

Trauma-Informed Leadership: A Case Study of Educational Leadership and Crisis Management of Secondary Schools

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Abstract

This qualitative research utilized a case study research design that investigated the school head's leadership and crisis management. It enlisted the participation of five school heads using convenient sampling based on inclusion criteria. To collect data, a semi-structured written interview based on Lawson (2021) was used. To display the narratives, the data were transcribed, examined, compared, and carefully categorized into several themes by using nVivo software. The findings reveal that school principals employed: 1. Varied leadership practices; 2. Modeling leadership behavior; 3. Decision-making and communication; and 4. External support. The findings of this study highlighted the need of applying situational leadership practices to strengthen school heads' instructional and administrative duties, particularly during times of global crises.

Keywords: School Leadership, Trauma-Informed Leadership, School-Based Disaster Risk Management, School Heads, Principals

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Introduction

The rising vulnerability of nations to both natural and man-made hazards endanger people's lives as well as efforts at sustainable development. According to the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, 302 hazards caused disasters in 2011 alone that affected 206 million people, claimed about 30,000 lives, and caused damages of an estimated US\$366 billion. Children are the most impacted by disasters because schooling systems are disrupted, which affects one of their fundamental rights—the right to education. So far, the Philippines have experienced typhoons, drought, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, and the pandemic, COVID-19. During the pandemic, there is evidence emerging across the globe of the critical role that leadership plays in steering communities through the challenges we are all facing.

Although crucial, the COVID-19 pandemic is not likely to be the last catastrophe we will see in our lifetime, and school leaders have been asked to guide their communities through uncertain times before. The difficulties faced by school administrators have included anything from aiding communities through economic, social, and emotional ruin to rebuilding after environmental catastrophes. Throughout these challenging times, school administrators have maintained their focus on achieving the best results for their students and school communities while providing clarity and direction, fostering resilience, and instilling optimism.

It might be intimidating to lead in an uncertain world because there are rarely simple answers or well-defined pathways to take. Leaders must quickly adjust to a scenario that is changing drastically in an uncertain environment. They must also use a variety of leadership styles and skills. To provide the best possible teaching and learning environment and outcomes for students, school administrators must manage the urgent while keeping an eye on the long term. When faced with difficulty, some behaviors set effective leaders apart from the rest of the pack. A proactive, inclusive, and open strategy that doesn't minimize information or postpone action is necessary (Kerrissey & Edmonson 2020).

In addition to assisting students and the community in getting back to normal life, education may play a significant role in developing the knowledge, abilities, and attitudes needed to prepare for and cope with catastrophes. The secondary schools that have integrated disaster risk reduction into their curriculum are mapped out in this paper. While capturing major difficulties when disaster risk reduction is less explicitly addressed or where specialized teacher training is lacking, it also covers national experiences. Trauma is embedded into the fabric of a crisis and must be carefully considered as part of a leadership response. The Philippines had a string of super typhoons, earthquakes, and other calamities before and even during the COVID-19 crisis, which had a severe impact on the Bicol region and damaged schools, forced school closures, and put officials in difficult situations as they managed the crisis response.

In accordance with the DepEd Order on School-Based Disaster Preparedness and Response Measures for Tropical Cyclones, Flooding, and Other Weather-Related Disturbances and Calamities, the current study aims to sketch the leadership practices and crisis management of school leaders in a trauma-informed school.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to explore the leadership and crisis management practices of secondary school heads. The present study sought to relate the implications of the findings to

the leadership and management practices in trauma-informed schools. achieve the purpose of this study, more specifically, intends to answer the following key questions:

1. How do school leaders describe the process of becoming trauma-informed school leaders?
2. What leadership practices and/or principles do trauma-informed school leaders employ?
3. How did the school leaders' leadership experience in managing the crisis induced by the natural calamities impact their response to other current crises?

Methodology

A. Methods

The current study is qualitative in nature and adopted the case study research design. School leaders were purposefully selected as the study's primary data sources. A semi-structured interview was utilized to gather data. Study codes were generated, and emerging themes were analyzed using Nvivo software for qualitative data analysis.

