



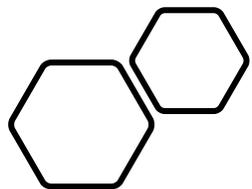
## Educational leadership in vulnerable contexts. Principals in the age of COVID-19

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**Objective:** to describe how eight leadership teams in vulnerable schools faced the COVID-19 crisis and whether their actions coincide with those described by academics for leadership in times of crisis

**Crisis:** urgent situation that requires immediate and decisive action by the organization and, particularly, *by the leaders of that organization* (Smith & Riley, 2012, p. 58)

**Crisis management**, as a response rather than a planning function, is a special type of change management typified by surprise due to the unexpectedness or size of an incident, short time frame, and criticality in terms of life-and-death consequences or organizational threat (Van Wart and Kapucu, 2011, p. 496)





**THIS IS A  
CRISIS**

<b>Characteristics of crises</b>	<b>Author-s</b>
Urgent situations that require instant and decisive action, particularly by the leaders of the organization	Elliott, Harris, & Baron, 2005 Smith & Riley, 2012 Van Wart & Kapucu, 2011
External crises come from outside	Coombs, 2005
External crises are often unexpected	Coombs, 2005 Elliott, Harris & Baron, 2005
Often affect different members of the organization	Elliott, Harris & Baron, 2005
Tend to have a high level of ambiguity	Elliott, Harris & Baron, 2005
Generate severe threats against the core objective of the organization	Elliott, Harris & Baron, 2005



## Methodology

- Qualitative
- **Descriptive and exploratory approach**

## Participants

- 21 school leaders from eight elementary and secondary schools located in the Community of Madrid
- Schools participating in this research are in areas of social vulnerability and serve families of lower socioeconomic status

## Data collection

- Data were obtained from a focus group formed to ascertain how leaders were feeling and responding to the COVID-19 educational crisis two months after the closures
- Data were recorded and transcribed

## Data analysis

- Analytical categories based on content were created: the leadership characteristics (3 leadership demands and 19 competences and behaviours found in the literature review) of the school leaders in relation to families and the nearest community; teaching and non-teaching staff; and students
- Stages in the development of the crisis were also defined and considered for the analysis



Characteristics and competences of the leaders facing the crisis- 1	Author-s	How these characteristics have manifested in the leaders of the sample of the current study
Crisis demands (according to Van Wart & Kapucu, 2011): <b>Need for calm but strong leadership</b>		
<b>Capacity to articulate a clear vision based on clear values</b>	De la Fuente, 2003 Klann, 2003 Van Wart & Kapucu, 2011	The LT maintained their ability to remain focused on the organization's priority objective: student learning.
<b>Self-confidence</b>	Van Wart & Kapucu, 2011	In the first phase, principals and other managers demonstrated their leadership through self-control by remaining calm at critical moments while helping the rest of the educational community do the same in such extraordinary circumstances.
<b>Motivating</b>	Klann, 2003 Van Wart & Kapucu, 2011	Principals demonstrate their leadership through their ability to cultivate collaboration within the educational institution by motivating and caring for people.
<b>Capacity to spread their example/ Willingness to assume responsibility</b>	De la Fuente, 2003 Van Wart & Kapucu, 2011	One problem that we saw was that the students could not connect because they did not have a computer, the internet, or both. Despite the initial bewilderment, at Easter we contacted the students who we knew had no resources to follow the classes. Furthermore, we offered them various possibilities to follow the classes. (Leader F)
<b>Capacity to provide restraint</b>	De la Fuente, 2003	I am <i>talking to parents more than ever</i> [...] <i>At any time</i> , because the children get up late, send homework late. Families also communicate late, as many come from work then. One day an email arrived at 11 p.m., and I thought I would answer it the next day. But then I said to myself: "We are all worried, how can I not answer now?" (Leader D)
<b>Optimism and tenacity/ Resilience</b>	Smith & Riley, 2012 Van Wart & Kapucu, 2011	Following student progress has been problematic and involved much dedication from LTs and teaching staff: The experience has been enriching in the sense that families and students appreciate communication <i>at any time</i> . (Leader B)
<b>Ability to improve communication and media skills/ Transparency</b>	Klann, 2003 Pascual et al., 2016 Smith & Riley, 2012	Because instructions coming from the educational authorities were diverse and changing, sometimes in a matter of hours, we tried to give teachers serenity and at the same time learn what was necessary for implementing online classes. Suddenly, the closure came (Leader B). The LT focused on informing and calming families, reassuring teachers, and learning what was necessary for the change to teaching in a virtual environment



