

Leadership Challenges and Strategies During the Post-Pandemic

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Abstract

This study explored the leadership challenges and strategies of school heads in the National Capital Region during the post-pandemic transition, using Fiedler's Contingency Theory and Generative Interactions Theory. Through qualitative methods, the study identified three key dimensions: Situation (health and safety), Tasks (learning gaps, technology, curriculum), and People (leadership adaptability, stakeholder collaboration, professional development, mental health). In response, school heads implemented National Learning Recovery Program (NLRP) interventions, strengthened technology-driven instruction, and fostered collaboration. These

efforts led to enhanced professional development, psychosocial support, and resilience strategies. A visual conceptual map developed from the findings outlines four phases: Crisis Preparedness, Adaptive Leadership, Collaborative Governance, and Sustainable Innovation. The model offers a strategic framework to strengthen crisis response, leadership adaptability, stakeholder collaboration, and long-term educational reforms. It contributes to leadership development and crisis management, ensuring schools remain adaptive, responsive, and future-ready.

Keywords: Adaptive Leadership, Post-Pandemic Transition, Educational Leadership, Crisis Management, National Learning Recovery Program (NLRP), Digital Literacy, Resilience

I. INTRODUCTION

The post-pandemic educational landscape presented unprecedented leadership challenges, requiring school heads to drive recovery while ensuring stability, instructional quality, and resilience. After the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the end of the COVID-19 global health emergency on May 5, 2023, the Department of Education (DepEd) launched the National Learning Recovery Program (NLRP) through DepEd Order No. 013, s. 2023, complementing the Learning Recovery and Continuity Plan (LRCP). Aligned with the Basic Education Development Plan 2030 (BEDP 2030), the NLRP focuses on recovery, quality improvement, and innovation. School heads played a critical role in implementing these initiatives, addressing learning gaps, and fostering future-ready schools.

This study, conducted in SY 2024–2025, examined how recovery programs influenced school leadership and instructional management in the National Capital Region, a crisis-prone context. School heads not only responded to pandemic disruptions but also managed crises like typhoons and disease outbreaks, requiring adaptive, innovative leadership. Rionga and Alwi (2021) and Eliophotou (2023) highlighted the importance of addressing digital inequities and promoting agile leadership.

It explored how school heads applied transformational and participative leadership to inspire staff, foster collaboration, and maintain instructional quality amid adversity. Netolicky (2020) and Appino (2024) emphasized that the research analyzed how proactive crisis management and distributed leadership supported sustainable reforms. Addressing mental health concerns and deep-seated educational inequities was central, with school heads integrating social-emotional learning into recovery efforts. By aligning with the NLRP, this study provided insights into building resilient, equitable, and future-ready educational communities.

Statement of the Problem

This sought to explain and characterize the lived experiences of school heads in the National Capital Region following the peak of the pandemic. Specifically, the study sought to answer the following questions:

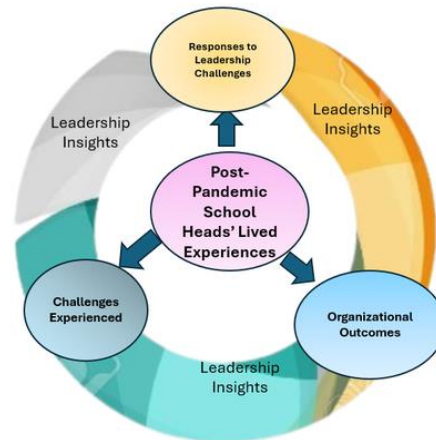
1. What are the leadership challenges school heads experienced during the post-pandemic transition?
2. How did school heads respond to the challenges during the post-pandemic transition?
3. What organizational outcomes have been achieved during the post-pandemic transition?
4. What leadership insights have school heads gained from their experiences during the post-pandemic transition?

Theoretical Framework

This study employed Fiedler's Contingency Theory and Generative Interactions Theory to analyze school leadership in the post-pandemic context. Fiedler's theory emphasized that leadership effectiveness depends on how well a leader's style—task-oriented or relationship-oriented—matches situational needs, such as managing health protocols, learning loss, and mental health. Meanwhile, Bernstein's Generative Interactions Theory (2020) framed leadership as a dynamic, collaborative process where school heads critically reviewed past practices ("artifacts") and fostered innovation, adaptability, and resilience. Together, these frameworks highlighted how principals balanced situational leadership and collaborative innovation to sustain educational quality and organizational resilience during post-pandemic recovery.

