

## **School Leaders' Leadership Practices and Their Influence on Crisis-Related Problem-Solving and Decision-Making: A Multi-Site Case Study**

**Saiful Azlan Othman<sup>1\*</sup>, Mohd Burhan Ibrahim<sup>2</sup>, Mohamad Johdi Salleh<sup>2</sup> & Suzana Suhailawaty Md Sidek<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>*PhD Candidate, Department of Social Foundations and Educational Leadership, Kulliyah of Education, International Islamic University Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia*

<sup>2</sup>*Department of Social Foundations and Educational Leadership, Kulliyah of Education, International Islamic University Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia*

*\*Corresponding Author: saifulazlan2012@gmail.com*

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### **Abstract**

This study explores how the leadership practices of school leaders influence their ability to solve problems and make decisions effectively in times of crisis. It employs a qualitative research design where a series of semi-structured interviews were carried out with six secondary school leaders, ages 55 to 59, from three different education district offices (*Pejabat Pendidikan Daerah* or PPDs) in a northern Malaysian state. Each participant has at least 30 years of experience in education and has served in the position of school leader for at least three years. From the thematic analysis of the interview data, four leadership practices on problem-solving and decision-making during crises were identified, i.e., *providing guidance and direction; inspiring and empowering; collaborative problem-solving and decision-making; and adopting a service-oriented approach*, which is an eclectic approach to leadership. The findings highlight the critical importance of strategic problem-solving and decision-making in overcoming challenges faced by schools. It also highlights how effective leadership ensures the resilience and success of a school, its community, and relevant stakeholders by fostering a supportive and collaborative environment, promoting proactive problem-solving, and prioritising service to students and staff during crisis. This research provides valuable insights for school leaders and policymakers seeking to enhance leadership effectiveness in crisis management.

**Keywords:** *School leaders, leadership practices, problem-solving, decision-making, crisis management*

## INTRODUCTION

A crisis in school may occur unexpectedly and without warning. Malaysia has coincidentally experienced double-crisis situations, where more than one crisis occurs in a single frame of time. An example of this is the severe floods in Peninsular Malaysia that occurred in November and December of 2020 at roughly the same time as the COVID-19 pandemic (Ng et al., 2022). The latter crisis persisted for two years, bringing the country to a halt from 2020 to 2022, and proved to be a significantly challenging experience for everyone. The physical and psychological harm inflicted by the crisis has a profound and detrimental effect on many sectors, particularly education, where schooling had to be completely stopped, resulting in a huge amount of learning loss. In schools, the way school leaders respond to crises is crucial to minimising the impact. Therefore, crises should be effectively understood and managed by school leaders (Alqahtani, 2019; Bundy et al., 2017; Pearson & Clair, 2008; Smith & Riley, 2012). School leadership in times of crisis requires strategic practices that can address immediate consequences, emotions, and circumstances in a manner that mitigates damage to both individuals and the institution. Hence, school leaders should be decisive and able to turn challenges into opportunities. Their ability to manage schools can be enhanced through the exercise of strategic and proactive leadership in times of crisis (Smith & Riley, 2012).

While there are school leaders who can guide their schools effectively, others disappoint and merely oversee routine operations (Day & Leithwood, 2007). In times of crisis, school leaders can no longer rely on their past leadership practices to pull through the situation (Harris & Jones, 2020). Crises require school leaders to possess leadership practices that are profoundly distinct from those that are typically expected in a "normal" school setting (Smith & Riley, 2012). The ability to fulfil this obligation is contingent upon the extent to which school leaders exercise their leadership discretion and effectively apply their decision-making and problem-solving authority (Leithwood et al., 2020). In times of crisis, school leaders' leadership practices are likely to influence their problem-solving and decision-making abilities to overcome challenges, recover from crises and ultimately emerge more resilient.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Leadership Practices, Problem-Solving and Decision-Making**

Leadership is the dynamic process and behavioural manifestation of leaders in guiding and influencing their subordinates and followers toward a common goal. It involves the ability to make transformative changes while integrating ethical principles into decision-making and problem-solving" (Barker, 2001, 2002). Leadership entails guiding and coordinating the endeavours of individuals and groups in order to inform and persuade them of the necessary actions and methods, as well as the shared goals (Bryman, 1999). Effective leadership practices are interactive, whereby leaders can influence a group of individuals to achieve a common objective (Northouse, 2016; Silva, 2016). In times of crisis, leadership entails leaders' capacity to effectively inspire and motivate others within an organisation to strive for better-than-average achievements. This relates to the practices employed by leaders in converting values into actionable steps, transforming visions into tangible outcomes, turning hurdles into opportunities for innovation, fostering unity, and converting risks into beneficial outcomes (Kouzes & Posner, 2017). Nevertheless, a contemporary approach to leadership should prioritise the act of serving and empowering team members, while also embodying qualities such as empathy, compassion, and vulnerability. The efficacy of this new leadership approach is underscored by its ability to yield improved team performance and satisfaction (MacKinsey & Company, 2022). In managing a crisis situation, a leader must choose the most appropriate leadership style that integrates the various cognitive, functional, and social competencies in order to be effective.

Skilled leaders are those able to navigate challenges, seize opportunities, and develop competitive advantage strategies. They also embrace change and drive organisational growth (Stefan & Nazarov, 2020). A cross-sectional survey of 329 employees across various public institutions was conducted in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to identify the impact of different leadership styles on achieving institutional excellence in the public sector. The results of the multiple linear regression analysis showed that transformational leadership has the strongest positive relationship with institutional excellence. The findings support the hypothesis that leadership styles have an impact on achieving excellence in public organisations in the UAE (Karam & Kitana, 2020).

