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School leadership in Israel amid COVID-19: A systematic review

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Abstract

This review examines how school leadership in Israel was studied during the COVID-19 pandemic and identifies the central themes in the emerging literature. Following PRISMA guidelines, twenty-four peer-reviewed publications were analyzed using inductive thematic synthesis. Three thematic areas were identified: emotional and relational leadership, crisis and agentic leadership, and instructional and inclusive leadership. Themes related to equity and learning continuity appeared far less frequently, pointing to notable gaps in Israeli scholarship. Beyond offering the first systematic review of Israeli research on this topic, the study provides a theoretical contribution by questioning the assumption that crisis leadership is a universal or uniformly defined construct. The findings illustrate that leadership during crises is shaped by local social, cultural, and political conditions, which influence what leaders prioritize and how they act. The patterns that emerged in the Israeli context reveal underlying cultural logics and value orientations that frame how leadership is understood and practiced in moments of disruption. By showing how crisis leadership takes different forms across contexts, the review extends theoretical conversations about leadership in emergencies and underscores the importance of situating global models within specific cultural settings.

Keywords

COVID-19, school leadership, Israel, literature review

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has been characterized as "an unprecedented test for organizations around the world" (Minciu et al., 2020, p. 251), profoundly disrupting nearly every facet of daily life. The education sector was among the many areas significantly affected by the pandemic, with widespread implications for its structures and practices. The pandemic marked a period of deep and systemic upheaval across global education systems, described as a "supernova" (Azorín, 2020) that "created undeniable chaos" (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2020, p. 334) and shook "the very fabric of education" (Harris and Jones, 2021, p. 243).

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Among the domains most affected by COVID-19 was school leadership, which experienced a dramatic and far-reaching transformation in response to the crisis (Pollock, 2020). The pandemic demanded immediate, adaptive, and often improvised responses from school leaders, compelling them to manage various challenges (Parveen et al., 2022). Harris and Jones (2021) observed that "school leadership has shifted on its axis and is unlikely [to] return to 'normal' anytime soon, if ever at all" (p. 245). For them, the pandemic not only altered the day-to-day responsibilities of school leaders but also challenged foundational assumptions about what effective leadership entails.

In response, educational research has intensified its focus on understanding the strategies, decisions, and leadership dispositions principals employed to adapt during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. This growing interest has led to the publication of several review studies aimed at synthesizing the evolving literature on school leadership in this context (e.g. Brown et al., 2023; Chatzipanagiotou and Katsarou, 2023). These reviews offer valuable insights into the shifting roles of school leaders, the emergence of innovative practices developed under pressure, and the broader leadership challenges that surfaced in a rapidly changing educational landscape.

A considerable portion of the research produced in response to COVID-19 has examined leadership practices within specific national contexts (Striepe and Kafa, 2025). This emphasis reflects the widely recognized importance of contextual factors in general, and national context in particular, in shaping school leadership. Elements such as educational policy frameworks, governance structures, regulatory environments, and deeply rooted perceptions and norms play a central role in influencing how leadership is enacted and understood (Miller, 2018). National context is not a peripheral concern but a central factor in educational leadership (Clarke and O'Donoghue, 2017). Thus, meaningful research in this field must be grounded in a deep understanding of the specific national conditions in which leadership practices unfold (Hallinger, 2018).

Against this backdrop, the present review systematically examines research on school leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic conducted within the Israeli education system. It addresses the following research question: What are the main topics discussed in the research literature about school leadership in Israel during the COVID-19 pandemic, and what do they reveal about the Israeli context? In doing so, the review offers a focused national perspective that complements existing international syntheses. While the absence of an Israel-focused review already justifies the study, the gap also has broader conceptual significance. International reviews of school leadership during COVID-19 highlight equity and learning continuity as central concerns across diverse systems (e.g. Brown et al., 2023; Chatzipanagiotou and Katsarou, 2023; Parveen et al., 2022; Striepe and Kafa, 2025). The prominence of these themes internationally raises the question of whether Israeli research addressed them to a comparable extent or whether local contextual factors produced a different emphasis.

Framed in this way, the current review extends theoretical understanding by illustrating that crisis leadership is not a uniform or universally defined construct. To ground this claim, the study draws on field-theoretic and institutional-work perspectives, which explain how national education systems operate as social fields that shape what is perceived as legitimate, meaningful, and even thinkable in leadership practice and in the scholarship that examines it (Bourdieu, 1990). From an institutional-work perspective, leaders' actions during crises are guided by prevailing institutional norms and cultural logics that influence which responses become visible, valued, and ultimately researchable (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006). Building on these insights, crisis leadership appears as a context-conditioned phenomenon that takes on different meanings and forms depending on the social, cultural, and political environment in which it operates. The specific emphases that emerge in each context reveal the deeper cultural logics and value systems that shape how leadership is both conceptualized and practiced during times of crisis.

Literature review

To establish the foundation for the current review, which focuses specifically on school leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Israeli context, this part examines key findings from recent international reviews on the topic. It then synthesizes their main themes to highlight common patterns in leadership responses across diverse educational settings.

Brown et al. (2023) conducted a review of 21 studies published during the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2021) to deepen understanding of school leadership in times of crisis. The study highlights the importance of leaders fostering strong connections within the school community as a means of promoting resilience and responsiveness during a period of profound disruption. A key emphasis is placed on the role of leadership in addressing equity challenges through the use of alternative strategies and digital technologies. By doing so, leaders were able to build capacity among both staff and students, preparing them to better navigate future changes and uncertainties. The findings underscore the evolving role of school leadership in creating adaptive, inclusive, and community-centered responses during times of crisis.

The key objective of the study by Parveen et al. (2022) was to comprehensively explore the challenges faced by principals in public schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. To achieve this, a systematic literature review (SLR) was conducted, identifying 24 distinct leadership challenges. Through frequency analysis, seven of these were found to be statistically significant, each appearing in 50 or more of the reviewed studies. These critical challenges include ensuring self-care, well-being, and safe school reopening; addressing digital divides and equity gaps; and managing learning continuity and educational quality. School leaders also faced increasing pressures related to emotional and mental health, the demands of distributive leadership, and cybersecurity threats in remote learning environments. These issues were further exacerbated by a lack of infrastructure, limited funding, and inadequate crisis preparedness, leaving many principals under-resourced and overwhelmed. The study underscores the urgency of adopting inclusive, adaptive leadership strategies and calls for strengthened systemic support, offering valuable insights for school leaders, researchers, and policymakers working to improve crisis-responsive educational leadership.

