The Attributes of School Leaders in a Time of Crisis: An Exploratory Case Study of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

The Coronavirus pandemic is a crisis that has fundamentally changed the fabric of school leadership globally. School leaders are required to work to mitigate the effects of this crisis through their demonstration of effective leadership attributes. Currently, a few western studies highlight the attributes of school leader's desirable in a time of disruption, but their findings have little relevance to middle-eastern contexts. This study addresses such gap by focusing on the exploration of leadership attributes of Saudi Arabian school leaders demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic. It focuses on the importance of human leadership as a part of school crisis leadership. Using an exploratory case study approach, a qualitative open-ended questionnaire was administered to a sample of Saudi Arabian school principals to explore their school leadership attributes exercised during the crisis. It was found that the circumstances imposed by the pandemic had a strong influence on their leadership attributes and their responses to the crisis. Nine leadership attributes found that leaders have: become more eager for development, learnt to remain calm, endured stress and difficulties, become more compassionate, supportive, strategic, emotionally intelligent, intuitive and better communicators. They found that these attributes helped them succeed in managing the crisis by better understanding micro and macro aspects of their schools. The findings highlight leadership qualities required for stronger school leadership within Saudi Arabian schools during periods of rapid change, and may benefit those involved in school leadership development and principal preparation in Middle-eastern contexts.

Keywords: Leadership Attributes; School Leaders; Middle-eastern Contexts; Crisis Leadership, COVID-19.

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Introduction

On March 12th, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared an unpredictable global health crisis caused by "acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2" (SARS-CoV-2) which rapidly became a pandemic (WHO 2020). In answer to the virus, international and national authorities have continued to monitor the situation and implement preventive and precautionary rules to contain the spread of the virus (Viner et al. 2020; Yezli & Khan 2020). For example, on 8 March 2020, all educational institutions in Saudi Arabia closed and moved to virtual learning as an integral step to limit the spread of the outbreak and to ensure the safety of students and their school communities (Almaghaslah & Alsayari 2020; Awan et al. 2020; Geo News 2020; Mann et al. 2020; Yezli & Khan 2020). Nationally, the Saudi Arabian educational system successfully handled the transition to distance-based learning (Arab News 2020). However, school leaders faced many challenges when framing their school priorities in attempts to provide essential services, maintain the process of teaching and learning, ensure the well-being and health of their school communities, and minimise the long-term impact of the crisis (Nyenswah et al. 2016). It was found that the crisis added an increased level of pressure on school leaders as they had already been working under pressure to improve their schools due to the Vision 2030 initiatives in action within their schools. (Al Otaibi 2020; SGMC 2018).

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia launched the Vision 2030 to create a more sustainable and

diverse economy away from its reliance on oil (Al Otaibi 2020; Saudi Vision 2030 2021). This transformation required developing other sectors within Saudi Arabian society, such as education. Building an education system that aligned with market needs was foreseen to increase the quality of life for Saudis and offer the essential skills upon which the new desired economy is being built (Almudara 2017; OECD 2020; Saudi Vision 2030 2021). One of the aims of this vision is to develop leadership and the efficiency of school leaders (Almudara 2017; Al Otaibi 2020; Saudi Vision 2030 2021; SGMC 2018). It also encourages school leaders to examine their own role in achieving this vision within their schools and to enable their schools to directly participate in national social and economic growth through their realization of the impact of this vision within their regular school teaching and learning processes at their schools (Almudarra 2019; SGMC 2018). School leadership encompasses certain attributes, tasks, behaviours, and effects on school members, and effective school leadership depends on the characteristics and actions of leaders (Verawati & Hartono 2020; Yahaya et al. 2011; Yukl 2012). However, in terms of leading schools within "a sudden and largely unanticipated, intensely negative, and emotionally draining circumstance" (Dubrin 2013, p. 3), it requires a successful educational leadership through the behaviour, beliefs, and outcomes of individuals involved within the school. It is not about models or theories that can guide leaders' actions, rather, it is more about the attributes that they can bring to deal effectively with the crisis (Smith & Riley 2012). In Saudi Arabia, the attributes of the leaders determine their

performance in working to achieve the vision even during the COVID-19 pandemic, making the study of their attributes extremely important.

