

Exploring the Impact of Leadership Practices during the COVID-19 Pandemic on Malaysian Primary School Principals' Initial Knowledge and Emotional Well-being

Lokman Mohd Tahir¹, Mohammed Borhandden Musah², Roslizam bin Hassan³, Adnan Mohammad Farah⁴, Shafeeq Hussain Al-Hudawi⁵, Hassen Hussain Altalhi⁶

Abstract

During the pandemic, school principals have had to reassess their leadership practices to support the well-being of teachers and students while concurrently enhancing online learning sessions. This study explores the initial knowledge of primary school principals in leading during crisis situations and their emotional experiences while managing primary schools amid the pandemic. Seventeen primary principals were interviewed using Google Meet due to lockdown and movement restriction orders (MCO). The findings revealed that primary principals' exposure to a pandemic situation had been largely theoretically-based. While the pandemic has caused anxiety and stress, principals have received collaborative decision-making support from teachers. Despite the challenges, principals noted that the pandemic enriched their new leadership experiences, knowledge, and skills in crisis management.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, initial knowledge, leading change, primary schools, Malaysia.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has abruptly closed schools, impacting teaching and learning (Marshall, Pressley, & Love, 2022; Rincones, Peña, & Canaba, 2021; Zhao, 2020; Fahy et al., 2020). UNESCO (2020) indicated that 90% or 1.6 billion students in the world were absent from schools due to this unprecedented challenge (Harris & Jones, 2020; Zhao, 2020). Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted schooling (Harris & Jones, 2020) and created 'undeniable chaos' within education (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2020). Due to the school closure, teaching and learning were delivered through digital-based learning using distance, blended and hybrid learning platforms (Biag et al., 2021; Sahlberg, 2020; Igbokwe et al., 2020).

During the pandemic, principals need to ensure that the learning process is uninterrupted despite schools being forced to close (Stone-Johnson & Miles, 2020). This has increased their workload as they seek to ensure that the new arrangements are being realised using the online platform (Gonzalez et al., 2020; Harris, 2020; Hayes et al., 2021) whilst

¹ Associate Professor at the School of Education, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia

² Assistant Professor at the Education Studies Department, Bahrain Teachers College, University of Bahrain, Kingdom of Bahrain

³ Senior Lecturer at the School of Education, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia

⁴ Professor of Counseling Psychology at Bahrain Teachers College, University of Bahrain

⁵ Assistant Professor at Yanbu Industrial College, Royal Commission of Yanbu Colleges and Institutes, Saudi Arabia

⁶ Associate Professor at Management Science Department, Yanbu Industrial College, Royal Commission for Jubail and Yanbu (RCYCI), Yanbu Industrial City, Saudi Arabia

safeguarding teachers' and students' wellbeing and health through stringent procedures and social distancing (Bubb & Jones, 2020; OECD, 2020; Kaul et al., 2020; Harris & Jones, 2020). Principals also have to deliver the learning modules whilst motivating the students, parents, staff and teachers who have been affected by the pandemic (Marshall, Pressley, & Love, 2022; Stone-Johnson & Weiner, 2020; Bubb & Jones, 2020; Gonzalez et al., 2020; Harris, 2020; OECD, 2020; Walker, Sharp & Sims, 2020).

COVID-19 in schools: the Malaysian context

The pandemic has affected schooling systems globally and interrupted normal schooling (Nally, 2022; Kafa & Pashiardis, 2020). Schools in Malaysia were not excluded from this challenge. The COVID-19 virus was declared a pandemic in Malaysia on 30 January 2020 (Ahmed et al., 2021) by the Ministry of Health, Malaysia. In order to stop contagion, the Malaysian government decided to close all schools to ensure that COVID-19 do not affect students (See et al., 2020) and enforced a strict social distancing policy (Sia & Adamu, 2021). At the same time, the government announced movement control orders (MCO) and lockdowns which applied to all Malaysians (Abdullah et al., 2020) and learning activities were stopped in schools and universities. The Malaysian government enforced the MCO starting from 18 March to 31 March 2020 for MCO Phase 1, MCO Phase 2 ran from 1 to 14 April 2020 and extended to MCO Phase 3 from 15 to 28 April. Subsequently, MCO Phase 4 lasted from April 29 to May 12 (Bahtiar et al., 2020). The lockdown situation which halted all learning activities lasted until 24th June 2020.

