
Managing an Art School in the Covid-19 Pandemic: The Experience of Polish Principals

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Abstract:

Purpose: The article aims to develop a model of managing art school by principals in the period of remote education, forced by the Covid-19 pandemic, in the context of the idea of educational leadership. In the theoretical approach, eclecticism was presented, which, in relation to the educational reality, has the best translation on the quality of the principal's work.

Methodology: The article presents the results of research carried out using the method of online narrative interview, partially guided, which covered all principals of art schools of a different type, from the region of Lublin (exhaustive research). The construction of the model was based on the identification of six categories in art school management. Both qualitative and quantitative research strategy was used in the result analysis procedure.

Practical Implications: The conducted research has allowed for the construction of a model of art school management in the period of the global crisis in education caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. The proposed empirical model can form the basis for further analysis in the context of educational leadership and management in crisis and the analysis of functioning schools in correlation with the personal resources of their principals. Moreover, it provides an overview of the situation of arts education, especially the key issues it faces in the post-pandemic reconstruction phase.

Originality/value: Reports available in the world scientific literature analysing the functioning of schools during the Covid -19 pandemic do not include and do not refer to art schools. Nor has the method adopted by the authors analysed the functioning of schools during this period in the context of educational leadership.

Keywords: Art education, educational leadership, remote education, Covid- 19 pandemic.

JEL classification: I2, I210, I200, Z110, H120.

Paper Type: Research paper.

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1. Introduction

In Poland, as opposed to many other countries in Europe and in the world, artistic education in music and plastic arts is based on a clear two-track system: an extensive system for all, which is implemented in general education, and an intensive system for some, in art schools preparing for the profession of musician or artist, but in the latter case only at the secondary level (Weiner, 2010).

The specificity of art education in Poland stems from the necessity to realise several artistic specialisations during education. In art schools, they comprise, among others, space arrangement, photography and film, sculpture, applied forms, including artistic violinmaking, graphic techniques, painting, renovation, or stage design. In music schools, these are classical or jazz instrumentalism, classical or jazz vocalism, rhythmic, and violinmaking. In an artistic ballet school, compulsory classes include classical dance, contemporary folk and characteristic dance, and early dance.

There are in Poland currently:

- 135 non-public art schools with the credentials of public schools,
- 157 non-public schools without public school accreditation,
- There are 194 public schools managed by a local government unit in Poland,
- There are 412 public schools managed by the Minister of Culture and National Heritage, of which 203 are music schools of the first degree (SIO, 2021).

A strictly defined legal procedure is applied to principals of these schools to entrust them with their posts. Each candidate enters a competition, announced by the school-leading body. A person aspiring for a position should meet the requirements contained in the relevant Regulation (Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, Dz. U. 2019, item 2470). The future director of an art school and the persons involved should have a professionalism level confirmed as a result of a state examination - at least the degree of appointed or diploma teacher (MEN, Teachers' Charter Act, Dz. U. 2019, item 2215), qualifications to hold a teaching position in a given art school (university degree in a specific discipline, most often art), completed course or postgraduate studies in education management, a minimum of five years of teaching experience, a very good work evaluation, and many other conditions listed in the Regulation. (MEN, Dz. U. of 2020, item 910 and 1371, as amended).

2. Tasks and Responsibilities of School Principals

The demands directed at school principals continue to grow in Poland and most European countries (Arlestig *et al.*, 2016). The central tension in theoretical discussions regarding their role relates to the dispute over *management and leadership* concepts. The first notion was the dominant way of thinking about school management in Poland as late as the 1990s and was created by simply transferring theory from general management theory to management in education, without taking

the specificities of this sphere into account (Bottery, 1992; Dorczak, 2009). Leadership has become the most emphasised element of the desired 'new thinking' about school leadership in the last decade (DuFour and Marzano, 2011). Such a position is recommended in documents developed by OECD organisations and the European Commission (OECD, 2008; OECD, 2012; Council of the European Union, 2013).

Noteworthy is the model of educational leadership developed by Mazurkiewicz (2011), which consists of 5 elements, relevance to the context, reflectivity, servitude towards people and institutions, respect for autonomy and diversity, continuous support for participation and dialogue, special focus on learning and development. The duties and tasks of the principal of each school are regulated by several legal acts, including the Education Law Act (Dz. U. of 2020, items 910 and 1371), the Education System Act (Dz. U. of 2020, item 1327), the Teacher's Charter Act (Dz. U. of 2019, item 2215).

