

## What Are the Long-Term Consequences of Covid-19 For School Leadership?

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### Abstract

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*In Denmark, schools were partly closed from March 2020 to summer 2022. This article discusses Danish primary school leaders' experiences with Covid-19. The research question was, What are the long-term consequences of Covid-19 for school leadership? The analysis gave rise to a further question: How is it that experiences with Covid-19 are so different from one school leader to the next? From January–March 2023, 15 school leaders from 6 different municipalities were interviewed about their experiences with the longer-term consequences of Covid-19. The statements in the interviews ranged from statements such as 'We are back to everyday life' to 'Everything has to be reinvented'.*

*Some school leaders pointed out that they learned a lot about leadership and themselves as leaders, while others reported what could be described as limited experiences. The interviews were inductive but nevertheless case-oriented and focused in their questions, particularly regarding themes linked to school leaders' experiences with Covid-19. Subsequently, a more deductively oriented analysis was conducted based on management theory, institutional theory and empirical studies of school leaders' experiences with the coronavirus.*

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**Keywords:** Covid-19, school leadership, long-term experiences, school life

### Introduction

School systems around the world have been changed by Covid-19. The pandemic was a global experiment that took place without anyone knowing the consequences. In more than 200 countries, schools closed, either for a short period or a longer time. It is estimated that around a billion children lost a year or more of schooling. This was most pronounced in countries that could offer compensatory distance learning which was the case in many high-income nations, such as Denmark. The youngest children were hit the hardest. Added to this were the long-term consequences: a loss of human capital as well as social and economic problems. The shutdowns had a high price in both the short and long terms (Azevedo et al., 2023; United Nations, 2020).

During the shutdown, the conditions under which school leadership was exercised changed dramatically. In many cases, school principals had to manage their schools by computer or telephone or deal with administrative tasks such as tracking and reporting cases of infection. In the media, pictures were seen of school leaders who walked around with a ruler and measuring tape to ensure that the rigid Covid restrictions were adhered to. However, the closure also meant that it became necessary to think about and organise schools in new ways. From this perspective, Covid-19 can be seen as an organisational crisis or disruptive occurrence that could nevertheless create opportunities for organisational growth and change (Horman, 2018; Schein, 2016).

This article's research question is as follows: What were the long-term effects of Covid-19 on school leadership? The analysis gave rise to a further question: How is it that experiences with Covid-19 are so different from one school leader to the next?

I conducted interviews with 15 school leaders in primary and lower secondary school 3 times: twice during the shutdown and once after the reopening. During the shutdown, many school leaders reported that they had to be creative and use their imaginations to reconfigure their schools in new ways and meet the challenges of the coronavirus. After the reopening, the experiences were more divided. The statements in these interviews ranged from 'We are back to everyday life' to 'Everything has to be reinvented'. Some school leaders reported that they had learned a lot about leadership and themselves as leaders, while others highlighted what could be described as limited experiences with, for example, digital technology.

Despite this range in the testimonies, which can partly be explained by the strong managerial focus on getting schools' everyday operations to function again, it is possible to identify both concrete changes and common experiences among the school managers, which point towards new notions of schools and school management. In what follows, I will first review some of the more lasting changes that have impacted school leadership and school leader work. In the second part of the study, I discuss at a more general theoretical level whether it is possible to pinpoint signs of experiences that can teach us something about organisational potential and school leadership. The two parts will discuss empirical studies of Covid-19 and leadership and general leader theory. In the last section, I discuss why it can be difficult to incorporate new experientially informed perspectives into research on everyday life at school. This last part will draw on institutional theory and theories about organizational learning.

## Methodology

In Denmark, primary schools were partly closed from March 2020 to summer 2022. In the beginning and still around December 2020, schools were completely closed. At other times, they were partly closed or had to function under restrictions. Older children were taught digitally during the longer closure periods.

In January–March 2023, a total of 15 school leaders from 6 different municipalities were interviewed about their experiences with the longer-term consequences of Covid-19. The same leaders had been interviewed twice before during the Covid-19 period (early summer in 2021 and 2022) in connection with school closures.