Therefore, we aim by this study to explore these attributes that Saudi school leaders are exhibiting during the COVID-19 pandemic. Apart from a focus on leadership in a time of crisis, we also examine some management activities since they are considered an integral part of leaders' responsibilities. We do not intend to rank school leaders or assign labels to them such as 'effective leader' or 'quality of leadership' neither to compare them to each other. Rather, it is intended to use their traits and behaviours in providing a framework for leaders interested in reflecting on their leadership practice. Prior studies on the attributes of leaders are dominated by western countries (Dubrin 2013; O'Connell & Clarke 2020; Smith & Riley 2012; Walker et al. 2016), and little is known in the context of Saudi Arabia (Gonaim & Peters 2017) of which only a few have highlighted the attributes of school leaders that are desirable in a time of crisis (Al Eid & Arnout 2020). This study responds to the call by Al Eid and Arnout (2020) for more studies focused on developing leaders' awareness of the attributes that are required in leading during a crisis and the significance of their roles when managing crises. The uniqueness of this study is that it focuses on leadership attributes in general and not influenced by any particular style or approach of leadership. It addresses the limitations in the current literature by focusing on the attributes

that Saudi school leaders are exhibiting during the COVID-19 crisis. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap.

Literature Review

Effective leadership in education, particularly at a time of crisis, depends on the attributes that leaders bring to effectively deal with the crisis (Smith & Riley 2012). Scholarly studies on the attributes of leadership show diverse understandings of the notion of leadership, and a number of them associate effective leadership with the characteristics, traits and skills of leaders during crises (Altamirano & Collazo 2020; Dirani et al. 2020; Dubrin 2013; Kaul et al. 2020) (see Table 1). Nevertheless, based on the literature reviewed, the role of leaders in emergency situations is usually studied in the fields of medicine, business and politics (Boin 2019; Kielkowski 2013; Walker et al. 2016), but relatively few have linked it with the role that school leaders should play during mass disruption, where the immediate response is needed (Al Eid & Arnout 2020; Fletcher & Nicholas 2016; Harris 2002; Harris 2020; Ibeawuchi et al. 2021; Malone & Caddell 2000; Netolicky 2020; Smith & Riley 2012; Thornton 2021). School leaders, like any other organizational leader, play an essential role in responding to a crisis beleaguering their schools. Thus, the ability of these leaders entails an influence on others by unleashing the encouragement and capacity to overcome the challenges posed by the crisis (Harris 2020). Al Eid and Arnout (2020), Smith and Riley (2012) and Van Wart and Naim Kapucu (2011) explained how school

leaders can strengthen their capacity to respond effectively by developing the necessary crisis leadership attributes in times of an unpredictably unique event. They stressed the importance of communication, cooperation, positivity and decision-making skill (see Table 1).

There is a plethora of literature addressing effective leadership and leadership styles (Fernandez & Shaw 2020; Silins 1994; Shufutinsky et al. 2020). According to Fernandez and Shaw (2020) and Shufutinsky et al. (2020), leaders within organisations need to combine multiple attributes from more than one leadership style, such as being adaptive, flexible and communicative. While these attributes are included in numerous styles of leadership, the type of crisis determines which attributes are most effective (Fiedler 1964). Numerous studies also indicate that in order for school leaders to respond effectively to a crisis, they should adopt certain key leadership attributes such as being adaptive, flexible, strategic and compassionate (Dubrin 2013; Shufutinsky et al. 2020; Kaul et al. 2020) as these will assist them in dealing with COVID-19 and similar future crises (Brelsford et al. 2020; Fernandez & Shaw 2020; Hauseman et al. 2020; O'Connell & Clarke 2020).

However, understanding effective leadership attributes requires delving deeper into the behaviours and practices that frame the traits of these leaders. Scholars recommended that for school leaders to respond effectively to the COVID-19 pandemic, they should adopt certain attributes and be reflective as this will assist them through similar future crises

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(Brelsford et al., 2020; Fernandez & Shaw, 2020; Hauseman et al., 2020; Kafa & Pashiardis, 2020; O'Connell & Clarke, 2020). The essential attributes of effective school leadership include working with and through others, coping with and thriving on ambiguity, taking risks and breaking rules if necessary (Smith & Riley 2012). Research abounds with directives and lessons for leaders to adopt for the improvement of their responses during a crisis (Ahlström et al. 2020; Brelsford et al. 2020; Dubrin 2013; Fernandez & Shaw 2020; Gainey 2009; Harris 2020; Hauseman et al. 2020; Ibeawuchi et al. 2021; Kafa & Pashiardis 2020; O'Connell & Clark, 2020; Thornton 2021). Common lessons are to act decisively, communicate clearly, cooperate and share responsibilities and demonstrate empathy. Moreover, the communication skill has become one of the most crucial and needed skills during the COVID-19 pandemic and almost every researcher agrees to be essential for the leader of an organisation. In particular, the studies conducted by Brelsford et al. (2020), Fernandez and Shaw (2020), Gainey (2009) and O'Connell and Clarke (2020) have emphasised the need for open communication during a crisis to avoid uncertainty and the role of being credible and trust-building among school members.

