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# Chapter 14

## Principals' Perceptions of Their Work During the COVID-19 Pandemic



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**Abstract** The present study aimed to describe school principals' perceptions of the changes and challenges they faced during the COVID-19 pandemic and what kinds of support and new competences they found important for managing their work. Fifty-five Finnish principals completed an online questionnaire that included open-ended questions. Qualitative content analysis was used to analyze the data. The results showed that principals experienced changes mainly in their workload, in the nature of their work, and at an individual level, such as in family-work balance and increased motivation. Information and communication technology skills were mentioned most often as new skills needed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, though some principals argued that no new skills were needed. Principals highly valued support from the school community through discussions, flexibility, and teamwork, as well as clear instructions and guidelines from the upper-level administration. The results help in planning crisis leadership to ensure the continuity of high-quality education during exceptional circumstances. As other educational crises may follow the COVID-19 pandemic and crisis and change management are essential skills for principals, these skills should be taken into account when revising the pre- and in-service training curricula.

**Keywords** School principals · Crisis leadership · Remote work · COVID-19 · Support · Competences

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## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused numerous social challenges, including worldwide economic hazards, deteriorations in people's well-being, and impacts on education. School systems around the world have had to adapt their ways of working to address various difficulties (Biag et al., 2021; Harris, 2020; Parveen et al., 2022). As the pandemic spread rapidly across the globe, there was an urgent need for school staff to cope with new demands and challenges to maintain education for students in exceptional circumstances. Many governments **ordered** schools to close totally or partly, requiring students and teachers to switch to remote learning almost overnight (Collie, 2021; Harris & Jones, 2020). Drawing from the conclusions of Biag et al. (2021), we can be sure that other educational crises will follow the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, we need to learn from the current situation to prepare for new challenges and ensure high-quality education in the future. School principals play an important role in planning, overseeing, and supporting these processes.

The global pandemic has created an unprecedented challenge, especially for school leaders (McLeod & Dulsky, 2021) who play a key role as mediators between national educational authorities and school staff. School leaders are positioned as the pinch point in the system, being reliant on guidance about COVID-19 responses, processes, procedures, and protocols from the upper administration (Harris & Jones, 2020). According to Thornton (2021), the challenges school leaders faced during the pandemic included preparing teachers and students for remote learning for an unknown length of time, supporting the well-being of students and staff, and communicating clearly and compassionately to all stakeholder groups. Salmela-Aro et al. (2020) found that organizing education during remote learning in spring 2020 decreased school principals' job engagement. Worldwide, principals' already heavy workloads have increased with the need to create new remote leadership practices and orchestrate teachers' new and diverse learning environments (Biag et al., 2021; Harris & Jones, 2020).

Although principals are used to handling smaller crises, most school leaders have never dealt with crises of this scale and scope for as long as this COVID-19 pandemic (McLeod & Dulsky, 2021). Thornton (2021) described five leadership practices undertaken by principals in crisis leadership: preparing, addressing well-being, communicating effectively, leading collaboratively, and taking opportunities to frame the discussion. She also indicated that crisis leadership demands agility, a willingness to embrace change, and a mindset of possibilities to resolve crises and position the organization for an improved future state (Thornton, 2021). Fernandez and Shaw (2020) suggested that to address possible future crises, school leaders should take advantage of opportunities to learn and evolve in the current one. Taking into account the unparalleled nature of the current crisis, it is important to understand how to support school principals in leading schools through immediate crisis and through change in the long term. In the current study, "principal" refers to a leader of a comprehensive school providing mandatory education for Grades 1–9, after which students enter secondary-level education.

The main purpose of this study was to provide knowledge about principals' work-related experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. We also investigated the kinds of new competences and support principals perceived as necessary during the

crisis. The results of the study provide important insights into factors that should be considered in supporting principals and preparing them for possible future crises.

### *School Leadership During the Crisis*

In a school context, a crisis can be regarded as any urgent situation that requires school leaders to take fast and decisive action (Smith & Riley, 2012). Boin et al. (2010) defined crisis management as the sum of activities aimed at minimizing a crisis's impact. The effectiveness of crisis management can be assessed in relation to taking action, making sure the task is completed and fulfilling a symbolic need for direction and guidance (Boin et al., 2010). The executive tasks of crisis management are early recognition, sensemaking, making critical decisions, orchestrating vertical and horizontal coordination, coupling and decoupling, meaning making, communicating, rendering accountability, learning, and enhancing resilience (Boin et al., 2010). These tasks are hard to accomplish in the best of circumstances, and the dynamics of crises make them even harder (Boin & Renaud, 2013). According to McLeod and Dulsky (2021), during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, some key challenges for school leaders were the unique nature of the crisis (i.e., most school organizations had not experienced a pandemic before), the rapid timeline, and the accompanying uncertainty that hindered effective responses. Leaders' experience did not matter significantly when the COVID-19 crisis had few "knowable components" (McLeod & Dulsky, 2021, p. 2).

