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SUSTAINING EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN CRISIS: PRINCIPALS' PRACTICES IN UKRAINE'S SCHOOLS AT WARTIME

Sustainability in education requires a comprehensive approach to school reform that fosters self-improvement, adaptability, and resilience to shocks such as war or economic collapse. This study focuses on how leadership practices contribute to sustainability in schools amidst socio-political and economic instability, specifically in the context of Ukraine. Drawing on Leithwood et al. (2008) and Wahlstrom et al. (2008), the study explores how school leadership can drive long-term improvements by embedding reforms directly into the school, transforming both teaching and learning practices and school culture. The research emphasizes the importance of principals in revealing the potential within their schools and utilizing leadership practices that promote collective efficacy develop faculty (pedagogical personnel) skills, and foster collaboration. The study further highlights the role of capacity building in supporting sustainable change, which allows schools to continuously improve student learning and adapt to new demands. The findings suggest that successful leadership requires a focus on vision-setting, fostering professional development, redesigning organizational structures, and managing instructional programs effectively. The study calls for reforms that go beyond short-term performance measures, urging a more long-term approach to education system improvement that can withstand external challenges.

The qualitative study uses semi-structured interviews with 7 school principals from various regions in Ukraine. The research explores their leadership strategies, challenges, and approaches to fostering sustainability within their schools during times of crisis and finding answers to the research questions: 1) How do principals perceive their role in fostering sustainability and long-term improvement in schools amidst socio-political and economic instability in Ukraine?; 2) What leadership practices contribute to the sustainability of schools during periods of crisis, particularly in conflict war-affected areas?

The findings reveal that effective school leadership in Ukraine is focused on building the capacity of both individual educators and the entire school community. Key leadership practices include setting a clear vision, developing professional capacity, fostering collaboration, and managing instructional programs. Principals also emphasized the importance of community engagement and resilience in ensuring the sustainability of educational reforms. Despite the challenges posed by instability, principals who adopted these practices were able to maintain focus on long-term goals, ensuring that their schools continued to improve and adapt in the face of adversity. The findings underscore that leadership practices that promote capacity building and collective efficacy are essential to creating a sustainable education system capable of weathering external shocks.

Key words: *educational leadership, school principals, crisis management, Ukraine schools, organizational resilience.*

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СТАЛЕ ОСВІТНЄ ЛІДЕРСТВО В КРИЗОВИХ УМОВАХ: РОЛІ ДИРЕКТОРІВ ШІКІЛ В УКРАЇНІ ПІД ЧАС ВІЙНИ

Сталий розвиток в освіті вимагає комплексного підходу до реформування шкіл, який сприяє самовдосконаленню, адаптивності та стійкості до потрясінь, таких як війна чи економічний колапс. Це дослідження зосереджується на тому, як лідерство сприяє сталому розвитку шкіл в умовах соціально-політичної та економічної нестабільності, зокрема в контексті України. Спираючись на роботи Leithwood et al. (2008) та Wahlstrom et al. (2008), дослідження вивчає, як керівники шкіл можуть сприяти довгостроковим покращенням, впроваджуючи реформи безпосередньо в школі, трансформуючи як методи викладання та навчання, так і шкільну культуру. Дослідження підкреслює важливість ролі директорів шкіл у виявленні потенціалу в школах та використанні практик лідерства, що сприяють колективній ефективності, розвитку навичок вчителів та співпраці. Дослідження також розкриває роль розвитку людського потенціалу у підтримці стійких змін, які дозволяють школам постійно покращувати навчання учнів та адаптуватися до нових вимог. Результати дослідження свідчать, що успішне керівництво має зосередитися на формуванні візії, сприянні професійному розвитку, реформуванні організаційних структур та ефективному управлінні навчальними програмами. Дослідження рекомендує реформи, що виходять за межі короткострокових показників ефективності, та запровадження більш довгострокового підходу до модернізації освітньої системи, здатного протистояти зовнішнім викликам.

В рамках якісного дослідження було проведено інтерв'ю з 7 директорами шкіл з різних регіонів України. Дослідження аналізує лідерські стратегії, виклики та підходи до сприяння сталому розвитку шкіл у період кризи та дає відповіді на такі питання: 1) Як директори сприймають свою роль у сприянні сталому розвитку та довгостроковому вдосконаленню шкіл в умовах соціально-політичної та економічної нестабільності в Україні?; 2) Які практики лідерства сприяють сталому розвитку шкіл у кризові періоди, особливо в районах, що постраждали від війни?

