

Research Article:

## **Exploring Teacher Leadership in Times of Uncertainty**

**Rania Sawalhi<sup>1\*</sup> and Youmen Chaaban<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Dadu Children's Museum of Qatar, QM Tower, P. O. Box 2777, Doha, Qatar

<sup>2</sup>Educational Research Centre, College of Education, Qatar University, P. O. Box 2713, Doha, Qatar

\*Corresponding author: [rania@edenterprise.org](mailto:rania@edenterprise.org)

### **ABSTRACT**

This qualitative study voices teachers' and school leaders' perspectives on teacher leadership in the aftermath of the educational disruption that lasted over two consecutive academic years. Research studies have documented the influences of this disruption on teacher leadership as it unfolded in schools worldwide, including in Qatar. This research examines teacher leadership manifestations after schools reopened for onsite teaching and learning, and it focuses on the following questions: What are the main changes in teachers' leadership practices based on teachers' and school leaders' perspectives? To what extent did teachers develop different leadership practices towards students, colleagues, school leaders, and parents? What have teachers taken away from their experiences during COVID-19 that they will use in classrooms in the future? The sample is comprised of 14 educators working in Qatar government schools. The educators include primary school teachers ( $N = 10$ ), vice-principals ( $N = 3$ ), and a principal ( $N = 1$ ). Findings reveal that teachers acquired adaptation skills that they carried to the school context. The educators further expanded their communication skills to encompass multiple stakeholders inside and outside the school. Lastly, the educators acquired technological skills that have supported student learning and professional learning. These teacher leadership manifestations were informal and voluntary and did not have a formal status or recognition. Despite these continuous changes and new requirements, several manifestations of teacher leadership, which had emerged during the pandemic, had disappeared. The study thus argues that the relapse of specific teacher leadership indicators may be due to the failure of policymakers and school administrations to establish systemic and systematic systems that support teacher leaders. Recommendations for researchers and practitioners are provided.

**Keywords:** Teacher leadership, uncertain times, educational disruption, government schools, Qatar

**Received:** 29 May 2023; **Published:** 29 December 2023

**To cite this article:** Sawalhi, R., & Chaaban, Y. (2023). Exploring teacher leadership in times of uncertainty. *Asia Pacific Journal of Educators and Education*, 38(2), 47–66. <https://doi.org/10.21315/apjee2023.38.2.4>

## INTRODUCTION

In the current phase after the COVID-19 era, the world continues to face uncertainty, mainly due to enduring economic instability, a rising number of conflict zones, and far-reaching natural disasters. The consequences of this uncertainty on education and schooling have been reflected in multiple reports and papers that have called for continued teaching and learning processes (Chaaban et al., 2021; Hollweck & Doucet, 2020). Although the impact of the pandemic is predicted to endure in the years to come, schools have since reopened and teachers have remained on the frontlines of restoring a broken education system. The challenges confronting teachers are many; yet in any crisis, there is always opportunity and hope (Campbell, 2020). Calls for re-imagining the education and the schooling system have accompanied a sincere recognition of teachers' exceptional roles and the need to support them (DeMatthews et al., 2020; Hollweck & Doucet, 2020) especially as their roles evolve and take on new meanings.

Scholars worldwide have examined teacher leadership practices during the pandemic to identify areas that need development and investment (Arar et al., 2022; Chaaban et al., 2021; Mila, 2022; Stone-Johnson & Weiner, 2020). In the past, educators faced many uncertain situations due to natural crises or different conditions inside and outside schools (Mutch, 2015; Myers, 2014). However, only a few studies have explored teacher leadership practices before, during, and after uncertain times in the last decades.

Notably, during the COVID-19 pandemic and from the beginning of school closures, teacher leadership was manifested through several practices and roles documented in studies worldwide (Aslan et al., 2020; Campbell, 2020; Chaaban et al., 2021). New teacher leadership roles emerged as teachers reported using new technologies, supporting colleagues, solving emerging problems, and responding to parents and students alike (Harris, 2020). Teachers influenced their colleagues in many ways, such as by providing professional development, offering instructional support and maintaining social connections. Other studies explored teacher leadership practices in response to the need to rapidly adapt to remote teaching and learning and to the use of new digital tools (Adarkwah, 2020; Anderson & Hira, 2020). In addition, teachers were expected to leverage remote, hybrid and in-person methods while coping with issues related to health, safety, and uncertainty (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2020; Harris & Jones, 2020; Sharma et al., 2022). Teachers thus became a beacon for how teacher leadership may ensure continued teaching and learning opportunities in a disrupted educational system.

The new teaching practices that emerged during the pandemic were expected to provide superior learning opportunities after the pandemic (Brooks et al., 2022; Chaaban et al., 2021; 2022). Previous studies have anticipated that teacher leadership could prompt sustainable teaching and learning quality and school improvement efforts (Killion et al., 2016; Wenner & Campbell, 2017; York-Barr & Duke, 2004) and that teachers who are aware of their influence and leadership practices have the potential to become instrumental in shifting educational opportunities toward successful learning outcomes. Furthermore, teacher leadership has been considered one of the main factors in enhancing effective education recovery because teachers can easily develop proper practices inside and outside their classrooms (Eltanahy, 2018). Other studies have indicated that teachers can lead

teams and engage in professional development as teachers know best what works in their contexts and how to promote learning for their peers (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009; Klein & Schwanenber, 2022).

The pandemic showed that the provision of educational opportunities during uncertain times does not depend on a country's wealth because some wealthy countries discontinued teaching and learning until late 2020 (Chaaban et al., 2021). However, there is a need to voice the experiences of educators from the field in different contexts, including Arab countries. While some studies, such as that by Chaaban et al. (2021) were conducted in the early months of the pandemic, there is a need to explore the sustainability of teacher leadership practices and acknowledge the lessons learned by educators in the field. Policymakers and world leaders have engaged in extensive discussions about the need for transforming education (<https://www.un.org/en/transforming-education-summit>), which highlights the necessity to explore teacher leadership in uncertain times and whether teachers' expertise and leadership skills are utilised and institutionalised. This study was conducted to answer the following questions:

1. What are the main changes in teachers' leadership practices from the perspective of teachers and school leaders?
2. To what extent did teachers develop different leadership practices towards students, colleagues, school leaders, and parents?
3. What have teachers taken away from their experiences during COVID-19 that they will use in future classrooms?