On 24th June 2020, the re-opening of all schools was announced so that student- teacher face-to-face sessions could resume. Despite this, school leaders and teachers were urged to comply with the stringent procedures prearranged by the Ministry of Education (MOE) and the Ministry of Health, Malaysia (MOH) (Malay Mail, 2020). In ensuring the schools complied with the standard operational procedure (SOP), school leaders and teachers held an initial meeting before the schools re-opened. In this meeting, principals explained to teachers the stringent procedures with which they needed to comply. In this critical situation, parents had the choice to send their children to school amid COVID-19 concerns. The Ministry of Health (MOH) and Ministry of Education (MOE) introduced the 'new normal' SOP, incorporated into the school's health and safety policy (Ubaidullah et al., 2021).

The study's gaps

The main premise for this study deals with a question whether Malaysian principals have been taught about leading their schools in times of crisis. This question leads to the principals' leadership preparation programme in Malaysia whether formally through the NPQEL (National Professional Qualification for Educational Leaders), the previous leadership development programme - the NPQH (National Professional Qualification for Headship) - or informally through short courses and workshops. There is a debate about whether primary principals in Malaysia have the knowledge and skills to lead schools during a crisis or turbulent situation and whether they have been exposed to, or been taught, any topics related to leading in a crisis situation either formally (NPQEL or NPQH) or informally. Previous studies have generally shown negative outcomes, highlighting that principals are inadequately prepared to lead during crises. Insufficient exposure during their leadership preparation programs has been identified as a key factor. Researchers have pointed out this omission, emphasizing the need for changes and amendments to the content of leadership preparation programs to address this issue (Tahir et al., 2023; Virella & Cobb, 2021; Harris & Jones, 2020; McLeod & Dulskey, 2021; Kelley, 2020; Smith & Riley, 2012; Ulrick et al., 2021).

The next gap is focusing on principals' emotional reactions while leading schools during the COVID-19 situation, which is also under-explored in the Malaysian principalship context. Past researchers abroad have pointed to the feelings of anxiety, unease, and stress experienced by principals dealing with COVID-19 within the UK (Kelley, 2020), Ireland

(Fahy et al., 2020), Greece (Spyropoulou & Koutroukis, 2021) and Sweden (Ahlström et al., 2020), but there are none from Malaysian schools. Principals experience stress, pressure, and anxiety due to several reasons. First, they face an increased workload while implementing 'new normal' precautionary measures in line with SOP guidelines. Furthermore, they must ensure uninterrupted online teaching and learning, despite limited equipment and digital competencies among teachers and principals. Despite these challenges, principals strive to find solutions that enable students to continue learning (Spyropoulou & Koutroukis, 2021; Anderson et al., 2020; Argyropoulou et al., 2021). Previous studies have reported on the extra workload experienced by principals to ensure that the new arrangements were being implemented through the online platform (Gonzalez et al., 2020; Harris, 2020; Hayes et al., 2021) whilst at the same time safeguarding teachers' and students' wellbeing (Bubb & Jones, 2020; OECD, 2020; Kaul et al., 2020; Harris & Jones, 2020). Second, principals' reasons for feeling anxious derived from their concerns to prevent any infections or reported cases in schools. However, there is no study on the emotional feelings of Malaysian principals while leading their school during the COVID-19 pandemic which gives rise to some important questions. Did principals experience anxiety and feel overwhelmed in ensuring their schools are free from any positive cases? Second, did they feel pressure or stress due to the extra workload required of them in complying with the standard SOP?

The study's aims

Many previous studies within the local setting focused on students' difficulties in learning during COVID-19 and left the school leadership practices during a pandemic situation unexplored. This study tries to explore principals' leadership experiences by addressing five pertinent research questions:

- (a) Do principals have the initial knowledge to lead schools during a crisis situation?
- (b) What are the emotional feelings that principals have experienced during COVID-19?

Reviewing the literatures

Initial knowledge, training or experience of leading during a crisis

As a school leader, principals should initially be exposed to leadership during critical situations by equipping them with the relevant experience of working under pressure (Schlafer, 2009). Such experience and exposure will be employed by principals in addressing complex and challenging problems that require immediate action to solve them (Robinson, 2017; Elliot & Hollingsworth, 2020). Hence, the role of principal is essential during a critical situation to implement the school's rules and policies which impact on its health and safety (Booren & Handy, 2009; Rashid et al., 2021). Hence, principals need to be exposed to changing and uncertain situations where their capacity to manage school and student performance is vital (Jensen et al., 2017). If principals were fortified with experiences, knowledge and skills appropriate to uncertain situations, they would have the capacity to understand and analyse a situation, think of effective actions and strategies and undertake decision-making and appropriate actions (Cunningham et al., 2019; Elliot & Hollingsworth, 2020). Thus, principals must be prepared with the initial knowledge and experiences to lead and guide their schools in multiple areas, including crisis situations (Parks, 2013). In this sense, Coombs (2004) stressed that there is still little information-sharing and training that will prepare organisational leaders to lead their institutions during a crisis.