Building on similar concerns, Chatzipanagiotou and Katsarou's (2023) systematic review synthesizes research evidence identified in a sample of 42 empirical studies on crisis leadership as experienced by school principals in a variety of educational contexts, focusing on the key challenges encountered and responsive practices applied within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The review identifies major challenges such as inadequate technological infrastructure, limited funding, and the absence of crisis management plans, which left school leaders unprepared to ensure learning continuity and address equity gaps. In response, principals employed a range of adaptive leadership strategies, including sense-making, digital instructional leadership, fostering team cohesion and resilience, transparent communication, attention to stakeholders' psychosocial needs, and proactive risk management. A key finding of the review is the effectiveness of distributed and collaborative leadership, which enabled principals to delegate responsibilities, strengthen collegial networks, and foster a shared sense of purpose in navigating the crisis.

Extending this line of inquiry, Striepe and Kafa's (2025) scoping review explores the existing literature on school leadership during the COVID-19 crisis, aiming to consolidate insights into how school leaders navigated the unprecedented challenges posed by the pandemic. This review highlights the multifaceted nature of crisis leadership, emphasizing the importance of care, collaboration, effective communication, and rapid decision-making. It finds that school leaders exhibited resilience and innovation to maintain learning continuity and safeguard the well-being of their

communities. Key themes identified include the significance of inclusive leadership, the integration of technology, and personal traits such as empathy.

A synthesis of these reviews reveals several recurring themes that characterize effective school leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic. Central to all studies is the importance of adaptability and responsiveness, as school leaders were required to make swift, context-sensitive decisions in the face of ongoing uncertainty (Brown et al., 2023; Striepe and Kafa, 2025). Equity and inclusion also emerged as critical concerns, with leaders working to address digital divides, support marginalized students, and ensure fair access to education (Brown et al., 2023; Parveen et al., 2022). The integration of technology and the emergence of digital instructional leadership were key components in maintaining learning continuity (Chatzipanagiotou and Katsarou, 2023; Parveen et al., 2022). In addition, all reviews underscore the essential role of school leaders in promoting the emotional well-being and mental health of students, staff, and communities through care, empathy, and relational leadership (Brown et al., 2023; Striepe and Kafa, 2025). A strong emphasis was placed on distributed and collaborative leadership approaches, which enabled shared responsibility, built collegial trust, and enhanced institutional resilience (Chatzipanagiotou and Katsarou, 2023; Parveen et al., 2022). Collectively, these studies portray crisis-era school leadership as multifaceted, community-centered, and grounded in values of inclusion, care, and adaptability.

Across the international reviews, equity and learning continuity emerged with notable frequency. For example, Brown et al. (2023) found that in their sample of 21 studies, more than half explicitly discussed leaders' use of technology to address equity gaps. Parveen et al. (2022) identified continuity of learning as one of the seven most significant leadership challenges, documented in 50 or more studies in their systematic review. Similarly, Chatzipanagiotou and Katsarou (2023), reviewing 42 empirical studies, identified inadequate infrastructure and digital divides as recurring obstacles, while Striepe and Kafa (2025) highlighted inclusive leadership and care for marginalized students as cross-cutting themes. Taken together, these findings show that international reviews consistently treated equity and continuity as high-salience concerns. Establishing this comparative baseline provides a benchmark against which the relative underrepresentation of these themes in Israeli research can be assessed.

The Israeli context

This review focuses on the Israeli school system, which serves approximately two million students across more than 5500 schools (Israeli Ministry of Education, 2025), with compulsory education spanning from kindergarten through grade 12 (Halevy-Feldman and Setiawan, 2020). Education is overseen by the central Ministry of Education, which sets policy, curriculum standards, and principal training frameworks for all public schools.

A defining characteristic of the Israeli education system is its structural division into separate Jewish and Arab sectors. Despite their geographic proximity, Israeli society remains deeply segregated both residentially and educationally (Feniger et al., 2021). The Jewish and Arab school systems operate largely independently, each serving predominantly homogenous student populations and using separate instructional languages (Hebrew and Arabic, respectively). This ethnic and linguistic segmentation reinforces systemic separation and contributes to persistent educational inequalities (Halevy-Feldman and Setiawan, 2020; Resh and Blass, 2019), placing Israel among the OECD countries with the highest levels of educational inequality. This is particularly evident in the achievement gap between Jewish and Arab students, reflected in standardized test scores, access to higher education, and long-term socioeconomic outcomes (OECD, 2019). This structural bifurcation has also drawn the attention of researchers during the COVID-19 pandemic, as

demonstrated by Frei-Landau and Avidov-Ungar (2022), who examined how sociocultural divisions contributed to digital inequities between Bedouin and Jewish female preservice teachers in the context of online learning.

Beyond ethnocultural divides, socioeconomic disparities further intensify educational inequality in Israel (Dadon-Golan et al., 2019). These disparities are not limited to sectoral separation but often exist within individual schools, particularly in mixed or socioeconomically diverse communities. In such cases, students from widely varying economic backgrounds study together in the same classrooms, posing both structural challenges and pedagogical dilemmas for school leaders. Issues such as resource gaps, learning readiness, and social cohesion complicate the leadership task, while also creating opportunities for equity-driven initiatives and inclusive leadership practices (Shaked, 2023).

The primary role of school principals in Israel is defined as serving as instructional leaders with the overarching goal of improving teaching and learning for all students. This role is central to the national leadership policy and principal preparation programs. The Israeli framework for instructional leadership is structured around four core dimensions: (1) planning the future image of the school, which involves developing a clear vision and leading strategic change; (2) leading the educational team and fostering its professional growth through ongoing development and capacity-building; (3) focusing on the individual needs of both students and staff, with an emphasis on personal support and differentiation; and (4) managing the relationship between the school and its broader community, including partnerships with parents, local authorities, and external stakeholders (Capstones, 2008).

