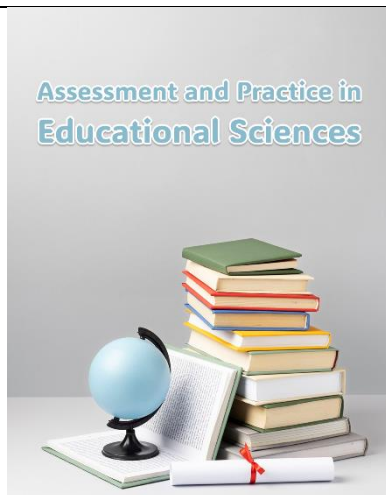




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A Systematic Review of the Factors and Components of School Principals' Empowerment in Crisis Conditions

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to systematically identify, synthesize, and classify the major factors and components contributing to the empowerment of school principals in crisis conditions. This study employed a systematic review design based on PRISMA 2020 principles. Persian- and English-language studies published from January 2000 to August 2026 were searched in Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, PubMed, ProQuest, Google Scholar, SID, Magiran, Noormags, and Civilica. Keywords related to school principals, educational leadership, empowerment, crisis management, resilience, emergency preparedness, adaptive leadership, decision-making, and managerial competencies were combined using Boolean operators. After removing duplicates and screening titles, abstracts, and full texts according to predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria, 32 studies were retained for final synthesis. Data were extracted using a researcher-developed form and analyzed through qualitative content analysis and thematic synthesis involving coding, constant comparison, categorization, and development of higher-order themes. The synthesis identified eight overarching dimensions of school principal empowerment in crisis conditions: crisis knowledge and preparedness; decision-making and problem-solving competence; psychological and emotional resilience; crisis communication and stakeholder engagement; collaborative and distributed leadership; organizational and resource-management capacity; strategic and adaptive leadership; and digital, informational, and contextual capacity. Clear and timely communication was identified in 31 studies (96.88%), while rapid decision-making and adaptive leadership were each reported in 30 studies (93.75%). Decision-making under uncertainty, psychological flexibility, staff communication, and instructional continuity planning were each identified in 29 studies (90.63%). Stress tolerance, teamwork, prioritization of essential school functions, communication with students and parents, and access to timely information were each reported in 28 studies (87.50%). School principals' empowerment in crisis conditions is a multidimensional construct requiring the integration of professional competence, psychological resilience, adaptive decision-making, communication, collaborative leadership, organizational capacity, technological competence, and institutional support; therefore, crisis-oriented principal development should address these dimensions simultaneously.

Keywords: School Principals, Empowerment, Crisis Management, Educational Leadership, Psychological Resilience, Adaptive Leadership, Systematic Review

Introduction

Schools are among the most important social institutions responsible not only for formal education but also for maintaining psychological security, social stability, continuity of learning, and community resilience during periods of disruption. In

ordinary conditions, school principals are expected to coordinate teaching and learning, supervise human resources, communicate with families, manage organizational processes, and maintain educational quality. Under crisis conditions, however, these responsibilities become considerably more complex. Crises such as pandemics, natural disasters, technological disruptions, social instability, security threats, organizational breakdowns, and sudden policy changes can rapidly transform the school environment and force principals to make consequential decisions under uncertainty, limited information, time pressure, and resource constraints. In such situations, the effectiveness of school leadership depends not merely on formal managerial authority but on the extent to which principals possess the professional, psychological, communicative, technological, strategic, and organizational capacities necessary to respond adaptively. Therefore, the empowerment of school principals has become an increasingly important concern in educational administration, particularly in environments characterized by uncertainty, rapid change, and recurrent disruption.

Empowerment in educational organizations is a multidimensional concept that generally refers to strengthening individuals' capacity, autonomy, competence, influence, motivation, and access to resources required for effective performance. In managerial contexts, empowerment extends beyond delegating authority and includes the development of knowledge, professional judgment, decision-making competence, psychological readiness, communication capacity, and organizational influence. Earlier approaches to human-resource empowerment emphasized the necessity of developing organizational members in ways that allow them to assume greater responsibility, use their capabilities more effectively, and participate actively in organizational decision-making (1). In educational systems, this perspective is especially important because schools are complex human organizations in which leadership outcomes depend substantially on interactions among principals, teachers, students, parents, and external institutions. Consequently, principal empowerment should be understood as a process through which school leaders acquire and exercise the competencies and organizational conditions required to guide their schools effectively in both routine and non-routine situations.

The importance of empowerment becomes particularly evident when considering the relationship between school leadership and the performance of other organizational members. School principals influence teachers not only through formal authority but also through communication patterns, leadership behaviors, trust, organizational support, and the creation of opportunities for professional participation. Communication competence has been identified as an important managerial resource associated with employees' motivation and empowerment, suggesting that managers who communicate effectively can strengthen participation, engagement, and confidence among staff members (2). Similarly, information literacy and communication skills have been associated with important educational and psychological outcomes, emphasizing the role of access to information, interpretation, interaction, and communication in effective educational functioning (3). These capacities become even more critical during crises, when uncertainty, contradictory information, rumors, and rapidly changing institutional requirements can undermine collective confidence and coordination.

Leadership approaches that emphasize participation, support, coaching, and positive organizational relationships are also closely associated with empowerment. Positive leadership has been shown to contribute to work engagement through psychological empowerment, indicating that leadership behaviors can shape employees' sense of competence, meaningfulness, autonomy, and organizational involvement (4). More recently, coaching leadership among school principals has been linked to creative performance through the mediating role of psychological empowerment, highlighting the importance of supportive leadership in stimulating initiative and adaptive behavior within schools (5). These findings are particularly relevant to crisis management because periods of disruption require teachers and staff members to move beyond routine roles, generate new solutions, adopt unfamiliar technologies, and respond flexibly to changing conditions. An empowered principal is therefore not

only personally capable but also able to empower others, distribute responsibility, strengthen staff confidence, and develop collective capacity for coordinated action.

Trust and professionalism provide another important foundation for effective educational leadership. School leaders influence instructional practices partly through the extent to which they create conditions of professional trust, autonomy, and empowerment among teachers (6). In crisis conditions, trust becomes an especially important organizational resource because staff members, students, and parents frequently depend on school leaders to interpret uncertain situations, communicate risks, and justify difficult decisions. When trust is weak, even technically appropriate decisions may be resisted or inconsistently implemented. Conversely, principals who are perceived as credible, transparent, fair, and professionally competent are more likely to secure cooperation from stakeholders. Thus, principal empowerment should include not only personal competence but also relational authority grounded in trust, professional legitimacy, and consistent communication.

The psychological dimension of empowerment is equally significant. Crisis leadership exposes principals to sustained uncertainty, emotional pressure, fear of adverse outcomes, responsibility for the welfare of students and staff, and the need to make high-stakes decisions. Under such circumstances, psychological resources such as self-efficacy, hope, resilience, emotional regulation, flexibility, and confidence become essential. Psychological capital has been recognized as an important developmental resource in educational settings, and managerial experiences can contribute to strengthening psychological capacities among learners and organizational members (7). Likewise, interventions aimed at psychological functioning have demonstrated the importance of social cognition and psychological capital in adaptive behavior (8). Although such studies may not focus directly on crisis leadership, they underscore the broader significance of psychological resources for effective functioning under demanding and uncertain conditions.

Psychological empowerment among educators has also attracted increasing scholarly attention. Research on female high school teachers has identified multiple factors contributing to psychological empowerment, illustrating that empowerment is shaped by individual, interpersonal, and organizational conditions rather than by a single variable (9). In similar terms, professional empowerment models for elementary school teachers emphasize the importance of professional development, competence enhancement, organizational support, participation, and opportunities for growth (10). These insights are highly relevant to school principals because educational leadership operates through interconnected professional systems. Principals must not only possess psychological resilience themselves but also create working environments that support the resilience, efficacy, and participation of teachers. During crises, such capacities become essential for maintaining continuity, reducing burnout, and sustaining collective commitment.

