

Emergence of an Adaptive Leadership Model from the Collective Practices of Public Secondary School Principals during COVID-19 Education Crisis

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study generates an adaptive leadership model based on the emerging school leadership practices among public secondary school principals during COVID-19 pandemic. Utilizing Colaizzi's method (1978) of thematic analysis, this study investigated the lived experiences of principals in managing their respective schools at the peak of Covid-19 pandemic. Using an instrument based on the leadership domains mandated in the Philippine Professional Standards for School Heads (PPSSH), data were gathered through a semi-structured in-depth individual interview and focus group discussions (FGD) from nine school principals in Tablas Island, province of Romblon. Results showed that nine themes emerged as adaptive leadership practices namely: leadership style, stakeholder involvement, monitoring and evaluation, resource management, data management, health protocols, curriculum review and contextualization, quality teaching and assessment, and teacher support. Moreover, during Covid-19 pandemic, the secondary principals did not deviate from the PPSSH legally mandated leadership domains but in congruence with these, they strategized and devised ways utilizing the nine adaptive leadership practices in successfully running their respective schools during the education crisis.

Keywords: *education crisis, educational leadership, adaptive leadership practices*

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic brought an unexpected crisis in the field of education. Everyone was caught unaware of how to handle this education crisis properly. As a major consequence, principals around the world were prompted to implement adaptive leadership practices to normally run their schools. Operationally defined in this study, adaptive leadership refers to the various individual and collective leadership practices, styles, and attributes employed by the public secondary school principals in Tablas Island, province of Romblon during the COVID-19 educational crisis. After the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak of the coronavirus SARS-COV-2 a pandemic on March 11, 2020, the usual educational routines, plans, and processes were abruptly challenged and replaced by uncertainty.

The studies of Panunciar (2022), Pagdilao, and Paguyo (2023), focused on the application of an adaptive leadership framework in public schools during the pandemic. Their studies showed that there should be systematic school plans, that curriculum should be modified, and that there should be established partnership with the community in sharing common goals towards achieving quality education for the learners. Also, there is a need to maximize and outsource funds to provide enough resources to address the needs (e.g. printing materials, COVID-19 virus equipment prevention, etc.) of the school and community. Implemented plans should be based on the context of the school, and concerns of the community. Local and national government involvement, parents' active participation, telecommunication devices, and literacy in social media are significant adaptive leadership approaches during the COVID-19 crisis (Panunciar, 2022). Their study recommends that school leaders must enhance their communication skills in disseminating information, listening to concerns, giving feedback, and immersing themselves in the status quo of their teachers, learners, parents, and community. Very importantly, principals should have skills in Information Communication Technology (ICT) for facilitating and monitoring distance learning modalities of the school.

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Their adaptive leadership model showed that principals demonstrated strategic leadership abilities, efficiently managed school operations and resources, and supported remote teaching and learning with the help of teachers and parents who served as learning facilitators, using printed modular learning and supplemental materials (Pagdilao & Paguyo, 2023).

At the peak of the pandemic, principals experienced a crisis in implementing leadership practices. As an immediate approach, principals applied various emergency response measures by connecting to health officials, local chief executives, education authorities, teachers, students, and communities. According to Dykstra-Lathrop (2022), the pandemic was hard for leaders, teachers, parents, students, and the community. It was described as dark days because of fear and anxiety brought about by the virus. There was no fixed academic program because school authorities can't predict what's going to happen next (Harris, 2020). The research findings in Norway by Lien et al. (2023), indicated that school principals experienced the pandemic as a significant stress test applied to the educational system. One great impact is in the digital world. The pandemic brought a kind of quantum leap that revealed significant differences in digital competency among teaching staff. Working remotely and using digital workspaces was, to a large extent, a new and unfamiliar experience.

Before the COVID-19 crisis, the Philippine government in its aim to provide quality leadership and management to all schools nationwide, had already implemented a standardized leadership program. The Department of Education (DepEd) enacted the Principal Empowerment Act in 2012, empowering school principals to be more effective and efficient in implementing their educational leadership practices to address challenges that come along the way. Aside from this, PPSSH (Fig. 1) was also issued by the Department of Education as the mandated set of rules for school leadership quality in the Philippines (DepEd, 2020). The Standards contain five domains that define what is expected of school heads' gaining of pedagogical approaches, practice, and professional engagement. The leadership domains stipulated have been the tool as a basis for quality leadership and management by school principals around the country. It was embraced by the Department of Education (DepEd) through its issuance of DepEd Order No. 024, series 2020. The Standards allow for school heads' widening understanding, applied with increasing sophistication across a broader and more complex range of leadership and management situations.