Other studies that were reviewed highlighted the usefulness of some leadership attributes as crucial motives that can be reflected in leaders' practices during a crisis. For example, Fletcher and Nicholas (2016) emphasise the importance of leaders having effective communication and social media skills during a crisis, and the study of Sellnow et al.'s

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(2018) study revealed that. Leaders, in Sellnow et al.'s study, who used communication networks and shared information during the Porcine Epidemic Diarrhea virus (PEDv) outbreak successfully shifted the story of the virus away from the uncertainty to the dominant narrative that helped to resolve the crisis efficiently. On the other hand, leaders may bring inappropriate attributes to situations or they may use them incorrectly, especially when these situations are unexpected crises. The study of Nyenswah et al. (2016) reveals poor decision-making by leadership led to the epidemic in Libya escalating. That, however, was initially and then conditions improved due to strong leadership.

Moreover, one of the most important factors that needs to be considered by all leaders is that of trust and building a positive relationship with others (Al Eid & Arnout 2020; Ahlström et al. 2020; Brelsford et al. 2020; Fernandez & Shaw 2020; Harris 2002; Netolicky 2020). Schools that have a leader who creates an environment of trust, has the most important building block of leadership required in creating a resilient school culture (Ahlström et al. 2020; Dotlich et al. 2009; Harris 2002). As Harris (2020) suggests that leaders dealing difficulty had a set of personal values and traits including resilience, adherence and the capacity for hard work. O'Connell and Clarke's (2020) study also found that leaders' feelings, beliefs and experiences drive their dominant style, and effective leaders had a high degree of emotional intelligence. Altamirano and Collazo (2020) also found that emotional intelligence played an important role in the crisis response of leaders.

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Although there are many theories and models that apply to the concept of leadership attributes, for the purpose of this study, only contingency theory is considered. It was developed during the 1960s by Fred Fiedler who is one of the first theorists of leadership to shift the focus in leadership research by considering the relationship between leaders' attributes and leadership effectiveness (Fiedler 1964; Zaccaro et al. 2018). Fiedler (1964) argued that there is no one best style of leadership that fits all situations, and leaders may be successful in some situations and unsuccessful in others. Although this study was generated by studying and analysing leadership styles within different contexts, its elements guided our thinking when attempting to determine which attributes of leadership are required to be successful during a crisis. It explains why some Saudi school leaders, who might otherwise be considered successful, might not show great leadership attributes in a situation such as a pandemic. Behaviours during crises stem from the personal leadership attributes of leaders and their skills, but situations can also influence leaders' behaviours (Fiedler 1964). According to this theory, leaders have an awareness of their behaviours and their skills in accordance with what is suitable in given situations (Liu et al. 2011). Such situations frame and impact the attributes and abilities enacted by these leaders. This would suggest that their responses, accordingly, may differ from their everyday leadership practices (Mutch 2015) when leading through a crisis.

As discussed in the literature, it would seem that there is more than one leadership attribute

required when facing a crisis, and leaders need to adjust their leadership attributes and behaviours according to the situation (Fiedler 1964). Much of the extant literature focuses on listing the needed attributes during crises (Dubrin 2013; Al Eid & Arnout 2020; Harris 2002; Kaul et al. 2020) rather than exploring the attributes that leaders bring and the levels to which these leaders exhibited them while demonstrating effective crisis leadership (Altamirano & Collazo 2020; Fletcher & Nicholas 2016; Mutch 2015; Nyenswah et al. 2016; Sellnow et al. 2018; Van Wart & Naim Kapucu 2011). This limitation in the literature became the basis for this study. The common attributes were identified from a number of crisis researchers and were combined in Table 1. This table indicates, across relevant research, highly desirable attributes of leaders, and the crisis responses that were driven by personal attributes.