The relationship between empowerment and organizational learning is another central issue. Schools that function as learning organizations are better positioned to interpret environmental changes, revise ineffective practices, develop shared knowledge, and adapt to emerging challenges. Models of effective schools based on the learning-organization approach highlight the importance of organizational learning, collective participation, shared goals, continuous improvement, and adaptive capacity (11). Similarly, models of learning and teaching schools emphasize structures that facilitate knowledge creation, professional interaction, reflective practice, and continuous development (12). These characteristics are directly relevant to crisis conditions because schools cannot rely exclusively on pre-established routines when circumstances change rapidly. Instead, principals must facilitate collective learning, extract lessons from emerging experiences, and transform those lessons into revised procedures and organizational practices.

School-based management perspectives further reinforce the importance of local managerial capacity. The effectiveness of schools depends partly on the ability of school leaders to translate broad policies into practical organizational decisions appropriate to local circumstances. Evaluation of board-of-trustee schools and school-based management has revealed

persistent challenges in developing operational models that adequately support decentralized performance and accountability (13). Such challenges become more visible during crises, when standardized policies may not fully correspond to local needs and principals must balance central directives with school-specific realities. Empowered principals therefore need sufficient professional discretion, institutional support, and decision-making authority to adapt general regulations to rapidly changing local conditions while maintaining accountability.

The contemporary digital transformation of education has further expanded the meaning of principal empowerment. Digital technologies increasingly shape teaching, communication, administrative coordination, data management, professional learning, and interaction with families. Consequently, school leaders require digital competence not only as a technical skill but also as a strategic leadership capability. A model specifically developed for empowering elementary school principals in the era of digital transformation emphasizes the need for competencies associated with technological adaptation, digital leadership, organizational change, and effective use of information systems (14). These competencies became particularly visible during periods when schools were required to shift rapidly toward technology-mediated learning and virtual communication. In crisis situations, principals who lack digital readiness may face serious limitations in maintaining instructional continuity, coordinating staff, monitoring student participation, and communicating with stakeholders.

Artificial intelligence and emerging technologies have added another layer to the contemporary empowerment discourse. Recent work on designing an empowerment model for entrepreneurial school principals using artificial intelligence highlights the growing importance of digital innovation, intelligent decision support, information processing, and technological entrepreneurship within educational leadership (15). Although artificial intelligence is still developing as an educational management tool, its expanding role suggests that future crisis leadership will increasingly require principals to interpret data, use digital platforms, evaluate technological options, and make decisions in information-rich environments. Empowerment in modern schools therefore cannot be separated from digital literacy, technological adaptability, and strategic awareness of emerging tools.

Teacher empowerment models also provide important insights into the broader organizational ecosystem in which principals operate. Research on teachers of students with special needs has emphasized that empowerment requires structured programs that strengthen professional competence, knowledge, support, and capacity to respond to diverse educational needs (16). A related empowerment model for elementary teachers in integrated-inclusive education likewise underscores the importance of professional capabilities, supportive structures, and contextual conditions for effective educational performance (17). These findings are especially relevant in crises because vulnerable and special-needs students may face disproportionate disruption. School principals must therefore be empowered to identify diverse needs, allocate resources equitably, support teachers working with high-risk groups, and ensure that crisis responses do not widen educational inequalities.

Empowerment is also closely connected with innovation. Schools confronted with crises often need to redesign schedules, modify teaching methods, use new communication channels, reorganize staff responsibilities, and develop alternative mechanisms for maintaining educational continuity. Research suggests that teacher empowerment contributes positively to the innovation climate of schools, indicating that empowered personnel are more likely to participate in change, propose new ideas, and support innovative organizational practices (18). For principals, this means that empowerment should include the capacity to foster an environment in which experimentation is possible and staff members feel sufficiently trusted to contribute solutions. Crisis conditions rarely permit leaders to rely exclusively on conventional administrative routines; instead, effective response frequently requires creative adaptation supported by a culture of participation and innovation.

The managerial role itself is also influenced by individual characteristics and patterns of behavior. Research examining managerial roles and personality traits has shown that effective management cannot be reduced to technical procedures alone

and is influenced by personal and behavioral attributes (19). In crisis conditions, characteristics such as emotional stability, responsibility, decisiveness, adaptability, ethical judgment, and interpersonal sensitivity may become especially important because principals must simultaneously manage organizational tasks and the emotional reactions of stakeholders. Thus, empowerment involves a dynamic interaction between acquired professional competencies and individual capacities that support effective performance under pressure.

Contemporary educational systems also increasingly emphasize preparing students and staff for uncertain futures. Initiatives involving smart career planning and technology-based support demonstrate the growing integration of digital tools into educational development and empowerment processes (20). Although such interventions are not primarily concerned with principal crisis leadership, they illustrate the broader transition of schools toward technology-mediated decision-making and personalized support. This transition increases the responsibility of principals to understand digital systems, evaluate their relevance, and integrate them into organizational strategies in ways that support resilience and continuity.

Recent research on empowerment also indicates that professional development must be systematic rather than episodic. Principal and teacher empowerment models consistently emphasize training, continuous learning, access to supportive resources, participation in decision-making, and organizational structures that enable individuals to use their competencies effectively. Such principles are reflected in research on professional empowerment, psychological empowerment, inclusive education, coaching leadership, and digital transformation (5, 9, 10, 14). From a crisis-management perspective, this suggests that principals should not be expected to develop crisis competencies only after a disruptive event occurs. Preparedness must be institutionalized through anticipatory training, scenario planning, leadership development, and organizational learning.

Another important consideration is that crisis-related empowerment cannot be understood only at the individual level. A principal may possess strong personal competence but remain ineffective when organizational structures restrict access to information, resources, authority, professional support, or external networks. Conversely, schools with adequate resources may still respond poorly when leadership lacks confidence, communication competence, or adaptive judgment. Empowerment should therefore be conceptualized as the interaction between personal capacity and enabling organizational conditions. The literature on educational empowerment repeatedly demonstrates that leadership, organizational climate, trust, access to resources, professional development, and opportunities for participation are mutually reinforcing (6, 18). Crisis preparedness must consequently address both the capabilities of individual principals and the structural conditions that determine whether those capabilities can be translated into action.

Despite the growth of research on educational empowerment, the existing literature remains fragmented. Some studies focus on psychological empowerment, others on professional development, communication, digital competence, innovative climates, school-based management, coaching leadership, learning organizations, or teacher empowerment. Much of this evidence has been generated under routine educational conditions rather than explicitly within crises. At the same time, crisis-related studies often examine specific events or isolated competencies without developing an integrated framework of principal empowerment. This fragmentation makes it difficult to determine which factors are consistently supported across contexts and which dimensions are especially important when school leaders operate under uncertainty and disruption. The growing complexity of contemporary educational environments, including digital transformation, social change, public-health emergencies, and increasing demands for organizational resilience, makes such synthesis increasingly necessary.

Moreover, the emphasis of recent studies on digital leadership, artificial intelligence, psychological empowerment, professional trust, inclusive education, innovation, and adaptive organizational development suggests that the concept of principal empowerment is expanding beyond traditional administrative competence (6, 15-17). The modern school principal is expected to function simultaneously as a strategic leader, crisis coordinator, communicator, technology leader, human-resource

developer, and facilitator of organizational learning. Identifying the recurring dimensions that underpin these roles can provide a more coherent foundation for leadership development programs, principal selection, professional training, policy formulation, and school-level crisis preparedness.

Accordingly, a systematic review is needed to integrate the dispersed evidence and identify the principal factors and components that constitute effective empowerment of school leaders under crisis conditions. Such a synthesis can distinguish broadly applicable competencies from context-specific requirements, reveal the relative prominence of different empowerment dimensions, and provide a conceptual basis for developing evidence-informed models of crisis leadership in schools. By consolidating findings across psychological, managerial, organizational, technological, relational, and strategic domains, a systematic review can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of what school principals need in order to maintain educational continuity, protect organizational functioning, and strengthen school resilience during disruptive events.

