

Chapter I

Research Background

1.1. Introduction

Agile leadership research and its implications have been the focus of attention since the COVID-19 outbreak. The crisis had forced organizations to address the emerging, novel challenges that came with the uncertain situations (Fitzpatrick, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic abruptly caused debilitating effects on the educational sector (Babbar and Gupta, 2021; Tang et al., 2021) with more than 90% students across the globe being heavily affected by the pandemic crisis (Zheng et al., 2022). The educational landscape has significantly shifted and the leaders' role had been redefined (Azorin, 2020) as crisis disrupts the established patterns and practices of organizations (Schechter et al., 2022). The uncertainty brought by the COVID – 19 made it challenging for educational leaders to properly assess the situations and decide the appropriate actions to take (Shehada et al., 2021). The pandemic crisis significantly affected changes in the educational organizations and their members, from students to teachers and school leaders (Zheng et al., 2022). With unexpected challenges emerged during a crisis, many school leaders are forced to tackle these novel challenges with limited prior knowledge (Thien and Adams, 2021).

The pandemic crisis had brought more attention to the role of school leaders and how their qualities as leaders can bring meaningful impacts to their organizations (Lawton-Misra and Pretorius, 2021). In the world before pandemic, a call for re-imagining leadership had been requested (Uhl-Bien, 2021) and when the pandemic hit, school leaders and policy makers need to reshape their ways of thinking and doing things

when leading under a crisis (Hulme et al., 2021). Different set of skills and behaviours are required to lead under a crisis (Striepe and Cunningham, 2022). Although the focus slowly shifted from handling the sudden disruption to the process of recovery by the end of 2021, focused efforts to keep the schools running smoothly is still very much needed (Brown and Nikolai, 2022). The pandemic crisis has brought an opportunity for a fresh change in the educational context along with innovation and new educational models (Yan, 2020). Innovative decisions are needed to be taken by academic leaders given the increased complexity that came with the crisis (Al-Dabbagh, 2020).

In handling the many obstacles during a crisis, leadership holds a key role. Much work regarding school leaders' responses in handling the crisis has been conceptual or theoretical rather than empirical. This creates a room for educational crisis leadership to derive more empirical evidence from the field especially during the pandemic crisis, where there have been no prior situations resembled this crisis magnitude in previous crisis leadership research. The implications caused by the pandemic in a long-term shall depend on school leaders' actions and how they mitigate the impacts and consequences derived from the pandemic crisis (Chen et al., 2021). Leaders hold a relevant role in helping their organizations and stakeholders to make sense and comprehend the aftermath of crises and the process during the crisis period (Sobral et al., 2020). Agile leadership quickly emerged as one of the most crucial elements in terms of leading under a crisis (Al Fannah et al., 2020). Agility is crucial for any organization to adapt with agility as the most crucial aspect (Appelbaum et al., 2017; Eliophotou, 2021). Agility has become one of the most required leadership qualities alongside with empathy and self-awareness (Lawton-Misra and Pretorius, 2021). Leadership agility means leading through change, inspiring resilience, and fostering positivity (Gerlach et al., 2020). Agile leadership offers uniqueness and adaptability

(Murfi et al, 2020). Agile leaders quickly adapt and reflect (Cleveland and Cleveland, 2020; Joiner, 2019) and they help their organizations to develop agility (Sugiharto, 2022). An agile leader navigates change effectively, allowing organizations to flourish amidst dynamic shifts. Being agile means that one can sense and anticipate change that occurs unexpectedly better and faster than their market competitors (Sadeghi and Kalantari, 2021). For research and learning opportunity, the COVID – 19's potential is undeniable (Sein, 2020). Researches about how the academic community such as the teachers, students and parents navigated their lives during a crisis had been conducted (Rahiem, 2020; Joshi et al., 2020) but the ones conducting them from the perspectives of school leaders and their leadership practices remains scant (Kruse et al., 2020). A gap on principal leadership practices and school leaders' responses in a time of crisis exists despite a considerable amount of literature about crisis leadership and leadership abilities in the stages of crisis (Thornton, 2021) with most crisis leadership research focuses mainly aimed at threats which are man-made instead of other types of crises (Fee, 2017). The support of literature that addresses the leadership agility development and process is still limited (Hu et al., 2020; Yuan et al., 2021) and the research gap in effective leadership under crisis situations needs to be filled (Bartsch et al., 2021).

