

## Leadership Changes in Primary Schools of Bangladesh Due to the COVID-19 Pandemic

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### ABSTRACT

In the COVID-19 pandemic, schools across the world, including those in Bangladesh, have experienced significant changes in their leadership dynamics. This paper presents a qualitative case study that displays the leadership transformations in primary schools in Bangladesh due to the pandemic. Utilizing a convenience sampling strategy, two government primary schools were selected as cases, and their head teachers along with all class teachers were chosen as participants. Through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, data were collected and analyzed thematically. The findings reveal distinct differences in leadership before, amid, and after the pandemic, highlighting various aspects of change. These include the leadership shifts from classroom to online teaching, the transition of administrative meetings to virtual platforms, navigating co-curricular activities from in-person to online settings, fostering guardian involvement for student well-being, reconfiguring textbook distribution from house-to-house methods, leading school feeding programs involving NGOs, and more. Additionally, the research highlights teachers' technological and peer-based training initiatives and the transition from exam hall-based assessments to assignment-based assessment systems. Furthermore, the study touches on the challenges of dealing with student dropouts. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the critical role of leadership in adapting school leaders to unforeseen challenges and provide valuable insights for educational institutions.

**Keywords:** School-leadership, COVID-19, Pandemic, Primary schools, Bangladesh, Crisis, Leadership.

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## **Introduction and Background**

The COVID-19 pandemic brought significant disruptions in the lives of people worldwide, and the education sector has encountered several challenges. Bangladesh's primary schools particularly have been profoundly affected, necessitating closures and a shift towards online and alternative methods of teaching and learning. Additionally, various aspects of school operations, including co-curricular activities, book-utshab, student leadership, SMC meetings, and overall school management have transformed (Khan et al., 2021; Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). This paper applied to investigate the customary leadership practices of primary schools in Bangladesh and assessed the adaptations they have had to make in response to the COVID-19 outbreak. The primary goal of this paper was to evaluate the efficacy of school leaders in adapting to these unprecedented changes. The objectives included examining the prevailing leadership practices in primary schools across Bangladesh, determining changes in the roles of school leaders in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and assessing the extent of successful adaptation by school leaders.

This study has presented a comprehensive rationale aimed at confronting the transformation encountered by primary school leaders in Bangladesh amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. It has academically acknowledged the hardships encountered by these school leaders. By elucidating the state of school leadership in Bangladesh, this research has aimed to substantially influence the development of educational policies, the new curricula, and garner international acknowledgment for the country's educational endeavors. Additionally, this paper is significant for teachers, researchers, students, and academics alike, as it provides a comprehensive understanding of the actual circumstances and positions of educational leaders in Bangladesh.

## **Conceptualizing School Leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

According to Leithwood and Riehl (2003), school leadership includes principals, administrators, and other administrative personnel, and their roles responsible for monitoring and administering educational institutions. These personnel are accountable for creating a positive learning environment, assisting, and training teachers, and ensuring student achievement. Within this paper, the scope of leadership primarily revolves around the perspectives of headmasters and teachers, with a specific focus on their roles and insights. While acknowledging the potential involvement of student leadership in various activities, and showcasing their oscillation, the research's core concentration remains centered on the viewpoints and data collected from school headteachers and teachers.

On the eve of this 21<sup>st</sup> century, 'leadership' means basically the initiation, management, and actualization of leading 'teaching-learning' in the classrooms (Bush & Glover, 2003). The other leadership tasks of a school are auxiliary to 'teaching-learning' (Bush & Glover, 2003). So, the leadership of a school needs to practice a growth of mindset that leads the school to

generate a positive school culture (Huber et al., 2017). School leadership also means the skills of teamwork, as the class teachers play their own roles in their classrooms to reach a holistic goal of the school's achievement of teaching-learning (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). As the primary school leadership deals with the children, their guardians have strong communication with the teachers. This connects the community and the whole society to the teachers, and the school leaders (Salahuddin, 2016). So, school-leadership means having a firm understanding of the community (Kumari & Shukla, 2020). This understanding helps the leadership of primary schools to maintain a strong relationship with the community. Thus, school leadership influences the community (Kumari & Shukla, 2020). Additionally, 21st-century school leadership also includes 'shared leadership'. This means, for example, the headmaster needs to share his leadership role of 'book choice' for certain classes with some of the expert class teachers (Harrison & Killion, 2007).