According to the above-mentioned legal acts, the headmaster manages the school's activities by representing it outside and exercises pedagogical supervision responsible for the following processes: didactic, educational, and caring. Creating proper conditions for students' development, he/she cooperates with school organs: student self-government, parent council, and pedagogical council. He/she manages financial resources and is liable for their proper use. He/she organises the administrative and economical service of the school. As the head of the workplace (Art. 94 and 97 of the Labour Code), he/she decides on matters concerning the dismissal and employment of teaching and non-teaching staff, awarding prizes, administering punishments, submitting motions in matters concerning school employees, counteracting mobbing, and so forth.

The coronavirus pandemic as a permanent crisis that requires multidirectional actions (Huczek, 2015) set new challenges for school principals. The characteristics of this period can be related to the Cynefin Framework model proposed by Snowden and Boone (2007), which is based on the science of complexity. The management of art schools before the pandemic was characterized by stability (Obvious domain), e.g., by well-established procedures. Contexts of Complicated situations were also typical, in which a cause-and-effect relationship dominated, noticeable especially for experienced leaders. The most typical area of the functioning of art schools before the pandemic is the Complex context, in which the existing management patterns required ongoing modification, still within the safety limits for the functioning of the organization.

The global crisis triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic has reduced the art school management model to a chaotic area where the relationship between cause and effect was impossible to define because of constant change. There were also no models to refer to (e.g., no experience in remote arts education). In such a situation, the leader was forced to work on transforming the chaos into at least the domain of complex

(Complex). This could, however, lead to a situation in which the context of the disorder would become the dominant. Then it is not known on what principles the organization operates. The undertaken research will help to determine how art school principals made decisions and assessed the situation during the period of remote education forced by the global pandemic.

3. Research Methodology

The paper aims to develop a model of managing art schools by principals in the period of remote education forced by the Covid - 19 pandemic. Information from principals was collected in February and March 2021 using the method of an anonymous, computer-assisted, web-based, partially guided narrative interview. In contrast, narration in the form of a written reconstruction of a sequence of events referred to individual questions posed in the interview, thus representing a thematic form of life history (Ward, 2003). The respondent decided to end the narrative (Groeben, 1990; Rubacha, 2012; Konarzewski, 2000).

Following the principles of qualitative research and the method of a narrative interview with factual features (Kvale, 2012), the researchers' attention was focused on specific cases, so the sample selection was purposeful. An exhaustive survey was used, i.e., an invitation was sent to all (29) art schools in the Lubelskie region. A group of 23 principals representing all art schools in the region: music and art, primary, secondary, and post-secondary, run by different authorities, including public and non-public, responded. They represented 79% of principals of art schools from the region and both genders (14 men, 15 women).

All respondents (except 5) were middle-aged (between 40 and 65 years old) and had between 2 and 25 years of experience in their position. Principals' narratives, as a distinct form of discourse, were analysed and then contrastively compared, looking for similarities and differences between them (Chase, 2005), identifying facts, events and situations that are representative, relevant, and significant for the adopted problem (Smolińska *et al.*, 2010; Rostańska 2020).

The questions directing to the following areas: the most challenging areas of decision-making for the school principal during the pandemic, the organisation of education, the principals' relationship with the community of educational decision-makers, gains, and losses for art education after the pandemic, and the projected direction of change for art schools served the respondents' focus on a specific aspect of their lives (life history). The assessment of personal resources in relation to the principals' perceived levels of stress and burnout was planned for analysis using a quantitative research strategy.

Statistical analyses for the data obtained were carried out using IBM SPSS Statistics version 26 with the bootstrapping method with 20000 returns. The method does not require the assumption of the distribution normality to be met and allows conducting

analyses on relatively small groups without the need to expand from the original population. It is not required that the original sample be drawn randomly from the population, but only that the distribution of the measured variables approximately reflect the population (which is retained).