The process of problem-solving and decision-making is multidimensional and necessitates the use of advanced cognitive capacities. Both processes necessitate the evaluation of one's environment, the application of acquired knowledge, and the utilisation of heuristics (i.e., mental shortcuts to avoid cognitive load) to execute a particular action (Emily & John, 2019). Problem-solving and decision-making necessitate the use of critical thinking skills. These two cognitive processes possess a mutually beneficial relationship and have the capacity to effectively address a multitude of issues and obstacles (Birt, 2021). A study of 40 leaders of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Cluj-Napoca, Romania evaluated the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the challenges and opportunities for leadership and found that a leader should be intelligent, creative, and emotionally stable during the crisis (Stefan & Nazarov, 2020), the latter two qualities being crucially important in crisis management.

Cognitive biases explaining suboptimal outcomes that do not align with logic used to be the focus in leadership research (Emily & John, 2019). Moreover, despite extensive theoretical development and successful applications in various crisis situations, the concept of leadership practices at times of crisis—together with the idea of crisis management, problem solving and decision making—has not received sufficient attention in the field of educational leadership. This is evident from the lack of empirical study on the subject (Chatzipanagiotou & Katsarou, 2023). A series of crises in recent years have highlighted the need for new concepts, ideas and approaches in response to the changing global context such as crises (Mazurkiewicz, 2021). Consequently, in education, leadership practices of school leaders—found to have an impact on problem solving and decision-making—will likely improve school management and success at times of crisis (Mazurkiewicz, 2021).

A recent study examined the impact of common classical leadership styles (i.e., autocratic, democratic, and laissez-faire) among faculty leaders in Egyptian government universities on their decision-making and problem-solving abilities. Using a quantitative research approach, the study collected information from 384 faculty members through structured questionnaires. According to the data, authoritarian and democratic styles had a significant positive impact on decision-making and problem-solving abilities, while the laissez-faire style showed no significant effect (Hanan, 2023). Another quantitative study involving 300 professional workers in Saudi Arabia found that leadership practices influenced leadership effectiveness and decision making. The study also confirmed earlier findings from numerous researchers that there is a significant relationship between decision-making and leadership effectiveness in the context of problem-solving and decision-making (Albejaidi et al., 2020).

Overall, it is crucial to emphasise the significance of leadership practices in shaping crisis-related problem-solving and decision-making. The impact of leadership practices on decision-making and problem-solving transcends the crisis and affects the adaptability, motivation, and resilience of organisations such as schools. In addition to setting the tone for leaders' responses to challenges, leadership practices also define the results of these responses. Hence, in the context of education, school leaders' effective leadership practices may convert challenges and difficulties into possibilities for growth and resilience during crisis. Scholars have developed theories and conducted research to identify the relationships, contexts, and characteristics that contribute to effective leadership in schools (Howard & Dhillon, 2021).

## **Leadership Theories**

The study draws from the following leadership theories and models. The overarching claim made in this paper is that different circumstances, especially crisis situations, call for different styles of leadership and that leadership styles do impact individuals, schools and societal systems (George, 2006). Some of these styles are:

### **a) Transformational and Transactional Leadership**

Transformational leadership drives significant change in followers and organisations. Leaders who are dynamic and forward-thinking see it important to create positive change and develop followers into leaders (Northouse, 2019). They achieve this by influencing the views, values, expectations, and goals of the followers. Transformational leaders seek to understand followers' motives, fulfil their needs, and engage them fully in the leadership process. As a result, such leaders are capable of transforming the followers into leaders themselves by setting an example and motivating them to exceed expectations. Leaders, therefore, must be accountable, exercise responsible leadership, and strive to meet their followers' needs. Clearly, leaders are not born or produced but instead emerge from motivation, values, and goals (George, 2006; Odumeru & Ogbonna, 2013; Stewart, 2006).

When transformational leadership is exercised, leadership and followership become connected and intertwined, with leaders and followers closely helping each other to achieve the targeted institutional goals, higher morale and motivation. Bass and Avolio (1990, as cited in Bryman, 1999) introduced new types of transformational behaviours to Bass' (1985) initial concept of transformational leadership. Table 1 outlines the leadership behaviours delineated in Bass' (1985) transformational leadership concept (adapted from Odumeru & Ogbonna, 2013; Northouse, 2019; Bryman, 1999).

**Table 1***Transformational Leadership Traits and Behaviours*

<b>Behaviour</b>	<b>Description</b>
Idealised Influence (Charismatic Leadership)	These are highly moral and trustworthy leaders who inspire their followers and serve as role models for good ethical behaviour, instilling pride, respect, and trust in followers. They are highly respected by followers who have a lot of faith in them.
Individualised Consideration	The leader focuses on the needs of each follower, acting as a coach or mentor, and listens to their problems and requirements. He/she is empathetic and supportive, and maintains a respectful, open communication with followers. The leader recognises each follower's unique contribution to the team.
Intellectual Stimulation	The leader's behaviour is risk-taking and idea-seeking. They promote creativity and encourage independent thinking in their followers. This leadership style fosters creativity and encourages the questioning of views and ideals.
Inspirational Motivation	The leader has the ability to inspire and communicate a compelling vision to followers. Inspiring leaders set high expectations, express optimism, and bring significance to tasks.

On the other hand, transactional leadership focuses on leader-follower interactions, which can boost motivation and honesty (Stewart, 2006). These interactions help leaders to achieve goals, complete tasks, maintain the organisation, inspire followers, influence behaviour, emphasise rewards, avoid risks, and enhance effectiveness. Followers typically accept the organisation's aims, structure, and culture. Hence, there is a shift in commitment and increased capacity to achieve the shared goal (McCleskey, 2014). Transactional leaders are direct and action-oriented. They prioritise processes over innovation (Odumeru & Ogbonna, 2013; Stewart, 2006; Bryman, 1999). Table 2 highlights the transactional behaviours that explain the dynamic process between leaders and followers (Bass & Avolio, 1990, 1993) (adapted from Odumeru & Ogbonna, 2013; Northouse, 2019; Bryman, 1999).

