

CRISIS AND CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN SPECIAL EDUCATION SETTINGS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF SCHOOL LEADERS' EXPERIENCES

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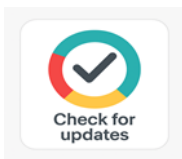
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Abstract

Keyword:

crisis management, conflict management, special education, school leadership, qualitative research, phenomenology

This qualitative study examines how school leaders experience and manage crises and conflicts in special education settings. Drawing on a phenomenological design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve school leaders working in inclusive and special education schools. Reflexive thematic generated six interrelated themes: the multidimensional nature of crises, the emotional labour of leadership, navigating stakeholder tensions, the tension between reactive response and proactive planning, systemic constraints and resource inadequacy, and reflective learning as a leadership resource. Findings indicate that leaders draw on relational, ethical, and improvisational competencies to manage volatile situations, often in the absence of formal preparation. The study contributes contextually grounded insights to the literature on special education leadership and offers practical implications for leadership preparation programmes, professional development, and policy reform. Implications for the Malaysian higher and basic education contexts are discussed.



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Introduction

Special education has emerged as one of the most ethically demanding and operationally complex domains of contemporary schooling. Across jurisdictions, the legal, pedagogical, and moral imperative to provide high-quality, inclusive education for students with disabilities has expanded dramatically over the past two decades (Crockett et al., 2019; McLeskey et al., 2019). Schools now serve learners with an increasingly diverse range of cognitive, behavioral, sensory, and physical needs, while simultaneously responding to growing parental advocacy, evolving regulatory frameworks, and shifting societal expectations (Sider et al., 2021). In Malaysia, the national commitment to the Zero Reject Policy and inclusive education provisions under the Education Blueprint has further intensified the

responsibilities placed upon school leaders, who are tasked with translating ambitious inclusion mandates into the daily realities of classroom practice (Hashim et al., 2020).

Within these settings, crises and conflicts are not exceptional disruptions but recurrent features of organisational life. Crises in special education range from acute behavioural episodes and medical emergencies to safeguarding incidents and reputational threats, while conflicts often arise around the interpretation of individualised education plans, allocation of scarce resources, or differing expectations between staff, parents, and external agencies (DeMatthews et al., 2021; Pepper et al., 2018). Such situations are often emotionally charged, ethically ambiguous, and time-sensitive, requiring leaders to act decisively under conditions of uncertainty (Smith & Riley, 2018). When mishandled, these episodes can escalate into formal grievances, litigation, staff turnover, and lasting damage to school climate; when navigated skilfully, they can become catalysts for institutional learning and stronger stakeholder relationships (Mutch, 2018).

School leaders' principals, deputy principals, and special education coordinators occupy the structural and symbolic centre of these dynamics. Their decisions shape not only immediate outcomes but also the long-term ethical climate of the school (Grissom et al., 2021; Leithwood et al., 2020). Yet, a consistent finding across the literature is that leaders feel inadequately prepared for the conflict-laden, crisis-prone realities of special education work. Pre-service preparation tends to focus on instructional leadership and compliance, while the relational, emotional, and ethical dimensions of leading inclusive schools are often left to be learned through on-the-job experience (Boscardin & Lashley, 2019; Pazey, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic intensified scholarly attention to crisis leadership, but also revealed how thinly resourced and undertheorised this aspect of school leadership remains, particularly in non-Western contexts (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020; Harris & Jones, 2020).

Despite growing scholarly interest, the lived experiences of school leaders managing crises and conflicts in special education settings remain underexplored, especially in Asian contexts. Existing research is dominated by Anglo-American case studies and quantitative surveys that may not capture the cultural, religious, and systemic particularities of leadership in countries such as Malaysia (Tintoré et al., 2022; Yong & Mohd Yunus, 2022). The present study addresses this gap by adopting a phenomenological qualitative approach to examine how special education school leaders experience, interpret, and respond to crises and conflicts. The paper proceeds as follows: it first reviews relevant literature on crisis and conflict management in education and on special education leadership, articulates the research questions, describes the methodology, presents the findings as six interrelated themes, and concludes with a discussion of implications for theory, practice, and policy.