B. Literature Search

To find trustworthy papers and publications for the research, the researcher searched several databases, including Google Scholar, EBSCO Information Services, Science Direct, and websites. Trauma-informed leadership, leadership skills, leadership practices, crisis management, lived experiences, covid – 19, and disaster risk management were the keywords utilized. The databases were restricted to 10 years, from the years 2012 to 2022, however, there were no geographical restrictions. The researcher wanted to discover information regarding the study, thus manual research was done to reduce the number of sources available.

C. Eligibility Criteria

The researcher searched trustworthy databases including Google Scholar, EBSCO Information Services, and Science Direct to find the publications of interest using the titles and abstracts as a guide. It was promised that from the year 2012 onward, resources would be published in English. The researcher restricts the inclusion of peer-reviewed papers and topic references to achieve that goal.

In terms of exclusions, the researcher specifically omitted studies conducted in languages other than English and unreliable websites like Wikipedia, social media, and unpublished studies and blogs. Additionally, non-peer-reviewed, out-of-date research that was published in 2012 or earlier is not included.

D. Selections Strategy

The researcher was able to determine the inclusions for the chosen study, as well as its eligibility and discrepancies, and review them. Regarding the full-text evaluation of the eligible research articles, the author skimmed the title and abstract of the chosen articles.

E. Data Extraction

Using a standardized form, the researcher retrieved the following study characteristics from the eligible articles which include: (i) study characteristics (title, first author's name, journal, year of publication, country of origin, and objective); (ii) methods (research design, sample size, and duration of the study); (iii) subject characteristics (inclusion and exclusion criteria); (iv) results: the key or major findings of the study.

Results and Discussion

A. Study Selection

The researcher discovered a total of ten relevant research articles and journals on championing trauma-informed leadership, crisis management, and leadership practices from 2012 to the recent year through screening of titles and abstracts from thirty-nine (39) articles collected from the initial search on EBSCO Information Services.

B. Data Interpretation

Four themes emerged from this study's findings of school leaders' leadership practices during a crisis. It's based on their organization's 1. Varied leadership practices; 2. Modeling leadership behavior; 3. Decision-making and communication; and 4. External support.

Research Question 1: How do school leaders describe the process of becoming trauma-informed school leaders?

The safety of schools is important and every school's disaster risk management team aims at reducing the vulnerability to, and impact of disasters on schools. It prepares both teachers and students for potential disasters, thereby reducing the impact of said disaster. The Philippines is constantly plagued by different natural calamities and has been known to become resilient regardless of the adversities faced by each family. As a major part of the community, schools are strongly affected by each disaster faced by the country, and school leaders serve as front liners in facing issues and challenges brought by the crisis.

School leaders have faced a variety of challenges, ranging from rebuilding after natural catastrophes to assisting communities in the aftermath of economic, social, and emotional turmoil. School leaders have provided clarity and direction, created resilience, and inspired hope while remaining focused on the greatest possible outcomes for their children and school communities during difficult times (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership Limited, 2020). School head 1 highlighted the process of becoming a trauma-informed leader, she tells:

"I must move forward. I must be the character during the time of a calamity that people expect to be present during hard times. I must be the leader that people need answers from, and people see as vulnerable too."

School Head 2 spoke of the importance of positivity and courage:

“You know, you must stay positive and courageous. People will look at you as a pillar of courage during tough times. A crisis is an opportunity that let a school leader exhibit courage and boost other people’s morale just by setting an example of having a positive and courageous mindset.”

Similarly, School Head 3 described the importance of continuing to move forward through the crisis, and moving forward with empathy and caring for others during that time:

“I can always move forward no matter what. You move forward with empathy. You must put people's emotional health before anything else.”

When describing the process of being a trauma-informed leader, School Head 3 stated:

“I've been around enough and gone through enough and face different challenges brought by calamities, natural or man-made. But as a leader, you know the crisis will be resolved. You just must hang in there long enough to see it resolve.”

School Head 5 described positivity as the most important skill that a school head must possess to successfully lead through a crisis:

“You just got to stay positive and optimistic. I tried to be brutally realistic and positive at the same time. I’m going to call it as I see it, but I’m always looking at the upside of things, and I think that’s critical.”

Leaders that are trauma-informed understand that everyone, including themselves, will struggle because of traumatic events, and they react with kindness and empathy. The leaders described the process of becoming trauma-informed leaders by respecting and honoring the values they possess and of the people surrounding them.