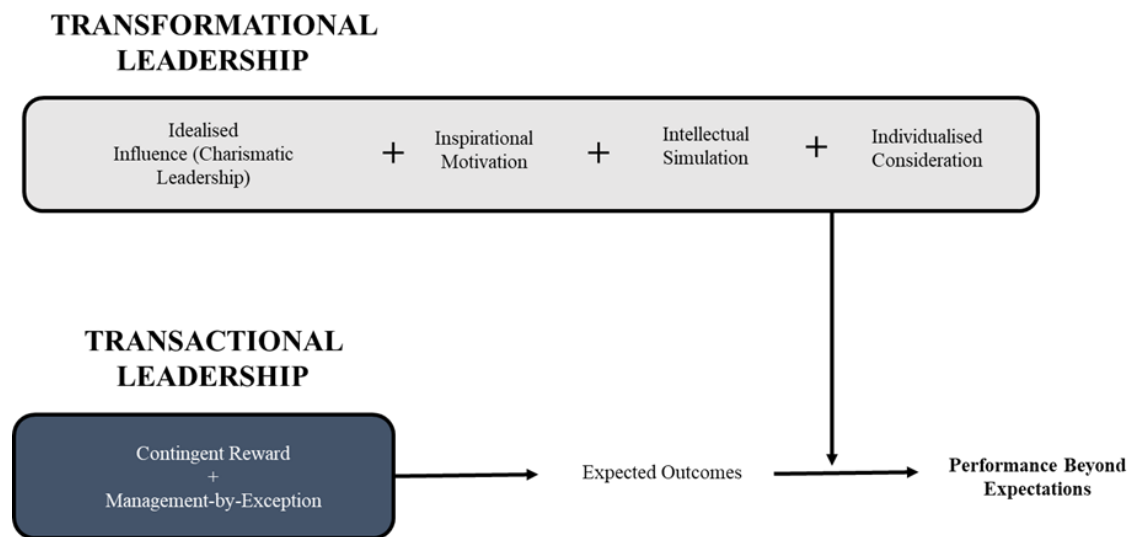
**Table 2***Transactional Leadership Traits and Behaviours*

<b>Behaviour</b>	<b>Description</b>
Contingent Reward	Leaders and followers exchange efforts for rewards. This leadership style aims to align followers on goals and rewards.
Management by Exception	Active management-by-exception involves closely monitoring followers for errors or rule violations and taking corrective action.
Non-leadership (Laissez-Faire)	This leader avoids responsibility, delays decisions, gives little feedback, and offers minimal assistance to followers. No interaction or support for followers' growth.

Both the transformational and transactional styles impact the leadership quality of leaders and the motivation of followers to achieve institutional goals. Experts stress that transformational leadership is more effective because it produces additive effects (Bass & Avolio, 1990, as cited in Northouse, 2019). This is critical in crisis management as motivated followers can exceed expectations by prioritising the organisation's interests over their own.

**Figure 1**

*Transformational and Transactional Leadership*

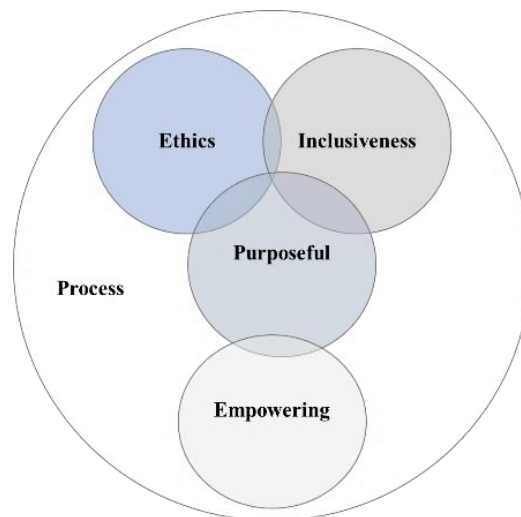


**b) Relational Leadership**

Komives et al. (1998) introduced the Relational Leadership Model (RLM), which challenges the conventional perception of a leader as someone with innate charisma, persuasive skills, and the ability to wield power and influence. Leadership can be learned, and it involves everyone in the group (Komives et al., 1998; Komives et al., 2013; Rice, 2012). Relational leaders prioritise others' professional growth (Rocco & Griffin, 2015). The RLM highlights the significance of connections in leadership and encourages leaders to use relationships to create responsive leadership practices for positive change and common benefit. Leadership effectiveness depends on collaborative relationships for positive change. It prioritises relationships in leadership and values inclusion, empowerment, purposefulness, ethical behaviour, and process orientation. Ethics, inclusivity, and holistic thinking are also important in this model of leadership (Komives et al., 1998; Komives et al., 2013; Rice, 2012). Five key elements of RLM are explained in Table 3:

**Table 3***Key Elements of RLM*

<b>Element</b>	<b>Description</b>
Inclusiveness	Leaders aware of biases and actively seek diverse ideas for better decision-making, embracing diversity in perspectives, approaches, styles, and personal traits like gender and culture.
Empowering	Empowering followers to enhance organisational decision-making. Each follower takes ownership of the team outcomes by asserting themselves and wanting to be included.
Purposeful	Involves making strategic decisions to inspire followers. Collaborating to achieve a common objective while regularly evaluating actions and decisions.
Ethics	Honesty, integrity, and goodwill are essential in leadership.
Process-Oriented	The leader and members review procedures to ensure they align with the essential characteristics of the RLM. Leaders must be accountable for creating an empowering environment, motivating their team, and inspiring them to achieve the end goal.

