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Research Article

The Lived Experience of Followership in K-12 School Crisis: A Phenomenological Study of Trust and Organizational Resilience

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Abstract

School crises have become increasingly complex, requiring not only leadership action but the active contribution of followers who serve as first responders to crises. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the perceived role of followership in crisis management within a K–12 school setting, particularly how school followers contribute to effective crisis response, build trust, and develop organizational resilience. The researcher provided a voice to the experiences of school followers (teachers and educational assistants) in a K–12 school setting. Guided by followership theory and social identity theory, the study sought to answer two research questions: (a) How do followers perceive and respond to crises, build trust, and develop organizational resilience in a K–12 school setting? (b) What is the lived experience of followers during crises in a K–12 school setting? Using Moustakas's (1994) [1] phenomenological methodology, purposive criterion sampling was employed to recruit 10 school followers who had experienced and responded to significant school crises. Analysis of participants' descriptions revealed 10 interconnected themes, with five themes addressing each research question. Collectively, a seven-theme integrative model for school crisis response was established: Adaptive Professional Action, Trust-Based Relationship, Collaborative Crisis Response, Reflection & Learning, Professional Advocacy, Organizational Resilience, and Transformation of Professional Identity. The findings contribute to the growing body of followership literature by demonstrating that followers are not passive recipients of leadership directives but co-creators who influence crisis outcomes, organizational learning, and resilience.

Keywords: Crisis Management, Criterion Sampling, Followership, K–12, Leadership, Lived Experience, Organizational Learning, Organizational Resilience, Phenomenology, Themes, Trust

Introduction

Crisis management research in education focuses on leaders' actions and competencies. Crisis research has focused on leadership during crises, without understanding followers' psychological and organizational contributions to crisis management. Haslam et al. (2024) [2] cited an overreliance on individual leaders, focusing on their attributes, behavior, and competencies as the advantage needed to manage crises, rather than on the social processes required to mitigate and handle crises. Leadership is interconnected with followership (Platow et al., 2015) [3] and followers give leaders a reason to lead and determine collective mobilization (Klein & Licata, 2003) [4]. A major crisis, such as the pandemic, necessitates a collective effort to address the collective threats it poses, thereby increasing the psychological need for safety and the

collaborative efforts of leaders and followers to mitigate the crisis (Contu et al., 2024) [5].

Leadership and followership are interconnected; however, scholars emphasize a distinct understanding of each concept. While leadership is viewed as a set of behaviors involving influencing others to achieve set goals (Northouse, 2019) [6], followership is viewed as the behavior and responses of those who are influenced. Occasionally, it is the active role of shaping outcomes with the formal authority of a leader (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014) [7]. Contemporary research asserts leadership as a relational and developing phenomenon, co-created through interactions between leaders and followers rather than a one-way influence process. This view provides a platform where followers are not only viewed as recipients of influence but also as people who amplify, resist, negotiate, or direct a leader's capabilities through communication, compliance, and team building (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014) [7].

Focusing only on leaders provides an incomplete account of how organizations function under duress. Recent studies in followership have synthesized this perspective into a systematic research agenda that treats followership as a distinct but interdependent construct with leadership (Kelley, 1988; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014) [7,8]. Despite the evolving followership studies, only a few followership frameworks within K-12 school crisis contexts are evident, leaving a gap in how followers navigate uncertainty and contribute to resilience.

This article presents findings drawn from a qualitative phenomenological study that examined the lived experiences of followership in K-12 school crises. Specifically, it delves into how school followers responded to crisis, built trust, and developed organizational resilience, aligning with the existing literature on followership theories (Kelley, 1992; Chaleff, 1995) [9,10] and social identity theory (Tajfel, 1974) [11]. It also addresses the research questions: "How do followers perceive and respond to crises, build trust, and develop resilience in a K-12 school setting?" and "What is the lived experience of followers during crises in a K-12 school setting?"

The discussion begins by outlining different school crises, followership typologies, and their application to this study, especially Kelly's followership theory and Chaleff's courageous followership, which are the theoretical frameworks for this study. It also pinpoints trust and resilience-building during school crises. Next, the method, data collection, and analysis used in this study are outlined. Then, the seven-part integrative crisis response model - Adaptive Professional Action, Trust-Based Relationship (peers and administrators), Collaborative Crisis Response, Reflection and Learning, Professional Advocacy, Organizational Resilience, and Transformation of Professional Identity - was developed from the 10 themes identified from participants' interviews. This integrative model offers innovative insights into educational crisis management from a follower-centric perspective. The article concludes with a brief discussion of the implications, followed by concluding remarks.

School Crisis

When crisis occur, they usually disrupt not only operations but also the emotional, relational, and instructional climate of an organization. School crisis periods could be health-related (disease outbreak), safety-related (school shooting, lockdown), technology-related (power outages, cyberattacks on school data systems), or social-emotional (death of a student or staff member), which can disrupt instructional activities, increase stress, and cause burnout (Cornell & Mayer, 2010) [12]. (Table 1) elaborates on how different crisis types may shape followers' lived experiences.