### **International Perspective of Primary School Leadership during COVID-19**

The COVID-19 pandemic affected over 90% of the world's schoolchildren in over 190 education systems (Gore et al., 2021). According to Gore (2021), Australian parents were urged to keep their children at home, resulting in a quick and large shift from face-to-face to flexible and remote education delivery. This created changes in the leadership practices of schools. Also, the "quarantine vacation" from normal schooling drew criticism for its long-term and short-term effects on student well-being, teacher motivation, self-efficacy, and talents (Gore et al., 2021). Fernandez and Shaw (2020) reported a crisis in American academic leadership. Burki (2020) reported that academic income for US educational institutions fell 10% in 2019-20 compared to 2017. So, several institutions faced closure. Yet, European educational policy regularly and frequently changed, affecting school administrators (Grek & Landri, 2021). COVID-19's repeated educational vision modifications left school administrators impotent (Grek & Landri, 2021). Most African students and parents could not afford smartphones for online lessons, and most people are unaware of this (Le Grange, 2020). As a result, physically many African pupils have grown by two years, but not academically (Le Grange, 2020). Gautam and Gautam (2021) found that Asian students, particularly Nepalese students, were afraid during the COVID-19 pandemic yet more ready to learn. Despite their zeal, the three variables - infrastructure, online class technology, and anxiety hindered educational success (Gautam & Gautam, 2021). Bangladesh shares almost the same image.

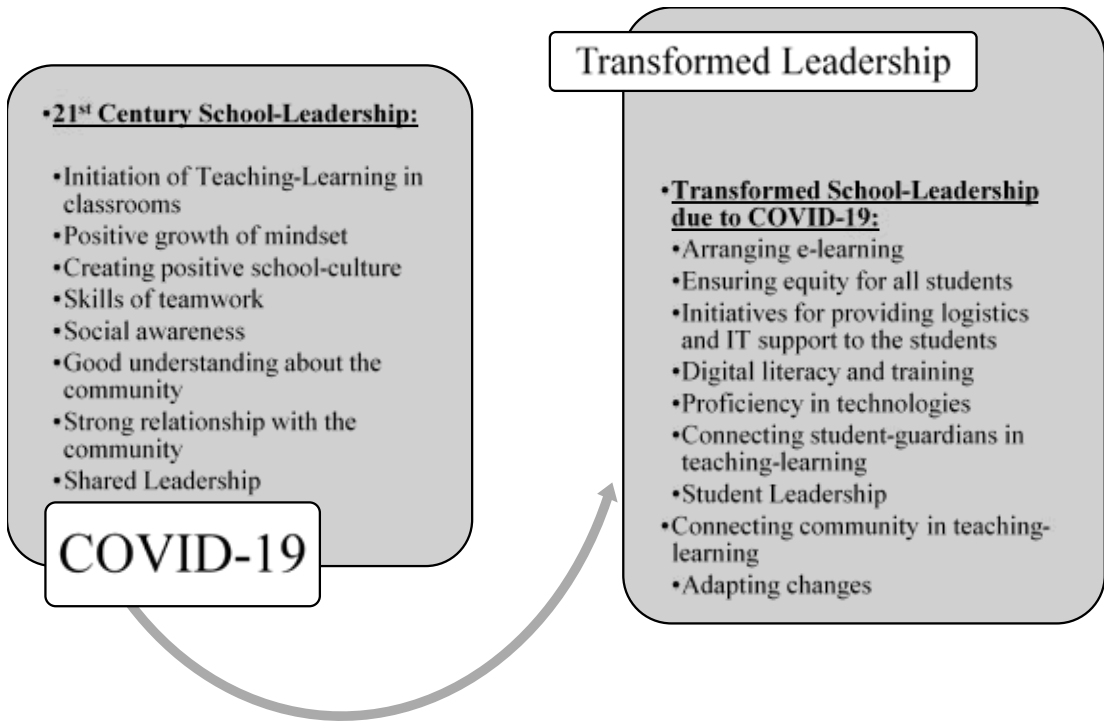
### **Bangladesh Perspective**

The COVID-19 pandemic has struck Bangladesh's education sector worst apart from its economy (Khan et al., 2021). The state shut down all schools, colleges, and universities on March 26, 2020. On May 31, 2020, after more than two months, the lockdown was provisionally lifted (Khan et al., 2021a). The government started classes on Sangsad TV then. It was a new distance

