

Moving Forward: Lived Experiences and Perspectives of Private-Tertiary Education Leaders of Koronadal City toward Post-Pandemic Education

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Abstract

This study looks at the real-life experiences of CEOs at private tertiary education institutions in Koronadal City, South Cotabato, Philippines, analyzing their strategies for adaptation and success in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. It seeks to identify successful leadership techniques and contribute to academic research and practical applications in policy creation and strategy planning. The research employed a phenomenological technique, analyzing the personal experiences of five leaders from a private tertiary education institution in Koronadal City. Data was obtained using purposive sampling, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach. The findings demonstrate that leaders displayed flexibility and resilience by adopting online learning, investing in digital infrastructure, and engaging stakeholders in strategic planning. However, concerns such as financial restrictions and diverse stakeholder expectations were also identified. The study stresses the significance of strategic planning, stakeholder involvement, and digital infrastructure in maintaining educational continuity during crises. It stimulates additional research to compare leadership styles across public and private entities, as well as to analyze wider geographical locations. Enhancing digital infrastructure and professional development for educators is crucial for future education resilience.

Keywords: post-pandemic education, private higher education, adaptive leadership, Koronadal City, digital transformation.



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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 outbreak greatly impacted international education, notably in the Philippines, since private universities encountered difficulty in switching to online and hybrid learning methodologies. This shift involves rapid adjustments in teaching methodologies, resources, and leadership. This study investigated private higher education leaders in Koronadal City, offering insights into educational resilience and presenting ideas for policies and practices usable in similar cultural settings within the Philippines and Asia (Joaquin et al., 2020). Globally, the epidemic increased the introduction of digital technologies in education. Asia had diverse ramifications, with some nations like South Korea and Singapore responding fast, while others like the Philippines faced more severe disruptions due to insufficient digital infrastructure and varying levels of

preparedness among educators and learners (Parentela & Vargas, 2021). The Commission on Higher Education (CHED) in the Philippines developed legislation to support distance education, yet many private colleges struggled owing to budgetary constraints, lack of expertise, and technology access.

This study attempted to bridge this gap by evaluating leadership tactics, decision-making processes, and innovative practices in Koronadal City, focusing on how these institutions evolved to ensure educational continuity during the pandemic. The relevance of this study lies in its potential to provide empirical insights into the continual adaptation processes of educational leaders. As the pandemic prompted a quick migration to online instruction, many private schools had challenges with digital infrastructure, student involvement, and staff training (Camariñas & Tagare, 2022). While some larger colleges

accomplished the shift more efficiently, smaller private tertiary education institutions, particularly those in less urbanized regions like Koronadal City, struggled to retain educational continuity.

The significance of this study was underscored by the socio-economic value of education in the Philippines, where post-tertiary education is viewed as a gateway to socio-economic mobility. Understanding the post-pandemic difficulties encountered by educational leaders in Koronadal City was crucial for formulating measures that might support the revival and survival of private higher education institutions (Bustillo & Aguilos, 2022). One of the primary difficulties facing private higher education leaders was the digital divide, which was reinforced during the epidemic. In Koronadal City, where internet connectivity was limited and infrastructure was lacking, educational leaders had to overcome tremendous challenges to provide quality education (Bustillo & Aguilos, 2022). The pandemic also indicated weaknesses in digital literacy among instructors, students, and administration, prompting urgent capacity-building initiatives. Studies in similar conditions found that private tertiary education institutions saw a fall in student enrollment, greater dropout rates, and reduced student engagement owing to the move to online instruction (Lim et al., 2022).

The limits of online learning, such as retaining student engagement, building meaningful relationships, and ensuring academic integrity, further elevated the expectations placed on educational leaders, making adaptive leadership strategies crucial. The pandemic's influence on higher education was well documented globally, but research on private tertiary education institutions in the Philippines, particularly in the post-pandemic scenario, was scarce. Most past studies emphasized immediate crisis remedies, such as migrating to online platforms, rather than addressing the long-term goals of educational leaders (Estrellado, 2021). The literature lacked an in-depth assessment of private tertiary education leaders in Koronadal City's post-pandemic context. This study provided practical insights

for policy creation, strategic planning, and sustainable practices in higher education. Understanding these leaders' adaptive strategies was crucial for institutional recovery and future educational policy. Research suggested that leadership styles significantly impacted institutional resilience, with collaborative and flexible models being more effective in crisis management (Adams et al., 2023).

