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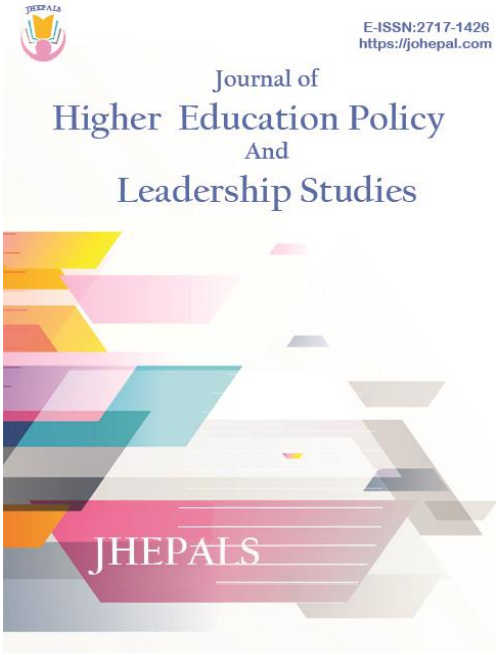

Educational Decision-Making During COVID-19 in Ontario: Lessons for Higher Education

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented novel and unprecedent challenges within the educational realm, from the closure of educational establishments and the rapid implementation of e-learning to monitoring and managing the spread of the virus within the school community. The present research in Ontario, Canada, a province which has experienced prolonged lockdowns, explores the challenges faced by educational leaders as they navigate their schools through the pandemic. This qualitative case-study resulted from interviews conducted with eleven principals who were diverse in terms in gender, years of experience, and school type. The findings of the study reveal that leaders experienced a lack of resources to aid them in their decision making and experienced difficulties in managing their staff and students. However, leaders revealed that they were best capable of overcoming those concerns when using distributed leadership models within their organizations. While the study was conducted in a K-12 context, the findings present valuable insight into leading higher educational establishments through crisis.

Keywords: Covid-19; Educational Administration; Decision-making; Crisis Management; Distributed Leadership

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Introduction

In March of 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic took a turn for the worse as it spread around the globe, impacting over 1.6 billion students and created a chaotic situation within the educational realm (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2020) resulting in unprecedented detrimental impacts on students, their families, and schools as a whole (World Health Organization, 2021). Indeed, the unexpected health dangers caused by the virus lead to governments around the world mandating a rapid shift to virtual and remote learning with little preparation or notice bringing about many concerns regarding the quality of education for students. For instance, In Canada, the country saw a decrease in instruction hours per week (Gorbet et al., 2020), significant concerns regarding the ability to provide students with the resources needed for them to be successful in engaging with remote learning (Alberta Teachers Association, 2020), as well as fears that prolonged remote learning would only exacerbate achievement gaps within Canadian schools (Aurini & Davies, 2021). The underlying pressing concern for these as documented in the literature regards the access to remote education. In fact, the move to online learning created a significant digital divide in education within the Western world through factors such as internet stability or simply having access to any internet connection (Harris & Jones, 2020). This digital divide experienced both by instructors and by students led to significant inequalities within the school system (Duroisin et al., 2021).

Furthermore, studies have shown that racial and ethnic minority groups living in poverty were particularly vulnerable to barriers preventing their access to high-quality and inclusive remote learning (Harris et al., 2020). In fact, these households were more susceptible to disruptions such as chaos, crowding, and changes in routine while also having less resources to overcome these challenges, negatively impacting already vulnerable children's ability to adhere to remote learning (Johnson et al., 2021; Andrew et al., 2020). To illustrate, estimations of the disruption caused by school closure show that children from such disadvantaged backgrounds will likely see a 7-to-11-month loss in their learning (Dorn et al., 2020). In this way, the pandemic not only brought forth a danger to the physical health of individuals, it also introduced a plethora of factors impacting the overall well-being of communities (Poulin, 2022).