### **Conceptualising Teacher Leadership**

According to the systematic review by York-Barr and Duke (2004), teacher leadership is the "process by which teachers, individually or collectively, influence their colleagues, principals, and other members of school communities to improve teaching and learning practices with the aim of increased student learning and achievement" (pp. 287–288). Their review revealed that teacher leadership entails effectively engaging, influencing, and cooperating with individuals and organisations to facilitate improved teaching and learning in the following dimensions: (a) coordination and management, (b) school or district curriculum work, (c) professional development of colleagues, (d) participation in school change/improvement, (e) parent and community involvement, (f) contribution to the teaching profession, and (g) pre-service teacher education. Further, Wang and Xia (2020) expanded this view of teacher leadership and identified five vital overlapping themes related to teacher leadership: (a) influence in leading others, (b) leading with others, (c) leading collegial relationships, (d) leading teacher learning, and (e) leading for teaching and learning.

Lai and Cheung (2015), for instance, concluded that "both adapting and capacitating teacher leaders demonstrated a significant initiative to negotiate with the school surroundings to establish facilitative school conditions for better teaching and learning" (p. 689). It is noteworthy, however, that most teachers do not even know that they have the potential to develop leadership practices (Sawalhi & Chaaban, 2021).

Extant literature has by concluding that every teacher can intentionally and unintentionally influence others, differentiated between teacher leadership and teacher leaders. In addition, teachers practice leadership in formal, informal, positional, and non-positional ways (Nguyen et al., 2019; Schott et al., 2020; Wenner & Campbell, 2017).

Teacher leadership practices have three targets of influence: People, teams and organisational capability (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Teachers' leadership practices influence students in and outside classrooms (Augustsson & Boström, 2012; Shah & Ilyas Khan, 2020). However, scholars are still investigating teacher leadership's impact on students' outcomes and performance. Besides students, teacher leadership is well known for developing and improving teachers' professional practices (Hunzicker, 2019; Prenger et al., 2021; Schott et al., 2020). Furthermore, teacher leadership improves school leaders' practices and environment (Hallinger & Walker, 2017; Hunter, 2012). The people and teams who are targets of influence include parents and other national and international stakeholders, such as professional learning communities and policy developers (Bangs & Frost, 2015; Campbell, 2017). In their systematic review, Schott et al. (2020) showed that teachers could help parents conquer "learned helplessness," which is commonly used to refer to learners' lack of confidence. However, studies show that the relationship between teacher learning and the translation of that learning into practice is in no way linear.

There are many benefits to schools and schooling when teacher leadership is a common practice. Teacher leadership enables teachers to collaborate with their peers to develop relationships and establish lines of communication (Poekert, 2012). In doing so, teacher leaders debunk any notions of superiority or competence that may otherwise discourage teachers from cooperating with them by showing their peers that they are nonsupervisory, nonthreatening partners (Mangin, 2005). Teacher leaders may engage in moderate "nudging" toward instructional improvement once relationships are established (Ackerman & Mackenzie, 2006).

While many studies claim that teacher leadership aims to increase student achievement, this does not indicate enhancing test scores only (Nguyen et al., 2019; Schott et al., 2020; Wenner & Campbell, 2017). Within the classroom, teacher leadership practices entail various strategies and procedures that aim to create opportunities for students based on their needs. Outside the classroom, teacher leadership provides a broad perspective of teachers' influence across their careers as the leadership relates to educational systems, structures, and practices in and outside the teachers' classrooms and communities. For the most part, teachers have been observed to participate in various activities that help them improve their critical consciousness over time. These activities also help the teachers strengthen their capacity for self-reflection as they encounter, examine and overcome obstacles. The activities and beliefs of teachers are linked and mutually beneficial. Teachers re-evaluate their prior views when adopting new practices, and this reevaluation influences their subsequent practices (Oppi et al., 2022). Furthermore, according to Hairon and Goh (2015), teacher leadership improves professional learning by fostering collegial ties, encouraging teachers' learning, and aiding in the adjustment of the teachers' practices.

## **Developing Teacher Leadership**

Under normal circumstances, teachers tend to develop their leadership practices gradually over time. We believe, as do many educators, that teachers develop their leadership skills while developing their teaching and learning practices (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001). Researchers indicate that teacher leadership developmental progression includes collaboration, self-reflection and modelling. However, risk-taking, which is one of the main characteristics of this progression, is not seen in teacher leadership developmental stages (Jacques et al., 2016).

Studies on teacher leadership during COVID-19 showed that individuals within schools became capable of dealing with challenges and adapting faster than expected, and school leaders encouraged learning, sharing new ideas, and innovation (Chaaban et al., 2021; 2022). Systematic reviews show that there is a lack of research on teacher leadership in times of uncertainty before COVID-19 (Nguyen et al., 2019; Schott et al., 2020; Wenner & Campbell, 2017).

## **Teacher Leadership During Educational Disruption**

During school closures, parental involvement and participation in teacher networks and professional learning communities become a vivid outcome of teacher leadership (Chaaban et al., 2021; Schott et al., 2020). Several researchers continue to explore the side effects of this disruption. Several other studies provided empirical evidence about the nature and quality of teacher leadership practices that emerged during the pandemic.