The characteristics of feelings of stress and burnout were based on the calculation of modal, median, range, minimum, and maximum (King and Minium, 2020; Shreffler and Huecker, 2021; Wadhwa and Azzam, 2021). The distribution shapes of the variables were verified using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. Correlation matrix analyses were performed using the Spearman rho correlation coefficient, and the results obtained were interpreted regarding the classification proposed by Guilford (Braghetto and Figueroa, 2021; King and Minium, 2020). The prediction model developed was estimated using the PLUM (Polytomous Logit Universal Model) procedure included in the generalised linear model (Bono *et al.*, 2021; Gory *et al.*, 2021; Martens and Logan, 2021). The predicted relationships were verified at the two-sided significance level (Braghetto and Figueroa, 2021; Tenny and Abdelgawad, 2021; Wiczorkowska and Wierzbiński, 2019).

4. Research Results

In this approach, the narratives of the principals-respondents, subjected to critical analysis, became an invitation to share their experience (Varaki, 2007). The quoted statements, which illustrate the problem presented, are in italics. The formal numbering of the collected research material is included in brackets, where "w" stands for the narrative statement, the letter designates the interview question, the number stands for the number of the respondent.

4.1 The Most Challenging Areas of Decision-Making for School Principals During a Pandemic

School principals were quite precise in identifying the difficult areas of decision-making. They considered as important:

1. Responsibility - *Pedagogical supervision - responsibility for the quality and results of the school's* (w. F1).
2. Stability - *Lack of stability. I also found it hard to see at least a substitute for a logical cause and effect sequence or forward thinking in some government decisions* (w. F8).
3. Decision-making reality - *Lack of decision-making at the level of CAE (Centre for Artistic Education - ed.) and the Ministry. Legal provisions, which "shift" all responsibility to the headmaster is somewhat unacceptable and very unfair* (w. F15).
4. Changes in regulations - *rapidly changing legal environment* (w. F8).
- *the most difficult scope relates to the need to monitor changes in regulations and issue them at the "last minute"* (w. F7).

5. Requirements for schools' responsibility for safety - *The whole Covid-19 procedure, organising disinfectants, masks* (w. F3), *Ensuring the students' safety* (w. F 9), *Disease risk management...responding promptly to changes in epidemic outbreaks* (w. F20).
6. The importance of responsibility in school management is particularly defined by the statement: *the most demanding decisions are those related to responsibility for people's health and lives, e.g., intra-school* (w. F13). The art school principal's statement best summarizes the discussion about the most difficult areas of 2 decision-making: *all F4* (w. F23).

4.2 Organising Didactics During the Pandemic

In the narratives, the interviewed art school principals identified the organisation of remote education as the primary difficulty of their work. The difficulty, as the statements indicate, mainly concerned the technical sides of the work.

- *despite a clear system of information flow, many times the headmasters encountered a situation where teachers were difficult to reach in direct contacts, we can also see a reduced motivation level of some teachers* (w. F22),
- *managing the continuity of educational processes and the implementation of the core curriculum, which means non-standard solutions* (w. F20).

Among the statements that are negative references to remote education, there was also an example that can be described as an indication with a positive sign,

- *I do not notice any major difficulties; everything is to be established and implemented.*

4.3 Principals' Relations with the Educational Decision-Making Environment

The principals presented negative opinions about the reaction of the educational decision-makers (ministry, local authorities, school supervisory authorities) to the difficulties and needs of artistic education:

- *they will do whatever they want. I do not trust and do not believe* (v. H13),
- *I suspect that (in spite of the official message) they may become convinced that stationary education in music schools can be replaced by remote education* (v. H1),
- *I fear that decision makers will conclude that this is too expensive education and money is needed for other purposes* (w. H3),
- *I have the constant impression that the MEiN regularly omits artistic education from its decisions* (w. H8),
- *I think that the decision makers are not decisive and do not make significant changes in the regulations that would help the directors in school management* (w. H10).

There were also positive evaluations of the influence of educational authorities on the functioning of art schools in pandemic conditions:

- *The problems of remote education made the representatives of the educational authorities aware of the need for dialogue with the art school community. It turned out that communication - even via the Internet - is possible and effective. The regulations for the study of the quality of education have already been changed, which has also been articulated as a big problem for many years. Nevertheless, the pandemic has created the need for rapid computerisation in schools (w. H6).*
- *It seems that educational authorities have already recognised the problem of shrinking numbers of applicants for music schooling, to which the pandemic has definitely contributed (w. H7).*

One statement captures the determination of such an assessment in a catastrophic mood:

- I have no idea. Let's hope they don't come up with the idea of abolishing schools or switching them to disco polo!!! (v. H2).