In their systematic literature review, Parveen et al. (2022) showed that the most significant challenges influencing school activities during the COVID-19 pandemic were related to well-being (self-care, safety issues, and emotional and mental health), distributed leadership, digital gaps, the cybersecurity of online education, and ensuring equity, learning continuity, and quality of education. Boin and Renaud (2013) observed that joint sensemaking is particularly important to effective crisis management; if decision-makers do not have a shared and accurate picture of the situation, they cannot make informed decisions and communicate effectively with partners, politicians, and the public (Boin & Renaud, 2013). Unfortunately, for many school leaders during the first months of the pandemic, the administrators and policy-makers often lacked an accurate picture of what was occurring and did not share what they knew with others in ways that enabled effective leadership responses and partnerships (McLeod & Dulsky, 2021).

Effective communication is another consistent element of crisis leadership, and numerous scholars (Marsen, 2020; McLeod & Dulsky, 2021; Thornton, 2021) have emphasized the leader's role in communicating with both internal and external audiences. Marsen (2020) noted that crisis communication must deal with both issue management during the crisis and reputation management after the crisis. Effective communication builds trust and helps create shared understanding and commitments across stakeholders (Lucero et al., 2009).

Generally, school leadership involves positioning the school for the future and supporting and empowering staff and students in the pursuit of teaching and learning excellence (Smith & Riley, 2012). Based on a meta-analysis conducted before the

COVID-19 pandemic by Smith and Riley (2012), the leadership attributes and skills required of school leaders in times of crisis are different in nature from those generally required as part of the “normal” school environment. In its primary focus, leadership in times of crisis is neither developmental nor future oriented but concerns managing events, emotions, and consequences in the immediate present in ways that minimize personal and organizational harm within the school community (Smith & Riley, 2012). In their study on school leaders perspectives toward their leadership practices during COVID-19 pandemic, Arar et al. (2021) found that the principals reported discovering or developing new digital skills that enriched their repertoire while leading in the digital era.

According to Harris and Jones (2020), crisis and change management are now essential skills for school leaders. They argued that running an effective school in disruptive times requires more than routine problem-solving or occasional firefighting. Instead, all school leaders should be engaged in constant crisis and change management, which requires support and collaboration from all staff (Harris & Jones, 2020). As a consequence of the high-speed changes caused by the pandemic, a high degree of trust among principal and teachers is needed to ensure that issues are addressed collectively as they arise (Harris & Jones, 2020).

Previous research has shown that key attributes for effective crisis leadership include the following: assessment of the situation and decision-making that involve sensemaking and skill synthesis (Wooten & James, 2008); decisive decision-making under pressure (Smith & Riley, 2010, 2012; Wooten & James, 2008); flexibility and lateral thinking (Smith & Riley, 2012); and, to a reasonable extent, risk taking (Wooten & James, 2008). During the crisis, communication with different stakeholders should also be effective (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020; Thornton, 2021; Wooten & James, 2008), providing certainty and engendering hope with empathy and respect (Harris & Jones, 2020; Smith & Riley, 2012). Boin et al. (2010) found effective crisis leadership to involve recognizing emerging threats, initiating efforts to mitigate the threats, and dealing with their consequences, as well as reestablishing a sense of normality once the acute crisis period has passed (e.g., Daniel, 2020). In addition to challenges, researchers have recognized that crises provide opportunities for learning and development. As Smith and Riley (2012) stated, crises can create major opportunities for a school by giving it a chance to refocus, reenergize, and try new ideas.

