

Leadership Roles of School Leaders and Directors of Education amid The Covid-19 pandemic: the Crisis, Adaptation, and Opportunities

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Abstract

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in Ghana in March 2020 resulted in the closure of schools at all levels of education, disrupting academic work. However, when the infection rate reduced, there was the need for the government of Ghana to re-open schools. This paper explored the reality of leading educational institutions in a crisis such as the unexpected coronavirus pandemic. The study employed the qualitative research strategy to explore views from leaders of pre-tertiary institutions to gain insights into their challenges, leadership actions, and learning opportunities during the pandemic. Fifteen pre-tertiary school heads and Directors of Education were selected using the convenience sampling technique. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews via phone calls and analysed thematically using inductive and deductive approaches. The study found that leaders of educational institutions faced the challenge of scarcity of resources and students' non-compliance to established protocols aimed to ensure the safety of students and staff. Nevertheless, it was discovered that calm resilience, flexibility, optimism, leadership distribution, and effective communication helped the leaders succeed. The findings also showed that the COVID-19 crisis created an opportunity for reflection and learning.

Keywords: Covid-19, educational institutions, educational leaders, leadership in crisis, opportunities, Ghana

Introduction

The emergence of the coronavirus disease (Covid-19) outbreak in 2019 has created enormous uncertainty and extraordinarily challenging circumstances that disrupted educational systems across the globe (O'Connell & Clarke, 2020; Igbokwe, Okeke-James, Anyanwu & Eli-Chukwu, 2020). The unexpected emergence of the novel coronavirus, its virulent, mutative and deadly nature created fear and uncertainty (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention – CDC, 2021; Smith, 2021; Thornton, 2021) that compelled nations to lock down partially and wholly, including the closure of schools as both precautionary and preventive measures against the spread of the disease.

Additionally, governments mandated people to mask up, stay in seclusion, practise social distancing, and observe hygiene procedures, including regular washing of hands (CDC, 2021; Ghana Education Service – GES, 2020; Ghana Health Service – GHS, 2020; Ministry of Health – MoH, 2020).

In Ghana, for a while in the 2019/2020 academic year, while the virus spread in Asia, the Americas and Europe, life appeared to continue as usual until the first confirmed case was reported on March 12, 2020, with a second case reported on March 17, 2020 (GES, 2020; GHS, 2020). Initial public health measures taken to stop the virus spread included the closure of all educational institutions in Ghana starting from Monday, March 16, 2020 (MoH, 2020). The exponential rise in the Covid-19 cases caused the government of Ghana to lock down parts of regions of the country with high rates of infection on March 28, 2020. Given successes at containing the spread of the virus and Ghana's readiness to mitigate further spread, president Nana Akufo-Addo lifted the regional lockdown effective April 20, 2020 (Dontoh & Dzawu, 2020). However, the spread of the virus in Ghana led to the reintroduction of restrictions, including the continued closure of all educational institutions until their re-opening in January 2021 (GES, 2021).

It is important to stress that the decision to re-open schools was informed by many factors, although the Covid-19 pandemic remains a worrying global health issue. The first factor, among other things, connects to the experiences of isolation and exclusion among educators and learners. As Christine Lee asseverated in a blog post on January 14, 2021: "Education experienced unimaginable disruption and upheaval due to Covid-19 [and] educators and students alike felt isolated and overwhelmed". Given that teaching and learning involve various social, emotional, cognitive and psychomotor dimensions, keeping learners away from these activities negatively affected education. As social beings, children prefer to be with their friends with whom they play, test ideas and develop a learning identity (Swaffield & MacBeath, 2009). The second factor relates to the dissatisfaction and confusion among education stakeholders regarding how to address the psycho-social, emotional, economic and intellectual needs of learners, teachers and parents.

We acknowledge that e-learning (electronic learning) became a practical alternative to teaching and learning amidst the pandemic. E-learning is a form of distance learning that uses electronic technology – web-based, computer-based or virtual classrooms to mediate knowledge sharing to enable understanding (Aboderin, 2015; Hubackova, 2015; Kyari, Adiuku-Brown, Abechi & Adelekun, 2018). Electronic technology allows teachers and learners to teach and learn via audio, videotapes, satellite TV, and video conferencing. Ghana's Ministry of Education embraced the e-learning facility. It partnered with mobile communications technology companies and television houses to facilitate e-teaching and learning during the almost ten-month school closures. However, as was expected, the rural nature of Ghana, poverty levels, and the attendant challenges of accessibility, connectivity, and affordability of electronic technologies made it difficult for some learners to benefit maximally. Consequently, trusting stakeholders' support and expertise, including educational leaders – directors and heads of schools to ensure safe and effective teaching and learning, the government took a leap of faith to re-open the country's schools.