Table 1: Common Attributes and Responses That Were Driven by Attributes

Authors and Years	Communicative	Decisive	Adaptive	Flexible	Resilient	Supportive	Strategic and Planner	Calm	Collaborative	Emotional Intelligent	Intuitive	Good User of New Media Platforms and Resources	Optimistic and Positive	Credible	Compassionate and Caring
Dubrin (2013)	•	•	•	•	•		•	•	•	•					•
Smith & Riley (2012)	•	•		•	•				•		•		•	•	•
Fletcher & Nicholas (2016)	•					•								•	•
Hayashi & Soo (2012)	•		•						•			•			
Al Eid & Arnout (2020)	•	•	•				•	•	•	•			•	•	
Netolicky (2020)	•	•					•		•					•	•
Harris (2002)	•		•		•	•	•		•	•			•	•	•
Harris (2020)									•			•			•
Shufutinsky et al. (2020)	•	•	•	•	•		•	•	•						•
Kaul et al. (2020)	•	•	•	•			•				•		•		•
Seeger et al. (1998)	•														
Fernandez & Shaw (2020)	•		•	•					•	•		•		•	
Dirani et al. (2020)	•					•				•		•	•		
Van Wart & Naim Kapucu (2011)	•	•		•	•		•		•			•			
Ahlström et al. (2020)														•	
Gainey (2009)	•						•					•		•	
Breksford et al. (2020)	•			•		•						•		•	•
O'Connell & Clarke (2020)	•	•					•	•			•			•	
Iheanuchi et al. (2021)			•											•	•
Hauseman et al. (2020)	•			•					•				•		
Thornton (2021)	•				•		•		•			•	•	•	•
Altamirano & Callazo (2020)	•										•				
Mutch (2015)	•	•	•	•		•			•			•			•
Fletcher & Nicholas (2016)	•					•								•	•
Nyenswah et al. (2016)	•	•					•					•		•	
Sellnow et al. (2018)	•						•					•			

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Methodology

This study sought to understand the attributes of school leaders through their interpretation of their actions during the crisis. The theoretical lens (Fiedler 1964) and the data collected were identified and linked to draw a general inductive inference from the impact of COVID-19 on the leadership attributes indicating the internal motives to their behaviours (Bryman 2016, p. 21). Clearly, the best source of data would be those involved in the situation. The chosen topic is rooted in the human factor of school leadership, which makes the qualitative approach the most logical way to facilitate the exploration of school leadership attributes within rapid change caused by a crisis. Furthermore, as the data sought does not aim to focus on a universal discovery nor a generalisable truth, a case study approach was an appropriate design for this research. Conducting a study on this case enables researchers to collect an in-depth information and have a better understanding of a complex issue that could have an effect on societies, institutions and individuals (Bryman 2016, p. 375; Simons 2009, p. 21). It has been suggested that case study research, adopting a qualitative approach, is the most appropriate methodology when examining a complex social phenomenon (Bhatta 2018). An explorative case-study design was used for this study, with a specific focus given to the attributes demonstrated by Saudi Arabian school leaders when faced with numerous challenges in times of a crisis.   By choosing COVID-

19 as our case study, we examined whether the school leadership attributes of school leaders changed as the situational favourableness of the pandemic changed.

Since the aim of this research is to explore the attributes of school leaders in Saudi Arabia during the time of COVID-19's influence, it is important to view these leaders as active members of the Saudi society who change and construct their social reality based on what suits their staff and students. Thus, a semi-structure questionnaire that combines closed and open-ended questions was adopted. However, the open-ended questions contained the largest portion of the questionnaire. Two factors influenced our decision of choosing this method over other qualitative methods for data collection. Firstly, a love of privacy is a predominant characteristic of Saudi society. Face to face meetings, as in this instance, with strangers are generally not a comfortable way of communicating in the Saudi community (Abokhodair et al. 2017) especially for females. Hence, a more private, convenient and less embarrassing method of gathering data was chosen. Secondly, the intention of open-ended questions is to obtain in-depth responses from participants, which, in turn, effectively enabled us to explore their personal attributes, as they were allowed to answer freely and without any limitation (McLeod 2018).

The questionnaire consisted of three sections: demographic questions, questions related to the leaders' attributes; and questions on leadership responses. The second section

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comprised items that describe different attributes of leaders during COVID-19 which were drawn from a review of the literature. School leaders were asked to reflect on their own leadership attributes and to rate themselves based on the level to which they exhibited these attributes specifically in dealing with the challenges of the pandemic. These items were presented to leaders before they indicated their own attributes that they felt they exhibited during the crisis to clarify the nature of this study and its aims. The questionnaire was created through Qualtrics (https://www.qualtrics.com/), then was sent to leaders who work in school leadership in Saudi Arabia and directly involved in dealing with the COVID-19 crisis. A total of 9 out 20 (45%) leaders fully responded to the survey and therefore constituted the study cohort. The sample included seven female and two male leaders from public and private schools in Saudi Arabia. The questionnaire was distributed through WhatsApp; a social networking application, due to its popularity among Saudis (Statista Research Department 2021), in four major cities in Saudi Arabia: Jedda, Al Dammam, Al Riyadh, and Al Ahssa. Therefore, since the researchers were able to quickly access and select the study's sample, it is classified as a "convenience sampling". "A convenience sampling is one that is simply available to the researcher by virtue of its accessibility" (Bryman 2016, pp. 187).