Результати дослідження показують, що ефективне керівництво школами в Україні зосереджене на розвитку потенціалу як кожного окремого вчителя, так і всієї шкільної спільноти. Ключові практики лідерства включають визначення чіткої візії, розвиток професійного потенціалу, сприяння співпраці та управління навчальними програмами. Директори шкіл підкреслили також важливість залучення громади та її стійкості для забезпечення сталого розвитку освітніх реформ. Незважаючи на виклики, пов'язані з нестабільністю, директори шкіл, які застосовували ці практики, змогли зосередитися на довгострокових цілях, забезпечивши подальше вдосконалення та адаптацію своїх шкіл в умовах несприятливих обставин. Результати дослідження підкреслюють, що лідерство, яке сприяє розвитку потенціалу та колективній ефективності, є необхідною умовою для створення стійкої системи освіти, здатної протистояти зовнішнім потрясінням.

Ключові слова: освітнє лідерство, директори шкіл, управління кризовими ситуаціями, школи України, управлінська стійкість.

Introduction. Contemporary school leadership is thus widely recognized as one of the most crucial factors influencing school effectiveness and serving as a driver of change and strategic innovation through the formulation of a clear vision, specific goals, and actionable plans for implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. Nevertheless, the disruption in the provision of educational services caused by the war in Ukraine has exposed significant gaps in school leadership theory,

particularly regarding the acquisition and application of crisis management skills by many principals to swiftly adapt to a radically altered reality and effectively address emerging challenges at both instructional and organizational levels. While crisis management has been extensively theorized and successfully applied in other contexts, it still lacks sustained attention within the field of educational leadership, as evidenced by the limited scope of empirical research in this domain.

The recent data show that the infrastructure of schools and kindergartens in Ukraine has suffered immensely, with over 2,600 institutions either damaged or destroyed. More than 200 schools have been completely ruined, while over 1,600 have sustained significant damage. This means that one in eight schools across the country has been directly affected by the war. The scale of destruction reflects not only the physical toll on educational buildings but also the profound disruption to the teaching and learning process. Most alarmingly, around 7 million children in Ukraine have been impacted – facing interrupted schooling, displacement, and severe psychological trauma (MOE, 2024).

In such circumstances, the need for sustainable educational leadership becomes particularly urgent. In our study, we define sustainable leadership in crisis situations as the ability of school principals to maintain stability, remain resilient, and adapt to changing conditions over time. This type of leadership emphasizes thoughtful decision-making aimed at sustaining the learning process, offering consistent support to teachers and students, and cultivating a culture of collaboration and innovation even in the face of disruption. Building on studies that highlight the pivotal role of leadership in effectively managing educational challenges, we argue that sustainability in education, especially under conditions of war, requires a robust and adaptable approach capable of driving reforms and securing continuity.

The role of principals is central to fostering resilience and driving long-term improvement within Ukraine's education system, as their leadership practices directly influence whether schools can withstand external shocks while maintaining the quality of education. Beyond administrative management and ensuring safety, principals are tasked with developing and implementing innovative initiatives that promote continuous growth and advancement. Key aspects of their contribution include supporting school resilience by building systems that enable adaptation while sustaining educational standards, introducing innovative leadership practices that drive development despite adversity, encouraging community engagement through schools' participation in local volunteer projects to strengthen school–community relations, and fostering social responsibility by implementing volunteer programs that cultivate students' civic engagement, personal growth, and collective responsibility (Ertem, 2024).

This gap underscores the relevance of our study, which seeks to examine how school leaders in Ukraine exercise sustainable leadership in the face of war, by identifying the strategies, practices, and competencies that enable principals to foster resilience and adaptability.

Theoretical framework and research methods.

The concept of the crisis management life cycle has been widely discussed in the literature, with early models providing the foundation for contemporary frameworks in both organizational and educational contexts. One of the earliest and most influential contributions was offered by Fink (1986) who conceptualized crisis as a dynamic process unfolding through four distinct stages: the *prodromal*, *acute*, *chronic*, and *resolution* stages. At the prodromal stage, proactive crisis management is emphasized, as leaders attempt to recognize warning signs of an impending crisis, resembling the *pre-crisis stage* of Coombs's three-stage model. The acute stage, initiated by a triggering event, represents the manifestation of the crisis and its immediate damage, while the chronic stage captures its longer-term effects, including organizational recovery and prolonged disruption. Finally, the resolution stage signals closure, echoing Coombs's post-crisis stage, though with less focus on long-term organizational learning (Coombs, 1999).