Instructional leadership has been established as the central focus of principal preparation. These programs aim to equip school leaders with evidence-based, applied knowledge and leadership competencies, particularly in relation to the interconnectedness of school leadership, instructional quality, and student achievement. As stated by the Israeli Ministry of Education (2019, p. 5), the overarching goal of these programs is to provide principals with "up-to-date and applied knowledge" to lead pedagogically effective and socially responsive schools.

During the COVID-19 pandemic in Israel from 2020 to 2022, six distinct waves of infection occurred, each accompanied by varying degrees of restrictions, lockdowns, and phased easing measures depending on the epidemiological situation. The first wave began in March 2020, prompting a broad lockdown that included the closure of educational institutions, restrictions on movement, and the shutdown of businesses. In April, as case numbers declined, the government initiated a gradual reopening of the economy under the "Purple Badge" (Tav Sagol) framework. The second wave began in late June 2020, characterized by rising case numbers and renewed restrictions, including the implementation of the "Traffic Light Plan" to manage localized outbreaks. In September, just before the Jewish New Year, a second national lockdown was imposed. A gradual exit began in February 2021, accompanied by the introduction of the "Green Pass" system, which allowed vaccinated and recovered individuals to access certain venues and services. The third wave, triggered by the Alpha variant, led to a third lockdown in December 2020. In spring 2021, restrictions were gradually lifted. However, by June, a fourth wave emerged, driven by the Delta variant. This wave was managed under a policy of "soft containment," aimed at minimizing harm to the economy while controlling the spread. In August, additional restrictions were imposed and the third-dose ("booster") vaccination campaign was launched. Toward the end of 2021, the fifth wave began with the emergence of the Omicron variant. Although this variant spread widely, it generally resulted in less severe illness. By early 2022, most restrictions were lifted. The sixth wave began in June 2022, driven mainly by the BA.5 subvariant. This wave gradually subsided by late August, as the number of confirmed cases steadily declined (Barda et al., 2021; Leshem and Wilder-Smith, 2021; Rossman et al., 2021).

Beyond description, the distinctive features of the Israeli educational context suggest propositions that can inform the interpretation of findings. The bifurcated school system, with its parallel secular, religious, and Arab sectors, may lead leadership research to foreground questions of equity differently than in more unified systems. Israel's strong security culture, forged through repeated exposure to conflict and emergency situations, could predispose research to emphasize crisis management and resilience over other leadership dimensions. Likewise, the national prestige accorded to digital technologies, reinforced by widespread government initiatives in ICT, might increase scholarly attention to digital instructional leadership during the pandemic. While this review does not test such propositions directly, articulating them helps to connect contextual observations to theoretical expectations and offers a conceptual lens for interpreting the patterns observed in the Israeli corpus.

Method

To conduct this systematic review, the study adhered to the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines, which promote transparency, methodological rigor, and replicability throughout the review process. The PRISMA flow diagram, illustrating the identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion phases of the review, is presented in Figure 1.

Databases and search strategy

The search for this review was conducted in June 2025 across two major academic databases: Scopus and Web of Science. In Scopus, the search was limited to the title, abstract, and keywords, while in Web of Science, the search was conducted using the Topic field, which includes title, abstract, author keywords, and Keywords Plus. In both databases, the search was structured around three core components: (1) School leadership-related terms ("school leader" OR "school leaders" OR "school leadership" OR "educational leader" OR "educational leaders" OR "educational leadership" OR "instructional leader" OR "instructional leaders" OR "instructional leadership" OR "principal" OR "principals"); (2) Geographic focus ("Israel" OR "Israeli"); (3) Pandemic-related terms ("COVID" OR "COVID-19" "COVID 19" OR "pandemic"). The search in Scopus yielded 40 results, while the Web of Science search returned 73 results, resulting in an initial pool of 113 records.

Screening and selection process

After merging the results from the two databases, 28 duplicate records were identified and removed, leaving 85 unique publications. These remaining records were then screened for relevance to the field of education. At this stage, 43 publications were excluded because they were not related to education, most commonly dealing with topics in medicine or public health.

The remaining 42 education-related publications were then examined in greater depth based on the following inclusion criteria: (1) a clear focus on school leadership (excluding studies centered on middle leadership); (2) situated within the Israeli K–12 system, including kindergartens; and (3) directly related to the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, 18 publications were excluded: some focused primarily on teaching and learning rather than leadership, one addressed middle leadership, several were not conducted in the Israeli context, others dealt with higher education instead of K-12, and some were not inherently linked to COVID-19. This screening process yielded a final corpus of 24 publications, which formed the basis for the analysis presented in the following section. These 24 sources are marked with an asterisk(*) in the reference list and presented in Table 1 below.