This study could aid policymakers in constructing frameworks that support educational leaders in building more resilient institutions. Additionally, as private tertiary education institutions frequently functioned with limited financial resources, strategic planning that stressed resource efficiency, stakeholder involvement, and inclusive decision-making was crucial (Cruz & De La Cruz, 2023). A lack of full understanding of leadership flexibility could lead to unproductive approaches that fail to suit the specific demands of private tertiary education institutions, especially in less urbanized locations. This might prolong existing gaps, reduce access to excellent education, and degrade the entire educational system in regions like Koronadal City, and South Cotabato (Camariñas & Tagare, 2022). Furthermore, without focused support, educational leaders could struggle to promote student engagement, increase learning results, and develop sustainable practices, consequently threatening the long-term viability of private tertiary education in the region.

This research aimed to address the knowledge gap in Koronadal City's private education leaders' adaptation to the future of tertiary education. It sought to provide evidence-based insights that could influence policies, strategic planning, and leadership behaviors in post-pandemic education. The findings would assist policymakers, educators, and academics construct resilient and equitable education systems. The goal was to support the development of private higher education institutions, offering equitable access, quality education, and sustainable growth for future generations. This study aimed to investigate the

lived experiences, perspectives, and approaches and to identify the key adaptation techniques adopted by educational leaders in response to post-pandemic challenges. It would also examine the influence of different initiatives on educational performance and institutional sustainability to propose policy recommendations that could support the recovery and expansion of private tertiary education in similar socio-cultural contexts.

LITERATURES

This section presents the relevant literature and studies that the researcher considered to strengthen the importance of the present study. It also presents the synthesis of the literature to fully understand the research for better comprehension of the study.

The lifeworld of private education leaders in post-pandemic education. After the outbreak, officials in private education dealt with COVID-19 concerns. They have to manage administrative chores and design forward-looking innovative educational techniques. Using their own experiences, sentiments, and points of view, leaders establish paradigms. Rashid and Yadav (2020), in their article, suggested that campus closures and online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic have dramatically influenced the global economy in the higher education system. Similarly, Muftah (2020), in his research, looks at how COVID-19 effects higher education, particularly in African colleges. Secondary data was employed for analysis to examine models, policy papers, and literature. Results imply that educational institutions are adopting unique decisions, including online instruction, training, and remote learning. The survey presents a worldwide view of higher education, consequently altering beliefs and stereotypes. In addition, Damayanti et al. (2023) aims to offer insights on leadership following the COVID-19 pandemic from an organizational aspect, comparing data from significant scientific investigations. The findings encompass numerous leadership styles, such as transformational and adaptive leadership.

Contexts of lived experiences of private education leaders. Private school leaders in post-pandemic education faced unique challenges, including operational difficulties like digital platform migration and existential challenges due to the changing nature of education and institutional survival, as they navigated the unprecedented times they faced. In their study, Ashour et al. (2021) said that private school leaders' context and lived experiences in post-pandemic education hint at the special issues, options, and changes they encountered while managing their institutions during unprecedented times. These leaders encountered both operational difficulties, such as migrating to digital platforms, and bigger existential challenges linked to the changing nature of education and institutional survival.

In addition, Tsantopoulos et al. (2022) said in their research review undergraduate students' experiences during and after the pandemic, finding variables impacting their satisfaction with online and in-person learning. The results show that students prefer face-to-face education to online learning because they are more satisfied with in-person learning. Anxiety, demographic characteristics, and COVID-19 information drive a person's learning happiness, while information sources and parents' employment influence in-person learning pleasure. Moreover, Hubaishi (2022) said in his study that the COVID-19 outbreak has led to global educational system closures, harming nearly 1.7 billion youngsters and damaging teachers, families, and the economy. Around 153 countries are implementing national and local closures, affecting almost 99% of the world's student population. Post-COVID-19, remote learning will transition from physical classrooms to virtual platforms.