Literature Review

Conceptualising Crisis and Conflict in Education

Crisis and conflict, while related, are conceptually distinct phenomena. A crisis is typically defined as a low-probability, high-impact event that threatens an organisation's core values, operations, or stakeholders, demanding rapid decision-making under uncertainty (Pepper et al., 2018; Smith & Riley, 2018). Conflict, by contrast, refers to perceived incompatibility of interests, values, or actions among individuals or groups, which may be either episodic or chronic (Tintoré et al., 2022). In schools, the two often intertwine: an unmanaged conflict can escalate into a crisis, and a poorly handled crisis can generate enduring conflicts. Recent scholarship has argued that crisis and conflict management should be viewed not as separate technical skill sets but as integrated dimensions of leadership practice that draw on ethical reasoning, emotional regulation, and relational intelligence (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020; Hauseman et al., 2020). This integrated view is particularly salient in special education, where high stakes, multiple stakeholders, and asymmetric power dynamics make ethical sensitivity indispensable.

Special Education as a Site of Heightened Complexity

Special education settings are uniquely susceptible to both crises and conflicts. The presence of

students with significant behavioural, medical, or communication needs increases the frequency of acute incidents requiring immediate intervention (McLeskey et al., 2019; Sider et al., 2021). Simultaneously, the regulatory architecture surrounding special education individualised education plans, accommodations, due-process rights create structured arenas in which disagreements among parents, teachers, and administrators routinely surface (DeMatthews et al., 2021). Billingsley and Bettini (2019) further document how chronic understaffing and high attrition among special educators amplify pressure on remaining staff and leaders, contributing to environments in which conflict and crisis are normalised features of work. In Malaysia, additional layers of complexity arise from religious, cultural, and family expectations that shape how disability is understood, disclosed, and managed within school communities (Hashim et al., 2020).

Leadership Approaches to Crisis and Conflict Management

A range of leadership models has been advanced to guide crisis and conflict management. Distributed and instructional leadership frameworks emphasise the importance of shared responsibility and collaborative problem-solving (Leithwood et al., 2020), while inclusive and social justice leadership perspectives foreground equity, voice, and ethical commitment as core leadership resources (DeMatthews et al., 2020; Theoharis & Causton, 2020). Crisis-specific frameworks, such as those proposed by Pepper et al. (2018) and adapted in pandemic-era studies (Harris & Jones, 2020), highlight a cyclical process of prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery. However, scholars increasingly caution that prescriptive models risk underplaying the improvisational, contextual, and emotional nature of leadership work in real settings (Hauseman et al., 2020; Smith & Riley, 2018). For special education leaders, who must combine technical compliance with deeply personalised ethical judgements, the gap between abstract models and on-the-ground practice is particularly pronounced (Lashley & Boscardin, 2020).

Empirical Research on School Leaders' Experiences

A growing empirical literature documents the experiences of school leaders working in inclusive and special education contexts. Sider et al. (2021), in a Canadian study, identified relational trust, advocacy, and capacity-building as central to inclusive leadership, while DeMatthews et al. (2021) showed that principals' beliefs about inclusion strongly mediate how they interpret and respond to conflict. Pazy (2020) and Cobb (2020) emphasised the importance of student voice and equity-oriented preparation, finding that leaders who centred the perspectives of students with disabilities reported more constructive conflict resolution. Studies from non-Western contexts, though comparatively scarce, suggest that cultural norms regarding hierarchy, family honour, and religious obligation shape leaders' interpretive frames in distinctive ways (Hashim et al., 2020; Yong & Mohd Yunus, 2022). Across these studies, however, leaders consistently report feeling that their formal preparation did not adequately equip them to manage the relational and emotional intensity of the role (Boscardin & Lashley, 2019; Grissom et al., 2021).

Gaps and the Need for Qualitative Inquiry

Three gaps emerge from this literature. First, despite growing interest, qualitative studies that foreground the lived experiences of special education school leaders remain limited, particularly outside North American and European contexts (Tintoré et al., 2022). Second, much existing research treats crisis and conflict management as discrete competencies rather than as interwoven, ethically loaded leadership practices (Smith & Riley, 2018). Third, while pandemic-era scholarship has accelerated attention to crisis leadership, this literature has tended to focus on mainstream schools, leaving the distinctive challenges of special education settings undertheorised (Harris & Jones, 2020; Hauseman et al., 2020). Addressing these gaps requires qualitative inquiry that is contextually sensitive, methodologically rigorous, and attentive to the ethical and emotional textures of leadership work (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Maxwell, 2020). The present study responds to this call by examining the experiences of school leaders in Malaysian special education settings.