Therefore, the aim of the present study was to systematically identify, synthesize, and classify the factors and components of school principals' empowerment in crisis conditions.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

The present study was conducted using a systematic review design to identify, synthesize, and classify the factors and components associated with the empowerment of school principals in crisis conditions. The review process was designed in accordance with the principles of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020) to ensure transparency, methodological rigor, and reproducibility in the identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and final inclusion of relevant studies. The statistical population of the review consisted of all Persian- and English-language scientific studies addressing school leadership, principal empowerment, managerial competencies, crisis leadership, crisis management in educational settings, organizational resilience, decision-making under critical conditions, and related constructs. The search covered studies published from January 2000 through August 2026. This period was selected to capture contemporary developments in school leadership and crisis-management research, particularly the growing attention to organizational resilience, emergency preparedness, digital leadership, and adaptive management following large-scale health, environmental, social, and organizational crises. Following the identification and screening process, 32 studies met all eligibility criteria and constituted the final corpus of the systematic review.

The inclusion criteria required studies to have a direct conceptual or empirical relationship with the empowerment, competencies, capacities, skills, or professional capabilities of school principals or educational managers in responding to crises, emergencies, disruptions, or highly uncertain organizational conditions. Eligible studies included quantitative, qualitative, mixed-methods, and review studies published in peer-reviewed journals, as well as high-quality academic dissertations where the full text was available and the methodological procedures were sufficiently described. Studies focusing on principals, school administrators, educational leaders, or comparable school-level managerial positions were considered eligible. Studies examining crisis-related competencies without explicitly using the term “empowerment” were also included when their findings addressed managerial capacities that could reasonably be classified as components of principal empowerment, such as strategic decision-making, communication, psychological readiness, resource mobilization, technological competence, resilience, collaborative leadership, conflict management, or emergency preparedness. Studies were excluded when they focused exclusively on teachers, students, university administrators, corporate managers, healthcare managers, or other occupational populations without presenting findings applicable to school principals. Editorials, conference

abstracts without full texts, non-scholarly reports, duplicated publications, studies lacking adequate methodological information, and studies whose primary focus was unrelated to either managerial empowerment or crisis conditions were also excluded.

The study-selection process was conducted in several consecutive stages. Initially, all records retrieved from the selected databases were imported into a reference-management system, and duplicate records were identified and removed. The remaining titles and abstracts were screened for relevance to the objectives of the review. Publications that clearly failed to satisfy the inclusion criteria were excluded at this stage. The full texts of potentially relevant studies were subsequently assessed against the predefined eligibility criteria. Particular attention was given to whether each study provided identifiable findings concerning the knowledge, competencies, psychological capacities, interpersonal abilities, organizational resources, leadership behaviors, or contextual conditions required for effective school management during crises. Any uncertainty regarding the inclusion of a study was resolved through repeated examination of its objectives, participants, methodological approach, and reported findings. After completion of the screening and eligibility assessment, 32 studies were retained for qualitative synthesis and systematic analysis.

Data Collection Tools

Data were collected through a comprehensive literature-search strategy and a researcher-developed systematic review extraction form. Electronic searches were conducted in major international databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, PubMed, ProQuest, and Google Scholar, together with Persian scientific databases including the Scientific Information Database (SID), Magiran, Noormags, and Civilica. To increase the sensitivity of the search and minimize the possibility of missing relevant studies, combinations of controlled terms and free-text keywords were used. The principal English search terms included “school principal,” “school leader,” “educational manager,” “principal empowerment,” “school leadership,” “managerial empowerment,” “leadership competency,” “crisis leadership,” “crisis management,” “emergency management,” “school crisis,” “organizational resilience,” “adaptive leadership,” “disaster management,” “emergency preparedness,” “decision-making,” “managerial skills,” and “leadership capacity.” Equivalent Persian terms were also searched individually and in combination. Boolean operators such as AND and OR were applied to construct different combinations of the keywords and enhance the comprehensiveness of the search.

The researcher-developed data-extraction form was used as the primary instrument for organizing information from the selected studies. The form was designed in accordance with the objectives of the systematic review and included bibliographic, methodological, and substantive information for each publication. Extracted information included the authors’ names, year of publication, country or geographical context, study design, research population, sample characteristics, data-collection method, analytical method, type of crisis or critical condition investigated, theoretical framework where applicable, and the major factors, dimensions, competencies, and components related to school principals’ empowerment. Particular emphasis was placed on extracting statements and findings that described the personal, professional, managerial, organizational, technological, social, psychological, and contextual capacities needed by principals to effectively manage schools in crisis situations. The extraction form also provided space for recording the operational definition of each identified component, the context in which it was observed, and its relationship with other empowerment-related constructs.

The methodological quality of the included studies was assessed before the final synthesis to reduce the influence of weak or insufficiently documented evidence. Quality assessment focused on the clarity of the research objectives, appropriateness of the research design, adequacy of sampling procedures, transparency of data-collection methods, appropriateness of analytical procedures, consistency between findings and conclusions, and relevance of the reported findings to the purpose of the

systematic review. For qualitative studies, particular attention was given to the transparency of participant selection, data-saturation procedures, coding processes, and credibility strategies. For quantitative studies, the adequacy of the sample, measurement procedures, validity and reliability evidence, statistical analyses, and reporting of findings were considered. Mixed-methods studies were examined in terms of both quantitative and qualitative methodological quality and the degree of integration between the two components. The quality appraisal was used to guide the interpretation and weighting of evidence rather than to exclude studies solely on the basis of study design.

Data Analysis

The final 32 studies were analyzed using qualitative content analysis and thematic synthesis. The analysis was conducted through a systematic process of familiarization, extraction of relevant findings, initial coding, comparison of conceptually similar codes, development of subthemes, and synthesis of higher-order themes. First, the full texts of all included studies were read repeatedly to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the theoretical and empirical perspectives presented in the literature. Statements, findings, interpretations, and reported constructs directly related to the empowerment of school principals in crisis conditions were then extracted as meaning units. Each meaning unit was assigned an initial code that represented the principal concept expressed in the original study. The coding procedure remained sufficiently close to the terminology and conceptual meaning of the original publications while allowing conceptually equivalent expressions from different studies to be integrated.

During the second stage of analysis, the initial codes were continuously compared to identify similarities, differences, overlaps, and conceptual relationships. Codes expressing closely related managerial capabilities were merged into broader conceptual categories. For example, findings related to rapid judgment, prioritization, problem solving, evidence-based decisions, and decision-making under uncertainty were considered within a broader managerial decision-making domain, while findings concerning emotional regulation, stress tolerance, self-efficacy, psychological flexibility, and persistence were examined as related psychological empowerment capacities. Similarly, communication with teachers, parents, students, external institutions, and community stakeholders was analyzed in relation to interpersonal and collaborative leadership capabilities. This constant-comparison process was continued until a coherent categorical structure representing the principal dimensions of school principals' empowerment in crisis conditions had been developed.

In the subsequent stage, the categories were synthesized into higher-order themes representing the major domains of principal empowerment. Both the frequency with which particular components appeared across the included studies and the conceptual significance attributed to those components were considered. Frequency alone was not regarded as sufficient evidence of importance, because some competencies were examined in a smaller number of highly relevant crisis-specific studies but were theoretically central to effective crisis leadership. Accordingly, the synthesis combined descriptive aggregation with interpretive analysis. Attention was also given to differences associated with the type of crisis, educational context, methodological design, and national setting of the included studies. Findings originating from health emergencies, natural disasters, organizational disruptions, social crises, security threats, and technology-dependent educational disruptions were compared to distinguish general empowerment components from competencies that were primarily context-specific.