Education leaders' views. The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly impacted school institutions, creating loss and anguish for teachers, students, parents, administrators, and academic advisors. Yet Gina (2022), in his article, emphasizes the beneficial lessons acquired from this transitional phase and underscores the need to enrich the educational experience for all ages. Key lessons include

resolving crises, developing instructional management systems, expressing flexibility, upgrading advisement procedures, incorporating wellness checks, addressing socio-cultural growth, and providing community resources. Additionally, the pandemic has questioned the status quo and encouraged leaders to bring all stakeholders together to discuss the road to the future. School leaders emphasize diverse learning modalities, leadership practices, continuous improvement, and resource management to ensure quality education post-pandemic. Moreover, school leaders in India are focusing on digital practices, developing individuals, organizations, and teaching methods to meet individual student needs, while reflecting on the complexities and opportunities in leading for digitalization post-COVID-19. They are creating new learning opportunities, implementing reforms, focusing on technology-oriented education, and managing resources effectively (Grover & Leemamol, 2022).

Furthermore, the COVID-19 outbreak has led to international health, economic, social, and education challenges, demanding a strong leadership presence. Nevertheless, the study of Seyama (2021) reveals that leadership romanticism during crises could lead to functional stupidity, doing more harm than help. The disease is also causing a global education challenge, making it even tougher in educational systems like South Africa. Thus, the study proposes pandemic leadership as a model to adapt to these crises while mediating against coercive authority and function.

The COVID-19 epidemic has drastically altered educational leadership locally and abroad, driving leaders to conform to administrative demands and establish new teaching paradigms. The move from traditional to digital venues has produced fresh assessments and innovative leadership techniques. These leaders have managed problems like educational justice, mental well-being and ongoing learning. The crisis showed hazards but also brought opportunities for progress and innovation. The insights collected may impact more resilient educational models.

Theoretical Lens. This study was anchored in the transformational leadership theory of Burns (1978) and the adaptive leadership theory of Heifetz & Linsky (1990). Transformational leadership proposes that leaders can change their followers' moral and ethical outlooks and encourage them to do better than expected by providing a supportive environment, setting a goal, and offering individualized consideration and intellectual stimulation. On the other hand, adapted leadership theory suggests that the leadership paradigm should focus on the ability of leaders to manage organizations and people through complex, dynamic, and unexpected environments. It is based on the notion that leaders must be able to diagnose challenges, identify required modifications, and inspire people to adapt effectively to changing conditions.

Research Questions. This study examined the lived experiences of selected private education leaders in post-pandemic education. It answered the following questions:

1. In post-pandemic education, what are selected private education leaders' lived experiences?
2. What is the context for private education leaders' lived experiences in post-pandemic education?
3. How do selected private education leaders view themselves in the future?

METHODS

Research Design. The study employed phenomenological techniques to evaluate the lived experiences and viewpoints of private tertiary education leaders in Koronadal City. Phenomenology is a qualitative research methodology that tries to comprehend a phenomenon from the perspective of individuals who have encountered it. The researchers focused on investigating individuals' ideas, experiences, attitudes, behaviors, and interactions with participants. This approach stresses subjective experiences, perceptions, and interpretations, seeking to

uncover the essence of a phenomenon (Van Manen, 2014). Therefore, phenomenology was chosen as the research framework for this study, as it allowed for a complete evaluation of the leaders' experiences and opinions.

Population and Sampling. This study was conducted in one of the tertiary education institutions in Koronadal City, South Cotabato. The participants were five (5) selected tertiary education leaders who are currently employed and have been in the said institution for the last ten (10) years. Purposive or criterion-based sampling was utilized to select participants. This method involves a deliberate selection of participants that satisfy certain specified criteria required in this study.

Instrumentation. A semi-structured interview-guided questionnaire and personal, in-depth interview were employed as a technique to identify the lived experiences and perspectives of private tertiary education leaders on post-pandemic education. The instrument was checked and validated by the adviser and an expert in research writing. A set of five (5) sub-questions was given in every research question, one-on-one interviews were done, and a focus group discussion followed. The interviewee's responses were recorded verbatim to ensure that no data was changed.

Data Analysis. The data gathered from the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is the process of discovering and interpreting patterns or themes within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and this method comprises reading through a set of data and looking for patterns in the meaning of the data to locate themes. The study consisted of a careful assessment of the interview transcripts to find general patterns and themes connected to the research topics.

In this study, thematic analysis helped the researcher obtain a better understanding of the study participants' experiences and opinions, as well as identify emerging themes. Furthermore, the researcher's reflexivity was vital to the study design, as it enabled self-awareness and addressed personal biases throughout the

research process. Furthermore, the researcher's reflexivity was critical to the study design, as it enabled self-awareness and addressed personal biases throughout the research process.

