' skills in using the internet and teaching methods became professionally developed, they faced several challenges. Firstly, the schools' lack of support. It was found that in conducting online learning, several teachers did not get proper facilities. Secondly, it creates psychological pressures. The teachers were afraid to be fired since the outbreak highly affected the economic sector and resulted in the global crisis. The data proved that the developing countries must fill a \$2.5 trillion financing gap to combat COVID-19 and subsequent economic crises (Stubbs et al., 2021). This also led to the third challenge, which was the salary cut. Even though they were doing a great job in teaching, the teachers must face that their salaries still must be cut. The fourth is moral pressure. Teachers must block the students who cannot pay their school tuition, which puts the teachers under moral pressure.

From the empirical above, it can be concluded that the teachers face several challenges. Firstly, teachers must increase their adaptation skills due to the shift in the learning process during the pandemic. As the school leader, the school principal must provide such training or workshop platforms. Thus, the teachers can improve their adaptation skills in online learning. Secondly, there must be full support from the school to provide online learning facilities, especially the internet connection, since the unstable internet becomes a significant challenge while conducting online learning (Mishra et al., 2020). Full support must be provided from the school, which is the principal's role. Thirdly, the teachers' psychological impacts are afraid of being cut from school or how they must block the children from online learning who cannot pay the tuition. This fact contributes to the rate of psychological distress in developing countries during the pandemic (Bukuluki et al., 2020; Chaturvedi et al., 2021; Islam et al., 2020; Olaseni et al., 2020; Sevilla Vallejo & Ceballos Marón, 2020).

#### *School principal leadership and students' performance*

Most students feel that online learning is enjoyable and motivates them to learn (A. M. Khan et al., 2021), yet there are some challenges they must face. A. M. Khan et al. (2021), revealed that the technical issue became one biggest nuisance for students in learning. The lags happened a lot due to internet instability. The gadget quality they used also influenced their performance in learning. The assessment format was limited. The students could not explore their insight only by answering multiple questions. Time management also became a challenge where the faster students must wait for the rest to finish the task, and for them, it was a lot of time wasted. The students also needed to explore their understanding of materials because their teachers often did not explain the material comprehensively.

Students not only face technical challenges in online learning. Students also face mental struggles during the pandemic. Chaturvedi et al. (2021); Jan (2020); Asanov et al. (2021); and Sevilla Vallejo & Ceballos Marón (2020), proved in their studies that during the pandemic, students face difficulty with their mental health. Online learning causes the students to lack social interaction and communication, even facing depression.

The students' well-being at home also needs our concerns. Lancet (2021), proved that over 1.5 billion students worldwide were affected by the closure of schools during the pandemic. They face the loss of motivation in learning and the protection from domestic violence and child abuse. Children in low-income country such as the Gaza Strip, and Palestine, faces a loss of nutritious meals of the day (Radwan et al., 2021).

The technical issue, lack of qualified facilities, the types of assessment, time management, and mental health condition are the struggles that the students in developing countries must be faced during online learning. The technical issue should be overcome by implementing the school facilities. The type of assessment and time management in online learning must be adjusted in the new curriculum. The student's mental health and well-being should become the principal's, teacher's, and parent's concern. It is because not all students are the same. They cannot be pushed into the same system.

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*School Principal Leadership and Parents' Support*

Talking about parental support is always interesting. [Azubuiké et al. \(2021\)](#), investigated the digital divide aiming to know how remote learning in Nigeria. They found out that one crucial factor influencing the digital divide in Nigeria was the parents' socio-economic status. The parents' support of this remote learning program also was influenced by the parent's level of education.

[Islam et al. \(2020\)](#), found out that 85.60% adult population in Bangladesh suffered from COVID-19-related stress. This means including the parents as well. The stress resulted in sleep shortness, a short temper, and chaos in the family. Chaos here included the study planning for their children to become neglected. This fact contributed to the number of students who left school during the pandemic. This is supported by the findings in [Lancet \(2021\)](#), that the economic crisis pushes greater poverty, which results in an early marriage arranged by families.

The most crucial part when we talk about parental support is the socio-economic status of the families. It can be concluded that the parent's mental health, level of education, and economic crisis contribute less support to the children's learning process. Huge chaos resulted in domestic and child abuse and even children's early marriage.

*School principal leadership and government regulation*

The uncertain condition of the COVID-19 outbreak made the government difficult to formulate policies ([Sharma & Mahendru, 2020](#)). India, for instance, must face a significant loss of migrant laborers, which increases the jobless rate. Data also gained from Pakistan stated that it is difficult to handle the outbreak and the following problems with fewer facilities ([Fawad et al., 2021](#)). Besides, [Stubbs et al. \(2021\)](#), stated that developing countries must fill \$2.5 trillion in facing COVID-19. It presents the economic crisis that these developing countries must face. Presented with these struggles that the government should face, which directly impact the education sector in developing countries, the question remains: how should the school principals act? The school principals become the ones who have to follow the government policies while keeping up the quality of the instructional process by motivating the teachers, students, and parents.

## 4 Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic causes sudden disruption to the educational system. The results of the study show that COVID-19 brings various challenges. Those include the challenges of the teachers, students, parents, and government. Thus, strong leadership is needed to anticipate and face its challenges. The school principal has a significant role in helping the teachers, parents, and students. In addition, the school principal also needs to build good communication with the government. The present study only identified the challenges of principal leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic. Further study is expected to investigate the school principal's strategies to face those challenges.

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