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1. Research Paradigm



This framework centers on the post-pandemic lived experiences of school heads, highlighting the leadership challenges faced, adaptive responses employed, and organizational outcomes achieved. It emphasizes how leadership insights—gained through managing operational shifts, educational innovations, and community engagement—inform future practices. Its circular design illustrates a continuous process of learning and adaptation, strengthening school resilience and leadership competencies in navigating future crises.

Scope and Limitations of the Study

This study explored the lived experiences of school heads in the National Capital Region (NCR) during the post-pandemic transition (SY 2024-2025), focusing on leadership challenges, strategies, organizational outcomes, and insights. It provided a localized analysis specific to the socio-cultural and policy context of the Philippines. Limitations include the scarcity of research on reverse transitions, a small sample size of ten public school heads, and the exclusion of private schools and broader stakeholder perspectives (teachers, students, parents). The study's time frame, limited to one school year, may not capture long-term effects. Future research could address these gaps for broader insights.

Significance of the Study

The study "Leadership Challenges and Strategies: During the Post-Pandemic" highlights the key leadership challenges school leaders faced post-COVID-19 and offers strategies for effective recovery. It emphasizes adaptability, crisis management, and emotional intelligence, focusing on digital literacy, stakeholder collaboration, and post-pandemic recovery strategies. The study also provides a framework for future crises and fills gaps in leadership studies, particularly regarding mental health and collaborative efforts.

II. METHODOLOGY

Research Design. A qualitative design, based on Creswell and Poth (2018), explored school heads' leadership challenges post-pandemic. Semi-structured interviews captured experiences on hybrid learning, equity gaps, and stress. Thematic analysis ensured rigorous interpretation.

Tradition of Inquiry and Data-Generation Method. Using Moustakas' (1994) phenomenology, open-ended interviews underwent phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis. Van Manen's (2014) reflective analysis deepened insights into adaptive leadership.

Sources of Data. Ten public school heads from NCR cities (Pasig, Mandaluyong, Makati, Taguig, Manila) were selected via fishbowl method. Three supervisors were purposively chosen for macro-level leadership validation.

Instrumentation. Semi-structured interviews, validated for relevance, captured micro- and macro-leadership views. Transcriptions supported thematic analysis.

Ethical Considerations. Clearance was secured from the University Ethics Center and DepEd. Participants gave informed consent, assured of confidentiality, voluntary participation, and secure data management.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The matrix shows the summary of all responses taken from the interview conducted by the researcher. It highlights the primary themes that emerged from the responses of school leaders in the post-pandemic period.

Table 1
Summary Matrix

THEME	MEANING	SAMPLE QUOTES
Addressing Learning Gaps	Bridging disparities in students' knowledge and skills through targeted interventions and curriculum adjustments.	"Addressing significant learning gaps" (Participant A) "Implementing recovery gaps and learning continuity" (Participant B)
Health and Safety Prioritization	Ensuring a safe and healthy environment through protocols, risk management, and well-being initiatives.	"Ensuring the health and safety of students" (Participant B) "Ensuring a safe learning environment" (Participant D)
Adoption of Technology	Integrating digital tools and innovations to enhance teaching, learning, and school operations.	"Improving digital infrastructure" (Participant A)

		"Using technology as a teaching intervention" (Participant J)
Leadership Adaptability	Adjusting leadership styles and decision-making to effectively respond to rapidly changing circumstances.	"Adopting flexible leadership styles" (Participant D) "Demonstrating adaptability and creativity in leadership" (Participant F)
Stakeholder Collaboration	Involving partnership with teachers, parents, and the community to address educational challenges and foster shared responsibility.	"Encouraging open communication among educational stakeholders" (Participant E) "Engaging in active collaboration with community members" (Participant D)
Curriculum Contextualization	Adapting the curriculum to local needs, culture, and real-life experiences, while integrating innovation, digital literacy, and student-centered approaches to meet post-pandemic learning demands.	"Revising the curriculum to incorporate digital literacy" (Participant H) "Focusing on contextualized innovative teaching and student interaction" (Participant C)
Professional Development	Providing ongoing professional development to equip teachers with the skills to effectively implement new teaching methods and technologies.	"Revising the curriculum to incorporate digital literacy" (Participant H) "Focusing on contextualized innovative teaching and student interaction" (Participant C)
Psychosocial and Mental Health Support	Providing essential emotional support for both teachers and students to cope with the challenges caused by the pandemic.	"Providing psychosocial and mental health support for students and teachers" (Participant G) "Addressing emotional well-being through mental health programs" (Participant D)

Addressing Learning Gaps emerged as the top priority for school leaders, who implemented recovery plans, remedial programs, and targeted initiatives to bridge significant academic gaps. Participants A and B emphasized the urgency of these recovery efforts, with Participant A noting, "addressing significant learning gaps" and Participant B stating, "implemented recovery gaps and learning continuity." This focus on recovery aligned with Garcia & Weiss (2020), who argued for the immediate need to close literacy and numeracy gaps exacerbated by the pandemic. Such efforts underscored the essential role of strategic interventions in restoring academic outcomes.