Six municipalities – four urban and two rural – were selected to ensure variation in size and population density. The urban municipalities are in a larger Danish provincial town, a medium-sized town and two smaller areas distributed across the country. The two rural municipalities are in relatively sparsely populated areas of the country. Eight of the principals were men, and the rest were female. Most had been leaders for two years or more, while four had held the position for under two years.

The semi-structured interviews all took place virtually via Zoom (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2014). The interviews were inductive but nevertheless case-oriented and focused in their questions (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2014).

In the last round, the interviews focused on permanent changes at schools in general, specifically in relation to the impact of Covid-19 on being a school leader, touching on new pedagogical practices, understandings of new school leadership practice, new modes of organisation, ideas, and values.

I sought to record material descriptions that transcended mere factual reports to make it possible to understand the meanings the actors attributed to their experiences and actions. In the first phase, all interview data were transcribed and read to understand and capture the principals' ideas, meanings and reasons and become familiar with the data. In the second phase, thematic coding was applied to analyse the qualitative interview data (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2014).

Subsequently, a more theoretical analysis perspective was carried out based on management theory (Bolman & Deal, 2017). In the attempt to discuss the results in connection with other experiences of Covid 19 situation. Empirical studies of school leaders' experiences with Covid-19 were used (e.g. Chatzipanagiotou & Katsarou, 2023; Contantia et al., 2021; Gonzales et al., 2022; Harris, 2020; Harris & Jones, 2022; Tahir et al., 2024). Several studies on covid 19 and school leadership has been published since the pandemic reached the world in 2020. Even though only a few studies have focused on the more long-term consequences of covid 19 and school leadership. The mentioned studies are including experiences with that issue.

In the attempt to discuss the school leaders quite different experiences with Covid 19 institutional theory (e.g. Berger & Luckmann, 1976; Scott, 2018) and theories about organizational learning (Argyris, 1999) was also applied.

## **Results**

### **School Management**

In this section, the school principals' experiences with management will be analysed. As noted above, there was considerable variation in the leaders' experiences.

The statement by one participant that 'I have learned a lot about being a leader' reflects this experience. Others thought that the coronavirus period had not given rise to any significant changes: 'We have not brought much with us'. Several leaders said they were exhausted. As one stated, 'I can feel in myself as a leader that I have some kind of mental fatigue'. Several studies have also pointed to this fatigue among school leaders. At certain points, school leaders must work weekends and holidays and put in mental overtime. Internationally, a high incidence of stress, sick leave and burnout has been reported, and many school leaders have changed jobs during this period because of Covid-19 (Harris & Jones, 2022; Kelley, 2020; Tahir et al., 2024).

### **The Importance of Well-Being**

Many school leaders pointed to an increased focus on relationships, well-being and community among pupils and teachers. Many leaders had become more aware that these are central concerns for a leader. This is also an area where many schools still have backlogs and unfinished work. The importance of well-being is reflected in the fact that some schools see more conflicts between students and teachers. 'Pupils and teachers are more sensitive there is still a job to be done.' Or as another school leader says: 'we are spending much more time on conflict management and personal management.'

There are children, but also adults, who continue to have difficulty returning to everyday life. The degree of school refusal has, for example, increased everywhere, although it can be difficult to isolate it because of the Covid-19 period, as noted by many of the leaders. As one school principal put it, 'My most important task as a school leader is to create some sort of cohesion and meaning when it comes to going to school and being at school'.

### **Building Organisational Capacity**

Several school leaders discovered during the pandemic that they had very flexible and adaptable staff, although the pedagogical and didactic imagination activated during Covid disappeared in most places after the schools reopened. 'We are back to normal. We no longer experience creativity and didactic imagination,' as a school-leader tells.

Certain school leaders became more conscientious about involving teachers in decisions and priority setting. As one school leader put it, 'As management, we have noticed that we can bring the employees much more into play in relation to finding solutions.'