In terms of the data analysis, certain aspects of the questionnaire were analysed using qualitative methods for open ended questions while other quantitative data was interrogated

using quantitative analysis. These open-ended questions provided more clarification and emphasis on the presence of various and prominent attributes of the leaders. Since this research involved a case study, thematic analysis was used to clearly explain the social phenomenon. Thematic analysis enables a researcher to become familiar with the data, from which initial codes are applied, patterns emerge and are reviewed, leading to conclusions, in which the specific phenomenon chosen to be studied is described (Swart 2019). The answers from the survey were coded manually in order to recognise any emerging themes. However, some of the answers were vague and difficult to analyse, which led us to eliminate these answers in order to avoid the misinterpretation of these answers. The closed-ended questions, on the other hand, were limited set of responses from which respondents choose (Swart, 2019), but they helped us clearly understand the degree to which leadership attributes existed. In the analysis of the responses, descriptive statistical analysis was applied. The respondents' answers were read and understood, then examined and grouped into different categories through statistical analysis, after which they were assigned and numbered as codes using a 'Microsoft Excel database'.

Findings and Analysis

As a means for better understanding the attributes of leaders working within a crisis, data was first collected with closed-ended questions. The closed questions relied on exploring

the attributes in two different periods, pre-crisis[1], and during-crisis in order to identify

whether these leadership attributes appeared only during the crisis or if they are a part of

the enduring personality of the leaders. A key finding in this study was that the majority of

the participants had exhibited a variety of attributes prior to the pandemic at a relatively
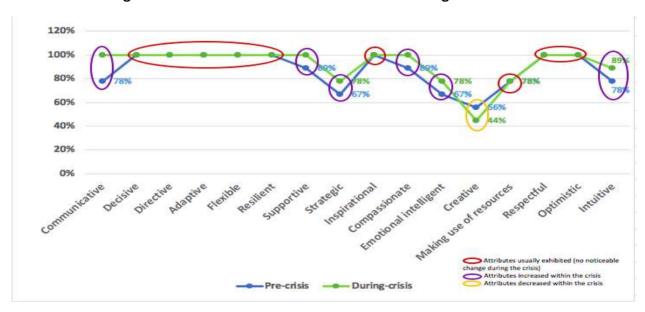
stable rate (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Attributes Exhibited Pre-Crisis and During-Crisis

However, nearly all the school leaders found themselves more communicative, supportive,

intuitive and compassionate during the crisis than before the crisis (see Figure 1). In the

open-ended questions, the participants were asked to provide more clarifications of these

emerged attributes and how they exhibited them during the crisis. Participant E, for

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[1] The use of pre-crisis in the context of this research refers to leadership attributes during normal times.

example, was not highly effective in terms of communication, support, sympathy, emotional intelligence, creativity, or social medial skills before the pandemic, but at the time of the current pandemic, her level of communication, support and sympathy suddenly increased. She said, "during the pandemic, I have become more communicative and supportive, especially for students, by making sure that they have gained the required knowledge".

The trait of emotional intelligence, on the other hand, did not appear sufficiently among the participants during the crisis (see Figure 1), but it was exhibited successfully for participant A who surprisingly found himself more emotionally intelligent when COVID-19 hit the country. He found himself capable of handling the work and interrelationship in a more judicious way. Regardless of the closed questions and its limited access to the full exploration of the level of emotional intelligence among the participants, within the open-ended questions, other attributes were discovered that were not mentioned in the survey. In fact, in order to explore other attributes that may be specifically related to our study sample or influenced by the Arabic culture, not all of the suggested attributes discussed in the literature were provided to the participants (see Table 1). Participant D, G and H, for example, have learnt to remain calm, optimistic and affirmative. All of which can be linked to managing emotions and coping with the stress, which all are in the centre of the

emotional intelligence. Participant G stated "during the pandemic, I was calm in my decisions.

In addition, the participants dedicated their efforts during the crisis to develop themselves and their school community. For example, participant G stated, "I persevere. I look for better, I love innovation and I keep myself abreast of everything new". Participant D discussed, "I am a team developer" and participant I stated, "I am keen on developing myself and my work team".