Health and Safety Prioritization was another critical theme, reflecting leaders' dedication to ensuring safe learning environments. As Participant D emphasized, "ensuring a safe learning environment," and Participant B added, "health and safety of students," the implementation of strict health protocols became essential. Decker et al. (2020) also highlighted that maintaining trust in the educational system during crises relies heavily on safeguarding the well-being of staff and students, a sentiment echoed by school leaders during the post-pandemic transition.

Adoption of Technology became central to maintaining educational continuity. Leaders such as Participant A ("improved digital infrastructure") and Participant J ("used technology as teaching intervention") emphasized the accelerated shift to digital learning. Barrot (2021) and Carambas & Espique (2023) noted that the pandemic acted as a catalyst for rapid technology adoption in education, which allowed schools to continue teaching and learning despite physical limitations.

Leadership Adaptability was crucial, with leaders adapting swiftly to changing circumstances. Participant D highlighted this flexibility, stating, "adopted flexible leadership styles." This theme of adaptability aligns with Hoglund (2022), who emphasized the role of flexible leadership in fostering resilience and innovation during crises, enabling leaders to navigate challenges effectively.

Stakeholder Collaboration became a key focus, with school leaders recognizing the need for collective efforts. As Participant E noted, "open communication among educational stakeholders," and Participant D emphasized, "active collaboration with community members." This emphasis on collaboration reflects Beck et al. (2022), who highlighted how engaging families, teachers, and the wider community strengthens educational resilience during challenging times.

Curriculum Contextualization and Professional Development were key priorities as leaders worked to revise curricula and support teachers. Participant H discussed integrating local contexts and digital literacy into curricula, while Participant C emphasized professional development programs to equip educators with new teaching skills. These efforts were in line with Garcia & Weiss (2020), who advocated for continuous professional development to ensure educators adapt to evolving educational landscapes.

Psychosocial and Mental Health Support became increasingly important, with school leaders acknowledging the emotional and psychological impact of the pandemic on students and staff. Participant G emphasized providing "psychosocial and mental health support for students and teachers." These initiatives align with Hoglund (2022), who recognized the necessity of addressing mental health in schools during crises, ensuring the well-being of both students and educators.

Table 2

Summary of Findings

Statement of the Problem	THEMES	KEY FINDINGS
1. What are the leadership challenges school heads experienced during the post-pandemic transition?	Learning Gaps and Academic Recovery	The pandemic caused major disruptions in learning, creating academic gaps. School heads identified the need for curriculum adjustments and targeted recovery strategies.
2. How did school heads respond to the challenges during the post-pandemic transition?	Leadership Adaptability and Health & Safety	School leaders showed adaptability, flexibility, and resilience. They also prioritized the implementation of health and safety protocols to ensure a safe learning environment.
3. What organizational outcomes have been achieved during the post-pandemic transition?	Technology Integration and Stakeholder Collaboration	Technology became essential in teaching, learning, and school management. Collaboration among teachers, parents, and the community helped address educational challenges and build shared responsibility.
4. What leadership insights have school heads gained from their experiences during the post-pandemic transition?	Curriculum Innovation and Professional Development	Leaders realized the importance of revising the curriculum to include digital literacy and adopting innovative pedagogies. Professional development for teachers was also emphasized as essential for navigating post-pandemic education.

1. Learning Gaps and Academic Recovery

The pandemic caused significant disruptions in learning, leading to substantial academic gaps. Participants A, B, and H emphasized the importance of curriculum adjustments and the development of recovery strategies, including remedial programs focused on literacy and numeracy. Key Informant (KI) 1 reinforced

this, stating that "data-driven approaches were essential in monitoring student progress." Participants also noted the need for differentiated teaching and diagnostic assessments to address learning deficits, aligning with Beauchamp et al. (2021), who emphasized targeted interventions to support students in recovering from pandemic-induced academic setbacks.