Research Question 2: What leadership practices and/or principles do trauma-informed school leaders employ?

School head 2 described a combination of relational and servant leadership that was remembered and continues to be acknowledged by her school,

“servant leadership- it was relational, it was participatory, it was empowering. So that’s kind of my style and that was appreciated by people during volcanic eruptions or typhoons and even during the pandemic.”

Further, she described the frailty of positional power,

“You know how thin positional power is during the best of times and how it just disappears when the pressure is on, and so you know building relationships is the most important thing.”

School head 3 described the way in which she went to each barangay shelter and evacuation center impacted by typhoons or volcanic eruptions. She and her team connected with every child amidst the chaos of the calamities. She further described how she ensured that when school resumed, that student was able to stay with their teachers even though there were initial

recommendations to have students attend alternative schools throughout their district to resume their education.

All 5 school heads created a leadership, or crisis response team, to support the management of the crisis, this is following the DepEd Order 21, s. 2015 (updated DepEd Order 33s.2021) for the school-based disaster risk reduction management team. Teachers form part as members of the team and school heads established roles for different members of the crisis response team. Their practices include meeting monthly to discuss issues and concerns and determine the next steps in the crisis response. There were two specific themes related to the development of leadership that emerged from coding: distributive leadership and traumatization.

Democratic structures are important during a crisis (Smith & Riley, 2012). All five school heads in the study demonstrated distributive leadership to varying degrees, some more apparent than others.

Though School head 1 created a team to support the crisis management process, he described that he would get the support of his team, but he made all the decisions, which isn't something he recommended doing. He believed, *"it's unique to whatever situation you were in and what kind of school you have."* He further explained that *"it helps if you're in that type of situation to be that kind of leader because you get to plan and you don't have as many checkpoints to go."*

School head 2 acknowledged the ways in which members of her team stepped up, assuming more leadership responsibility and they were instrumental in the crisis management response. She stated:

"We were able to come in and commit to the team strategically. And so really my leadership style is very participative. I want to surround myself with people more intelligent than me. I want to empower them. I feel my job is to get out in front of them and clear the way and turn them loose. Having like-minded people press in was important. That was the core that really got us through."

Similarly, school head 3 explained how members of her team meet each other and conduct consultation with the Local Government Unit and other partner agencies such as Bureau of Fire Protection and the Philippine Red Cross. Having clarity was very important for her team. She shared, *"You really couldn't take a day off or things might start to get confusing. You might ask, 'where is he?' And so, we had a lot of collaboration and talked a ton."* She also worked closely with her students, assembling her student council representatives to learn from them. She would, *"bring it back to the team and say, okay, here's what I'm hearing. Here's what they want. How do we make this happen?"* In describing her leadership style, school head 3 explained:

"So that was a lot of my leadership is don't put people into a win, lose situation, give people choices, choices that you can live with. So, I always gave students choices and staff choices that I could live with."

School head 5 described that one of the most important things a leader can do is encourage problems to come forward and be open to the problems and be open to people:

“You want to be available. You want to know the good and bad things to come your way, but then we want to empower people by asking them what’s your recommendation. I try to say that all the time- what’s the recommendation? What would you do? What should we do? What do you think so that all the time that trains people who work with the leadership team.”

She uses this leadership practice as a way of building capacity and empowering his team to develop problem-solving skills. In fact, she used the analogy of weightlifting to explain the importance of doing this as a leader:

“I can go into a weight room and lift all the weights while everyone watches. But it’s not helping them get stronger right? Okay, so you want people to be, you know, lifting as much weight around you and building up their capacity as much as possible. And you can do that in subtle and kind of encouraging ways, but what’s your recommendation then of course you can empower them by saying, “That’s a great idea! Let’s do it” Then they’re like wow. Then they feel really empowered.”

Moreover, the school leaders also mentioned that another practice they do in school is to have the teachers and selected students attend training sponsored by other agencies. The trainings sponsored by different agencies were especially for disaster preparedness and prevention.

Research Question 3: How did the school leaders’ leadership experience in managing the crisis induced by the natural calamities impact their response to other current crises?