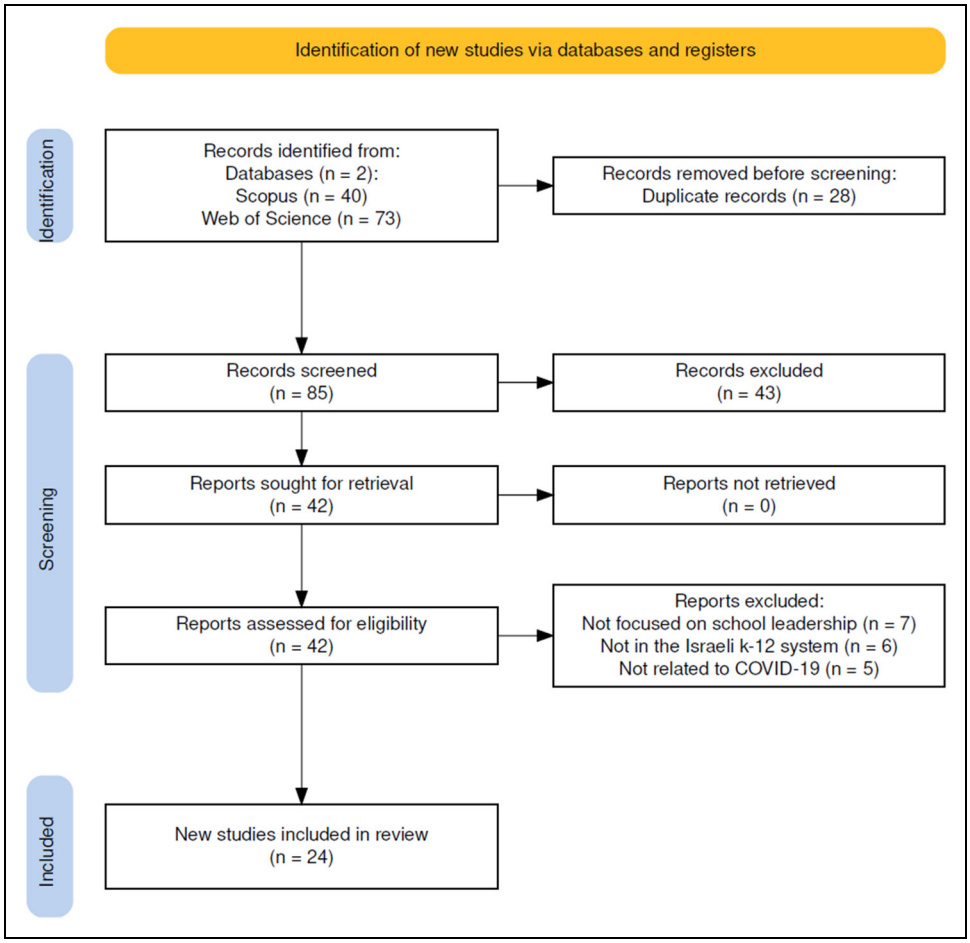


Figure 1. The PRISMA flow diagram.

Data analysis

Building on this focus, the data analysis phase involved a systematic review of each of the 24 publications, examining key features such as its stated aim, theoretical framing, main findings, and significant implications. Initial coding was conducted inductively, allowing the codes to emerge directly from the content of the texts rather than being based on a pre-established coding framework. This inductive approach enabled the analysis to remain grounded in the specific language, emphases, and perspectives of the reviewed studies.

As codes were developed, they were continuously compared across texts using a constant comparative method, allowing for the identification of similarities, variations, and recurring patterns. These initial codes were then grouped into broader conceptual categories, forming the foundation for thematic synthesis. The synthesis process involved interpreting, refining, and elevating these categories into higher-order themes that captured distinct conceptual directions within the literature.

Table 1. Overview of publications by thematic area.

Source	Type	No. of participants	Topic
Emotional and relational leadership			
1. Ben Harush (2024)	Qualitative	10	School climate
2. Buskila et al. (2025)	Qualitative	26	Resilient leadership
3. Da'as et al. (2025)	Qualitative	42	Principals' metaphors
4. Dor-Haim (2023)	Qualitative	14	Teachers' emotional consequences
5. Kaim et al. (2023)	Tool development	20	Functional resilience
6. Kaim et al. (2024)	Quantitative	1802	Functional resilience
7. Masry-Herzallah (2023)	Mixed-methods	215	Technology-assisted learning
8. Masry-Herzallah and Stavissky (2021)	Quantitative	331	Technology-assisted learning
9. Masry-Herzallah and Stavissky (2023)	Quantitative	437	Technology-assisted learning
10. Nissim and Avidan (2024)	Mixed-methods	64	Care
11. Oplatka and Crawford (2022)	Conceptual		Emotions
12. Rave et al. (2023)	Quantitative	465	Principals' listening
Crisis and agentic leadership			
13. Ganon-Shilon and Becher (2024)	Qualitative	16	Principals' sense-making
14. Golan et al. (2022)	Qualitative	23	school-based wellness program
15. Gordin Yoskovitz and Schechter (2024)	Qualitative	60	Agentic leadership
16. Qadach (2024)	Quantitative	1134	Self-efficacy
17. Schechter et al. (2024)	Conceptual		Crisis leadership
18. Taun et al. 2022)	Quantitative	169	Management skills
Instructional and inclusive leadership			
19. Berkovich (2023)	Quantitative	267	Digital instructional leadership
20. Chen-Levi et al. (2023)	Qualitative	16	Digital leadership
21. Finkelstein et al. (2024)	Qualitative	25	Inclusion
22. Ganon-Shilon et al. (2023)	Qualitative	22	Inclusion
23. Shaked (2024)	Qualitative	36	Instructional leadership
24. Shaked and Benoliel (2024)	Qualitative	33	Instructional boundary management

Through this iterative and interpretive process, three overarching thematic areas were identified, each representing a major focus in the body of Israeli research on school leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic. These areas serve as the foundation for the following section, which presents the main findings of the review. Table 1 provides an overview of the 24 publications analyzed in this review, categorized by the three thematic areas identified.

Findings

This systematic review synthesizes Israeli research on school leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic and aims to identify the main topics addressed in this body of literature. Data analysis revealed three primary areas of focus: emotional and relational leadership, crisis and agentic

leadership, and instructional and inclusive leadership. Each of these areas is presented in the sections that follow.

Emotional and relational leadership

Insofar as the COVID-19 pandemic amplified affective demands and brought interpersonal relationships to the forefront within school communities, research conducted in Israel underscored the importance of principals attending to both the relational dynamics and the emotional well-being of all members of the school community, including themselves, both during the height of the crisis and throughout the transition back to in-person learning.

Ben Harush (2024) found that COVID-19 disrupted school climate and principal–student relationships. In response, principals worked to restore open communication and a sense of belonging, requiring a shift toward a more open and inclusive leadership style. Dor-Haim (2023) examined teachers' perspectives on the emotional impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in the context of their relationship with the principal. The findings revealed that while some teachers reported burnout, decreased motivation, and heightened stress due to technical and pedagogical challenges, others described the period as one of professional growth, highlighting the importance of having a supportive and responsive principal during times of crisis.

