Instructional leadership: the key to addressing psychological issues post-covid-19

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we examined the challenges school leaders faced during and after COVID-19, including maintaining teacher morale and student engagement. Utilizing bibliometric analysis, the study reveals instructional leadership as a crucial factor in addressing psychological issues. The findings demonstrate that shared instructional leadership by principals is essential for effective crisis management. This research highlights the importance of adaptive instructional leadership in navigating uncertainty. By adopting collaborative approaches, school leaders can mitigate the pandemic's psychological impact, foster resilience, and promote a supportive learning environment.

Keywords: *: bibliometric analysis, instructional leadership, psychological issues, students, teachers*

INTRODUCTION

Coronavirus has had a strongly negative impact on the world. The world was brought to a standstill. While office goers came up with the concept of work from home, the educational institutions also had to bring school near home to maintain continuity and educate students for better prospects. It has always been pertinent to include technology in education or teaching learning experiences (Berkovich & Hassan, 2022a). The pandemic ensured that. Existing data from UNESCO reports

indicate that the pandemic has affected more than 80% of students around the world at various levels of education (Batista-Toledo & Gavilan, 2022; Stepanović, 2020; Usmani, 2021).

The effects of the pandemic were quite visible not only in the mode of teaching but also in the learning outcomes of the students. The gaps in which teachers imparting education to students' acquisition of education were evidently visible. Researchers have studied various aspects of all stakeholders, specifically teachers and students, via SWOT analysis, thereby identifying the "not-so-easy path" traversed by teachers (Karakose et al., 2024, Singh et al., 2021). The pandemic has posed several hurdles to the existing "normal" nature of everyday routines. People of all ages have started to show symptoms such as sleeplessness, irritability, anxiousness and lethargy in times when confusion and uncertainty have become the new "normal". With the end of the lockdown and the eventual reopening of schools, educational leaders have deliberately started recognizing and prioritizing psychological issues and mental health (McLeod & Dulsky, 2021a).

In all this melee, the most affected were school-going children. Others worked around the problem and found some or the other way to continue their normal life to earn their daily bread. The students were suddenly deprived of school, played time, chatted around and enjoyed the beauty of nature with friends, and found themselves cocooned within the four walls of the house. Solutions to continue studies through the digital medium have increased in pace. This solved the immediate problem to some extent. However, the larger issue of peer learning, experimentation, playing and developing interpersonal relationships was completely missing. Teachers found it hard to teach under the comprehensibility of each child. Doubt clarification and personal interaction to ensure correct learning by the child cannot be compensated through e-learning (Rogers, 2022).

The leadership played a great role once relaxation started, and the children started returning to school. The challenges ranged from ensuring appropriate COVID-19 behavior, adhering to social distancing, getting children back to deal with physical classes and understanding the new set of students, since the pandemic had knocked off nearly two years of actual school time classes. Students have become more cautious, introverted and weak because they are constantly staying home with no physical activity, have no contact with friends and have innumerable instructions from parents to be careful (Anand et al., 2021).

The school leaders reported that issues of physical weakness and catching up with classes could be handled well by teachers. However, psychological issues related to seclusion, breaking the dogma of meeting and greeting freely and ensuring the ability to 'behave like children' require intervention from senior leaders. To this end, the leadership had to put in extra effort. Schools started investing in mental health and emotional wellbeing and hence started hiring trained and (preferably) experienced psychologists to counsel parents and children, as they

also have more personalized nonlinear interactions with their children (Crutchfield & Eugene, 2022).

While the world was struggling with the deadly virus, ways of pedagogy and the role of a principal or the head of the school were put to trials and reinvented (Zhao, 2020). In earlier times, the role of the head of the school was restricted to just being an administrator or the face of the school. However, this traditionalist perception has been overhauled and has since been transformed into a person who envisions and communicates the mission and vision of the institution, develops and promotes a positive culture and climate and above all strikes a balance between stakeholders (Connolly et al., 2019). In addition, educational leadership has begun to move toward a more inclusive, all-encompassing, coherent and collaborative way of leading rather than being restricted to a one-man show (Harris, 2020). Research has shown that a head of the school ensures that the institution strives the best every time and that the requisite changes can be made to achieve this goal. The data also shed light on the vision of the educational institution. This vision mostly coincides with the experience and morals of the individualistic self (Charalampous et al., 2021).