Similarly to the rest of Canada, Ontario also saw a significant disruption in education caused by the pandemic through mass school closures and inconsistent support (Gallagher-Mackay et al., 2021). For instance, in January 2021, nearly a year after the pandemic had begun, schools and their leaders were still being asked to rapidly adapt to ever-changing provincial public health guidelines such as putting in place a return to in-person learning with very little notice. This novel and unique situation not only introduced new issues but also exacerbated existing inequities (Harris, 2020). In response, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development Canada (OECD, 2020) put forth a call for educational leaders to develop and implement various strategies in an effort to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic on students. In this way, educational leaders have been faced with the task of rapidly finding ways to address these unprecedented challenges within their schools, while also respecting the Covid-19 processes and protocols mandated by their provincial governments (Harris, 2020). For instance, in Ontario, educational leaders have been tasked with the responsibility for preventing the spread of the virus within their

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schools, implementing intervention strategies and, all the while, caring for the health and well-being of the school community (Pollock, 2020). This presented educational leaders with the difficult and stressful task of decoding, interpreting, translating, and implementing rapidly evolving policies within their schools (Fotheringham et al., 2022).

Leading in the Face of Rapidly Changing Times

The COVID-19 pandemic has plunged leaders across the globe in an unprecedent crisis requiring them to make critical decisions with constraints such as ambiguity, lack of time, and lack of information, resulting in the experience of high psychological pressure (Dumulescu & Mutiu, 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the world experienced uncertainty, complex issues, ambiguity, and volatility forcing the educational community to step up and act (Noworol, 2020). Leading educational organizations during a crisis magnifies the influence of leaders and puts upon them the onus of managing a particularly stressful situation in changing times (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020). Such a context has left leaders to face issues which are unfamiliar and sudden (Lawton-Misra & Pretorius, 2021). Yet, educational leaders worldwide have been put into a position requiring them to learn and implement reforms and ever-changing policies within their organizations while also navigating structural constraints and limited resources (Burch et al., 2020). Furthermore, novel concerns arising as a result of the virus such as increase sickness rates, staff quarantine, social distancing requirements, and more, have resulted in educational leaders having lower social support in conducting their role (Cordoba et al., 2021). As such, the pandemic presents unpredictable challenges calling on leaders to be flexible and adaptable (Dumulescu & Mutiu, 2021). Thus, in times of crisis, educational leaders must act quickly and have foresight while also being careful in considering the potential side effects and impacts of their actions (Netolicky, 2020).

Currently, educational institutions are faced with the complex decision of choosing which strategies should be implemented within their organizations to mitigate the impact of the virus within their community. For instance, while health organizations such as the American Academy of Pediatrics advocated for the return to in-person learning to mitigate inequities between students (Pattison et al., 2021), the decision of conducting in-person learning, remote learning or hybrid learning still asked educational leaders to weigh the risk the virus poses on their community while also taking into consideration the social, emotional, and psychological outcomes of their decision on students and staff (Campbell et al., 2021). This is only further complicated by the fact that education policies developed by government bodies are at times contradictory to those being implemented elsewhere in the country leaving leaders in a complex and confusing situation (Beauchamp et al., 2021). Additionally, changing and evolving public health and governmental guidelines left school leaders with the task of determining their own reopening plans, monitoring COVID-19 testing in their establishment, while also ensuring their community had access to resources and information regarding these updated guidelines (Gillespie et al., 2021). As such, the pandemic presented leaders with unfamiliar terrain within the context of a fast-changing and dangerous environment requiring speedy decision-making for complex issues with potentially life-saving implications for students and staff alike (Lawton-Misra & Pretorius, 2021).

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Leading Staff and Students through Crisis

Following the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the well-being of teachers has been detrimentally affected (Keleynikov et al., 2022). In fact, a study conducted in Canada showed that over 1,000 teachers reported increased stress related to their profession directly related to the novel circumstances of the pandemic (Sokal et al., 2020). That is, in addition to the already stressful tasks faced on a daily basis by teaching staff (Ngwenya, 2021), during the pandemic teachers must also cope with increasing anxiety and stress related to the pandemic such as the stress of catching COVID-19 and transmitting it to their families (Smith & Granja, 2021). In fact, a survey conducted in the US showed that teachers reported feelings of being overwhelmed, anxiety, fear, and worry related to working during the pandemic (Brackett & Cipriano, 2020). The reopening of schools also presented an additional stressor for teachers. Unsurprisingly, teachers main concern was related to working in a closed environment with a large number of children, some of which remain ineligible for vaccinations (Dos Santos, 2021).