Some studies focused on teachers' struggles with the transition to online learning, specifically in primary schools where the teachers were required to use new tools although there was scant preparation and readiness (Gudmundsdottir & Hathaway, 2020; Hollweck & Doucet, 2020). Other papers focused on how teachers worked together meaningfully to support each other, school leaders, and students and their parents during a time of ambiguity and uncertainty (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2020; Nguyen & Ng, 2020). In contrast, other researchers called for reigniting teacher leadership as a means for reimagining education systems, as teachers become catalysts for educational change (Campbell, 2020). A common thread across empirical studies was the notion that educational disruption generated numerous challenges for schools and challenged the status quo, which educationalists and researchers have attempted to do for many years. Despite these challenges, educational disruption was considered an opportunity for teachers to execute their professional learning and leadership practices in ways deemed impossible in the past (Campbell, 2020).

Many teachers were found to embrace school-wide leadership roles and responsibilities in creative and innovative ways (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2020), such as establishing strong ties with students and parents despite social distancing, managing the transition to online learning, implementing new forms of pandemic pedagogies, and maintaining sustainable relationships with colleagues (Chaaban et al., 2021). Extending the lessons learned during the pandemic to other emergencies, including the kinds of support that can be provided for teachers and students and how teachers can influence different stakeholders at the same time, remains to be seen.

## Conceptual Framework

In Sawalhi's study (2019), 96 teachers (males and females) were interviewed in 2017–2018 to explore the nature of teacher leadership from their perspectives. Teacher leadership's formal and informal practices have been found to influence others in an orbit model (see Figure 1). Teachers can engage in dynamic interactions at different levels, including with students, other teachers, administrative staff, school leaders, parents, the broader community, and national and international collaborations. The model also emphasises that a teacher's influence is not a linear process but a dynamic, interactive one.

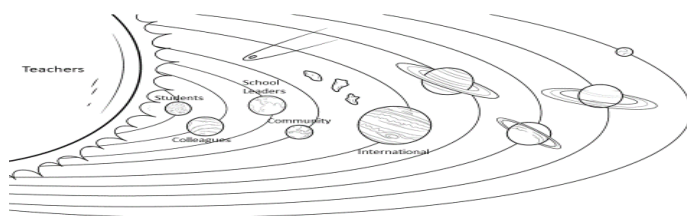


Figure 1. Orbit model

Although previous studies mentioned that teacher leadership spheres and domains are related to influence (Fairman & Mackenzie, 2012; Grant, 2017), most studies explored teacher leadership impact on one level at a time for instance, by examining teacher leadership practices with students or their impact on students, or teacher leadership professional activities with colleagues. However, Webber and colleagues (2023, p. 7) explain how teacher leaders' spheres of influence start from teachers "in their pursuit of professional growth, it is important that teacher leaders engage in critical reflection of their professional practices and challenge the assumptions and beliefs that they and colleagues may hold."

Following the orbit model, this study presented results to explore the teacher leadership circle of influence before and during the pandemic.

## Context of the Study

The context of this study is the Qatari educational system has been recently scrutinised on the basis of low student performance, high attrition rates and shifting landscape (Chaaban & Du, 2017; Chaaban et al., 2023). The centralised nature of this educational system is translated into the managerial role played by the The Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MOEHE) in the country. As opposed to private and international schools in the country, government schools are managed and regulated by MOEHE. Due to the centralised nature of the education system, MOEHE plays a decisive role in overseeing curriculum implementation, student distribution, funding allocations and teacher recruitment. Despite its fairly regulatory role of private schools, the MOEHE allows more autonomy for decision-making in all aspects of their operation.

When COVID-19 was announced as a global pandemic, the MOEHE took a decisive role in shifting all learning online (Chaaban et al., 2021). Following this period, government schools in Qatar opened for face-to-face teaching and learning for the academic year 2021–

2022. Although the reopening process was gradual, all government schools were operating at full capacity within the first few months of that academic year. MOEHE also offered teachers professional development opportunities depending on the changing requirements of the education system. For instance, a new digital platform was launched immediately after schools reopened in response to the challenges faced during online learning with the old system. All teachers were required to take the training offered by MOEHE to learn how to use the new system.

Generally speaking, the Qatari educational landscape can be characterised as continuous change and improvement that sometimes result in less-than-desirable effects on teacher readiness and acceptability. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers in government schools had been accustomed to educational reforms, which had become a fixed staple of their school experiences. Many such reforms had been rolled out without careful planning and vanished shortly thereafter (Du et al., 2019). Although the educational reform in Qatar was based on borrowing educational policies and programmes from Western countries, the term teacher leadership was not used (Sawalhi & Sellami, 2021). However, MOEHE provides formal and informal teacher leadership opportunities, such as forming teacher advisory committees to represent teachers and share ideas with policymakers.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

This study utilised qualitative phenomenology as an approach to gain insight into the lived experiences of teachers in Qatar government schools and explore the teachers' personal beliefs, knowledge, interpretations and actions (Ivankova & Creswell, 2009). This research thus emphasised educators' experiences and subjective interpretations of teacher leadership, and the educators' voices precede any a priori assumptions, definitions or theoretical framework. We assumed that the participants' lived experiences would support a detailed description of the nature of teacher leadership manifestations beyond the disruption to education caused by COVID-19.

A reflective and inductive approach was adopted, and it involved gathering insight into participants' lived experiences after schools reopened for face-to-face classes. The researchers obtained permission from the Qatari MOEHE to conduct the study, while ethics clearance was obtained from the Qatar University Institutional Review Board (IRB) committee. After these initial approvals, schools were contacted for participation.

### **Participants**

The current study investigated educators' perspectives on sustained teacher leadership manifestations assumed during school closures. The decision was made to focus on government schools fully regulated by MOEHE. Further, similar contextual and structural factors have been known to influence leadership in these schools as they follow a centralised system of operation.

E-mails were sent to all primary government schools in Qatar, and the first three schools

to respond were recruited. Accordingly, two schools with a population of female students and another with a population of male students were selected to participate in the study. Each school was requested to nominate up to five teachers alongside the principal and/or the vice-principal (VP) to participate in semi-structured interviews. The sample comprised 10 primary school teachers, 3 VPs and 1 school principal ( $N = 14$ ). Table 1 presents the participants from each school.