Research Questions

Building on the gaps identified above, this study is guided by three interrelated research questions:

- RQ1. How do school leaders in special education settings experience and conceptualise crises and conflicts in their daily practice?
- RQ2. What strategies, both formal and informal, do they employ to manage these situations?
- RQ3. What contextual, organisational, and personal factors shape their decision-making and sense-making?

Methodology

Research Design

A qualitative phenomenological design was adopted to explore the lived experiences of school leaders in special education settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Phenomenology is well suited to research questions that seek to illuminate the meanings participants attach to complex, emotionally significant phenomena, and aligns with this study’s focus on how leaders interpret and respond to crises and conflicts. The design was further informed by interpretivist assumptions, recognising that reality is socially constructed and that the researcher and participants co-construct meaning during the inquiry process (Lochmiller & Lester, 2018; Yin, 2018).

Participants and Sampling

Twelve school leaders were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling from Malaysian primary and secondary schools that operate special education integration programmes (Pendidikan Khas Integrasi) or dedicated special schools (Sekolah Pendidikan Khas). Inclusion criteria required participants to (a) hold a formal leadership position principal, deputy principal, or senior coordinator— (b) have at least three years of leadership experience in special education, and (c) have managed at least one significant crisis or conflict episode in the past 24 months. The sample included seven women and five men, ranging in age from 38 to 56 years, with leadership experience ranging from three to 22 years. Pseudonyms were used throughout to protect anonymity. Table 1 summarises participant characteristics.

Table 1

Profile of Participants (n = 12)

Role	School Type	Years in Leadership	Gender
Principal	Special School (Primary)	14	F
Principal	Integration Programme (Secondary)	9	M
Deputy Principal	Special School (Primary)	6	F
Senior Coordinator	Integration Programme (Primary)	11	M
Principal	Special School (Secondary)	17	F
Deputy Principal	Integration Programme (Secondary)	5	M
Coordinator	Integration Programme (Primary)	4	F
Principal	Integration Programme	8	M

Role	School Type	Years in Leadership	Gender
	(Primary)		
Senior Coordinator	Special School (Secondary)	12	F
Deputy Principal	Special School (Primary)	7	M
Principal	Integration Programme (Secondary)	22	F
Coordinator	Special School (Primary)	3	M

Data Collection

Data were collected primarily through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted between January and June 2024. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was conducted in either Bahasa Malaysia or English, according to participant preference. The interview protocol included open-ended questions about: (a) memorable crisis and conflict episodes; (b) decision-making processes; (c) emotional and ethical dimensions; (d) perceived sources of support and constraint; and (e) lessons learned. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and translated where necessary, with translation accuracy verified by an independent bilingual researcher. To enhance triangulation, publicly available school documents and policy circulars were also reviewed (Yin, 2018).

4.4 Data Analysis

Transcripts were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021), which is well-suited to phenomenological inquiry and to research seeking patterned meaning across rich qualitative data. Analysis followed six recursive phases: data familiarisation, generation of initial codes, construction of candidate themes, review of themes, definition and naming of themes, and production of the report. NVivo 14 was used to organise codes and audit decisions. Coding was both inductive—driven by participants’ language and theoretically informed by the literature on crisis and conflict leadership (Saldaña, 2021; Vaismoradi & Snelgrove, 2019).

Trustworthiness and Ethics

Trustworthiness was addressed through Lincoln and Guba’s criteria as elaborated by Stahl and King (2020). Credibility was supported by prolonged engagement, member checking, and peer debriefing; transferability through thick description; dependability through an audit trail; and confirmability through reflexive journaling. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board, and standard procedures for informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and data protection were observed throughout.

Findings

Reflexive thematic analysis generated six interrelated themes: (1) the multidimensional nature of crises in special education; (2) the emotional labour of leadership; (3) navigating stakeholder tensions; (4) the tension between reactive response and proactive planning; (5) systemic constraints and resource inadequacy; and (6) reflective learning as a leadership resource. Each theme is presented below and illustrated with multiple verbatim excerpts drawn from across the participant sample. Excerpts have been lightly edited for readability without altering meaning, and translated quotations from Bahasa Malaysia interviews are marked with [trans.].