teaching-learning method for Bangladeshi teachers and students (Sultana & Khan, 2019). At that time, the school administration's only job was to instruct students to participate in those TV classes (Biswas et al., 2020). After this phase, Bangladesh launched online elementary school lessons without adequate preparation or resources. Virtual education in Bangladesh primary schools was hindered by technological infrastructure, the expensive cost and slow speed of the internet, family financial problems, and student mental distress (Ramij & Sultana, 2020). The school leadership struggled to overcome these challenges and consistently enroll students in online classes (Emon et al., 2020) since they had little control over the elements affecting student engagement. A study by Khan et al. (2021) showed that overall, 56% of Bangladeshi students participated in online classes whereas the rest were out of the shadow. School administrators had to ensure that primary school teachers had the necessary ICT infrastructure (Khan et al., 2021). On the other hand, Dhawan (2020) argues that educators did not teach from school. They taught and learned from their home. So, during COVID-19, online teaching and learning in Bangladesh were less reliant on school IT infrastructure (Dhawan, 2020). However, school leaders used to receive updates from parents (Yeasmin et al., 2020). They provided distinct recommendations for mental and physical wellness, thus ensuring students' well-being. Islam (2021) discovered that teachers needed urgent online training for conducting classes due to the pandemic. In such situations, school leaders and administrators seized responsibility for teacher training (Islam, 2021). The SMC meetings had to find alternate ways. Throughout the pandemic school leaders were diligent in implementing cleanliness, social distancing, and mask-wearing protocols across all school premises to safeguard students (Mackie et al., 2022). They also took measures to ensure vaccination and protection of the children (Mackie et al., 2022). However, it was evident that some school leaders encountered difficulties in maintaining adequate social distancing in various schools (Rezaei & Azarmi, 2020). Overall, during the COVID-19 pandemic, school leaders displayed numerous distinct leadership roles for their schools.

Based on the review of literature, the following conceptual framework was developed and used in this study:

*Figure 01: Conceptual Framework*



The conceptual framework delineates juxtaposition between the existing 21st-century school leadership ideals and the transformed landscape precipitated by COVID-19. It embodies the transition school leaders had to adapt from traditional teaching methodologies towards a holistic approach cultivating positive attitudes, inclusive cultures, and proficient collaboration. The pandemic necessitated that school leaders hold a swift transition towards e-learning, prioritizing equity through logistical and IT support, nurturing digital literacy, and intertwining student-guardian involvement in the educational process. This paradigm shift accentuates the pivotal role of community engagement and adaptability as fundamental for the leaders’ principles in navigating the evolving educational terrain.

## Methodology

This article was developed based on a Master’s thesis that investigated school leadership practices and transformations of primary schools in Bangladesh amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Employing an interpretive research paradigm, the study utilized qualitative methods (Creswell, 2009; Patton, 2002) to gather and present data obtained from headmasters and teachers. By adopting a case study approach (Yin, 1989) the study encompassed qualitative

parameters to examine the challenges, issues, contingencies, decision-making processes, and actions undertaken by educational leaders as observed in two primary schools as two separate cases. The research employed interviews and focus group discussions as the primary data collection methods, and the procedure involved conducting interviews with headmasters initially, followed by the FGDs with all teachers and headmasters in each school. The ‘thematic’ qualitative data analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used in this study. The following codes have been used to present the analysis of data:

<b>Codes</b>	<b>Statements</b>
S1	School – 01
S2	School – 02
IHM1	Interview of the headmaster of School – 01
IHM2	Interview of the headmaster of School – 02
TFGD1	FGD of the teachers of School – 01
TFGD2	FGD of the teachers of School – 02

Table 01: Codes

## **Findings**

### **Leading Teaching-Learning from Classroom to Virtual Space**

During the COVID-19 lockdowns, classrooms were shifted to online mediums. The findings outline that the primary education system followed a national curriculum through online and Sangsad TV classes. To cope up with the novel medium of instruction, teachers faced several challenges, as the findings revealed, S2 students lacked technology access, leading to low attendance. Non-interactive classes made learning tedious, and some parents were uninvolved viewing the lockdown as a break, which impacted online enrollment. On the other hand, a teacher in TFGD1 said, “Despite our teachers’ enthusiasm for online classes, most students’ parents are financially constrained and unable to afford smartphones. Network and power issues in this area further disrupt classes. Only 10-15 out of 40-50 students usually attended classes”.