4.4 Gains and Losses for Art Education after the Pandemic

The topic of the chances and perspectives of the art school after the period of remote education and pandemic restrictions evoked negative associations for most of the school principals, who spoke:

- *I personally do not see any benefits, opportunities (w. L3).*
- *I see no chances, only losses (w. L4).*

What was described as positive was most often related to the technical conditions of the teacher's work:

- *most people learned to use new information technologies (w. L16).*

In a similar perspective, the principals saw new opportunities in the art schools they managed:

Online concerts gathered far more listeners than even the largest concert hall could accommodate. We have learned to record, send recordings to competitions, we have overcome many barriers, international borders. It should be preserved and developed (w. L20).

When referring to the area of gains and losses, the principals pointed to the danger of a potential lack of students as a key threat to the functioning of the schools they manage:

- *I'm afraid that art schools will face a large scale of student drop-outs or a lack of applicants to the school (w. G5).*

- *If it continues, there will be fewer and fewer pupils in school. There will be drop-outs from school due to lack of purpose (w. G3).*
- *My biggest concern as head teacher is admissions to Year 1. I ask myself whether parents, not knowing what will happen in the future, will want to enrol their children in school... whether this will not be the year with the least number of applicants to the school and whether this will not already become the norm (w. G17).*

There were also signs of optimism among principals about the future of art schools:

- *there will be pros and cons. The downsides are a decline in the level of teaching, no matter how hard the student and teacher try, emotional problems for students, a decline in interest in music teaching (in a while interest will return to normal). The pros are the use of digital technology, the ability to find sheet music, teaching materials, etc., the improvement of students' self-discipline, the use of tools to record and present students' achievements (w. G5)*

They also pointed to specific courses of action and new opportunities provided by the experience of their own skills in the situation of having to transform a fixed, pattern of behaviour:

- *It is definitely an opportunity to move with the times - we feel that art schools have stopped exactly where they were 20 years ago.... The pandemic has shown that what seemed impossible is possible - teaching in a music school via the Internet, constant communication between the directors -CAE-the Ministry.*

4.5 The Projected Direction of Change for Art Schools in the Principals' Plans

The principals' statements in relation to this area were generally divided into those which indicated the need for no change:

- *From a long-term perspective, I think it is time to stop changing all the time (w. I1).*

And on the need for change:

- *We are all used to a certain character and level of our education. However, reality requires correction, we need to change our way of thinking.*

The necessity of curricular and methodological changes was pointed out, and mainly the Core Curriculum and framework teaching plans were criticised:

- *The pandemic has shown that we are dealing with a completely different student than in the past and the "old" teaching methods are sometimes simply unattractive to them (v.I7).*
- *It will be necessary to change the core curriculum, which already before the pandemic was inadequate to the current children's abilities (w. I9).*

Two statements by art school principals stressed a broader spectrum of the problem of the future of these schools, namely the educational policy of the state, without the

correction of which school managers may be powerless, in view of the unfavourable tendencies they indicate in the "post-Covid" society:

- *Artistic education is such a specialised branch of the education system that it should await a dedicated law defining the way it operates (rather than being implemented from general education) (v. I18).*
- *The new strategy for musical education should be interwoven into the cultural activities of the regions, cities, cultural institutions (philharmonic halls, music universities), and anticipate the demand for the profession on the labour market (w. I20).*

4.6 Assessment of Personal Resources in Relation to the Level of Stress and Burn-out Perceived by the Principals

Stress is recognised as a condition that exceeds the resources a person has and threatens his or her well-being (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Occupational burn-out is a set of psychological symptoms occurring in active individuals due to the experience of chronic stress resulting from an imbalance between resources and the demands of the external environment (Ribeiro *et al.*, 2021; Salmela-Aro *et al.*, 2019). The values of descriptive statistics of stress and sense of burn-out of art school principals are presented in Table 1.