This study exploratively unearthed the phenomenon of leading the school amidst the COVID-19 education crisis and uncertainty. Specifically, this study sought answers to the following questions: (1)

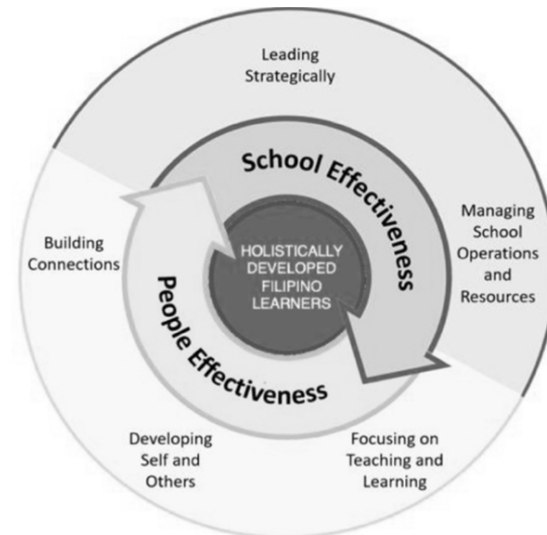


Figure 1. The Philippine Professional Standards for School Heads (PPSSH)

What are the leadership practices individually and collectively performed by the public secondary school principals during the education crisis?; (2) What themes and insights can be generated from their individual and collective practices?; and (3) What adaptive leadership model can emerge or can be derived from the themes? This study also sought to determine whether the secondary school principals implemented the PPSSH or if they deviated from it and strategized ways to run their schools successfully. Did the principals still adopt the legally mandated PPSSH, or did they come up with adapted new leadership strategies?

METHODOLOGY

Phenomenology and ethnographic research designs were used. The rationale behind this is to describe the principal's common individual and collective lived experiences, to grasp the very nature or essence, interpretation, and meaning of the COVID-19 phenomenon. Ethnographic research design immersed the researcher in a group of principals sharing common beliefs, cultures, and geographic characteristics in real time to gather first-hand information and high-quality data that is accurate, legitimate, and realistic about the experiences of the group.

Locale, Population, and Time of Study

This study was conducted in the four municipalities in Tablas Island, Division of Romblon namely: Odiongan, San Andres, Looc, Sta. Fe, and San Jose comprising of nine (9) secondary public-school principals for the period from December 2020 to January 2021 amid the peak COVID-19 pandemic.

Instrument Used

The research instrument was a standardized Interview Questionnaire used with permission from Pagdilao and Paguyo (2023). It was made based on the five leadership domains and strands set by PPSSH. Questions were taken from leadership domains which are competence skills turned into interview guide questions namely: leading strategically, managing school operations and resources, focusing on teaching and learning, developing self and others, and building connections.

Samples of the Study

Purposive sampling was used in the study. The criteria for qualified participants were as follows: permanently appointed principals of DepEd public secondary school with plantilla positions ranging from Principal I to Principal IV who have actual leadership experience from December 2020 to January 2021 COVID-19 crisis regardless of their age and gender; at least 3 years in service as school leader in the institution he/she is in; must not be affected or quarantined due to COVID-19 pandemic; and must be in an active status.

Data Gathering Procedure

Two in-depth interviews were conducted to gather data: the individual interview stage and the collective or group interview stage (Fig. 2). The first stage was the individual interview, which explored themes using a phenomenology approach to nine principals, which totaled nine interview sessions. This uncovered themes from individual participant's lived experiences during the COVID-19 crisis. The second stage was the collective interview stage using Focus Group Discussion (FGD) sessions to look and confirm for similarities and occurring themes of their collective leadership practices using ethnography. The ethnographic research interview immersed the researcher in the group of principals in real time to gather first-hand information and high-quality data that is accurate, legitimate, and realistic experiences of the group. This stage was arranged into two FGD sessions comprising three principals for the FGD 1 session and another three principals for the FGD 2 session. Two sessions were conducted to give an equal chance for all participants to share their leadership practices and prevent the monopoly of discussion and the sharing of ideas by a single participant.