Figure 1: Recommended instructional leadership model post covid-19
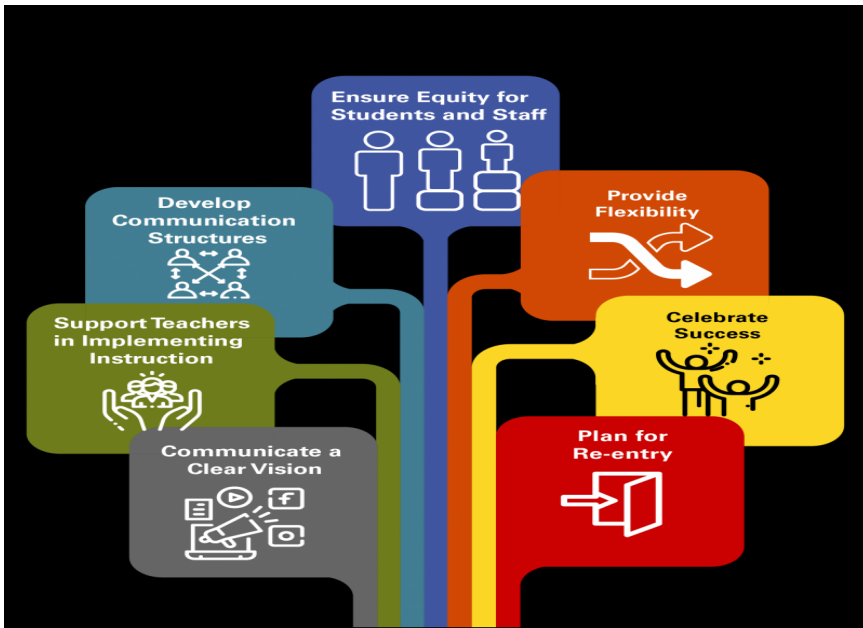
Until 2020, before the pandemic became a reality, the world was talking about transformational and distributed leadership. With the virus affecting all and lockdowns being declared in all parts and spheres of world and life, a new model

slowly evolved and picked up pace. The concept of instructional leadership (abbreviated as IL in the paper) was born in the USA in the 1980s and has since transformed (Raman et al., 2022). The evolution has evolved from being masters and guides in instruction and pedagogy to inclusive and digital leaders (Nurabadi et al., 2022). The pandemic has also played a part and ensured that the concept can be tweaked to provide not only a better shape to the ideology but also a better preparedness for any kind of adversity in the future (Jarvis & Mishra, 2024). The figure below gives a fair idea of the responsibilities of a principal as an instructional leader post pandemic, which not only recognizes the psychological issues faced but also attempts to provide viable solutions for the same (Recommendations for Instructional Leaders – Friday Institute for Educational Innovation, 2020).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Instructional leadership

Instructional leadership is a style of leadership that involves managing both the curriculum and instructions to foster and promote a climate of mutual growth among teachers, students, schools and the self.

Hallinger et al. (2020) reported that the concept of instructional leadership, which was predominantly American, has become universal. Dr. Hallinger, who is also called the father of the concept, has critically evaluated extensive literature along with his colleagues to identify the mapping, landscaping, meaning and importance of the particular style of leadership that is recommended for the principals to follow.

Tools and Findings: This extensive literature review highlights the progress of instructional leadership. The authors have provided a concrete knowledge base for the concept and the relationships that the concept has with respect to various variables related to school vis-à-vis students, teachers and the environment of the school. This offers a vital asset to policy makers, management and researchers.