Leadership researchers, including Zame, Hope and Respress (2008) and recently, Lee (2021), argue that educational leaders are initiators, innovators, motivators, calculators, communicators, and problem-solvers. Thus, educational institutions and directorates are at the forefront of education delivery in Ghana, ensuring that their manner of socialising and influencing helps people achieve academic goals (Iszatt-White & Saunders, 2020; Thornton, 2020) the face of the coronavirus pandemic. Martin Luther King's (1963, p. 26) words that "the ultimate measure of a person is not where they stand in moments of comfort, but where they stand at times of challenge and controversy" resonate with the leap of faith the government took to direct re-opening of schools. Mackay (2018, p. 16) recently argued similarly that "given our paradoxical blend of dissatisfaction and complacency, it may require even more severe instability, perhaps amounting to chaos, to convince us to look for more imaginative solutions to the problems that beset us". Several scholars (Boin, McConnell & Hart, 2010; Deverell, 2011; Boin, Kuipers & Overdijk, 2013; Thornton, 2021) who have extensively published on leading through crisis underscored the need to learn from situations, especially the positives and opportunities it offers to prepare for the future. As Boin et al. (2010) illustrate, the unexpected crisis provides leaders opportunities to learn from their experiences to reform and reshape the institutions they lead.

Since the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic, Ghanaian researchers have studied the Covid-19 disease concerning education, exploring its relationship to the emergence of virtual teaching and learning and the implications

(Aboagye, Yawson& Appiah, 2021; Henaku, 2020; Owusu-Fordjour, Koomson& Hanson, 2020); fear and conflict (Gyasi, 2020; Nantwi&Boateng, 2020) and its economic and educational implications for stakeholders (Quarm, Sam-Quarm& Sam-Quarm, 2021). These efforts have tremendously contributed to illuminating our appreciation of the different ways in which the coronavirus has affected the educational system. However, far too little attention has been paid to the specific role heads of schools and directors of education have played to ensure safe re-opening of schools, effective teaching and learning, and valuable lessons for leading through crisis. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the reality of leading educational institutions in emergencies such as the unexpected coronavirus pandemic. The study draws from Wooten and James (2008), Smith and Riley (2012), and O'Connell and Clarke (2020) frameworks of leadership in crisis to underpin how pre-tertiary school heads and directors of education handled challenges and maximised opportunities during the Covid-19 to ensure smooth and safe re-opening and functioning of schools. The research questions that guided the study were:

1. What were the challenges that schools and directors of education leaders faced in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic?
2. What strategies contributed to their effective leadership practices?
3. What lessons have they learnt from the pandemic?

The study can contribute to the existing corpus of knowledge in the field of leadership during crises. It mainly sheds light on leaders' views in education from a developing country – Ghana, thereby enabling mutual learning. By sharing the findings through peer-reviewed journal publications, conferences and workshops, they can provide a forum for educational leaders within Ghana, Africa and advanced economies to share and compare experiences, challenges, expertise and best practices of leading academic institutions during crises.

Leading In Times of Crises: Models

As a dynamic relational activity (Eacott, 2016; Branson &Marra, 2019) that places a premium on mutual interactions to initiate, build, motivate and encourage others (Hawkins & James, 2018) to achieve a set goal, leadership is crucial to the effective functioning and improvement of institutions. In a dark tunnel of unexpected crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic, people lead to provide a ray of hope (Gardner-McTaggart, 2020). As Mackay (2018, p. 10) asserts, “Nothing clarifies our priorities like a crisis, and nothing keeps the brain active like an encounter with the unexpected”. Crisis presents opportunities to develop adaptive capabilities necessary for successful leadership (Robertson, 2011). We draw insights from three works to navigate the question about leading during crises.

Wooten and James' Approach to Leading during Crises

Wooten and James (2008) have identified five phases of leadership in times of crisis. The five phases are signal detection, leadership action to prepare for and prevent further problems, contain the situation and damage control, crisis recovery and reflection, and learn from the crisis for future action. Each of the phases requires particular leadership capabilities and responses. The signal detection phase is foundational, requiring leaders to develop a blueprint for directing future steps to address organisational needs and the well-being of people. Leaders work to make sense of the crisis, understand its gravity and put it into proper perspective. For example, considering the coronavirus pandemic, the signal detection phase urges school leaders to foresight the possible dire implications on teaching and learning. Wooten and James maintain that leaders prepare and act to avert the crisis from wreaking more havoc in the second phase. A fundamental problem with this explanation is that it ignores the fact that there may be no time to prepare in a situation of unexpected crisis. In phase three – containment and limiting damage, these authors enjoin leaders to amass a wealth of personal and organisational arsenals, weigh alternatives, make decisions and communicate across the board to keep all stakeholders informed to co-own the process (Wooten, James & Parsons, 2013). Thornton (2021), who has researched learning through crisis, found that flexibility and optimism – holding a positive attitude and countenance is a powerful arsenal to contain a situation.

In phase four, leaders take action towards recovery by establishing practical measures to assure organisational resilience. This involves laying the groundwork that changes practice in light of what is learnt from the crisis. As leaders navigate through the leadership quagmire, in phase five, they learn from the situation and their practices to guide future actions (Asare, 2015; Wooten & James, 2008). The strength of Wooten and James' Model is that it

offers a useful, practical leadership guide capable of addressing crises. Nonetheless, people and organisations may miss opportunities to learn (Bhaduri, 2018). Moreover, not all crises are preventable because some of them emerge unexpectedly. Thus, it may not be possible to have time to detect signals and draw a timetable to avert specific crises, as was the case with the Covid-19 pandemic.