Ethical Consideration. Before starting the study, the researchers acquired written permission from the participants. They ensured anonymity for all persons partaking in the research study by presenting information about the investigation and promising that no names would be utilized. The idea of confidentiality was largely respected as a means to prevent study participants from damage (Baez, 2002). Participants were encouraged to resign from the interview at any time if they considered that finishing the interview questions or sharing their ideas could affect their emotional well-being. The researcher valued participants' views and viewpoints, and the results were reported straightforwardly and honestly.

RESULTS

1. Private education leaders' lived experiences in post-pandemic education.

The thematic analysis was based on qualitative data collected from interviews with private education leaders, examining their experiences and strategies during the post-pandemic period. The major themes identified from the data included "Appointment Process and Leadership Transition," "Adaptive leadership in Post-Pandemic education," and "Pandemic-Induced Challenges." Below is a detailed breakdown of these themes:

Relevant Theme 1. Appointment process and leadership transition. Papadimos (2019) emphasized the importance of succession planning at academic institutions to effectively manage leadership transitions. The findings of this study highlighted the need for institutions to prepare individuals who would serve as interim leaders to reduce disruptions during transitions. In addition, Zodikoff and Pardasani (2020) investigated pathways to academic leadership, focusing on the shift from faculty to administrative positions. Their research

examined the challenges faced by those who transitioned suddenly into leadership roles. Participants often discussed the nature of their appointments to leadership positions, with many education leaders reporting that they were recruited rather than actively seeking these roles, implying an urgent institutional need. The participants stated.

Participant 1 explained, "Actually, the appointment was sudden because there was a need to fill the position, so I was appointed to be the Dean for Academics." Similarly, Participant 2 stated, "I was appointed as a school head initially at an annexed college and later as an ISO auditor. For proper acceptance, two parties must sign a contract or appointment at the same time. Currently, the educational criteria require only a four-year degree and two years of experience to qualify for the position."

This theme emphasizes the importance of systematic succession planning and clear leadership paths in educational institutions. The data show that many leaders were chosen based on institutional needs, often without transfer preparedness. Leaders transitioning into new positions need planning to ensure they have the resources and support they require. Institutions can reduce disruptions and build a strong leadership pipeline by prioritizing nominations.

Relevant Theme 2. Adaptive leadership in post-pandemic education. Singh et al. (2021) stressed the importance of hybrid and blended learning in post-pandemic education and the necessity for leaders to adapt to online and flexible teaching techniques. Koekemoer et al. (2021) found a link between leadership style, work engagement, team effectiveness, and adaptive performance during remote lockdowns. This highlights the necessity for adaptable leadership, especially in remote contexts, and the need for leaders to adjust their methods to changing institutional norms and stakeholder expectations in the modern educational system.

Participant 5 remarked, "The pandemic pushed me to adopt digital processes, and I decided to

keep those even after it ended. For instance, moving to online learning became a permanent part of our school." Meanwhile, Participant 2 shared, "I was more focused on transitioning to blended learning models, where I combined in-person classes with online teaching methods. I conducted one-on-one or small group lessons, tailoring instruction to the student's needs. This involved classroom instruction, which, during the post-pandemic period, shifted to online learning." I find that flexibility and guidance are especially important when mentoring younger, millennial educators, who often bring diverse teaching styles and methodologies (P4). At the same time, I agree with P3's view that the integration of digital platforms has placed leaders under increased scrutiny, requiring us to adapt our engagement and leadership styles, especially on social media. This shift in visibility has influenced how I connect with and support my team in the public eye, particularly via social media (P4).

Adaptive leadership is crucial in post-pandemic education when flexibility in teaching methods and digital resources is necessary. Leaders have utilized hybrid learning methods to promote accessibility and adaptability while meeting various stakeholder expectations. The integration of digital platforms has improved public visibility, demanding nuanced involvement and assistance, especially with younger educators and social media. Adaptive leadership is today characterized by innovation and dynamic reactivity to educational landscape demands.