2. Leadership Adaptability and Health & Safety

School heads exhibited adaptability and resilience in response to the post-pandemic challenges. Participants A, B, D, and I highlighted the need for flexible leadership in adapting to rapidly changing circumstances. As Participant B noted, "flexibility in leadership was crucial for addressing diverse challenges." In addition, the implementation of strict health and safety protocols was a top priority to ensure a safe learning environment. KI 3 echoed this sentiment, emphasizing that "protecting the well-being of both students and staff was paramount." These actions reflected the leadership adaptability outlined by Hoglund (2022) in navigating crises and maintaining operational stability.

3. Technology Integration and Stakeholder Collaboration

Technology became a key component in education, with leaders prioritizing its integration to ensure continuity in teaching and learning. Participants A, E, and H discussed the urgent need for upgrading digital infrastructure and embedding digital literacy into the curriculum. KI 1 emphasized, "Technology-driven change was essential for maintaining instructional continuity." Stakeholder collaboration was also vital; Participants D, E, and G stressed the importance of engaging parents and the community in decision-making. This collaboration was crucial for building a shared sense of responsibility for student success, in line with Beck et al. (2022), who highlighted the role of stakeholder involvement in strengthening educational systems.

4. Curriculum Innovation and Professional Development

Curriculum innovation was identified as a key theme during the post-pandemic transition. Participants C, H, and I noted the need to integrate digital literacy into the curriculum while revising teaching strategies to address emerging student needs. As Participant H mentioned, "Curriculum contextualization was necessary to address gaps caused by the pandemic." KI 2 also emphasized that "professional development for teachers must encompass both pedagogical and technological skills." These efforts aligned with Garcia and Weiss (2020), who argued for continuous professional development to ensure teachers were equipped to navigate the new educational landscape. Leaders acknowledged the importance of revising curricula to prepare students for future global challenges while fostering teacher resilience.