All participants were females, which reflects the teacher demographics in primary schools in Qatar. Data from the school principals and VPs were used to validate the findings and provide a deep understanding of the provision of teacher leadership.

**Table 1.** Participants from each school

School	Participant	Subject taught	Years of experience
School A	T1	English	9
	T2	Science	30
	VP	Islam	29
School B	T1	Math	8
	T2	Science	10
	T3	IT	12
	T4	English	24
	VP	Science	21
	T1	Science	16
School C	T2	Science	4
	T3	English	10
	T4	Social sciences	12
	VP	Arabic	14
	PR	Science	24

### Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews that allowed participants to express their views and reflect on their teacher leadership practices freely and without restrictions. One interview schedule was developed for teachers and a separate one was developed for principals/VPs. An interview guideline was created to support the interviewees in discussing their perspectives. It included several domains: student needs, technology use, professional learning, peer collaborations, school leadership support and parental engagement. The interviews with the school leaders were meant to triangulate the data gathered from the teachers and included inquiring about teachers' experiences in their schools.

Each interview lasted approximately 40 to 60 minutes. The interviews were conducted in Arabic, the participants' mother tongue. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and analysed using a data-driven and code-oriented approach, thus allowing for the



construction of meaning using the themes embedded in the collected data. The transcripts were read by the authors individually, as they searched for meaning and took notes of initial impressions. Several open coding strategies recommended by Saldana (2011) were adopted in this stage. The data emerging from the individual cases were grouped for each school and then compared across the three participating schools. The next step included a thorough discussion of emerging codes and recurrent categories used to reduce the data. This process resulted in reaching a consensus on how the data could be further condensed, labelled and sorted. Finally, only specific instances of transcripts used in this report were translated into English and used to provide empirical evidence for the identified themes.

## **FINDINGS**

This study aimed to explore teacher leadership during uncertain times such as the COVID-19 pandemic in response to the research questions:

1. What are the main changes in teachers' leadership practices according to teachers and school leaders' perspectives?
2. To what extent did teachers develop different leadership practices towards students, colleagues, school leaders, and parents?
3. What have teachers taken away from their experiences during COVID-19 that they will use in future classrooms?

The results will be presented according to three main themes: First is a demonstration of leadership, which refers to self-described personal growth, and second is leadership in action, which shows the changes in teacher leadership practices towards the main domains mentioned in the circle of influence/orbit model (students, colleagues, parents and community, and national and international contributions), which answers the second research question. Unfortunately, some aspects of teacher leadership did not stand the test of transitioning to a face-to-face environment and teachers are still shifting between pre- and during-COVID-19 practices. The results related to the third question as main takeaways were mentioned in the third theme in addition some comments were mentioned in previous themes to avoid repeating that teachers stated that they are still exploring new practices.

These themes are presented in the following sections:

### **Demonstrating Leadership**

To answer question one, the interviewees were asked to share the main changes in their teaching and learning and leadership practices as well as their success stories. Their comments showed self-discovery and growth mainly in dealing with continuous changes, remote and in-person learning, and sharing ideas with colleagues and school leadership. Although teachers did not consider their new actions as leadership practices, they showed their willingness to collaborate with school leaders and other teachers in their school and other schools to develop their practices and share ideas.

Interestingly, the findings reveal that teachers who had previously demonstrated resistance

to change and used to complain about dealing with students acquired “flexibility” and “a welcoming attitude” toward returning to face-to-face learning. One VP said that teachers were “iron ladies” because they were able to manage challenges related to “students, parents, ministry requirements, and zigzagging decisions,” which were needed in returning to school. Further, several teachers noted a shift in attitude towards ministerial directives: teachers “stopped complaining and were ready to implement any regulation.” Most teachers also noted their ability to “accept change from the ministry as they were used to it by now.” While acknowledging the influence of change on their workload and effort, the teachers noted that “everyone is trying their best, and it will take some time for things to settle.”

Another encouraging finding was teachers’ sustainable technological skills. Teachers commented on their ability to learn and adapt new technologies and requirements “without hesitation or thinking.” They continued to use technological tools and applications even after the students returned to school. Most teachers expressed their increased confidence in searching for new information and sharing new ideas. Many teachers discussed their interest in searching for new technological tools and applications with features that were relevant to content and students. As T9 explained, teachers developed skills in “selecting and evaluating the usefulness of applications for student learning.”

Teachers’ need for technological tools as a medium for ongoing learning opportunities also “forced them out of their comfort zone and made them keen learners of technology.” These skills were considered as “remaining relevant to student learning” and “should never be lost.” Although all interviewees highlighted the need to utilise technologies, interviewees noted that “we need to provide learning opportunities according to the needs of the students and the country. We need to study other approaches such as those taken by the German and Finnish schooling systems.”

Teachers returned to the classroom after a two-year disruption, and this disruption disconnected them from their previous ways of planning and teaching. In this respect, several teachers discussed how they had to “relearn how to make plans for face-to-face learning and design group works differently.” One VP discussed how “some teachers resorted to traditional teaching methods, and required some reminders at the beginning of the academic year to ensure student engagement and motivation.” Yet most teachers viewed the incorporation of “enjoyment” and “interaction” in their lessons as two important criteria for using new technologies. They observed “students’ distraction” and students’ “inability to focus” and “confusion” and “needed to give them time to adjust to the classroom environment.” The teachers described students’ joy when students returned to school and highlighted that “teachers were even happier than the students as they really missed them.”

The teachers also expressed a renewed commitment toward student learning as they contemplated elements of learning loss and concerns for student well-being. The teachers became “very focused on students, who were at risk, so they had to focus even more on their learning and find out their levels to help them.” One teacher observed that “low achievers were mostly impacted by the school closure, whereas some students actually did better at home.” Such observations were made by the teachers who “noticed a quick gain among students since they returned,” which prompted them to further “monitor students’ progress in the following semester.” For one grade 3 teacher, “students had not acquired

the basic skills in grades 1 and 2 and could not keep up with science lessons.” She addressed the importance of “going back to the basics to teach them reading and writing skills before moving forward.” In response to learning loss, several teachers designed make-up lessons for students with low grades. Notably though, these teachers did not recognise their work as influencing others or pertaining to teacher leadership as they assumed that “it was the norm and duty.”