To strengthen the credibility and dependability of the synthesis, coding and categorization were repeatedly reviewed throughout the analytical process. Conceptual definitions were refined whenever overlap was identified between categories, and categories were merged or separated according to the degree of conceptual distinctiveness supported by the reviewed evidence. An audit trail was maintained for the transition from extracted findings to initial codes, categories, and final themes, thereby enhancing the transparency of the analytical process. The final thematic framework was developed when additional

comparison of the included studies no longer produced substantively new categories and the identified themes adequately represented the range of empowerment factors reported in the reviewed literature. The resulting synthesis provided the analytical foundation for presenting the factors, dimensions, and components of school principals' empowerment in crisis conditions in the findings section.

Findings and Results

The systematic search, screening, and eligibility assessment resulted in the final inclusion of 32 studies addressing the factors, competencies, capacities, and contextual requirements associated with the empowerment of school principals under crisis conditions. Examination of the general characteristics of the included sources demonstrated considerable diversity in publication period, geographical context, methodological orientation, educational setting, and type of crisis investigated. The studies covered the period from 2000 to August 2026, although the distribution of publications was not uniform across this period. A marked concentration of research was observed after 2020, reflecting the substantial growth of scholarly attention to crisis leadership, school resilience, emergency preparedness, digital transformation, and adaptive school management following the COVID-19 pandemic and other large-scale disruptions to education. Of the 32 included studies, 17 studies (53.13%) were published between 2020 and August 2026, compared with 11 studies (34.38%) published between 2010 and 2019 and four studies (12.50%) published between 2000 and 2009. This pattern indicates that the empowerment of school leaders in crisis situations has increasingly developed as a distinct area of educational leadership research during the most recent period.

The included literature also represented different methodological traditions. Qualitative studies constituted the largest single methodological group, comprising 12 of the 32 studies (37.50%). These studies generally used interviews, focus groups, case studies, phenomenological approaches, or qualitative content analysis to explore principals' lived experiences, leadership behaviors, coping mechanisms, decision-making strategies, and organizational responses during crises. Ten studies (31.25%) employed quantitative designs, typically assessing relationships among leadership competencies, crisis preparedness, resilience, self-efficacy, organizational support, communication, or school-level outcomes. Six studies (18.75%) used mixed-methods designs, and four studies (12.50%) were review or synthesis studies. The methodological diversity of the evidence base facilitated consideration of both measurable leadership capabilities and more context-dependent or experiential dimensions of empowerment.

Geographically, the included sources represented multiple national and regional contexts. Ten studies (31.25%) were conducted in Iran or other West Asian educational contexts, seven (21.88%) originated from European settings, six (18.75%) from North America, five (15.63%) from East or South Asian countries, two (6.25%) from Oceania, and two (6.25%) from African contexts. Although national education systems differed in governance, resource availability, crisis exposure, and the formal authority assigned to school principals, substantial conceptual convergence was found across contexts regarding the importance of decision-making capacity, communication, psychological resilience, collaborative leadership, preparedness, resource management, and adaptive competence.

The crises examined in the included literature also varied. Health-related emergencies, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic, were the most frequent crisis context and were addressed in 11 studies (34.38%). Six studies (18.75%) investigated natural disasters or environmental emergencies, including earthquakes, floods, severe weather, and other disruptions affecting school continuity. Five studies (15.63%) focused primarily on organizational or social crises, four (12.50%) addressed multiple or unspecified crisis conditions, three (9.38%) considered security-related threats, and three (9.38%) emphasized technological or instructional disruption. This heterogeneity allowed the synthesis to distinguish between crisis-specific skills and broader empowerment capacities that appeared relevant across different forms of educational disruption.

With regard to educational level, nine studies (28.13%) concentrated primarily on primary schools, eight (25.00%) on secondary schools, ten (31.25%) included both primary and secondary educational settings, and five (15.63%) examined school leadership without restricting the sample to a specific educational level. Twenty-three studies (71.88%) were published in English and nine (28.13%) in Persian. Overall, the characteristics of the evidence base demonstrated sufficient methodological and contextual diversity to support an integrative synthesis of the major factors and components of school principal empowerment under crisis conditions.

Table 1. General Characteristics of the 32 Included Studies

Characteristic	Category	Number of studies	Percentage
Publication period	2000–2009	4	12.50
	2010–2019	11	34.38
	2020–August 2026	17	53.13
Publication language	English	23	71.88
	Persian	9	28.13
Study design	Qualitative	12	37.50
	Quantitative	10	31.25
	Mixed methods	6	18.75
	Systematic, narrative, or integrative review	4	12.50
Geographical context	Iran and other West Asian contexts	10	31.25
	Europe	7	21.88
	North America	6	18.75
	East and South Asia	5	15.63
	Oceania	2	6.25
	Africa	2	6.25
Primary crisis context	Health emergencies and pandemics	11	34.38
	Natural disasters and environmental emergencies	6	18.75
	Organizational and social crises	5	15.63
	Multiple or general crisis conditions	4	12.50
	Security-related crises	3	9.38
	Technological and instructional disruptions	3	9.38
Educational level	Primary schools	9	28.13
	Secondary schools	8	25.00
	Primary and secondary schools	10	31.25
	General or unspecified school level	5	15.63

As shown in Table 1, more than half of the included studies were published from 2020 onward, indicating a substantial increase in attention to crisis-related school leadership during the most recent period. The predominance of qualitative and quantitative empirical research, which together accounted for 22 studies (68.75%), also indicates that the synthesized framework was primarily grounded in empirical evidence rather than exclusively conceptual discussions. Qualitative evidence was particularly useful for identifying context-sensitive processes such as emotional regulation, sense-making, trust formation, communication with families, distributed leadership, and adaptation under uncertainty, whereas quantitative evidence provided support for recurring associations among leadership competence, crisis preparedness, resilience, self-efficacy, organizational capacity, and continuity of educational functioning. The geographical diversity of the included studies further suggested that the emerging dimensions of empowerment were not confined to one educational system. At the same time, the relatively high proportion of studies conducted during health emergencies shows that contemporary understandings of crisis leadership have been significantly influenced by experiences associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, convergence between pandemic-related studies and research on natural disasters, security threats, technological disruptions, and organizational crises supported the identification of several broader empowerment domains that appear transferable across different types of critical conditions.

The first major domain emerging from the thematic synthesis concerned the individual and professional capacities that enable school principals to understand crisis conditions, make timely decisions, maintain personal functioning, and guide the school through uncertainty. Three closely related themes were identified within this domain: crisis knowledge and preparedness, decision-making and problem-solving competence, and psychological and emotional resilience. These themes were highly recurrent across the included literature and formed the foundational layer of the overall empowerment framework. Crisis empowerment was not represented simply as possession of formal administrative authority; instead, effective principals were characterized as leaders who could accurately interpret emerging threats, identify priorities, select viable courses of action despite incomplete information, regulate their own emotional responses, and remain sufficiently flexible to revise decisions as conditions changed.