Data Analysis

The individual and group interviews were transcribed, coded, thematically analyzed, and synthesized to arrive at the emerging adaptive leadership themes. Specifically, Colaizzi's method of thematic analysis (1978) was adopted which consists of

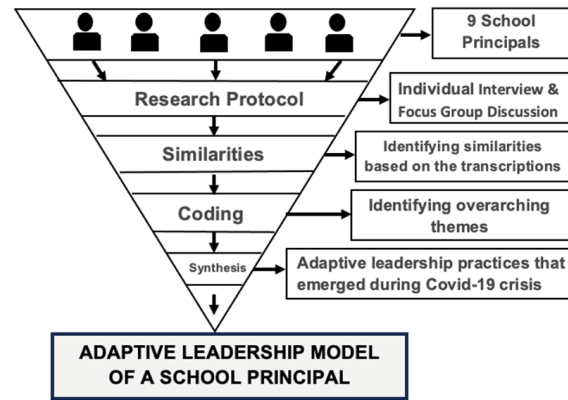


Figure 2. Methodological Framework

developmental steps as follows: acquiring a sense of each transcript; extracting significant statements; formulating meanings; organizing the meanings into themes; describing the phenomenon; describing the fundamental structure; and returning to the participants (Creswell, 2007). This method presents a cogent process through which the fundamental structure of the educational adaptive leadership practices of school principals in the context of the COVID-19 crisis was explored. Interviews or statements were confirmed during face-to-face and online focus group discussions using Google Meet and Zoom meetings, affirming that the participants employed or adapted the generated leadership practices and experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results showed that nine themes emerged as adaptive leadership practices: leadership style, stakeholder involvement, monitoring and evaluation, resource management, data management, health protocols, curriculum review and contextualization, quality teaching and assessment, and teacher support.

Leadership Style

Based on the key findings of the interview conducted during the COVID-19 crisis, the principals demonstrated strong leadership styles by adapting to the challenges of the pandemic and ensuring that the school continued to provide quality education to its students. The principal's leadership style was crucial in guiding the school through the challenges of the pandemic. By adopting a democratic approach, they involved stakeholders in decision-making, fostering a sense of ownership and collaboration. As one participant responded:

“I used a democratic leadership style to consult with teachers and other stakeholders in making decisions. I was resourceful in finding ways to print and distribute modules, even with limited resources. I used technology to stay connected with teachers and students and to provide support for remote learning.”

According to the study of J. Szempruch et al. (2023), heads of schools during the COVID-19 pandemic employed a more democratic management style, shared power, and decision-making, creating an environment that fostered the development of new ideas and inspired teachers to be more independent. The Adaptive Leadership Theory, developed by Ronald Heifetz (2001), also supported the findings of this study which asserts that leaders must mobilize individuals to tackle challenging problems, including adapting to change and crisis.

Adam et al.'s (2021) study of principals' leadership in Southeast Asia during COVID-19 is quite similar to the leadership strategies employed by principals in Tablas Island. They found that principals demonstrated strong leadership and perseverance during the COVID-19 crisis.

Stakeholder Involvement

The principals actively engaged their stakeholders in the implementation of the PPSSH program. They consulted with parents, barangay officials, and other community members to get their input and feedback. They also worked with the LGU to secure funding and resources for the program. The principal's emphasis on stakeholder involvement was instrumental in ensuring that the PPSSH program aligned with the needs and expectations of the school community. One participant revealed:

“I used a variety of methods to communicate with stakeholders, including face-to-face meetings, online platforms, and home visits. I was able to build strong relationships with stakeholders and gain their support for the program.”

The study of Pagdilao and Paguyo (2023) proved that during the COVID-19 education crisis, stakeholder involvement, especially the Local Government Unit (LGU), has a crucial role in the success of school leadership. Parents, barangay officials, LGU, and national agencies were vital partners in the implementation of school programs especially the domains stated in the PPSSH. Their proactive communication strategies, including face-to-face meetings, online platforms, and home visits, effectively engaged parents, barangay officials, and other stakeholders. Open dialogue with stakeholders was always conducted to incorporate valuable feedback and strengthen the program's relevance and acceptability.

Monitoring and Evaluation

The principals developed a comprehensive system for monitoring and evaluating the implementation of the PPSSH program. They collected data from teachers, students, and parents to assess the effectiveness of the program and identify areas for improvement. The principal's commitment to data-driven decision-making was evident in their comprehensive monitoring and evaluation processes. By collecting and analyzing data from various sources, they gained insights into the program's effectiveness, identifying areas for improvement and making informed adjustments. During the interview with one principal, she said:

“I developed a comprehensive system for monitoring and evaluating the implementation of the PPSSH program. I collected data from teachers, students, and parents to assess the effectiveness of the program and identify areas for improvement.”

