

Leading Schools Through Crisis: Participative Leadership, Institutional Resilience, and the Anglophone Crisis in Cameroon's South West Region

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ABSTRACT

The global literature on educational leadership in conflict-affected settings has focused primarily on access and protection, with limited attention to the governance mechanisms that determine whether conflict-affected schools can maintain educational quality and institutional coherence during sustained disruption. This article addresses this gap by reporting qualitative findings from 24 in-depth interviews with principals, teachers, and teacher leaders across diverse secondary schools in Fako Division, South West Region of Cameroon — a region experiencing acute educational disruption from the Anglophone socio-political crisis since 2016. Qualitative thematic analysis identified the Anglophone crisis as a 'leadership crucible': a context that simultaneously constrains participative governance through physical disruption, institutional fragmentation, and the demand for rapid crisis-management decision-making, while catalysing it through the experiential discovery of collective intelligence as the decisive institutional resilience resource. Principals who had invested in participative leadership before the crisis found it their most resilient governance asset during it; crisis conditions forced some principals toward participative practices they had not previously developed, with several describing crisis-born collaborative decision-making habits that have become permanent governance practices. The article proposes a crisis-participative leadership model identifying the conditions under which crisis catalyses rather than constrains the development of distributed school governance, and develops implications for educational recovery planning in conflict-affected settings.

Keywords: educational leadership in conflict, school resilience, Anglophone crisis, Cameroon, participative leadership, crisis management, distributed leadership, educational recovery

INTRODUCTION

Globally, more than 75 million children in at least 35 countries are affected by armed conflict, protracted humanitarian crises, or other conditions that severely disrupt their education (INEE, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). The educational consequences of these crises are well-documented in terms of access — the loss of school days, the displacement of students and teachers, the destruction of school infrastructure — but the consequences for the governance of schools that remain functioning in conflict environments, and the specific leadership strategies through which effective school leaders maintain educational quality despite extreme institutional disruption, have received far less systematic research attention (Bush, 2007; Nicolai & Triplehorn, 2003; Kirk & Winthrop, 2008).

The Anglophone crisis in Cameroon's North West and South West Regions — which began as professional grievances articulated by lawyers and teachers in 2016, escalated into armed conflict by 2017, and has created sustained educational disruption across both regions ever since — provides an urgent and under-researched case for investigating educational leadership in crisis. By 2019, over 600,000 children in the two Anglophone regions had experienced significant disruption to their schooling (OCHA, 2020; UNICEF, 2019), with the ghost day phenomenon — armed non-state actors enforcing school boycotts on specified days — creating institutional uncertainty and compressed instructional time that severely challenged the governance capacity of school principals.

Against this backdrop, the present article asks: how does the Anglophone crisis context shape the practice and development of participative leadership in Fako Division's secondary schools? Specifically, does the crisis primarily constrain participative governance by overwhelming institutional capacity and demanding rapid unilateral management responses, or does it in some circumstances catalyse participative governance by making the limits of individual authority management experientially vivid and the value of collective institutional intelligence practically demonstrable? In addressing these questions, the article makes three contributions: it provides original empirical evidence on school leadership in a rarely studied African conflict context; it proposes a crisis-participative leadership model identifying conditions under which crisis catalyses distributed governance; and it develops implications for educational recovery planning that go beyond the physical reconstruction typically emphasised in post-crisis educational investment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Educational Leadership in Conflict-Affected Settings

The international literature on education in emergencies (EiE) has developed substantially since the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) published its Minimum Standards for Education in 2004 (revised 2010). The minimum standards framework addresses education system management and coordination in emergency contexts, identifying school management functions — safety, protection, attendance, basic educational quality maintenance — as priority governance concerns in emergency settings. However, the framework's treatment of leadership is primarily structural and administrative rather than relational and governance-oriented: it specifies what school management systems should do rather than how school leaders can build the governance capacity to do it.

Academic research on school leadership in conflict settings is sparse. Bush's (2007) analysis of educational leadership in South Africa's post-apartheid transition documents the governance challenges of leading schools through systemic institutional transformation, identifying distributed leadership as a key strategy for building institutional resilience and adaptation capacity. Shields and Sayani (2005) examined community-engaged school leadership in under-resourced settings, arguing that school leaders who build strong community partnerships develop a form of social capital that is particularly resilient to external shocks. Kirk and Winthrop's (2008) study of Afghan schools operating under Taliban pressure identified the maintenance of teacher professional communities as a critical resilience resource, noting that schools where teachers experienced collegial professional support were more likely to maintain some educational functioning than those characterised by professional isolation.