**Figure 2***Relational Leadership Model***c) Islamic Leadership**

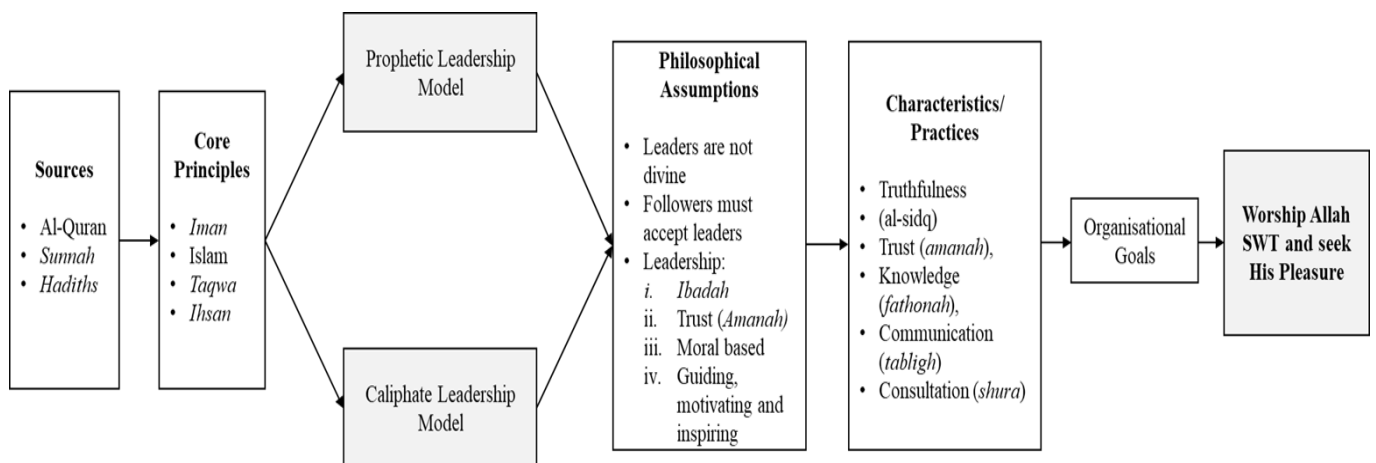
Islamic leadership is based on the Holy Qur'an, *Sunnah* (i.e., life practices) of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) and his teachings, sayings and wisdom embodied in *ahadith* (Alabed, 2017; Khaliq, 2018; Khaliq & Fontaine, 2011). These elements guide Muslim leaders in effectively leading the *ummah* and their respective organisations. In Islam, leadership involves assisting followers to complete tasks, developing their potential for future leadership, and motivating and guiding them in a systematically planned manner based on Islamic law (*syari'ah*). Islamic leadership is based on the prophetic and caliphate models, emphasising guidance rather than direct control towards good in this world and the

hereafter (Ali, 2011; Fontaine et al., 2020; Khaliq, 2018, 2019). *Iman*, *Islam*, *Taqwa*, and *Ihsan* are the four stages of moral and spiritual development in Islamic leadership (Alabed, 2017b; Gazi, 2020; Khaliq, 2019; Muhammad, 2015).

Islam sees leadership as a morally upright action that requires leaders to communicate ethically and justly with followers to achieve a shared goal. Leaders are distinguished by their knowledge, dedication to Islamic principles, and high moral standards. Leaders and followers are discouraged from persuading or manipulating each other. Islamic leadership fosters unity, community, and identity among leaders and followers to achieve institutional goals. Both leaders and followers understand the goals and are motivated by their beliefs, engaging in the process as *ibadah* (act of worship) to seek the pleasure of Allah (S.W.T) (Alsarhi et al., 2014). Figure 3 shows the conceptual framework used to explain the variables and interpret the findings of the study.