Table 2. Individual and Professional Factors and Components of School Principal Empowerment in Crisis Conditions

Main theme	Component	Number of studies	Percentage
Crisis knowledge and preparedness	Knowledge of crisis-management principles and crisis phases	27	84.38
	Recognition and assessment of risks and vulnerabilities	25	78.13
	Emergency preparedness and contingency planning	26	81.25
	Knowledge of safety, emergency, and continuity procedures	23	71.88
	Scenario planning and anticipation of alternative crisis trajectories	19	59.38
	Awareness of legal, ethical, and professional responsibilities during crises	17	53.13
	Familiarity with institutional emergency protocols	21	65.63
	Continuous crisis-management training and professional development	24	75.00
Decision-making and problem-solving competence	Rapid and timely decision-making	30	93.75
	Decision-making under uncertainty and incomplete information	29	90.63
	Problem identification and prioritization	27	84.38
	Analytical and critical thinking	26	81.25
	Evidence-informed decision-making	22	68.75
	Flexible revision of decisions according to changing conditions	28	87.50
	Creative problem solving and generation of alternative solutions	25	78.13
	Balancing immediate and long-term consequences of decisions	20	62.50
	Ethical judgment and fairness in crisis-related decisions	18	56.25
Psychological and emotional resilience	Stress tolerance and maintenance of functioning under pressure	28	87.50
	Emotional self-regulation	27	84.38
	Leadership self-efficacy and confidence	25	78.13
	Psychological flexibility and adaptability	29	90.63
	Persistence and perseverance	22	68.75
	Management of fear, anxiety, and emotional contagion	21	65.63
	Hope, optimism, and positive future orientation	18	56.25
	Reflective capacity and learning from crisis experience	24	75.00
	Tolerance of ambiguity	23	71.88
	Personal recovery and prevention of leadership burnout	19	59.38

As presented in Table 2, decision-making under crisis conditions was among the most consistently emphasized dimensions of principal empowerment. Rapid and timely decision-making was reported in 30 studies (93.75%), while the ability to make decisions under uncertainty or with incomplete information appeared in 29 studies (90.63%). These findings indicate that crisis

conditions fundamentally alter the decision environment of school principals. Routine administrative decision-making generally occurs within relatively stable structures, established regulations, predictable resource conditions, and recognizable lines of authority. Crisis situations, by contrast, often require principals to act before complete information is available and to make consequential decisions regarding school closure, student and staff safety, instructional continuity, resource allocation, communication, attendance, technology use, or coordination with external organizations. Accordingly, empowered crisis leadership involves not merely decisiveness but the ability to combine speed with analytical judgment, ethical awareness, prioritization, and continuous reassessment.

Flexible revision of decisions was identified in 28 studies (87.50%), demonstrating that adaptability was considered nearly as important as initial decision quality. The reviewed literature consistently suggested that crisis leadership is iterative rather than linear. Principals may initially select a response based on the best information available and subsequently need to modify or reverse that response as risks, resources, policies, or stakeholder needs change. Creative problem solving was similarly prominent, appearing in 25 studies (78.13%), while analytical and critical thinking was identified in 26 studies (81.25%). Together, these findings indicate that principal empowerment requires cognitive flexibility and an ability to move beyond habitual administrative routines when established procedures are insufficient.

Crisis knowledge and preparedness represented a second important professional foundation. Knowledge of crisis-management principles was identified in 27 studies (84.38%), emergency and contingency planning in 26 studies (81.25%), and risk and vulnerability assessment in 25 studies (78.13%). Continuous crisis-management training was reported in 24 studies (75.00%). These findings suggest that principals become more capable of effective crisis action when preparedness is developed before a disruptive event occurs. Empowerment therefore involves anticipatory competence as well as reactive competence. An empowered principal understands potential threats to school functioning, identifies vulnerable groups and critical resources, develops contingency arrangements, clarifies responsibilities, and ensures that staff members are familiar with emergency procedures before a crisis escalates. Scenario planning, identified in 19 studies (59.38%), further extended preparedness from compliance with existing protocols toward anticipation of alternative crisis trajectories.

Psychological and emotional resilience represented the third major element of individual empowerment. Psychological flexibility was reported in 29 studies (90.63%), stress tolerance in 28 studies (87.50%), and emotional self-regulation in 27 studies (84.38%). Leadership self-efficacy was also prominent, appearing in 25 studies (78.13%). These findings indicate that the capacity to manage a crisis is partly dependent on the principal's ability to maintain cognitive and emotional functioning under sustained pressure. Principals are frequently required to provide reassurance and stability to others while simultaneously experiencing uncertainty, workload escalation, fear, conflicting stakeholder expectations, and responsibility for consequential decisions. Emotional dysregulation at the leadership level can therefore affect not only the individual principal but also the collective emotional climate of the school. The literature accordingly conceptualized resilient principals as individuals capable of recognizing and managing personal stress, maintaining confidence without ignoring risks, tolerating ambiguity, communicating calmness, and sustaining effort over extended periods.

Reflective learning was identified in 24 studies (75.00%), demonstrating that psychological resilience also had a developmental dimension. Crisis experience could strengthen future leadership capacity when principals systematically reflected on successful and unsuccessful responses, identified weaknesses in preparedness, and converted experiential learning into revised practices and protocols. Consequently, individual empowerment emerged as a dynamic combination of knowledge, cognition, psychological readiness, and continuous learning rather than a static set of personality characteristics.

A second major domain concerned the relational and organizational capacities that enable principals to mobilize collective action. Across the reviewed studies, crisis management was consistently described as a distributed organizational process rather

than an activity that could be successfully performed by the principal alone. Three themes were identified within this domain: crisis communication and stakeholder engagement, collaborative and distributed leadership, and organizational and resource-management capacity. These dimensions reflected the principal's ability to establish trustworthy information flows, coordinate staff members, engage families and community actors, delegate responsibility, create functional crisis teams, and mobilize available human and material resources.

Table 3. Relational and Organizational Factors and Components of School Principal Empowerment in Crisis Conditions

Main theme	Component	Number of studies	Percentage
Crisis communication and stakeholder engagement	Clear and timely communication	31	96.88
	Transparent communication regarding risks and decisions	27	84.38
	Active listening and responsiveness to stakeholder concerns	24	75.00
	Communication with teachers and school staff	29	90.63
	Communication with students and parents	28	87.50
	Coordination with education authorities and external institutions	25	78.13
	Management of rumors, misinformation, and contradictory messages	20	62.50
	Use of multiple communication channels	26	81.25
	Empathetic and psychologically supportive communication	23	71.88
	Building trust through consistency and credibility	27	84.38
Collaborative and distributed leadership	Formation and activation of crisis-management teams	26	81.25
	Delegation of authority and responsibility	25	78.13
	Staff participation in decision-making	24	75.00
	Teamwork and interprofessional collaboration	28	87.50
	Empowerment of teachers and middle-level leaders	22	68.75
	Shared responsibility and collective ownership	23	71.88
	Utilization of staff expertise and specialized competencies	21	65.63
	Conflict management and negotiation	20	62.50
	Maintenance of staff cohesion and morale	26	81.25
	Rapid allocation and reallocation of resources	26	81.25
Organizational and resource-management capacity	Human-resource management during disruption	25	78.13
	Identification and prioritization of essential school functions	28	87.50
	Continuity planning for teaching and learning	29	90.63
	Flexible restructuring of routines, roles, and schedules	27	84.38
	Mobilization of external and community resources	21	65.63
	Equitable allocation of resources to vulnerable groups	20	62.50
	Coordination of safety, logistical, and operational arrangements	24	75.00
	Monitoring resource shortages and emerging operational needs	23	71.88
	Development of organizational redundancy and backup capacity	16	50.00

Table 3 demonstrates that communication was the most pervasive relational component identified in the systematic review. Clear and timely communication appeared in 31 of the 32 studies (96.88%), making it the single most frequently identified component in the entire synthesis. Communication with school staff was reported in 29 studies (90.63%), communication with students and parents in 28 studies (87.50%), transparent communication and trust building each in 27 studies (84.38%), and the use of multiple communication channels in 26 studies (81.25%). These findings demonstrate that information management is a central mechanism through which leadership empowerment is translated into effective crisis response. During crises,

uncertainty is often intensified by incomplete information, rapidly changing policies, conflicting messages, rumors, and heightened emotional reactions. The principal therefore functions as both an information processor and an institutional communicator.

