ERNA ARDIANI PALUPI

Venzelaue

BUILDING HEALTH BRIDGES FOR BPJS PATIENTS BY STRENGTHENING THE LINK OF PREMIUM COSTS, INFRASTRUCTURE, SERVICE QUALIT...

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Leadership strategies for alleviating teacher stress in crisis contexts: a grounded theory

Abstract

Purpose: This study constructs a grounded theory of school leadership strategies designed to alleviate severe teacher stress and mitigate workforce attrition during acute systemic crises.

Method: Employing an inductive qualitative grounded theory design, data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with 14 primary and secondary school educators operating within severe infrastructural and economic disruption contexts.

Findings: The grounded framework identifies two core leadership mechanisms: (1) *Radical Task Triaging ("Survival Pedagogy")*, which strips up to 80% of administrative compliance requirements to prioritize basic literacy and psychosocial stabilization, and (2) *Institutional Buffering*, wherein principals act as administrative "airlocks" to shield educators from unaligned state mandates while granting hyper-local operational autonomy.

Practical implications: The findings provide school administrators with actionable structural strategies to eliminate moral injury, adjust attendance policies flexibly, and preserve human infrastructure when national systems collapse.

Originality/value: This study advances crisis management literature by shifting the prevailing paradigm away from individualized teacher resilience toward leader-led structural workload reduction and protective institutional buffering.

Introduction

Teacher stress has increasingly emerged as a critical concern in contemporary educational systems, directly threatening the fundamental domains of schooling, including qualification, socialization, and subjectification (Biesta, 2020). Educators navigate dynamic workplace demands that fluctuate significantly daily, making occupational stress a persistent structural phenomenon rather than an isolated

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incident (van Alphen et al., 2022). As teachers cope with intensifying professional expectations, individual accounts highlight how chronic workplace strain manifests as acute psychological distress, identity erosion, and systemic burnout (Anderson, 2025). School leadership operates as the primary institutional buffer within this high-pressure landscape, responsible for maintaining structural stability while supporting educator well-being.

Understanding and mitigating teacher stress holds profound implications across pedagogical, social, and organizational dimensions. Unmanaged occupational stress directly compromises early childhood workplace environments and everyday classroom practices (Natale et al., 2023). Elevated stress levels further impair the quality of educational dialogue, reducing constructive teacher-student interactions (Muhonen et al., 2023). Beyond the school gates, occupational stress spills over into educators' personal lives, causing severe work-family conflict and marked gendered impacts (Leo et al., 2022; Toprak et al., 2024). Consequently, institutional leadership strategies that successfully alleviate teacher stress yield wide-reaching benefits by retaining experienced personnel, safeguarding instructional quality, and preserving workforce mental health.

A growing body of literature highlights various individual coping mechanisms and organizational support structures designed to alleviate teaching stress. At the individual level, scholars have evaluated cognitive-behavioral strategies (Ghasemi, 2022), emotion regulation capabilities (Rauterkus et al., 2024), and personal psychological capital or resilience (Qin, 2024; Shirazizadeh & Abbaszadeh, 2023). At the institutional level, research underscores the value of professional development programs (Shakimova et al., 2024), targeted video feedback interventions (Junker & Holodynski, 2022), formal mentoring networks (Mosley et al., 2023; Mosley & McCarthy, 2023), positive school climates (Nguyen et al., 2023), and whole-school relational approaches (Ruttledge, 2022) in mitigating routine classroom pressures.

Despite these insights, existing literature predominantly examines routine, predictable educational contexts or relies on individual-centered resilience models, leaving a major void regarding leadership-driven interventions during acute crisis contexts. Sudden structural disruptions—such as emergency remote teaching, modality shifts, and pandemic-driven institutional overhauls—introduce unique stress vectors that standard operational protocols fail to address (Leger et al., 2025; Mouw et al., 2023). Furthermore, educational policy narratives frequently overemphasize individual resilience, urging teachers to "push on through" without offering structural leadership solutions (Brown & Dixon, 2020; Brown & Donnelly, 2022). Consequently, an empirical and theoretical gap remains regarding how school leaders actively construct, adapt, and deploy stress-alleviation strategies during systemic crises.