Crisis Type	Primary Stressors	Trust Challenges	Resilience Demands
Safety Threat	Immediate danger; fear	Rapid transparent communication	Improvisation under time pressure
Public Health Emergency	Prolonged uncertainty	Consistency and reliability	Sustained adaptation
Community Trauma	Emotional distress	Demonstrations of relational care	Collective sensemaking
Organizational Disruption	Policy ambiguity	Perceived fairness and voice	Resource mobilization
Note: Crisis experiences vary in duration and intensity but consistently require adaptive leadership and network coordination (Duchek, 2020; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018) [13,14].			

Table 1: Crisis Types and Experiential Dimensions for Followers

School crisis refers to any event that affects the safety, well-being, or normal functioning of the school community and requires immediate or sustained action beyond normative procedures (Grissom & Condon, 2021) [15]. During crisis events such as lockdowns or health emergencies, teachers and staff must implement procedures, guide students, communicate with families, and collaborate with school authorities. The ability of followers to make sense of uncertain information and act decisively directly contributes to a school's capacity for immediate response (L. Smith & Riley, 2012; Weick & Weick, 1995) [16,17].

School crisis research focuses on administrators, rather than the lived experiences of frontline educators. L. Smith and Riley (2012) [16] noted that crisis leadership studies underrepresent staff perspectives despite their operational input and involvement. Followership scholarship remains underdeveloped in education compared to business and military contexts. Thus, critical gaps persist in understanding how educational institutions navigate uncertain situations from the bottom-up.

Followership Typologies

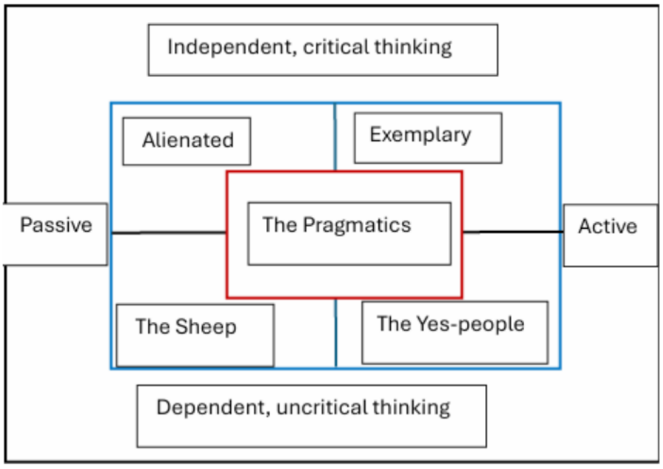
The study of followership has evolved through several foundational theoretical frameworks that have redefined leader-centric models to include relational and collaborative paradigms.

Scholarships like those by Kelley (1992), Chaleff (1995), Kellerman (2008), and Uhl-Bien et al. (2014) [7,9,10,18] have played pivotal roles in redefining the influence of followers in leadership processes and organizational effectiveness. Robert Kelley's (1988, 1992) [8,9] typology of followership was one of the first to systematically conceptualize followership as an essential part of leadership and organizational success.

Crossman and Crossman (2011) [19] categorized followership into three main areas: descriptive behavioral typologies (Kelley, 1992; Kellerman, 2008) [9,18], prescriptive behavioral typologies (Chaleff, 1995) [10], and situational theories (Bjugstad et al., 2006) [19]. Typologies, such as Kelley's (1992) [9] five styles of followers and Chaleff's (1995) [10] five domains of effective followers, provide the foundation for empirical assessment, while constructivist work calls attention to the situational malleability of follower identities. Recent empirical research (Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al., 2022; Ribbat et al., 2023) [21,22] has examined the temporal stability of followership styles and how organizational climate, psychological safety, and role expectations moderate the expression of followership identities.

Kelley (1992) [9] proposed a model based on two dimensions: independent critical thinking and active engagement (as shown in Figure 1). From these dimensions, five follower types were suggested: exemplary followers (high in both dimensions), alienated followers (high dependence, low engagement), conformist followers (high engagement, low independence), pragmatists (moderate in both), and passive followers (low in both). It redefined followership as shared responsibility with leaders, shifting the focus from leader dependency to follower agency.

Building on Kelley's framework, Chaleff (1995) [10] proposed the Courageous Follower Model, emphasizing the moral and ethical responsibilities followers hold in supporting and challenging leaders. It is rooted in ethical leadership and accountability, highlighting the role followers play in preventing ethical misconduct and promoting integrity (Chaleff, 2009) [23]. He posited that effective followers exhibit courage in five domains: courage to assume responsibility, courage to serve, courage to challenge, courage to participate in transformation, and courage to take moral action.



Note. Adapted from Kelley (1988, p. 145) [7].

Figure 1: Kelley's Follower Typologies

Theoretical Framework

This study helps to redefine and extend the followership theory, especially in the educational field. It challenges the traditional leader-centric focus by pinpointing the role of followers as active agents and co-constructors in achieving organizational vision during crises. It extends constructivist followership theory, which posits that followers co-construct leadership and outcomes through meaning-making, processes, and interactions, rather than passively absorbing information (Carsten et al., 2010) [24].