Although initial knowledge, or having exposure and experience of leading their schools during crisis situations is considered critical, previous studies have mentioned the lack of such exposure given to principals. According to Virella and Cobb (2021), principals lack

the specific training to manage their school efficiently during crisis situations. In facing challenges during a critical situation, principals relied on the role of their institutions' support programmes and their prior preparatory experience to prepare them for leading their schools' change process when meeting enormous demands. Furthermore, McLeod and Dulsky (2021) opined that the global pandemic has created an unprecedented challenge to principals. Thus, principals are seen in terms of their experience and knowledge of dealing with a large-scale crisis, such as the pandemic, which has forced schools to close (McLeod & Dulsky, 2021). In this sense, the situation of the COVID-19 pandemic has emphasised the deficiencies in the principals' preparation programmes which lack crisis leadership content (McLeod & Dulsky, 2021).

Likewise, Harris and Jones (2020) suggested changing and re-thinking aspects of the content of the leadership training and preparatory programmes aimed to assist aspiring principals in facing tremendous challenges and crisis situations which are taxing and demanding (Harris & Jones, 2020; Ulrick et al., 2021). Thus, the leadership preparation programmes should be re-focused not just on instructional aspects but also on the need to re-orient towards the role of principals as a school's caretaker during impending turbulence, unexpected crises and emergency situations (Ulrick et al., 2021). In addition, emphasis should also be given to principals' self-care and that of their followers as an aspect of management and leadership in crisis situations (Ray et al., 2020; Ulrick et al., 2021).

Principals' feeling experienced from the pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has also resulted in issues for school leaders' mental health and stress experiences. Both teachers and principals faced the same challenges when trying to balance and adapt to new ways of living and working. At the same time, they have to manage others and their fears, stress and uncertainties (Spyropoulou & Koutroukis, 2021). Kelley (2020) disclosed that English school leaders experienced increased stress and disruption due to their additional workload when dealing with students' parents, managing teachers and dealing with stakeholders and education officers. They also mentioned a lack of sleep and receiving less emotional and practical support.

In Ireland, principals experienced intense situations when they were emotionally exhausted and felt isolated and disconnected (Fahy et al., 2020). Swedish principals also shared the challenges faced when dealing with pupils', staff members' and parents' anxiety; a constant state of uncertainty and the 'ones left behind' (Ahlström et al., 2020). Meanwhile, in Manitoba schools, Hauseman et al. (2020) shared principals' challenges related to access to technology and remote learning to support students' learning whilst fulfilling their needs in an environment that limits social interactions. In this sense, Anderson et al. (2020) disclosed that principals experienced high levels of stress due to various factors linked to school closure, online instruction, other school-provided services and, lastly, ensuring students access to the internet. With similar findings, Reid (2021) disclosed from a study with 31 principals from New Jersey (USA) that the stress experiences during the pandemic resulted from their efforts in providing motivation and supporting the school community, especially teachers and parents. Second, principals also need to be involved in activities outside their school premises to support communities feeling stressed and anxious.

Thus, in the context of Malaysian schools, we are still unsure about two major elements related to principals' initial knowledge on leading during COVID-19. Second, a detailed understanding of principals' emotional feelings when leading their schools during the COVID-19 pandemic, which is considered to be a critical crisis situation.

Methodology

Participants

A total of 17 primary principals were purposively selected due to the lockdown and MCOs which restricted the researchers' opportunities to collect data (Reyes-Guerra et al., 2021) in the field. Before being interviewed, principals were informed of the study's objectives, data limitations and confidentiality (Tengku Ariffin, Bush, Nordin, 2018). All selected principals were given their verbatim and assurance that data obtained in this study would be used only for its purposes and objectives (Bryman, 2012). Principals were also given the option of withdrawing at any time if they decided not to participate in the study.