Once the school heads began to make sense of the situation, they began to engage in prioritizing the issues and responses needed. School head 4 described how her leadership experience in managing crises induced by natural calamities impacted her response to another current crisis:

“The COVID-19 pandemic was more challenging than another crisis we faced. We were put in a serious dilemma how to figure out how to further serve our students. However, like our practice when we face natural calamities, we nailed down all the variables that you have control over so that you know for sure you identify the variables that are out there that you don’t know. You get input and you know to make your best guess. This is one of the beautiful parts I think when we experience a crisis, we start brainstorming priorities, disasters really focus you down on what matters. You know we talk in education all the time about the importance of goal setting. And this is like where the rubber hits the road. It’s no longer academic or theoretical. There’s no way we can address all those priorities, so let’s put them in order and start at the top and see how many of them we can address.”

School head 2 routinely used a whiteboard and mapped out the pros and cons for each situation. Her barometer for prioritizing was considering what was best for students. After making sense of a critical situation and prioritizing the needs, the skill of decision-making involves the implementation of necessary responses. The decision-making process involves economic, political, ethical, and safety considerations. These decisions often need to be made under stressful conditions with limited information and time to make them. School head 2 indicated that decisions were made by her. She recalled:

“The board said you don’t have to come to us for any decisions, so literally, I carried the school on my shoulders. That’s what I did. And to be honest with you, it helps if you’re in that situation to be that kind of leader, because you can plan, and you don’t have as many checkpoints to go to.”

School head 3 emphasized:

“You make your decision on what you feel is at times going to do the least amount of harm. And then it’s at other times on what’s best for everybody. Sometimes you just must make decisions and go with them. Moving forward with empathy and being part of the community. Even when you make the hard decisions, they can hear those hard decisions and have faith in you.”

School head 5 acknowledged the need to engage in repeated questioning to help facilitate the decision-making process:

“You’re not going to find a perfect situation like you just must make the best decisions now. And you must keep saying to yourself what next? What do we need to do next?”

Further, school head 5 described the challenges inherent in the decision-making process because *“You don’t have all the information you want. You don’t have all the time you want. Typically, in schools, we have plenty of time.”*

Communication is a critical aspect of crisis management with a specific need for information to flow smoothly within an organization as well as between organizations involved in the coordinated response. As part of their crisis management response, each of the five school heads within this study spoke of the importance and challenges of communication.

School head 2 described the surreal scene when the volcano erupted when the sky turned black and ashes filled the air, barely allowing her to breathe. Since their school is near the vicinity of the volcano, communication became a challenge especially during this disaster because power lines are out, and mobile connection is out too.

Similarly, school head 4 described how rescues were coming narrowly escaping harm and arriving safely at the evacuation center. Parents were unable to contact their children and rushed to school or the evacuation centers.

School head 1 described the need to set up messaging protocols to communicate with staff and families. He emailed staff each day to inform them what was happening for the day. As part of this, he routinely sent pictures to teachers so that they could see first-hand what things looked like. This helped him make sure that “everybody was in the loop of communication about what was going on.” Subsequently, he provided families with FAQs each day.

School head 2 described the challenges with communicating when information was changing:

“Communication was probably the toughest part because people want to know, and you want to give them information, but the information is changing constantly. It’s very frustrating. It’s hard enough to reach people. You try every form you have. And again, you don’t know where people are so communication is tough.”

Both School heads 1, 2, and 3 described town hall meetings that they held for their communities and/or staff. School heads use their gymnasium to hold the conference and use it as a platform to communicate with the staff and the parents. Other stakeholders are invited too, this serves as an avenue to relay important details on crisis management and/or to orient people on their roles in crisis management.

Another theme that emerged through the analysis of the data was the theme of external systems of support. External networks of support are part of crisis management efforts and responses, providing opportunities for consultation, negotiation, and coordination. In fact, “Crisis operations are multi-organizational, trans-jurisdictional, polycentric response networks. They demand lateral coordination, not top-down command, and control” (Boin & t’ Hart, 2003, p. 547). All five school heads described coordinated efforts with public and private organizations as part of their crisis response with varying experiences both positive and negative.