This study draws on two interrelated theoretical foundations: followership and social identity theory. While the followership theory challenges the conventional top-down leadership model by emphasizing the active role of followers in shaping organizational processes and outcomes (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014) [7], the social identity theory posits that individuals derive part of their identity

from their membership in group settings, influencing how individuals perceive themselves, interpret social situations, and respond to different situations (Tajfel, 1974) [11].

Organizational Trust

Trust in organizations is a multi-dimensional construct widely studied in management and organizational psychology. A dominant integrative model defines trust as the willingness of a trustor to be vulnerable to the actions of a trustee, with trustworthiness determined by three perceived attributes: ability, benevolence, and integrity (Mayer et al., 1995) [25]. In situations where risk and uncertainty are high, followers rely on leadership competence, care, and honesty to navigate times of crisis.

Studies have shown that trust in leaders is related to positive organizational outcomes (job performance, organizational citizenship behavior, and low turnover intentions) and that a leader's behavior is pivotal to the development of trust (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002) [26]. Organizational members depend on trusted authorities for timely information, credible directives, and decisions that prevent harm (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002; Mayer et al., 1995) [25,26]. Scholarship on crisis management suggests that trust precedes leadership honesty, competence, and fairness, serving as "buffers" for organizations.

A school with higher baseline trust will easily comply with guidance, sustain coordination, and recover faster during times of crisis (Guzzo et al., 2021; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014) [7,27]. Trust literature converges on the view that trust is an enabled, coordinated behavior and that psychological safety develops during times of crisis (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002) [26]. However, there are divergent views on trust, emphasizing that it is an essential ingredient for rapid coordination, yet it can be eroded during times of crisis, fear, and inconsistent communication (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002) [26]. In schools, followers may be expected to trust leadership decisions while navigating other dilemmas related to students' safety and well-being.

Organizational Resilience

Organizational resilience is the capacity of an organization to adapt, anticipate, absorb, and recover from both internal and external crises, while continuing to meet other necessities (Bucovetchi et al., 2024; Duchek, 2020; Lengnick-Hall et al., 2011) [13,28,29]. Duchek (2020) [13] highlighted resilience as the vital capacity made up of other capacities, such as anticipation (sensing risks and preparing), coping and adaptation (responding affectively under stress), and learning or transforming (changing structures or practices). In educational contexts, these capacities can be translated into school measures such as the continuity of instruction during a crisis (disruption), students' support during uncertain events (shelter-in-place), and organizational learning that strengthens future responses (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2011; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007) [29,30].

Resilience in schools can be categorized into three types: structural, human, and social. Structural resilience includes infrastructural adaptations (safe buildings), material resources, and formal policies that enable operations to continue (Duchek, 2020; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007) [13,30].

Human resilience includes staff capabilities, skills, and psychological resources (e.g., problem-solving), which can be incorporated into professional development periods, thus strengthening followers' commitment to the school plan (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2011) [29]. Social resilience includes trust, networks, and collaboration within and outside the school. Parents and stakeholders enable effective information dissemination and resource mobilization during times of crisis (Boin et al., 2013) [31]. Resilient schools are crisis-ready schools that can easily adapt and learn when contingencies arise.

Resilience is not a single act demonstrated by only leaders; it is a shared responsibility and collective agency that enables flexible, scalable responses (Carson et al., 2007; Pearce & Conger, 2003) [32,33]. School followers play critical and active roles in the resilience process. Organizational resilience scholarship converges on the idea that resilience is an emergent capability developed through shared meaning, collaboration, and learning (Duchek, 2020) [13]. However, there are resilience theorists who contradict the convergence of organizational resilience. Some frame resilience as a structural or procedural capacity embedded in systems and routines (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2011) [29].

Method

This study employed a qualitative design, specifically a descriptive phenomenology, developed by Husserl (1970) [34]. This approach centers on describing rather than interpreting, requiring the researcher to engage in epoché or bracketing to suspend personal assumptions and biases (Moustakas, 1994) [1]. By focusing on participants' accounts of their lived experiences, adopting this framework ensured adherence to participants' perspectives, methodological rigor, and commitment to describing the phenomenon as it was experienced rather than theoretically explained.

Phenomenology was chosen over other qualitative designs (e.g., grounded theory, case study) because the goal was to expound the meaning and essence of followers' lived experience rather than generate a process model (grounded theory) or conduct a bounded, multi-modal case study (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Patton, 2015) [35,36]. This research design supported a deeper understanding of followership as a relational and socially constructed process in

organizational settings (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014) [7]. It provided a rigorous framework for building foundational knowledge directly from participants' accounts (van Manen, 1990) [37].