Smith and Riley's Approach to Leading during Crises

A related work to Wooten and James' (2008) effort is Smith and Riley's (2012) study on school crisis leadership. They advanced five steps that can help education leaders to lead in crises. According to them, during an emergency, leaders first need to gather information; second, make plans to adapt to the problem; third, make decisions – sometimes spontaneously; fourth, be thoughtful and show concern for others; and fifth, communicate to all stakeholders clearly and honestly. To navigate through these steps successfully, leaders require knowledge and capabilities in soft skills, including interpersonal communication skills, information analysis and synthesis, empathy and respect, optimism, and flexible yet focused ability to capitalise on prevailing opportunities to address the crisis (Asare, 2015; MacBeath&Dempster, 2009; Smith & Riley, 2012; Waterhouse & Møller, 2009). This implies that a leadership style in crisis is contingent on the leader's expertise, "feelings, values, beliefs and experiences" (Loader, 2010, p. 195).

O'Connell and Clarke's Approach to Leading through a Crisis

Drawing from a leadership approach during the Covid-19 pandemic in a school in Australia, O'Connell and Clarke (2020) proposed an eleven-step leadership model during a crisis. The steps are that leaders should stay calm, identify and solve pressing problems, seek advice, think strategically, be authentic, be open, act decisively, communicate, strengthen the existing community, demonstrate empathy, and envisage the long term. The essential message of some of the steps is the same. Thus, we consider only some of the steps for this study. O'Connell and Clarke believe that people do not want to sense that leader's panic during a crisis and expect them to remain emotionally stable. Thus, the first step in leading during an emergency is to stay calm. The second step is for leaders to identify, define and solve the pressing problems.

Given that crises environments are susceptible to emotions, there can be immediate unintended consequences on people. Therefore, the third step requires leaders to seek advice. In the fourth step, leading during a crisis involves thinking strategically and acting decisively about things that truly matter. As O'Connell and Clarke (2020) explain, "The scale of the message, speed of decisions and their efficacy, and judicious use of language directly affect the confidence people have in leadership in times of crisis"(p.8). Amidst crisis, people want clarity on issues and the challenges, and strategies leaders initiate to address the situation, assurances, and leaders' acknowledgement of their vulnerability and humanity where necessary. In other words, the fifth step enjoins leaders during the crisis to be authentic, open and communicate clearly about what is known and not known about the situation to establish and maintain relationships necessary for adaptation during a crisis (Reddy & Gupta, 2020). In the sixth step – strengthening the existing community, the authors argue the importance of making students, parents, staff, and communities feel safe and confident in their daily working environment. This is achievable through timely alignment of authentic, clear communication and decisive actions. In challenging and unpredictable times, emotional intelligence is essential for nurturing sympathy, which is critical in giving assurances to the community. Thus, O'Connell and Clarke propose that leaders during a crisis need to demonstrate emotional intelligence. Finally, leading through an emergency requires that leaders envisage the long-term implications by considering "what comes next week, next month, and even next year to prepare the organisation for changes ahead" (O'Connell & Clarke, 2020, p.8).

Methodology

This study was a qualitative interpretative exploration seeking views from District Directors of education and heads of pre-tertiary schools to gain insights into their leadership challenges, actions, and learning opportunities during the Covid-19 pandemic. It was more appropriate to deploy a qualitative interpretative approach to the study because it allowed for seeking in-depth perspectives, experiences and meanings that the participants constructed based on their unique positions as leaders of education in seven regions of Ghana. Thornton (2021) noted that using qualitative interpretative approaches to implement this kind of research helps maintain focus and faith in the participants' narratives.

Sampling Participants

Fifteen stakeholders, including heads of pre-tertiary schools and directors of education, participated in the research. They were selected using the convenience sampling technique. A request embedding a brief rationale for the study was sent out to all education professionals WhatsApp platform members, inviting leaders of educational institutions or directorates to participate in the research. Individuals who were interested provided their phone numbers. The initial five people who responded also provided contact information for other members of the group. This resulted in a cumulative number of thirty-seven contacts of people who accepted to participate in the research. These individuals were contacted via text message to solicit their participation in the study. After getting the potential participants, it was clear that some of them were middle-level leaders, including assistant school heads and departmental heads. Given that our target participants were heads of schools and directors of education at the district, municipal and metropolitan levels, responsible for day-to-day decisions about education and teaching and learning, the final number of participants was reduced to fifteen. Table 1 shows the composition of the study participants.

Table 1. Composition of study participants

Participant ID*	Gender	Designation	Educational Outfit	Region	Years at Role
P1	F	Director of Education	District Education Office	Oti	2
P2	F	Headmistress	High School	Ashanti	4
P3	F	Headmistress	High School	Greater Accra	4
P4	M	Headmaster	High School	Greater Accra	5
P5	F	Headteacher	Special School	**	8
P6	M	Headteacher	Primary School	Savanna	6
P7	F	Director of Education	Metropolitan Education Office	Greater Accra	4
P8	M	Headmaster	High School	Western	3
P9	M	Headteacher	Junior High School	Western North	7
P10	M	Headmaster	High School	Central	4
P11	F	Headmistress	High School	Western	3
P12	M	Headmaster	High School	Central	3
P13	F	Directress	Preschool/KG	Central	9
P14	F	Headmistress	High School	Ashanti	5
P15	M	Headmaster	High School	Central	6

*Participant IDs were assigned based on who offered to participate in the study first; P1 is Participant 1, and P15 represents Participant 15.