To address this gap, this study offers a novel theoretical contribution by utilizing a Grounded Theory methodology to build an inductive framework of crisis-specific leadership strategies. Rather than imposing predefined, static stress models or relying solely on general thematic classifications (Braun & Clarke, 2006), this research conceptualizes the lived experiences and adaptive actions of school leaders directly from empirical crisis data. By grounding leadership actions within relational practice (Billington et al., 2022) and an ethics of care (Culshaw & Kurian, 2021), this study shifts the focus away from individual teacher coping toward systematic, leader-led organizational support mechanisms during severe disruption.

Accordingly, the primary objective of this study is to construct a grounded theory detailing how school leadership strategies effectively alleviate teacher stress in crisis contexts. Specifically, this research aims to identify the actionable leadership practices, organizational conditions, and relational dynamics that emerge during acute disruptions. By establishing an inductively derived conceptual model, this study seeks to illuminate the interactive processes through which educational leaders identify acute teacher stressors, allocate structural resources, and foster psychological safety under crisis conditions.

Investigating leadership interventions in crisis contexts is urgent, as post-pandemic reports indicate that teachers continue to operate in a state of "surviving, rather than thriving" (Wilson et al., 2024). Lingering institutional shocks, coupled with ongoing technological integration and shifting teaching modalities, have prolonged teacher fatigue and heightened turnover risks (Leger et al., 2025; Mouw et al., 2023). Educational systems can no longer rely on ad-hoc crisis responses; there is an immediate imperative to equip educational leaders with evidence-based, grounded frameworks to protect teacher well-being before crisis-induced stress permanently degrades institutional capacity.

Ultimately, this research provides substantial theoretical and practical contributions to educational leadership, policy, and school psychology. Theoretically, it advances a grounded framework that conceptualizes stress mitigation as a core leadership responsibility anchored in relational care and systemic infrastructure (Billington et al., 2022; Culshaw & Kurian, 2021). Practically, the resulting model offers administrators actionable, grounded guidance to mitigate teacher burnout, optimize institutional crisis response protocols, and build sustainable, resilient educational environments in times of severe disruption.

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative Grounded Theory design following Charmaz's constructivist approach to construct an explanatory model of leadership behaviours that mitigate teacher stress during institutional crises. Constructivist Grounded Theory acknowledges that reality is co-constructed through shared interactions, making it ideal for examining how educators and administrators interpret stress, agency, and supportive leadership. Rather than testing pre-existing hypotheses, this approach prioritizes the lived experiences and subjective meanings of practitioners navigating chaotic educational environments.

Grounded Theory was deliberately chosen over traditional qualitative designs, such as phenomenology or case studies, because existing crisis leadership literature relies heavily on top-down operational protocols rather than the interpersonal and structural mechanisms that alleviate psychological strain. Quantitative methodologies often fail to capture the complex, contextual nuances of emotional labour in schools. An inductive design allowed core concepts to emerge directly from empirical field data, ensuring the resulting theoretical framework reflects the authentic human dynamics of school communities under acute pressure.

Research Participants and Theoretical Sampling

The initial participant group comprised 24 school personnel—10 principals, 4 department heads, and 10 classroom teachers—across primary and secondary public schools operating within region-wide emergency recovery contexts. Sampling commenced with purposeful selection, targeting educators who had completed a minimum of two years of continuous service during a sustained institutional crisis. This baseline criterion ensured participants possessed rich, longitudinal experience regarding administrative responses and workplace stress dynamics.

As initial data collection and open coding progressed, sampling shifted from purposeful to theoretical sampling, driven by the needs of the emerging conceptual framework. Participants were iteratively selected based on their ability to illuminate, test, and refine developing categories, such as administrative communication and workload recalibration. To ensure variation and conceptual depth, subsequent recruits were deliberately drawn from diverse school profiles—contrasting high-resource environments against under-resourced institutions—until theoretical saturation across all categories was achieved.

Data Collection Instruments and Fieldwork Procedures

Primary data were gathered using an open-ended, semi-structured interview guide operationalized through the Critical Incident Technique (CIT). Rather than

eliciting generic opinions on workplace stress, the CIT approach required participants to systematically reconstruct 2 to 3 specific, memorable crisis events involving acute emotional or operational strain. Interview prompts were designed in alignment with Charmaz's constructivist framework, focusing on four chronological phases: the onset of the stressor, the immediate and sustained administrative response, the interpersonal dynamics during the event, and the perceived psychological outcome for the teacher. In line with Grounded Theory's iterative nature, the interview instrument was not static; it evolved across data collection waves to incorporate probing questions that targeted emerging theoretical categories, such as administrative transparency and workload recalibration.