Principals from primary schools were chosen as participants in this study for specific reasons. First, they were required to have a minimum ICT competency, demonstrated by their ability to use Google Meet for interviews. Researchers assessed their ICT competencies before selecting them. Second, public principals were selected from schools with above average or excellent academic achievements, recommended by their state department of education. For private schools, principals were purposely chosen based on their schools' previous good achievements in public examinations. It is crucial for researchers to select participants capable of providing information and having relevant experience to answer the research questions (Patton, 2015). Thus, purposive sampling is an appropriate sampling strategy for selecting participants (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2010). A total of 14 public primary principals and three private school principals in urban areas were purposively selected.

Principals from different leadership trajectories and demographics were selected to obtain a heterogeneous sample with a range of leadership experiences to allow comparison (Palinkas et al., 2016; Tengku Ariffin, Bush, Nordin, 2018). Of the 17 primary principals, eight were from rural areas, and the other nine from urban areas. In terms of gender, eight primary principals were female and the other nine males. As for academic qualifications, 15 held bachelor degrees and two had master's degrees. Based on their leadership experience, three primary principals were categorised as novice principals, while another 14 were categorised as middle and senior principals in terms of their career trajectories (Refer Table 1). These principals were selected to obtain insights and in-depth explanations regarding their leadership experiences during the MCOs.

Instrumentation

The main instrument for this study is the interview protocol which is meant to capture principals' initial exposure and their emotional feedback during COVID-19. Interviews were chosen as the data collection approach since they reflect and help to evaluate participants' experience and feedback (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018). Through interviews, participants can share their experiences and standpoints based on certain events or situations (Denscombe, 2010).

Constructing the items for the interview protocol involved two major phases. First, in developing items for principals' initial knowledge and experience of leading during a crisis situation were identified based on a discussion with principals who have experience leading schools during COVID-19. Second, items were later checked, reviewed, refined and finalised to ensure that only relevant items were chosen. In selecting the items, emphasis was given to item statements that address the study's topics and issues (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). There were three items that underwent changes before being finalised. The final outcome resulted in only three items that address questions relevant to the study being used in the pilot study.

To ensure the validity of the items, a pilot study was conducted with two principals whom were excluded from the actual study. Items were also simplified to provide principals with a better understanding. The actual online interview sessions were conducted using

the Malay language and in informal situations to provide a comfortable setting. The questions that were asked during the online interview are: (a) Did you have initial exposure on how to lead in a crisis situation? (b) If yes, what would be the exposure that you received? and (c) what did you feel when leading your school during COVID-19?. All interview sessions were tape-recorded with principals' consent using a video recording device. Two principals were reluctant, so researchers made sketch notes based on their answers (Cheng & Szeto, 2016).

Data collection and analysis

The interview sessions consisted of an online interview (an 'e-interview') since the MCOs in Malaysia limited face-to-face sessions. Further, through online sessions, data were collected using Google Meet as the interviewing platform due to difficulty meeting the geographically dispersed participants face-to-face (Salmons, 2012; Beauchamp et al., 2021). Salmons (2012) contends that the e-interview allows interaction to occur using computer-based communication. During COVID-19, it was not feasible to conduct face-to-face observations (Reyes-Guerra et al., 2021; Beauchamp et al., 2021).

To analyse the online interview data, a multi-phase thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) was conducted. In the first phase, all interview data were transformed into transcripts. Next, all transcripts were re-read at least twice. The process of reading was conducted to understand and capture the principals' ideas, meanings and reasons and to become familiar with the data (Merriam, 1998). In the second phase, the thematic coding method was applied to analyse the qualitative interview data. The codes were later decided and labelled after reading the transcripts. Codes were given to the transcripts on a line-by-line basis. In this phase, the transcripts were given the preliminary codes. After completing the preliminary codes, the next process was merging some of them into the next level of the coding process called the 'final code' (Saldana, 2013). The process of coding enables researchers to organise and group similar coded data into categories or "families" because they share the same characteristics (Saldana, 2013). Next, all final codes were discussed, reviewed and checked and those with shared or very similar meanings merged. This process was conducted following Patton (2015) to reduce the number of codes with similar meanings and, later, to construct the framework (Noman et al., 2017; Noman et al., 2018; Richards & Morse, 2007). Third, themes were then developed based on the shared meanings that emerged from the codes. Furthermore, themes were checked and reviewed again to ensure the relevance of the derived themes and a comprehensive understanding of the views within the interview data.

In securing the credibility of this interview data, important precautions were taken to secure its reliability and validity. First, three co-raters were asked to assess all transcriptions which later indicated a value of 0.77, indicating considerable acceptance based on kappa statistics (Landis & Koch, 1977; Norman et al., 2017). Second, an online debriefing process was conducted with three experts in school leadership which resulted in satisfactory comments. Third, to improve the data validity, transcripts were returned to principals by email to secure agreement on the accuracy of the interview data (Bush, 2012).