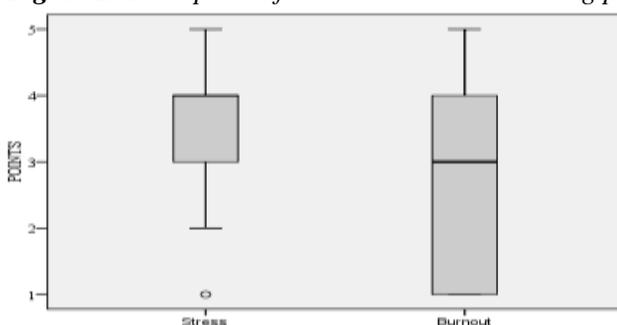
Table 1. Descriptive statistics of stress and burn-out of art school principals

Variable	Mo	Me [95% CI]	IQR	Min.	Max
Stress	4,00	4,00 [4,00; 4,00]	4,00	1,00	5,00
Burn-out	1,00	3,00 [3,00; 3,00]	4,00	1,00	5,00

Source: Own study.

Figure 1 provides a graphical illustration of research participants' feelings of stress and burn-out.

Figure 1. Perception of stress and burnout among principals of art school



Source: Own study.

The data obtained shows that the group under consideration consists of both principals who do not experience stress related to managing an art school and those who reveal emotional tension. The symptoms reported by the respondents range from rather low to very high, which also suggests that their professional role often exceeds their resources and is a factor that threatens their sense of psychological well-being. Research participants most often feel rather high stress resulting from their professional duties. Moreover, at least half of the analysed population manifest rather strong emotional tension, with a difference of four points between the lowest and the highest level.

The sense of professional burn-out of art school principals ranges from no such symptoms to very high intensity, which indicates that in the considered group there are people who, due to chronic distress, feel psychophysical exhaustion, observed deterioration in the quality of relationships with colleagues, may reveal a sense of ineffectiveness of tasks, and are disappointed with their profession. However, it should be added that although the sample is dominated by respondents not experiencing symptoms of the syndrome in question, at least 50.0% report moderate intensity of professional burn-out. On the other hand, the difference between the lowest and the highest score of the research participants is four points. The value of the correlation coefficient between the respondents' stress and sense of professional burn-out is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. *The value of the correlation coefficient between stress and professional burn-out of principals of art schools*

Variables	Professional burn-out	
	<i>rm</i> [95% <i>CI</i>]	<i>p</i>
Stress	0,42 [0,31; 0,52]	0,001

Source: *Own study.*

The correlation matrix analysis indicates that stress, on average, directly proportionally co-occurs with professional burn-out of the participants under study, which suggests that as the emotional tension felt by the directors, which results from managing an art school, increases, their sense of professional burn-out increases, thus psychophysical exhaustion, belief in the lack of task effectiveness and disappointment with the professional role undertaken, and the quality of relationships with colleagues deteriorates.

The results of the predictive analysis performed to explain the role of stress in predicting the likelihood of developing professional burn-out syndrome in the participants are presented in Table 3. In the effect of the research work undertaken on the stress and burn-out levels of art school principals, a model was developed that explains 32.0% (R^2 Nagelkerke = 0,32) of the fungible variance explained.

Table 3. Coefficient estimators of the regression model explaining the role of stress in the development of professional burn-out in art school principals

Variable	Category	Measures of model fit			Regression weights of predictors			
		R^2 Nagel - kerke	χ^2	p	R^2	B [95% CI]	SE	W [95% CI]
Burn-out	none	0,32	97,52	0,001	-2,05[-2,89; -1,44]	0,30	47,21[- 2,64; - 1,47]	0,001
	very low				- 1,91[- 2,72; -1,30]	0,30	41,53[- 2,49; - 1,33]	0,001
	moderate				-1,04[-1,90; - 0,39]	0,28	13,69[- 1,59; - 0,49]	0,001
	quite high				0,69[0,57; 0,44]	0,27	6,40[0,16; 1,23]	0,011
Stress	none				-23,88[-24,68;-22,73]	0,00	[-23,88; -23,88]	0,001
	very low				-5,14[- 24,44; - 3,73]	1,08	22,47[- 7,26; - 3,01]	0,001
	neutral				- 1,35[- 2,10; - 0,42]	0,36	11,56[-1, 91; - 0,51]	0,001
	quite high				- 1,20[- 2,21; - 0,64]	0,32	17,82[- 1,96; - 0,72]	0,001
	very high				-	-	-	-

Source: Own study.

The model is correctly fitted to the data and reveals that the lower the level of perceived stress associated with art school leadership experienced by principals, the lower the likelihood of developing symptoms characteristic of burn-out syndrome, with the risk of developing burn-out being highest for those experiencing very high, followed by rather high, emotional tension.