Specifically, principals' attentive listening played a critical role in supporting teachers during stressful periods, such as COVID-19 lockdowns. Rave et al. (2023) illustrated how teachers who perceived their principals as good listeners reported lower intentions to leave the profession and demonstrated higher levels of organizational citizenship behavior, such as helping colleagues. Notably, the negative impact of stress on turnover intention was mitigated when teachers felt their principals listened to them, which highlighted the protective effect of principal listening on teacher well-being and school climate. In a similar vein, Nissim and Avidan (2024) observed that kindergarten teachers shifted from a primarily pedagogical role to a leadership approach centered on care, emotional support, and relational stability. While the study offered interesting observations, its methodological approach limited the strength of the conclusions that could be drawn. Nonetheless, their findings suggested that the more confident teachers felt in their leadership abilities, the more they fostered strong, supportive relationships within their school communities.

By exploring principals' use of metaphors, Da'as et al. (2025) illustrated how their emotional role during the COVID-19 pandemic was expressed in two key dimensions: their own emotional experiences and the emotional support they provided to their school communities. Principals used vivid metaphors to convey feelings of isolation, pressure, and responsibility. Despite these challenges, they drew on their inner strength to empower teachers and offered emotional support, portraying themselves as stabilizing and caring figures within the school.

Masry-Herzallah and Stavissky (2021) argued that the effective implementation of technology-assisted learning during the COVID-19 pandemic relied on trust, collaboration, and openness among teachers, students, and parents. To better understand this dynamic, the authors examined the relationship between principals' transformational leadership style and teachers' success in online teaching, finding a positive correlation. Further research revealed that this relationship was mediated by the quality of communication within the school (Masry-Herzallah, 2023) and moderated by the teachers' educational sector (Masry-Herzallah and Stavissky, 2023).

Buskila et al. (2025) argued that resilience was closely linked to emotional intelligence, positive emotions, and strong interpersonal relationships. They asserted that their results yielded three main manners of applying resilience leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, this interpretation may have gone slightly beyond what the data supported, as the findings more accurately

reflected three strategies that principals used to demonstrate resilience in practice, rather than a fully developed model of resilience leadership. These included: (a) adopting a proactive, pragmatic, and creative approach; (b) finding meaning in their work and setting purposeful goals; and (c) actively shaping and leading the school's emotional climate. These practices enabled school leaders to effectively navigate the complexities of the pandemic and provide meaningful support to their communities. However, resilience was not solely a leadership trait, it was also an organizational capacity. As Kaim et al. (2023, 2024) emphasized, building functional resilience at the school level was essential for maintaining operational continuity and adapting effectively during crises.

Even after the pandemic, principals were required to adopt a more relational and emotionally responsive leadership approach. Drawing on a conceptual perspective, Oplatka and Crawford (2022) argued that the return to in-person schooling had to be accompanied by intentional efforts to address and manage the emotional well-being of both teachers and students. They emphasized that school leaders played a crucial role in helping staff cope with feelings of loneliness and frustration, thereby enabling them to better support the emotional needs of their students.

Crisis and agentic leadership

A crisis was a low-probability, high-impact event that threatened an organization's viability and required a swift response (Beilstein et al., 2021). In schools, it disrupted safety and stability, exposing students, teachers, and families to trauma, threats, and loss. Marked by unpredictability, fear, and uncertainty, these conditions were clearly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic (Harris and Jones, 2025). In response, Israeli research on school leadership during this period engaged with crisis leadership frameworks and emphasized the importance of key capacities for navigating and overcoming crisis, including sense-making, self-efficacy, and agentic leadership.

Recognizing the need for conceptual frameworks to better understand school leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic, Schechter et al. (2024) recommended drawing on existing literature on crisis leadership in schools, in which they identified six key elements. First, preparation involved developing proactive plans and protocols in advance of a crisis. Second, communication was vital for conveying clear, accurate, and timely information to all stakeholders. Third, decision-making required school leaders to assess situations rapidly and make informed, adaptive choices. Fourth, emotional support entailed addressing the psychological well-being of staff, students, and families (see the first section above). Fifth, collaboration highlighted the importance of coordinating efforts with both internal teams and external partners. Finally, reflection and learning focused on evaluating the crisis response to strengthen future preparedness and resilience.

In times of crisis, school principals often encountered role tensions arising from the competing demands of various stakeholders. Golan et al. (2022) noted that during the COVID-19 pandemic, the implementation of external programs was hindered by limited parental cooperation and strained relationships between families and the education system. Ganon-Shilon and Becher (2024) investigated how principals managed tensions arising from the competing demands of various stakeholders during the COVID-19 pandemic and found that they engaged in sense-making and sense-giving processes to navigate them in creative and context-sensitive ways. Two key strategies emerged: protective mediation, which allowed principals to maintain moral discretion under external pressure, and contrived mediation, a novel, collaborative approach aimed at preserving the school's moral and professional identity.

Qadach (2024) examined the extent to which school principals' self-efficacy predicted effective school functioning during the COVID-19 crisis. The findings revealed a positive relationship, indicating that principals with higher self-efficacy were better equipped to lead their schools through the

challenges of the pandemic. Among the five self-efficacy dimensions—general management efficacy, leadership efficacy, human relations efficacy, efficacy in managing external relations, and pedagogical management efficacy—significant sectoral differences were found only in external relations efficacy, which was higher among Arab school principals compared to their Jewish counterparts.

While the study by Taun et al. (2022), conducted in Bedouin schools in Israel, did not explicitly reference the concept of self-efficacy, its findings strongly reflected its core elements. Although the study lacked a clearly defined conceptual focus and presented somewhat fragmented findings, it nonetheless offered useful insights into leadership perceptions during the COVID-19 crisis. Principals reported high levels of confidence in their decision-making, organizational planning, and team management abilities, which they considered essential for navigating the challenges of the COVID-19 crisis. They also emphasized their availability, accessibility, and commitment to clear communication, underscoring their efforts to cultivate a supportive and stable school environment. Teachers, in turn, perceived their principals' leadership as formative and authentic, reflecting a style grounded in competence, care, and strong relational capacity. Collectively, these findings pointed to a leadership approach characterized by a deep sense of self-efficacy and resilience.