Ethics in research

In this study, the research ethics were addressed based on the concept of anonymity and confidentiality for all human participants (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). The element of confidentiality means that participants' identities cannot be revealed to, and need to be kept hidden from, anyone outside the study (Johnson & Christensen, 2014; Saunders, Kitzinger & Kitzinger, 2015). The second element is anonymity which refers to the concept of not exposing the true identity of the participants involved in the study (Johnson & Christensen, 2014; Saunders, Kitzinger & Kitzinger, 2015). Thus, in this study, researchers are responsible for not exposing any information related to the participants which includes their names, the school's name, their email address and

relevant information that might lead to participants' identification. Thus, pseudonyms, e.g. 'P1' to 'P17', were employed to replace the true identities of the principals. The names of the schools were also substituted by pseudonyms.

Findings

The discussion of the findings was predominantly based on the emerging themes obtained from transcripts concerning principals' initial exposure and their feelings when leading their schools during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Initial exposure to leading during a crisis situation

In terms of principals' initial knowledge about leading during a crisis situation, the study found that a majority of the studied principals had little exposure. According to principals, they were taught how to lead during a crisis under the framework of risk management. Most of them commented on the least exposure obtained from their leadership preparation programmes. During interviews, principals disclosed that the contents or syllabus seemed too theoretical and did not emphasise practical aspects. Second, the concept of leading during a critical situation was conceptualised in terms of social and disciplinary issues such as gangsterism and bullying or situations that threaten the school's disciplinary system. In fact, little exposure was provided on how to lead during a pandemic, environmental mishaps and natural disaster threats such as floods.

Based on principals' responses, most claimed that they were initially exposed to practical aspects and the need to know how to lead during a crisis. During interviews, principals did mention that they were exposed to how to lead their schools in a critical situation from the leadership preparation programmes they had attended. When further asked, principals admitted that the contents of these sessions had been limited and mainly focused on how to lead their schools when facing critical situations such as gangsterism and other disciplinary threats. Thus, principals were unsure about leading during a pandemic situation. A principal explained the initial exposure that they had obtained;

"Yes, I remembered there is a session on how to lead our schools during a critical situation. Nevertheless, I think it was referred to improving your schools when in a critical situation such as gangsterism etc. In terms of a pandemic, I'm not sure on that." (P9).

Another principal supported the claim that they had obtained exposure during their leadership preparation programme. However, the principal admitted the lack of practical information. Principal 10 remembered that a lesson was provided to them; nevertheless Principal 10 commented on the lack of practical information. Principal 10 shared the initial knowledge that they had obtained previously.

"I once remembered that we were trained on how to continue leading although in a crisis when attending a course on school leadership. Nevertheless, the situation was on a small scale such as how to make a turnaround of your school performance. This pandemic is considered macro when it involves the whole schooling system, not only in Malaysia but also in other countries. In terms of practice, we have limited experiences." (P10).

Likewise, another principal mentioned that they received initial exposure from previous courses that they had attended. Nevertheless, principals seemed critical when explaining that content, which to them was solely theoretical. Thus, principals felt least proficient in terms of practical aspects of leading during a pandemic situation such as COVID-19.

"I have been exposed to how to lead during a crisis. As for me, the initial exposure was too theoretical and you can't really experience the actual situation like what we have experienced now during the real pandemic. As for me, to be positive, although the

situation is challenging, I think we obtained a remarkable experience in leading schools during a crisis.” (P14).

“Yes, we have a topic on that which was taught under the framework of risk management. However, the focus very much emphasised students’ social issues such as gangsterism or bullying. We least discussed how to lead during natural disasters such as the pandemic which we experienced now, natural disasters such as floods. As for principals from other states in Malaysia, I think they experienced the heavy floods at the end of the year during the rainy session. I think it was at least three or four years ago.” (P9).

In contrast, three rural principals admitted that they have little knowledge about leading during a critical situation. Nevertheless, they had an actual experience when their schools were involved with heavy flooding a few years ago. This actual experience has provided principals with skills on how to lead schools during the pandemic. A rural principal shared the initial experiences;

“In terms of knowledge, I personally don’t have much knowledge on that particular topic. I think I have learned that under the risk management framework. But I still remember my school was being flooded due to a heavy raining session. Thus, as principal, I have to be a resource person to my teachers, parents and students. In fact, I have to emphasise their welfare since most of my students are from nearby villages. I think the situation is almost the same. We don’t have our schooling session. In fact, our schools were used as a temporary place for the flood victims.” (P5).