Despite these obstacles, school leaders of both S1 and S2 were required to continue innovating and finding solutions. Findings indicate that headmasters suggested creating social media groups and providing students with class links by SMS to the guardians, while other teachers conducted online classes from their homes or multimedia classrooms. A teacher from TFGD1 said, “We have a multimedia classroom in our school. I conduct online classes while staying at my home. When I needed materials, or when it was difficult at home, I came to school to take the online classes.” Teachers of S1 used to remind parents of the notification of their child’s education by texting class links before each class. However, this study finds that some students of S2 violated social distance rules by meeting in one another’s homes and using a friend’s device to access online courses. A teacher from TFGD2 described the scenario as:

We help some of our guardians who are financially in adverse conditions. For example, we provide their children with uniforms, notebooks, etc. for free. They cannot afford even those things for the children due to poor economic conditions. So how can we expect their participation in online classes with adequate devices?

These statements acknowledge the leadership roles and responsibilities of the teachers towards students' wellbeing in various aspects apart from merely doing their professional duties.

### **Administrative Meetings from in-person to Virtual Apps**

The School Managing Committee (SMC) is the primary leadership and administrative body of a primary school, responsible for planning, developing, and managing school activities (Salahuddin, 2016). Findings from the analysis of data indicate that SMC meetings and teachers' meetings of both S1 and S2 were held monthly before the COVID-19 pandemic and shifted online via platforms like Zoom and Google Meet during the pandemic. A teacher from TFGD1 said:

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, we used to hold our SMC meetings regularly in our school's office room. However, during the pandemic, we started holding these meetings online via Zoom and Google Meet apps. As the pandemic came to an end, we resumed our meetings in the office room while taking necessary precautions. We ensured that everyone washed their hands, kept a Savlon's wet sack in front of the doorpost, and wore masks. This way, we were able to conduct our meetings while maintaining hygiene and social distancing.

Headteachers of S1 and S2 made similar comments on shifting administrative meetings from in-person to online mode.

### **Transitioning Talent by Navigating Co-curricular Activities from In-person to Online**

The findings reveal that before the pandemic, local businesses and guardians supported S1 co-curricular events, while the school leaders played crucial roles in organizing and coaching students. They also facilitated participation in national events, showcasing talents in cultural competitions. However, COVID-19 disrupted these activities, compelling schools to transition to online platforms, and throwing challenges to school-leaders limiting students' participation. A teacher in TFGD2 stated "Our school participates in all Upazila education competitions and has won awards many times. However, our students struggled with the online version due to the lack of proper rhythm in the music performances, despite having good internet speed".

However, findings show that during the pandemic, there were some government-sponsored co-curricular initiatives, but online programs failed to replace the benefits of in-person cultural

programs to the fullest. Due to the pandemic, football, and cricket, which were previously student-led at S2, had to cease. As a result, the chances of students practicing leadership were reduced.

### **Navigating Guardian Involvement for Adapting Together**

The findings show that amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, the customary monthly gathering of guardians, “Ovivavok Somabesh”, “Maa Somabesh”, to discuss teaching and learning development in both S1 and S2 was modified to ensure adherence to social distancing guidelines. In this context, teachers regularly monitored student progress updates conveyed by their parents, and their leadership roles had become more challenging within this aspect.

However, with the shift to online classes, teachers offered regular updates from students, while guardians were largely unable to participate. Consequently, the traditional ‘Maa Somabesh’ (mothers’ gathering) of S1 meetings was discontinued temporarily. Following the pandemic, these activities resumed at S2 as before.

### **Shifting to Administering Textbook Distribution from Textbook Fest**

The findings reveal that, before the pandemic, teachers of S1 and S2 played a key role in organizing and executing Book Utshab, where all students received new textbooks provided by the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) on the first day of every calendar year. However, the pandemic disrupted this tradition, and teachers were required to distribute textbooks to students individually, resulting in possible inequity and irrationality in book distribution. For example, IHM1 said:

Our Upazila is the biggest in our district. Many students from the village side come to our school while most of our teachers reside in the municipal area. So, we could reach books maximum to those who are living in this municipality. Many village students got their new books later in February or March.

Teachers tried to deliver books to students’ homes during the pandemic but faced challenges, resulting in uneven distribution, and a lack of ensuring equity which is a crucial challenge of leadership during the crisis.