Complementing this perspective, Gordin Yoskovitz and Schechter (2024) highlighted the importance of principals' agency, which they defined as "leaders' ability to initiate action that is independent and purposeful, suggesting will, autonomy, freedom, and choice" (p. 923), as a critical factor in crisis leadership. During the pandemic, principals demonstrated agency by proactively creating opportunities in various domains, including professional development, role autonomy, and building relationships and connections with diverse communities.

Instructional and inclusive leadership

Another key aspect of school leadership examined in Israeli research on the COVID-19 pandemic was the domain of teaching and learning. This area was explored through the lens of instructional leadership, an approach in which principals consistently directed their efforts toward teaching and learning to advance student academic achievement (Hallinger et al., 2020). In addition, researchers investigated the implementation of an instructional reform introduced during the pandemic, which focused on placing students with special education needs in general education classrooms and the instructional adjustments required to support their learning (Crispel and Kasperski, 2021).

In his exploration of principals' instructional leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic, Shaked (2024) identified three distinct theories of action, defined as the conscious or unconscious assumptions that guided professional behavior in specific situations. The first, moratorium, described principals who temporarily suspended their instructional leadership practices in response to the crisis. The second, adaptation, referred to principals who adjusted their instructional leadership to meet the unique demands of the pandemic. The third, determination, characterized those who continued to exercise instructional leadership consistently and without compromise, despite the challenging circumstances. Shaked and Benoliel (2024) also examined principals' growing need for instructional boundary management during the COVID-19 pandemic, an area of school leadership that encompassed activities combining instructional leadership with boundary management.

Chen-Levi et al. (2023) emphasized the importance of broad digital leadership, including the effective management of virtual school spaces. While their study offered valuable insights, it lacked a clearly articulated conceptual framework to anchor its findings. Building on the exploration of digital leadership in the post-pandemic context, Berkovich (2023) examined teacher attrition in

the aftermath of COVID-19, using principals' regular and digital instructional leadership profiles as a framework for understanding this broader phenomenon. His findings suggested that teachers led by principals who scored low in both regular and digital instructional leadership reported the highest intent to leave. Even teachers under principals who demonstrated strong digital but weak face-to-face instructional leadership reported higher attrition intentions than those led by principals who were strong in both domains. One possible explanation was that principals who excelled only in digital leadership may have been perceived as less supportive in areas such as interpersonal communication and relationship-building, which were critical to teacher retention.

Under a national inclusive education reform, Ganon-Shilon et al. (2023) highlighted the central role of principals in advancing inclusive approaches, particularly within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. They argued that the crisis compelled educational leaders to collectively revisit and refine their inclusive practices in response to the urgent and evolving needs of their school communities. The study emphasized the importance of developing a shared vision, building school capacity for inclusion, and fostering trust and collaboration with stakeholders. Building on this context, Finkelstein et al. (2024) examined how principals and school counselors co-led the development of multicultural school competencies during the pandemic. They argued that COVID-19 heightened the need for culturally responsive leadership capable of addressing students' diverse emotional, social, and cultural needs. The study identified three key areas through which multicultural school competencies were enacted: demonstrating a commitment to multicultural values, building relational skills, and fostering social-emotional learning.

Importantly, there was a need to draw a clear distinction between the formal presence of instructional leadership themes in Israeli research and the lack of meaningful engagement with teaching quality and learning continuity. This section may have given the impression that teaching and learning were central concerns in Israeli research on school leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, several studies referenced instructional leadership, inclusive practices, and digital learning environments. However, a closer examination revealed that these discussions often lacked sustained attention to teaching quality and the learning experience as core educational priorities. The research did not highlight the importance of maintaining instructional standards or ensuring uninterrupted learning throughout the crisis. In many cases, references to teaching and learning were indirect, situated within broader discussions of leadership adaptation or inclusive education, rather than addressed as a primary and explicit focus.

Discussion

This systematic review examines how school leadership in Israel was studied in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. It identifies three primary areas of focus: emotional and relational leadership, instructional and inclusive leadership, and crisis and agentic leadership.

Interpretation of findings

Compared with international scholarship, Israeli studies on school leadership during COVID-19 exhibited a distinctive emphasis on emotional and relational leadership, with less sustained attention to equity and learning continuity. This divergence can be understood in light of contextual factors: the centrality of principals' relational role in a society under prolonged stress, the predominance of security-oriented discourses that frame crises as tests of resilience, and the government's digital learning policies, which shaped research attention toward technology rather than pedagogy. Interpreted through these lenses, the Israeli corpus reflects a leadership model

that prioritized community cohesion and psychosocial support while giving less explicit attention to issues of teaching quality and equitable access. At the same time, several studies hinted at the importance of inclusive practices and continuity of learning, suggesting potential lines of development that future research could pursue. Grounding the analysis in both contextual features and international benchmarks thus strengthens the theoretical contribution of the review: it highlights how local structures and cultures shape the salience of leadership themes, while also exposing the gaps that merit further inquiry.

The prominence of emotional and relational leadership in Israeli studies can be interpreted through theoretical perspectives that illuminate its deeper meaning. Drawing on emotional labor theory (Beatty, 2000; Hochschild, 1983), principals in Israel were required to perform continuous affective work, managing their own emotions while supporting those of teachers and students in order to sustain morale and a sense of stability during prolonged uncertainty. This emotional regulation constituted a central component of their professional role, not an auxiliary task, and reflected the moral expectations attached to educational leadership in crisis. To clarify how this emotional labor becomes a source of legitimacy and authority, it is important to note how different forms of emotion work are recognized within the local educational field. Emotional labor theory distinguishes between surface acting and deep acting, and in the Israeli context, where calmness, care, and relational presence are culturally expected, principals who engage in deep acting acquire symbolic capital through the trust, credibility, and loyalty they generate. Even consistent surface acting signals steadiness and control, qualities that teachers and parents regard as markers of competent leadership during stressful times. From the standpoint of crisis leadership theory (Harris and Jones, 2021; Smith and Riley, 2012), these emotional practices also functioned as strategic responses to the highly pressurized and unpredictable conditions of the pandemic, where trust, empathy, and relational presence helped maintain coherence and collective efficacy. In the Israeli context, characterized by recurring exposure to national emergencies and societal stress, these emotional and relational capacities are deeply embedded in the professional habitus of school leaders. Thus, the focus on emotional and relational leadership in Israeli research is not only situational but also culturally institutionalized, reflecting a longstanding orientation toward care, cohesion, and resilience in the face of adversity.