Methodological rigor and trustworthiness—the qualitative analogs to validity and reliability—were embedded throughout the data collection process using Lincoln and Guba's criteria for qualitative rigor. Prior to deployment, the instrument underwent a pilot test with two non-participant educators to refine question clarity, eliminate leading phrasing, and calibrate timing. Credibility was enhanced through participant member-checking, wherein transcribed texts and preliminary category maps were returned to a subset of participants (n = 6) to ensure accurate interpretation of their lived experiences. Dependability and confirmability were maintained through a rigorous audit trail, including time-stamped reflective memos, field notes capturing non-verbal cues (e.g., sighs, prolonged pauses during discussions of stress), and detailed logs documenting every refinement made to the interview protocol.

Fieldwork was executed across three sequential waves over a seven-month period, following formal approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and district administrators. To ensure participant psychological safety and confidentiality, interviews were conducted in private, neutral settings—either secure, closed-door school offices during non-instructional hours or encrypted video-conferencing platforms based on participant preference. Each participant provided written informed consent prior to recording and was assigned an alphanumeric code (e.g., Principal-03,

Teacher-08) to guarantee anonymity. Sessions lasted between 50 and 70 minutes and were recorded using dual digital audio devices. Audio files were transcribed verbatim within 48 hours using standardized formatting protocols that captured both spoken language and paralanguage. Rapid transcription was critical to the theoretical sampling process, enabling immediate line-by-line coding that directly informed the selection criteria and prompt refinements for subsequent participant waves.

Data Analysis

Data were systematically processed using the constant comparative method facilitated by NVivo software. Analysis began with initial (open) coding, during which raw transcript text was broken down line-by-line into discrete, action-oriented conceptual tags. These tags were continuously compared against one another across different transcripts to identify recurring patterns, emotional triggers, and perceived leadership interventions across different school contexts.

The analysis then progressed to axial coding, which grouped initial codes into higher-order categories—such as transparent communication, empathetic scheduling, and psychological safety nets—and established relationships between context, causal conditions, and strategies. Finally, selective coding integrated these sub-categories around a central core concept: *adaptive protective leadership*. Analysis concluded when full theoretical saturation was reached, confirmed when additional comparative data yielded no new properties, dimensions, or conceptual relationships.

Results and Discussion

In hyper-acute national crises marked by infrastructure collapse, hyperinflation, and state instability—such as in Venezuela—standard leadership protocols crumble. Under these conditions, two core mechanisms of Adaptive Protective Leadership become non-negotiable for preserving a functioning teaching force:

Radical Task Triaging into "Survival Pedagogy"

When systemic infrastructure fails (e.g., severe power grid collapse, water shortages, or hyperinflation), forcing teachers to adhere to standardized curricula and heavy administrative reporting creates overwhelming moral injury and triggers mass teacher flight. This operational strain mirrors the severe occupational disruptions highlighted by Anderson (2025), who noted that unaligned administrative burdens lead directly to personal distress and identity erosion. As one participant captured during an acute systemic shutdown:

> *"When basic infrastructure collapsed and families were struggling for daily necessities, being mandated to submit complex lesson plans and tracking metrics felt like psychological torture. We were trying to support traumatized kids, yet central management only cared about standardized paperwork."* (Participant 7, Secondary Educator)

Under systemic collapse, forcing educators to maintain rigid compliance exacerbates burnout and forces mass exit from the profession. School leaders must unilaterally strip away up to 80% of routine administrative requirements—eliminating formal lesson plans, complex grading matrices, and bureaucratic tracking. One participant described the immediate relief brought by this decisive leadership intervention:

> *"The moment our principal stood up and said, 'Burn the administrative compliance checks—focus only on your students and basic survival,' a collective weight lifted off our shoulders. That single leadership decision saved our teaching staff from total collapse."* (Participant 14, Elementary Educator)

This finding directly aligns with the research of Leger et al. (2025) and Mouw et al. (2023), who demonstrated that rigid operational expectations during emergency modality shifts severely degrade teacher mental health. Furthermore, this result strongly reinforces the work of Culshaw and Kurian (2021) and Billington et al. (2022), which advocates for dismantling transactional administrative burdens in favor of institutional care and relational practice. By actively eliminating bureaucratic strain, school leaders protect teaching staff from the acute exhaustion documented across

international contexts (Leo et al., 2022). This strategy contributes to educational leadership practice by establishing structural workload reduction as a primary crisis intervention mechanism.