Building on this foundation, Mitroff (1994) proposed a cyclical five-stage model: *signal detection*, *probing and prevention*, *damage containment*, *recovery*, and *learning*. Mitroff's first two stages highlight proactive organizational efforts before a crisis emerges, aligning with Fink's prodromal stage and Coombs's pre-crisis phase, yet extending them by explicitly addressing the need for structured probing and prevention. The latter three stages parallel Fink's acute, chronic, and resolution stages but add depth by distinguishing recovery and learning. Unlike Fink, who limited recovery to varying rates of return, Mitroff emphasizes organizational strategies for regaining stability and highlights learning as a critical process to prevent crisis recurrence. Coombs's model similarly acknowledges learning as integral, underscoring the necessity of embedding lessons into organizational practice. Collectively, these early models established a progression from proactive preparation to recovery and learning, providing a cyclical understanding of crisis processes.

Recent scholarship has adapted these foundational models to the educational context, particularly in light of crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Grissom and Condon (2021) proposed an adapted framework for school leadership crises with five phases: (i) mitigation/prevention, (ii) preparedness, (iii) response, (iv) recovery, and (v) learning. These phases align with broader crisis management models but are tailored to the specific responsibilities and capacities of educational institutions. The framework depicts crisis management as a continuum encompassing pre-crisis, in-crisis, and post-crisis stages, with gradual transitions except for the sudden trigger event mar-

king the onset of crisis response. Importantly, this model emphasizes differentiated readiness, requiring school leaders to adopt varied leadership practices suited to each stage (Grissom & Condon 2021).

The mitigation and prevention phase includes risk identification and long-term activities aimed at reducing vulnerabilities, echoing Mitroff's signal detection. Leaders are advised to conduct safety audits and manage hazard assessments to minimize threats (Robertson, 2017). Crisis preparedness then involves the establishment of comprehensive crisis management plans that draw upon risk assessments, define roles, and prepare communication strategies (Kennedy-Paine et al., 2013; Gainey, 2010; Connolly-Wilson & Reeves, 2013).

Given that leadership is central to effective crisis management, educational research has sought to identify the specific competencies and practices required for navigating crises. Smith and Riley (2012) highlighted nine critical attributes of successful school crisis managers: strong communication, procedural intelligence, synthesis skills, optimism and tenacity, flexibility, intuition, empathy, creativity, and decisive decision-making. These qualities emphasize both cognitive and affective capacities needed for managing crises in highly complex environments.

Other studies clustered crisis leadership competencies into three broad categories: (a) promoting care,

collaboration, and resilience by fostering well-being and community among students, staff, and families; (b) managing organizational and informational resources to maintain continuity while adapting systems under stress; and (c) developing agile and holistic management, encompassing distributed leadership, systemic thinking, and flexible organizational practices. These findings underscore that effective crisis leadership requires not only immediate response capacity but also relational and systemic approaches that support both short-term stability and long-term adaptability (Schechter et al., 2022).

Across these models and studies, crisis management is understood as a cyclical and multi-phased process requiring proactive risk assessment, decisive crisis response, structured recovery, and continuous organizational learning. While early frameworks such as those by Fink and Mitroff laid the groundwork for understanding crisis as a dynamic lifecycle, contemporary adaptations emphasize the unique contexts of educational leadership. The literature suggests that successful crisis management in schools depends on both structured organizational strategies and the personal competencies of leaders, ranging from communication and empathy to adaptability and systemic thinking. These insights provide a foundation for developing leadership training programs that can strengthen schools' resilience in times of crisis and better equip leaders for future challenges.

Table 1

Comparison of crisis management models

Author / Model	Main Stages	Focus / Key Contribution	Strengths	Limitations
Fink (1986)	1. Prodromal (warning) 2. Acute (crisis occurs) 3. Chronic (aftermath, clean-up) 4. Resolution (normalization)	Medical metaphor (disease lifecycle). Focuses on crisis as a process with warning signals.	Clear sequential stages; highlights early detection.	Too linear, less adaptable to complex crises.
Mitroff (1994)	1. Signal detection 2. preparation/prevention 3. damage limitation 4. Recovery 5. Learning	Systems approach; integrates technical, organizational, and psychological perspectives.	Emphasizes prevention & learning; holistic view.	Can be complex to operationalize; requires strong organizational culture.
Coombs (Situational Crisis Communication Theory (1999)	Not strictly phased; focuses on matching crisis response strategies (denial, diminish, rebuild, bolstering) to crisis type (victim, accidental, preventable).	Communication-centered; stakeholder perceptions and reputation management.	Flexible; strong focus on communication with stakeholders.	Less attention to operational/structural aspects of crisis.
Grissom & Condon (2006)	1. Pre-crisis planning 2. Crisis response 3. Post-crisis recovery & evaluation	Practical framework for organizational leaders. Stress on leadership and decision-making.	User-friendly; emphasizes leadership responsibility.	Less theoretical depth compared to others.