5.1 The Multidimensional Nature of Crises in Special Education

Participants overwhelmingly described crises in special education as layered, interlocking events rather than discrete incidents. What initially presented as a single episode a behavioural meltdown, a medical emergency, an allegation quickly unfolded into multiple parallel concerns involving students,

staff, families, and external authorities. Pn. Aminah, a principal of a primary special school with 14 years of leadership experience, captured this multidimensionality:

“When a child has a meltdown in the canteen, it is not just one problem. Suddenly I am dealing with the child, the teacher who got hit, the aide who is in tears, the other parents who saw it and are now WhatsApping each other, and by the evening I will get a call from the district office asking what happened. One incident, but five or six different fronts at the same time.” — Pn. Aminah, Principal, 14 years

En. Hassan echoed this observation, but added the dimension of medical complexity, which he described as a particular feature of secondary integration programmes:

“Last term we had a student with epilepsy who had a seizure during assembly. While we were calling the ambulance and trying to keep the other students calm, one of our autistic students became extremely distressed by the noise and the panic. So now we have two emergencies running side by side, and only one of me. [trans.]” — En. Hassan, Principal, 9 years

For Pn. Siti, what made these situations especially difficult was the way reputational concerns travelled faster than the leadership team could respond. Social media and parent group chats, she explained, often “wrote the story” before the school had time to investigate:

“By the time I was finishing my report for the JPN, the parents already had three different versions of the story circulating in their WhatsApp group. So now my crisis is not only the incident itself; it is the rumour, the screenshots, the people demanding meetings. We are always playing catch-up. [trans.]” — Pn. Siti, Deputy Principal, 6 years

En. Ramli, a senior coordinator, described the cascade effect that often followed even small incidents, suggesting that crises in special education behave less like isolated events and more like ecological disturbances:

“One incident is never just one incident. A student is restrained on Monday, and by Friday we are facing a parent complaint, a teacher requesting transfer, an aide on medical leave for stress, and questions in the staff room about who is next. The ripples keep going for weeks.” — En. Ramli, Senior Coordinator, 11 years

These accounts collectively support Pepper et al.’s (2018) characterisation of school crises as multi-systemic events and extend it by demonstrating that, in special education contexts, the multidimensionality is not only structural but also temporal: crises persist, mutate, and reappear long after the initial trigger.

5.2 The Emotional Labour of Leadership

A second pervasive theme was the profound emotional labour of leading special education settings. Participants spoke of carrying the distress of students, the anxieties of staff, and the demands of parents simultaneously, often without adequate space to process their own emotions. Pn. Mariam described this as a constant condition of being “full of other people”:

“By the time I reach home, I am empty. I have given everything to everyone—the children, the teachers, the parents—and there is nothing left for myself or even my own family. My husband says I am there but not there. He is right. [trans.]” — Pn. Mariam, Senior Coordinator, 12 years

For En. Faizal, the difficulty was not feeling the emotions but having to suppress them in order to fulfil the leadership role. He described what he called the “public face” that the position demanded:

“When a parent is shouting at me, I cannot show that I am also frightened or hurt. When a teacher cries in my office, I have to listen and stay calm even if I am breaking inside. The position requires a certain face. But you cannot wear that face for ten hours a day without paying a price.” — En. Faizal, Deputy Principal, 5 years

Pn. Norhayati, the most experienced participant in the study, reflected on the cumulative cost of this emotional work over time. Her account introduced an important temporal dimension to the theme:

“After seventeen years, I notice that the small things now affect me more, not less. I thought I would become tougher with experience. Instead, the weight just keeps accumulating. Every child who struggled, every parent who cried in this office—they are all still here with me, somehow. [trans.]” — Pn. Norhayati, Principal, 17 years

En. Ibrahim, by contrast, described the disorientation of being a relatively new coordinator confronted with emotional intensities he had not anticipated during his preparation:

“Nobody told me in my training that I would cry in my car after work. I thought leadership was about decisions and meetings. I did not realise it would be this emotional. I am still learning how to carry it without it carrying me.” — En. Ibrahim, Coordinator, 3 years

These accounts resonate with Hauseman et al.’s (2020) and Fernandez and Shaw’s (2020) findings on the affective burdens of school leadership during the pandemic, but participants here characterised these burdens as a permanent feature of special education leadership rather than a crisis-bound exception. The emotional labour is not, they suggested, an unfortunate side-effect of the role; it is the role.