Beyond these immediate threats to educational staff's health, the awareness of the inequities and subsequent achievement gaps caused by remote learning present yet another point of distress for teachers (Sokal et al., 2020). That is, being limited by social distancing measures, school closures, and quarantine requirements, teachers were cognizant that they were unable to reach and help their most disadvantaged students in the same way they had previous done in their careers. Furthermore, teachers world-wide have been consistently asked to implement and adapt their teaching strategies and plans to unpredictable and oftentimes last-minute governmental decisions (Kim et al., 2022). Unsurprisingly, these working conditions put onto teachers the experience of chronic stress which has been known to lead to professional burnout characterized by feelings of inefficacy, inefficiency, and emotional exhaustion (Maslach et al., 2001). This is evident by the results of a survey conducted with teacher wherein 43% stated that the increased chronic stress related to their position during the COVID-19 pandemic has led them to take the decisions of leaving their teaching positions (Diliberti et al., 2021). Moreover, teacher stress and burnout are also linked to reduced creativity, reduced productivity, and reduced efficiency in teaching (Tran et al., 2020). This presents a concern for those in educational administrative positions as it is well documented that teacher chronic stress is correlated to negative outcomes for students (Herman et al., 2020) including lower academic achievement (Herman et al., 2018).

Indeed, the tumultuous atmosphere caused by the pandemic also presents a risk for students which must be considered by educational leaders. In fact, according to Zhou (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed school-aged children and adolescents to secondary trauma which has the potential of causing delayed-onset distress and anxiety. This increased risk of experiencing mental health difficulties results from the loss of routine, structure, and stability in school-aged children's lives (Goldberg et al., 2022). These experiences are only worsened for children living with special needs (Harris, 2020). Additionally, during the pandemic, students have experienced isolation from their peers, boredom, and for some the fear of getting infected by the virus all of which may lead children to experience additional social-emotional difficulties (Spinelli et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020). As a result, students whose mental health has been negatively impacted by the pandemic are likely to exhibit detrimental behaviours to their learning such as avoidance of

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schoolwork, agitation, or boundary testing (Goldberg et al., 2022). As previously mentioned, these impacts are felt more deeply for students coming from disadvantaged homes. For instance, a study conducted by Andrew et al. (2020) demonstrate that there is a significant achievement gap between primary students from low and high socioeconomic status homes associated to decreased learning time, an association which was previously inexistent prior to the pandemic lockdowns. In this way, educational administrative staff must surmount yet another challenge resulting from the pandemic. However, despite these challenges faced by teachers and other educational staff, the quality of school leadership has the potential of mitigating these impacts and influence the ways teachers respond to the changes resulting from the pandemic (Bottiani et al., 2019; Herman et al., 2021). As such, school leaders have needed to shift their leadership practices in order to better address the needs of their school communities.

Managing Crisis through Distributed Leadership

In the face of an international crisis such as that brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, leadership style chosen by educational administrators becomes increasingly vital in managing and mitigating the detrimental impacts of the pandemic on their school community. For instance, it calls into questions the previous top-down and hierarchical approach to educational leadership. Educational organizations might risk not being successful in adapting to the pandemic's rapidly changing circumstances (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020). Instead, with the uncertainty caused by COVID-19, combined with the policy and human relation challenges faced by educational leaders, school leaders began to adopt a distributed leadership perspective (Burch et al., 2020). Indeed, D'Auria and De Smet (2020) advocate that, in the face of the COVID-19 crisis, school leaders should work towards relinquishing their top-down approach in favour of a more distributive and collaborative leadership paradigm.

Distributed leadership is also not about delegating leadership. In a school setting, for example, it is about teachers, parents and staff all contributing to the decision-making process (Chitpin, 2015). Hence, this collective decision contributes to achieving the desired outcomes. It can also be regarded as an acknowledgment and involvement of all the actors' decisions in the school. For example, distributed leadership could include principals, vice-principals, teachers, students, and support staff. In fact, according to Leithwood et al. (2020), in times of crisis, educational leaders should pivot their approach to one which is more collaborative and distributed in nature to focus on building a shared vision and increasing capacity through relationships and trust within their educational institutions. Through this approach, educational leaders are capable of developing their staff and providing them with the support and consideration needed to work through crisis (Thornton, 2021). Additionally, educational institutions using a distributed leadership style have benefitted from a higher degree of peer-support, innovation, adaptability, and agility, increasing their success in overcoming crisis (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020).