The participants

The sample of this qualitative phenomenological study consisted of 10 participants who were all school followers in Alberta, Canada. All participants agreed to participate in the study. The participants in this study were included through a purposive criterion sampling process, in which they reported working (or having worked) in a school and experienced crises in various capacities (Creswell & Poth, 2016) [35]. The research participants in this study varied in experience, roles, and length of time worked at each school. They were either teachers or EAs. The geographical locations varied from urban to suburban regions. Five research participants worked in an urban area and another five in a suburban area where their schools were located. These areas are spread across three major school boards. There were eight female participants and two male participants, reflecting the gender distribution commonly found among EAs and teachers within Alberta K–12 education, where about 70% are female (Walker, 2024) [38].

Focusing on participants in schools in the province of Alberta allowed for shared contextual conditions (policies, leadership style, community), increasing the coherence of the phenomenon under investigation (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018) [39,40]. Participants had experienced at least one significant crisis within 3 to 5 years in a school context, such as safety incidents, public health disruptions, or organizational emergencies. The timeframe of interest was to ensure participant recollection remains reasonably detailed while acknowledging that crisis memories persist meaningfully over time (Chatzipanagiotou et al., 2023) [41]. The study was limited to participants from K–12 schools in the province of Alberta, which may reduce its transferability. Findings rely on participant recall and subjective interpretation, which are inherent limitations of phenomenological research.

For the study, each research participant was referred to as a school follower. Essentially, none of these participants held formal administrative, supervisory, or leadership positions within their respective institutions, ensuring the perspective captured was primarily from a non-management point of view. All 10 research participants indicated that they had experienced crises at least once at their different schools, and each was able to recall the type and nature of the crisis. As the purpose of this study was to understand the lived experience of school followers during times of crisis, specifically how they build trust and develop resilience, understanding their responses was crucial to this study.

Ethics

Ethical approval from the Research Ethics Board (REB) was obtained before data collection. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was secured, and confidentiality was maintained through pseudonyms and secure data storage. Given the sensitive nature of crisis experiences, care was taken to minimize participant distress. The study adhered to the Belmont Report principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979) [42].

The informed consent form described the purpose of the study, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw. To protect participants' involvement, the researcher ensured school administrators were not responsible for selecting participants, but only gave their permission to conduct the study by approaching school followers, thus avoiding any form of coercion, undue influence, or perceived pressure for school followers to be a part of the study (Orb et al., 2001) [43].

The researcher reviewed the consent document verbally with each participant before data collection and answered any questions. The voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality protection, and data usage, including potential risks and benefits, were explained. It was central to ethical requirements, ensuring participants understood the study's purpose, procedures, risks, benefits, and right to withdraw at any time without being penalized.

Data Collection

Data collection was done through Microsoft Teams, recording 10 participant interviews, from which transcripts were generated, creating the data for this study. The interview process allowed the researcher to understand the characteristics of the phenomenon and the lived experience of the school followers as they responded to it. Additionally, the interview allowed the researcher to observe the verbal and nonverbal cues of the research participants, including facial expressions and body language. Follow-up questions and prompts were used when appropriate to encourage research participants to elaborate on their experiences and clarify responses.

Following each interview, the audio recordings were transcribed verbatim using Microsoft Teams. Any identifying information was removed and replaced with pseudonyms to protect participants' confidentiality. Electronic data, including recordings, transcripts, consent forms, and analytic notes, were stored in a password-protected, encrypted computer accessible only to the researcher. Using participants as the primary data source aligned with qualitative research principles that focus on lived experiences over secondary or archival sources (Patton, 2015) [36].

The researcher practiced bracketing, member checking, and reflexive journaling throughout the process of data collection to minimize bias and set aside any personal assumptions (Moustakas, 1994) [1]. Bracketing is the process in which the researcher intentionally sets aside personal assumptions, prior knowledge, and preconceived beliefs about the phenomenon to approach participants' experience with an open mind and neutrality (Moustakas, 1994) [1]. Member checking involves providing participants with their raw interview transcripts and a summary of what the researcher was able to gather from the interview transcripts, inviting them to review for accuracy, completeness, and clarification. Reflexive journaling entails the researcher noting personal experiences with school crises, beliefs about followership roles, and assumptions about trust and resilience.

Data Analysis

Following data collection, the seven-step phenomenological analysis established by Moustakas (1994) [1] as a modification of the Steven-Colaizzi-Keen method was employed to analyze the raw and de-identified transcripts using NVivo and hand coding. (Table 2) summarizes the demographic characteristics of the participants. Pseudonyms were used to represent each participant and reflect their gender. It also outlines the primary crisis experiences.