## Remote Leadership

Values and purpose, combined with intrapersonal and interpersonal knowledge, have been identified as central to effective leadership (Harris, 2020). The same applies to successful school leadership in remote settings, in which principals are required to lead individuals they rarely see (Daniel, 2020). While Kelley and Kelloway (2012) noted that leading virtually might not be as interactive and effective as in face-to-face situations, Contreras et al. (2020) proposed that remote leadership can be advantageous for not only companies' productivity but also the environment and people working there. However, to thrive in remote work environments, managers must adjust the companies' structures to make them less hierarchical and develop new

abilities to establish strong and trusting relationships with their employees while retaining genuine concern for their employees' well-being (Contreras et al., 2020). Harris (2020) suggested that in times of challenge, school leaders need to establish and sustain a collaborative culture involving connected networks among people. Fernandez and Shaw (2020) found that educational leaders' ability to establish a culture of trust, collaboration, and shared leadership prior to a crisis will more significantly influence institutions' ability to withstand times of crisis. According to Smith and Riley (2010), the question of how to develop appropriate crisis attributes and skills for both present and future leaders has not been addressed in the literature. Moreover, the existing literature on crisis leadership concentrates mainly on crises triggered by natural hazards, such as Hurricane Katrina (Boin et al., 2010), earthquakes (Much, 2015), or human interventions (Katsiyannis et al., 2018) rather than on crisis similar to the one caused by COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite growing awareness of the nature of principals' work, relatively little is known about how school principals experience their work (for exceptions, see Bellemans & Devos, 2021; Elomaa et al., 2021; Mahfouz, 2020), particularly during crises (for exceptions, see Arar et al., 2021; Thornton, 2021). As the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic is unique in its prolonged nature and breadth, it is important to record principals' perceptions of the kinds of challenges they have been facing during the current crisis and the kinds of support they perceive as necessary to assist them during the crisis and prepare them for future crises through in- and pre-service training.

## **Aim of the Current Study**

The present study first describes the principals' perceptions of the changes and challenges they faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. It then elaborates on the support for leadership and competences they perceive as needed to manage their work. The specific research questions are as follows:

1. How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected principals' work?
2. Which new competences did principals need to manage their work during the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. What supportive elements did principals need for their leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic?

## **Methodology**

### ***Data and Participants***

The current study is part of a larger project investigating teachers', students', and principals' well-being and related factors (TESSI; Lerkkanen & Pakarinen, 2016–2022). The study was approved by the university's Committee of Ethics. The participants of the present study were 55 principals from 12 Central Finland

municipalities. All the principals of comprehensive schools (delivering compulsory basic education to students in Grades 1–9) in those municipalities were asked to participate in the study. All participants filled out an informed consent form. The participants' ages ranged from 33 to 66 years (mean [ $M$ ] = 51.3 years, standard deviation [ $SD$ ] = 7.7). Their working experience as principals varied from 0.5 to 30 years ( $M$  = 12.2 years,  $SD$  = 9, missing four). Of all 55 participants, 5 did not have a teaching obligation (one missing), and the number of teaching hours ranged from 1 to 27 per week ( $M$  = 13.2 hours,  $SD$  = 8.5, missing six). School sizes ranged from 20 to 1100 students ( $M$  = 373 students,  $SD$  = 279), and the number of staff members in each school ranged from 1 to 151 persons ( $M$  = 37 persons,  $SD$  = 33). Overall, 3 participants reported leading 3 schools, 10 reported leading 2 schools, and 42 participants reported leading 1 school. The participants were assigned random ID numbers from 1 to 55 to ensure confidentiality.

Of all 55 participants, 33 worked remotely to some extent at the time of data collection in spring 2020. The proportion of remote work in the participants' total working time varied from 10% to 100% ( $M$  = 60.8,  $SD$  = 32.1). Before the COVID-19 pandemic, 33 participants already worked remotely as part of their regular work arrangements, with the proportion of remote work varying from 1% to 35% ( $M$  = 10.5,  $SD$  = 8.7).

## ***Procedure***

The principals were asked to complete an online questionnaire in spring 2020 during the school closure due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The questionnaire included the following three open-ended questions: (1) What kind of support do you feel you need for your leadership at the moment? (2) How has the ongoing COVID-19 situation/pandemic affected your work? (3) What new competence has the COVID-19 situation required of you? The responses varied from very brief descriptions of 1 to 5 words to answers of more than 100 words.