Multiple studies have worked towards developing distributed leadership models which could be implemented within school to mitigate the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, Nathanial and Van der Heyden (2020) put forth a model which focuses on exploring a given problem in collaboration with various experts and individuals in order to elaborate a well-thought-out strategy to manage crisis. Similarly, Azorin (2020)

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emphasizes that leaders faced with the COVID-19 crisis should mobilize those in their surroundings to collectively engage in decision-making and put solutions into practice. In this way, school administrators are empowering their community and providing a space for participation and ownership, increasing trust, and ultimately working collaboratively to achieve the goal of high-quality educational delivery no matter the circumstances faced (Mazurkiewicz, 2021).

Situational Context of the Present Study

The current study was conducted in the greater Ottawa area, Ontario, Canada during the months of December 2020 – January 2021. On December 21st 2020, the provincial government had announced a province-wide lockdown due to high spread of the virus and an increase in hospitalizations across the province which would take into effect the eve of December 26th. Part of the government's lockdown plan included the immediate closure of public and private schools and the temporary re-implementation of remote learning for at least 28 days. On January 2nd 2021, the Ministry of Education issues a letter to Ontarian parents stating that elementary schools would return to in-person learning as of January 11th, 2021 and that secondary schools would return to in-person learning on January 25th, 2021 despite the continuously rising cases of COVID-19. However, on January 12th, 2021 the provincial government declared a state of emergency and extended online learning until February 10th, 2021. Later that month, on January 28th, 2021, the province in consultation with Ottawa Public Health took the decision to reopen all schools on February 1st, 2021 giving educational leaders very little time to reformulate their school reopening plans. In addition, new public health guidelines were mandated within schools including mandatory mask wearing for all students Grades 1-12, completion of the Ottawa Public Health screening tools prior to entering the establishment for staff and students, as well as a promise for new HEPA filters to be installed in classrooms (see Lecce, 2021). During this time period, the Ontario federal government was also ramping up its COVID-19 vaccination campaign. While individuals working in the health care sector as well as those living in hot-spot communities or living with high-risk health condition were amongst the first to be eligible for the vaccine, educational workers were not originally considered by the province as a priority group for vaccination by the province, only receiving priority in beginning of May 2021 (Boisvert, 2020). This aforementioned context was anecdotally reported as creating stress and anxiety for all educational staff as evidence by news articles and personal posts on social media (Ward, 2021). Thus, the current study aims to explore the challenges faced by educational leaders as they worked towards mobilizing their schools during the third wave of the pandemic in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada.

Research Methodology

This paper draws upon empirical evidence from a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Insight grant awarded to the first author. The study is guided by the following four questions:

1. What challenges do educational leaders face regarding COVID-19?;
2. What are the primary social, political and research-based influences regarding their decision-making process?;

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3. What resources do educational leaders need to support decision-making?; and
4. How does networking with other educational leaders influence decision-making?

A qualitative case study methodology was used to for the present research study (Merriam & Simpson, 2000) as case studies allows researchers to examine and illuminate various aspects of a general problem (Merriam, 1998) such as that presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. Through this case study approach, the goal is not only to develop concepts and hypotheses grounded in systematically obtained data (Abercrombie et al., 1990) but also acknowledges that as researchers, we cannot enter a study free from preconceptions.

This case study explores the experience of eleven (11) educational leaders in the Greater Ottawa, Canada region working within francophone schools. The participants are diverse in terms of gender and years of experience in educational administration. Table 1 provides a summary of the characteristics of the participants of the study.

Table 1
Summary of Participants' Characteristics

Name	Gender	Profession	Years of Experience	Student Population	Staff Members	School Type	Modality
Tarek	Male	Principal	3	468	62	Elementary	In-person
Chase	Male	Principal	10	349	64	Elementary	Hybrid
Cecilia	Female	Principal	6	1800	101	Elementary	Virtual
Cameron	Male	Vice-Principal	3	1500	150	High School	In-person
Eric	Male	Vice-Principal	3	1100	100	High School	In-person
Fernanda	Female	Principal	10	255	30	Elementary	Hybrid
Melinda	Female	Principal	4	1550	100	High School	In-person
Natasha	Female	Principal	3	320	45	Elementary	In-person
Richard	Male	Principal	17	348	59	Elementary	Hybrid
Sofia	Female	Principal	20	150	32	Elementary	In-person
Vivienne	Female	Vice-Principal	5	1140	100	High School	In-person

Participants

- Tarek is a male school principal working in a francophone school. He has three years of experience working in educational administrations, two of which were at a different school. His current school has a student population of approximately 468 students and 62 staff members.
- Chase is a male school principal working in a francophone school. He has 10 years of experience in educational administration of which he spent 2 years as a Vice-Principals and eight years as a school principal in a school of 349 students of which 288 have opted for in-person instruction and 75 have opted for virtual learning. He also has a staff of approximately 64 members.
- Cecilia is a female school principal working in a completely virtual francophone school. She has six years of experience in educational administration, three of which

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were within the French school board. She leads a virtual school with a student body of 1800 students ranging from kindergarten to sixth grade. She has 101 staff members including 85 teachers, 10 special education teachers and 15 kindergarten teachers.