**Not provided because it is easy to identify the piece of information

As Table 1 shows, most (12) of the participants were school heads from 10 high schools, one junior high school and one primary school. Only two participants were Directors of Education. Except for participant 13, who heads a private pre-school facility, the rest headed government schools. The disproportionately large number of heads of schools in the study was because they take the day-to-day leadership decisions to ensure safe and effective teaching and learning in schools.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were used to gather data from the participants from January 2021 to April 2021. All the participants volitionally participated in individual phone-based semi-structured interviews to avert a potential spread of the Covid-19 disease. The interviews, which lasted between 15 and 48 minutes, were audio-recorded to capture the interview content comprehensively. All participants responded to the same items. The interview discussions enabled us to engage with the participants, probe and prompt them to share their knowledge, perceptions, perspectives, and experiences flexibly in reasonable depth (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). The interview protocol consisted of two sections. The first part sought information on the participants' background and experiences, including their gender and years in their current role. The second part included items for soliciting

information about participants' leadership experiences and strategies during the crisis. Questions asked focused on what the institutional or organisational mood was like, what participants did to address challenges and prioritise well-being and methods employed to assure safety for all people. The audio recordings were then transcribed verbatim into texts for analysis. Member checking was deployed as a strategy to validate the transcripts (For the interview protocols, see Appendix A).

Data Analysis

The second part of the interview questions and the thematic analysis of the resulting qualitative data followed Breakspear's (2020) framework. The Breakspear Model is appropriate for presenting issues leaders have had to deal with during crises (Thornton, 2021). The Breakspear Model includes eight pointers that depict what leaders can expect and do through times of crisis.

The eight leadership action points in Breakspear's Model include challenges leaders face, what leaders do to keep connected, novel ways of communicating, and innovations to deal with the crisis. Other areas are role models leaders looked up to, opportunities that arose and took advantage of, leadership distribution, and necessary changes to leadership practices (Breakspear, 2020; Thornton, 2021). The researchers intentionally left out the element of role model since they were particularly interested in the leaders' practices during the pandemic. The remaining seven pointers and the item on organisational mood were grouped under three phases: crisis, adaptation, and opportunity. Breakspear's Model was a helpful guide in our analysis of the transcripts to identify analytic themes that helped respond to the research questions or tell the story of leading educational institutions during the pandemic crisis.

The authors read the transcripts several times, enabling them to isolate analytic statements from the various participants, which they compared and contrasted. Using thematic analysis, it was possible to identify common strands in the participants' narratives (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The thematic analysis enabled us to identify three overarching themes: crisis, adaptation, and opportunity. Each of these central themes has accompanying sub-themes, as summarised in Table 2.

Table 2. Emergent themes and sub-themes

Theme	Sub-themes
Crisis phase	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Organisationalmood• Resourcechallenges• Well-being
Adaptationphase	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Communication• Check-in• Adaptation and optimism• Leadershipdistribution
Opportunityphase	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reflection• Opportunitiesforlearning

Results

The results of the study are presented under the themes and sub-themes identified in Table 2. The sub-themes were grouped under the three phases of disruptive situations: crisis, adaptation, and opportunity phases.

The Crisis Phase

Here we present what school leaders and directors of education went through or did during the pandemic. The three sub-themes addressed are organisational mood, challenges, and well-being.

The Organisational Mood

The mood of stakeholders – staff, students and community members at various schools and education directorates was characterised by calmness, hopefulness, worry and pessimism. People were calm and optimistic that Ghana would not encounter the virus. Thus, one of the high school heads (P3) stated that "it had not been determined that the virus was in the country for us to contract it. Thus, the school's situation before the lockdown was not overwhelming or fearful". Corroborating P3's claims, participant P2 said: "At my end, the situation was very

calm. I did not see that anybody was visibly panicky". There was optimism that even if the Covid-19 spread to Ghana, the final year students would still be able to write their final external standardised West Africa Secondary School Certification Examination (WASSCE), whose outcome is used to place them in higher educational institutions and jobs (P15). This is because, as P3 explained, "authorities anticipated people would observe the protocol measures to allow for the normal running of the school".

However, despite the calm and hope-filled optimism, a mere reception of the news of the Covid-19 disease unsettled some heads of schools and other stakeholders, creating anxiety and pessimism about the future. As one high school head indicated, "the news of the pandemic and its effects from other countries brought fear and uncertainty" (P10). For example, P2, who had earlier said that the mood of stakeholders was calm amidst the news of the pandemic, acknowledged that it was a challenge because the final year students were worried that they were preparing for their final examination.

Challenges

A common challenge most of the school leaders and education directors experienced was how to get the needed resources to ensure the safety of students and staff and the effective running of the schools. A view expressed by P14 captured the sentiments of most of the participants.

My concern is on what to do and by what means we will get the water containers, soap, tissue papers, hand sanitisers for students and the staff to wash their hands clean all the time. The challenge presents more questions than answers. Umm, when would schools get the needed resources? Would the quantities be enough, and if not, how would we ensure that we got enough for everyone? How could we cater for the needs of [boarding] students if they were restricted from travelling? (P14).