## ***Analysis***

The present study was conducted using inductive reasoning and data-driven content analysis (Patton, 2015). Initially, the first author performed the analysis independently, after which all the authors discussed the analysis. During the discussion, possible findings that needed to be changed were highlighted. Open coding was used to remain receptive to the data and to identify concepts and themes for categorization (Patton, 2015). The data were first organized into broad themes (Williams & Moser, 2019). First, the principals' answers to open-ended questions were coded for emergent descriptions. Second, repeated codes were identified and drawn together to develop subthemes (Blair, 2015). This process led to the development of three main themes concerning the ongoing COVID-19 situation's effect on

the principals' work, six main themes concerning new competences needed, and eight main themes on the support needed for leadership. Third, the existing literature was examined. Because the data analysis results did not support any existing conceptualization, results, and/or theories, the analysis of support needs, the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on principals' work, and the new necessary competences remained inductive (see Tables 14.1, 14.2, and 14.3 for the results and examples of the analysis processes). The themes and subthemes that emerged are presented and further discussed in the results section below. Throughout the analysis, we were particularly careful not to overinterpret the principals' very brief self-reports.

## Results

### *Effect of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Principals' Work*

The study's first aim was to discover how principals experienced the COVID-19 pandemic as affecting their work. Thus, the principals' self-reported descriptions were divided into three main themes, which were then divided into subthemes based on the patterns emerging from the data (Patton, 2015). These themes are as follows: (1) changes in workload, which was divided into increased workload in general, constant planning and making new arrangements, hurry, extended working hours, and decreased workload; (2) changes in the nature of the work, which was divided into changed work description in general, unpredictability, and remote learning; and (3) individual level, which was divided into increased motivation, family-work balance, and no significant changes (see Table 14.1).

#### Changes in Workload

Thirty-four out of 67 principals reported changes in their workloads. Participants described a generally increased workload. For example, P4 said, "After a normally already full work description, there is a corona [COVID-19] bonus that has undermined the basic tasks." Under the same subtheme, another principal described how the increased workload influenced their well-being: "[The COVID-19 pandemic] has significantly increased the workload and, through it, also affected my/one's own coping" (P21). The second most-mentioned subtheme under this theme was planning and making new arrangements, such as continuous arrangements and making rapid changes in plans on a tight schedule. As P51 explained, "I am overworked. I need to react quickly to changing situations without ready-made operating models—developing a new model, organizing, and implementing it on a tight schedule." Principals' working hours were extended, as one principal described: "Working hours have stretched—easily up to 12 hours per day. Remote work takes



**Table 14.1** The ongoing COVID-19 situation's effect on work (N = 51)

Verbatim text	Meaning	Subtheme	Main theme	Mentioned N (%)
<i>After a normally already full work description, there is a corona [COVID-19] bonus that has undermined basic tasks. As a new principal, nothing follows a routine during the first year, and leading a large unit is very challenging</i>	Extra workload Stretching workdays Extra time-consuming tasks	Increased workload in general (n = 19)	<b>Changes in workload</b>	<b>34 (67)</b>
<i>I am overworked. There is a need to react quickly to changing situations, without ready-made operating models. Developing new practices, organization, and implementation and a tight schedule</i>	Continuous arrangements Rapid changes in plans New developments	Planning and making new arrangements (n = 20)		
<i>Hurry has increased, and normal spring tasks have shifted to summer</i>	Rush and urgent tasks	Hurry (n = 5)	<b>Changes in the nature of work</b>	<b>14 (27)</b>
<i>Working days have extending—easily stretch up to 12 hours per day. Remote work takes time in a different way</i>	Stretched working days Working on weekends	Extended working hours (n = 6)		
<i>There is no need for teaching or hiring deputies while working remotely. More relaxed</i>	A calmer work situation	Decreased workload (n = 2)		
<i>Work description changed completely in a couple of days. Although working remotely has also been part of the job description in the past (evening and weekend work at home), its nature was completely different from now</i>	The nature of the work has changed Remote work	Changed work description in general (n = 8)	<b>Individual level</b>	<b>5 (10)</b>
<i>The whole spring went new. And now we think about the time after 14.5, and we are afraid that the ambiguity will continue in August</i>	Hard to prevent Ambiguity	Unpredictability (n = 4)		
<i>Most of the contact teaching has been shifting to distance teaching and learning</i>	Transition from face-to-face to remote learning	Remote learning (n = 3)	<b>Individual level</b>	<b>5 (10)</b>
<i>I am more motivated now</i>		Increased motivation (n = 1)		
<i>Work is constantly interrupted when three children and a wife are also at home. There is a lot of staring at the screen and calling. There is enough to organize in changing situations</i>	Working at home while other family members are also there	Family-work balance (n = 2)		
<i>In the end, surprisingly little, but of course there have been new things to think about</i>		No significant change (n = 2)		