In general, the principals praised the readiness and flexibility of their teachers and employees as well as their ability to be innovative during the Covid era. Along thematically similar lines, they reported staff awareness and readiness for crisis management. Now that everyday life has resumed, the need for innovation has mostly disappeared, although it is anticipated that it could be reactivated should new crises announce their arrival. All in all, experiences like these point to organisational capacity, or what Hargreaves and Fullan (2014) call professional capital – an organisation's overall ability to face disturbances and continuously solve the problems they create for the core organisational process (Elsass, 2003).

### **The Professional–Pedagogical Role**

There were slightly different experiences with the professional–pedagogical management role. For some school leaders, experiences with various educational initiatives during the Covid period gave rise to the initiation of professional and pedagogical changes. One leader put it this way: 'It has forced us to think in new ways. I think that has been very good'.

Concretely, these changes include new organisational forms, such as fewer teachers for each individual class and year group. There has also been work with various professional immersion measures and the prioritisation of extracurricular activities. A third example is the increased use of outdoor activities for pedagogical reasons. As one school leader tells: 'We are using the outdoor area in a different and new way compared to the time before Covid 19.'

In several cases, these initiatives were still on the way or lay as untapped opportunities and resources in the culture; Covid 19 became the concrete occasion to create frameworks and conditions for concrete educational changes.

### **Other Experiences**

A fourth change was the shift towards an increased use of digital media in, for example, meetings, whether meetings of administrators, municipal school head meetings or simply short internal meetings at the school. 'We are keeping many more digital meetings,' as one school leader concludes.

Several school leaders expressed that they had become more aware of and better at communicating precisely and clearly with staff and parents. The many correspondences with teachers and parents during Covid-19 along with the constantly changing guidelines contributed in several cases to the development of new experiences in communicating. Some had continued to make video clips by the last interview, which they started doing during Covid as a way of communicating more directly with parents. International research confirms that many school leaders reported developing new skills during the Covid period, e.g. problem solving, decision making, crisis management, critical thinking, and communication (Chatzipanagiotou & Katsarou, 2023; Harris & Jones, 2022; Tahir et al., 2024).

### **Experiences in Context**

Compared to more experienced school leaders, there was a tendency for relatively new leaders to report that the Covid-19 era brought with it unique experiences, which they continued to draw on when leading. They thought that their personal leadership skills had been enhanced.

Another interesting trend was that principals at smaller schools reported learning more than principals at large schools. The explanation could be that the principals at larger schools assume more strategic and background-oriented roles, while those at smaller institutions deal with more day-to-day and managerial concerns. At smaller schools, principals deal with daily and more management-oriented questions and challenges and was directly involved in problem solving and solutions. A third, more contextual explanation for the different experiences among the school leaders concerns the way specific schools were affected by Covid. During the pandemic, some schools had many severe outbreaks among pupils and teachers and were completely closed for a long time. No variations were discovered across municipalities.

### **Discussion: Perspectives on Management**

To understand the development that school leaders underwent during the Covid-19 period, Bolmann and Deal's (2017) theory of how leaders define and handle managerial situations can be consulted. While an inductive approach was used earlier in the article, Bolmann and Deal's concepts allow for a more deductive interpretation. Various researchers have worked with Bolmann's and Deal's concepts, which can inform a comparative international perspective and illuminate how the experiences of Danish school leaders differ from those of their foreign colleagues (Gonzales et al., 2022). Bolmann and Deal's theory is rooted in organisational studies. The four methods or interpretive frameworks comprise structural, humanistic, political, and symbolic perspectives on how, with the intervention of managers, organisations can work to become as effective as possible.

### ***Structural Tasks***

In the interview material, we find all four modes of reaction. In many places, during the Covid era, the school head was forced into a bureaucratic or structural role, where they had to act as a manager rather than a leader. Tasks included issuing and following up on circulars, health recommendations and reports of infection cases, while technical guidance for information technology services was also required. Some leaders had to allocate significant portions of their time and energy to working with technology. This is no longer the case.