The Cameroonian crisis specifically has received limited educational leadership research attention. Ngalim's (2019) qualitative study of crisis management in Anglophone schools provides the most systematic available evidence on leadership strategies during the early phases of the crisis, finding that schools with stronger institutional trust and more established community engagement practices were better positioned to maintain functioning during periods of acute disruption. The present study extends this work by examining the relationship between participative leadership — as a theoretically grounded governance approach — and institutional resilience across a larger and more diverse sample of schools during a more advanced phase of the crisis.

Crisis Leadership Theory

Crisis leadership theory (Pearson & Clair, 1998; James & Wooten, 2005; Boin et al., 2005) provides a theoretical framework for understanding the specific governance demands that crisis conditions impose on institutional leaders. Boin et al.'s (2005) framework identifies five critical leadership tasks in crisis contexts: sense-making (constructing coherent understanding of ambiguous, rapidly evolving situations), decision-making (making consequential choices under uncertainty and time pressure), meaning-making (communicating coherent institutional narratives that sustain community confidence), coordinating (mobilising diverse institutional and community actors around shared response activities), and accounting (maintaining institutional accountability while operational norms are disrupted).

The intersection of crisis leadership theory with participative leadership theory is theoretically productive and practically important. Some of these crisis leadership tasks — particularly decision-making under time pressure

— appear to demand the kind of rapid, centralised decision-making that participative governance theory identifies as appropriate for genuine time emergencies (Vroom & Yetton, 1973). Others — particularly sense-making in complex, ambiguous situations; coordinating diverse community actors; and meaning-making across fragmented communities — appear to demand precisely the collective intelligence, distributed relationships, and social capital that participative leadership builds. This intersection suggests that the relationship between crisis conditions and participative governance is not simply antagonistic but is more complex: the specific demands of different crisis tasks call for different combinations of centralised and distributed leadership.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative Design and Sample

The qualitative findings reported in this article derive from the qualitative phase of the larger mixed-methods study described in the companion articles. Twenty-four in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with principals (n=8), teachers (n=12), and teacher leaders (n=4) across government (n=8), lay private (n=8), and faith-based (n=8) secondary schools in Fako Division. Maximum variation purposive sampling (Patton, 2015) ensured diversity across gender, experience level, geographic location, and — crucially for the crisis analysis — degree of crisis impact exposure, with participants drawn from both relatively protected urban schools and more severely affected peri-urban and rural schools.

Interviews were conducted in participants' preferred language (English or French), lasted 45–90 minutes, and were audio-recorded with participants' written informed consent. All recordings were transcribed verbatim and analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase reflexive thematic analysis. The crisis theme reported in this article emerged as Theme 6 from the full thematic analysis and was not an a priori analytical category — it arose organically from the data during the familiarisation and initial coding phases, reflecting the salience of crisis experience in virtually all participants' accounts of their institutional leadership experiences.

FINDINGS: THE ANGLOPHONE CRISIS AS LEADERSHIP CRUCIBLE

Constraining Effects of the Crisis on Participative Governance

All participants described significant crisis-related constraints on participative governance, though the specific nature and severity of these constraints varied across school types and geographic locations. Four constraining mechanisms were consistently identified.

Physical disruption of governance rhythms was the most universally experienced constraint. The ghost day phenomenon — the enforcement of school boycotts on specific days of the week or month — created a school calendar characterised by unpredictability that disrupted the regular institutional rhythms on which participative governance depends. As one government school teacher described: 'We are supposed to hold a full staff meeting every two weeks, but in practice it is more like once a month — sometimes less. And then on ghost days, when attendance is uncertain, planning a meeting is almost impossible. The crisis has made everything harder, including maintaining the regular institutional rhythms that participative governance needs to function.'

Competition for the principal's time and attention was the second constraining mechanism. Several principals described how the management demands of the crisis — communicating with security authorities, managing parent anxiety, responding to student welfare crises, navigating operational uncertainty — consumed the time and emotional bandwidth that participative governance development requires. 'There were months when all I was doing was managing the crisis moment by moment. Thinking about how to improve our consultation processes or develop our delegation architecture — those conversations had to wait' (Principal P12, Government School).