Another challenge for the participants was that it was difficult getting students to obey and observe the established protocols to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. One of the Directors of Education (P1) spoke about the challenges as follows:

You know these students are difficult to handle. You say, do not go there, and they will go there. They may pretend to wear the mask, wash their hands, or stay apart when teachers and staff members are around. However, in their absence, the students ignore the protocols. Therefore, getting them to observe the protocols all the time was going to be a nightmare.

P13, a private Early Childhood Education (ECE) centre leader, described the challenge of getting students to comply with established Covid-19 safety protocols as problematic and required concerted effort from all stakeholders to succeed. In clarifying what concerted effort entails, P7 and P13 referred to the formation of committees responsible for procuring, distributing and restocking the necessary supplies and educating students, staff, parents, and the schools' communities. For example, "we immediately held meetings and set up committees to attend to different issues such as procurement" (P7) and "education of stakeholders" (P13). These efforts aimed primarily to ensure the stakeholders' well-being to facilitate safe, efficient and effective teaching and learning.

Well-Being

Individuals' well-being is related to their health and safety. Participants of the study resonated that during the Covid-19 pandemic, the leaders of schools and directors of education prioritised the well-being of students, teachers, and the community. The view below enshrines the opinions of most of the participants.

Schools exist because of students and the staff. If there are no learners and staff, there will not be schools. Hence, during the pandemic, what was very important to us was how to ensure the well-being of our students, teachers, and community members (P5)

In addition to the fact that it was morally right to ensure stakeholders' well-being, including students and teachers, the fear of the unknown consequences of contracting the coronavirus spurred the leaders to prioritise their well-being. One of the senior high school heads (P11) explained: "We had some knowledge on the basic protocols and based on that we implemented some measures to avert the virus because we did not know what the outcome would be if we did not take the right actions".

Additionally, some participants, including P7 and P9, believed that one of the core functions of leaders was to ensure their subordinates' well-being. P7 clarifies this claim as follows:

"My brother, let me tell you something. If I do not take action to keep students and workers safe, why am I a leader? Why am I a Director? The whole point of running here and there and holding meetings was to bring my people together to answer the question 'what can we do to assure safety for all?' If we do not protect the students, staff, and community members, we fail as leaders.

In times of crisis, leaders acknowledged that knowing their fundamental roles, including understanding the people's mood, the attendant challenges of the situation and the centrality of ensuring the well-being of the people being led was necessary but not sufficient. There was a need for adaptation strategies.

The Adaptation Phase

In the adaptation phase, the leaders of schools and education directorates explained that learning to accept and understand the reality of the coronavirus crisis and the kind of people they were dealing with was crucial to the strategies they deployed to manoeuvre through the Covid-19 crisis successfully. In the view that follows, P9, a headmaster – a male head of a rural school clarified how a knowledge of their context helped them to adapt to the coronavirus:

In our community, we have many illiterates, so while we were worried about our students, the broader picture involved the community members. They depend on what information the school gives. Some come and say, 'sir/madam, teach us about the virus and what we must do'. Hence, we arranged with the traditional authorities to hold public meetings to educate members of the community. Then [we] liaised with the health authorities.

Drawing from the dynamics of the crisis and the contexts, the leaders deployed effective communication, check-in, adaptability and optimism, and leadership distribution to manoeuvre the coronavirus crisis successfully.

Communication

A converging view among most participants was that effective communication was essential to the efficient functioning of the schools and directorates during the coronavirus pandemic. Participants 7 and 8 clarified that the communication process involved a message, a sender, and a recipient and feedback to assure that the sender got information affirming the receipt of the notification. These elements allowed for exchanging vital information between school heads and directors of education, and other stakeholders to adapt to the crisis. The participants talked about how communication between stakeholders became a regular feature of their daily activities. P8 and P13 added that frequent communication between the GES, which implements pre-tertiary education, directors of education and heads of schools, and other stakeholders was helpful means of adapting to the coronavirus situation.

We receive regular circulars, handouts, and wall-mounted posters for quick reference so that we can take spur-of-the-moment actions for the safety of the precious lives in our care – I mean the students. We also participate in a series of workshops to keep us abreast with the changing situation of the crisis (P13).

Even when the crisis compelled the closure of schools, the MoE and GES teamed up to communicate directives to directors of education and school leaders for adaptation according to their contextual needs to ensure key education stakeholders were abreast with what to do about teaching and learning amidst the coronavirus pandemic.

Check-Ins

In the context of this study, checking in conveys the idea of leaders taking practical steps to contact staff, students and community members to make sure that they are okay and going about their daily activities. One of the high school heads, P10, explicated that checking on stakeholders was one of the core responsibilities of leaders because "we needed to find out about their experiences to report to our superiors about what is happening in the school community and its environs". P13 highlighted the tools the leaders employed to check in on the stakeholders: "In addition to writing letters, sending text messages and emails, and making calls, I had to learn to use the Twitter, WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram and all those apps to send and receive messages". Checking on others for the participants (P9, P13) was a valuable strategy for adaptation during the pandemic. However, it was an expensive and challenging activity. P13 said: "Think of the cost of phone calls and internet data, [yet] people do not respond for you to know what their situation is. Huh! It is challenging". P13's explanation showed that

check-in as an adaptation strategy required personal sacrifice and investment of time and resources if school heads and directors of education were to help staff, students, parents, and communities be adaptable and optimistic.

