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Research Article

Leadership Agility of Indonesian School Leaders During a Crisis: A Grounded Theory Approach

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Abstract

This study investigated how school leaders engaged in agility practices during crisis. The study outcome is hoped to help generate an in-depth understanding, rich description, and new proposition of leadership agility in school leaders. Using grounded theory approach, this study presents findings from semi-structured interviews with 28 participants. By using the qualitative software tool NVivo 12, the study builds on theme constructs of resources readiness, crisis strains, leaders' agile capabilities, and crisis solutions. Key findings elaborated from the themes include the staff digital competence, school infrastructure, learning loss, lack of personal connection, leaders' agile capabilities, support of school community, and school leaders' ability to build the culture of collaboration during crisis. The findings presented deeper insights on how the school leaders led their organizations during a crisis and how their agile capabilities which are represented by their ability to adapt, being flexible, active learner, being a role model, and having future – oriented mindset is crucial for use during periods of novel crisis in schools. The identification of how the agile school leaders led their schools during a crisis could help fill the existing gaps in agile school leadership under the context of COVID-19.

Keywords: agile capabilities, agility, leadership roles, school crisis

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic abruptly caused debilitating effects on the educational sector (Babbar and Gupta, 2021; Tang et al., 2021) with more than 90% students across the globe being heavily affected by the pandemic crisis (Zheng et al., 2022). The educational landscape has significantly shifted and the leaders' role had been redefined (Azorin, 2020) as crisis disrupts the established patterns and practices of organizations (Schechter et al., 2022). The uncertainty brought by the COVID – 19 made it challenging for educational leaders to properly assess the situations and decide the appropriate

actions to take (Shehada et al., 2021). The pandemic crisis significantly affected changes in the educational organizations and their members, from students to teachers and school leaders (Bundy et al., 2017; Zheng et al., 2022). With unexpected challenges emerged during a crisis, many school leaders faced uncertainty (Petriglieri, 2020; Bozkurt et al., 2020) and they are forced to tackle these novel challenges with limited prior knowledge (Thien and Adams, 2021).

The pandemic crisis had brought more attention to the role of school leaders and how their qualities as leaders can bring meaningful impacts to their organizations (Lawton-Misra & Pretorius, 2021). In the world before pandemic, a call for re-imagining leadership had been requested (Uhl-Bien, 2021) and when the pandemic hit, school leaders and policy makers need to reshape their ways of thinking and doing things when leading under a crisis (Hulme et al., 2021). Different set of skills and behaviours are required to lead under a crisis (Striepe and Cunningham, 2022). Although the focus slowly shifted from handling the sudden disruption to the process of recovery by the end of 2021, focused efforts to keep the schools running smoothly is still very much needed (Brown and Nikolai, 2022). The pandemic crisis has brought an opportunity for a fresh change in the educational context along with innovation and new educational models (Yan, 2020). Innovative decisions are needed to be taken by academic leaders given the increased complexity that came with the crisis (Al-Dabbagh, 2020).

The role of school leaders had dramatically morphed because of the pandemic crisis and it had effectively increased the need for agile leaders to navigate demands (Breakspear et al., 2017). Leaders hold a relevant role in helping their organizations and stakeholders to make sense and comprehend the aftermath of crises and the process during the crisis period (Sobral et al., 2020). Agile leadership quickly emerged as one of the most crucial elements in terms of leading under a crisis (Al Fannah et al., 2020). Agility, the ability to lead through change and manage teams effectively, is crucial (Gerlach et al., 2020). Agility is crucial for any organization to adapt with agility as the most crucial aspect (Appelbaum et al., 2017; Menon and Suresh, 2021). Agility has become one of the most required leadership qualities alongside with empathy and self-awareness (Lawton-Misra and Pretorius, 2021). Leadership agility means leading through change, inspiring resilience, and fostering positivity (Gerlach et al., 2020). Agile leadership offers uniqueness and adaptability (Muafi and Uyun, 2019). Agile leaders quickly adapt and reflect (Cleveland and Cleveland, 2020; Joiner, 2019) and they help their organizations to develop agility (Sugiharto, 2022). An agile leader navigates change effectively, allowing organizations to flourish amidst dynamic shifts. Adaptability, agility, and mobility are essential in the era of society 5.0 (Salgues, 2018). Being agile means that one can sense and anticipate change that occurs unexpectedly better and faster than their market competitors (Sadeghi & Kalantari, 2021). The concept of an outliner which lies beyond the normal realm is referred to as the "Black Swan" phenomenon (Taleb, 2007) and for research and learning opportunity, this COVID – 19's "Black Swan" potential is undeniable (Sein, 2020).