Boyce and Bowers (2017) reviewed the literature review and meta-narrative review. While traversing, the authors have carved the path that instructional leadership or, as they call, leadership for learning has undergone. The authors emphasized that IL is key for teachers, students and schools to grow together.

Tools and Findings: The authors used a survey tool, which includes school heads and teaching staff in the USA, as sample participants. The analysis of the survey was carried out in light of four themes. They highlighted the correlation between the IL of the heads and that of professional content, allegiance and retention of the teaching staff. The four themed relationships with the three

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variables were consolidated under a single model, which necessitates the growth of teachers, students and schools in general and gives rise to the 30 years of paths traveled by ILs.

Psychological issues post-COVID-19

Psychological issues are faced by both teachers and students. On the one hand, teachers face issues concerning both professionals and personnel, and on the other hand, students feel motivated enough to study, which leaves the fear of redeveloping social skills and striving toward academic achievement.

1. *Teachers*

Robinson et al. (2022) researched how teachers were stressed during and after the pandemic. The anxiety was restricted not only to their individualistic front but also to that of the students. The teachers experienced burnout, a lack of motivation, distress over professional development, and job retention, which were the major reasons for stress.

Tools and findings: An online survey was conducted with teachers to address the issues endured by them. They included portrayal of commitments to extensively stretched levels, being innovative every time, having less or no balance between work and life and, most importantly, strategizing instructions and curricula.

In his work, Aditya (2021) discussed whether teachers had a smooth sail in adapting technology to impart pedagogy. While he feels that schools around the world had to be shut down because of the pandemic, the teaching staff were not quite prepared for online pedagogy and issues arising from such a teaching learning process.

Tools and findings: The researcher used an online quizzing inventory to obtain data from teachers. He concluded that there was a lack of active participation, motivation, responsible learning by students and collaborative teaching and learning experiences.

2. *Students*

Pandey et al. (2021) studied the various effects of the pandemic on the mental health of children. They underlined the fact that the coronavirus has affected all, irrespective of age, some or the other capacity.

Tools and findings: Using a standardized pandemic-related scale, they reported that children and young adults presented symptoms such as anxiety, sleep disorders, suicidal tendencies and depression. All these issues were due to a lack of social interaction, confusion about the present situation, uncertainty about the future and a lack of human interaction while learning.

In his research work, Thakur (2020) discussed the precariousness of the world caused by the coronavirus and subsequent lockdown. The author also underlines the fact that schools shutting down indefinitely have had a tremendous impact on the mental health of students.

Tools and findings: After extensively studying various studies and from their own experiences, Aditya Thakur concludes that the virus, lockdown and quarantine have affected students' mental health. These factors have been coupled with no or minimal social networking, and uncertainty in terms of education and inactivity has led to many psychological disorders.

Need for Instructional Leadership Post-COVID-19

Now that we have seen that both the teachers and the students have had psychological symptoms of anxiety, lack of motivation, lack of concentration, emotional exhaustion, social anxiety, burnout, agitation and, above all, apathy. These symptoms arise due to a lack of support, collaboration, self-doubt and hence lessened efficacy, professional development, and academic outcomes; a lack of social networks; and a happy, positive and safe environment. Instructional leadership provides a strong base for supportive teaching learning experiences and a collaborative culture, minimizing isolation and supporting equity (Howley-Rouse, 2021).

Research has also shown that when principals follow the model of IL, they support teachers not only instructionally but also technologically. Such heads also substantiated the scholastic support provided to the learners. Interestingly, such principals have been a pillar of psychological, social and emotional support. They have included parents in their line of communication, which has led to a decrease in mental trauma and other struggles faced during and thereafter after Covid-19 (Keleş et al., 2020).