Adaptability and Optimism

Participants of the study believed adaptability and optimism amidst the corona pandemic helped them to survive its scare. P1, P3 and P4 thought that being adaptable implied being flexible and affable. They argued that flexibility was necessary because uncertainties were unavoidable, requiring a constant review of established plans and approaches to life issues in the face of a crisis. As P1 explained, "flexibility enables people to be optimistic about finding solutions to the crisis". Using an Akan adage (one of the Ghanaian languages) to corroborate the need for a spirit of adaptability and optimism amidst crisis, one of the senior high school heads (P2) confirmed the need for adaptability and optimism as follows: "Se wo a worediadee no wo dwane a, hwanna wo pɛsɛko?"

This means that if you, the ruler, run away from a battle or difficulty, who do you expect to fight it? In other words, "Leaders must be role models. I must lead by example of flexibility and optimism. There were times that I felt uneasy about the pandemic [because] no one could predict what was to happen next" (P2).

P8 resonated with P2 as follows: "We needed to function as a team, and I had to be the thread that strings them together. I had to shelve my feelings, keep calm, and motivate my team members to be optimistic and creative during the crisis". In clarifying the idea of functioning as a team, some participants (P2, P6 & P8) equated it to sharing or distributing leadership.

Leadership Distribution

By leadership distribution, the participants acknowledged that members' mutual sharing of ideas and experiences as individuals or committees significantly influenced their success in implementing adaptation strategies during the Covid-19 crisis. Participant 13 was emphatic on shared leadership when she said that, "I counted very much on the mutual strengths, skills, experiences, and willingness of everyone to sail through the storm of the pandemic. I just could not do it alone. It's impossible". One of the directors of education was upbeat, attributing the shared leadership efforts of her team members as the reason for their ability to adapt to the pandemic.

I cannot stop thanking my team members. They are like on-the-ground machinery getting things done. In the night, they would be there; during the day, they are there. They are my eyes and feet everywhere, allowing me to rest and exercise proper oversight (P1).

Even though the coronavirus pandemic constituted a crisis, which compelled schools and directors of education to devise strategies that enabled schools to adapt, the participants considered it an opportunity.

The Opportunity Phase

There was a converging view among the participants that the coronavirus crisis was a Kairos moment for reflection and learning.

Reflection

Some of the study participants believed that the crisis was a wake-up call for reflection on their established conceptualisation of leadership and practice. One of the education directors said: "The coronavirus pandemic has helped me revisit my mantra of thinking twice and deciding once. It reminds me of the crucial role of reflection in leadership practice since it helps to make informed decisions about issues" (P7). A director of education, P1, agreed that "reflecting on issues will help you to appreciate the dynamics of the issue, your strengths and vulnerabilities to consult people with the right expertise and source of information about the issue". P10 believed that reflection might not apply in crisis because of the immediacy with which some decisions and actions must be taken.

[During the coronavirus pandemic], I sometimes wished I could reflect on issues before deciding on what to do. However, if you receive a letter to send a report by a particular deadline, the focus is on meeting the deadline leaving no room for reflection (P10).

However, P13 argued that responding to issues devoid of reflection could be costly. She said: "The fact is that if you rush to meet deadlines, you can make costly mistakes. Thus, reflection is necessary, especially during a crisis". Analysis of the participants' views also showed that a crisis is an opportunity for learning new things.

Opportunities to Learn

Participants, including P1 and P5, said that the Covid-19 pandemic provided opportunities to learn new ways of doing things.

My colleagues call me a technology professional now. All the various things we had to do provided opportunities to learn to use technology to improve our communication. I, for one, learned how to use Zoom for teleconferencing and Instagram to send and receive messages. Hitherto, I would pick a phone to call or wait for paper correspondence to come to me so that I simply minute on it for the necessary action to be taken. Now I use these other means to communicate because the pandemic necessitated it (P1).

According to P5, learning to use the modern means of communication enabled him to understand students' tricks and correct inappropriate use of these applications. He said:

Today's kids are learning many things on their phones, including inappropriate stuff. Because I learnt to use these apps, I could spot some children's tricks with their phones. This knowledge has helped me to educate them along those lines.

Students also took the opportunity of the Covid-19 crisis to embrace electronic learning. As 13 explained: "we encouraged students to contact their colleagues and teachers via phones and computers to ask questions and learn collaboratively. Some students found the e-learning helpful because they could access information wherever they had [internet] connection".

Discussion

This study explored how heads of schools and directors of education handled challenges and maximised opportunities during the Covid-19 to ensure smooth and safe re-opening and school functioning. The key findings of the study were drawn mainly from the research data and nourished by relevant literature. This is a practice, which Coffey and Atkison (1996, p. 153) consider as helpful, arguing that "generation of ideas can never be dependent on the data alone". Thus, the study relied on the data-embedded themes and Breakspear's (2020) analytic framework to draw the final themes grouped under crisis, adaptation, and opportunity phases of leadership during crisis.