Moreover, four participants exhibited effective attributes during the pandemic related to enduring difficulties and overcoming what hindered work. "We tried to overcome the challenges in all ways possible" (participant F 2020). "In spite of the team's lack of mastery of technology and broadcasting problems, I contributed to overcoming difficulties hindering work" (participant A 2020). Participant C also had a difficulty with technology in terms of training mothers of the students, who are not highly skilled in the use of technology. COVID-19 imposed many challenges and pressures on school leaders including financially and technologically. One leader (participant H) faced a difficulty with finances, but she effectively dealt with it. "In order to respond to the lack of resources and financial support provided to my school, I had to buy resources with my own money" (Participant H 2020). In terms of the technological support, the participants (A, B, C, G, H and I), generously offered help regarding specific problems with the platform (imposed by

the Ministry of Education as a connector during the COVID-19), Information Technology related services, training sessions and online workshops.

However, participants (C, D, E, F) also indicated an attribute of support, sympathy and caring by providing moral and educational support to students. Participant C's response to students who got infected by COVID-19 was, "I personally communicated with them, ensured that they are in good health, and I required repeating lessons for those who could not attend". Similarly, participant A noted that: "following up with students and teachers' health conditions, providing devices and internet connection, developing individual educational plans for them that serve their ongoing educational process". Participant E was less supportive before the crisis and highly supportive in the midst of the crisis, she said "during the pandemic, I have been providing moral support to students and teachers".

In terms of communication, the percentage of well-communicative leaders during the crisis increased as most of the leaders who participated in the survey found that they became more connected with their school community and interacted with them in many ways. Leaders shared how their communication with the school community members and parents became more successful due to online communication which led them to adopt a number of new communication modes at the same time. Furthermore, four leaders clearly expressed that their communication during the pandemic became very effective (A, C, D, and I).

Participant D stated that their communication during the pandemic had become "very effective, it is almost more than 12 hours of communication through WhatsApp or by phone". Another finding drawn from the results of the questionnaire was that when the participants were asked about their behaviours during the pandemic. While all leaders had a high effective level of communication with students, teachers and parents, only four of the nine were in excellent communication with healthcare providers (A, D, G, and H). For example, participant D responded, "providing health supplies and forming a security and safety team were my emergency plans". Leaders were asked about another important leadership characteristic exhibited during a crisis, which is being decisive and a proactive decision-maker. Leaders were asked whether they made successful decisions from the start of the pandemic. The results show that five of them had made such decisions without receiving any help from others, while the rest of the participants made decisions after a discussion with the planning team in their schools, with other leaders with experience, or with school members.

Moreover, the attribute of decision-making was explored by providing these leaders with a scenario in order to see how they would make a decision in a time of stress. For example, leaders were asked what they would do if they knew that one of their teachers had been infected with COVID-19 while they were in a school filled with students. The results showed a great convergence in the leaders' response to this situation, as many of them

agreed to take the decision "to immediately isolate the teacher, sterilise the school, and identify all those whom the teacher was in contact with as soon as possible before allowing students to return to their homes".

In contrast, not all the leaders preferred to make such decisions themselves. Some preferred to resort to the competent authorities before making any decision. For e.g., participant F stated, "I would seek help from experts". Participant D responded to the scenario, "I would deal with the situation calmly, I would privately ask the teacher who got infected whoever she had contact with, and the parents of whom she contacted will be informed to take their children home and isolate them.

Certain attributes were discovered by Saudi Arabian school leaders that were heightened during the crisis which included: being communicative, compassionate, supportive, strategic, emotionally intelligent, intuitive, calm, enduring stress and difficulties and being eager for development. While there might be numerous attributes that leaders can demonstrate during a crisis, the findings of this study presented what these Saudi Arabian school leaders identified within themselves that are highly relevant to a middle-eastern context.

Discussion

Based on the findings that was presented in the preceding section of this paper, here we offer our own analysis of the main attributes, through which the leadership of Saudi schools

were operationalised in the seek of confronting the dilemma of COVID-19 pandemic. The process of analysing the data revealed similarities between the attributes of the crisis leaders and the one discussed in the existing literature. Only the emerged attributes will now be discussed.

Being a supportive and caring leader is a key interpersonal attribute that is used to build cooperative relations with members in order to help them cope effectively during stressful contexts (Dubrin 2013; Yukl 2012). The leaders of this study found themselves more supportive and compassionate during the crisis. Such attributes are commonly seen in the literature as being effective and essential leadership approaches, that involve taking some form of actions to ease pressures and alleviate suffering of others (Al Eid & Arnout 2020; Altamirano & Collazo 2020; Brelsford et al. 2020; Dirani et al. 2020; Fletcher & Nicholas 2016; Harris 2002; Harris 2020; Mutch 2015; Nyenswah et al. 2016; Smith & Riley 2012). An example was provided by Dubrin (2013) who stated that a leader in a crisis who has an attribute of compassion, will act compassionately toward his followers. With reference to contingency theory, it would seem that these leaders adaptively worked on their leadership behaviour and related leadership attributes and become more supportive and compassionate in response to the demands of the situation by helping others work their way out and overcome the crisis (Fiedler 1964; Verawati & Hartono 2020). These leaders found that their supportive behaviour during the crisis grew as required by the situation that their

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schools were facing and that it helped strengthen their own leadership approach within their respective schools.