Several studies point to how this managerial role dominated the work of school administrators during the closure (Contantia et al., 2021; Jones & Harris, 2020). During Covid-19, many school leaders spent time on so-called administrative management functions, such as tracking down and reporting cases of infection. Some leaders learned to use various administrative management tools during the shutdown, which they continued to use for coordination, surveying, and planning. As one leader said, ‘Coordination and management documents that we used for something completely different . . . I really took that to heart’.

### ***Symbolic Tasks***

The symbolic or culture-oriented approach was identified in the leaders who made particular use of rituals, myths, stories, and other cultural creations. In such cases, the school leaders were role models for the school’s other personnel. Such a function has been linked to the role of promoting hope, community and identity while instilling trust and courage in the school’s staff, pupils, and parents. During Covid-19, the school management’s cultural–symbolic role assumed prominence because the managers became extra-visible and central to operations. During crises, there is a tendency for a leader to become a unifying figure in whom one can trust and who can create psychological safety among employees, pupils, and parents (Edmundson, 2018). An example of this is that many school leaders welcomed students, parents, and teachers in the morning at the entrance to the school (Raae & Wiedemann, 2023). A few of the leaders continued with this practice. Other leaders consciously worked in the cultural dimension by developing new traditions, such as staff arrangements, and reconsidering the school’s primary values. For some school leaders, the Covid era showed that existing traditions and events needed to be reviewed. For some, this led to a feeling of ‘Having to reinvent everything’.

### ***Political Tasks***

The political approach is about trying to develop networks, create alliances and obtain resources for the school. School leaders in some countries and areas had to work devotedly to obtain financial and technological resources and involve local communities during the Covid era (Chatzipanagiotou & Katsarou, 2023; Gonzales et al., 2022). One could argue that the managers who became aware of communicating more precisely and effectively and involving staff in strategic considerations and choices embody this politically oriented approach.

### ***Human Resource Tasks***

The last role is personnel or human resource manager. Here, human, and relational considerations have a high priority in relation to looking after the interests of the organisation in the best possible way. Especially in Denmark, this tradition has stood strong. This role involves considering and finding solutions to the problems of worried teachers, parents and students and possibly even getting involved in the families’ challenges.

Many principals reported an increased focus on developing well-being, relationships, and social communities in the student group – and also, in some cases, among the teachers. This was a challenging issue during the Covid period, but progress was made towards completing these tasks. There seemed to be a difference here between smaller and larger schools, as the challenge seemed most significant in the larger schools. For some school leaders, this was a significant priority area and strategic task. As one school principal said, ‘My most important task as a school leader is to create some kind of cohesion and meaning in relation to going to school and being at school so that well-being can improve. It is not good for various reasons. If the adults are not doing well, the pupils will often have the same experience’.

Harris and Jones (2022; Tahir et al., 2024) note that one of the ways school leaders support their staff is by taking on relational or emotional duties that go beyond their normal management approaches. Based on a review of studies of school leaders’ experiences with Covid-19, Chatzipanagiotou and Katsarou (2023) point out that many leaders extended their worry and concern for individuals during the pandemic to the whole of school life afterwards, frequently mentioning initiatives designed to improve the well-being of students and teachers.

### **Danish Principals’ Experiences in an International Context**

It is useful to interpret Danish experiences with school management in the context of general international experiences with school management during Covid-19. Jones and Harris (2022) conclude that a school management approach has developed since Covid that is notable for being distributed, digital and network oriented.

Based on a systematic review of studies that have dealt with Covid-19 and school management, Chatzipanagiotou and Katsarou (2023) argue that the management style that was the most effective in dealing with the shutdown was distributed, collegial and collaborative. The collaborative management style captures how school leaders have worked to create shared responsibility and team spirit among school employees to deal with the many challenges of the Covid-19 era.

There is no doubt that digital communication has assumed a more central role in Danish schools, and Jones and Harris (2022) confirm that this is the case internationally. We recall, for example, how the Danish school leaders reported a much more frequent use of digital conferencing. Experiences with distributed management could also be identified but were full of contradictions because the pandemic was characterised by both central and decentralised management initiatives. It was common for principals to have prioritised management distribution, but several leaders also said that they almost had to teach the teachers to take responsibility and act independently, as central management was dominant during the cycle of openings and closings.