The principals’ transcripts disclosed that a majority of primary principals have limited knowledge and practical information about leading during a critical situation. However, they felt that they had at least been exposed to other critical situations such as natural disasters e.g. floods.

Principals’ feelings while leading schools during COVID-19

The unexpected COVID-19 virus has had major effects on the practice of school leadership by the principals in this study causing them to experience intense, overwhelming stress during the pandemic. The reasons for this stress were due to the extra workload and tasks given to them in order to protect or safeguard their students’ safety, health and well-being. Second, principals were feeling anxious to avoid COVID-19 positive cases their schools.

Intensity and stress

A newly appointed principal admitted that leading a school during the pandemic was hard due to her lack of experience and as yet imperfect understanding of the school’s culture. In explaining the reasons for feeling stressed, Principal P3 mentioned the increased number of tasks given which she had to comply. The second reason was related to being newly appointed, a new member of the school and still learning the school culture. These challenges left her intensely stressed;

“This unexpected pandemic indeed delivered a great blow to me personally. This is because I had just been appointed as a principal at this school 4 months back. When I reported to this new school, the MCO for session 2.0 was about to finish. I can’t deny that I felt a little stressed and tired with the increase in tasks [for] managing and leading the school. Moreover, I still did not know and understand the work pattern of the people of this school.” (P3).

Likewise, another principal revealed the overwhelming pressure due to the extra-workload arising from the stringent SOP with which they had to comply during the pandemic. The situation became critical when it was announced that all schools were to reopen with face-to-face learning sessions. The extra workload experienced during the pandemic included various tasks that they needed to execute. First, principals needed to ensure that all teachers were implementing the standard SOP provided by the MOH.

Second, principals needed to ensure that students were also adhering to the SOPs: social distancing, wearing face masks, sitting one metre away from their friends, not dining in the school canteen and not gathering in small groups inside or outside the school premises. Third, students' disciplinary issues and instructional practices were to proceed as usual. As for Principal 8, handling students' affairs such as asking them to wear face masks and practise social distancing, and handling student health issues were challenges that arose as schools re-opened. However, Principal 8 was being positive when emphasising that, as school leaders, they are required to know how to manage their stress.

“In the first wave of the pandemic, I felt the pressure due to the extra workload, including the various SOPs that we had to follow. The challenging part is related to responsibilities in handling and managing students' affairs when schools were allowed to be opened. Nevertheless, as school leaders, we need to learn how to manage our stress as part of our challenge as school leaders.” (P8)

The situation was found to be similar for the private school principals interviewed. Two private school principals admitted that they experienced overwhelming stress due to increased workload during the COVID-19 pandemic. The increase workload referred to the tasks added to the school's health and safety SOP provided by the MOH such as taking students' temperatures, monitoring social distancing, wearing their face masks and frequently washing hands. Simultaneously, principals needed to monitor the improvements to the online teaching and learning sessions, social distancing and ensure that students were not creating small crowds while in school. Nevertheless, they had to accept it since it was their duty to stop the spread of COVID-19 in their schools.

“We truly understand the necessity and implications of the extra duties and how it is important to curb the spread of COVID-19. We also feel overwhelmed, tired and stressed handling the increased amount of workload and pressure.” (P16).

Likewise, another principal revealed that they felt anxious because they had to be extra cautious in ensuring that students are complying with the SOP. Most of them are still considered immature and need to be monitored.

“Felt worried, because this primary school is not the same kind of students as at the secondary school. We must be extra careful in monitoring our students. In primary school, we need extra efforts because they are still small kids and not easy for us to handle. They do not understand, their minds are unreachable and we need to be very patient. Think of this as a trust and a responsibility.” (P9).

During interviews, principals also mentioned that the extra workload was experienced not only by principals but also teachers. First, principals did mention the teachers with low competence in ICT for whom schools had to provide extra guidance. Second, teachers also needed to remind students and parents of the school's assessment sessions and insist that students join them.

“Due to the school closure, teachers are having their online classes. Not all teachers are good in ICT. Some of them are not familiar with ICT. Thus, we need to provide them with [an] ICT course. During the school's assessment time, it was another critical situation when teachers need to call students to join the sessions. In fact, we have to call their parents if the students are not joining our assessment session.” (P8).

