Chapter 1
Navigating the Unknown:
International School Leadership and the Transition Through COVID–19

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ABSTRACT

This purpose of this qualitative study was to apply the four central tenets of Schlossberg's transition theory—situation, self, social support, and strategies—to the experiences of 10 international school leaders in 10 different countries who guided their schools through multiple transitions between in-person and virtual learning during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. The leaders' experiences shared five common elements: (1) feelings of pervasive and persistent uncertainty, (2) recognition of the importance of communication and shared leadership, (3) attention to providing for stakeholders' social and emotional and physical health, (4) the leaders' need to care for themselves, and (5) responding effectively required creativity and flexibility. The findings provide guidance for identifying priorities, developing leadership models, and the leadership characteristics and behaviors that can be effective during times of unexpected and far-reaching crisis.

While the authors believe serving as an educator is one of society's highest callings, holding any position in a school, especially one in senior-level international school leadership has the potential to be stressful and isolating (Butler, 2020). These feelings, which can be exacerbated during crisis, are particularly applicable to leaders working in international school contexts; there may not be other school leaders locally with whom to professionally engage as a peer (Bailey & Giubson, 2020; Brackett et al., 2020: Hüsrevşahi & Sahan, 2020). With these concerns in mind, and with the prospect of learning more about how international school leaders manage disruptive events, the authors investigated the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on international school leaders as they led the transitions from a traditional to either

a hybrid or entirely online learning environment. A better understand of how these educational leaders perceived the challenges to their roles while leading these transitions was sought, and their empirical knowledge as crisis managers may inform school leadership scholarship and practice.

The intended audience is both practitioners and scholars. Practitioners currently working in schools, particularly those serving in middle or senior level leadership roles, may feel their stories of navigating the pandemic resonate with the leaders' experiences presented in this study. By reflecting on these narratives, educational leaders may be affirmed by their work in crisis management and draw upon the lessons learned by these participants to more effectively prepare for the next disruptive event. Scholars may also mine the gaps of this research to further contribute to the literature on school crisis management. Areas of research interest may include, but are not limited to, focusing on the crisis-related experiences of those serving in non-positional leadership roles in schools and the perceptions of school leaders of their pre-crisis readiness in the post-pandemic years.

The scale of the pandemic and its effect on school leadership was exceptional. A global shutdown of schools had not occurred since World War II (d'Orville, 2020), and COVID-19 quickly felt like an unprecedented crisis in the sense that most school leaders simply had not experienced a disruption of this magnitude (Adams & Muthiah, 2020; Thien & Adams, 2021, as cited in Adams et al., 2021). Due to the profound impact the pandemic has had on the field of education in so many contexts, there is an expectation that scholars and practitioners can learn more effective leadership traits and be better prepared for the next disruptive event. Given the opportunity to grow from this experience, the lessons participants shared with contribute to scholarship and leadership efficacy during times of anticipated and unanticipated crisis.

While gaining a clear understanding of school leadership experiences during crisis navigation is critical to more effectively prepare future educational leaders to support schools as well as their personal well-being (Urick et al., 2021), contextualizing the disruption COVID-19 caused on international education is imperative to understanding this study. The reach of the pandemic, which the World Health Organization declared "a public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC)" on January 30th, 2020, was vast (World Health Organization, 2020a, as cited in DeMartino & Weiser, 2021), ultimately forcing 98% of the world's international schools to transition from a traditional to either an online or hybrid teaching and learning model (Keeling, 2020). More than 13,000 international schools serve approximately 6,000,000 students and their communities, and the magnitude of this was both significant and paralyzing (ISC Research, 2022). Most schools and their stakeholders faced an unanticipated crisis without either a viable strategic model to follow or a clear indication of how or when the situation would be resolved.

In the search for a broad representation of voices, 30 potentially eligible senior international school leaders who lived and worked in 20 countries during the initial year of the COVID-19 pandemic were contacted. This study presents the voices of 10 international school leaders in various senior level leadership roles working in 10 different countries. Each participant joined us for a one-hour interview structured according to the four central tenets of Schlossberg's (1984) transition theory: situation, self, social support, and strategies (Evans et al., 1998). The rationale for selecting participants is further explained in the methods section. The findings from this qualitative study align with the framework's four tenets and are examined in detail in the discussion section. Implications for international school leadership practice and gaps for further research are also explicitly identified and discussed.

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