The reviewed studies emphasized that effective crisis communication should be timely, accurate, understandable, consistent, and sensitive to the informational and emotional needs of different stakeholder groups. Merely transmitting instructions was insufficient. Empowered principals were able to explain the rationale underlying decisions, acknowledge uncertainty when necessary, respond to stakeholder concerns, and modify communication strategies according to the needs of teachers, parents, students, governing authorities, and community partners. The relatively high frequency of trust-related communication, identified in 27 studies (84.38%), further demonstrated that communication competence has a relational as well as informational function. Stakeholders are more likely to cooperate with difficult or disruptive decisions when they perceive the school leader as credible, transparent, competent, and responsive.

Collaborative and distributed leadership was another major organizational factor. Teamwork and interprofessional collaboration were identified in 28 studies (87.50%), crisis-team formation in 26 studies (81.25%), delegation of authority in 25 studies (78.13%), and participation of staff in decision-making in 24 studies (75.00%). These findings challenge highly centralized models of crisis leadership in which the principal is assumed to personally control all important decisions and responses. Under conditions of complexity and rapidly changing demands, excessive centralization can slow response, overload the principal, reduce the use of specialist expertise, and weaken organizational ownership. In contrast, empowered principals create structures through which responsibility can be distributed while maintaining strategic coordination and accountability.

Delegation was particularly significant because crises often generate simultaneous demands across safety, instructional, technological, psychological, logistical, administrative, and communication domains. Principals who delegate appropriately can create specialized response teams, assign staff members to specific operational tasks, and draw on the professional expertise of teachers, counselors, technology personnel, administrative staff, and community partners. Staff participation also contributes to the legitimacy and practicality of crisis decisions because individuals directly involved in implementation can identify constraints that may not be immediately visible at the senior leadership level. Maintenance of staff cohesion and morale, identified in 26 studies (81.25%), further illustrates that collaborative leadership involves sustaining a collective sense of purpose during prolonged disruption.

Organizational and resource-management capacities also emerged strongly. Continuity planning for teaching and learning was identified in 29 studies (90.63%), prioritization of essential school functions in 28 studies (87.50%), flexible restructuring of routines and roles in 27 studies (84.38%), and rapid resource allocation in 26 studies (81.25%). The evidence therefore indicates that empowerment has a practical operational dimension. Effective principals need sufficient authority, competence, and access to information to decide which school functions must be maintained, which can temporarily be suspended, which resources are scarce, and how staff, infrastructure, time, finances, and technology should be redistributed.

Resource management also incorporated equity. Twenty studies (62.50%) specifically addressed equitable allocation of resources to vulnerable groups. Crisis conditions do not affect all students and families equally. Students with disabilities, economically disadvantaged families, students with limited technology access, geographically isolated populations, and children requiring specialized support may experience disproportionately severe consequences during disruption. Empowered principals therefore need the discretion and ethical competence to recognize differential needs and adapt organizational resources accordingly. The overall pattern indicates that organizational empowerment is not simply the possession of additional resources; it is the capacity to mobilize, coordinate, prioritize, and redistribute available resources in a timely and equitable manner.

The third major domain extended beyond immediate crisis response and concerned the principal's ability to position the school strategically within an uncertain environment. Two major themes emerged within this domain: strategic and adaptive leadership and digital, informational, and contextual capacity. These themes represented the forward-looking dimension of principal empowerment and included strategic vision, organizational learning, policy interpretation, environmental scanning, technological leadership, data use, digital communication, and collaboration with external systems.

Table 4. Strategic, Adaptive, Technological, and Contextual Factors and Components of School Principal Empowerment in Crisis Conditions

Main theme	Component	Number of studies	Percentage
Strategic and adaptive leadership	Development of a clear crisis-oriented strategic direction	26	81.25
	Adaptive leadership in response to changing conditions	30	93.75
	Environmental scanning and recognition of emerging threats	24	75.00
	Strategic prioritization of short- and long-term objectives	23	71.88
	Organizational learning from previous crises	25	78.13
	Revision of school policies and procedures after crisis experience	22	68.75
	Innovation and experimentation with new practices	24	75.00
	Maintenance of educational mission and organizational values	21	65.63
	Development of a culture of preparedness and resilience	27	84.38
	Balancing stability with organizational change	22	68.75
Digital, informational, and contextual capacity	Digital leadership competence	27	84.38
	Ability to organize technology-mediated teaching and school operations	26	81.25
	Data collection, interpretation, and evidence use	24	75.00
	Selection and use of digital communication platforms	25	78.13
	Awareness of cybersecurity, privacy, and data-protection concerns	14	43.75
	Assessment of students' and staff members' digital access and readiness	22	68.75
	Reduction of inequalities in digital access	19	59.38
	Interpretation and implementation of changing policies and regulations	26	81.25
	Networking with community agencies and external organizations	23	71.88
	Understanding the social and cultural context of the school community	21	65.63
	Coordination with health, emergency, security, or welfare services	20	62.50
	Access to timely and reliable information for situational awareness	28	87.50

As indicated in Table 4, adaptive leadership was among the most prominent factors across the entire evidence base, appearing in 30 studies (93.75%). This result reinforces the finding that crisis leadership differs fundamentally from routine administration. In rapidly changing situations, fixed plans and rigid adherence to previous procedures may become ineffective. Principals require the capacity to identify which existing practices remain appropriate, which need modification, and where entirely new approaches must be developed. Adaptive leadership therefore involved continuous interpretation of changing circumstances, consultation with relevant stakeholders, experimentation with alternative responses, and recalibration of organizational arrangements.

The development of a culture of preparedness and resilience was identified in 27 studies (84.38%), while strategic crisis direction was reported in 26 studies (81.25%) and organizational learning from previous crises in 25 studies (78.13%). These findings demonstrate that effective empowerment extends beyond the principal's performance during the immediate

emergency. Highly empowered school leaders create organizational conditions that increase the school's future capacity to absorb, adapt to, and recover from disruption. Such principals institutionalize learning from previous crises, encourage staff preparation, revise procedures, strengthen communication networks, identify backup arrangements, and integrate crisis preparedness into routine organizational development. In this sense, empowerment is connected to the transformation of the school from a reactive organization into a resilient organization.

Innovation and experimentation were reported in 24 studies (75.00%). Crisis situations often make previously established routines impossible or inefficient. School leaders may therefore need to redesign schedules, adopt new teaching arrangements, modify assessment procedures, create alternative communication systems, or establish new partnerships. However, the findings suggest that innovation should not be interpreted as unrestricted change. Twenty-one studies (65.63%) emphasized maintenance of the school's educational mission and organizational values, while 22 studies (68.75%) discussed balancing stability with change. Empowered leaders were thus characterized by their ability to preserve core educational purposes while remaining flexible concerning the means through which those purposes were achieved.

Digital leadership emerged as a particularly important contemporary dimension, appearing in 27 studies (84.38%), while the ability to organize technology-mediated teaching and school operations was identified in 26 studies (81.25%). The prominence of these components was especially evident in research conducted during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, but digital capability was also relevant to natural disasters, security disruptions, and other circumstances in which physical access to schools was interrupted. Digital empowerment involved more than technical familiarity with software. It included selecting appropriate platforms, organizing communication, supporting teachers in technology use, monitoring student participation, interpreting digital data, safeguarding information, and addressing inequalities in technological access.

Access to timely and reliable information was identified in 28 studies (87.50%), making situational awareness one of the strongest components within the strategic domain. Principals cannot make high-quality crisis decisions without reliable information regarding the nature of the threat, policy requirements, staff capacity, student needs, resource availability, and changing environmental conditions. Data collection and evidence use were identified in 24 studies (75.00%), suggesting that crisis leadership increasingly depends on the ability to transform information into actionable knowledge. This can include monitoring attendance, student engagement, staff availability, infection or safety indicators, technological access, resource shortages, or feedback from families.

The importance of interpreting changing policies and regulations was identified in 26 studies (81.25%). During major crises, school principals frequently operate between central administrative requirements and local implementation realities. Policies may change rapidly, contain ambiguities, or require adaptation to local school conditions. Empowered principals therefore require sufficient policy literacy and professional discretion to translate higher-level directives into workable school-level practices while maintaining legal and ethical compliance.