Relevant Theme 3. Pandemic-induced challenges. Kobylarek (2021) discussed the post-pandemic challenges in education, such as rebuilding social relationships and addressing technological barriers. The study emphasized the need for educational leaders to balance technological integration with fostering social and civic development. The pandemic introduced various challenges, particularly in maintaining student engagement and managing school operations under increased restrictions. Participants highlighted several critical issues, including:

Participant 2 shared, "I've found that keeping children engaged in virtual settings has been a real challenge. It's difficult to switch from classroom instruction to an online platform, especially considering that not all students can afford to connect to the online system." Participant 3 added, "I've also realized the importance of maintaining momentum in both business and education by using creative solutions, like online classes and meetings. However, the primary issue with implementing these strategies is the lack of internet infrastructure in the country. We have limited internet service providers, and some areas still lack access to internet, whether broadband or through local area networks. That's the challenge."

This theme underlines the pandemic-induced challenges educational leaders have, particularly the difficulty of retaining student engagement and negotiating restricted technology infrastructure. Leaders are faced with creatively managing technology integration while fostering critical social linkages inside their institutions. The difficulty of sustaining effective virtual engagement and overcoming connectivity limits highlights the need for continued investment in internet infrastructure, especially to enable fair access to education in poor areas. These themes highlight the challenging realities of directing education through and past a crisis.

2. The context for private education leaders' lived experiences in post-pandemic education.

This thematic analysis examined the contextual factors influencing the lived experiences of private education leaders in the post-pandemic educational environment, as detailed in the qualitative data from the interviews. The major themes that emerged from the data included "strategic management and technological innovation in leadership," "stakeholder relationships," and "conflict management and decision-making."

Theme 1. Strategic management and technological innovation in leadership. Rasli et

al. (2022) recommend a strategic framework for higher education in the post-pandemic era, highlighting resilience, change management, digital transformation, curriculum adaptation, and sustainability. Education authorities in South Cotabato adopted many approaches stressing decision-making, innovation, and the inclusion of technology. Iliško et al. (2021) noticed that while technology aided remote learning, it also produced challenges like digital literacy and equitable access. Rasli et al. (2022) underlined the significance of digital transformation in higher education institutions, stressing resilience and the application of new technology to serve educational demands and promote innovation. Researchers have developed hybrid techniques that combine online and face-to-face learning.

Participant 1 explained, "I believe that effective decision-making is crucial for managing various areas and ensuring that all responsibilities are fulfilled. Managing this large department—or rather, multiple departments under different academic divisions—requires me to oversee time management carefully. In terms of decision-making, I need to ensure that I am actively overseeing all aspects." Participant 3 commented, "For me, excellent time and stress management have become even more important, especially with technological advancements and the growing demand for quicker results, which add more pressure on leaders." "In my experience, our school adopted a mixed-platform approach, which made operations more efficient and provided us with greater flexibility in both teaching and management" (P3). Meanwhile, P2 said, "my colleague reflected that the pandemic created new opportunities for professional development through online platforms. I think social media is a very good example because now you can reach more people when it comes to disseminating information."

Strategic management and technological innovation are crucial in current educational leadership. Leaders must overcome smart decision-making, time management, and adaptation to integrate digital tools effectively.

Hybrid learning systems increase operational efficiency and flexibility, meeting expanding educational demands. Technological developments support learning and create new avenues for professional development, including social media's function in information distribution. This systematic, tech-driven technique is key to developing resilient institutions.

Relevant Theme 2. Stakeholder relationships.

Educational leaders have adapted to post-COVID-19 challenges by emphasizing flexibility, communication, and stakeholder collaboration. To preserve learning and well-being, leaders must engage with stakeholders to implement digital transformation, inclusive practices, and fair resource access (Rasli et al., 2022; Biag et al., 2021). Leaders must balance these linkages while accomplishing institutional aims. Other participants have the following highlights:

"In my approach, I emphasized the importance of building positive connections with stakeholders by fostering open communication and actively involving parents in the decision-making process. It inspires me to see my students determined to pursue their dreams, motivating me to do better and supporting them" (P5). "Similarly, I recognize the necessity, as highlighted by P1, of acknowledging and addressing the concerns and input from students and stakeholders when making leadership decisions. This collaborative and responsive approach is central to my leadership style."

This theme emphasizes how educational leaders are prioritizing stakeholder connections to tackle post-pandemic issues effectively. Leaders appreciate the significance of open communication and the active involvement of parents, students, and other stakeholders in establishing an inclusive, collaborative atmosphere. By addressing concerns and integrating stakeholder input into decision-making, leaders strengthen institutional resilience and ensure that educational policies coincide with the broader requirements of the community. This strategy stresses a devotion to building supportive,

engaged connections that uphold both learning results and well-being.