Participant	Position	Years of Experience	Gender	Primary Crisis Experience
P1 (Sherri)	Teacher	30	Female	Student physical aggression
P2 (Jean)	Educational Assistant (EA)	3	Female	Student aggression/violent behavior
P3 (Graham)	Teacher	7	Male	Systemic institutional crisis
P4 (Susan)	Teacher	15	Female	School crisis management & student safety
P5 (Nicole)	Educational Assistant (EA)	4	Female	School crisis management & student safety
P6 (Mavis)	Teacher	21	Female	Violent student behavior
P7 (John)	Teacher	3	Male	Systemic instructional crisis
P8 (Lowis)	Teacher	6	Female	Student physical aggression
P9 (Kate)	Teacher	4	Female	Student behavioral escalation
P10 (Maria)	Teacher	16	Female	Systemic & literacy crisis
Note: Demographic information of participants (with pseudonyms) showing position, years of experience, gender, and type of crisis				

Table 2: Participants Demographic Characteristics

The Steven-Colaizzi Keen method (Colaizzi, 1978) [44] involves establishing codes and themes that help the researcher identify common lived experience among research participants. The codes and themes were obtained from the transcripts and were coded line-by-line to identify significant statements related to crisis response, trust, and resilience, and then combined collectively. This provided structured, systematic steps for data analysis (Colaizzi, 1978) [44]. The combination of hand-coding and NVivo served as a form of triangulation. As discussed in the following section, the themes explain school followers' crisis response and their lived experiences of crises.

Findings and Discussion

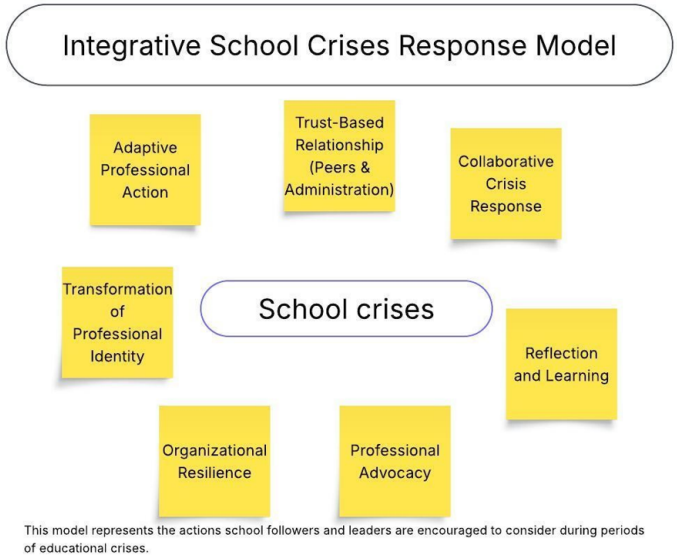
After analyzing the data from the interview transcripts, the researcher identified 10 overarching themes reflecting 10 findings. The themes were: Adaptive Professional Action, Trust-Based Crisis Response, Evolving Advocacy Practice, Relational Reflective Practice, Structural Followership Barriers, Bearing Protection Responsibilities, Compassion vs. Limits, Navigating Systemic Constraints, Finding Collective Strength, and Transforming Professional Identities. (Table 3) highlights the ten themes from crisis responses and lived experiences of school followers.

Theme	Meaning Unit	Significant Statements
Adaptive Professional Action	Followers responded by adapting swiftly to the uncertain crisis while maintaining responsibility for students' safety	What I did was to protect the other kids first. That was the main thing (P1). I did not swear at them or scream at them. My immediate go-to was to be calm and try to protect the student (P6).
Trust-based Crisis Response	Collegial trust enables coordinated crisis management, while distrust of organizational systems complicates crisis response	I had total trust in my school admin. My admin staff has a strong advocate for children, and they really helped put in place to make this child's life better (P1). If I did not have my admin who was in the building, I do not know if I would have continued. Like it was crazy (P3).
Evolving Advocacy Practice	Crisis experiences empowered participants' willingness to advocate for student and staff safety	Let us not confuse a right to education with what is beneficial and better for the student. I will voice it instead of accepting it (P2). We kept a record of everything down to the last detail (P1).
Relational Reflective Practice	Resilience developed through teamwork, shared reflection, emotional support, and professional learning.	We are building relationships, and we must show them that together we are going through this (P2). My faith and love for the Lord really are my help and strength in these kinds of situations, and I pray for wisdom (P1).
Structural Followership Barriers	Organizational policies, procedural limitations, and systemic decision-making inhibited effective followership	Frustrated because it just felt like we were kind of unprepared for a situation such as that (P4). In the instant at the school I was at, there was no protocol in place, and it was frustrating (P5).
Bearing Protection Responsibilities	Followers experienced an immediate sense of responsibility for protecting students, colleagues, and themselves during crises	My first thing was to get the other students back to school with the interns (P2). I was just kind of managing the class and the bystanders that witnessed the situation, as well as managing my own classroom (P4).
Compassion vs. Limits	Participants balanced compassion for students with recognition of professional and personal limitations	I always make sure that if I have not got it right, I am very quick to apologize. I think that is what stood me in good stead with my students (P6). I anticipated the challenges with students and families, making it my duty to send personal emails to families and put out the fire before it gets started (P10).
Navigating Systemic Constraints	Participants experienced frustrations with organizational structures that limited effective crisis management	Due to a series of unenforced policies, he was permitted at school for some days in a highly elevated state, which resulted in me being assaulted (P8). I have been doing this for seven years. I have seen most of my age teachers leaving the profession because of how much pressure is being put on them (P3)
Finding Collective Strength	Participants relied upon supportive relationships with colleagues to cope with crisis experiences	I talked to colleagues, and they said it was a pattern with the admin, and it kind of felt good to know I was not crazy but doing a good job (P9). We would probably rant to each other if the day went badly. We will work together on some kind of plan (P7).
Transforming Professional Identity	Crisis experiences reshaped participants' understanding of themselves as educators, followers, and advocates.	We teach subjects, yes. But as teachers, we first teach people, right? So, we teach people before we teach a subject (P10). The biggest thing I learned is just trusting my gut (P4). If I work in another school that will be the first question: Is the protocol in place for emergency situations (P5)?
Note. Common themes, meaningful units, and individual quoted significant statements provided context for crisis response and lived experience of school followers.		