External networking also formed part of this contextual empowerment. Networking with community organizations was identified in 23 studies (71.88%), understanding the social and cultural context of the school in 21 studies (65.63%), and coordination with health, emergency, security, or welfare services in 20 studies (62.50%). These findings indicate that schools are embedded within wider systems and that severe crises frequently exceed the capacity of the school to respond independently. A principal's empowerment is therefore partly determined by the ability to establish and activate interorganizational relationships. Such relationships can provide specialist information, health and psychological services, emergency resources, social support, technological assistance, and additional resources for vulnerable families.

Discussion and Conclusion

The present systematic review aimed to identify, synthesize, and classify the factors and components associated with the empowerment of school principals in crisis conditions. The findings demonstrated that principal empowerment in crises is a multidimensional and interconnected construct encompassing crisis knowledge and preparedness, decision-making and problem-solving competence, psychological and emotional resilience, crisis communication and stakeholder engagement, collaborative and distributed leadership, organizational and resource-management capacity, strategic and adaptive leadership, and digital, informational, and contextual capacity. The results further showed that the most frequently identified components included clear and timely communication, rapid decision-making, adaptive leadership, decision-making under uncertainty, psychological flexibility, communication with school staff, instructional continuity planning, stress tolerance, teamwork, and access to timely and reliable information. Collectively, these findings indicate that crisis-related empowerment cannot be reduced to formal authority, administrative experience, or possession of isolated technical skills. Rather, it depends on the integration of individual competencies, relational capacities, organizational resources, psychological readiness, and enabling institutional conditions.

One of the most prominent findings of the review was the central role of crisis communication and stakeholder engagement. Clear and timely communication was the most frequently identified component across the reviewed evidence, and communication with teachers, parents, students, and external institutions was repeatedly emphasized as a fundamental requirement of effective crisis leadership. This finding is consistent with research showing that managers' communication skills contribute to employee motivation and empowerment and can strengthen the quality of organizational interaction (2). It is also compatible with evidence indicating that information literacy and communication skills are associated with important educational outcomes and can reinforce individuals' ability to function effectively in educational environments (3). In crisis conditions, the significance of communication becomes even greater because principals must deal with incomplete information, contradictory instructions, heightened emotional reactions, and the rapid circulation of rumors or misinformation. Communication in this context is therefore not simply the transmission of administrative messages; it becomes a leadership mechanism for reducing ambiguity, preserving trust, coordinating action, and preventing the fragmentation of the school community.

The importance of communication is also closely related to the role of trust and professionalism. The findings suggested that crisis-related empowerment is stronger when principals are perceived as credible, transparent, responsive, and professionally competent. This interpretation is supported by evidence showing that school leaders can shape instructional practices by creating conditions of trust, professionalism, and empowerment (6). Trust is especially important in crisis situations because stakeholders may be required to comply with unfamiliar procedures, accept rapid organizational changes, or tolerate temporary restrictions. A principal who communicates consistently and explains the rationale behind decisions is more likely to obtain cooperation than one who relies exclusively on formal authority. Thus, the present findings suggest that communicative competence and relational credibility are inseparable dimensions of empowered crisis leadership.

Decision-making and problem-solving competence represented another core dimension of the findings. Rapid decision-making, decision-making under uncertainty, analytical thinking, flexible revision of decisions, and creative problem solving were among the most recurrent components. This result is theoretically plausible because crises substantially alter the decision environment of school leaders. During routine administration, principals can often rely on established procedures and relatively predictable circumstances, whereas crises require decisions to be made under time pressure and with incomplete information. The finding also corresponds with the broader literature on empowerment, which emphasizes autonomy, competence,

influence, and the ability to take responsibility for organizational action (1). From this perspective, empowerment is meaningful only when school leaders possess both the authority and the competence to make context-sensitive decisions.

The importance of decision-making is also related to school-based management. Research on the performance of board-of-trustee schools has highlighted the continuing challenge of developing operational models that adequately support decentralized school management and accountability (13). The present findings extend this issue by suggesting that decentralization becomes particularly consequential during crises. When school leaders are unable to adapt centrally developed directives to local realities, crisis responses may become delayed or poorly matched to the needs of students and staff. Empowered principals therefore require not only professional competence but also sufficient organizational discretion to prioritize essential functions, reallocate resources, and revise procedures according to evolving local circumstances.

Psychological and emotional resilience also emerged as a major dimension of principal empowerment. Psychological flexibility, stress tolerance, emotional self-regulation, leadership self-efficacy, tolerance of ambiguity, perseverance, and reflective learning were consistently identified in the reviewed studies. These findings indicate that effective crisis leadership depends not only on what principals know but also on their ability to maintain effective functioning under prolonged pressure. This interpretation is supported by research emphasizing the importance of psychological capital as a developable educational and organizational resource (7). Psychological capital includes adaptive resources that can strengthen confidence, persistence, and constructive responses to challenging circumstances. Evidence concerning social cognition and psychological capital likewise highlights the importance of psychological capacities in supporting adaptive functioning (8).

The psychological dimension is also aligned with research on psychological empowerment among educators. The identification of multiple factors contributing to psychological empowerment among teachers demonstrates that empowerment is shaped by both personal and organizational conditions (9). Similarly, positive leadership has been associated with greater work engagement through the mediating role of psychological empowerment (4). These studies help explain why psychological resilience emerged so strongly in the current review. Principals experiencing sustained uncertainty, workload escalation, responsibility for safety, and competing stakeholder expectations may struggle to provide stable leadership unless they possess sufficient emotional resources. Moreover, the principal's emotional condition can influence the broader organizational climate. A leader who reacts to uncertainty with panic or inconsistency can intensify staff anxiety, whereas a psychologically resilient leader can model calmness, realistic optimism, and adaptive coping.

Collaborative and distributed leadership constituted another important finding. Teamwork, crisis-team formation, delegation, staff participation, empowerment of teachers, shared responsibility, and maintenance of staff cohesion were frequently identified. This finding suggests that the traditional image of the principal as the sole crisis decision-maker is inadequate for complex school environments. Crises generate multiple simultaneous demands involving safety, teaching, communication, technology, student welfare, logistics, and coordination with external agencies. No single school leader can manage all of these responsibilities effectively without distributing authority and using the expertise of others. This interpretation is consistent with research showing that coaching leadership can enhance creative performance through psychological empowerment (5). Coaching-oriented principals create conditions in which teachers can exercise initiative and contribute actively to organizational problem solving.

The same pattern is reflected in models of professional teacher empowerment that emphasize competence development, participation, support, and opportunities for professional agency (10). Studies of empowerment in inclusive education also indicate that effective educational performance depends on the interaction between professional competence and supportive organizational structures (16, 17). Applied to crisis leadership, these findings imply that principals who empower teachers and middle-level leaders effectively increase the school's distributed response capacity. Delegation is therefore not a sign of reduced

principal authority; rather, it represents a more mature form of leadership in which authority is strategically distributed to enhance speed, expertise, and collective ownership.

Organizational and resource-management capacity was similarly central to the synthesis. Continuity planning for teaching and learning, prioritization of essential functions, flexible restructuring of routines, rapid resource allocation, human-resource management, and equitable distribution of resources were frequently identified. These findings demonstrate that crisis leadership is not exclusively a psychological or interpersonal process but also an operational one. Principals must translate plans into practical arrangements that preserve core educational functions despite disruption. This operational capacity is particularly important when resources are scarce and when vulnerable students experience greater barriers to access.

The emphasis on equitable allocation of resources is consistent with the broader logic of empowerment in inclusive education. Research on teachers working with students with special needs shows that professional empowerment requires structures capable of responding to diversity and supporting differentiated educational requirements (16). Similarly, empowerment models for integrated-inclusive education emphasize contextual and organizational support in addition to individual competence (17). These studies support the present finding that empowered crisis leadership must be sensitive to differential needs. A uniform crisis response may reproduce or intensify inequalities, whereas empowered principals are better able to recognize which groups require additional technological, instructional, psychological, or financial support.