Relevant Theme 3. Conflict management and decision-making. Conflict management became an important skill for school leaders during the pandemic. Skoulidas et al. (2022) studied how school disputes, frequently connected to pre-existing difficulties, were aggravated by the increased health protection measures, ICT obstacles, and organizational changes due to the pandemic. Leaders had to manage these disputes while maintaining a pleasant working environment. They also faced tensions originating from conflicting stakeholder interests and institutional standards. Navigating these problems required an organized approach to decision-making, frequently involving compromise or adherence to institutional policies. Other participants shared their thought.

"I recognize that disputes are inevitable due to the varying satisfaction levels and expectations of our stakeholders. However, I rely on our institutional rules and regulations as a guiding framework to address these challenges" (P1). In addition, P5 mentioned that when conflicts arise between stakeholders' interests and management decisions, we depend on clear and effective communication and adherence to the decisions issued by higher authorities, like the Board of Justice, to maintain alignment and resolve issues constructively.

This theme underscores the vital necessity of conflict management and structured decision-making in educational leadership, especially under pandemic-induced stress. Leaders confronted more conflicts due to opposing stakeholder expectations, health norms, and ICT difficulties. By relying on institutional policies and supporting clear communication, leaders effectively resolved disagreements, ensuring alignment with corporate goals and maintaining a supportive work environment. This method stresses a balanced, policy-driven strategy needed for settling differences and ensuring institutional coherence during adverse times.

3. Private education leaders view of themselves in the future.

This thematic analysis was based on qualitative data from interviews with private education leaders, focusing on their views regarding their future roles and career development post-pandemic. Key themes identified include "commitment to leadership," "career goals and plans," "milestones and future aspirations," and "continuous learning and professional development."

Relevant Theme 1. Commitment to leadership.

The pandemic exposed educational system weaknesses and highlighted the importance of school leadership in ensuring continuity and addressing disparities. School leaders fostered inclusive and adaptive learning environments, ensuring quality education in line with 21st-century demands, especially in Uganda, where they were instrumental in addressing inequalities. (Atuhaire & Turyagyenda, 2023). Leadership during the pandemic was marked by a strong focus on equity. School leaders reflected on strategies to ensure equitable access to resources despite institutional challenges. This focus on equity in leadership was expected to continue in the post-pandemic era as leaders worked to address systemic inequalities (Kruse et al., 2020). The majority of responses reported a sense of loyalty and passion for their work, often noting personal progress and the favorable attention they received as motivators. The following transcripts were taken from the participants' responses.

"I guess I wanted to continue, sir, because one thing is I saw myself grow in private institutions. I guess when it comes to leadership, I was not neglected; instead, I was acknowledged for doing good or doing something different. That's the one reason why I wanted to continue being a leader in private institutions because, more than that, I can always do my task because I have this passion to be a leader" (P1). While P2 said, "yes, education leaders were instrumental in shaping the future of education. By continuing to serve after the pandemic, we could contribute to the ongoing growth, resilience, and success

of the educational community," and P3 underscored the significance of continuing to serve, recognizing the ability to contribute to ongoing educational achievements, and P4 implied loyalty and commitment. "Yes, since I've been in this institution for 27 years and my loyalty and dedication are still in my heart, serving this way is a tremendous pleasure for me. I am thrilled to serve and lead in a private institution until my retirement."

This study demonstrates that dedication to leadership is not only about performing institutional tasks but also firmly entrenched in personal growth, loyalty, and a shared desire for equity. The dedication displayed by educational leaders demonstrates a robust, forward-looking approach, underscoring the vital role of leadership in building an inclusive and flexible educational landscape beyond the epidemic.

Relevant Theme 2. Career goals and plans.

Educational leaders have had to focus on crisis management and long-term strategic career development. Leaders of postgraduate programs in academic institutions, for instance, shifted their focus to ensuring that residents and trainees had opportunities for career advancement through virtual education and innovative leadership roles (Vusse et al., 2021). Education leaders usually had separate career aspirations that encompassed both professional and personal growth. Their objectives revolved around academic triumphs, such as gaining higher degrees and contributing to the progress of their institutions. Other participants stated the following:

"One of the things I wanted to achieve, sir, is more than the position; I guess it's more of developing myself, and one of those is to continue my doctorate, but somehow, I'm not ready yet because I still have to focus on my personal life and my position in this institution. Sooner, I will be back to school to finish my doctorate" (P1). While P3 said, "for me, I planned to have more impact. I believe in more people because it means that I can do more and I can help many people more; that's my goal, and I intend to achieve that by simply mastering what

I am currently doing while at the same time learning continuously. Learning is very important, so continuously going to the master's school and at the same time attending seminars, training, workshops, and collaborating with different institutions that help us see how they are doing it, so we can benchmark from their schools and educational institutions so that we can do more for the students and the institutions we currently work for."