The Crisis Phase

Challenges during the Covid-19 Pandemic

It emerged from the data analysis that the Covid-19 pandemic had brought challenges that have disrupted the socio-economic and emotional spaces of education stakeholders, especially school heads and directors of education. The infectious and fatal nature of the crisis has stirred up the equilibrium of organisational mood rendering people anxious, fearful and pessimistic. As the data amply showed, it was an arduous task for the participants to provide the essential resources needed to ensure a safe re-opening of schools and effective teaching and learning amidst the coronavirus pandemic. For example, participants struggled to provide personal protective equipment and cleaning supplies, sometimes not knowing when to receive the subsequent supplies and whether there would be enough for all given the enormous unexpected resource burden the pandemic placed on governments and families. Thus, disruption of socio-economic, emotional and economic equilibrium were attendant challenges of the coronavirus crisis, which the participants had to live through. This finding corroborates the ideas of several scholars, including O'Connell and Clarke (2020), Igbokwe et al. (2020), Smith (2021) and Lee(2021). They suggested that the emergence of unanticipated challenges and demands are typical of crises situations. Using the Covid-19 to illustrate their claim, these authors argue that the unexpected emergence, deadly, virulent and mutative nature of the virus has created enormous fear, uncertainty and extraordinarily challenging circumstances that rendered people isolated, overwhelmed and anxious. However, a surprising finding from this study was that there was calmness, especially among the leaders implying that calm resilience was a necessary aspect of leadership during crises (O'Connell & Clarke, 2020).

Another challenge was the non-compliance of learners. Learners of pre-tertiary schools range from five to eighteen, encompassing children, adolescents and teenagers. This implies that they will exhibit varied behaviours, including submissiveness, obedience, disobedience or resistance, depending on their developmental stage.

Therefore, it was expected that some learners would disobey some of the established health protocols, including regular wearing and washing of hands and keeping of socio-physical distance of one metre to avert the spread of the coronavirus. However, this finding implies that the challenge of getting people to comply with the laid down Covid-19 protocols was as crucial as making available the needed resources to observe them. Nonetheless, as Mackay (2018) asserts, the paradoxical blend of fear, dissatisfaction, chaos, and confidence often inspires us to look for more imaginative solutions that help us adapt to problems that beset us.

The Adaptation Phase

Strategies That Contributed to Their Effective Leadership

Over half a century ago, Martin Luther King (1963: 26) counselled humanity that "the ultimate measure of a person is not where they stand in moments of comfort, but where they stand at times of challenge and controversy". Leadership researchers, including Zame et al. (2008) and recently, Lee (2021), corroborate this view stating that educational leaders are initiators, innovators, motivators, calculators, communicators, and problem-solvers. Thus, school heads and directors of education-initiated strategies to ensure safe school environments for effective teaching and learning during the Covid-19 pandemic through several methods discussed.

Understanding the Context of a Crisis and Ensuring People's Well-Being

The results indicate that understanding the reality of the coronavirus crisis and the kind of people they were dealing with – literates, semi-literates, or illiterates was a crucial strategy participant deployed to address the coronavirus crisis successfully. Participants insisted that schools exist because of learners, staff and the community. Thus, prioritising their well-being was a core component of leadership practice. A practical adaptation strategy they used to reach out to staff, students, and community members was check-in. It is a challenging and expensive strategy requiring personal sacrifice and time, and resources since it involves phone calls, social media and physical visits where suitable. That notwithstanding, check-in challenges us to view the scope of schools beyond the spaces where teachers and learners occupy to include the entire community (Tangonyire, 2021). The finding points to the necessity of applying emotional intelligence or empathy as Iszatt-White and Saunders (2020) observe, and resonates with the conclusions of Wooten and James (2008) and recently, O'Connell and Clarke (2020) that strengthening and making students, parents, staff and communities feel calm, safe, confident and flexible during a crisis is a powerful adaptation strategy.

Flexibility enables people to be optimistic about finding solutions to a crisis. Thornton (2021), who has researched learning through the problem, found that flexibility and optimism – holding a positive attitude and countenance are powerful arsenals to contain a crisis. Staying calm as leaders is particularly important because people do not want to sense their leaders panic (O'Connell & Clarke, 2020). The idea of keeping calm amidst a crisis has important implications for policymakers, practitioners, learners, and communities because it is a stabilising ingredient that enables people to think, imagine and collaborate to combat difficulties of life.

Effective Communication

The data analysis showed that effective communication was another critical strategy that enabled schools to run safely during the coronavirus pandemic. It equipped everyone with relevant information about the pandemic. This finding of the current study corroborates the results of a lot of previous works relating to leadership during crises, including those of Smith and Riley (2012), O'Connell and Clarke (2020), and Reddy and Gupta (2021). For example, as O'Connell and Clarke explain, people want clarity on issues, the challenges, strategies leaders initiate to address the crisis, assurances, and leaders' acknowledgement of their vulnerability and humanity where necessary.

Leadership Distribution

The participants acknowledged that members' mutual sharing of ideas and experiences significantly influenced their implementation of adaptation strategies during the coronavirus crisis. As P13 said: "I counted very much on the mutual strengths, skills, experiences, and willingness of everyone to sail through the storm of the pandemic. I just could not do it alone". This finding is worth noting because several authors argue that leadership is essentially a dynamic relational activity (Eacott, 2016; Branson & Marra, 2019) that focuses on mutual interactions to initiate, build, and motivate others (Hawkins & James, 2018). Thus, shared leadership is a solid basis for collective efforts

(DuBrin, 2018; Mutch, 2020; Smith & Riley, 2012). However, to be more effective and reap the intended benefit, some authors (Smith & Riley, 2012; Waterhouse & Møller, 2009) asseverate that leaders must distribute leadership and coordinate activities.