**Table 14.2** New competences needed ( $N = 49$ )

Verbatim text	Meaning	Subtheme	Main theme	Mentioned $N$ (%)
<i>Using different platforms. Transforming teaching online. Online meeting techniques</i>	ICT skills Using new programs	ICT skill in general ( $n = 27$ )	<b>ICT skills</b>	33 (67)
<i>Meeting-type work via Teams and Meet was basically familiar but increased and diversified explosively</i>	Organizing online meetings Using Teams and Skype	Online meetings ( $n = 7$ )		
<i>Continuous change management</i>	Crisis and change management Remote management Fast reaction and decision-making	Crisis and change management ( $n = 5$ )	<b>Management skills</b>	9 (18)
<i>Simultaneous handling of many things</i>	Multitasking Systematicity	Managing one's work ( $n = 5$ )		
<i>Better control over working remotely</i>	Working methods		<b>Skills to work remotely</b>	4 (8)
<i>Not exactly new skills. There is organization, clarification, and consultation with people</i>	Not experiencing new requirements		<b>Nothing</b>	4 (8)
<i>Reacting fast, rapid communication, resilience to change, and, on the other hand, the fact that one person cannot do everything</i>	Communication Guiding teachers		<b>Communication and cooperation skills</b>	3 (6)
<i>Virus action and infection prevention</i>	Healthcare Safety in general		<b>Safety issues</b>	2 (4)

time in a different way” (P6). Furthermore, principals reported an increased rush. For example, one reported, “Hurry has increased, normal spring tasks have shifted to summer” (P44). In contrast, two principals mentioned a decrease in workload, reporting that “stress has reduced, there is no hurry” (P12) and “there is no need for teaching or hiring deputies while working remotely. It is more relaxed” (P23).

### **Changes in the Nature of the Work**

Fourteen participants mentioned changes in the nature of their work, including changed work descriptions in general, unpredictability, and remote learning. Eight participants referred to changed general work descriptions, such as working remotely and on a computer. For example, one principal reported, “Work description changed completely in a couple of days. Although working remotely has been part of the job description in the past (evening and weekend work from home), its nature is completely different now” (P27). The principals’ work also became more unpredictable: “The whole spring went new, and at the moment, we think about the time after 14.5 [schools’ reopening], and we are afraid that the ambiguity continues in August [start of the new school year]” (P20). Another principal stated, “Most of the contact teaching has been shifting to distance teaching and learning, which has also changed the nature of principals’ work as remote leaders” (P3).

### **Individual Level**

Five principals mentioned elements belonging to the individual level, including family-work balance, increased motivation, and experiencing no significant changes in work. For example, one principal described the challenges of working from home: “Work is constantly interrupted when three children and my wife are also at home” (P13). Two principals reported no significant changes in their work, with one saying, “In the end, work has changed surprisingly little, but of course there are new issues to go through” (P33). One principal indicated that the current situation had increased their motivation to work.

### ***New Competences Needed***

The study’s second aim was to identify the kinds of new competences that principals experienced as needing when managing their work during the COVID-19 pandemic. The principals’ self-reports were organized into the following six main themes: (1) information and communication technology skills (ICT), which was divided into the subthemes of ICT skills in general and online meetings; (2) management skills, which was divided into the subthemes of crisis and change management and managing one’s work; (3) skills to work remotely; (4) communication and

cooperation skills; (5) safety issues; and (6) no new skills needed (see Table 14.2 for developed themes, subthemes, and the analysis process).

ICT skills were mentioned by 33 out of 49 participants. Under this theme, 27 principals referred to ICT skills in general, involving the use of ICT tools and different programs. For example, one principal listed new competences needed: “Using different platforms, transforming teaching from face-to-face to online, and online meeting techniques” (P48). Skills for organizing online meetings via Skype and Microsoft Teams were also mentioned by six other principals. One explained that “Teams and Skype meetings were not familiar. Needed to take control over those” (P13), and another (P37) added that although they were familiar with those communication channels before, the intensity and multiplicity of usage had increased.

The second most-mentioned theme under new competences needed was management skills (referred to by nine participants), consisting of crisis and change management skills, remote management, fast reaction and decision-making, and managing one’s work. Three other principals described remote management skills as needed to manage their work. Systematicity, setting boundaries, multitasking, and organizing one’s own work in general were also cited.