Psychological strain created pressures toward directive management. The sustained psychological stress of leading in a dangerous and unpredictable environment created what several principals described as an instinctive reversion to more directive management styles — the institutional equivalent of the 'fight or flight' response that simplifies decision-making by concentrating it in the individual leader. 'When you are frightened, you want to be

in control. The temptation to make all the decisions yourself — because at least then you feel like something is under control — is very strong' (Principal P4, Government School). Resisting this instinct, and maintaining the slower, more deliberative rhythms of participative governance under conditions of sustained stress, was identified as one of the most demanding leadership challenges of the crisis period.

Institutional fragmentation through teacher and student displacement eroded the relational foundations of participative governance. Schools that lost significant proportions of their experienced teaching staff to displacement or security-related transfer faced the challenge of rebuilding the professional trust and collegial relationships on which genuine participation depends — a rebuilding process that is inherently slow and cannot be accelerated by managerial directive.

The Crisis as Participative Leadership Catalyst

Against the constraining effects described above, the qualitative data revealed a counterintuitive finding of substantial theoretical and practical significance: for a significant minority of principals in the study's qualitative sample, the Anglophone crisis has functioned as a catalyst for the development of more genuinely participative governance, rather than as an obstacle to it.

The mechanism of this catalytic effect was consistently described as necessity-driven democratisation: the recognition, born from the experience of institutional demands exceeding any single leader's capacity, that collective governance is not merely a normative ideal but a functional necessity when institutional survival depends on the mobilisation of all available intelligence and social capital. The most striking account came from Principal P1, the only principal in the qualitative sample who used the phrase 'crisis-born habit' to describe the governance transformation precipitated by the crisis:

'During the worst weeks of the crisis, when we did not know from one day to the next whether school would be safe to open, I realised I could not manage this alone. I needed my vice-principals, my department heads, the PTA — everyone. We started meeting every Monday morning to share information, plan the week, and decide together how to handle whatever was happening. That crisis-born habit of regular collective decision-making is one of the most positive things to come out of a very difficult period.' (Principal P1, Government School)

This account illustrates the catalytic mechanism with particular clarity. The crisis stripped away the institutional conditions — the bureaucratic routines, the administrative hierarchy, the ministerial authority — that had previously made principal-centred governance appear functional, and exposed the underlying reality that in genuinely complex, uncertain institutional situations, no single leader has the knowledge, relationships, or energy to provide effective governance alone. The experiential discovery of this institutional limitation — vivid, urgent, and practically immediate in ways that no abstract argument for participative leadership could be — created the motivational foundation for participative governance development that theoretical advocacy had failed to generate.

Several additional accounts confirmed the generality of this pattern. A faith-based school principal described the crisis-forced development of a multi-stakeholder crisis management committee whose practices subsequently became permanent governance structures:

'When we were managing displaced students arriving from other areas, no single person could know everything needed. We formed a crisis committee with the vice-principal, the school counsellor, two experienced teachers, the PTA chair, and a community representative. Meeting three times a week for several months. The collective intelligence of that group was infinitely more effective than anything I could have managed alone.' (Principal P16, Faith-Based School)

The language of 'collective intelligence' — echoing Gronn's (2002) theoretical argument that distributed leadership generates synergistic outcomes exceeding what any individual leader can achieve — in the experiential testimony of a practising school principal navigating an active conflict crisis provides striking validation of the theoretical proposition from an unexpected empirical direction.

Situational Contingency: When Directive Leadership is Appropriate

The qualitative evidence does not support an unqualified advocacy for participative leadership in all crisis governance situations. Several participants offered important qualifications that reveal the situational contingency structure of the crisis-participative leadership relationship.

'I do not want to give the impression that participative leadership means everything must go through a committee. In a crisis moment — when there is an immediate security threat and students need to be sent home urgently — the principal must decide and act immediately. Participative leadership is about the culture and the normal rhythm of governance, not about referring every decision to a group in every circumstance. Effective leaders know when to consult and when to act.' (Principal P19, Government School)

This account reflects the situational contingency insight of Vroom and Yetton's (1973) normative model: participative governance is most appropriate when time permits deliberation, when followers possess relevant knowledge the leader lacks, and when decision acceptance is important for implementation. It is least appropriate in genuine time emergencies where immediate individual action is the only viable governance mode. The most effective leaders in the qualitative sample demonstrate fluid contextual intelligence — the capacity to shift between consultative and directive modes depending on the specific demands of the governance situation, while maintaining the predominantly participative institutional culture that crisis-resistant schools require.