Table 3: Themes from Crisis Response and Lived Experience of School Followers

The findings from this study corroborate existing literature on followership in school crisis management. The study results contribute to existing literature, highlighting that followership in K–12 school crises is fundamentally an adaptive, relational, and ethical practice rather than a passive organizational role. Participants saw their role beyond being a follower to active contributors who exercised professional judgment, protected students, adapted to various situations, and collaborated with colleagues during periods of crisis. Thus, this challenges traditional perspectives on crisis management that focus solely on leadership rather than on the relational contributions of followers.

The 10 collective themes discovered in this study provided the framework for establishing the seven-integrative model for school crisis response, as visualized in (Figure 2). These are: Adaptive Professional Action, Trust-Based Relationships (Peers and Administration), Collaborative Crisis Response, Reflective Learning, Professional Advocacy, Organizational Resilience, and Transformation of Professional Identity.



Note: The integrative model for school crisis response was developed from the ten themes generated from participants' descriptions.

Figure 2: The Integrative Model for School Crisis Response

Followership as Adaptive Professional Practice

Participants perceived crisis responses as requiring immediate action, flexibility, and ongoing professional decision-making. Rather than relying on administrators' directives, school followers made prompt responses to handle classroom crises, modify instructional situations, protect vulnerable students, and de-escalate behavioral incidents. These experiences corroborate Kelly's (1992) [9] conceptualization of exemplary followers as independent critical thinkers and active "engagers" who contribute to organizational success rather than merely following leadership directives.

Chaleff (2009) [23] posits that courageous followers accept responsibility for organizational outcomes and are ready to exercise moral courage during times of uncertainty. Participants repeatedly demonstrated these characteristics by placing students' safety and needs ahead of their own, assuming responsibilities beyond their role and job descriptions. This extends followership scholarship into an educational crisis context by describing how school followers demonstrate leadership characteristics during periods of crisis.

The findings also support distributed leadership positions, which emphasize that leadership functions should be shared across organizational members rather than concentrated on formal leaders (Spillane, 2006) [26]. The collaborative need for school actors to successfully manage crises describes the essence of social identity in a school system (Tajfel & Turner, 2004) [46]. Participants' descriptions suggest that both leaders and followers contribute their experience and skills during unpredictable situations.

Trust as the Foundation of Effective Crisis Response

Trust was at the core of the findings from this study. Participants consistently described trust as foundational to effective crisis management. They differentiated between interpersonal trust developed within school teams and organizational trust directed towards district-level leadership.

Trust developed among teachers, educational assistants, and school administrators enhanced the crisis management process through coordinated action, emotional support, and effective communication networks. These findings align closely with Mayer et al.'s (1995) [25] model of organizational trust, which argues that ability, benevolence, and integrity are the foundation for developing trustworthiness. Participants trusted their colleagues because they had demonstrated professional competence and reliability during periods of crisis.

Similarly, Bryk and Schneider (2002) [47] demonstrate that trust among school actors is the bedrock condition for collaborative actions and exercising discretionary efforts. Participants consistently emphasize that trusting relationships were developed during times of crisis through daily collaboration. Thus, this helped reduce emotional burden.

However, participants complained about district-level trust, which they perceived to be different from school-based trust.

While school-based trust was primarily viewed as supportive, district-level trust was believed to focus more on policies, compliance, and procedures over frontline realities. These findings show that trust extends beyond a single organizational level to multiple levels. It is imperative for policy and decision-making at all levels to be connected to classroom experience, building followers' trust and confidence in organizational leadership.

Collaborative Crisis Response

The next component for crisis management is collaborative crisis response, highlighting how adaptive action and trust enable effective crisis response. It illustrates how crisis management surfaces as a collective rather than an individual action. Participants consistently emphasized coordinated action among teachers and educational assistants during periods of crisis.

Responsibilities were distributed among frontline actors to protect students while also working with administrators in coordinating emergency responses and documentation. This aligns with Uhl-Bien's (2006) [48] study that conceptualizes leadership as a shared process distributed among organizational members, instead of relying solely on formal leadership. It also reflects organizational resilience literature, which outlines coordination, communication, and distributed decision-making as key components for a resilient organization (Duchek, 2020; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2015) [13,49].