- Cameron is a male vice-principal working within a francophone high school. He has three years of experience in educational administration of which two are at his current establishment. He serves a school of 1500 students and has a staff of 150 individuals of which 75 are teachers.
- Eric is a male vice-principal working within a francophone high school. He has three years of experience in educational administration. The school has approximately 1,140 students and employs around 100 staff members.
- Fernanda is a female principal working within a francophone elementary school. She has 10 years of experience in educational administration and 41 years of experience in the educational sector. Her school has approximately 215 students through in-person learning and 40 students through virtual learning with 30 teachers delivering in-person learning.
- Melinda is a female principal working within a francophone high school. She has four years of experience in educational administration. Her school has a student body of approximately 1,550 students and employs approximately 100 staff members.
- Natasha is a female principal working within a francophone elementary school. She has three years of experience in educational administration and is currently in her first year as principal. Her school serves 320 students and employs 45 staff members.
- Richard is a male principal working within a francophone elementary school. He has a total of 17 years of experience in educational administration of which six were as vice-principal and 11 were as principal. His current school has a student population of approximately 307 students enrolled in in-person learning and 41 enrolled in virtual learning. The school employs approximately 59 staff members.
- Sofia is a female principal working within a francophone elementary school. She has over 20 years of experience in educational administration. Currently, her school has a student body of approximately 150 students and approximately 32 staff members.
- Vivienne is a female vice-principal working within a francophone high school. She has five years of experience in educational administration. The school within which she works has a student body of approximately 1,140 students and employs approximately 100 staff members.

Research Findings

The participants in this study articulated three main themes related to leading during the pandemic. The themes were (1) a lack of resources to aid in decision-making; (2) challenges in managing staff and students; and (3) the use of distributed leadership and networking in decision-making.

Lack of Resources to Aid in Decision Making

According to Netolicky (2020), the pandemic has pushed leaders to find a balance between quickly enacting decisions while also taking time to carefully consider the potential

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consequences of those decisions. Given the inconsistencies in political and public health discourse as evidenced by the Ontario government's communications, this has left educational leaders in a position where they were, and continue to be, responsible for student, staff and educational delivery, while also having little control and only a vague understanding of the evolving COVID-19 situation and protocols (Ferguson, 2020). Within our study, participants unanimously expressed frustration with the Ontario's government unclear guidelines and the lack of resources provided by the province. In fact, the participants communicated a need for more robust guidelines and training opportunities from both public health and the school boards for which they worked to aid them in making equitable decisions for the safety of their students. For example, Eric states "I have the impression of missing tools to take these [equitable] decision…I don't have any theoretical framework to refer to". This sentiment is further echoed by Richard who says:

> "As a principal, what I find difficult presently is that the office of public health often repeats…that these [covid-19 guidelines] are recommendations. But when you hear the word recommendation, you hear that it is optional. Take for example the Ottawa Public Health form which parents need to sign when their kid returns to school after being sick with COVID-19 […] They did not tell us it was optional but the last time we did an update, we were told we are reminding you that this form is optional […] At one time it was required then it was optional. So, we find ourselves in situations where we are making a choice, to use it or not?"