DISCUSSION: A CRISIS-PARTICIPATIVE LEADERSHIP MODEL

Drawing on the findings reported above, this section proposes a crisis-participative leadership model identifying the conditions under which crisis catalyses rather than constrains participative governance development in conflict-affected schools.

Pre-Crisis Participative Investment as Resilience Capital

The most important determinant of whether crisis conditions catalyse or overwhelm participative governance is the degree of participative capital — the accumulated social trust, distributed leadership capacity, and collaborative professional culture — that the school had developed before the crisis began. Schools in which principals had invested systematically in participative governance before 2016 entered the crisis with three forms of resilience capital that proved decisive: relational capital (the network of trust relationships with teachers, parents, and community leaders that could be activated for collective crisis response); distributed leadership capacity (the vice-principals, department heads, and teacher leaders who had been equipped through genuine delegation to exercise governance functions independently when the principal was overwhelmed); and social capital (the community confidence in the school's stewardship that sustained financial support even during periods of severe disruption).

Schools that entered the crisis without these resources — institutions characterised by principal-centred governance, transactional rather than relational leadership, and limited community engagement — found that the crisis exposed and amplified the fragility of their institutional foundations. When the bureaucratic structures that had previously sustained principal authority were disrupted, the shallow social foundations of directive governance were revealed.

The Crisis-Catalysis Pathway

For principals without pre-existing participative capital, the crisis provided a harsh but effective experiential lesson. The crisis-catalysis pathway operates through three stages: experiential encounter with the limits of individual authority management in conditions of genuine complexity and uncertainty; recognition of the functional value of collective intelligence for managing ambiguous governance challenges; and the formation of new participative habits — initially crisis-driven, subsequently institutionalised — that persist because their effectiveness is demonstrable within the school's own governance experience.

The persistence of crisis-born participative practices beyond the immediate crisis period — described by Principal P1 as the 'most positive thing to come out of a very difficult period' — is theoretically significant: it suggests that

experiential learning from crisis governance is a genuine leadership development mechanism, not merely a temporary adaptation. This finding has important implications for leadership development theory and practice, suggesting that carefully designed high-stakes practice opportunities — including the simulation of complex governance challenges — may be more effective catalysts for participative leadership development than conventional training programmes.

Implications for Educational Recovery Planning

The model's implications for post-crisis educational recovery planning are significant and partly counter-intuitive. Conventional recovery planning emphasises physical reconstruction — rebuilding damaged infrastructure, replacing destroyed materials, restoring administrative systems. These material interventions are necessary but insufficient: the present study's evidence suggests that genuine educational recovery also requires deliberate investment in the relational and governance dimensions of institutional functioning.

Specifically, educational recovery programmes for conflict-affected Cameroonian schools should include: explicit investment in rebuilding the community trust relationships and participative governance structures that the crisis has disrupted; structured support for principals in developing the distributed leadership architectures that make institutional governance more resilient to future disruption; and the formalisation and institutionalisation of the crisis-born participative practices that the most effective principals have developed — ensuring that these practices outlast the crisis conditions that generated them and become permanent features of improved governance.

CONCLUSIONS

The Anglophone crisis has created extraordinary governance challenges for secondary school leaders in the South West Region of Cameroon, but it has also — for the most effective and reflective among them — provided a leadership development experience of unusual power. The finding that crisis conditions can catalyse rather than merely constrain participative leadership development, through the mechanism of necessity-driven democratisation, is a theoretically important and practically significant contribution to the literature on educational leadership in conflict-affected settings.

Three conclusions follow. First, pre-crisis participative investment is the most important determinant of institutional resilience in conflict conditions: schools with established participative governance enter crises with the relational, distributed leadership, and social capital resources that make collective crisis management possible. Second, crisis conditions create opportunities for participative leadership development through experiential learning that pre-crisis conditions may not provide: the leadership development value of genuine crisis experience should be recognised in post-crisis professional development planning. Third, post-crisis educational recovery must attend to the governance and relational dimensions of institutional recovery as explicitly as it attends to physical reconstruction, recognising that the social foundations of institutional effectiveness cannot be rebuilt through infrastructure investment alone.

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