Regarding self-described leadership growth, teachers discovered new skills and attitudes such as being flexible. Some teachers shifted from being against technology to advocating and training others to use it. Furthermore, although school leaders did not request it, some teachers devised ways to help others, and the school leaders did not stop these teachers.

The following sections show domains where teachers influenced others.

### **Leadership in Action**

Following the orbit model mentioned earlier in this study to answer research question two, this section provides results for the areas in which teachers influenced and focused during the pandemic and which might influence their future practices. At the core of the teacher leader’s conceptual underpinning lies influence. The teachers and principals participating in this study explored this notion with multiple stakeholders within the school and beyond. The following sections show examples of teacher leadership practices related to students, colleagues, school leadership and parents in that order.

#### ***Students***

Because teachers relied on MOEHE ready-made videos and teaching resources during the pandemic, they shifted from using these materials to planning for their students. Despite being aware of students’ learning loss, as indicated above, all participating teachers described changes to students’ behaviours after they returned to the classroom. The teachers revealed some students had become alienated from school rules and regulations. While the teachers expected compliance, many students were “unable to adapt to the new tasks and requirements, even basic things like sitting at their desks, following rules, doing homework and listening to the teacher.” For others, getting students to go back to paper-based learning was a challenge as “students did not want to write and wanted to use their computers instead.” Most teachers believed in the importance of reintroducing textbooks, which created “some resistance from the students who preferred technology.”

Accordingly, several teachers noted difficulties in managing and maintaining classroom order. For some teachers, resorting to establishing positive relationships with students was considered the solution. These teachers tried to provide a supportive environment where the students became confident in asking for help. They also admitted that they needed to pay increased attention to the importance of connecting to students at a personal level during school closures as they were concerned with students’ completion of tasks.

Notably, teachers did not focus on well-being issues. When inquiries about students’ well-being were made, all teachers explained they had not been involved in catering to students’ well-being needs because most of the teachers’ attention had been on issues of learning loss and classroom management. The school principals, however, had professed to know about

issues related to student well-being, such as experiencing the divorce of parents, financial issues, and loss of family or friends. Yet the principals admitted to “not attending to these issues in a way that was satisfying.”

Teachers did not find or create opportunities to influence students because the teachers were focused on MOEHE requirements and following instructions. Teachers described being restricted in their ability to cater to students’ needs due to strict ministerial regulations. Given the centralised nature of the system, the teachers were apprehensive of the need to heed ministerial directives administered by their school leaders. Some teachers considered their school leaders to be “understanding of their needs,” yet “when it came to the ministry, they had no choice but to make sure the teachers were following them.” The teachers called for ministerial directives to “ease a little” and “provide space for teachers to plan and teach their students according to their needs.” One school leader also stated that “they need to provide learning opportunities according to the needs of the students and the country, not just adopting what other countries are doing.” The leader mentioned that teachers needed the autonomy to “design curricula for times of crisis that focus on students’ basic skills and that equipped them to deal with new situations” and that “there were other more urgent needs that should be met than to follow a yearly plan.” In contemplating the usefulness of online learning, all the teachers agreed that primary students needed face-to-face interactions. Nevertheless, the teachers were reluctant to support hybrid learning due to “the extra tasks that the ministry will request.”

### *Colleagues*

Compared to the situation during initial school closures, teachers and school leaders noted diminished collaboration among teachers after reopening. Once schools reopened, teachers described workload burdens and time constraints that inhibited their ability to work closely with other teachers. Accordingly, teachers described collaborations as a formality and requirement and not “an urgent need as before.”

Further, because teachers must engage in professional development according to ministerial directives, some teachers took the initiative to execute these directives voluntarily using similar video conferencing tools to those they had previously used during school closures. The teachers noted that the accessibility of professional development increased due to online training and various resources. One teacher mentioned how she supported her colleagues individually to customise their professional development according to their needs as “some teachers may need more one-on-one help, while others are quick to learn.” The school leaders, however, favoured face-to-face professional development because “teachers are required to apply new techniques, and need to practice and interact with the trainer and colleagues.” Another objection against online professional development was that “teachers might minimise the screen and do other things during the training session.”

### *School leadership*

Teachers felt that they could share ideas via groups more easily than before. VP2 was happy that teachers were proactive in suggesting new ideas and strategies. The results revealed that most teachers’ contributions were related to instructional practices after students returned to school.

School leaders appreciate the fact that teachers were flexible and understanding regarding continuous changes and tried their best. VP1 said it was mission impossible because teachers would be informed late Thursday (our last working day) that a new timetable would be implemented on Sunday (the first day of our work week). The teachers would try to adjust their plans and prepare for the new requirements. T8 said, “We all were reacting, no time to think or reflect.”

Moreover, teachers faced challenges related to new administrative tasks such as the student attendance system or documentation using the new templates. Notably, MOEHE did not train subject coordinators, and teachers had to act according to their assumptions and understanding, which they tried to communicate to students and parents.

### ***Parents***

When schools reopened, they followed specific protocols for contacting parents and coordinating with social workers. In contrast, during COVID-19, teachers used WhatsApp, direct calls, Microsoft Teams and many other ways to follow up with students and their parents. Currently, teachers are allowed to use their mobiles in many schools.

Regarding their relationships with parents, all teachers clearly noted reduced communication with parents. Typically, they explained that “during school closures, the parent played a major role, especially that [sic] students are in the primary grades.” However, once students were back at school, they described a restricted approach toward communication protocols. The response reduced these connections to those which “were necessary, such as students are falling behind or having difficulty following classroom rules.” The notion that the ministry regulates parental involvement through specific protocols reduced the degree of freedom for teachers to contact parents regularly.