Characteristics and competences of the leaders facing the crisis- 2	Author-s	How these characteristics have manifested in the leaders of the sample of the current study
Crisis demands (according to Van Wart & Kapucu, 2011): <b>Need for coordination and reorganization counting on people</b>		
<b>Social skills:</b> <b>Ability to maintain caring and good relationships to manage the human dimension of the crisis / empathy and respect/emotional support for the whole community</b>	Klann, 2003 Pascual et al., 2016 Smith & Riley, 2012 Van Wart & Kapucu, 2011	Keep in mind that it is not just a matter of the internet but of emotional management: sick relatives, little space. For this reason, our objective is to transmit calm to families and to avoid burdens. (Leader C)
<b>Operations planning</b>	Van Wart & Kapucu, 2011	The LT had to immediately ascertain the situations of all students and teachers, specifically in terms of access to the necessary technologies as well as their security and stability. The primary efforts were devoted to these matters
<b>Team building</b>	Van Wart & Kapucu, 2011	LTs had to meet virtually with teachers, hold online LT meetings, and talk with families and students to follow up.
<b>Networking and partnering</b>	Van Wart & Kapucu, 2011	Worksheets were prepared with other schools so that all the children could work in the same way. The worksheets included how to contact the teachers, and the work of each subject was divided into weeks and sessions. (Leader B)



Competences of the leaders facing the crisis- 3	Author-s	How these characteristics have manifested in the leaders of the sample of the current study
Crisis demands (according to Van Wart & Kapucu, 2011): <b>Need for pragmatic decision-making under severe time and resources constraints</b>		
<b>Procedural intelligence</b>	Smith & Riley, 2012	The second phase consisted of determining the context and needs: the LT had to immediately ascertain the situations of all students and teachers, specifically in terms of access to the necessary technologies as well as their security and stability.
<b>Analytical and Synthesising skills</b>	Smith & Riley, 2012 Van Wart & Kapucu, 2011	Indeed, the analysis of the situation showed that many students lacked the technological resources to be able to continue with their learning, as some principals pointed out. At first, there were many problems because many students were not connected, and they were called one by one on the phone to find out their situation.
<b>Decisive decision-making</b>	Smith & Riley, 2012 Van Wart & Kapucu, 2011	Once the situation was identified, the LT began to seek solutions very quickly, many of them innovative and creative
<b>Flexibility</b>	Smith & Riley, 2012 Van Wart & Kapucu, 2011	Leaders try not to overburden or demand too much and help the teachers to find solutions.
<b>Decisiveness</b>	Van Wart & Kapucu, 2011	Virtual learning is created overnight
<b>Delegating/Distributing leadership</b>	Pascual et al., 2016 Van Wart & Kapucu, 2011	Principals tried to calm down the teachers, help them, reassure them. Help teachers to connect with all the students and find solutions to specific problems (Leader C).
<b>Intuition</b>	Smith & Riley, 2012	
<b>Creativity and lateral thinking</b>	Smith & Riley, 2012	Once the situation was identified, the teams began to seek solutions very quickly, many of them innovative and creative: Currently, 100% of students have Wi-Fi and a computer. The man who runs the cafeteria and a secretary offered to take the computer equipment to the houses (Leader F)



Without any formal knowledge of the leadership characteristics recommended by the academic literature for this type of situation, the LTs put them into practice



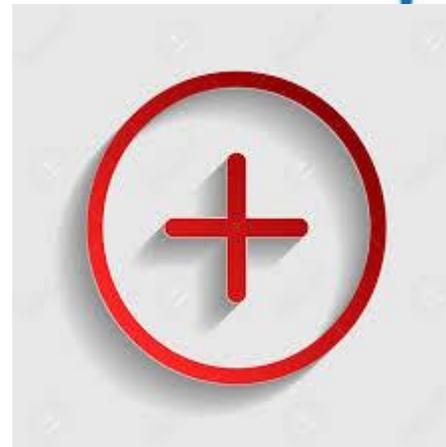
Learning has continued at the schools, not exclusively in an academic sense but, above all, emotionally even though there is still a gap compared to other educational establishments



Relationships have been cultivated and improved with the families as well as with other institutions and people who can help the school



None of this was easy, and it involved much time and effort



**The crisis made it possible that the LTs could:**

Map the technological situation of families and students.

Improve the educational community's digital skills and experiment with other working ways (Jiménez, 2020).

Empathise, relate better to other members of the community, and collaborate in searching for solutions.

Demonstrate the leadership of principals emphasising the leadership of other staff members, mainly through their proactive, creative, and supportive attitudes

Show how leadership works best when shared and commitment centres around a common purpose, which in this case was that students could continue their schooling.





- The closure of schools during the pandemic highlighted many inequalities and deficiencies in the system. So, **it is still essential to enhance schools' technological resources, train teachers, and adapt students to this new form of education** (Cóndor-Herrera, 2020).
- **The crisis taught us that we need to improve our use of technology for teaching, but we must also increase our humanity.** Thus, to keep up with new needs, **leaders, teachers and future teachers should improve their technical, personal, and socio-emotional capacities.**
- The changes must also affect the educational authorities. It is imperative **to tackle the digital divide**, and the small advances made during the pandemic can help generate the necessary change.
- The change could start with technology, but it must be much more profound and **address students' complete needs while counting on families.** In the face of this profound social and educational change, **we can take advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic to generate new responses to new needs, not only doing things but also doing things better.**



# Thank you

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