**Figure 3**

*Model of Islamic Leadership*

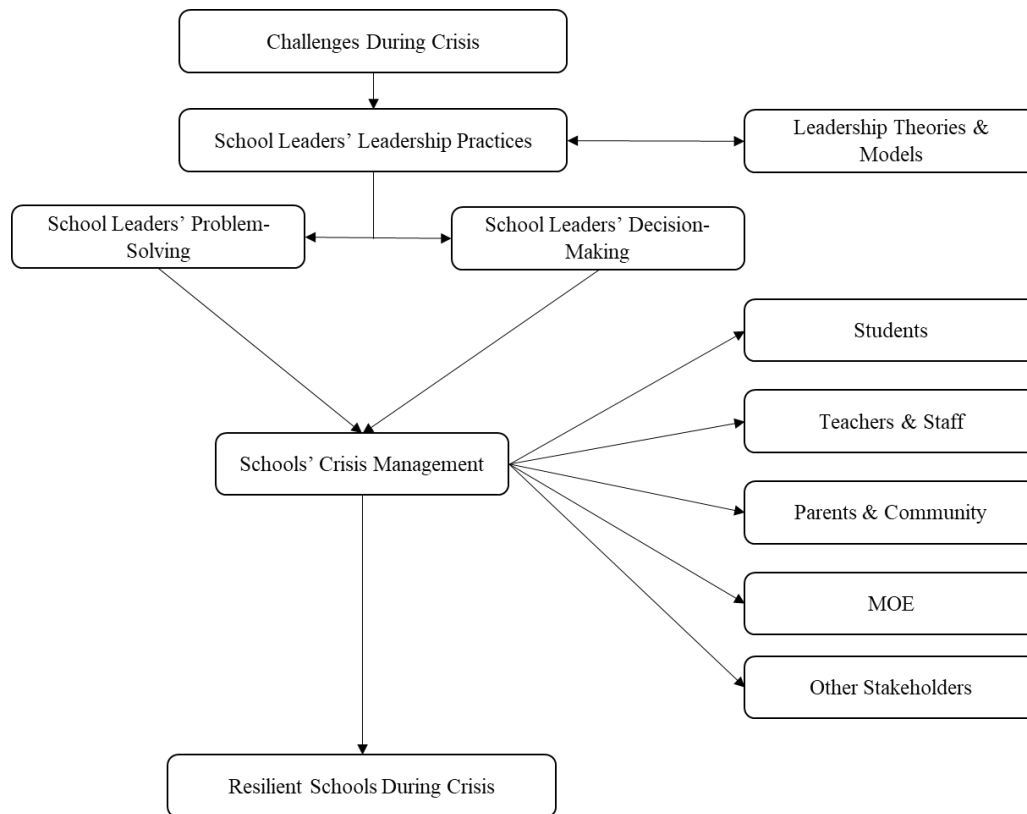


(adapted from Alabed, 2017a; Ali, 2011; Alsarhi et al., 2014; Fontaine et al., 2020; Gazi, 2020; Khaliq, 2018, 2019; Khaliq & Fontaine, 2011; Mustafa, 2010; Muhammad, 2015; Rafiki, 2020)

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Figure 4 shows the study's conceptual framework drawn from the three theories reviewed earlier.



**Figure 4***The Study's Conceptual Framework***RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

The aim of this study is to explore and gain an in-depth understanding of how school leaders' leadership practices influence their ability to solve problems and make decisions in times of crisis effectively. The study uses a multi-site case study approach with semi-structured, one-on-one interviews as the primary method of data collection to achieve this research goal.

**METHODOLOGY****Research Design**

To address the study's objectives, qualitative research methods were employed to gain a comprehensive understanding of how school leaders' effective problem solving and decision making are influenced by their leadership practices, knowledge, and experience and by how they make sense of the problems and possibilities that come with their roles during crisis (Audet & d'Amboise, 2001). This study is interpretive in nature as the researcher examines the participants' perspectives, knowledge and experiences through the interpretive paradigm (Khan, 2014).

A multi-site case study was conducted with the goal of producing findings that are both contextually relevant and broadly applicable across different locations (Audet & d'Amboise, 2001; Jenkins et al., 2018). Data was collected at each specific site that had varying crisis circumstances. The researchers decided to undertake a multi-site, instead of a single-site, case study as the former would allow leadership patterns across various situations to be analysed. Such robust analysis would not have been possible with the single-site approach (Yin, 2003). Moreover, a multi-site case study allowed the researchers to gain a deep understanding of problem solving and decision making in various contexts of crisis and a broader perspective of the leadership practices and challenges involved in crisis situations. As a result, the extensive range of information sources enhances the credibility and robustness of the research findings.

## Setting

The study was conducted at six (6) government secondary schools located in urban and rural locations affected by flooding and the COVID-19 pandemic. They were five (5) national secondary schools (NSC) and one (1) national religious school (NRS) under the purview of three state education departments (PPDs) in Kedah, namely the state education departments of Kota Setar (urban), Jitra (rural), and Kulim Bandar Bharu (urban). Each school had their own unique norms, niche areas and school culture and was governed by the specific leadership styles of their principals. Table 4 shares some of their characteristics.

**Table 4**

### *School Characteristics*

<b>School</b>	<b>Year Founded</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>Cluster</b>	<b>Location</b>
A	1984	NRS	Excellence School	Urban
B	1962	NSC		Urban
C	1948		Urban	
D	1961		TS25*	Urban
E	1965	-	-	Rural
F	1986	-	-	Rural

*Notes:* \* The School Transformation Programme 2025; NRS-National Religious School  
NSC-National Secondary School

## Participants

The participants were six (6) secondary school leaders (i.e., three males and three females) between the ages of 55 and 59 who have been in the education system for 30 years or more. They were selected using purposive sampling based on three main criteria: (1) they must be school leaders categorised as excellent principals of Grades DG52 or DG54; (2) they must have substantial experience in managing schools in times of crisis (e.g., during monsoon rains and heavy flooding or during the COVID-19 pandemic); and (3) they have served as school leaders for at least three years. Table 5 shows some background characteristics of the participants.

**Table 5***Participants' Demographic Background*

Participant (P)	Gender	Age	School Leader Experience (Years)	Service Duration	Grade
P1	Male	59	9	34	
P2	Male	59	4	36	
P3	Female	55	4	30	DG54
P4	Male	59	6	36	
P5	Female	55	6	31	
P6	Female	56	3	30	DG52

Data saturation determined the number of participants in this study. The assumption is that the participants, who are school leaders, represented the target group under study and could provide insights into the phenomena being examined (i.e., leadership practices, effective problem solving, and decision making) (Finnegan, 2021; Leung, 2015). Research experts suggest that four to five participants are ideal for qualitative interviews and case studies (Kumar et al., 2020; Sim et al., 2018).

**Instrument**

To enhance the data collection process, optimise the efficacy of the interviews, and the likelihood of obtaining information-rich data, the study developed a set of interview protocol (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). It consisted of an interviewer script to provide direction during the interview process, a set of interview questions and their corresponding probes. The researcher engaged in interviews with participants in accordance with the established interview protocol (Salmons, 2012). The interview protocol, containing both main questions and probes, was checked and vetted by four experts in the field of educational leadership. Some sample questions and probes that made up part of the interview protocol are shown in Table 6.