5. Art School Management in the Covid-19 Pandemic - Discussion of the Results

The specificity of the decision-making of the principals of art schools in the pandemic period was - according to the presented analysis of research results - marked by overcoming constant crises (James and Gililand, 2006), which "prevented" or "significantly limited" the implementation of the school's basic functions. It included instability, loneliness in decision-making, and insufficient support from educational authorities. The principals were forced to carry out their tasks in a 'somewhat unacceptable and very damaging situation' in which dissatisfaction with their professional role could grow (Zeitoun and Newton, 2002).

Monitoring changes in legislation, often issued 'at the last minute', the responsibility for implementing 'Covid procedures' in school life, the daily 'management of sickness risk', created a leadership model in which 'everything' was difficult. In turn, given the

experience of high levels of stress by most of the principals interviewed, with half additionally experiencing high levels of burn-out, that period can be considered a turning point in the individual's life (Bühler, 1999), which N. Denzin (2009) refers to as *an epiphany*.

The organisation of remote education in art schools represented, in the light of the research results, the most challenging scope of school management. Similarly, as in many pandemic reports (Ptaszek *et al.*, 2020; Pyżalski, 2020; Buchner *et al.*, 2020; Sobiesiak-Penszko and Pazderski, 2020; Douce *et al.*, 2020; Mrzyglocka-Chojnacka and Rynca, 2021), the principals surveyed note both gains and losses associated with the introduction of remote education.

The way of coping with a crisis and chaotic context indicates that all principals interviewed are reflective practitioners (OECD, 2001), approaching the crisis reality in a way that is both rational and forward-looking. They understand their role as leaders as a person whose potential lies in their ability to influence the cultural context, which is characteristic of transformational leadership (Northouse, 2009).

The surveyed directors repeatedly indicated that the quality of management is determined by mutual relations between teachers, management, and educational decision-makers. They also emphasised the necessity to look for new solutions, resign from established patterns, and use the pandemic as a springboard for school development, treating it as "an opportunity to move with the times". Undoubtedly, in this case, the nature of leadership can be described as transformational, going beyond the realm of the transactional. The dimension of leadership is certainly the most desirable (Bush, 2007).

The research confirmed the reports presented in the literature (Chapman, 2005), that the position of principal is quite a strong burden for the individual, which, compounded by the experimental situation of the pandemic, may have been the cause of such a high level of stress felt by the respondents. The research results presented in this paper allowed for an attempt to construct a model of managing an art school (Figure 2) against the background - typical of the Covid-19 pandemic - of coexisting mechanisms, crisis situations and accompanying symptoms of stress and burnout experienced by principals.

The leaders surveyed considered the organisation of education to be the most fundamental part of their work, that is, their *de facto* responsibility for the operation of schools, regardless of the uncertain and changing conditions in which they had to make decisions. The attitude of a reflective practitioner presented by the surveyed principals allowed for a rational analysis of crises, in the context of perceiving the strengths and weaknesses of the existing reality. In turn, such an approach triggered leadership competencies considering the role of the entire school community in achieving the assumed objective, which undoubtedly was, in this situation, the effective functioning of the organisation.

Figure 2. Art school management model in the Covid-19 pandemic

Source: Own study.

The search for new solutions in labile and unprecedented realities became the basis for building the most valuable model of transformational leadership, deeply embedded in the context of understanding the needs of art education and creating a vision of a different, new school, a school - after the pandemic.

6. Conclusion

According to the research, the principals, despite the crisis in which they had to manage art schools, presented themselves not only as efficient managers, but also as reflective practitioners, strongly connected to their organisation and looking for new ways and rational solutions for its better functioning in the future.

Their educational leadership includes elements of unpredictability, dynamics, and interdisciplinary reflection characteristic of management in the context of chaos. As pointed out by Leithwood *et al.* (1999), the only salvation for schools working in crisis situations is an effective leader who would be able to manage under all these conditions.

In this way, they fit into state-of-the-art thinking about education while identifying with the most productive model of educational leadership. Unfortunately, this is at the same time paid for with high levels of stress, often combined with quite high levels of professional burn-out.

The research revealed that chaos situations, in this case caused by a global pandemic, require changes in the management process and a new type of leadership. They showed art school principals as leaders capable of transforming the elements of the crisis into an opportunity for both the management process and education. The model proposed by the authors requires further scientific exploration, especially in the context of the personal resources possessed by leaders.

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