School head 5 emphasized that relationships were instrumental in helping them navigate the crisis. The LGU offered their support to her school, sharing resources and information, including email lists of important resources in the community. Training for staff was also provided for crisis response and management.

School head 1 acknowledged the challenges with coordinating multiple agencies:

“You have different state agencies and you’re trying to put them all together with questions and answers because they don’t talk to each other and how the food chain goes up and the food chain comes back down to you. It was an immense situation that took a while to get through the process.”

She also described how she communicated directly with the Department of Education when she became frustrated with agencies that she felt were not getting things done in a timely manner, so “she just jumped on that and things happened at the provincial level because like I mentioned going up the food chain, then coming back.” School head 3 recalled objecting to local officials and asking them to refrain from communicating messages to her families and undermining her response plan:

“I talked to all the other school heads in the area, and they said what do you need? I said I need classrooms with my teachers. I don’t need kids spread out. They need to be with their teachers and their friends. Other schools provided classrooms so we can continue our classes.”

Conclusions and Recommendations

Utilizing the potential and skills of stakeholders to turn crisis roadblocks into development opportunities is the organizational duty of the school head. They oversee raising production and efficiency of the organization, especially responses in crisis management. They owe it to their stakeholders and the rest of society to set an example of moral behavior and inspire others to do the same. They must encourage virtues and moral conduct despite the health and education challenges to maintain organizational integrity. Finally, it is the professional and operational accountability of school leaders to shape the learning environment for everyone’s safety while allowing teachers to perform their duties. When a crisis strikes, they oversee planning support services to help with problem-solving as well as facilitating access to different resources, linkages, and technology.

Based on the findings of the study, it is recommended that future researchers identify factors that impact the coordination of external networks and their ability to collaborate and develop a cohesive crisis management response within a school system. It is also recommended to investigate the characteristics of effective crisis management teams within school settings. Since the researcher conveniently chose the school heads for the current study, it is advised to perform additional case studies and increase the diversity of the participants. Because the conclusions reached from a multiple case study may be more important than those from a single case study and because the findings may support theoretical representation, doing a multiple case study can also have analytical advantages (Yin, 2017).

APPENDIX A
TRAUMA-INFORMED LEADERSHIP QUESTIONNAIRE
Adopted from Lawson (2021)

Part I. Open – ended questions.

1. Please tell me why being trauma-informed is important as a leader?

2. Can you describe any personal and/or professional experiences you feel influenced your commitment or preparedness as a trauma-informed leader?

3. What is your definition of trauma-informed school approach? Has it changed? And if so, how?

4. Tell me about the knowledge, skills, dispositions you have found important to creating a trauma-informed environment.

5. Have you deal with resistance with trauma-informed practices and if so, how have you chosen to deal with those?

6. To what degree have trauma-informed approach supported the needs of your staff and students?

7. Tell me about the process you and your staff went through to become a trauma-informed school?

8. Can you describe any challenges you may have encountered in becoming a trauma-informed school?

9. What evidence of change have you seen since becoming a trauma-informed school?

10. Based on your experience, how might other school leaders be better prepared to lead and develop a trauma-informed school environment.

PART II. Please consider your knowledge, experiences, and practices related to your role as school principal in a trauma-informed school as you complete the following survey questions.

Questions	Minimal Knowledge	Below Average Knowledge	Average Knowledge	Above Average Knowledge	Extensive Knowledge
What is your level of knowledge related to trauma-informed practices?					
What level of professional development have you received to support teachers and stakeholders in trauma-informed best practices?					
Statements	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I am prepared to be an instructional leader for trauma-informed best practices in school.					
Faculty and staff participate in on-going professional development and collaboration related to a trauma-informed school.					
The COVID – 19 pandemic, natural calamities such as typhoons, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes and others influence my understanding of creating and sustaining					

a trauma-informed environment.					
The COVID – 19 pandemic, natural calamities such as typhoons, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, and others has influenced my commitment to creating and sustaining a trauma-informed school environment.					

Part III. Open – ended questions

1. What type of professional development do you receive to support teachers and stakeholders in trauma-informed best practices?

2. How do you ensure staff members are held accountable for implementation of trauma-informed best practices within school?

3. How has the natural calamities and the COVID – 19 pandemic affected your vision for a trauma-informed school environment?

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