**Table 6***Interview Protocol: Sample Questions and Probes*

Questions	Probes
1. Can you provide an overview of your leadership approach during the crisis?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ How were your subjects and subordinates informed about your practices of leadership?</li> <li>▪ What were their reactions?</li> </ul>
2. How do you deal with the school at times of crisis?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ What were the main challenges your school faced during times of crisis?</li> <li>▪ What leadership styles do you practice to handle these challenges?</li> <li>▪ How do you know they were effective?</li> </ul>
3. Do you modify your leadership practices during crisis as opposed to normal situations? Please explain within the framework of problem-solving and decision-making.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ What were the situations that required changing your practices?</li> <li>▪ Why do you think the changes were important?</li> <li>▪ How did you adapt your leadership practices to enable effective problem solving and decision making to take place?</li> </ul>

## Data Collection and Ethics

The study utilised semi-structured, one-on-one interviews to gather data on the perspectives and experiences of six excellent or expert school leaders on how their leadership practices influenced their problem-solving and decision-making during crises. Two layers of approval, first from the Educational Planning and Research Division (EPRD) of the Ministry of Education in Putrajaya and second from the Kedah State Education Department, had to be first obtained to conduct the study. The six excellent or expert school leaders were then identified from the list provided by the State Education Department of Kedah.

Six interview sessions, all digitally recorded and later transcribed verbatim, were conducted at the participants' respective schools (i.e., the case study sites), with the duration of each interview ranging between 43 minutes to 1 hour 26 minutes. All interviews were conducted in *Bahasa Melayu*. The interviews were concluded when all the questions were asked, or when data saturation had been reached.

Before conducting the interviews, the participants were given a consent form to enable them to make a well-informed decision regarding their participation in the research. All identified participants signed the forms and consented to participate in the interview. In addition, they were informed about their right to remain anonymous and withdraw from the interview at any time, the confidentiality of the data they provided, and the option to disclose or withhold specific information during the interviews. Prior communication with the participants before the interviews fostered a strong rapport and supportive relationship, leading to enthusiastic participation during the interviews.

## Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed using Transkriptor, an online transcription service at <https://transkriptor.com/>. The data was translated to English as the interviews were conducted in *Bahasa Melayu*. The interview data was translated using Lingvanex Translator and Microsoft Translator in MS Word. The outcomes were compared, edited, and combined to find the best translation for the interview context. Then, the verbatim transcriptions—fully translated into English—were sent together with an approval form to the participants by email to seek their verification of the accuracy of the translation and transcription. This constitutes the process of member checking to provide the evidence of data trustworthiness and credibility. The participants were given 14 days to return the approval forms to the researcher either by email or WhatsApp.

Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis procedure was used to extract themes and make sense of the interview data. The analysis involved a six-step process: familiarisation, coding, theme generation, theme evaluation, theme definition and naming, and documenting the findings. The researchers used coding to identify words or phrases for theme development, and MS Word and Excel to create code lists to ensure the consistency of the coding. Templates were created to simplify the procedure.

A thorough analysis of the data was carried out to identify key concepts, arguments, subjects, and recurring patterns that emerged during the investigation. As a result, 64 codes were identified and colour-coded for easier identification. The study used the recursive methodology developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) and Nowell et al. (2017) that allowed numerous modifications to be done during the processes. The data was then presented using Bazeley's (2009) D-C-R methodology, which significantly enhanced the data analysis through comparisons, pattern analysis, divergent views, literature review, and visual aids for deeper thinking.

## Credibility and Trustworthiness

In their approach to trustworthiness, Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed four general criteria, namely credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The study utilised four different strategies to establish the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

### a) Inter-Rater Reliability (IRR)

Inter-rater reliability (IRR) was one of the means to ensure reliability and trustworthiness in this study (McAlister et al., 2017). Inter-reliability checks can enhance the credibility of codes or themes in research. Having multiple coders or raters to cross-check the emergent themes prevented the researchers' own personal biases from obscuring participants' experiences and meaning making during the analysis. IRR helped to verify interpretations for consistency and research validity (Ahmad, 2017). A panel of two experienced and well-qualified researchers in leadership research was selected as expert coders or raters of the extracted themes. They were tasked to review the themes independently to maintain a high degree of objectivity and were encouraged to provide feedback, comments, and suggestions on the themes using the provided templates and forms. Based on the inter-rater agreement formula specified by Miles and Huberman (1994, as cited in Ahmad, 2017), the study obtained a 100% inter-rater agreement on the themes. The percentage of agreement was calculated as follows:

$$\text{Reliability} = \frac{\text{number of agreements}}{\text{number of agreements} + \text{disagreements}}$$

Rater	Agreement
Rater 1	4/4 x 100% = 100%
Rater 2	4/4 x 100% = 100%
<b>Average</b>	<b>8/8 x 100% = 100%</b>

### b) Audit Trail

An audit trail was maintained in the form of a log, consisting of the study's activities, steps, and decisions. The log kept a comprehensive record of the data collection methods, the problems faced while conducting the study, and how and when new strategies or plans to attain the study's goals were added. Strategy enhancement was done to increase the credibility and rigour of the findings as the study was being conducted and this was documented as audit trail evidence (Carcary, 2020). To systematically complete the record, a template was created.

### c) Member Check

Each interview's verbatim was sent to the relevant participant to have him/her check the accuracy of the transcription. It was important for the participants to verify whether the practices, views, challenges, feelings and solutions they conveyed in the interviews were accurately described and reported in the verbatims. Participants were also asked to indicate whether the interpretations and conclusions reached by the researchers accurately reflected their experiences, perspectives, or opinions on leadership practices and the influence of those variables on problem solving and decision making.

#### d) Triangulation

The data gathered from the interviews were frequently compared with field notes and audio recordings. Data from different participants were also compared and cross-checked.

## RESULTS

Thematic coding from the data analysis identified four themes showing school leaders' practices of leadership that influenced problem solving and decision making.