Despite all the challenges primary students faced during the pandemic, the findings show that teachers need to communicate with parents to differentiate their practices according to the impact of uncertainty because some families faced loss, economic impact, or other issues.

### **Main Takeaways**

Results for the third research question indicated that teachers needed time to reflect and think about the new requirements. Time was a luxury during the pandemic and teachers tried their best to improve teaching and learning opportunities. However, the teachers indicated that they need to explore other systems such as Finnish schooling and try out new learning opportunities during normal times.

Teachers further tried to identify the lessons they learned. Firstly, they noticed that some students preferred online learning and that these students’ performance increased. They started discussing ways of designing new opportunities for students. Interviewees still needed to increase their openness towards online, face-to-face, or hybrid teaching and learning. All teachers were against teaching primary students online only. However, the teachers were reluctant to support hybrid learning due to the extra tasks that MOEHE would request them to do. Second, the teachers said that MOEHE needs to provide space

for teachers to plan and teach their students according to their needs. Teachers shared their students' needs with school leadership. All interviewees stated that there was a need to educate parents and communities on how to deal with new changes and provide support. In addition, MOEHE staff should be trained on new demands and requirements during times of uncertainty. One teacher mentioned that "there is a need to design curricula for times of crisis that focus on basic skills and that equip learners to deal with new situations." Third, teachers highlighted the fact that MOEHE and school leaders need to take care of them by motivating them and recognising their efforts and needs.

Teachers did not use data to describe their successes or failures. Instead, the teachers were content with obtaining agreement from others in their school. For instance, teachers would say: "school leaders accepted my idea" and "my colleagues were happy and learned from my new strategies." Teachers explained how they taught during in-person teaching: they had to keep students distanced and wearing masks and they were not able to use previous teaching strategies, such as group work. However, school leaders mentioned that teachers could have developed other ways of applying teaching strategies, but it seemed "teachers were shocked and not able to relate."

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The teachers in this study reported that there were new changes and requirements for daily tasks. These changes in their responsibilities crossed nearly every professional relationship: students, colleagues, school leaders and parents. In addition, teachers reflected on their professional growth and practices.

For the first research question, findings revealed that teachers stopped complaining and focused on teaching and learning continuity despite facing stress and uncertainties. This finding is consistent with previous studies in Qatar and in neighbouring Arab countries (Arar et al., 2022; Chaaban et al., 2021). However, continuous changes in ministerial decisions did not allow teachers to reflect, and educators were under great pressure to meet specific expectations without questioning the context or the students' needs. Interestingly, studies showed that teachers tried to find or create new opportunities early in the pandemic (Chaaban et al., 2021; Chaaban et al., 2022; Sharma et al., 2022) while the findings of this research reveal that teachers are not willing to take a risk or even continue the new practices they learned during uncertain times. This exciting finding needs further exploration to compare teachers' leadership practices in regular and uncertain times as previous studies show that teacher leaders tend to take risk and advocate (Webber et al., 2023).

The findings show that teachers identify success criteria to include things such as engaging students. However, there are core requirements such as students' well-being or other learning needs that teachers do not consider a priority. Previous studies discussed the importance of pedagogy over technology (Adarkwah, 2020; Hsu & Lin, 2020), while this study indicated teachers focus more on using technology than on content.

Furthermore, using technology in professional development raised many concerns about the quality of online training and the ability to apply new skills compared to face-to-face professional development and follow-up. These concerns indicate the need to redesign

professional development opportunities and avoid a one-size-fits-all approach, but instead provide multiple personalised learning opportunities (Chaaban et al., 2021)

Regarding the teacher leadership circle of influence/orbit model, the findings indicate that teachers faced many challenges related to students such as new behaviours, learning loss and emotional needs. However, teachers still needed to provide solutions to deal with the new requirements, which had increased, compared to early in the pandemic. School leaders indicated that teachers were in shock and needed reminders of basic tasks and teaching and learning activities. Teachers assumed that they were focusing on students' learning, while in reality they were focusing on implementing ministerial decisions without reflecting on their students' context and needs. For example, school leaders had to remind teachers of basic practices, such as preparing their classes before students resumed in-person learning and applying and designing educational activities, such as group work, despite social distancing and health requirements. Further studies need to be conducted to explore teacher leadership practices during and after COVID-19. Webber and others (2023, p. 8) indicate that "teacher leaders feel obliged to serve the interests of students and colleagues throughout their schools." However, teachers in uncertain times need to identify students' needs and reevaluate their resources.

For the third question, results showed the need to clarify what type of data could be used during uncertain times and how teachers can identify progress and achievements at their personal level or for all domains mentioned in the orbit model and for school improvement. Notable that Leithwood (2007) claim that teacher leadership is a movement rather than evidence-based practice.

Although teachers accomplished great and rapid changes that affected all their areas of influence, they did not proactively identify new needs and develop solutions to deal with new requirements. Table 2 summarises these key findings.

**Table 2.** Key findings

Domain	Early pandemic	In-person learning late-pandemic
Student	Strict; no direct contact with students.	Trying to identify new behaviours
Colleagues	Sharing information and supporting others. Launching new initiatives and volunteering.	Sharing ideas upon request
School leadership	Proactive and continuous discussions.	School leaders reminding teachers of basic tasks
Parents	Using different channels and engaging during after-school hours.	Controlled communication

The results show the importance of equipping teachers to identify the needs of students and to deal with changes in the students' behaviours to improve classroom management and design teaching and learning activities and assessment methods and strategies. There is

a need to support teachers in designing curricula that consider main competencies during times of uncertainty; such an endeavour needs to be supported by ministerial staff and school leaders. The findings also showed the need to reflect on the use of technology and explore the best schooling options, such as in-person or hybrid learning (Crompton et al., 2022). Because teachers experience different forms and types of professional development such as F2F and online training, school leaders need to support teachers to develop their own continuous professional development plan through shared leadership, intentional opportunities to practice leadership with coaching, and feedback when needed to help teachers develop successfully.