At first glance, this study's three thematic areas may be seen as aligning with international trends in educational leadership research during the pandemic. Israeli research on emotional and relational leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic closely parallels international findings that underscore the increasing affective demands placed on school leaders during times of crisis. Global studies have highlighted the significance of care, empathy, and relationship-building in sustaining school communities (e.g. Brown et al., 2023; Striepe and Kafa, 2025), and Israeli research reinforces these themes by emphasizing principals' roles in supporting teacher well-being, fostering trust, and maintaining staff morale (Dor-Haim, 2023; Rave et al., 2023). The domain of crisis and agentic leadership also reveals strong convergence with global scholarship. International research has emphasized resilience, collaboration, and timely decision-making as central to effective crisis leadership (Harris and Jones, 2021; Striepe and Kafa, 2025), and Israeli studies similarly highlight the importance of adaptability (Schechter et al., 2024) and principal agency in navigating complex stakeholder environments (Ganon-Shilon and Becher, 2024; Gordin Yoskovitz and Schechter, 2024). Similarly, instructional and inclusive leadership emerged as key concerns in both the Israeli and international literature. Reviews conducted globally point to the urgent need for digital integration, the preservation of instructional quality, and equity-oriented approaches to remote learning (Chatzipanagiotou and Katsarou, 2023; Parveen et al., 2022). Israeli studies reflect these priorities through analyses of how principals adapted instructional practices under pressure (Shaked, 2024),

engaged in instructional boundary management (Shaked and Benoliel, 2024), and led reforms to promote the inclusion of students with special education needs in mainstream classrooms (Ganon-Shilon et al., 2023).

However, a closer examination reveals that research on school leadership in Israel not only aligns with international literature but also reflects the distinct characteristics of the local educational context. These contextual influences become particularly evident in two key areas that are largely absent from Israeli research.

First, the theme of equity is largely unaddressed in Israeli research on school leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic. Israeli studies make no direct reference to equity, despite the well-documented disparities within the education system and the widespread recognition that the crisis, particularly the shift to remote learning, intensified existing gaps. While some studies compare principals from the Jewish and Arab sectors (Masry-Herzallah and Stavissky, 2023; Qadach, 2024), they do not explore disparities or systemic inequities between these populations. Similarly, research related to the national inclusion reform (e.g. Finkelstein et al., 2024; Ganon-Shilon et al., 2023) focuses primarily on the integration of students with special education needs into general education classrooms, emphasizing pedagogical inclusion rather than broader socioeconomic equity.

This limited engagement stands in sharp contrast to the global literature, where equity is placed at the forefront of educational leadership research during the pandemic. For example, Brown et al. (2023) explicitly address equity challenges and how school leaders responded using alternative strategies and digital technologies; Parveen et al. (2022) emphasize efforts to address digital divides and equity gaps; and Chatzipanagiotou and Katsarou (2023) similarly focus on equity-related challenges. From an international perspective, this absence is striking, given the centrality of equity in contemporary educational leadership discourse. Principals are increasingly expected to act as social justice leaders, actively working to identify and dismantle inequities related to race, gender, socioeconomic status, and ability within their schools (Khalifa et al., 2016; Theoharis, 2024; Wang, 2018). Yet this internationally recognized role of principals as equity-focused leaders remains largely unexamined in the Israeli context.

This absence may partly reflect how equity is conceptualized and operationalized within the Israeli education system, which differs in important ways from Western contexts where equity is often framed explicitly around race, gender, or social class. In Israel, structural inequities are deeply embedded in the bifurcated organization of the education system, which is divided into separate Jewish and Arab sectors. These sectors operate largely independently, with distinct instructional languages and largely homogenous student populations, reinforcing ethnic and linguistic segregation and contributing to persistent educational inequalities (Feniger et al., 2021; Resh and Blass, 2019). These divides are further compounded by geographic and socioeconomic disparities, particularly in peripheral communities and mixed socioeconomic settings, where resource allocation, learning conditions, and student readiness vary considerably (Dadon-Golan et al., 2019). Thus, the limited engagement with equity in Israeli leadership research may reflect not a lack of relevance, but rather a distinctive sociopolitical context in which equity concerns often remain implicit.

In addition to these structural dynamics, equity may also be pushed outside the boundaries of legitimate inquiry through dominant discursive filters that shape what counts as a meaningful leadership problem in Israel. Accountability systems emphasize test scores and compliance indicators rather than equity-oriented outcomes, reducing the visibility of disparities in both professional conversations and research agendas. Funding formulas that allocate resources primarily on the basis of sector and locality rather than demonstrated inequities further normalize existing gaps as administratively acceptable. Moreover, national principal standards prioritize managerial efficiency, safety, and instructional improvement, with little explicit reference to social justice or equity work.

Together, these institutional and discursive mechanisms shape the field of school leadership in ways that make equity a peripheral, rather than central, focus of scholarly and professional attention.

Second, Israeli research on school leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic does not substantially engage with the issue of learning continuity. While international reviews emphasized the importance of maintaining instructional quality and ensuring learning continuity during the crisis (Chatzipanagiotou and Katsarou, 2023; Parveen et al., 2022), Israeli studies placed relatively little emphasis on this domain. The only study that directly focused on teaching and learning as the core function of schooling was Shaked's (2024) work on instructional leadership, which found that some Israeli principals temporarily suspended their instructional leadership efforts in response to the crisis. This limited attention to teaching and learning as the central mission of schools may suggest that although the Ministry of Education formally expects that the preparation of novice principals will center on instructional leadership, this focus appears to be underdeveloped.