### Theme 1: Providing Guidance and Direction

This theme emphasises the significance of *advice, guidance and direction* provided by school leaders to stakeholders. The participants remarked on the importance of having a clear direction about what to do in a crisis situation, which empowered them to guide the school community, comprising students, teachers, staff, and other stakeholders, in aligning their decision-making processes with the established objectives and key performance indicators (KPIs) during times of crisis. The theme also implies that the participants, as school leaders, must be able to make timely and well-informed judgments to reduce ambiguity, thus facilitating problem-solving and decision-making processes. Three school leaders explained the importance of setting a clear direction for school and staff management during crises:

“...during COVID, I also made sure that the direction of the school was clear.” (P2, DU. 9-10)

“At the same time, I am assertive. It means I am friendly and assertive. But to guide the teachers...”

“So, during the COVID-19 pandemic... hmm aa...(my) leadership style [was] a little more assertive so that teachers [would] follow the principal's instructions.” (P1, DU. 15-16)

“Aa so at the end of the day we must have a stand... we.... We're the principal. We set the team. We set the pace. We're going to set the direction.” (P3, DU. 25-26)

### Theme 2: Inspiring and Empowering Practices

The second theme that emerged was *inspiring and empowering leadership practices*, which promotes the idea of teacher and staff empowerment through principal leadership. This empowerment should enable teachers and staff to make decisions autonomously, thus inspiring them to become further involved in their schools' problem-solving and decision-making processes during crisis. The participants explained that staff and teachers' active participation was made possible when they delegated responsibilities to the school community and stakeholders throughout the problem-solving process. They appeared to encourage the ownership and accountability of followers by involving the school community and stakeholders in decision-making, including choosing the appropriate teaching and learning strategies during crisis.

“...I must always motivate and provide inspiration to everyone in school...must set a good example...a [role model]. Even if there's a problem,

you have to remain calm. On top of that, I give autonomy to the teachers, especially about their PdP (teaching and learning).”  
(P2, DU. 9-10)

“Okay so...my method is always...I always try to inspire my teachers.” (P3, DU. 25-26)

The theme demonstrates that the participants’ practices inspired followers by instilling confidence, trust, and motivation in them during crisis. They inspired the school community and stakeholders by staying calm and focused while simultaneously believing in the abilities of followers to manage and address the crisis. They positioned themselves as individuals to be emulated in dealing with problems and challenges. They also inspired followers by encouraging creativity and innovation, leading to innovative problem-solving and decision-making. Inspiring and being inspired were highlighted as two critical leadership practices that contributed to effective problem-solving and decision-making in times of crisis in this study.

“If you are a leader, you have to go first. You have to do [it first]. You have to start first. And then the second one is you have to...gain trust! Gain trust! It’s not only that we were inspired, but we also became inspired.” (P5, DU. 15-16)

### **Theme 3: Collaborative Problem-Solving and Decision-Making**

The third theme identified was *collaborative problem-solving and decision-making*. This theme emphasises the importance of a leadership style that promotes teamwork, cooperation, inclusivity, problem-solving, and informed decision-making to achieve better outcomes. This leadership approach highlights the significance of engaging the school community and stakeholders in decision-making and problem-solving to ensure inclusivity of everyone in the process of eliminating challenges. The participants spoke about promoting cooperation through open communication. This involved encouraging input, ideas and information from the school community and stakeholders, promoting ownership, and commitment to the decision-making, and problem-solving. The leadership practices of the participants allowed them to engage all parties and utilised their diverse skills to develop innovative solutions and make effective decisions during the crisis.

“... I empower communication. Good communication. That means... that’s the point of practising good communication with students...we also want to be together. Our concept, in the school where I was at, togetherness is a must. It means we must play our roles, together...join [the teachers]....cooperate with [them].” (P1, DU. 25-26)

So, the practice was to make collective decisions...do not leave gaps. [Enforce] Togetherness and celebrate the difference...  
(P4, DU. 10-11)

### **Theme 4: Adopting a Service-Oriented Approach**

The final theme shows how important it is for school leaders to employ a “service-oriented” approach in managing situations of crisis. The participants adopted the leadership practice of serving and supporting the needs of followers, including students, teachers, and other stakeholders, during crisis. In addressing problems and challenges, they prioritised quality service to ensure the well-being of their followers. Any decision made during crisis took into account how it might impact the school,

students, teachers and other stakeholders; hence, no hasty decisions were made and implemented. The service rendered by the participants became a source of inspiration to followers when it became clear to them that their well-being was being taken care of. The participants reported aligning their practices with Islamic principles of modesty, empathy, and dedication in serving others. In essence, they employed a service-oriented approach to crisis management that empowered followers, stakeholders and subordinates. The approach helped them to navigate and address the problems associated with the crisis by giving them a strong mental and emotional encouragement. For the purpose of staying calm and stable, the participants integrated religious and spiritual elements into their leadership practices.

“...I always tell them, “I am a leader. I am not a boss. It means [being] a principal. He’s a leader [so] he’s got to be an all-rounder.”  
(P1, DU. 25-26)

“Aa...I tell religious stories...Secondly, is the spiritual aspect... We [have to] exploit [our] emotional and mental strength.” (P6, DU. 17-18, 29-30)

## DISCUSSION

Four specific leadership practices that influenced the participants as school leaders to effectively solve problems and make decisions were identified. The four practices could be theoretically linked to several facets of (1) transformational and transactional leadership; 2) relational leadership; and 3) Islamic leadership. The findings are consistent with that of other studies, albeit in different settings. To begin with, all the participants agreed that leadership practices that provide clear guidance and direction to the school and school community are essential during the initial stages of a crisis due to rapidly changing information and guidelines from authorities (Deloitte, 2020; Howard & Dhillon, 2021; Meinck et al., 2022). They agreed that a lack of guidance from school leaders can lead to ambiguity among the school community and stakeholders, resulting in chaotic confusion and people losing sight of the correct thing to do in the face of the crisis (Deloitte, 2020; Finnegan, 2021; Kouzes & Posner, 2017). Therefore, during crisis, the participants prioritised leadership practices that embedded guidance and direction to reduce ambiguity and prevent a state of chaos among the school community and stakeholders, mainly parents and the local community, thereby establishing order, direction, confidence, and calmness.