1. *Creating clear and structured communication to address and resolve learning loss.*

School heads need to collaborate with other school principals to address the loss of learning that the students had to bear and subsequent psychological issues that they had to experience. A clear communication, on the basis of the loss and strategic ways to overcome them, between the principals and the stakeholders, i.e., parents, teachers and the students, is a step toward this. A clear connection always leads to a robust relationship, especially between teachers, students and principals (Hargreaves, 2021). Collaboration and clear communication are the basis of an instructional leader, as mentioned earlier. An effective head of the school that displays instructional leadership is constantly striving to enhance teachers' instructional strategies and improve learners' outcomes. Hence, the model's foundation is to establish a structured framework of communication (Munna, 2021). These aspects of IL aid in understanding the struggles of both students and teachers and eventually make up for the loss in learning.

2. *Supporting teachers*

Supporting teachers by continuously providing them with opportunities for professional development and feedback is a vital responsibility of the principal. This not only enhances the teacher's efficacy but also improves students'

achievements and learner outcomes. Studies have shown that instructional leadership is crucial for better competency among teachers. A feedback and support system is always in place with such a leadership module. For this reason, schools with heads displaying such a model of leadership clearly have teachers with clearer goals, follow improved pedagogies, are confident in the support that they receive and hence have enhanced efficacy (Kilag & Sasan, 2023). As teachers' instructions, learner outcomes and school achievements take precedence in the case of instructional leaders, the supporting teachers in every way are the highest (Lopez & Hossain, 2021).

3. *Creating a positive and safe environment*

Another characteristic of instructional leadership is re-entry. Reentry is twofold, with both teachers and students struggling to reenter after the pandemic. While teachers are offered workshops and faculty development programs for easy reentry, students are dependent on the teacher's efficacy and school climate and culture. A safe and conducive environment offers smooth reentry for both teachers and students (Jalapang & Raman, 2020). The focus of principal adapting to IL remains to create a safe and positive school climate. Studies have shown that a positive and safe climate enhances teachers' proficiencies and parents' trust in sending their wards to the institution (Nguyen et al., 2020).

4. *Emphasizing equity*

The term equity spells out fair and just and devoid of any kind of bias. In recent times, a school has been termed successful if it is inclusive, devoid of a climate that promotes feelings or attitudes that are discriminatory and provides an equal opportunity to all, irrespective of gender, caste, race or ethnicity. Such schools provide a sustainable option. IL has emerged as a clear alternative to providing equity. Instructional leadership need not be a stand-alone model but can also be combined with other forms of leadership to attain complete equity and sustainability (Muresherwa & Jita, 2021).

5. *Fostering innovation*

Studies have shown that school heads, following the model of instructional leadership, focus on innovation, synergy and partnership. The three pillars are used to foster the efficiency of the teaching staff, the academic achievement of the students and the success of the school. The practice of innovation was more evident in the recent pandemic when most schools were shut down and when the gap between students, teachers and schools was bridged digitally (Ikrama et al., 2021; Maruf et al., 2022).

RESEARCH METHOD

We attempted to study this topic by analyzing extensive literature via bibliometric analysis techniques. After a considerable number of journal articles are studied,

we selected them using the filter of a timeline between 2020 and 2023. The researcher intentionally applied the filter because she intended to study

1. Whether students and teachers of schools had any psychological issues during the period of COVID-19 and the lockdown.
2. Does instructional leadership address the psychological issues faced by students and teachers?
3. The changed role of a principal as an instructional leader after COVID-19 and when schools reopened after the lockdown.

We limited the study search to Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science and other online sources for literature review. For the analysis, per se, the scholar selected only those articles that were published in Web of Science and Scopus journals. Both Web of Science and Scopus are databases with high rankings and peer-reviewed journals. These two large databases have high credibility, as the articles published are scrutinized under various parameters. Both Scopus and Web of Science are highly recommended and beneficial for scientific analytical research (Birkle et al., 2020; Burnham, 2006). After nearly 200 articles from both databases were selected, various factors were analyzed via an application called VOSviewer. The bibliometric software VOS Viewer was used to understand and comprehend the existing situation and conceptualize the ideas. The app also draws out the connections between various variables. The app provides a clear bibliometric map of keywords, citations, authors and coauthors. To obtain a bibliometric map of clear links, one must choose the number of occurrences of the keywords. One can also eliminate unnecessary keywords or keywords not pertaining to the study (Van Eck & Waltman, 2010).