Source: Chatzipanagiotou, P.; Katsarou, E. *Crisis Management, School Leadership in Disruptive Times and the Recovery of Schools in the Post COVID-19 Era: A Systematic Literature Review*. *Educ. Sci.* 2023, 13, 118.

Among the leadership initiatives is the engagement of schools in community work, including participation in volunteer projects. Schools involvement in community projects and school volunteering classes are effective tools for engaging young people and teachers in socially responsible activities as they promote empathy, teamwork, and a sense of community. These initiatives help students develop important life skills, such as communication and problem-solving, while encouraging active citizenship. For teachers, they provide opportunities to model positive behaviour, strengthen relationships with students, and connect learning with real-world challenges. Together, these experiences foster a shared commitment to making a positive impact on society.

Recent studies highlight several key leadership initiatives undertaken by school principals to sustain educational functioning during crises, particularly in the context of the war in Ukraine. These initiatives include creating support programs for students and their families, offering psychological assistance to address the heightened stress associated with war (Błaszczuk et al, 2025). Principals also actively engage in volunteer and charitable projects, enabling students and teachers to contribute to efforts that support communities affected by the war. Building partnerships with local organizations and businesses represents another strategic initiative, providing schools with additional resources and support to maintain educational processes. Developing programs for parents and local residents fosters collaboration between schools and their communities, promoting sustainable school development even in times of war (Liu, 2024).

The ongoing war has heightened communities to come together, mobilizing resources and knowledge

to address the challenges of displacement, loss, and rebuilding. Between 2021 and 2023 in Ukraine, the number of charitable organizations grew by 43. Volunteer participation skyrocketed from January 320 in 2022 to almost 7,000 by October 2022, reflecting a broader surge in civil society activities. Civil society organizations (CSOs) have increasingly focused on social services, community development, and rehabilitation, with 23% diversifying their focus to address military support, war victim assistance, and youth initiatives. Trust in volunteers and NGOs has significantly increased since 2022, with volunteers (85%) and NGOs (65%) ranking among Ukraine's most trusted institutions. Volunteers remain a key driver of public confidence (Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 2024).

The aim of the study. This research aims to contribute to the theoretical development of crisis leadership in education while providing practical insights for building a stronger, more responsive education system during prolonged crises. Specifically, the study explores principals' leadership strategies, challenges, and approaches to fostering sustainability within their schools and seeks to answer the related research questions.

1) How do principals perceive their role in fostering sustainability and long-term improvement in schools amidst socio-political instability in Ukraine?

2) What leadership practices contribute to the sustainability of schools during periods of crisis, particularly in war affected areas?

In our study we employed a qualitative research design, using semi-structured interviews to explore the leadership strategies and practices of school principals in Ukraine.

Table 2

Growth and Public Trust in Ukrainian Civil Society (2021–2023)

Organisations	Value	Comments
Growth in charitable organizations (2021–2023)	+43%	Significant wartime increase
Growth in NGOs	+6.1%	Reflects expanding civil society activity
Growth in HOAs (Homeowners Associations)	+5.4%	Community-level organizational growth
New civil society registrations in 2023	~5,000	Concentrated in Kyiv, Dnipro, and Lviv
Volunteer participation (Jan–Oct 2022)	Increased from 320 to ~7,000	Major surge in grassroots civic engagement
Civil society organizations (CSOs) focusing on social services	53%	Dominant area of focus
CSOs diversifying to military, victim support, and youth efforts	23%	Reflects adaptive response to wartime needs
CSOs officially registered for state funding	12%	Majority operate on donor support
Public trust in volunteers	85%	Highest among all institutions
Public trust in NGOs	65%	Strong trust in organized civil society efforts

Source: Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 2024.