Reflection and Learning

Participants repeatedly interpreted crisis experiences as reflective of how their day turned out through debriefing sessions, documentation, collaborative discussions, and personal evaluation. They viewed crises as opportunities to improve professional judgment, easily recognize warning signals, and prepare for future occurrences instead of just seeing them as traumatic experiences. Kolb (1984) [50] proposes that learning occurs through concrete experience, reflective observation, conceptualization, and experimentation.

Participants' reflection contributed to increased preparedness and organizational resilience because it made them aware of behavioral warning signs, understanding the needs of students, and anticipating escalation before they happen. This supports the sense-making and meaning-making cognitive processes, allowing participants to build situational awareness and manage emotionally difficult situations while enabling professional competence (Weick, 1995; Moustakas, 1994) [1,17]. Thus, it helped them improve future responses.

Advocacy as an Evolution of Followership

Participants were transformed from compliant practitioners into active advocates as the crisis unfolded. They became courageous to question decisions, request additional support, document incidents, and advocate for students and colleagues. This agrees with Chaleff's (2009) [31] proposition that courageous followers demonstrate loyalty through constructive challenge rather than blindly complying with commands.

Participants viewed advocacy as an ethical responsibility to improve students' safety and outcomes, rather than opposition to leadership. This finding aligns with Edmondson's (1999) [51] concepts of psychological safety, which suggest that individuals are more likely to express their concerns when the organizational environment encourages open communication and ideation. Such conditions empower school followers to advocate for safer educational practices, students' placement, and to recover quickly during times of crisis (Edmondson, 1999; Frazier et al., 2017) [51,52].

Organizational Resilience as Collective Adaptation

Participants repeatedly described resilience as a collaborative action developed through collaboration, reflective learning, emotional support, and continual adaptation. They emphasized teamwork, documentation, and shared problem-solving as key components for building resilience during times of crisis. This finding is consistent with Duchek's (2020) [13] model of resilience that highlights resilience as the vital capacity made of other capacities- anticipation (sensing risk and preparing), coping and adaptation (responding affectively under stress), and learning or transforming (changing structures or practices).

Similarly, Weick and Sutcliffe (2015) [49] describe resilient organizations as those that develop collective mindfulness through continuous learning and adaptive decision-making. Participants described their experience of school crisis with colleagues through debriefing, mutual support, and collaborative reflection, which are all part of organizational learning processes. Resilience was experienced as relational rather than individual, attributing support from colleagues and professional relationships as a coping mechanism during periods of crisis instead of individual toughness.

Transformation of Professional Identity

Participants' professional identity represents the cumulative outcome of crisis experiences. Rather than simply performing assigned duties, participants viewed themselves as advocates, protectors, reflective practitioners, and collaborators. This transformation reflects social identity theory, which posits that identity develops through group membership and shared experiences (Tajfel & Turner, 2004) [46].

The more the crisis lingered, the greater their determination to uphold shared values of care, responsibility, and collective protection. The experience strengthened their professional

community and provided an avenue to identify with colleagues during crisis. Followers became courageous and engaged (Chaleff, 2009; Kelley, 1992) [9,23] instead of maintaining role compliance; thus, balancing organizational expectations with ethical responsibility for students' and staff safety.

The model demonstrates that crisis experience develops adaptive professional action, which is strengthened by trusting relationships. Collaborative responses promote reflexive learning, which strengthens advocacy and contributes to organizational resilience. Over time, repeated experience transforms professional identity by causing them to be aware of situations for students' wellbeing and the safety of colleagues. This integrative model extends existing followership theory by emphasizing the emerging nature of followership during times of educational uncertainty.

Structural Barriers to Effective Followership

Despite uncertain situations that were managed effectively, many participants described significant organizational barriers that consistently inhibited effective crisis management.

Policies such as inconsistent procedural support, delayed organizational responses, staffing shortages, and insistence on inclusion frequently conflicted with participants' professional judgments during uncertain periods. These findings corroborate Lipsky's (2010) [53] theory of street-level bureaucracy, which emphasizes that frontline professionals usually align institutional policies with complex practical realities – the difference between government policies in theory and policy in practice, which can be troubling.

Participants complained about the gap between inclusive education mandates and keeping a safe classroom for all students. This inconsistent mandate creates an atmosphere of frustration, emotional exhaustion, and organizational distrust despite followers' commitments to student safety and learning. These findings suggest that effective followership is contingent on organizational structures and policies that recognize frontline inputs and support their contributions to decision-making processes (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014; Carsten et al., 2010) [7,24].

The findings of this study provide a comprehensive understanding of how school followers experience crises and contribute to crisis management in a K-12 school environment. Interpreted through the lens of the two research questions, the findings demonstrate that followers are not passive recipients of leadership directives but active and engaged members, whose professional judgment, contributions, adaptive behaviors, and collaboration are pivotal to effective crisis behavior. Collectively, the findings illustrate that followership is a dynamic process that encompasses adaptive professional action, trust-based collaboration, collaborative crisis response, reflection and learning, advocacy, organizational resilience, and transformation of professional identity, all of which shape followers' lived experience during times of crisis.