Such last-minute changes or vague guidance by government bodies, requiring leader to adapt has been mentioned throughout the world, where many have had to learn to work within the boundaries of unclear guidance (Kim et al., 2022). Additionally, such contexts have put leaders into situation where they are required to make important leadership decisions on incomplete or partial information while also experience the immense pressure of ensuring the safety of their school community (Potter et al., 2021). Evidently, these ever-changing guidelines and inconsistencies cause uncertainty for staff as well as increased workloads for teachers, leading to higher than normal turnover rates within the school (Dos Santos, 2021; Education Support, 2020). This effect was also reported by the participants who expressed a need to have additional human resources within the school to help alleviate the additional workload placed upon teachers. For instance, Tarek who states that "people withdrew when they saw the amount of work [caused by the pandemic], it adds a lot to our plate which is already very, very full". This view is further supported by Natasha who expresses, "I need human resources. I need supply teachers so that I can provide my teachers with the time to diagnose and determine the profiles of students. It also relieves the anxiety of teachers". As previously mentioned, COVID-19 have put onto teachers increased job demands and fewer resources to conduct their daily activities (Kim & Asbury, 2020). However, studies have shown that when senior leadership acknowledge and support teachers, they are less likely to experience teacher burnout, stress, anxiety, and depression (Alves et al., 2021; Pressley, 2021). As reported in the participants, school leaders in this study showed concern for their teaching staff and were asking for resources to help them in further supporting their teachers whether it be through asking for more clear guidelines or additional resources within their school. Despite their efforts, the participants in the study

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still express significant challenges in managing their staff and students during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Challenges in Managing Staff and Students

The COVID-19 pandemic has engendered a dissolution of routine within school systems, which has heightened the experience of stress and anxiety for both staff and students (Jones & Kessler, 2020). For instance, teachers are experiencing increased concerns for others' well-being, health struggles, and psychological tensions as a result of the uncertainty of the pandemic (Kim et al., 2022). This disrupted fluidity of routine presented a significant challenge for the participants in the study, as they were faced with new and novel concern. For example, Sofia explains that some disruptors of routines are caused by "all the rules, the sanitary rules, the security rules, all of that, is a whole other challenge as much for staff as for me. Talking about the equipment, the mask, the visor, etc.". Similarly, Chase also alludes to a loss of routine caused by COVID-19 public health measures and states "We all want to assemble before class to chat, but I need to maintain the directives and make people act in the opposite way that they want to. It is difficult to manage teacher and make them change the way they have being doing things for years now".

In order to mitigate the potentially life-threatening impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, many have emphasized the need for clear and frequent communication with the school community (Beauchamp et al., 2021; Kerrissey & Edmonson, 2020). This was reflected by our participants who stressed the need to communicate with all members of the school community. For instance, Sofia states "I have never sent so many emails before. I am worried, always a little worried. I always check my emails and look for lists of people who are self-isolating. I check the list for errors and verify that all the required people are on the list […] and I need to ensure the emails are being opened". So was, Cameron who describes:

> "One significant challenge is good communication with parents because there are many uncertainties. There is a lot of anxiety, each person lives with COVID-19 in their own way. You have people who are hyper anxious, students who will always look around them and make sure all guidelines are being followed, and then you have others who are very much not preoccupied by it."

In this way, leaders are needing to clearly communicate with teachers, students, and parents in hopes of instilling safety measures both within and outside the walls of their establishment in an effort to reduce the spread of the virus and its associated impacts such as teacher absenteeism or illness (Ngwenya, 2021). In addition to the need of managing the physical aspects of the pandemic, the participants highlighted the challenges of managing the psychological factors encountered by staff when trying to implement Covid-19 protocols with uncooperative students, parents, and staff, as well as with the culpability felt when a school members tested positive. For instance, Tarek states,

> "[One of the biggest challenges is] socioemotional, I would say it was very difficult to maintain a positive ambiance within the school […] and balance family life with professional life for staff."

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This was also corroborated by Vivienne who reports:

> "On the personnel level I would say it's really the stress […] There is very little time for them [teachers] to exchange ideas with colleagues, and just in terms of the school climate, with staff testing positive, there are some who are feeling isolated and lonely."

These findings provide additional support to the literature demonstrated that Canadian teachers are experiencing increased job demands (Sokal et al., 2020), are more likely to experience stress and burnout, impacting the overall quality of education within the school (Baker et al., 2021). However, the behaviour and relationships of teacher with their school leadership team can work towards mitigating the physical health and mental stress felt during the pandemic (Dos Santos, 2021).