The principal's comprehensive system for monitoring and evaluating the PPSSH program provided a clear picture of the program's effectiveness and areas for improvement. This data-driven approach ensured that the program was continuously refined and improved. The principals' commitment to accountability was evident in their transparency and willingness to share data with stakeholders. The principal's data-driven decision-making ensured that adjustments to the PPSSH program were based on evidence rather than assumptions. They used data to identify trends, patterns, and areas for improvement, guiding their decision-making process.

Resource Management

The principals effectively managed the school's resources to support the implementation of the PPSSH program. They secured funding from a variety of sources, including the LGU, private donors, and alumni. Their ability to secure funding from various sources, including the LGU, private donors, and alumni, demonstrated their strong networking and fundraising skills. A principal responded during the interview:

“I allocated budget for the PPSSH program and tracked expenses carefully. I was resourceful in finding ways to stretch their resources, such as asking for donations and using technology to reduce printing costs.”

Pagdilao and Paguyo's (2023) study revealed that to succeed during the pandemic, careful planning and budgeting should be implemented to obtain efficiency, effectiveness, and transparency in matters of financial and material resources. School heads should exercise careful planning and budgeting in the utilization of the school maintenance and other operating expenses

(MOOE) fund, align their Annual Implementation Plan (AIP) and their Annual Procurement Plan-Procurement Planning and Management Plan (APP-PPMP) with the Basic Education-Learning Continuity Plan (BE-LCP).

Data Management

The principal maintained accurate and up-to-date records to track the progress of the PPSSH program. They used data to inform their decision-making and to communicate with stakeholders. By establishing a system for collecting, storing, and analyzing data, they ensured that the PPSSH program had a strong evidence base. Their ability to identify trends and patterns from the data allowed for informed decision-making and enhanced the program's effectiveness. One participant responded:

“I developed a system for collecting, storing, and analyzing data. I used data to identify trends and patterns and to make informed decisions about the program.”

The principal's data management efforts helped to ensure that the PPSSH program was evidence-based. The principal's establishment of a data management system ensured that data was organized, accessible, and utilized effectively to inform decision-making. Cahapay (2022) revealed that principals must “manage through the machines” meaning digital tools must be considered in managing data.

Health Protocol

The principals took steps to ensure that the school was a safe and healthy environment for students and staff during the pandemic. They implemented strict health protocols, such as wearing masks, social distancing, and frequent handwashing. One principal replied:

“I followed the guidelines set by the DOH and DepEd for safe school operations. I worked with the LGU to secure supplies and equipment for the school.”

The principal's efforts helped to protect the health and safety of the school community. The principal's implementation of strict health protocols created a safe and healthy learning environment for students and staff during the pandemic. They followed guidelines set by the DOH and DepEd and collaborated with the LGU to ensure compliance with health protocols.

Curriculum Review and Contextualization

The principals ensured that the school's curriculum was aligned with the Most Essential Learning Competencies (MELCs) and was relevant to the needs of the students. They conducted curriculum reviews and

involved stakeholders in the process. A secondary principal expressed strongly this idea during the interview:

“I used a variety of methods to gather feedback from stakeholders on the curriculum. They made changes to the curriculum based on the feedback they received.”

The principal's efforts helped to ensure that the school's curriculum was of high quality and met the needs of the students. According to Adams (2021), school principals should be instructional leaders. In his study in Southeast Asia during the COVID-19 crisis, principals played an important role in planning and developing the curriculum and provided a clear curriculum direction, devised an immediate school mission and vision, and developed remedial plans to ensure students' learning albeit remotely.

Quality Teaching and Assessment

The principal provided support to teachers to help them improve their teaching and assessment practices. They conducted training sessions, provided resources, and observed teachers in the classroom. By providing training sessions, offering online resources, and conducting classroom observations, they equipped teachers with the skills and knowledge necessary to deliver effective remote learning. A principal responded during the interview:

“I used a variety of methods to support teachers, including face-to-face training, online resources, and observation. I focused on helping teachers to develop their ICT skills and to use technology effectively in their teaching.”

The studies of Panunciar et al. (2022) and Lien et al. (2023) about COVID-19's effect on the digital aspect of learning revealed that “we took a quantum leap into the digital world to address digital education,” as verbalized by one principal in Norway. Pagdilao and Paguyo's (2023) study emerged a theme that ICT is crucial in school. Their research stressed on continuous updating of school data and information.