The Application: Leadership explicitly shifts the institutional mission from rigid academic benchmarks to basic literacy, numeracy, and community psychosocial stabilization. Redefining school as a haven and feeding anchor—rather than an academic testing site—aligns workload directly with the daily survival realities of both teachers and students. As another educator noted regarding this shift:

> *"Once school became a sanctuary where kids were fed, safe, and taught essential skills, our sense of purpose returned. We were no longer fighting an impossible academic syllabus; we were serving as a stabilization anchor for our community."* (Participant 3, Middle School Teacher)

This study aligns with the research of Biesta (2020), showing that during times of crisis, schools must reprioritize fundamental socialization and care over strict qualification metrics. Similarly, this approach aligns with Ruttledge (2022) and Nguyen et al. (2023), who established that whole-school relational shifts and supportive climates reduce teacher stress and boost efficacy. By reframing the school as a community shelter, leaders move away from harmful individual-resilience narratives that demand educators simply "push on through" without structural changes (Brown & Dixon, 2020; Brown & Donnelly, 2022).

Comparing these findings with broader international empirical literature reveals crucial insights into crisis leadership. While studies in stable contexts emphasize individual coping mechanisms such as emotion regulation (Rauterkus et al., 2024), cognitive-behavioral strategies (Ghasemi, 2022), or professional development (Shakimova et al., 2024), our grounded theory demonstrates that acute systemic failure demands immediate structural interventions over individual psychological adjustments. While traditional support models highlight continuous mentoring (Mosley & McCarthy, 2023; Mosley et al., 2023) or diagnostic video feedback (Junker

& Holodynski, 2022), such tools become secondary when basic institutional infrastructure collapses. Internationally, research on teacher stress metrics (van Alphen et al., 2022), psychological capital (Toprak et al., 2024), and teacher resilience (Qin, 2024; Shirazizadeh & Abbaszadeh, 2023) often assumes operational stability; however, our findings confirm that in severe crisis contexts, structural task triaging is the prerequisite for protecting classroom interactions and preserving basic educational dialogue (Muhonen et al., 2023; Natale et al., 2023).

Ultimately, this research contributes to the field of educational management by providing a realistic, leader-led framework for crisis survival pedagogy. The practical implication of this work is clear: school leaders who courageously triage administrative tasks safeguard educator well-being and maintain institutional continuity when standard operating procedures fail, preventing teachers from falling into a permanent state of "surviving, rather than thriving" (Wilson et al., 2024). A key limitation of this research, however, is its dependence on qualitative data gathered from specific extreme disruption settings, which may vary across different regional policy frameworks and infrastructural conditions. Future research should investigate how leadership task triaging can be systematically integrated into formal emergency policy frameworks across diverse global educational systems.

Institutional Buffering and Local Autonomy Shields

During prolonged national turmoil, top-down state directives often become completely disconnected from ground-level survival. Teachers face immense stress when caught between impossible official mandates and actual physical or economic impossibility. This operational mismatch mirrors the findings of Anderson (2025), who documented how unaligned institutional demands trigger profound professional alienation and personal identity erosion among educators. As one participant captured during an acute crisis period:

> *"We were receiving official emails demanding standardized testing reports while the city had no electricity or running water. Trying to meet state mandates while figuring out how to feed our families created an unbearable psychological breaking point."* (Participant 5, High School Teacher)

Under systemic collapse, forcing educators to maintain rigid compliance exacerbates moral injury and forces mass exit from the profession. This study aligns with the research of Brown and Donnelly (2022), demonstrating that macro-level educational policy directives frequently ignore the social and emotional realities of school staff during systemic disruption. The Strategy: Principals act as an administrative "airlock," absorbing pressure from central authorities while granting teachers hyper-local operational autonomy. One participant highlighted the transformative impact of this leadership stance:

> *"Our principal basically stood between us and the ministry. She told us, 'I will answer to the district inspectors; you just focus on what your students need today.' Knowing she was shielding us gave us the psychological safety to keep showing up."* (Participant 11, Primary School Educator)

This proactive buffering strategy directly aligns with the research of Culshaw and Kurian (2021) and Billington et al. (2022), who argue that institutional well-being requires leadership grounded in relational practice and structural care rather than bureaucratic enforcement. By absorbing external regulatory demands, leadership creates a localized sanctuary where educators can function without perpetual panic. Furthermore, this finding strongly reinforces the work of Leger et al. (2025) and Mouw et al. (2023), who identified administrative flexibility as a crucial buffer against systemic teacher exhaustion during emergency operational shifts. This strategy contributes to educational management theory by redefining school leadership not merely as policy implementation, but as a critical protective airlock during acute societal crises.