Table 1: Criteria followed for review of bibliometric analysis

Articles	Description	Result
Articles included with keywords	Instructional leadership, psychological issues, school, teachers, students	200
Articles excluded	Not in English, instructional leadership as a dependent variable, psychological issues, school, teachers and students as independent variables	95
Articles reviewed		105

Participants

The analysis was conducted after a systematic review of 200 articles. Thus, the participants were 200 articles available in Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar and other online sources which were published post Covid, i.e. between 2020 – till date.

Hypothesis

The following null hypothesis was proposed:

H₀: There is no significant change in the number of psychological issues in schools where principals practice instructional leadership.

RESULTS

Results

The VOS viewer has revealed a significant correlation between instructional leadership by the principal and various variables. The visualization is based on the number of occurrences of keywords from the extracts from articles in the Web of Science. Each cluster is represented by a different colored dot and lines linked with others. The larger the dot is, the greater the number of occurrences of the keyword. Figure 2 shows how ILs are strongly connected to teachers, schools, students, professional development of teachers, support, job satisfaction and student outcomes. The bibliometric map also helps to identify the areas that are less researched. For example, the correlation between instructional leadership and social justice has not been researched, and hence, there is an absence of a direct link. A closer look at the map reveals many such variables that can be researched further.

Figure 2: Network based on occurrences of keywords from extracts of wos
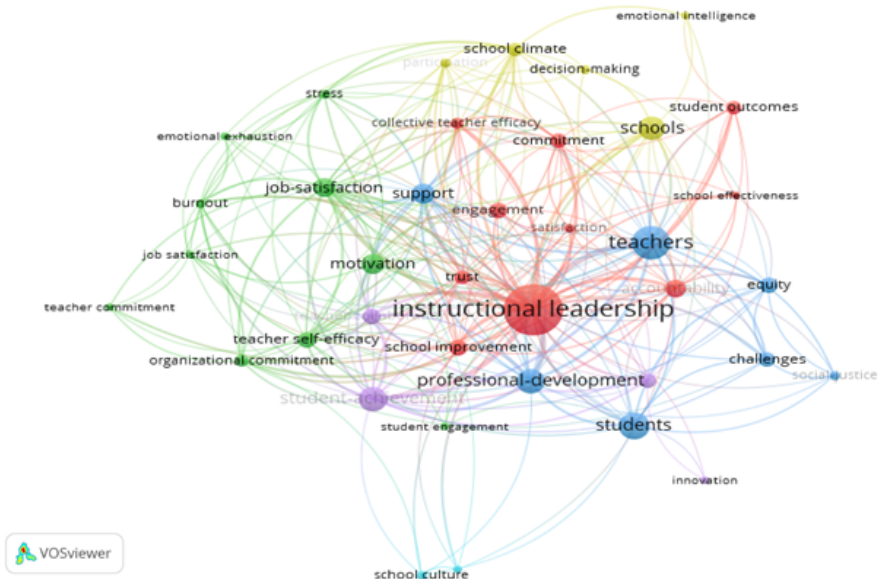
The three figures, vis-à-vis Fig. 3, show the total link strength between ILs; Fig. 4, which shows a network based on keyword occurrences; and Fig. 5, which shows density visualization from keywords from Scopus, highlight the strong links to stress, burnout, emotional exhaustion and intrinsic motivation. IL is also linked to job satisfaction, teacher efficacy, commitment, support and equity. The leadership model also has strong links with the school climate, student achievement and innovation. The interesting fact brought out by the map is that IL brings about parental involvement in school matters. Thus, IL is a perfect model that involves all stake holders while leading schools toward success.