The findings of the present review suggest that neither equity nor learning continuity played a meaningful role in Israeli scholarship on school leadership during the pandemic. The studies reviewed offer little evidence of principals addressing systemic inequalities or implementing leadership practices aimed at ensuring the continuity of teaching and learning. This absence appears to reflect two underlying patterns. First, it suggests a tendency among Israeli principals to give limited attention to issues of equity and instructional quality, even in times of crisis when such issues are particularly urgent. Second, it may point to a broader pattern within Israeli educational research of overlooking these critical areas, which are widely regarded in international literature as central to effective and socially responsive school leadership. Importantly, the absence of equity and learning continuity in Israeli leadership research should not be interpreted as a new blind spot generated by the pandemic. Rather, the COVID-19 crisis amplified epistemic hierarchies that long predate it. In the Israeli educational field, discourse surrounding leadership has historically privileged narratives of stability, resilience, and organizational survival, while issues related to social justice, equity, and instructional continuity have often remained secondary or implicit. The pandemic therefore did not introduce an imbalance but made existing priorities more visible by intensifying reliance on these long-established frames. Seen in this light, the gaps identified in the review are not contingent or crisis-specific but reflect deeper historical patterns that shape what is foregrounded and what is marginalized in both leadership practice and scholarly inquiry in Israel. Recognizing these enduring hierarchies helps clarify that the absence of equity and learning continuity is structural and epistemic rather than episodic, revealing how cultural and institutional conditions define the boundaries of legitimate leadership knowledge.

To move beyond a descriptive interpretation, these thematic absences can be understood through the lens of critical and sociological frameworks. From a Bourdieusian perspective, the Israeli field of educational leadership can be seen as structured by a unique interplay between *habitus* and *field*, where dominant national narratives of resilience, security, and collective responsibility operate as forms of symbolic capital that shape scholarly agendas and professional norms (Bourdieu, 1990; Lingard and Christie, 2003). Within such a field, leadership constructs aligned with emotional resilience and adaptive management gain epistemic legitimacy, while issues of equity and learning continuity are marginalized. Similarly, drawing on critical policy enactment theory (Ball et al., 2011), Israel's ethnocentric policy structures and segmented governance systems can be understood as "discursive filters" that restrict the conceptual vocabulary available to both policymakers and researchers. These filters are reinforced by what Connell (2019) terms Northern epistemologies of schooling, which in the Israeli context materialize in the adoption of OECD-style managerial tools such as performance dashboards and quantifiable accountability metrics. These instruments define educational success through measurable outputs like attendance rates or the number of

instructional days, reducing learning continuity to a countable indicator and leaving little conceptual space for examining deeper inequities in access, engagement, and support. By privileging managerial and technical rationalities, such tools crowd out equity-oriented understandings of leadership and narrow the horizons of what is considered legitimate or researchable. Consequently, the limited attention to equity and learning continuity in Israeli leadership research does not simply reflect omission but reveals how structural, cultural, and policy logics jointly delimit the horizons of educational leadership thought and inquiry in this context.

Beyond its national significance, the Israeli case offers a valuable lens for comparative theorization. It demonstrates how contextual configurations of governance, culture, and social structure shape not only how leadership is enacted but also what is considered legitimate to study or celebrate in leadership research (Clarke and O'Donoghue, 2017; Hallinger, 2018). In a system characterized by centralized control, systemic segregation, and a civic culture influenced by security discourses and militarized values (Feniger et al., 2021; Resh and Blass, 2019), leadership tends to be conceptualized less as an engine of social transformation and more as a mechanism for maintaining stability, cohesion, and functional continuity. This orientation contrasts with dominant Western paradigms that position school leadership as a means for advancing social justice, equity, and instructional improvement (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2020; Khalifa et al., 2016). By examining these contrasts, the Israeli case invites a reconsideration of the presumed universality of such paradigms and suggests that crisis leadership should be understood as a culturally mediated construct (Hallinger, 2018; Rizvi and Lingard, 2010). Rather than treating Israel as a critical case in general terms, its value lies in the specific configuration of conditions that produce the leadership patterns observed here. These conditions include a highly centralized governance structure that limits school autonomy, extensive ethnic and linguistic segmentation that normalizes unequal provision, and a civic culture shaped by security concerns that elevates resilience, compliance, and organizational survival as central leadership virtues. It is the interaction among these elements that generates the distinctive emphases identified in the review. Making this configuration explicit clarifies when and where the insights may be relevant, particularly in other national contexts that display similar structural and cultural alignments.

Limitations, implications, and future research

This study offers valuable insights into how school leadership in Israel was studied in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, it has several limitations. First, research on school leadership in Israel in other crisis contexts, which could provide useful points of comparison, was not included. In addition, further studies on COVID-19 in Israel may still appear and could alter the findings presented here. Finally, while this review categorized studies across three major thematic areas, a more detailed cross-tabulation between themes (e.g. the overlap between equity and learning continuity) was beyond the scope of the present analysis, given the limited number of available studies. Future reviews may benefit from such an approach once a larger body of research becomes available.

The findings of this review carry important implications for both educational research and leadership practice in Israel. First, there is a clear need to expand the conceptualization of school leadership to position equity and learning continuity as central rather than peripheral concerns. This shift should inform not only principal preparation programs but also the design of professional development frameworks and national policy guidelines. Serving principals should be offered ongoing, structured opportunities to strengthen their capacity for equity-oriented and instructional leadership through targeted training, reflective practice, and peer learning. Professional development initiatives must equip school leaders to identify and address systemic inequalities, foster

inclusive and culturally responsive school environments, and ensure the continuity and quality of teaching and learning, particularly in times of crisis or disruption. These priorities should be embedded in national leadership standards, supervisory practices, and school improvement strategies. In parallel, researchers should be encouraged to engage more critically with the dimensions of equity and access, investigating how leadership practices can help close socioeconomic and educational gaps. This would support the alignment of Israeli scholarship with international discourse. Researchers should also place greater emphasis on leadership for learning, with the goal of improving academic achievement across the Israeli school system. Strengthening the equity and learning dimensions of school leadership across both research and practice is vital to advancing a more just, inclusive, and resilient education system.

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