Four participants mentioned skills for working remotely, and three outlined communication and cooperation skills, such as “fast reactions and communication” (P49). Furthermore, safety issues—more precisely, “learning more about safety issues” (P18) and “action related to the virus and infection prevention” (P32)—were described as new skills needed. However, opposite positions occurred as one principal revealed not needing new skills: “Not exactly new skills. There is still organizing, clarifying, and communicating with people as before” (P5). Three other principals also agreed that there had been no need for new skills or competences due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

### ***Support Needed for Leadership***

The study’s third aim was to find out what supportive elements principals needed for their leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic. The principals’ descriptions were divided into eight main themes: (1) clear instructions and guidelines from the upper-level administration level; (2) support from the school community; (3) support from their supervisor; (4) general communication and cooperation; (5) resources; (6) support from other principals; (7) in-service training; and (8) no need for extra support (see Table 14.3).

Fourteen participants mentioned support from the school community, including discussion in the work community, joint effort, flexibility and teamwork, support from colleagues, exchange of ideas, and a school management team. For example, as two participants noted, “We are doing it together, so that is our great support to one another” (P29) and “Joint efforts of subordinates during exceptional times, flexibility, and teamwork” (P40). The principals also highly valued having a school

**Table 14.3** The support needed for leadership ( $N = 46$ )

Verbatim text	Meaning	Theme	Mentioned $N$ (%)
<i>Joint efforts of subordinates during exceptional times, flexibility, and teamwork. Mentoring, common lines, peer support, and exchange of ideas</i>	Discussion in work community, joint effort, flexibility, and teamwork Support from colleagues Exchange of ideas School management team	<b>School community</b>	14 (30)
<i>Upper administrative level/ Board of Education, etc. instructions and advice so that you do not have to think of all the impossible practical arrangements on a school-by-school basis</i>	Common and clear instructions Instructions and advice in general	<b>Clear instructions and guidelines from upper level</b>	13 (28)
<i>Meeting with a supervisor even occasionally, and opportunity to discuss and figure out solutions to challenging situations</i>	Discussions and conversations Support in general	<b>Support from supervisor</b>	9 (20)
<i>Perhaps the most thought-provoking support, another perspective on teacher transfer issues. Principals' work is quite lonely</i>	Open communication and discussions Help in making important decisions Help in reasoning	<b>General communication and cooperation</b>	6 (13)
<i>Insufficient resources are the biggest problem</i>	Resources in general Financial resources Time resources	<b>Resources</b>	5 (11)
<i>Exchange of thoughts and ideas with other school principals</i>	Principals' network Sharing Peer support	<b>Support from other principals</b>	3(7)
<i>I am in in-service training, and that is enough now</i>	In-service training in general	<b>In-service training</b>	2 (4)
<i>I don't feel a need for more support than before. There is enough support offered and available from supervisor</i>	Enough support available	<b>No need for extra support</b>	1 (2)

management team and considered it important to discuss, reflect on, and share tasks and responsibilities. For example, one principal wrote, “from other principal at the same comprehensive school” (P30), while another referred to “well-functioning teamwork with the deputy principal” (P24).

The need for clear instructions and guidelines from the upper-level administration was mentioned by 13 principals. More precisely, to manage their work during the crisis, the principals reported requiring clear and common instructions and guidelines, including “clear guidelines and common line” (P3) and “clear and

common policies, so one doesn't need to figure it all out alone" (P11). The principals seemed to perceive such support and clear guidelines from the upper-level administration as important as it allowed them to concentrate on leading their schools by guiding teachers, students, and guardians during this exceptional time. For instance, one principal said, "From upper administrative level, Board of Education, etc., instructions and advice so that you do not have to think about all impossible practical arrangements on a school-by-school basis" (P24).

Three participants mentioned support from supervisors. While some principals reported the need for supervisor support without clarifying its type or target, what they seemed to value most in such support was sharing ideas and figuring out possible solutions to problems together, with participants mentioning the need for "meetings with supervisor even sometimes to discuss and figure out solutions to challenging problems" (P17) and "thinking together with supervisor" (P45). However, one principal reported already having access to sufficient help: "I am not feeling the need for extra support. There is enough support available from [my] supervisor" (P12).

Six principals mentioned general communication and cooperation without clarifying the source of support. When talking about the support needed, one principal reported that "Principals' work is quite lonely" (P28). This theme also included the need for open communication and discussions and support in reasoning and making important decisions. Five participants reported needing resources, with three requiring financial resources and two time resources. Three principals cited collaboration with other principals, including an "exchange of thoughts and ideas with other school principals" (P43), as a form of support needed for their leadership.