In addition, educators need to clarify that communicating with parents involves more than just sharing information. Epstein (1985) identified six types of parental involvement, including parenting, learning and decision-making. COVID-19 was identified as a pandemic, and each community faced various uncertainties. Because teachers and school leaders encountered great difficulty in performing new tasks to help students, families and communities in the aftermath of social-emotional and economic consequences and learning loss, teachers and school leaders must think and act in new ways. Webber and others (2023) state that the most important relationship school can forge is with parent as studies how that parents supports student learning, develop joint problem-solving ability and informs decisions about their children.

Moreover, educators need to utilise new opportunities and build on lessons learned from their experience. They need to resist going back to the way things were because it was only working for some students. These lessons learned and shared by the teachers and school leaders could be developed as future research agendas.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work was supported by the Qatar National Research Fund under the Grant Number RRC02-0811-210035.

## REFERENCES

- Ackerman, R., & Mackenzie, S. V. (2006). Uncovering teacher. *Educational Leadership*, 63(8), 66–70.
- Adarkwah, M. A. (2020). “I’m not against online teaching, but what about us?”: ICT in Ghana post COVID-19. *Education and Information Technologies*, 26(2), 1665–1685. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-020-10331-z>
- Anderson, E., & Hira, A. (2020). Loss of brick-and-mortar schooling: How elementary educators respond. *Information and Learning Science*, 121(5–6), 401–408. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ILS-04-2020-0085>
- Arar, K., Sawalhi, R., Chaaban, Y., Zohri, A., & Alhouthi, I. (2022). School leaders’ perspectives towards leading during crisis through an ecological lens: A comparison of five Arab countries. *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 54(2), 123–142. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220620.2021.1957793>



- Aslan, A., Silvia, S., Nugroho, B. S., Ramli, M., & Rusiadi, R. (2020). Teacher's leadership teaching strategy supporting student learning during the COVID-19 disruption. *Nidhomul Haq: Jurnal Manajemen Pendidikan Islam*, 5(3), 321–333.
- Augustsson, G., & Boström, L. (2012). A theoretical framework about leadership perspectives and leadership styles in the didactic room. *International Journal of Human Resource Studies*, 2(4), 166–186.
- Bangs, J., & Frost, D. (2015). Non-positional teacher leadership: Distributed leadership and self-efficacy. In *Flip the system* (pp. 91–107). Routledge.
- Brooks, M., Creely, E., & Laletas, S. (2022). Coping through the unknown: School staff well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. *International Journal of Educational Research Open*, 3, 100146. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedro.2022.100146>
- Campbell, C. (2017). Developing teachers' professional learning: Canadian evidence and experiences in a world of educational improvement. *Canadian Journal of Education/Revue canadienne de l'éducation*, 40(2), 1–33.
- Campbell, P. (2020). Rethinking professional collaboration and agency in a post-pandemic era. *Journal of Professional Capital and Community*, 5(3/4), 337–341.
- Chaaban, Y., & Du, X. (2017). Novice teachers' job satisfaction and coping strategies: Overcoming contextual challenges at Qatari government schools. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 67, 340–350. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2017.07.002>
- Chaaban, Y., Alkhateeb, H., Abu-Tineh, A., & Romanowski, M. (2023). Exploring teachers' perspectives on career development: Q methodology research. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 122, 103987. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2022.103987>
- Chaaban, Y., Arar, K., Sawalhi, R., Alhouthi, I., & Zohri, A. (2021). Exploring teachers' professional agency within shifting educational contexts: A comparative study of Lebanon, Qatar, Kuwait, and Morocco. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 106, 103451. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2021.103451>
- Chaaban, Y., Sawalhi, R., & Du, X. (2022). Exploring teacher leadership for professional learning in response to educational disruption in Qatar. *Professional Development in Education*, 48(3), 426–443. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2021.1973070>
- Crompton, H., Burke, D., Jordan, K., & Wilson, S. (2022). Support provided for K-12 teachers teaching remotely with technology during emergencies: A systematic review. *Journal of Research on Technology in Education*, 54(3), 473–489. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15391523.2021.1899877>
- DeMatthews, D., Knight, D., Reyes, P., Benedict, A., & Callahan, R. (2020). From the field: Education research during a pandemic. *Educational Researcher*, 49(6), 398–402.
- Du, X., & Chaaban, Y., & Almabrd, Y. M. (2019). Exploring the concepts of fidelity and adaptation in the implementation of PBL in the elementary classroom: Case studies from Qatar. *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research*, 18(9), 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.18.9.1>
- Eltanahy, M. (2018). *Teacher leadership potential: Assessment in the light of teachers' perceptions in UAE*. Unpublished master's thesis, American University in the Emirates.
- Epstein, J. L. (1985). Home and school connections in schools of the future: Implications of research on parent involvement. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 62(2), 18–41.
- Fairman, J. C., & Mackenzie, S. V. (2012). *Supporting teacher learning and leadership: Progress and challenge*. European Educational Research Association (ECER) paper no. 081114-1, 1–28.