In their role as school leaders during crisis, the participants empowered, inspired, and motivated the school community and stakeholders to address the challenges that arose from the crisis. They demonstrated a leadership style that cultivated confidence and motivation in the people under their governance, promoting ownership and togetherness and enabling them to contribute meaningfully to problem-solving and effective decision-making (Chan & Kaur, 2009). The participants' leadership practices reflect Burns' notion of transformational leadership. Transformational leaders inspire and cultivate dedication, boosting motivation in their followers by communicating a shared vision, setting high expectations, and fostering trust. This motivates followers to overcome their limitations and achieve better performance. Burns (1978) stated that effective leaders emerge from a dynamic framework of motivation, values, and goals (as cited in Stewart, 2006).

Participants also prefer leadership practices that promote collaboration, teamwork, and inclusivity. Engaging stakeholders in inclusive decision-making during a crisis leads to more effective solutions. This is similar to the RLM (Komives et al., 1998), which emphasises effective leadership that engages everyone in the group instead of just the leader. The RLM emphasises interpersonal connections in leadership and encourages leaders to use relationships to develop an adaptable



governance style. In this model, leadership effectiveness culminates from the contributions of different individuals working together to create positive change for society (Komives et al., 1998; Komives et al., 2013; Rice, 2012).

Effective leadership is crucial during crises, as crises present complex situations that demand diverse and unique solutions (Al-Dabbagh, 2020; Al Eid & Arnout, 2020; Brown et al., 2021; Comfort et al., 2020; Hawati & Jerud, 2020; Izhar et al., 2021; Longmuir, 2021; McLeod & Dulskey, 2021; Ramos-Pla et al., 2021; Reyes-Guerra et al., 2021). By embracing collaboration, school leaders can utilise diverse ideas and opinions for problem-solving and decision-making. Establishing open communication fosters ownership and commitment to decisions by considering information from all stakeholders. They can use diverse expertise to find effective and innovative solutions to crisis-related problems. Effective and strategic leadership practices minimise risk and generate solutions during a crisis (Balasubramanian & Fernandes, 2022; Fotheringham et al., 2021; Harris, 2020; O'Day & Marsden, 2022; Thornton, 2021). The aforementioned leadership practices align with the Islamic methodology of problem-solving and decision-making referred to as "*shura*." This approach signifies an acknowledgement of the collective will of the people and highlights the importance of competence, ethical conduct, and openness of leaders in considering differing views, stands and perspectives. Furthermore, it was observed that the participants, who were categorised as excellent principals, recognised the significance of fulfilling the needs of students, teachers, and stakeholders as a crucial aspect of their leadership approach to crisis management. This practice aids them in efficiently resolving issues and making informed decisions amidst challenging circumstances (Mohiuddin & Muzahidul, 2016).

The participants found serving and supporting the needs of students, teachers, and stakeholders to be another key leadership practice that helped them to solve problems and make decisions effectively during crisis. Islamic leadership prioritises modesty, empathy, and commitment in serving students, teachers, staff, and stakeholders. Hence, the practice of the participants is found to align with Islamic leadership which promotes selflessness for the sake of followers (Khaliq, 2018). Prioritising the needs of others demonstrates that school leaders understand their role in providing support and in serving others in difficult circumstances. Additionally to maintain the morale of the school community and stakeholders during crisis, several aspects (such as taking care of followers' welfare) have been shown to boost their motivation (Paramboor et al., 2015). These leadership practices embody Islamic leadership concepts like *Tawheed*, *Iman*, *Islam*, *Taqwa*, and *Ihsan* (Khaliq, 2019). Leadership practices that prioritise the needs and well-being of students, teachers, and stakeholders will also enhance the effectiveness of problem-solving and decision-making in troubled times.

Impactful problem-solving and decision-making is closely linked to good leadership practices as they contribute to the establishment of an adaptable, collaborative, and responsive workplace. The participants' exercise of proper leadership facilitates their ability to effectively respond to the crises in their roles as school leaders. They are capable of managing the distinctive requirements of the crisis as well. The participants' effective leadership practices have guided them in problem-solving and decision-making, ultimately enabling them to lead the school and its community towards the goals and objectives they desire.

## LIMITATIONS

An oversight was found in the interview protocol where the study had fallen short of probing comprehensively into the specific leadership practices that the school leaders could have implemented to lift their respective schools out of the crisis situations. More incisive probes should have been prepared for this purpose, especially in terms of further exploring each school leader's insights in implementing the directives given to the schools by the Ministry, state education department and

district education office, considering the centralised nature of Malaysia's education system and the top-down execution of the SOPs at times of crisis.

## CONCLUSION

Four leadership practices have been identified in this study as being influential for school leaders to solve problems and make decisions efficiently in times of crisis. The practices include *providing guidance and direction, continuing to inspire and empower, ensuring collaboration and collectiveness in all problem-solving and decision-making processes*, and (4) *employing a service-oriented leadership approach*. In summary, it is evident that leadership practices influence the capacity of school leaders to effectively solve problems and make decisions. In this study, it was clear that the application of leadership practices by the participants enabled them to effectively adapt to the unique aspects of a crisis in their capacities as school leaders. Moreover, their leadership practices had effectively encouraged the active involvement of significant parties in resolving issues and making decisions, thereby guiding the educational institution, its community, and those with vested interests in the desired outcomes. As a result, they have successfully developed the capacity to efficiently meet the unique demands of the school and community that will prepare them well for crisis situations should such situations arise again in the future.

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## RESEARCH ETHICS

The research obtained approval the participants, with due consideration given to ethical concerns, including safeguarding participants' confidentiality, and respecting their right to withdraw from the study.

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