### **Leading School Feeding Program Involving NGOs**

Before COVID-19, the World Food Program (WFP) provided every student in S1 and S2 with a packet of biscuits daily. School feeding and the management of preventing any misuse in the feeding process had been one of the notable non-teaching-learning responsibilities of school administration and leadership. The COVID-19 pandemic altered the methods for conducting the leadership factors associated with this. Notably, the report finds that the school feeding was stopped after the pandemic. As a teacher in TFGD2 said:



During school closures, we took on the responsibility of distributing biscuits to students. Partnering with NGO ‘Shushilon,’ we compiled a list of catchment area students and delivered biscuits. The NGO aided in reaching out-of-area students, contributing significantly to the effort.

### **Sharing is Caring: Teachers’ Training Initiatives from Authority to Peers**

The practice of ‘shared leadership’ was visible among the teachers of S1 and S2 during the COVID-19 pandemic. The report reveals that headmasters identified teachers without ICT skills to conduct online classes. Then the Upazila Education Offices formed a team of tech-savvy teachers to instruct those teachers. Apart from this, school leaders of S2 took their own initiatives to train themselves in this regard. This determines their self-derived leadership approach.

A teacher in TFGD2: I do not understand well how to use the Google Meet app for online classes. My nephew is a university student. I told him to help me. He arranged a studio-like corner at our house and made initiations for my classes. I bought a whiteboard. He also taught me different things about using online apps. Thus, I could take my classes.

IHM2: As a member of the ICT team for our Upazila, we faced difficulty reaching a school located six to seven kilometers away in a rural area without any transportation available. To solve this problem, I contacted some acquaintances with bikes and convinced them to take us despite the restricted roads, paying them extra as an incentive. Reaching those schools, we provided their teachers with ICT training.

The small teams of trained educators traveled from school to school to train other teachers where they faced several obstacles. School leaders facilitated online classes and training without any extra financial backing from the government. or higher authority for essential materials, ICT tools, or internet access.

### **Halted Student Leadership Activities**

Primary school students in S1 and S2 held positions of leadership such as class captains, child doctors, and election candidates for student unions. Every two months, “Khude Doctors” administered deworming tablets to all students as part of the “Krimi Nashok Campaign” led by the students in S2. IHM2 said:

We had 18 ‘Khude Doctors’ who dosed deworming tablets and capsules to all of the students through the “Krimi Nashok Campaign” once in two months. An NGO and We, the school administration prepared the plans and served the outlines of the campaign to the students. The student’s leadership roles made those campaigns successful. We,

teachers, too facilitated them. Besides, the 'Khude Doctors' got pieces of training from those health NGOs and made the campaigns successful.

Before the pandemic, students organized rallies at national events. Teachers used group work methods, fostering leadership opportunities in classrooms, and identifying students' needs. Online learning isolated students, challenging motivation, and leadership efforts.

### **Leading Exam Hall to Assignment-based Assessment System**

School leaders of S2 distributed government-provided assignments but had minimal oversight of student assessments. Despite issuing guidelines and grading answer sheets, students resorted to copying the shared answers on social media. School leaders did hardly consider whether the students' methods were ethical or not. A teacher in TFGD2 said:

Once I was surfing the internet. I was listening to one of my favorite songs on YouTube. Suddenly, I found a video captioned 'Class Three English Assignment Solution'. It caught my eye and I started watching that. Surprisingly I found that it was completely the same as the last assignment I provided to my class. I was surprised one more time when I got the answer sheets from my students and found that those answers were completely the same as in that video. I had nothing but to give the students pass marks as their answers were not incorrect. Changing the system was also not in my hands.

Overall, in both schools, the role of school leaders in assessing their students became limited, and they faced obstacles in ensuring fair assessment practices.

### **Dealing with Dropout of Students**

During COVID-19, S1 and S2 leaders encountered a surge in student dropouts due to school closures and the preference for Madrasahs, chosen by parents without informing teachers. Certain guardians believed religious studies could safeguard their children from COVID-19 and benefit their future afterlife. A teacher in TFGD1 said:

As a school leadership team, we recently prevented a child marriage involving a bright class 04 student. After alerting the UNO, the ceremony was halted, but the child still faces pressure from parents, affecting her education. Despite law enforcers' efforts, we feel helpless, fearing she may be forced to marry or cease her education.

Child marriage and the economic downturn also contributed to S1 dropouts, with some parents employing them to earn money. The need for food and necessities made it difficult for school administrators to decrease dropout rates, despite their efforts.