The Opportunity Phase

Taking Advantage of the Crisis

Boin et al. (2010), Deverell (2011), Boin et al. (2013) and Thornton (2021), who have published on leadership through crisis, underscored the need to learn from situations to prepare for the future. For example, Boin et al. (2010) explain that emergency offers leaders opportunities to reflect on their practice and learn from their experiences to reform and reshape the institutions they lead.

Reflective Practitioners

Some of the study participants believed that the crisis was a wake-up call for reflection on their established conceptualisation of leadership and practice. In a busy, materialistic world like ours, where people believe in quick fixes, most participants resonated that crisis can be good reminders of the crucial role of reflection in leadership practice. It helps them make informed decisions about issues, appreciate their complexities, and their strengths and vulnerabilities as leaders. This finding accords with Wooten et al.'s (2013) observation that leaders can maximise learning and benefit from the situation by being reflective practitioners. However, the urgency with which some crises require responses implies that school heads and directors of education sometimes spontaneously make decisions (Smith & Riley, 2012). Decisions devoid of reflection can have profound implications, given that crises environments are susceptible to emotions and immediate unintended consequences on people (O'Connell & Clarke, 2020).

Learning from the Crisis

This study indicated that despite the enormous pressure that leaders of schools and directors of education experienced during the Covid-19 crisis, the crisis offered opportunities for learning. For example, the Covid-19 pandemic engendered some participants to learn for the first time how to use information and communication technologies, including e-learning, WhatsApp, Twitter and Zoom for teleconferencing. Thus, the crisis enabled them to learn new ways of doing things, including communication. This finding contradicts the finding of Bhaduri (2018) that in times of crisis, people and organisations miss opportunities to learn, perhaps because of the panic, anxieties and pressures, it imposes on them. However, the finding is consistent with Mackay (2018, p. 10), who asserts that "nothing clarifies our priorities like a crisis, and nothing keeps the brain act like an encounter with the unexpected". Crisis presents opportunities to develop the adaptive capabilities necessary for successful leadership (Robertson 2011; Thornton, 2021), confirming the belief that there could be a bright side to every misfortune.

Conclusion

Drawing on the experiences of a group of school leaders and directors of education, the purpose of this study was to gain insights into their leadership actions, challenges and learning opportunities to prepare for and strengthen leadership practices of leaders of schools and education directorates in times of crisis. The study results have highlighted the relevancy of the Ghanaian adage that *seyedebiribigya wo a, nayedeaso wo* (transliterated as, 'if you are asked to care for something, then you have been tasked to carry it through). The study participants shouldered the responsibility of ensuring safety for their staff, students, and community members during the Covid-19 pandemic. The study results relate to practices that leaders must engage in as part of their regular role performance. The study also contributes to the literature on leadership in a crisis by identifying and reporting on the coronavirus-induced challenges and the strategies that heads of schools and directors of education deployed to ensure school safety and effective teaching and learning.

While these leaders' situational learning helped them successfully protect students, staff, and community members, their learning extends beyond the crisis period. It has also prepared the leaders to assess and strategise to navigate unfamiliar situations and any future unforeseen occurrence to focus on learning to keep students and staff safe. The areas of leadership learning and preparation for the study participants have included what they did at the initial crisis stage to ready themselves for any eventuality and put the lives and welfare of students, staff and community members at the centre of their leadership decisions. In addition, the leaders learned to use different

media to communicate effectively, knew of and used new technologies, including social media platforms, to increase the frequency and effectiveness of sending and receiving information clearly and timely.

Although time management did not specifically come up in the participants' narratives, time management skills are invaluable during crisis periods. On-the-spur-of-the-moment decisions and actions, consultations and meetings, and implementing decisions involve time and must be done timely. The anticipation is that leaders in education and other organisations would hone their leadership skills and strengthen their leadership practices to continue to help them pursue measures to minimise the threats of the Covid-19 virus on school functioning to ensure continuous and improved teaching and learning during the pandemic. In the light of the outcome of this study, future research should focus on what leaders of education do to achieve work-family balance, health, and well-being. This research will enable education leaders to remain strong, lead others and coordinate activities to ensure safety for students and staff.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Protocol: Leadership During the Covid-19 Pandemic

Participant ID:

Section 1 Background Information

1. Respondent's biological gender: Male [] Female []
2. Title/Designation (please specify):
3. Educational Outfit (school or education office): Pre-school (crèche/KG), primary, junior high, senior high, education office (Regional/Metropolitan/Municipal/District)
4. Do you work in a public or private education outfit? Public [] Private []
5. In which Region of Ghana do you work (Name of Region)?
6. Years at the current role (number of years you have worked at your current position):

Section 2 Leadership Experiences and Strategies During the Covid-19 Pandemic

7. What was the mood or atmosphere at your school/office? (Were people afraid, panicky, hopeful, expectant, pessimistic, worried, confused or what?)
8. What challenges to your leadership did you face during the pandemic?
9. What strategies did you employ to maintain a focus on teaching and learning while assuring safety for all?
10. What lessons have you learned from the pandemic?
11. Are there any other views you would like to share?