Teacher Support

The principals provided ongoing support to teachers during the pandemic. The results are congruent with those of Lien et al. (2023) in Norway, who suggested that principals should support the needs of the teachers and students, especially during lockdowns and quarantine. The principal checked in with teachers regularly, offered them resources, and celebrated their accomplishments. In an interview, one principal said:

“I tried my best to be available to help, though at one point in time, it is impossible during the pandemic, especially

Table 1. Comparison between “Adoptive” PPSSH Leadership Domains and Emerging “Adaptive” Leadership Practice during COVID-19 crisis.

“Adoptive Practices” (PPSSH Leadership Domains)	“Adaptive Practices” (Emerging Leadership Themes)
Leading Strategically Managing School Operations and Resources	Leadership Style Resource Management, Data Management, Health Protocols, and Monitoring and Evaluation
Focusing on Teaching and Learning	Curriculum Review and Contextualization, Quality Teaching and Assessment
Developing Self and Others Building connections	Teacher Support Stakeholder Involvement

during lockdowns. I made sure that all teachers were given health protection and health rehabilitations like emotional counseling in times of fear and anxiety about uncertainties brought about by the pandemic. Vaccinations and other preventive health support were provided too especially when my teachers were diagnosed to be positive with the virus and were required to isolate and undergo quarantine for 15 days.”

Comparison Between Adoptive vs. Adaptive Leadership Practices

The PPSSH’s five “adoptive” domains can be compared with the nine “adaptive” emerging themes of this study (Table 1). The “adoptive” PPSSH leadership domains were still implemented by the secondary principals in congruence with the emerging “adaptive” leadership themes. This means that the principals flexed and strategized or adapted, defying the legal aspect of the DepEd PPSSH’s mandatory command to adopt the memorandum order but to a lesser extent. In other words, the domains were still implemented but not all. To a certain extent, the secondary school principals in Tablas Island adapted and defied some domains in the PPSSH to “adjust” or “adapt” to the current crisis.

The Emerging Adaptive Leadership Model During Education Crisis

The adaptive model (Fig. 3) shows the nine emerging themes that were implemented by the public secondary school principals in Tablas Island during the COVID-19 pandemic. The themes that emerged, as seen in the model, comprise the suited adapted leadership practices represented by nine circles pointing towards the central circle, which is the principal during the crisis.

The circles were the lived “adaptive” leadership experiences that were proven to have contributed to the success of the secondary school principal’s management approaches not to compromise the PPSSH’s mandate during the COVID-19 pandemic. Discussing further, the principals did not depart in implementing the required PPSSH domains as legally mandated by DepEd. The model depicts the different forms of school leadership styles and practices that were implemented and different

approaches to teaching that were strategized or “adapted”.

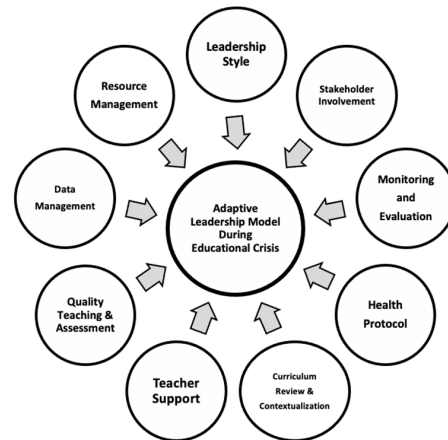


Figure 3. The Emerging Adaptive Leadership Model During COVID-19 Education Crisis

CONCLUSION

The adaptive leadership practices modeled by the emerging themes in this investigation were strategically employed by the secondary public school principals in their respective schools along with the PPSSH during the education crisis. The principal's leadership styles, stakeholder engagement, monitoring and evaluation, resource management, data management, health protocols, curriculum review, quality teaching and assessment, and teacher support were all key factors contributing to the success of school operations in Tablas Island in the Division of Romblon during COVID-19 educational crisis.

This adaptive leadership model was the principal’s management prerogative and leadership experiences that did not deviate, neither depart nor go away from the legally “adopted” or mandated PPSSH. The model proved to be effective in managing schools during education crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic as confirmed by the principals. During the crisis, the principals “adapted” and demonstrated strong leadership

skills by adapting to the challenges of the pandemic and ensuring that their respective schools continued to provide quality education by involving stakeholders, mobilizing resources, timely monitoring and evaluating, data management, abiding with the health protocols, maintaining quality teaching and teacher support.

In light of the conclusion, this emerging adaptive leadership model is strongly recommended to all academic institutions around the world in the context of uncertainty like the COVID-19 pandemic. The implications of this study are to improve the preparedness and resiliency program of every educational institution, thereby instituting, sustaining, and maintaining the quality of teaching and learning even if faced with unknown challenges.

AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTIONS

The author confirms sole authorship of this study.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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