Table 3

Key findings of the study

Leadership Theme	% of Principals Emphasizing	Key Practices / Observations	Implications for School Sustainability
Visionary Leadership	100%	Clear long-term educational vision; maintaining focus and motivation of school community	Ensures direction and cohesion during crisis; supports strategic decision-making
Psychological Support	85.7%	Providing professional development, emotional support for teachers and staff	Reduces stress, prevents burnout, maintains teaching quality
Resilience and Adaptability	85.7%	Flexible responses to rapidly changing conditions; adjusting school operations	Allows schools to continue functioning under uncertainty; supports continuity of learning
Community Engagement	71.4%	Involving parents, local stakeholders, volunteer initiatives	Strengthens school-community relationships; mobilizes additional support and resources
Resource Mobilization	57.1%	Securing materials, funding, and logistical support	Highlights gaps in resources; indicates need for external aid or policy support
Supportive School Climate	100%	Trust, open communication, emotional support for students and staff	Promotes psychological safety, collaborative teaching, and innovative instructional strategies
Fostering Social Responsibility	71.4%	Implementing volunteer programs; encouraging student civic engagement	Enhances personal growth of students; strengthens community cohesion

Our qualitative study was conducted between February and May 2024 and involved seven school principals from central regions of Ukraine, representing both urban and rural schools. As this is a preliminary study, participants were selected purposively – school principals whose teachers had previously participated in our earlier research projects (Avsheniuk & Seminikhyna, 2025). This approach ensured continuity of insights and leveraged participants' familiarity with the research context, enhancing the depth and relevance of the data collected. The relatively small sample size reflects financial constraints. The sample consisted of four female and three male principals, aged between 38 and 57 years. The semi-structured interview questions were developed to explore issues related to the leadership experiences of school principals, particularly in the context of ongoing educational challenges in Ukraine. The collected data were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2012).

Results of the scientific research. The study's findings underscore key leadership practices that are critical for sustaining schools during the war in Ukraine. Visionary leadership was identified as the most essential component, with all respondents highlighting the need for principals to articulate a clear long-term educational vision to maintain focus and motivation within school communities despite external disruptions. Psychological support and professional development for teachers were emphasized

by 85.7% of principals, alongside resilience and adaptability, reflecting the importance of flexible and responsive school practices in dynamic crisis contexts. Community engagement was recognized by 71.4% of respondents, with implementation shaped by local resources and contextual factors, while resource mobilization, cited by 57.1%, highlighted ongoing challenges in ensuring operational capacity during conflict. Principals' prior participation in leadership training programs, which provided competencies in strategic planning, team management, and crisis management, proved instrumental in enabling informed, adaptive, and resilient responses to unprecedented challenges. The creation of a positive and supportive school climate was consistently emphasized, fostering trust, open communication, and emotional support, and enabling schools to function as safe and secure environments for students and staff. This approach promoted empathy, collaboration, and the sharing of coping strategies among educators, facilitating the development of innovative teaching practices, including remote learning adaptations. Collectively, these findings indicate that effective school leadership in crisis contexts extends beyond administrative functions, encompassing visionary planning, staff well-being, community engagement, and adaptive practices, thereby ensuring continuity of learning, strengthening institutional resilience, and supporting long-term educational outcomes.

Conclusions. The findings of this study reinforce the central role of school principals in sustaining educational continuity and resilience during the ongoing war in Ukraine. Effective leadership practices, including visionary guidance, psychological support, resilience, community engagement, resource mobilization, and fostering a supportive school climate, are essential for enabling schools to adapt to rapidly changing conditions while maintaining educational quality. Principals' engagement in innovative initiatives, such as volunteer programs, partnerships with local organizations, and parent-community collaboration, further strengthens the capacity of schools to respond to crises and promote social responsibility among students.

The data also highlight the critical importance of prior professional development and crisis leadership training, which equip principals with the skills necessary to manage uncertainty, make informed decisions, and implement adaptive strategies. By cultivating a positive and collaborative school climate, principals

not only support the academic and emotional well-being of students and staff but also foster a culture of resilience, innovation, and collective responsibility.

These findings contribute to the practical and theoretical understanding of school crisis management, particularly during the war in Ukraine. They emphasize that the ability of school leaders to keep schools running during times of crisis depends on their ability to navigate complex organizational challenges, support students and staff, and implement innovative strategies. Ongoing professional development is essential to equip school leaders with the necessary skills for crisis response and day-to-day management, including decision-making under uncertainty, risk management, building resilience, and managing long-term consequences. For researchers and policymakers, these findings highlight the urgent need to reform education governance structures, processes, and organizational culture to ensure that schools better respond to crises and ensure continuity of learning, safety, and community engagement.

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