Researches about how the academic community such as the teachers, students and parents navigated their lives during a crisis had been conducted (Henaku, 2020; Rahiem, 2020; Joshi et al., 2020) but the ones conducting them from the perspectives of school leaders and their leadership practices remains scant (Kruse et al., 2020). A gap on principal leadership practices and school leaders' responses in a time of crisis exists despite a considerable amount of literature about crisis leadership and leadership abilities in the stages of crisis (Thornton, 2021) with most crisis leadership research focuses mainly aimed at threats which are man-made instead of other types of crises (Fee, 2017). The support of literature that addresses the leadership agility development and process is still limited (Hu et al, 2020; Yuan et al, 2021) and the research gap in effective leadership under crisis situations needs to be filled (Bartsch et al., 2021).

When it comes to investigating leadership skills and competencies during a crisis, the studies are still underwhelmed (Harris and Jones, 2021). Thus, the urgency of viewing how leadership works under a crisis needs to be addressed (Wu et al., 2021). Most leadership research addressing crisis are conducted in normal setting and contexts and it is feared that the findings may not be applicable in the context of crises with its high disruptive nature and uncertainty, such as during the COVID-19

pandemic crisis (Cho, 2020). Instructional leadership remains dominant in the current literature with less attention given to how leadership functions under a crisis, how they work, grow, and achieve their goals with such pressing needs (Grissom, 2021). Leadership research involving crises is still relatively scarce, especially the ones that involved extreme shock to the system (Stoker et al., 2019) which is something that pandemic crisis context can fill in to the literature gap. It is paramount to study crisis leadership within organizations, considering the major impacts that the pandemic crisis has brought on society (Wenzel et al., 2021).

Analyzing how leaders make sense of the crisis is needed to gain more insights into the ways leaders handle themselves and their organizations in uncertain situations (Crayne and Medeiros, 2021). In handling the many obstacles during a crisis, leadership holds a key role. School leaders are faced with complex challenges during a crisis and how to deal with uncertainty (Grice, 2021). Much work regarding school leaders' responses in handling the crisis has been conceptual or theoretical rather than empirical. This creates a room for educational crisis leadership to derive more empirical evidence from the field especially during the pandemic crisis, where there have been no prior situations resembled this crisis magnitude in previous crisis leadership research.

This study proposed that the unprecedented characteristics of this pandemic crisis may offer a novel research context that can be relevant for educational practices. Although many previous research supported the integral role of leadership in a context of crisis, the research that tackles the issue when the school leaders are faced with lingering crisis such as the pandemic needs to be further explored and how the agility plays its role in the leadership within the educational context.

2. Research Conceptual Framework

The framework indicates how leadership actions during this pandemic crisis can be demonstrated through stages of crises where schools move from crisis preparation to crisis containment and finally into the process of evaluation and recovery.
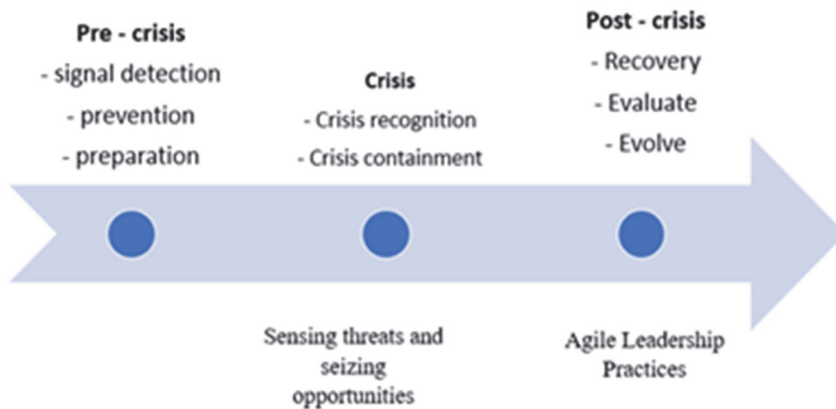
Figure 1. Conceptual Framework
Source: generated by author (2022)