Strategic and adaptive leadership also emerged as one of the strongest dimensions in the review. Adaptive leadership was identified in almost all included studies, while strategic direction, environmental scanning, organizational learning, innovation, and the development of a culture of preparedness and resilience were widely reported. This finding indicates that effective principals do not merely respond to immediate disruptions but continuously reinterpret their organizational environment and adjust practices accordingly. It is consistent with the concept of the school as a learning organization, in which organizational effectiveness depends on continuous learning, shared knowledge, reflection, and the capacity to respond to environmental change (11). Models of learning and teaching schools similarly emphasize learning structures, professional interaction, and continuous organizational improvement (12).

The present findings extend these ideas by showing that organizational learning becomes especially important after crisis experience. Principals who systematically evaluate their responses, identify weaknesses, revise protocols, and institutionalize lessons learned are more likely to develop resilient schools. Crisis empowerment therefore has a temporal dimension: it includes preparedness before the crisis, adaptive action during the crisis, and learning and institutional improvement after the crisis. This interpretation also explains why reflective capacity and revision of policies were important components in the review.

Innovation was another recurring element of strategic empowerment. Crises often make routine practices insufficient, requiring new schedules, new communication systems, alternative instructional arrangements, and new forms of collaboration. The relationship between empowerment and innovation has been supported by research showing that teacher empowerment contributes positively to the innovation climate of schools (18). Empowered organizational members are more likely to propose solutions, experiment with alternatives, and participate in change. Therefore, principals who wish to strengthen crisis resilience need to cultivate an organizational climate where staff members can exercise professional judgment and contribute creative solutions rather than waiting for detailed top-down instructions.

Digital, informational, and contextual capacities constituted another major set of findings. Digital leadership competence, organization of technology-mediated teaching, data use, interpretation of changing regulations, digital communication, and access to reliable information were frequently identified. These results strongly correspond with contemporary research on principal empowerment in the era of digital transformation. The development of an empowerment model for elementary school principals in digitally transforming educational environments demonstrates that digital leadership, technological adaptation,

and management of organizational change are now core dimensions of managerial competence (14). The present review indicates that these capabilities are even more important under crisis conditions, where technology may become the primary infrastructure for maintaining communication and instructional continuity.

The growing relevance of artificial intelligence further broadens the technological dimension of empowerment. A recent model of entrepreneurial principal empowerment using artificial intelligence emphasizes the emerging importance of technological innovation, intelligent decision support, and the strategic use of digital tools (15). Although artificial intelligence is not yet embedded uniformly in school administration, its expansion suggests that future crisis leadership may increasingly involve data-driven situational awareness, rapid information synthesis, automated communication, and decision-support systems. Technology-focused empowerment initiatives in other educational settings, such as smart applications for student career planning, similarly illustrate the broader movement toward digitally mediated educational support (20). These developments reinforce the conclusion that digital competence should be viewed as a leadership capability rather than merely a technical skill.

The findings also showed that contextual and external-networking capacities are important. Coordination with education authorities, community organizations, health services, emergency agencies, and welfare institutions appeared repeatedly across the reviewed literature. This finding reflects the reality that schools are open systems embedded within broader social and institutional environments. Severe crises frequently exceed the resources of individual schools. Empowered principals must therefore be able to activate external networks, interpret policy changes, and mobilize community resources. This contextual perspective is consistent with broader empowerment approaches that emphasize organizational conditions and access to supportive resources rather than viewing empowerment solely as a personal characteristic (1).

The current findings also reinforce the significance of managerial characteristics and leadership behavior. Research on managerial roles and personality traits indicates that managerial effectiveness is influenced not only by formal responsibilities but also by personal and behavioral qualities (19). During crises, attributes such as responsibility, emotional stability, interpersonal sensitivity, ethical judgment, and adaptability are likely to become especially salient. Nevertheless, the results of the present review suggest that these individual characteristics should not be interpreted in isolation. Effective crisis empowerment results from the interaction between personal attributes, professional competencies, supportive organizational structures, and opportunities for meaningful action.

Taken together, the findings support an integrated conceptualization of principal empowerment in crisis conditions. Empowerment begins with the leader's own knowledge, psychological readiness, professional judgment, and adaptive capacity, but it extends outward to communication, distributed leadership, staff empowerment, organizational learning, technological competence, resource mobilization, and external collaboration. This interpretation is consistent with the accumulated evidence that empowerment in educational settings is associated with leadership style, trust, psychological resources, innovation, professional development, and organizational support (4-6, 10). Accordingly, the most effective approach to crisis preparedness is unlikely to be a narrow training program focused only on emergency procedures. Instead, principal development should integrate professional knowledge, emotional resilience, adaptive decision-making, communication, collaboration, digital capability, strategic thinking, and organizational authority.

The present systematic review has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the included studies were heterogeneous in terms of research design, educational context, type of crisis, geographical setting, and conceptual definitions of empowerment, which limited direct comparison among studies. Second, a substantial proportion of the contemporary literature focused on health-related crises, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic; therefore, some identified components may reflect the specific characteristics of pandemic-related disruption more strongly than other types of

emergencies. Third, studies published in Persian and English were prioritized, which may have resulted in the exclusion of relevant evidence published in other languages. Fourth, many of the included studies examined constructs related to empowerment without explicitly adopting an integrated crisis-empowerment framework, requiring interpretive synthesis across related concepts such as resilience, leadership competence, preparedness, communication, and organizational capacity. Fifth, because the review employed qualitative thematic synthesis rather than meta-analysis, the relative importance of components was interpreted primarily through recurrence and conceptual significance and should not be regarded as evidence of causal effect size. Finally, differences in school governance systems and the formal authority granted to principals may limit the direct transferability of some findings across national contexts.

Future research should develop and empirically validate comprehensive models of school principal empowerment that specifically address the full cycle of crisis preparedness, response, recovery, and organizational learning. Longitudinal studies are needed to determine how empowerment capacities develop over time and whether training in decision-making, psychological resilience, communication, digital leadership, and distributed leadership produces sustained improvements in school crisis readiness. Comparative studies across different types of crises, including natural disasters, security threats, technological failures, public-health emergencies, and social disruptions, would help distinguish universal empowerment competencies from crisis-specific requirements. Future studies should also examine differences according to school level, geographical region, socioeconomic context, and governance structure. Development and validation of standardized instruments for measuring crisis-related principal empowerment would facilitate stronger quantitative comparisons. Mixed-methods research could further clarify how formal authority, organizational support, personal competence, and contextual resources interact in practice. Additional attention should also be given to emerging issues such as artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, digital inequality, data-informed crisis decision-making, and the ethical implications of technology-supported leadership.

Educational authorities should approach the empowerment of school principals as a continuous professional-development priority rather than as an emergency intervention introduced only after a crisis has occurred. Principal preparation and in-service training should include scenario-based crisis exercises, decision-making under uncertainty, communication with multiple stakeholder groups, psychological self-management, resource prioritization, distributed leadership, conflict management, continuity planning, digital leadership, and post-crisis evaluation. Schools should establish multidisciplinary crisis-management teams and clearly define delegated responsibilities before emergencies arise. Principals should also be provided with sufficient discretionary authority to adapt central policies to local circumstances while remaining accountable to legal and professional standards. Educational systems should strengthen reliable communication channels between schools and higher-level authorities, improve access to timely data, develop backup technological and instructional systems, and provide mechanisms for psychological and professional support for school leaders. Particular attention should be paid to ensuring equitable access to resources for vulnerable students and families. Finally, crisis experiences should be systematically documented and reviewed so that lessons learned can be translated into revised procedures, stronger organizational resilience, and more effective preparation for future disruptions.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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