The tendency to emphasise a collegial and collaborative management style is clear in the Danish context. Many school leaders emphasised the singular community and special team spirit that characterised the staff group during the cycle of openings and closings. As a school principal noted, 'We had to pull together. We could solve some crazy tasks together'. The fact that, at the same time, there are currently examples of dissatisfaction and several conflicts among teachers at some schools is evidence that this special collaborative approach has not necessarily continued everywhere since the Covid-19 period.

In our data, the principals did not emphasise that school management appears more network oriented than before because of Covid-19. This may be because the political leadership role is significantly less important in the Danish context than in other countries. However, school leaders who stated that new and flexible digital forms of meeting had emerged in administrative meetings, conversation with other school leaders and internally at individual schools exemplify that trend.

### **Divergent experiences among school leaders**

The analysis above adhered closely to the statements in the interviews. What follows does not have this close link to the empirical data. Instead, questions about how we should understand the preceding results are raised. How can it be that some school leaders said they had not truly learned anything, seemed focused on getting back to everyday life, and therefore might not pay much attention to leadership experiences during the crisis, while others pointed out that the crisis changed everything? How is it that some of the principals excitedly highlighted the creative solutions that their teachers devised and their experience of being lifted in a very clear way, while others did not find that the crisis had a major impact on educational or managerial practice? How can we understand these apparently divergent experiences?

In what follows, I do not seek to explain the variation based on local differences or individual conditions. Instead, I seek to discuss the relationship as a theoretical structure that can be applied to the interviewed group of school leaders. In this discussion, institutional–sociological theory and concepts of institutionalisation will be useful.

Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1976) defined institutionalisation in terms of interactions that are repeated as they are internalised. They form certain patterns and become recognised as sensible ways of acting, thinking and experiencing. Such patterns are building blocks in the social structure, the authors claim. At the same time, the patterns are part of a duality, as they are at once fixed and changing. Fixed because the fact that the institutionalised must be recognisable is the prerequisite for it to be confirmed in a given social context. Constantly changing because the patterns consist of social practices that are continuously adapted in small ways as new experiences are had. A fundamental point for Berger and Luckmann is thus that, although the institutional world may appear to 'face people' as objective and unchanging, it is created and maintained by people and therefore changes with them. Not all institutionalisation is explicit. Some is certainly expressed through adopted laws and procedures, while other behaviour-directing institutionalisation is bodily or consciously embedded as something we readily take for granted – a kind of tacit knowledge.

Accordingly, some currents in institutional theory emphasise how institutions resist change and generally remain more or less the same despite intentions to reform. Analyses of major political reforms since the end of the 20th century have given rise to institutional theory focused on the inertia of systems. Even if it seems to be empirically confirmed, it can also lead people to miss that even the sluggish systems are changing. This relationship is our focus in what follows.

### **‘Nothing Has Happened’**

John W. Meyer stated that educational institutions seem to be characterised by conformity rather than innovation because the structure that keeps the school in place is the expectations directed at it from the sociality in which the school is embedded (Meyer, 1980). These are expectations about what is important to learn, how good teaching takes place and so on; what seems meaningful in the social environment is locally legitimate to practice. Institutionalisation gives actors the opportunity to orient themselves in the world and adopt a perspective but at the same time implies path dependence: you let yourself be led without further ado by the paths you have trod before. This relationship can shed light on parts of the empirical analysis.

When school leaders in the interviews could not come up with examples of decisive changes since the Covid-19 crisis, it was perhaps because their focus was on the school having to get back on track and resume normal processes. But this means, conversely, that the unprecedented experiences during the crisis appeared from a distance as exotic and therefore unserious.