In the stage of pre – crisis, managing future risks and focusing on risk assessment, risk reduction, and crisis planning need to be done to help mitigate the impact of potential crisis. Agile school leaders can successfully implement strategic plannings and risk management by optimizing their school resources (Simon and Hitt, 2003) and becoming an agent of change. During crisis, the process of how the people within the organization communicate and navigate their way through the crisis is crucial

to ensure the survival of the organization. Here, crisis recognition and containment need to be done. Successful school leadership thrives amid challenges (Beauchamp et al., 2021). When entering the post – crisis, school leaders need to perform self-assessment and engage in reconstruction and reassessment. Efforts are made to review the decisions made and how to resume back to normal without forsaking the learning occurred during the crisis. The pandemic highlighted the need for better preparation programme and leadership practices among the school leaders (Harris & Jones, 2020). Since nobody could predict when the next crises will come and what type of crisis it will be, school leaders need to be better prepared and shift their focus to develop key competencies when handling a crisis.

3. Method

3.1 Grounded Theory

Grounded theory was selected as the methodology for this study for several reasons. First, the method is often used to study people's interactions and behaviours and it makes grounded theory a suitable method to use when studying about the leadership agility of school leaders as individuals. Second, grounded theory is a qualitative methodology which derives data upon natural settings and rather than imposing a scheme, it helps form and analytical foundation from which a theory emerges (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002).

3.2 Data Collection Method

Each informant was interviewed after providing their consents to the researcher in written forms. All interviews were recorded and transcribed to ensure the understanding of risks and benefits as well as to establish trustworthiness (Tracy, 2020). Data collection is stopped once the categories are saturated with the data collected in the form of interviews texts, documents, and field notes (Creswell and Creswell, 2018).

Typically, code saturation is reached after around nine interviews, while meaning saturation takes around 16 to 24 interviews (Hennink, Kaiser, & Marconi, 2016). In this study, the number of informants exceeded the recommended number of code and meaning saturations which helped establish data validity.
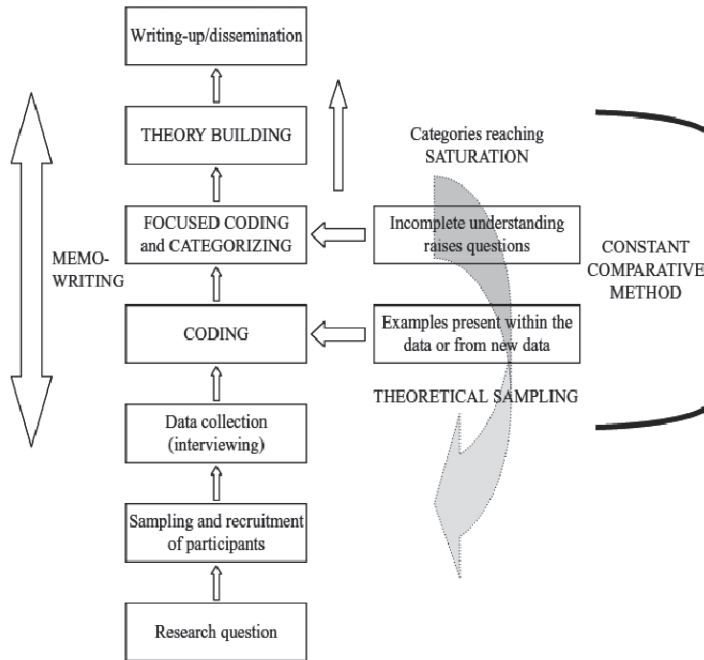
3.3 The Informants of Research

Participants selected in this study need to be aligned with the purpose of the research.