Research Question One: How do followers perceive and respond to crises, build trust, and develop organizational resilience in a K-12 school setting?

The findings suggest that followers perceive crisis response as an active professional responsibility, requiring immediate adaptation to uncertain events. Participants consistently described taking independent decisions to protect students, support colleagues, and maintain a safe learning environment. This finding is reflected in the theme of followership as adaptive professional practice, where participants demonstrated situational awareness and professional judgment during uncertain periods.

Trust served as the foundation of effective crisis response, enabling school followers to coordinate responsibilities, communicate efficiently, and rely on one another during dangerous situations. It further demonstrates that crisis response is inherently collaborative, pinpointing the need for shared responsibility. These collaborative actions suggest that organizational resilience is co-constructed rather than solely achieved.

Another key finding was the role of reflection and learning in managing future crisis responses. Participants repeatedly described learning from previous experiences by identifying warning signs, formulating intervention strategies, and increasing situational awareness. The continuous learning process contributed directly to organizational resilience by improving the collective capacity of school followers to respond to future crises. Reflection enhanced school followers' crisis experience from one of difficulty into opportunities for professional growth.

Experiences during crises strengthened many participants to become advocates for students' safety, colleagues' wellbeing, and safe classroom conditions. Rather than accepting existing formal procedures, participants questioned policies that they believed were inconsistent to everyday realities. Advocacy was practiced through documentation, voicing concerns to leadership, and promoting practices that balanced inclusion with safety.

The findings highlight the emergence of organizational resilience through collective adaptation rather than individual tenacity, transforming participants' practice to better meet future emergencies. Collaborative problem-solving, shared learning, and ongoing adaptation to complex situations strengthened how school followers trusted one another, reflected on their experience, and advocated for improvements in their school. Together, these findings answer research question one by demonstrating how school followers respond to crisis, build trust, and develop organizational resilience.

Research Question Two: What is the lived experience of followers in a K-12 school during crises?

The findings revealed that the lived experience of followers during a school crisis is characterized by significant professional transformation, emotional complexities, and great responsibilities. Participants consistently described their core responsibility as protecting students while also ensuring the safety of colleagues. These responsibilities often include doing more than what is expected of them, requiring rapid decisions under emotionally demanding conditions.

The most significant finding was the transformation of professional identity, where participants described how repeated crisis experience reshaped their understanding of their professional roles.

They became more observant of early warning signs, more willing to advocate for safer practices, and more confident in exercising professional judgment. Rather than seeing themselves as implementers of leadership command or directives, participants viewed themselves as knowledgeable professionals whose experience positioned them to influence crisis management practices and organizational improvement.

Implications

This study described the lived experience of school followers during a crisis in Alberta. Their descriptions and perceptions provided a foundation of knowledge about the crisis experiences school followers face daily. The in-depth phenomenological accounts of the participants provide possible ways crises could be handled by school leaders in collaboration with school followers, implementing the integrative strategies found in this study.

The findings have important implications for educational leadership, school policy, crisis management, and professional development. First, school districts should recognize followership as a relational part of the organizational process rather than a subordinate position. Crisis plans and protocols should not be designed without including frontline personnel – teachers and EAs, especially in the planning, implementation, and evaluation process (Brock et al., 2021) [54].

Next, educational leaders should empower school followers by ensuring they are supported and involved in the school decision-making process. Transparent communication, collaborative decision-making, and consultation with frontline personnel should be a priority for every school leader. Edmondson (2019) [55] asserts that when followers feel connected by sharing their concerns and their voice is heard, it fosters psychological safety, which boosts organizational learning.

In addition, schools should enact post-crisis debriefing protocols that promote reflection, emotional support, and organizational learning. Participants repeatedly stated that they were resilient in the face of crisis (during and after) when they reflected on their day with their colleagues through discussions and rantings. Followership competencies such as advocacy and resilience-building should be part of professional development training in schools, enabling effective school crisis management. Inclusive education policies should be accompanied by sufficient resources, adequate staffing, continuous training, and consultation with frontline personnel.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experience of school followers in a K-12 school crisis, specifically how they responded to the crisis, built trust, and developed resilience. An understanding of how school followers respond to a crisis is needed to implement structural and institutional changes to mitigate and manage crisis effectively. This study contributes to the nascent body of followership research by demonstrating that followers are key agents in K-12 school management crises.

Although participants encountered various structural and organizational barriers during crises, they consistently transformed these threats into opportunities for advocacy, reflection, learning, professional growth, and crisis preparedness. Thus, empowering followers to see themselves not as "organizational dependents", but as "organizational influencers". Recognizing the role of school followers in crises from this study can encourage policymakers, schools, and district leaders to view followers as co-creators of safe, resilient, and responsive educational environments. Ultimately, the lived experience of participants suggests that resilient schools are not created solely through effective leadership but co-constructed through followership characterized by trust, collaboration, shared responsibility, and greater commitment to student well-being.

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