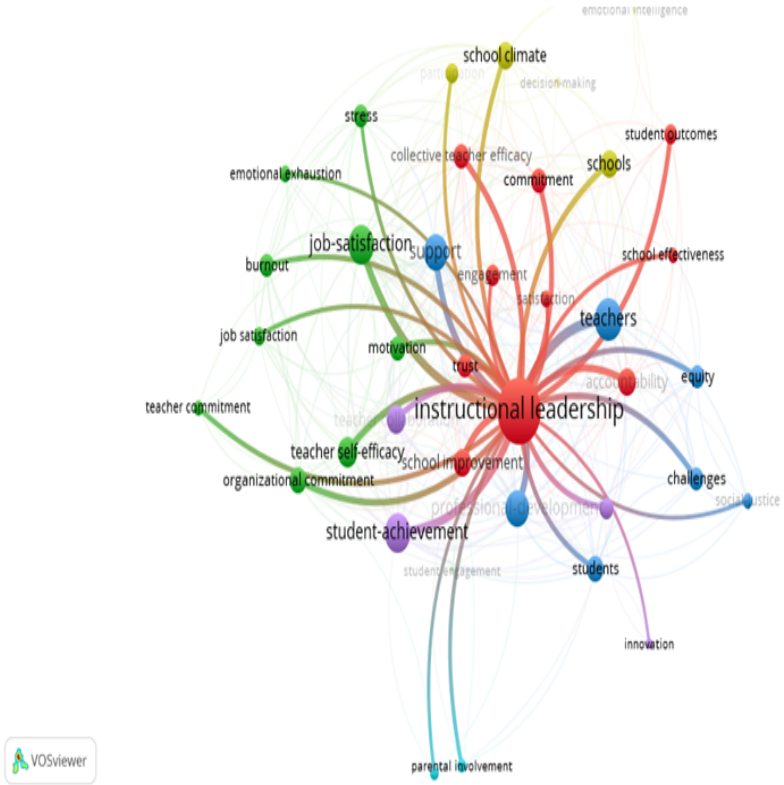**Figure 3: Total link strength from wos**

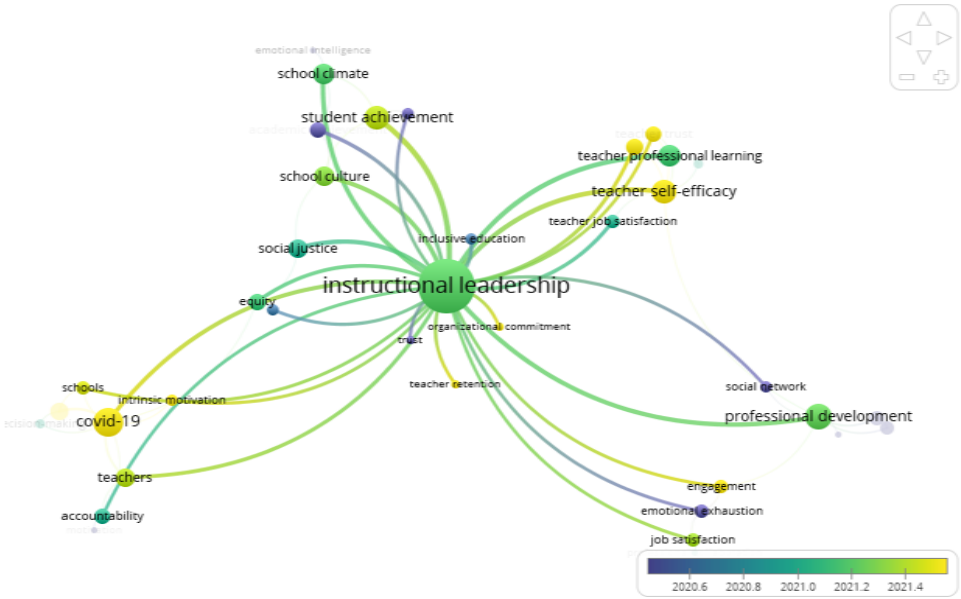**Figure 4: Network based on occurrences of keywords from scopus**