The research subjects are 28 school leaders and senior teachers that had been working in their respective schools during the pandemic crisis between the years 2020 – 2023. The schools selected are private high schools with low staff and teachers' turnover and an increased rate of students' enrolment between the years 2020 – 2023.

3.4 Data Analysis Techniques

Comparing and coding data is vital for analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory involves labeling and interpreting data during initial coding. Comparing data fragments allows for thorough analysis. The researcher records code-related memos. Crucial codes define analysis and generate categories, streamlining data collection and question emergence.

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Figure 3. Data Analysis Technique in Grounded Theory
Source: Grounded Theory Process (Tweed and Charmaz, 2012).

A qualitative tool of NVivo 12 was used to analyze the data in this research. In grounded theory, coding becomes a crucial part in data analysis. Coding comprises an initial and focused phase, where the researcher develops codes derived from the data collected. The word of choice that make up these codes will reflect the perspectives and experiences of the participants and theories based on the data will be constructed through the researcher and participants' interactions. These codes were collapsed and categorised across four emerging themes. These four main themes presented with descriptors are: (1) Resources Readiness (2) Crisis Strains / Challenges (3) Leaders' Agile Capabilities, and (4) Crisis Solutions. These four main themes then broken down and categorised into sub – themes which include the digital competence, school infrastructure, learning loss, lack of personal connection, leaders' agile capabilities, support of school community, and school leaders' ability to build the culture of collaboration during crisis.

3.5 Data Quality in Grounded Theory

Grounded theory's unique characteristics require distinct criteria for quality assessment (Berthelsen, Grimshaw-Aagaard, and Hansen, 2018; Elliott and Lazenbatt, 2005). Credibility and adaptability are key evaluation focuses (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). This study referred to Tracy (2020) for its validity markers which include ethics, meaningful coherence, credibility, resonance, rich rigor, sincerity, and meaningful contributions of the study. Semi – structured interviews are used in this research using the guidelines of four dimensions for agility by Lombardo & Eichinger (2000) which include people, mental, results, and change agility and the agile leaders' competencies which include humility, adaptability, visionary, and engagement (Neubauer et al., 2017).

4. Results and Discussions

Using NVivo 12 software, word-count queries and source code data were used in discovering selective codes from the data. The study revealed **four key themes** which are as follows:

4.1 Theme 1: Resources Readiness

When discussing about the gaps and resources readiness during this pandemic crisis, most participants mentioned fire drills and Earthquake evacuation drills as part of their school crisis planning. They all agreed that COVID-19 brought to light the lack of crisis management in their schools. Participant 8 mentioned how her school conducted these drills only once a year and they quickly realized how important it was to have contingency plans regarding crisis situations, including a virus outbreak.

> *"We always focused on natural disasters and things like possible demonstrations that could block traffic and interrupt students' learning. We now realized that there are different kinds of crisis and we need to be better prepared when dealing with them". – Participant 8.*

Crisis – sensitive planning in the educational sector is often limited to natural disasters and this pandemic crisis had brought a new light to schools' lack of variety in designing their crisis planning and crisis management.

> *"Our school does not even have crisis planning about possible bomb threats, let alone a virus outbreak. Our crisis planning has always been heavily centered in natural disasters and bullying case. We are lucky if we could have the fire drill twice a year.". – Participant 19.*

Most participants mentioned the importance of identifying potential crises and managing risk and safety assessments for potential threats and brought up the possibility of integrating the crisis planning with the school's professional development.