When it comes to investigating leadership skills and competencies during a crisis, the studies are still underwhelmed (Harris and Jones, 2020). Thus, the urgency of viewing how leadership works under a crisis needs to be addressed (Wu et al., 2021). Most leadership research addressing crisis are conducted in normal setting and contexts and it is feared that the findings may not be applicable in the context of crises with its high disruptive nature and uncertainty, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis (Cho, 2020). Instructional leadership remains dominant in the current literature with less attention given to how leadership functions under a crisis, how they work, grow, and

achieve their goals with such pressing needs (Grissom, 2021). Leadership research involving crises is still relatively scarce, especially the ones that involved extreme shock to the system (Stoker et al., 2019) which is something that pandemic crisis context can fill in to the literature gap. It is paramount to study crisis leadership within organizations, considering the major impacts that the pandemic crisis has brought on society (Wenzel et al., 2021). Crisis provides an excellent learning opportunity for school principals and their organizations (Ramos-Pla et al., 2021). Analyzing how leaders make sense of the crisis is needed to gain more insights into the ways leaders handle themselves and their organizations in uncertain situations (Crayne and Medeiros, 2021). In handling the many obstacles during a crisis, leadership holds a key role. School leaders are faced with complex challenges during a crisis and how to deal with uncertainty (Grice, 2021). Much work regarding school leaders' responses in handling the crisis has been conceptual or theoretical rather than empirical. This creates a room for educational crisis leadership to derive more empirical evidence from the field especially during the pandemic crisis, where there have been no prior situations resembled this crisis magnitude in previous crisis leadership research.

School leadership agility during the pandemic crisis serves as the contextual backdrop for this study. The objective of this study is to discover how school leaders' agility contribute to the way their organizations handle the novel crisis and how the leaders engaged in their agility practices to handle the crisis. It is hoped that the outcome of the study will help generate an in-depth understanding, rich description, and new proposed framework of leadership agility during crisis.

1.2 Research Questions

The research process always generates the question in grounded theory and one of the main characteristics in grounded theory research is that it does not have specific narrow questions or hypotheses commonly found in quantitative method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Thus, the main questions proposed in this research are as follows:

1. How do the external and internal challenges arise during the crisis help shaped the school leaders' ability to be an agile leader?
2. How do the school leaders adapt their leadership practices to address the novel challenges arising from the pandemic crisis?
3. How do the school leaders lead their organizations to develop agility during a crisis?

1.3 Research Objective

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1.4 Research Significances

This study's significance highlights how the results of the research may help anchor our understanding of leadership agility in the educational context during a crisis. The study findings are expected to add practical understandings of the educational leadership by showing the multi-layered nature of leading during a crisis. The current

knowledge regarding how agile leaders tackle unprecedented crisis obstacles such as the COVID-19 pandemic is still scant and therefore, more studies on this topic may help school leaders in specific and other organizational leaders in general to better prepare for the next large-scale crises coming their way. From the point of view of research, how the agile school leaders make sense of crises and the implications for the organizational life can bring deeper insights and fresh perspectives on the leadership research. In context, this study advances the knowledge of school leadership agility practices when applied during a crisis and help identify the concept of leading in a crisis from its current understandings. Considering that crises often bring disruptive changes for any organization, having a theory framework that helps highlight agile, effective leadership agility strategies may help leaders and organizations to make easier transitions and adaptation to growth and innovation in the future, especially in the educational sector.

Every crisis is a process of transformation and to align with this transformation, assessing this new reality requires repositioning, rethinking, and relearning in school leaders. Since leadership agility is a learnt skill, it can be learned through continuous effort and determination. The findings of this research are expected to have meaningful implications for future school leaders' preparation and professional developments to readily equip them transition through post – crisis times. For the educational institutions, this research findings are hoped to help push for the pursuit of change and strategy involvement not only from the top – bottom level, but also from bottom – up and offer contributions that can help advance research in leadership agility in the context of handling crisis and agile transformation post – crisis.