This theme underlines that educational leaders are driven by objectives that balance both professional performance and personal betterment. They consider their responsibilities not only as positions of authority but as highways to bigger impacts, always examining chances to expand their knowledge and influence through higher degrees, training, and collaboration. Their goals demonstrate a commitment to lifelong learning and a desire to enhance the institutions they serve, thereby boosting the educational environment for future generations.

Relevant Theme 3. Milestones and future aspirations. A key aspiration for the future was the development of resilient education systems that could withstand future crises. Leaders were focused on building robust infrastructure and adaptive educational policies to sustain progress even in the face of uncertainties (Gowan, 2022). With specific articulations below, these leaders shared, with many articulating ambitious intentions for the next five years:

"I wanted to graduate with my doctorate and then achieve another milestone in my personal growth by conducting my leadership training. I aimed to train young leaders in the next five years" (P1), while P5 had an institutional goal of transforming their college into a university, with a focus on improving teaching credentials, research, and accreditation. He commented, "in the next five years, I plan for this college to become a university in the future. To achieve this, we will apply for accreditation, especially with CHED. We are currently at level 1, and we aim to enhance the qualifications of our teachers, the quality of instruction, research

and development, and, of course, the facilities." Moreover, P3 aimed to become a "leader of leaders," establishing himself as a regional authority in educational innovation. In the next five years, "I want to develop the projects I'm working on so that they become a model for other leaders in the region. This means I can help more people, and they can become the best in their fields within Region XII" (P3).

The theme of milestones and future goals highlights educational leaders' determination to construct resilient, forward-thinking education systems. Their goals are both personal and institutional, trying to foster future leaders, strengthen their institutions, and promote themselves as regional exemplars of innovation. These objectives underpin a vision of education that is flexible and growth-oriented, with leaders devoted to generating long-term contributions that transcend beyond their current roles and institutions.

Relevant Theme 4. Continuous learning and professional development. In the post-COVID-19 era, continuous professional development (CPD) for educational leaders has emphasized digital literacy, collaborative leadership, and hybrid learning techniques to suit growing educational objectives. Essential features include the development of online pedagogical abilities, the advancement of adaptive leadership approaches, and the fostering of cooperation to sustain educational resilience (Coutet, 2021; Torrance et al., 2023). While the pandemic forced the rapid adoption of online education, educational leaders must now navigate the complexities of applying lessons learned during a crisis to long-term planning. Studies caution against overgeneralizing emergency solutions for post-pandemic education, emphasizing the need for continuous evaluation and adaptation (Coutet, 2021). The issue of continuous learning and professional development is prominent among education leaders, as they underline the importance of continuing training to stay current and effective in their roles. Other participants shared their views.

P1, P2, and P3 all expressed their desire to attend leadership training, seminars, and mentorship programs to develop their abilities. P1 said leadership training is number one for me because if you are in this kind of position, you need to continue learning in terms of leadership style, leadership strategy, and specific training courses in leadership. P2 mentioned, “yes, educational leadership courses, school management workshops, professional development for teachers, educational technology certification, and mentorship programs for educational leaders,” and P3 added, “so I intend to attend more leadership training courses in addition to the Master’s and doctorate programs that I also plan to enroll in. I also would like to be mentored by people who excel in the educational industry.”

This theme underlines the crucial need for continuing learning and professional development for educational leaders in adjusting to a continuously growing educational context. Post-pandemic, the focus on digital literacy, adaptive leadership, and hybrid learning has redefined Continuous Professional Development (CPD) as a dynamic, continual necessity. Leaders recognize that to be effective, they must actively seek advanced training, mentorship, and new certifications, ensuring they are prepared with relevant skills and views to address contemporary concerns and drive major change in education.