4.1.1 School Infrastructure

School infrastructures such as the internet connection, computers, and other teaching devices had become one of the biggest challenges during the pandemic crisis (Rincones et al., 2021). To most participants, the poor Internet connection became one of the most significant challenges when working during the pandemic crisis. Many challenges had been identified in schools that attempt to adopt technology into their classrooms (Johnson et al., 2016). Since the home locations of teachers are scattered in different parts of the cities, not all teachers' homes had strong Internet connection due to poor network infrastructure. Most teachers' computers and laptops were also inadequate to cater long hours of online sessions and to store big digital data and resources.

> *"Teaching profession is a form of lifelong service. It is heartbreaking to know that often I couldn't provide the best quality teaching for my students because my laptop is very old and takes forever to upload important files and teaching videos for my students". – Participant 9.*

Inequities in technology access posed a significant early pandemic barrier for both students and teachers. Unreliable devices and unstable Internet hindered smooth online and blended learning. Participant 12 resolved this by improving network infrastructure, facilitating better learning support. Crises offer valuable learning opportunities for principals and organizations (Ramos-Pla et al., 2021). High-quality Wi-Fi was installed, ensuring accessible digital resources for all. Participant 10 highlighted effective decision-making rooted in listening to team feedback and conveying it to management. Most participants prioritized students' well-being and quality education in school discussions.

4.1.2 Teachers' Digital Competence

While technology was acknowledged as valuable for classroom instructions, some teachers still avoided it due to fear and lack of confidence (Kim, 2016). Older teachers struggled with online tools, making the shift to digital classes challenging initially. Older generations are less inclined to adopt ICT compared to younger ones (Song and Chen, 2019). Participant 4 shared how some teachers in their fifties considered resigning early in the pandemic due to fears of inadequate teaching quality.

> *"Many senior teachers threatened to quit because they felt so overwhelmed with learning how to use web conferencing tools and create video instructions. We are very lucky to have many young teachers who were willing to step up and help their colleagues in this area." – Participant 4*

Furthermore, the frustration that occurred on most older teachers was amplified by the lack of time to prepare distance learning and eventually, blended learning.

> *"Making creative contents for our students and navigating the teaching tools and apps had been very challenging to say the least. The pressure to make attractive yet effective video instructions could feel a bit much." – Participant 7.*

Most participants pointed out the lack of use and implementation in their technology development and the pandemic highlighted the need to start shifting the teachers' mindset to fully embrace the use of technology in their classrooms. Video-conferencing tools such as Zoom and Google Meet were already introduced and used by most participants prior to the pandemic. However, the lack of urgency and the comfortable mindset of "why fix the things that aren't broken?" hampered the teachers and school leaders' ability to see the importance of learning and using them regularly. The school leaders pushed for knowledge sharing sessions among their school members where everyone shared their skills, tips, and advice on how to use the digital apps and explore other digital tools to support learning and creative instructions during the pandemic. These sharing sessions had been beneficial for mostly the older teachers since it helped them learn new skills in a less formal setting, which allowed them to be more relaxed and open to suggestions and feedback.

4.2 Theme 2: Crisis Strains/ Challenges

4.2.1 Children's learning loss

The children's learning is negatively affected by the isolation brought by the pandemic where they are forced to learn everything online (Burgess & Sivertsen, 2020). As mentioned by Participant 16, given all the distractions are just clicks away during the online and blended learning, students are easily distracted from what they are supposed to do and the distractions had been found to be detrimental to most students' learning progress. Another big challenge that needed to be faced by the teachers is the quality of online learning. Participant 18 acknowledged how copying the teaching approach to the online setting just simply did not work because the setting and the atmosphere were too far different.

> *"Different strategies and personal approach were needed to ensure my students stay engaged during lessons. I had to teach myself how to be content creator and a counselor at the same time because my students need me to. They need guidance because none of this had happened before and frankly, we all could use any help we could get". – Participant 18.*

Flexibility is a major part of online learning and this created an opportunity for students to choose how they'd spend their time during the day. Self – regulation is also deemed important for most participants because many of their students either failed to recognise that they needed help or they were too afraid or embarrassed to seek one from their teachers.