The results of the questionnaire revealed that the level of communication over the crisis became deeper and more effective than what it was before the crisis. Saudi school leaders successfully adopted various communication modes in order to facilitate the work of school members and to maintain accessibility to the community (Brelsford et al. 2020; Kafa & Pashirardis 2020). This similarly was seen in Sellnow et al.'s (2018) study, in which the leaders who adopted communication networks during the Porcine Epidemic Diarrhea virus (PEDv), effectively shifted the story of the virus away from uncertainty to the dominant narrative that helped to resolve the crisis. In contrast, leaders not only need to carefully adopt multiple communication modes they also have to diversify successful leadership actions in order to maintain their efficiency as successful leaders, to avoid uncertainty, and to ensure the safety and well-being of their school community. The action of regular communication with healthcare providers may explain leaders' eagerness to develop accurate and thoughtful contingency plans as a response to the pressures of the situation in which led them to be more communicative as a mandatory action that emerged with the pandemic, in which important precautions need to be taken by leaders to maintain the safety of their students and teachers (Fiedler 1964).

It is worth noting that being communicative is a highly desirable attribute of a leader (Al Eid & Arnout 2020; Altamirano & Collazo 2020; Dirani et al. 2020; Dubrin 2013; Fletcher & Nicholas 2016; Mutch 2015; Nyenswah et al. 2016; Shufutinsky et al. 2020; Smith & Riley 2012; Sellnow et al. 2018). However, the considerable strains that COVID-19 put on leaders made them more communicative and good users of new media platforms and resources as a necessary leadership attribute in moving out of the crisis (Altamirano & Collazo 2020; Dirani et al. 2020; Fernandez & Shaw 2020; Harris 2020; Hayashi & Soo 2012).

The nature of the decisions that were made differed. All leaders showed the skill of decision-making but demonstrated it in different ways. Some relied on themselves in making decisions by following their intuition and self-confidence. According to Smith and Riley (2012), "intuition can be extremely effective when decisions must be made very quickly, particularly when those decisions involve complex issues with considerable areas of uncertainty and ambiguity, as exists with most school crises" (pp. 66). While for the others, their decisions were sharing-oriented, which is motivated by strategic thinking and planning (Thornton 2021). They prefer to follow strategies by including the power of seeking advice and involving other parties in the decision-making process in order to finally reach successful decisions that benefitted everyone (Al Eid & Arnout 2020; Harris 2002). With regard to the participants' answers to the scenario, it is important that school

leaders make thoughtful and careful decision in a time of disturbance about how to best save their school communities (Netolicky 2020). Shufutinsky et al. (2020) explain in their study that leaders need to adopt numerous attributes, such as to be situational and decisive as the type of crisis determines which effective attributes need to be considered. The findings indicate that the leaders were expected to adjust their leadership attributes and behaviours according to the situation and this determined how they interacted with the situation (Fiedler 1964).

The ability to manage emotions is an important skill needed for school leaders in which helps them manage every action that leads to a successful crisis leadership. Altamirano and Collazo (2020), Fernandez and Shaw (2020), Harris (2002), and O'Connell and Clarke (2020) all emphasise the importance of being emotionally intelligent for academic leaders facing a stressful context. Although not all the participants mentioned having a high level of emotional intelligence during the crisis, they, nevertheless, still exhibited emotional intelligence in a variety of ways. The leaders comparably noted the feeling of having new attributes to their personality that appear to have emerged after the virus spread around the country. The pressures imposed by the pandemic on leaders have taught them how to endure difficulties, manage their own emotions to relieve stress, and be more resilient towards negativity and alternatively become more adaptive, tolerant, and calm while facing these tensions. This is consistent with the existing literature that emphasises that leaders

during a crisis should combine multiple attributes including the sense of calmness to maintain effectiveness (Dubrin 2013; Shufutinsky et al. 2020). In a situation like this, emotional intelligence and calmness are necessary to overcome the difficulties that COVID-19 imposes (Mutch 2015). Leaders should not be seen panicking, and they need to control their emotions as the event unfolds (O'Connell & Clarke 2020). In accordance with the contingency theory, the personal attributes of leaders, together with their situational contingencies and control, determine the effectiveness of their schools (Fiedler 1964). It can be noted that the majority of the study sample have the ability to withstand difficulties as effective leaders by being, patient, resilient and adaptive. They were aware of their actions and they applied appropriate attributes to the given situation (Liu et al. 2011).