- Grant, C. (2019). Excavating the South African teacher leadership archive: Surfacing the absences and re-imagining the future. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 47(1), 37–55.
- Gudmundsdottir, G. B., & Hathaway, D. M. (2020). “We always make it work”: Teachers’ agency in the time of crisis. *Journal of technology and teacher education*, 28(2), 239–250.
- Hairon, S., & Goh, J. W. (2015). Pursuing the elusive construct of distributed leadership: Is the search over? *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 43(5), 693–718.
- Hallinger P., & Walker A. D. (2017) Leading learning in Asia: Emerging empirical insights from five societies. *Journal of Educational Administration* 5(2), 130–146.
- Hargreaves, A., & Fullan, M. (2020). Professional capital after the pandemic: Revisiting and revising classic understandings of teachers’ work. *Journal of Professional Capital and Community*, 5(3–4), 327–336. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JPCC-06-2020-0039>
- Harris, A., & Jones, M. (2020). COVID 19–school leadership in disruptive times. *School Leadership and Management*, 40(4), 243–247. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2020.1811479>
- Hsu, Y. Y., & Lin, C. H. (2020). Evaluating the effectiveness of a preservice teacher technology training module incorporating SQD strategies. *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education*, 17(1), 1–17.
- Hunter, J. (2012). From school improvement to sustained capacity. *Professional Development in Education*, 38(4), 693–694.
- Hunzicker, J. (2019). What makes a teacher a leader? *Kappa Delta Pi Record*, 55(3), 130–136.
- Ivankova, N. V., & Creswell, J. W. (2009). Mixed methods. In J. Heigham, & R. Croker (Eds.), *Qualitative research in applied linguistics: A practical introduction* (pp. 135–161). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Katzenmeyer, M., & Moller, G. (2009). *Awakening the sleeping giant: Helping teachers develop as leaders* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Killion, J., Harrison, C., Colton, A., Bryan, C., Delehant, A., & Cooke, D. (2016). A systemic approach to elevating teacher leadership. *Learning Forward*, November, 1–24.
- Klein, E. D., & Schwanenberg, J. (2022). Ready to lead school improvement? Perceived professional development needs of principals in Germany. *Educational Management Administration and Leadership*. 50(3), 371–391. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143220933901>
- Lai, E., & Cheung, D. (2015). Enacting teacher leadership: The role of teachers in bringing about change. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 43(5), 673–692.
- Leithwood, K. (2007). What we know about educational leadership. In J. M. Burger, C. F. Webber, & P. Klinck (Eds.), *Intelligent leadership: Constructs for thinking education leaders* (pp. 41–66). Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands.
- Mangin, M. M. (2005). Distributed leadership and the culture of schools: Teacher leaders’ strategies for gaining access to classrooms. *Journal of School Leadership*, 15, 456–484.

- Mila, V. (2022). Teacher leadership in times of disorder: Building effective leadership in a time of pandemic. In *INTED2022 Proceedings*, (pp. 2313–2318). <https://doi.org/10.21125/inted.2022.0673>
- Mutch, C. (2015). Leadership in times of crisis: Dispositional, relational and contextual factors influencing school principals' actions. *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, 14, 186–194.
- Myers, E. L. (2014). Taming turbulence: An examination of school leadership practice during unstable times. *Professional Educator*, 38(2), 1–16.
- Nguyen, D., & Ng, D. (2020). Teacher collaboration for change: Sharing, improving, and spreading. *Professional Development in Education*, 46(4), 638–651.
- Nguyen, D., Harris, A., & Ng, D. (2019). A review of the empirical research on teacher leadership (2003–2017): Evidence, patterns and implications. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 58(1), 60–80. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JEA-02-2018-0023>
- Oppi, P., Eisenschmidt, E., & Jögi, A. L. (2022). Teacher's readiness for leadership: A strategy for school development. *School Leadership & Management*, 42(1), 79–103.
- Poekert, P. E., (2012). Teacher leadership and professional development: Examining links between two concepts to school improvement. *Professional Development in Education*, 38(2), 169–188
- Prenger, R., Poortman, C. L., & Handelzalts, A. (2021). Professional learning networks: From teacher learning to school improvement? *Journal of Educational Change*, 22(1), 13–52.
- Saldana, J. (2011). *Fundamentals of qualitative research*. Oxford University Press.
- Scott Williams, P., Lakin, J. M., & Kensler, L. A. W. (2015). Measuring the impact of teacher leaders. In N. Bond (Ed.), *The power of teacher leaders: Their roles, influence, and impact* (pp. 210–219). Kappa Delta Pi and Routledge.
- Sawalhi, R. (2019). Teacher leadership in government schools in Qatar: Opportunities and challenges. [doctoral dissertation, University of Warwick]. Retrieved from [http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/138040/1/WRAP\\_Theses\\_Sawalhi\\_2019.pdf](http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/138040/1/WRAP_Theses_Sawalhi_2019.pdf)
- Sawalhi, R., & Chaaban, Y. (2021). Mentor teachers and student teachers' perspectives toward teacher leadership. *Mentoring and Tutoring: Partnership in Learning*, 29(1), 70–88. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13611267.2021.1899586>
- Sawalhi, R., & Sellami, A. (2021). Factors influencing teacher leadership: Voices of public-school teachers in Qatar. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2021.1913238>
- Schott, C., van Roekel, H., & Tummers, L. G. (2020). Teacher leadership: A systematic review, methodological quality assessment and conceptual framework. *Educational Research Review*, 31, 100352. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2020.100352>
- Shah, S. R., & Ilyas Khan, M. (2021). The relationship between teacher leadership and students' performance at secondary school level in Peshawar, KP, Pakistan. *Pakistan Journal of Educational Research and Evaluation (PJERE)*, 8(2), 32–45.
- Sharma, U., Laletas, S., May, F., & Grove, C. (2022). "In any crisis there is an opportunity for us to learn something new": Australian teacher experiences. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 50, 1303–1321. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-022-00556-x>
- Stone-Johnson, C., & Weiner, J. M. (2020). Principal professionalism in the time of COVID-19. *Journal of Professional Capital and Community*, 5(3–4), 367–374. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JPC-05-2020-0020>

- Wang, M., & Xia, J. (2022). A scale for measuring teacher leadership in early childhood education in China: Development and validation. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 50(4), 649–671.
- Webber, C. F., Pineda-Báez, C., Gratacós, G., Wachira, N., & Nickel, J. (2023). Who is interested in teacher leadership and why? In C. F. Webber (Ed.), *Teacher leadership in international contexts* (pp. 3–25). Cham: Springer International Publishing.
- Wenner, J. A., & Campbell, T. (2017). The theoretical and empirical basis of teacher leadership: A review of the literature. *Review of Educational Research*, 87(1), 134–171. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654316653478>
- York-Barr, J., & Duke, K. (2004). What do we know about teacher leadership? Findings from two decades of scholarship. *Review of Educational Research*, 74(3), 255–316. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543074003255>