Figure 5: Density visualization of keywords from scopus

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Discussion

The bibliometric tool VOS Viewer analyzes the links between instructional leadership practices by the principal of the school and various other variables. It also highlights a strong connection between the issues faced by individual stakeholders, namely, teachers, students and the school. The pandemic has had psychological encumbrance to teachers, vis-à-vis efficacy, job satisfaction, emotional exhaustion and motivation, to students in terms of intrinsic motivation, burnout and engagement and, finally, the school in terms of school culture and climate. The VOS viewer analysis also highlights that in addition to redefining pedagogy, the pandemic and the post-COVID period have made the principal (with instructional leadership practices) the fulcrum for all stakeholders. It has also shown strong congruence of instructional leadership practices by the principal with the effective management of crises, especially in terms of managing social network and psychological issues arising from increased screen time.

The review of the literature also reiterates the findings of the analysis. The pandemic has clearly opened the pandemic's box of psychological issues. The mental health of learners, teachers and other staff in school before COVID-19 was considered healthy. However, the scenario changed drastically during and after the pandemic, with increased levels of anxiety, depression and suicidal tendencies (Jamshaid et al., 2023). The literature has also shown that principals practicing core elements of instructional leadership, i.e., communication and visibility, have a significant effect on reducing stress and improving mental health (Pollock, 2020). Moreover, shared instructional leadership, which actively involves teachers, parents and the community, has had a positive effect on burnout, anxiety and other mental health issues by creating a safe, caring, nurturing and enriching school environment (Berkovich & Hassan, 2022b, Shaked, 2024).

Conclusion

The pandemic caused by coronavirus disease 2019 (covid-19) has been deadlier than ever before. The virus claimed innumerable lives, and of the lives left behind, many were scarred emotionally and psychologically. Nearly all, whose lives were spared, felt confused around, lost control over mundane and routine work, experienced emotional turbulence and were unsettled "out of the joint". In such a vulnerable scenario, top-down leadership is a disaster (Forster et al., 2020).

Research has also shown that the period during and after a pandemic has aggravated psychological issues in many ways, thereby jeopardizing mental health and well-being (Vindegaard & Benros, 2020). To address these issues, the prevailing conservative styles of leadership had to be revisited and reoriented (McLeod & Dulsky, 2021b).

The few elements that are vital for educational leadership in schools post-COVID-19, as gathered by researchers, are as follows:

1. Communication
2. Flexibility and agility
3. Digital awareness
4. Student-centric
5. Innovation

The pandemic has forced us to reimagine leadership, especially educational leadership (Hesbol, 2021).

This review highlights vital psychological issues that have increased in number and the need for instructional leadership. The researcher has carried out an extensive review of literature from Google Scholar, Francis and Taylor and other online sources. She has studied a whole new set of articles from Web of Science and Scopus and analyzed the findings. The study is a bibliometric review in which the analysis is conducted via a tool called the VOS Viewer. The tool brought out various maps based on the filters applied. Each map and analysis reveal that instructional leadership is needed to address issues pertaining to teachers, students and schools.

The model of leadership has been successful in recognizing and addressing psychological issues suffered by teachers and students alike and thereby working out viable ways to solve mental health issues. The bibliometric analysis also proves that instructional leadership has been a forerunner in fostering innovation, equity and collaborative communication. This has been the essence of a successful school, especially after the pandemic.

IMPLICATIONS

The analysis of the literature, even though it was extensive, has several limitations. The review does not consider other sources of literature. The study could also not be carried out on a larger variety of psychological issues. It is important to understand that the pandemic created many curveballs. Things were not easy when everything opened up. Every individual, irrespective of age, has unique psychological issues (Chen et al., 2024). In addition, depending on the individual, the symptoms vary from few to innumerable. The researcher made an attempt to choose the common ones for the study. This study can be used as a basis for research on various types of psychological issues and how each can be dealt with by an instructional leader in an educational setting.

Note: AI has been used for grammar check only.

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