Despite that school leaders may not have noticed a significant difference of themselves in terms of the creativity level (see Figure 1), they dedicated their efforts during the crisis to develop themselves and their school community. The findings indicate that these leaders found developing themselves and others to be a core and important attribute to them during their leadership in times of COVID-19. In fact, their leadership practices have shifted as they have adopted certain leadership attributes that were refined by the time face-to-face engagement has stopped (Harris 2020). The inference that we can draw from these statements is that these leaders are relationally oriented (Yukl 2012), using leadership

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development to facilitate team members in their career advancement and to increase their confidence and skills.

Conclusion

In a time of increased disruptions and the non-linear circumstances of COVID-19, effective leadership in schools is required to minimise the impact on staff and students and guide the teaching and learning processes. This paper draws an important inference by reinforcing the understanding that different situations call for different attributes. This study sought to explore the attributes of Saudi Arabian school leaders by exploring their self-disclosed behaviours manifested during the challenges imposed by COVID-19. Through the qualitative survey, certain attributes were discovered by Saudi Arabian school leaders that were heightened during the crisis which included: being communicative, compassionate, supportive, strategic, emotionally intelligent, intuitive, calm, enduring stress and difficulties and being eager for development. The leadership power of the study sample changed during the crisis, which indicates the power of the situation. It was discovered that leadership attributes directly influenced the leadership and management processes employed within their respective school during the COVID-19 pandemic. Because the attributes may change during the crisis due to the rapid change of the situation, this study used the contingency theory (Fiedler 1964) to illustrate how the circumstances imposed by the pandemic had a strong influence on the attributes and the way in which these leaders responded. Such attributes assisted most of these leaders in leading their schools and

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reducing the fear of uncertainty within the school community.

There is no way of knowing from this study if these leaders are really effective or if they are using these traits positively or negatively. However, the extant literature indicates that if effective leadership attributes are present in a leader, it is more likely that they are effective due to those effective leadership attributes. Although we can make inferences about their effectiveness, ultimately, such judgement requires the input of other people such as teachers, students, and even parents, who can evaluate the performance of these leaders. This was beyond the scope of this small-scale study. This paper has looked at a case of a crisis response to COVID-19 in Saudi Arabia by nine local school leaders. These findings cannot be generalised to the wider population and is limited to the application of these findings to schools in Saudi Arabia. Despite the drawbacks of this study, the emerging data is significant for Saudi Arabian school leaders, their leadership and management practices, and critically important for their approaches to school effectiveness, especially given the on-going pressure imposed by Vision 2030. Saudi school leaders can turn the COVID-19 pandemic into an opportunity to adjust their leadership attributes and behaviours based on the circumstances and the people being led. This study raises the awareness of leaders regarding the leadership qualities required for stronger school leadership and better school outcomes. Leadership during a crisis does not require the leader to have specific attributes. Rather, it is better to be a multi-attributed, forward-thinking leader who successfully manages their schools through various combination of effective leadership attributes and

behaviours depending upon the situation that they find themselves in (Muriithi & Wachira 2016).

For this, it is important that the issue of crisis school leadership and the attributes of leaders to be extensively discussed further as effective leadership in a time of disruption contributes to the establishment of more effective teaching and learning practices. Certainly, although this study is a small-scale study, the data obtained provide a springboard for future research, especially within the middle-eastern context. Future research is called upon to intensively investigate the leadership attributes that school leaders are demonstrating while overcoming the crisis and ensuring the success of their schools, by combining more than one method and gathering data from other school members to provide a comprehensive exploration, increase credibility and validity, strengthen the data and overcome participant or researcher biases (Bhatta 2018; Mason 2002; Mishra & Rasundram 2017). Future research could also evaluate the effectiveness of school leaders in times of a crisis and examine to what extent certain attributes may decrease/increase during a crisis. Accordingly, this paper is a small scale study, it requires further deeper investigations in to school leadership attributes where a number of cases of principals are studied to look more closely at how these leaders understood their role as leaders during a crisis, and then responded over the protracted crisis period by leading their school community. Did they perceive the crisis to be an opportunity for organisational growth and agility or organisational decline and chaos?

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