The Application: Effective leaders provide explicit cover against punitive evaluations for non-compliance with unrealistic state mandates. They establish flexible attendance policies—allowing teachers to adjust hours around secondary income

sources, food distribution lines, or utility availability—without fear of losing their primary positions. By serving as a protective buffer, leadership preserves the human infrastructure of the school when national systems collapse. As another educator explained:

> *"When hyperinflation erased our salaries, my principal allowed us to rotate shifts so we could work second jobs or wait in lines for basic provisions. We weren't penalized for missing rigid hours; instead, we were supported as human beings."* (Participant 2, Middle School Instructor)

This study aligns with the research of Leo et al. (2022) and Toprak et al. (2024), who observed that external crisis pressures severely compound work-family conflict and economic strain, particularly among vulnerable teaching demographics. By granting flexible attendance and neutralizing punitive evaluation threats, school leaders actively mitigate the structural drivers of teacher attrition. This finding aligns with Ruttledge (2022) and Nguyen et al. (2023), proving that supportive, relational school climates preserve teacher self-efficacy and psychological stability. Practically, this application demonstrates that protecting the human infrastructure of education requires administrative pragmatism that prioritizes educator survival over formal regulatory compliance.

Reframing leadership as a local autonomy shield fundamentally alters the institutional purpose of schooling during emergency conditions. This study aligns with the research of Biesta (2020), which emphasizes that education must balance qualification with broad socialization and subjectification; in crisis settings, rigid qualification metrics must yield to relational stability and basic social care. As another participant noted:

> *"When our leaders stopped treating us like data-collection machines and started treating us like human beings in a crisis, school became a place of hope rather than torture."* (Participant 9, Vocational Teacher)

This empirical insight directly challenges normative educational policy narratives that urge educators to simply "push on through" without modifying

structural conditions (Brown & Dixon, 2020). By establishing local autonomy, leadership provides a structural alternative to individualized grit, offering a sustainable model for institutional survival.

While studies conducted in stable European environments emphasize individual psychological mechanisms, such as emotion regulation capabilities in Germany (Rauterkus et al., 2024) or structured video feedback interventions (Junker & Holodynski, 2022), our findings show that under systemic national turmoil, individual coping strategies become insufficient without institutional protection. Similarly, while research in Central Asia highlights formal professional development training as a primary stress mitigation tool (Shakimova et al., 2024), our data indicates that administrative protection and workload autonomy are far more critical when basic societal infrastructure crumbles. While Ghasemi (2022) focused on cognitive-behavioral coping mechanisms to manage anxiety, our study demonstrates that leader-led institutional buffering provides the external shield necessary for any internal coping mechanism to be effective.

Furthermore, international research evaluating daily teacher stress variance (van Alphen et al., 2022) and individual psychological capital (Toprak et al., 2024) typically assumes a functional state infrastructure. In contrast, our grounded theory demonstrates that during prolonged crisis, teacher resilience (Qin, 2024; Shirazizadeh & Abbaszadeh, 2023) cannot be treated as an isolated personal trait. Although formal mentoring programs serve as essential resources during routine induction periods (Mosley & McCarthy, 2023; Mosley et al., 2023), crisis contexts require school principals to step beyond developmental mentoring and assume an active defense posture. Shielding teachers from punitive state oversight preserves classroom climate and sustains basic educational dialogue (Muhonen et al., 2023; Natale et al., 2023), demonstrating that local autonomy is the fundamental foundation for maintaining instructional viability.

Ultimately, this study offers substantial theoretical and practical contributions to educational leadership in crisis management. Theoretically, it advances a model of "institutional buffering" that shifts stress intervention from individual resilience to structural defense mechanisms, preventing educators from falling into a perpetual cycle of "surviving, rather than thriving" (Wilson et al., 2024). Practically, it provides school administrators with a clear blueprint for exercising moral courage and administrative airlocking during national emergencies. However, a notable limitation of this research stems from its dependence on qualitative data gathered via inductive thematic protocols (Braun & Clarke, 2006) from specific hyper-disrupted settings, which may limit immediate generalizability to highly centralized systems with rigid legal oversight. Future research should examine how local autonomy shields can be formalized within legislative and emergency governance frameworks to legally protect school leaders when buffering their staff during systemic crises.