Feeling anxious and worried

Principals experienced worry and anxiety when school reopening was announced, particularly due to the effort required to prevent positive COVID-19 cases and avoid school closures. The emphasis on students' health and safety added to their concerns. Additionally, ensuring social distancing among students at school was seen as a challenging task. Two principals specifically expressed worry about the potential transmission of the virus through social interactions during school hours. However, they

maintained a pragmatic approach and believed that following the procedures outlined by the Ministry of Health (MOH) would protect their students.

“As a school leader, of course I feel anxious and worried about the health and safety of our students and teachers. I need to figure out how to ensure the school can operate in a safe condition so all school members stay healthy because this pandemic cannot be seen.” (P10).

“Similar with other school leaders, I’m worried and apprehensive in making sure that all teachers and students were spared from COVID-19 infection. I believe through the strict implementation of SOPs and our togetherness; we will be able to facilitate the smooth running of school sessions and be able to stay away from this contagious epidemic in the school community.” (P4).

Another principal shared their unease about the challenge of ensuring that all primary school students comply with the SOP.

“...most of our students are immature. It is not easy to ask them to practise social distancing and wearing their face masks. They like playing and talking to their friends. I noticed that some of them were losing their face masks. The ‘new normal procedure’ was not easy for them to absorb as primary school students.” (P6).

One principal from a rural school stressed the extra-workload required to ensure that only students without symptoms could enter the school’s premises. It was a challenge when many students came to school using the school buses and vans and many students were not adhering to the SOP.

“I have to ensure only students without any illness were allowed to enter the school’s premises. Some of them came to school on the school’s buses and vans. Although the SOP was emphasised, it is not an easy task to ask all primary school children to adhere to the SOP.” (P7).

Discussion

This study aimed to examine principals' initial leadership knowledge during the 'new normal' of the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, it sought to investigate their emotional experiences while leading schools in crisis situations.

Principals’ initial knowledge of leading during a crisis.

When asking principals about whether they have any initial knowledge about leading during a crisis situation, the majority responded that they had minimal knowledge. During interviews, most principals replied that they have been taught about the concept of leading a school during critical situations under the risk management framework. Nevertheless, some rural principals spoke of the initial and actual experiences related to heavy floods within their districts. In such situations, the school sessions were halted after receiving the official instruction from the state department of education. These initial experiences provided them with profitable experience of leading their schools during a critical situation such as the pandemic.

In discussing their limited knowledge, experiences and skills on how to lead during a critical or crisis situation, the challenges arose from the formal and/or informal content of their leadership preparation programme. In general, based on the transcripts of principals’ interviews, these findings proved that Malaysian primary principals received little exposure or limited knowledge about how to lead their schools during a critical situation such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, there were principals whose own initial experiences of leading during a critical situation included the heavy floods which prevented them from operating their school normally. These findings were congruent with previous opinions that principals were not prepared for, or had little knowledge about,

how to lead their schools during crisis situations (Virella & Cobb, 2021; Harris & Jones, 2020; McLeod & Dulsky, 2021; Kelley, 2020; Smith & Riley, 2012; Ulrick et al., 2021).

Principals argued that their previous experience lacked practical content and did not align with the realities of the COVID-19 pandemic. The exposure they received mainly focused on social disputes, such as disciplinary issues and gangsterism, rather than environmental mishaps, natural disasters, and pandemic situations. Therefore, principals requested more practical-based knowledge and support from educational authorities to effectively lead their schools during crisis situations. Support programs would enable principals to acquire knowledge, skills, and problem-solving abilities to tackle challenges during critical times. This opportunity allows principals to be creative, devise preventative measures, take strategic actions, and make informed decisions for the benefit of their schools.

Reasonably, principals believed that experiencing the current COVID-19 pandemic situation has enriched their leadership knowledge, skills and capacities on how to lead schools during a crisis situation. As principals, they realised that they always need to be prepared for the critical circumstances that inevitably arise and influence schools. In practice, the crisis situations have exposed principals' learning experiences on how to respond effectively to all inevitable challenges, utilising their best efforts and the skills of their workforce to adapt and change conditions and perform under-pressure (Tahir et al., 2024; Weiner et al., 2021; Dodgson, 1993).