DISCUSSION

This research explores the experiences of private tertiary education leaders during the COVID-19 post-pandemic and their impact on future educational leadership models. It reveals that these leaders have adapted to new roles, used innovative management strategies, and embraced digital technologies and flexible learning models to maintain educational continuity. The findings suggest that these changes may influence future leadership styles and decision-making processes in the education sector.

This study is aligned with accepted theories of adaptive and transformational leadership. For

instance, adaptive leadership principles were evident in leaders’ adaptations to changing educational demands, such as integrating digital technology and altering teaching approaches (Heifetz & Linsky, 1990). Transformational leadership was also exhibited by leaders’ initiatives to inspire staff and learners during uncertain times (Burns, 1978). The results suggest that leaders who utilized various leadership styles were better able to address post-pandemic challenges, aligning with studies by Adams et al. (2023) and Gocotano et al. (2021), which highlighted leadership flexibility as a crucial driver of successful adaptation in education.

The findings of the study are consistent with past research, specifically emphasizing the vital relevance of technological flexibility and the necessity for flexible leadership. For example, Coutet (2021) stressed the importance of strengthening technological skills in leadership, which was demonstrated in this study as leaders embraced online platforms and blended learning models to address post-pandemic challenges. Similarly, Rasli et al. (2022) underscored the usefulness of digital transformation as a resilience-building approach, corroborating this study’s finding that leaders prioritized technology integration.

However, the study uncovered significant facts that expand upon earlier findings. For example, whereas prior studies primarily focused on the immediate reactions of leaders to the pandemic (Adams et al., 2023; Singh et al., 2021), this research provides insight into how these leaders envision the future and prepare for long-term success. Leaders indicated a commitment to continued professional improvement, reflecting the findings of Crawford (2022), who asserted that time management and lifelong learning are essential for sustainable leadership in the post-pandemic period.

Despite the valuable insights, several potential sources of bias and confounding variables need to be investigated. Moreover, the semi-structured interviews are based on self-reported data, and social desirability may bias

this study. Only those leaders who may have exaggerated their achievements and downplayed challenges could make the results appear skewed. Additionally, the focus on only qualitative data may limit the generalizability of conclusions to other education leaders in different settings. As the study was localized in Koronadal City, South Cotabato, Philippines, there is a lack of generalizability among private higher education colleges nationwide and worldwide. It also relied on qualitative data that was unquantifiable. A future investigation may extend beyond a sample of private education leaders to include leaders across other parts of higher education and should examine those leadership strategies about downstream student outcomes, and employee engagement (including among faculty members), as well as the resilience such institutions exhibit over time. A post-pandemic study suggests that longitudinal research is necessary to comprehend the future evolution of leadership approaches. It would provide a better understanding of the ongoing impact on leadership practices post-pandemic.

The study has various theoretical and practical implications. Educational leaders should support constant professional growth and establish a culture of innovation within their institutions. Theoretically, the study contributes to the rising body of literature on crisis leadership, underscoring the necessity for agility, digital competence, and resilience. Practically, the results suggest that educational leaders should prioritize ongoing professional development and foster a culture of innovation within their institutions. The outbreak has underscored the importance of flexible leadership capable of reacting to crises with strategic readiness.

This study gives substantial insights into the experiences of private higher education administrators in the post-pandemic period; nonetheless, its shortcomings highlight a need for future research in various settings. The pandemic has radically impacted educational leadership, needing continuing learning, adaptation, and technical competence to address future issues. Future research on post-

pandemic educational leadership should emphasize longitudinal studies that track the growth of leadership strategies, involve bigger and more diverse samples, and study quantitative relationships between leadership approaches and institutional results.

It is proposed that private higher education institutions invest money towards professional development programs to prepare their leaders for coming issues. These programs need to emphasize crisis management, digital literacy, and innovative decision-making to boost their ability to navigate uncertainty and preserve resilience. We should foster collaborative leadership techniques that incorporate all stakeholders in decision-making processes. Inclusive leadership assures the consideration of all opinions, leading to more comprehensive and effective decision-making.

Finally, institutions may assist technological integration by investing in digital infrastructure and ensuring fair access to technology for both staff and students. Bridging the digital divide and ensuring an equitable learning environment is vital. Implementing these principles may greatly strengthen the leadership and technology capabilities of private higher education institutions, allowing a more responsive and inclusive learning environment.

Conflict of Interest:

The author declares no conflict of interest in the conduct of this research.

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