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"I let my students know that they could always call me for help until 8 or 9 p.m. at night should they struggle with their homework or need help before an exam. It is exhausting and I had to sacrifice my personal time but it's just something that needed to be done. They are my responsibilities and I want my students to know that they are not alone in this". – Participant 24

Most participants agreed that the teachers and non-teaching staff had become more adaptable and comfortable in embracing change during the pandemic. Participant 22 mentioned how the level of teachers' commitment and innovative collaboration among the school staff had made it possible for everyone to provide a quality education to the students.

4.2.2 Teachers' Connection and Well-being

Workplace well-being encompasses fulfillment and balance, not just coping (Bennett et al., 2017). The pandemic highlighted teachers' vital community role and how this crisis made teachers experienced anxiety, depression, and exhaustion as they must carry on extra workloads (Al Lily et al., 2020; Prado-Gascó et al., 2020). Participant 15 described blurred personal-professional boundaries due to random calls made by parents after working hours and evening online sessions for students who struggled academically. Teachers who are passionate about teaching stated how overwhelming the additional pressures could be and feared that it would result in their job burnout. This finding is supported by Prado-Gascó et al (2020) who found demands to upskill during crisis resulted in additional stress among teaching professionals. The school leaders are mentioned to be supportive, empathetic, and exhibit flexibility when handling the teachers' frustrations during the crisis. Although the traditional mean of communication such as email was still used, many participants agreed that the school leaders made a notable effort in making personal connections with their teachers and students. Participants pointed out that their school leaders showed support by having face-to-face interactions and making personal calls to their teachers every week. Caring gesture such as making daily check – ins when the teachers fell ill and giving care baskets for the students, school parents, and staff who caught the virus were also conducted during the times of crisis. Teaching roster was also implemented to ensure the students' learning would not be affected. This finding is supported by Longmuir (2021) who stated having leaders who are supportive and flexible are crucial to lead during times of extreme uncertainty and supportive leaders help employees to manage inter – role conflicts (Grimes, 2022).

4.3 Theme 3: Leaders' Agile Capabilities

4.3.1 Adaptability

School leaders need to quickly act without any prior experiences to draw from when the pandemic hit and this calls for the ability to be adaptive (Ganon – Shilon et al., 2021). The perception of school leaders' role had shifted from just leading the teachers and students to leading and supporting the school in a bigger sense, and this includes leading the non-teaching staff, school parents and working together with other school leaders in the community.

"I always try to listen to my teachers' grievances and ask what are the things that I could do to help. My teachers' well-being is one of the top priorities that needs to be maintained, especially during times like these. Our school is only as strong as its teachers". -- Participant 5

4.3.2 Active Learner

The need for leaders to enrich themselves with more learning had increased significantly during the times of crisis (Gonzales et al., 2022). School leaders re-assessed priorities and actively sought new ideas and solutions to emerging issues at hand. Most participants agreed that having more up-to-date

professional development and knowledge sharing sessions among staff are beneficial to support learning in times of crisis. School leaders actively built regular communication with other school leaders, sharing ideas and feedback from each other's school. They also took up more online webinars and leadership virtual trainings during the pandemic. This finding is supported by Girelli et al (2021) who found that leaders who possess willingness to learn and take up professional development during crisis are essential. The trait of active learner represents agility as it helps leaders to lead and navigate through change while inspiring the team members to stay resilient (Gerlach et al., 2020).

4.3.3 Flexibility

School leaders exhibit their flexibility by adopting more flexible work arrangements with their teachers during crisis. Online meetings are viewed to save time and resources. Similarly, parent – teacher meetings are also available to be held online, especially for busy parents or parents with long commute. School leaders recognised that teachers' trainings could also be done online by making use of webinars and virtual conferences and the fact that the teachers do not have to be there physically made the interest and attendance slightly improved compared to the times before pandemic. This momentum of upskilling the teachers need to be kept to ensure better quality education. This shift towards virtual professional development presented opportunities for school leaders to create more learning opportunities at a reduced cost. This finding is supported by Bligh et al (2018) who found agile leaders possessed the ability to being flexible and modify their actions as different situations demanded.