Principals' emotional feelings during the pandemic

Unconsciously, the COVID-19 pandemic situation has occupied principals with feelings of anxiety and stress for two major reasons. First, the unexpected pandemic had caused principals stress and apprehension along with a drastically increased workload. The extra-workload received by principals and teachers arose from the SOP that schools and principals needed to implement when school re-opening was announced. The experience of stress and pressure also affected principals from the private schools in this study. Thus, principals and the school community were mandated to follow the SOP standards, which indirectly added to the workload of principals who were already undertaking onerous responsibilities during their normal schooling sessions. The situation was described as pressured and intense, especially for newly appointed or novice principals who were in the middle of adapting to the principalship position.

In leading their primary schools, principals also shared their feelings of anxiety about the 'extra' effort required in ensuring that all students complied with the standard SOP. All primary students were immature and required close monitoring by principals and teachers. Thus, they need to be patient in ensuring and guiding all students to comply with the new normal procedure. Adding to principals' workload arising from the SOP, they also needed to support those teachers whose competence with ICT was below the level required to conduct their classes online, a situation that was also stressful for the teachers involved. Furthermore, teachers also received the extra responsibility to call or inform students or their parents about the need to join the scheduled examination sessions. These findings correspond with previous findings in Ireland and England that principals experienced stress, emotional exhaustion and feelings of isolation and being disconnected during COVID-19 (Fahy et al., 2020; Kelley, 2020). In both studies, principals shared their difficulties in sleeping due to their pressures; nevertheless, they received little practical support from educational authorities (Kelley, 2020). In fact, as a principal, they also experiencing stress and disruptions due to their additional workload when they had to deal with parental anxiety (Ahlström et al., 2020; Reid, 2021), students and responses to inquiries from education officers (Kelley, 2020). The pressure situations arising from the heavy workload were similar to those of Swedish principals facing challenges when handling student, staff and parental anxieties about whether they were safeguarded and protected from the COVID-19 virus while they were in school (Ahlström

et al., 2020). In fact, Reid (2021) noted that principals also experienced stress when they cannot show their real stressful or intense feelings but had 'to keep a brave face' for the school community during the pandemic situation.

From studies, it was reported that principals were also experiencing stress, worry and disruptions to their mental health and well-being. The principals' feelings of anxiety and worry resulted from their awareness of their responsibility to safeguard teachers' and students' health and safety as their top priority. Thus, principals needed to monitor their students, teachers and the execution of the SOP to ensure that no positive cases occurred in school. Principals knew that ensuring students' compliance with the SOP would not be an easy task for various reasons: the high numbers of students attending schools, students' immature thinking and their fondness of play while meeting their friends. In response principals needed to upgrade their efforts to ensure that students adhered to the SOP. The feeling of uneasiness also resulted from another factor - students daily journey to school. Most students travelled in buses and vans and could easily become infected with the virus while on their way to schools. Although principals felt uncomfortable, stressed and/or uneasy, they needed to be calm and resilient when leading their schools during the pandemic. Thus, principals pragmatically believed that by adhering to the SOP, their schools would have no positive cases and their students would be protected from infection.

Practical implications

This section suggests practical implications. First, it is recommended that aspiring principals receive comprehensive training and preparation in leadership knowledge and skills necessary for crisis situations as part of their leadership preparatory program. Topics such as leading during a pandemic or crisis should be included to provide aspiring principals with a broader understanding and relevant content. Second, the syllabus should encompass various threats schools face today, including disciplinary issues, environmental mishaps, pandemics, and natural disasters like floods, to prepare principals for potential disruptions to the normal schooling system. Furthermore, incorporating practical exercises like case studies, simulations, and decision-making activities into leadership preparation programs or courses is crucial to give aspiring principals hands-on experience with real incidents and challenges.

In addition, principals who have faced various challenges such as heavy floods and the COVID-19 pandemic should be appointed as mentors who can share their valuable knowledge and skills. Moreover, aspiring principals should be taught how to adapt their approaches and take immediate action during critical situations. With exposure to this knowledge, they can select flexible leadership models that align with their school's culture. During a pandemic, principals play a crucial role in motivating and supporting front-line teachers to ensure that only symptom-free students are allowed on school premises. It has been reported that front-line teachers are particularly vulnerable to contracting the virus through interactions with students at the school entrance.

Conclusion

This small-scale study aims to investigate Malaysian primary principals' initial leadership knowledge and emotional experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is crucial considering the limited research on how Malaysian principals identify and implement relevant leadership approaches. The study contributes to understanding how Malaysian principals were prepared to lead their schools during critical situations while prioritizing the well-being of students and teachers. Principals have faced challenges in monitoring the school environment to ensure a safe learning environment, which has resulted in stress and anxiety.

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