## COVID-19 Vaccination

Findings show that school leaders were mandated to receive vaccinations before school reopening following lockdowns as per government directives. Additionally, school-wide cleanliness initiatives were implemented in S1 and S2. Both school leaders played a significant role in this regard. For instances, two head teachers pointed out:

We may not be the doctors but we teach our students primary health and hygiene maintenance. We teach them hand washing, saline-making, and vitamin A-capsule eating. As leaders, it is our moral responsibility to get vaccinated appropriately. However, the government made it mandatory for us. We all got vaccinated. I hope that we do not spread the virus among society. (IHM2)

COVID-19 is a virus that can sleep in your body. You are not sick but you are spreading. To some people it is hazardous; to others it is normal. I do not know if I am containing this virus or if I am spreading the virus. So, not only for my safety but for the greater social safety, we all teachers got vaccinated in time. I strongly encouraged my colleagues. (IHM1)

The government set up a time limit for the teachers. Within that period, they got their vaccination. After ensuring their vaccinations, school reopening timetables were scheduled. Findings suggest that this kind of role was new for the school leaders and they performed their role successfully following the guidelines.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Usual practices of the 21st-century leadership include different initiatives for teaching-learning in classrooms, positive growth of mindset, creating positive school culture, skills of teamwork, promoting social awareness, strong relationship with the community, and shared leadership (Bush & Glover, 2003; Huber et al., 2017; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Salahuddin, 2016; Kumari & Shukla, 2020; Harrison & Killion, 2007). Findings of this study show that the leadership practices of S1 and S2 were limited within these areas before the COVID-19 pandemic. However, findings also suggest that during the tumultuous period of the COVID-19 crisis, primary school leaders in Bangladesh showcased a diverse array of leadership qualities, notably distinct from their usual practices. While prior research showcased various challenges teachers face in terms of online classes (Khan & Rahaman, 2020), our study outlines how they have overcome those challenges through various leadership approaches. Our study reveals that the school leaders skillfully managed various responsibilities, encompassing communication with parents, solving issues of technical access and troubleshooting, and enhancing teachers' technological prowess. Previous research hardly shows any evidence about the co-curricular activities of schools during the pandemic. Our study has shown that, cultural events transitioned to online formats during the pandemic, a shift necessitated by circumstances. Moreover, the responsibility for school feeding programs fell on teachers, who delivered those to students'

homes. Effective administrative practice entails accepting criticism and feedback (Luke et al., 2014; Tauber et al., 2016). Our study highlighted how school leaders in Bangladesh previously engaged in face-to-face parent meetings for constructive input. However, it also encompasses that despite these activities ceased during COVID-19, teachers maintained periodic contact with guardians, and online SMC meetings were conducted. According to Dawadi et al., (2020), challenges like limited mobile phone access, awareness issues, economic constraints, and illiteracy hindered their involvement. Findings of this study complement the challenges. Equity in leadership, as outlined by scholars (Cochran-Smith & Keefe, 2022; Tate & Warschauer, 2022), involves fair resource allocation and considering underrepresented voices. In our study, disparities in textbook distribution and access to online classes derived from varying financial resources, and awareness among guardians are displayed explicitly. It revealed that school leaders attempted to bridge these gaps through shared efforts but occasionally compromised on social distancing. Amid the crisis, school leaders demonstrated creativity by dispelling myths, raising awareness, and innovation in technological training. They faced multifaceted challenges, navigating the pandemic's impact and adapting to government directives, and showcased their newly adopted leadership skills to overcome them.

It can be concluded that while the leadership practices of S1 and S2 were limited within the usual and traditional activities before the COVID-19 pandemic, clear leadership changes in terms of role and practices due to the COVID-19 Pandemic was evident in the two schools. Most of the changes in the leadership practices were dominated by the utilization of digital platforms (i.e. Zoom, Google Meet) and commitments of the teachers and head teachers. However, challenges were obvious for the teachers and head teachers due to their limited understanding and skills of ICT, and lack of technological facilities in specific contexts of the children and parents.

Though the findings of this study are not generalizable due to the nature and limitation of qualitative case studies, findings of this study have implications for leadership practices in primary schools during the pandemic and beyond. Findings also have implications for leadership policy to prepare present leaders for future crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. Further large-scale research involving multiple stakeholders of primary education can be conducted to explore this issue and contribute to the literature from broader perspectives

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