The Use of Distributed Leadership and Networking in Decision-Making.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for distributed leadership to support the overall well-being of teachers (Cordoba et al., 2021). The final theme advanced by participants was the use of networking and distributed leadership practices to overcome the challenges resulting from the pandemic. For example, Cameron states, "Networking influences me. We have the duty to take the best decision possible. It is always a good idea to seek the advice of someone else. We always need input from others". Cameron emphasizes the need to seek out advice and diverse opinions which, according to Kerriseu and Edmonson (2020) is a key leadership approach in successfully leading schools through the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, Vivienne corroborates the need for collaboration and distributed forms of leadership by stating, "We are always open to discussion; we learn together, and we have a lot of trust within the team". Similarly, Sofia expresses

> "For me, my approach, my leadership is really a leadership centered on collaboration and sharing. With teacher, it is obvious that sometimes you don't have the choice, you have to give direction and follow politics especially with COVID-19 guidelines […] but I am more collaborative, I need to have allies before putting in place something or I need other's advice on putting things into action and get their input on whether it will work."

This is in accordance with previous findings, which demonstrated principals took on a directive leadership approach for certain decisions which did not allow for flexibility such as those related to COVID-19 protocols (Thronton, 2021) however, in general, educational leaders during the pandemic have tended to default to a form of distributed leadership in order to collaborate with and learn from others within their networks (Azorín et al., 2020). In this way, leaders are relying on collective wisdom, originating from both within and outside of their school, to be proactive in their decision-making as it relates to Covid-19 within their schools (McLeod & Dulky, 2020). Furthermore, such an approach builds trust and confidence within the school community, a necessity when trying to lead through crisis and uncertainty (Thornton, 2021). However, as with much of the activities lead during the pandemic, establishing networking opportunities and distributing leadership across the school was not without its challenges. For instance, Fernanda reports that networking has

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been made more difficult during the pandemic as informal meetings are no longer possible. In fact, she expresses

> "We have to rethink and review our networking with colleagues. Before, we found someone, we met with them face-to-face, we had time to have exchanges and chats. Now that everything is online, it is difficult. However, I still take time to validate or verify some things with others from other leaders and with teachers".

As stated, despite the challenges faced in establishing networking and communication challenges while respecting the social distancing measures put in place by the province, these practices remained invaluable to the participants. To illustrate, Melinda states

> "Networking influences my decision-making. The team spirit with my colleagues and vice-principals. I see them everyday, our offices are one next to the other so we mobilize ourselves, we consult with each other, and if we are not in-person, we meet virtually. I also meet with the teachers and walk around the school".

Similarly, Tarek expresses how networking and distributed decision-making is of great use to him given the fact that he is new in his role and was appointed to his position during a crisis:

> "Networking is absolutely essential, particularly in the time of the pandemic and as it is my first year as principal it is important for me to consult with my colleagues. I am a member of a group of principals in the region who are working in minority settings with very little francophones and services. We live the same challenges so for us, we chat on a daily or quasi-daily basis whether it be about discipline, management of staff, finances, pedagogies, everything."

These findings are concurrent with research which shows that distributing leadership allows educational leaders to incorporate alternative viewpoints into their decision-making, a significant benefit when leading schools through a crisis (Powley & Taylor, 2014). Furthermore, networking with other educational leaders allows principals to build a collaborative culture and to distribute their leadership not only within their own establishment but also across and outside their organization (DuBrin, 2013; Leithwood et al., 2020). Within the context of COVID-19, the pandemic has caused leadership roles to be revisited (Harris, 2020) and work towards using distributed leadership to empower staff, cooperate within and outside the school community (Mazurkiewicz, 2021) to take critical decisions which will work towards shaping the future of their institutions and ensure the safety of their school community (Dumulescu & Mutiu, 2021).

Discussion of Findings: Contribution to Higher Education Leadership Community

Prior to the pandemic, higher educational institutions have relied on century old practices and have been generally slow to change and evolve (Devitis & Sasso, 2018). However, similar to the disruption caused within K-12 schools, the higher education community saw widespread disruptions in its day-to-day activities due to the high spread of the COVID-19 virus. As a result, the pandemic forced higher education institutions to swiftly implement

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various institutional changes such as a move to online learning (Al-Areibi et al., 2022) and asking students to leave on-campus housing to decrease the spread of the virus within the university's community (Ramlo, 2021). In this way, educational leaders within higher education institutions, just like the principals in the present study, had to respond quickly to the evolving COVID-19 pandemic to ensure the continuity of education within their establishments while respecting imposed social isolation and distancing measures (Denisov et al., 2021). Moreover, while courses within most field of studies could be easily converted to e-learning, for other practical and clinical courses the disruption of the pandemic was more deeply felt as in-person practica had to be redesigned to respect governmental guidelines and health protocols (Kahn et al., 2021). As such, higher education leaders also had to re-invent the ways in which they managed their institutions (Denisov et al., 2021) all while having little to no guidance to aid them in their decision-making (Miller, 2021).