## Discussion

The present study contributes to filling the research gap regarding school principals' perceptions of the changes and challenges they faced during the COVID-19 pandemic and the kinds of support and new competences they found important for managing the situation. The results may help in planning crisis leadership and ensuring high-quality education in exceptional circumstances.

### *Effect of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Principals' Work*

The results indicate that principals experienced changes in their workload due to an increased workload in general, planning and making new arrangements, hurry, and extended working hours. In contrast, some principals experienced a decrease in their workloads. Participants also reported changes in the nature of their work related to changed work descriptions in general, unpredictability, and the switch to remote learning. They also described the challenges of maintaining family-work balance while

working remotely. However, some principals did not experience any significant change in their work compared to before the COVID-19 pandemic and even reported an increased motivation for work. Thus, the results highlight the importance of accounting for individual experiences and needs in planning support and future practices.

A high workload is one of the most important causes of principals' occupational stress (Elomaa et al., 2021). Principals' workload and stress levels were already showing steady growth before the COVID-19 pandemic (Drago-Severson et al., 2018; Kumpulainen, 2017; The Trade Union of Education in Finland, 2020). In line with earlier research (Biag et al., 2021; Harris & Jones, 2020; Thornton, 2021), during the COVID-19 pandemic, principals' already-high quantitative workload increased because of changes and continuous arrangements related to new remote leadership practices and guiding teachers and students in diverse learning environments. Reid (2022) found that principals described feeling increased pressure to support various organizational stakeholders, such as teachers, students, and parents, as well as increased stress due to their lack of ability to provide concrete answers during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, some principals did not experience a significant change in their work, and some even felt that the situation had become more relaxed. This finding is congruent with a study by Pöysä et al. (2021), which found that one-third of teachers did not experience high levels of occupational stress due to the COVID-19 pandemic. These findings again highlight the individual nature of the experiences of teachers and principals, which should be taken into account when planning support or pre- and in-service training for them.

### *New Competences Needed*

Regarding the competences necessary to manage their work, principals listed ICT and management skills, skills to work remotely, communication and cooperation skills, and competences related to safety issues. Some principals felt that no new skills or competences were needed. Earlier research on the skills needed for school leaders during a crisis has mostly concentrated on wider skills and qualifications. For example, Thornton (2021) described five effective leadership practices: preparing for a crisis by detecting signals and responding appropriately, demonstrating empathy and prioritizing the well-being of all stakeholders, communicating frequently and effectively using a range of media, leading collaboratively by involving others in leadership and taking a community leadership role, and taking opportunities to learn at all stages of the crisis. The current research offers important insights into factors to be considered when planning support for principals. The principals appeared to most frequently mention ICT skills, which is not surprising considering the switch to online leading, teaching, and learning (Collie, 2021). Arar et al. (2021) similarly found that one of the barriers principals faced during the COVID-19 was a lack of digital skills, though the principals also reported developing new digital skills through remote work during the pandemic. Other researchers have also highlighted the importance of management, communication, and cooperation skills, with Harris (2020) characterizing crisis and change management as essential

skills for school leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic. Beauchamp et al. (2021) underscored the need to build and maintain new teaching methods and content and communication systems during the COVID-19 pandemic. Such developments may be beneficial in the future and not only in crisis situations.

### *Supportive Elements for Leadership*

Our findings showed that principals need support from the school community through discussions in the work community, joint effort, flexibility, and teamwork. Communication and cooperation in general, clear instructions and guidelines from the upper-level administration, and support from supervisors and other principals in the field were highly valued. Principals' support needs seem to be partly the same as before the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, Elomaa et al. (2021) found that principals need informational support resources (cooperation, instructions and guidelines, and relevant information), support from colleagues, supervisors, and other principals, and social support in general.