4.3.4 Role Model

For most participants, the perception of their role as leaders had shifted during crisis. Many school leaders stated that no matter how challenging and overwhelming the pressures were, they could not afford to lose sight of the big picture and had to charge through the obstacles and challenges arose during the times of crisis. They placed more focus on understanding the needs of their school community and actively involved them in more school projects and strategic planning processes. They mentioned how important it was to being a good role model for their community by "walking the walk" and shifting their mindset regarding what is attainable in times of crisis. Consistent findings showed that school leaders placed their focus on what they could control and it meant controlling their own behaviours. They learnt to be comfortable during uncertain conditions and grew more confidence when making decisions. They recognised the importance of leading by examples and letting their staff know mistakes will be made as part of the learning process to achieve better results. This finding is supported by Nieuwenhuijze et al (2020) and Stephen & Dearani (2021) who stated the significance of role modeling by effective leaders to boost team members' morale and confidence.

4.3.5 Future – oriented

School leaders actively engaged in strategic planning and decision – making by making risk assessment and involving their school community in the process through meetings, surveys, and knowledge sharing sessions. The digital transformation in education could be successful when the school leaders play their roles effectively and ensure the room for innovation will always be available in their team (Hung et al., 2020). Participant 21 revealed that his school partnered with one of the biggest publishing companies in Indonesia, Kompas Gramedia Group to create Smart Library app as an act of learning innovation during crisis. This programme allowed his school community to gain more access to e-books and journal articles for free. Similarly, participant 20 revealed how he tried to cultivate the culture of collaboration during crisis for his teachers and students.

"I realized this pandemic crisis provided a perfect opportunity to expand our school market and build stronger brand awareness. We began opening online classes for students outside Jakarta, conducted school virtual competitions and asked teachers from other schools to collaborate with our school by doing team teaching and cross-subject collaboration". – Participant 20

Participant 10 mentioned how the pandemic crisis pushed the school leaders to take bold steps in their decision makings since the crisis leaves little room to stop and think too much.

"We took a big risk by creating and implementing a new Learning Management System in our school during this crisis but we felt it was important and necessary because we always believed that nobody could grow without embracing change and taking risks". – Participant 10

The school leaders generally maintained a growth mindset by thinking and planning far ahead, encouraging culture of collaboration and innovation, and making room for mistakes which helped enable fresh feedback and new ideas from their teachers and students. This finding is supported by El-Maalouf and Bahemia (2022) who found leaders with the ability to think far ahead and prioritize innovation are more likely to succeed.

4.4 Theme 4: Crisis solutions

Most participants described their school leaders' actions and behaviours when handling the crisis as positive, pointing to their ability to inspire confidence and trust while providing sense of shared values and purposes. In changeable markets, learning willingness is vital (Milani et al., 2021). The study revealed the school leaders exhibit the willingness to learn and receive new ideas, created a culture of collaboration, and focused on the school innovation during crisis. An important finding emerged in this theme was the school leaders' ability to reach the school community such as the school parents, non-teaching staff, and other principals from different schools. The school leaders generally recognised the need to help with their staff's well – being by implementing more flexible approach when making decisions and creating more opportunities for staff bonding. They created a monthly programme called *"Anjang Sana"* where the school staff took turns visiting each other homes and had get-together sessions to strengthen the bond. Virtual lunches and potlucks for birthday celebrants are also conducted during the pandemic to nurture the sense of togetherness by letting everyone know that they are not alone in the struggle. School leaders saw this pandemic crisis as a chance to evolve and shift their leadership style to be more people – focused as they aimed at more shared leadership responsibilities. The transformation allowed their schools to cultivate new culture of collaboration and innovation during the times of crisis.