Such radical changes in education delivery brought about concerns regarding students' confidence in their learning and competence (Lasheras et al., 2020), impacting the overall psychological health of the university community. Indeed, as experienced within K-12 schools in our study, higher educational institutions saw a decrease in the psychological well-being of students and staff. This trend is in part due to the prolonged social isolation experienced during the pandemic, that cause increased stress, anxiety, depression, as well as other negative emotions (Anglim & Horwood, 2021). Hence, educational leaders of higher educational institutions had to take into consideration the mental health aspect of their community in their decision-making. A further parallel issue faced by educational leaders in both K-12 schools in our study and universities regarded the delivery of education. As previously mentioned, university shifted their education to e-learning through the use of both synchronous and asynchronous classes (Al-Areibi et al., 2022).

Evidently, this move put students at risk of experiencing a digital divide through inability to afford a computer, laptop, or other technology as well as reliable access to the Internet (Jena, 2020). Another aspect influencing the quality of e-learning was seen in the digital literacy of both students and instructors (Carolan et al., 2020) whereby attitudes toward technology as well as comfort in using such technologies directly impacted student motivation for learning and student achievement within higher education (Nunez-Canal et al., 2022). As such, leaders had to ensure equitable access to e-learning, modernization of IT infrastructure to host increased online activities. They also had to provide the necessary support and training to both instructors and teachers so as to make efficient use of technology in their teaching and learning.

To better address these complex issues, many scholars have advocated that higher educational leaders make use of distributed leadership models. Traditionally, leaders of universities and colleges have made use of a top-down decision-making approach and, in the case of the pandemic, some retained this approach to manage their institution through the crisis (Ma et al., 2021). Yet, such an approach which excludes collaborative decision-making may result in a lack of consideration and understanding of the student learning experience (Miller, 2021) thereby implementing suboptimal solutions to the issues arising throughout the pandemic. To maximize outcomes, Kezar and Holcombe (2017) advocate for a distributed leadership that facilitates a shared governance and allows for higher education institutions to adapt and innovate their practices to the needs of their community. In this way, distributed leadership in a higher education setting allows the inclusion of

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multiple professionals and staff members and leverages their expertise to ensure equitable learning opportunities for all students (Jones et al., 2014), as seen in the findings of our current study. Additionally, Schlesselman et al. (2020) support the incorporation of frequent conversations between faculty and students to better adapt interventions and decision-making to meet the needs of the learning community. Such connections and networking opportunities allows for organizational change to be felt more meaningfully for all involved (Dumulescu & Mutiu, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic has made a significant changes in higher education, some of which will most likely remain as we move into the post-pandemic world (Kahn et al., 2021). For instance, (Dennis, 2021) demonstrate that more and more universities and colleges are moving towards implementing hybrid and online courses. As such, educational leaders need to adapt and rethink their leadership styles (Kachra & Brown, 2020) in order to increase equitable educational access for all students. The findings of this study suggest that leaders should:

- Seek to provide staff and students with the resources needed to meaningfully engage in the learning process;
- Establish networks both with students and with staff to increase transparency and communication within the institution;
- Make use of distributed leadership models to better understand and address the needs of the university community.

Through such practices, educational leaders within higher education institution can more aptly respond to crisis and change within the establishments and work towards better understanding the specificities of complex and novel situations such as those brought forth by the pandemic.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has produced many novel challenges for educational leaders, such as ensuring the well-being of staff and students (Hadar et al., 2020) with little consistency in guidelines from public health and educational organizations. The findings of this study provides empirical evidence highlighting the various struggles and challenges faced by educational leaders and demonstrating the protective nature of distributed leadership practices and networking when faced with a potentially life-threatening crisis. The study also provides insights as to the resources needed to support educational leaders within our community such as through the provision of additional human as well as training resources to aid them in addressing these concerns. Nonetheless, despite the lack of resources and the unique challenges they face, the participants showed resilience in their decision-making practices which helped them to better understand the scope of the problems they were facing within their schools.

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Human Participants

All human participants provided informed consent prior to being interviewed. The research project was approved by the University of Ottawa's Research Ethics Board (REB). All procedures were in accordance with the ethical standards of the University of Ottawa's REB.

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