However, during the pandemic, clear instruction and guidelines from the upper-level administration seem to have been particularly crucial, while the lack of clear instructions caused a problem (Arar et al., 2021; McLeod & Dulsky, 2021). As McLeod and Dulsky (2021) observed, during the first months of the pandemic, administrators and policy-makers failed to share information with school leaders, which may have hindered effective leadership responses. According to Fotheringham et al. (2020), the quality, quantity, and frequency of top-down communication contribute to school leaders' stress, while horizontal communication and collaboration between school leaders and across school communities support leaders during rapid change. Arar et al. (2021) found that the decisions the Ministry of Education made about closing schools were communicated in ways that increased uncertainty; most principals were left to fend for themselves and did not have a clear idea of what to do or how to proceed. At the same time, school leaders may not fully understand the responsibilities and demands of strategic leaders in the upper-level administration (Boin & Renaud, 2013), suggesting the need for open-minded communication and cooperation between different stakeholders to support successful school leadership during a crisis. As Lucero et al. (2009) have outlined, effective communication builds trust and helps create a shared understanding and commitment among stakeholders. Giving attention to and managing processes of communication, collaboration, and change may also support school leadership by allowing better policy-making (Fotheringham et al. 2020).

Researchers are increasingly recognizing the importance and benefits of not only describing but also learning from a crisis. Boin et al. (2010) highlighted the unique opportunities that crises provide for reshaping and reforming organizations. Thornton (2021) described taking the opportunity to learn at all stages of a crisis as one of five effective leadership practices. This opportunity to learn is particularly relevant to school leadership. According to Harris and Jones (2020), most school



leadership preparation and training programs prior to the COVID-19 pandemic were likely to be out of step with the challenges school leaders face today. In many cases, the existing preparation and training programs, along with the leadership models they espouse, will require radical rethinking to remain relevant to aspiring and practicing school leaders (Harris & Jones, 2020). Because cooperation and support from the school community were highly valued by principals, distributed leadership, which refers to leadership exercised by multiple leaders who work collaboratively across organizational levels and boundaries (Azorín et al., 2019), might be beneficial for handling crises. Harris and Jones (2020) noted that distributed leadership became the default leadership response during the pandemic, requiring more school leaders at all levels to connect, share, learn, and network their way through the issues. Including crisis management in school leaders' preparation and in-service training programs might help support principals now and in the future. Furthermore, reflecting on the results of the current research, differences in principals' needs should be taken into account when planning support for them. Likewise, as noted by Arar et al. (2021), in future leadership development, professional communities should pay attention to different contexts and cultures while sharing best practices and designing new policies.

The results of this study suggest that different approaches to crisis management and leadership are needed, depending on the nature of the crisis. For example, Boin and Renaud (2013) observed that the first phase of crisis management is early recognition, while Thornton (2021) highlighted the importance of preparation, yet neither activity was possible for principals in the COVID-19 crisis because the pandemic struck so rapidly. However, despite the differences in the nature of crises or in comparison to the "normal" situation, the role of principals as responsible for successful school functioning remains the same, with one of their key concerns being to ensure high-quality education in all situations. Similar to the results of the current study, before the pandemic, Elomaa et al. (2021) found that principals needed support from the school community, supervisor, and upper-level administration. While the need for clear instructions and guidelines seems to have increased during the crisis, it should be noted some of the challenges that appeared during the crisis may have already existed before the crisis and become apparent because of the exceptional circumstances. Considering the possibility that other educational crises will follow the COVID-19 pandemic (Biag et al., 2021) and that crisis and change management are now essential skills for school leaders (Harris & Jones, 2020), these unearthed challenges should be taken into account when revising the curricula for pre- and in-service training.

### *Limitations*

The study has some limitations that should be carefully considered in future research. First, although the sample was large enough for qualitative analysis, the sample size was rather small. Further research with a larger sample is needed to gain

a fuller understanding of principals' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, the data were collected in Finland concerning the Finnish educational context, which might have an impact on the generalizability of the results. More comparative cross-country and cross-cultural research is necessary to address the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on principals' work worldwide. Different cultural and educational systems have different leadership systems and practices from which best practices can be learned. Moreover, the data were collected only once in the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. To gain a deeper understanding of crisis leadership, more longitudinal research should be conducted, particularly concerning the post-pandemic period.

## Conclusions

Principals play a key role in school functioning in rapidly changing crisis situations. Not surprisingly, the already-high workload of principals increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. The essence of their work changed due to remote learning, which required different new skills and competences. In carrying out their important role in society, educational systems, and schools, principals need clear instructions and guidelines from the upper-level administration, as well as support from their work community and other principals in the field. How principals experience their work is influenced by various external and internal factors; thus, their perceptions should be considered when planning support and effective pre- and in-service training for them. In learning from the COVID-19 crises, it is important to evaluate which new practices should remain and which former practices should be given up so we can be better prepared for future challenges.

## Appendixes

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