Most participants agreed that being proactive and initiating agility need not wait until the next crisis to happen. School leaders recognised the need to connect with their communities to ensure schools' growth and sustainability and the practice should not stop when the crisis had passed. The finding revealed that school leaders received full amount of support from their management which allowed them to effectively lead during crisis. School leaders could ease formalities associated with the school's day-to-day operations and were given room for more flexible decision making. They fostered meaningful relationships with their school community by encouraging parents to be co – educators, inviting parents to conduct webinars or simple workshops for the students, cultivating the culture of knowledge sharing and collaboration by creating cross-subject school projects and mentoring programme, and actively seeking out collaboration opportunities with other schools. These findings are supported by Gonzales et al (2022) who found that successful school leaders empowered their school community and how effective leaders provide full support and engage in healthy communication with the school stakeholders (Naseem et al., 2022).

4.4.1 Agile Leaders' Capabilities Framework

An agile leaders' capabilities framework is generated based on the study findings. The framework emphasizes on the importance of utilizing agile leadership capabilities such as adaptability, active learning, flexibility, being a role model, and future – oriented mindset to lead the organization in times of crisis. The findings showed that school leaders successfully exercised their leadership agility by actively empowering the key players: the school management, the teachers, the students, and the school parents.
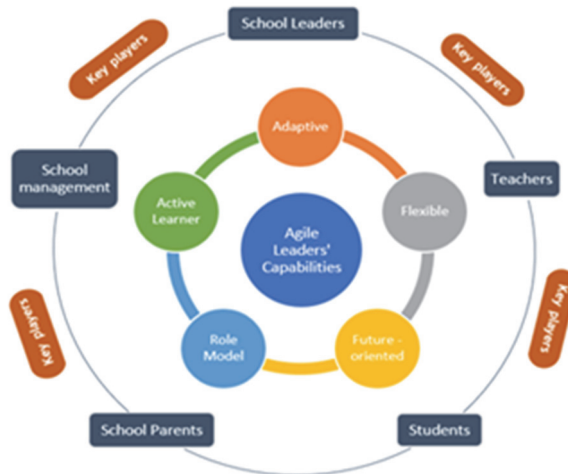
Figure 3. Agile Leaders' Capabilities
Source: generated by author (2023)

5. Conclusions

The COVID-19 crisis showed the urgency of schools to stay relevant in the digital era and to be agile in the world of uncertainty. The school leaders recognised the importance of having contingency planning and thinking far ahead to help them better manage any sudden disruptions. Agility involves the ability to be quick and adaptive to change, which means schools need to continually identify, learn, and connect with new things around them (Lien et al., 2022). School leaders play an important role as the vital source of influence and a person to foster interpersonal relations (Ahlström et al., 2020). This study found that school leaders actively engaged with their school community on a more personal level as they sought to identify their needs and struggle. By doing so, they helped build resilience and sense of togetherness among their school members and this shall help them in the future as they continue to make sense of the crisis and seek to thrive despite the challenges arose. The findings also suggested that school leaders demonstrated agility through adaptivity and flexibility. Their efforts to make strategic alliances with other schools and perform collaborative projects need to be continued. The momentum built needs to be maintained by continuing to share ideas, information, and resources even after the crisis had passed. The school leaders recognised the importance of school infrastructure and the teachers' digital competence during the crisis. The next step is to provide more solid school ICT infrastructure which could help schools to transition more smoothly in times of unpredictable future crises. For this, school leaders need to build good communication with the school management about school resources and digital technology

investment. The professional development of school leaders and teachers need to be continued and contextually relevant with today's needs and opportunities. These study findings contributed to the study of agile school leadership in times of crisis and it is hoped to provide meaningful implications for future research. The identification of agile leaders' capabilities in times of crisis and how their agility helped them navigate their schools in tackling challenges arose during the pandemic is hoped to fill the existing gaps in school leadership study under the context of slow burning crisis such as the COVID-19. By addressing the strains or challenges during the times of crisis, school leaders and administration can better navigate their way to overcome these obstacles in the future. For policy makers, the study findings may help them prepare better policies and strategic planning for future crises. Further investigation on the topic of leadership agility in the context of crisis can be done using different methods and approach, such as from the quantitative point of view or by using larger samples from different countries. The findings are hoped to provide more insights on specific set of agile capabilities required by school leaders to carry their organizations through crisis and thrive under uncertain conditions.

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