### **‘The Crisis Has Changed Everything’**

In the interviews, school leaders described how the crisis had a decisive impact on them as leaders and on the school in general. A recurring experience was that, when it really mattered, the schools were up to the task. We saw how outdoor areas were integrated into new ways of teaching within a short time, scheduling was rearranged so that existing and suddenly arising needs were met, and more stable relationships between children and adults were allowed room to develop. For some managers, experiences of ‘the alternative’ from the crisis period were superimposed on current daily challenges, which made past experiences seem less relevant. For others, such experiences indicated that everyday life could always be different, which means that one must prepare to adapt to unforeseen events.

So, although large parts of the empirical data can be understood from the perspective of path dependence – how an institutionalised everyday life, with its laws and routines, its incorporated norms and ‘silent assumptions’ (Scott, 2008), yearns for alternative experiences and retrospectively assigns them the status of exceptions – may this not blind us to elements in the material that may point to alternative experiences? This is something that later institutional–theoretical currents highlight (e.g. Weick & Quinn, 1999): because people are constantly finding new ways of mastering everyday tasks and thereby changing their practices, institutions are subject to a complex duality of freezing and thawing. Changes happen, but in small (incremental) ways, which means that we do not experience the loss of security and orientation that institutionalisation creates. In addition, according to historical institutional theory, crisis situations and the ‘new normal’ they impose increase people’s tolerance of uncertainty and enable them to act in novel ways despite the loss of security (Campbell & Pedersen, 2001; Thelen, 2003).

These theoretical considerations allow us to understand the variation, and perhaps even the contradictions, in the empirical material. It is simultaneously possible to find accounts that point to unchanged schools and management where experiences of the crisis retrospectively appear a bit exotic and perhaps not so viable anymore, while others insist that the crisis showed how things were possible that previously did not seem conceivable, and that organisational growth and change has taken place.

From an organisational learning perspective, one could draw on Argyris’s notions of single- and double-loop learning. Single loop learning refers to minor more superficial changes, while double loop learning refers to more fundamental changes in school culture and organization.

The notions will be used as analytical tools to discuss changes in schools resulting from Covid-19 (Argyris, 1999).

At some schools, only superficial changes were found, while at others, more fundamental changes were made. Where one can perhaps identify double-loop changes taking place in a broader way is in the recognition of how important relationships and well-being are and the central role the school plays in their development. Schools play a decisive part in fostering pupils' well-being, and school leaders have learned that they must pay more attention to this role. In the terms of Bolmann and Deal (2017), they must play a symbolic and human-resource-oriented role.

## **Conclusion**

This article's analysis shows that the school leaders' experiences with the Covid crisis were divided. For some, we are now back to the old ways; for others, a new layer of experience has been added to the old. There have been expressions of wonder both that one can apparently learn so little from so much and that the crisis has yielded new insights with decisive consequences.

Several experiences of a more limited nature can be identified because of the practices that emerged from the crisis and were put into action without further ado. These concerned, for instance, experiences with digital technology, outdoor school, and administrative tools. Primarily, it seems that experiences were had at a more superficial or single-loop level.

However, other interviews reported experiences of a more fundamental and disruptive character. This included stories about the importance that school, everyday school life and their organisation has for relationships between children, relationships between children and adults, and both parties' well-being. We could also highlight the reports about the didactic imagination that the teachers displayed under the constraints of the crisis. These are experiences that could be translated into more lasting changes in schools, and although their importance for some leaders has diminished since the crisis, they may inform other leaders' accounts of collegial and collaborative strength. 'We could do some crazy things together', as one leader put it, indicating that they were able to deal with the challenges of everyday life in a crisis together.

It is this layer of experience that is important. This is an experience that constitutes the ground for the development of organisational capacity, i.e. the ability of an action network (Charniawska, 2005) to continuously face and deal with disturbances in new ways.

The difficult question remains whether such experiences can be broadly anchored in school practice or whether they appear too fragile in the light of everyday institutional life. 'Culture eats strategy for breakfast', as the management guru Peter Drückner has often been quoted as saying. In other words, are the visionary and utopian experiences of busyness superimposed on new and urgent tasks that must be solved to get the 'business running', or can spaces be organised around them that make it possible to maintain and develop them and create more fundamental changes in school and school leadership?

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