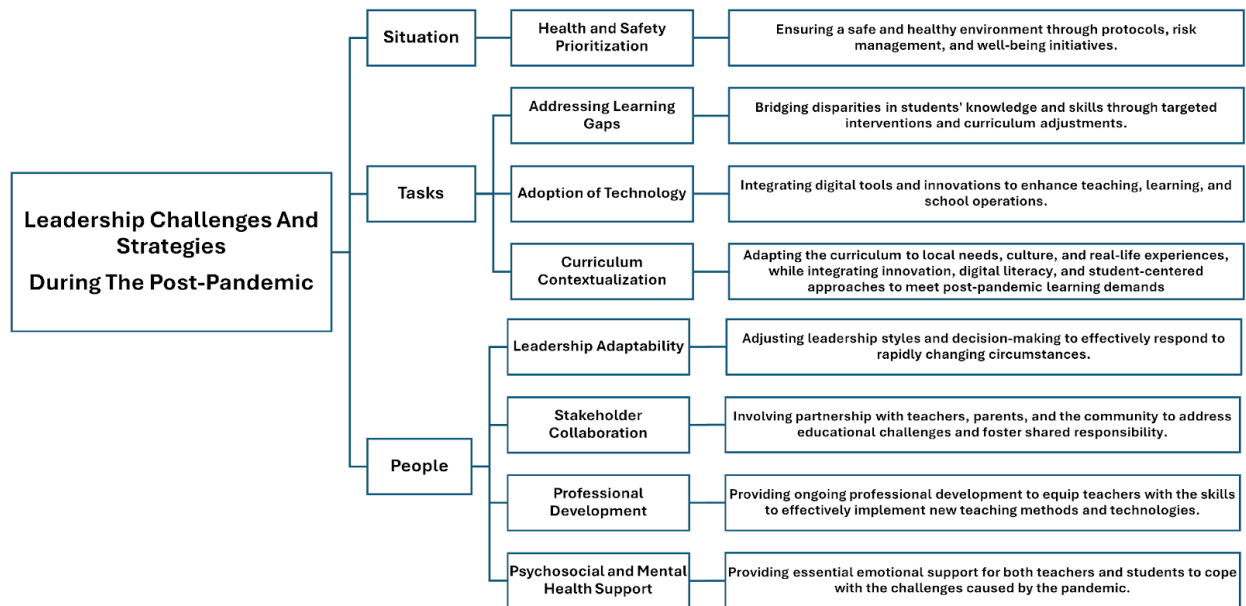


Figure 2. Conceptual Map

The diagram illustrates that Fiedler's Contingency Theory and Generative Interaction Theory guided the study's data collection, analysis, and interpretation in understanding leadership challenges and strategies during the post-pandemic period, with "Leadership Challenges and Strategies During the Post-Pandemic" as the central focus. The framework is divided into three key factors: Situation, Task, and People, each representing critical aspects of leadership in this context. Situation prioritizes Health and Safety, emphasizing the need for protective measures to safeguard students, staff, and the school community (Hoglund, 2022). Task focuses on Addressing Learning Gaps, Adoption of Technology, and Curriculum Contextualization, highlighting strategies to bridge learning gaps, leverage digital tools, and modify curricula for hybrid or online learning (Barrot, 2021; Rosales, 2024). People center on Leadership Adaptability, Stakeholder Collaboration, Professional Development, and Psychosocial Support, stressing the importance of flexible leadership, cooperation, educator capacity-building, and mental health support (Dykstra, 2022). Fiedler's theory, which asserts that leadership effectiveness depends on situational factors (Hankins & Gillilan, 2021), shaped the study's focus on how school heads navigated these post-pandemic challenges. Meanwhile, Generative Interaction Theory reinforced the role of collaboration in shaping leadership responses and fostering school resilience. The diagram aligns with these theories by illustrating the interconnectedness of situational challenges, operational strategies, and human resource considerations, reinforcing that leadership effectiveness is contingent on both external conditions and interactive engagement.



Figure 3: "Framework for Sustainable and Adaptive School Leadership"

The proposed model provides a structured transition for school leaders from crisis response to long-term educational sustainability and resilience. It follows four key stages: crisis preparedness, adaptive leadership, collaborative governance, and sustainable innovation. Initially, school leaders stabilize operations by activating emergency plans and ensuring readiness for immediate challenges. They then practice adaptive leadership, making flexible and timely decisions to respond to evolving conditions. Through collaborative governance, leaders engage teachers, parents, and stakeholders in shared decision-making, promoting inclusiveness and trust. Finally, by promoting sustainable innovation, temporary solutions developed during contingencies are transformed into lasting reforms, strengthening the education system's capacity to adapt, thrive, and prepare for future disruptions.

IV. Conclusion

This study explored the leadership challenges, responses, organizational outcomes, and insights of school heads during the post-pandemic transition in the National Capital Region. The findings highlight the complexities of navigating uncertainties while ensuring educational continuity and recovery.

1. Addressing Learning Gaps
School leaders implemented recovery plans and remedial programs to address significant learning gaps caused by the pandemic, focusing on personalized approaches to meet diverse academic needs.
2. Leadership Adaptability and Health & Safety Protocols
Leadership adaptability was key, with school heads adjusting their leadership styles in response to crisis demands, while ensuring health and safety protocols to protect students and staff.
3. Technology Integration and Stakeholder Collaboration
Technology integration became crucial, with schools enhancing digital infrastructure. Collaboration with stakeholders, including teachers and parents, was vital to overcoming challenges.

4. Curriculum Innovation and Professional Development
Curriculum revisions incorporated digital literacy and innovation. Ongoing professional development for teachers ensured effective integration of new methods and technology.

V. Recommendations

This study suggests several strategies for enhancing school leadership and educational outcomes post-pandemic, including:

1. Enhance Leadership Adaptability
Leaders should receive targeted training to develop adaptable leadership styles, crisis management skills, and digital literacy. Integrating these into the National Learning Recovery Program (NLRP) would solidify its role in long-term educational reform.
2. Invest in Digital Literacy and Teacher Development
School systems should expand professional development programs for teachers with a focus on digital literacy and technology integration. Aligning these programs with the DepEd Development Plan 2030 would ensure sustainable technology-driven education reforms.
3. Promote Stakeholder Collaboration
Structured programs should be developed to foster collaboration among teachers, parents, and the community. Such efforts should be integrated into the NLRP to ensure inclusive and sustainable educational recovery.
4. Focus on Mental Health and Emotional Well-being
Mental health support for students and staff should be integrated into schools' core operations. Strengthening mental health initiatives within the NLRP would help reduce stress and improve overall engagement.
5. Propose areas for further research

To ensure sustainability and equity, further research is needed in the following areas:

A: Leadership, Digital Literacy & Curriculum

- Leadership challenges in post-pandemic settings
- Digital literacy's effect on learning outcomes
- Curriculum innovation and contextualization

B: Mental Health and Leadership Styles

- Long-term effectiveness of school-based mental health programs
- Exploring transactional leadership in educational recovery

C: Inclusive Focus: Small & Private Schools

- Leadership challenges in small or rural schools

- Post-pandemic strategies in private school

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