5.3 Navigating Stakeholder Tensions

Conflicts most frequently arose at the intersections of competing stakeholder expectations. Leaders described their role as one of constant translation between parents, teachers, district officers, and external agencies, each operating with different vocabularies, priorities, and emotional tempos. En. Faizal articulated this translational labour with particular clarity:

“I have to explain the teacher’s reality to the parent, and the parent’s reality to the teacher, and somehow keep both of them on the same side. If I do this badly, the parent thinks I am protecting the teacher, the teacher thinks I am siding with the parent, and the child loses either way.” — En. Faizal, Deputy Principal, 5 years

A further dimension of stakeholder tension emerged within the staff itself, particularly between mainstream and special education teachers in integration programme settings. Pn. Zarina described this divide as one of her most persistent leadership challenges:

“The mainstream teachers feel the special education unit gets too much attention, smaller classes, more resources. The special education teachers feel they are doing invisible work that nobody understands. Every meeting can become an argument if I am not careful. [trans.]” — Pn. Zarina, Coordinator, 4 years

En. Azhar foregrounded a different fault line: between school priorities and the directives of higher authorities. He described how the temporal logic of district demands often clashed with the relational logic of school-level work:

“The district wants the report by Friday. The parent wants me to listen to her for an hour. The teacher wants me to defend her. The student needs to be safe right now. All of these are urgent. I cannot say no to any of them, but I cannot do all of them at the same time either.” — En. Azhar, Principal, 8 years

For Pn. Fadhilah, the most experienced participant, navigating these tensions had become less about resolution and more about holding the space for disagreement to be aired without rupture. Her framing reflects a more mature, dialogic conception of conflict management:

“After all these years, I have stopped trying to make everyone agree. My job is to make sure they all stay in the room. As long as the parent, the teacher, and I are still talking, we still have a chance. The day they stop coming, the conflict has already won. [trans.]” Pn. Fadhilah, Principal,

22 years

These accounts align with DeMatthews et al.'s (2021) framing of inclusive leadership as fundamentally relational and dialogic, and underscore Sider et al.'s (2021) emphasis on relational trust as a leadership resource. They also extend the literature by foregrounding the intra-staff dimension of conflict, which has received comparatively less attention.

5.4 Reactive Response Versus Proactive Planning

Most participants acknowledged that their day-to-day practice was dominated by reactive crisis response, leaving limited capacity for proactive prevention or systematic planning. Pn. Aminah described this dynamic with a metaphor that recurred, in different forms, across several interviews:

“Most days I feel like I am putting out fires. By the time I sit down to plan how to prevent the next fire, three more have already started. The planning never happens, or it happens at midnight when I cannot think clearly anymore.” — Pn. Aminah, Principal, 14 years

En. Kamal, a deputy principal in a primary special school, described attempting to introduce a structured behaviour-support framework, only to see it gradually displaced by the press of immediate operational demands:

“We started with a beautiful prevention plan. Early-warning meetings, weekly reviews, parent advisory committee. Within three months we had cancelled the parent committee, the weekly reviews became monthly, and the early-warning meetings happen only when something has already gone wrong. [trans.]” — En. Kamal, Deputy Principal, 7 years

En. Ramli linked this reactive posture to the absence of slack in the system a structural condition that made proactive work feel almost transgressive:

“There is no time built into the schedule for prevention. If I sit in my office to plan, someone will knock on the door within five minutes with an emergency. To plan, I would have to ignore real children with real problems right now. So planning always loses.” — En. Ramli, Senior Coordinator, 11 years

Pn. Norhayati offered a more reflective view, framing the reactive–proactive tension as a structural feature of the role that experienced leaders learn to manage rather than overcome:

“I used to feel guilty that I was always reacting. Now I understand that in this work, reaction is also a form of planning, if you reflect on it afterwards. The mistake is not to react. The mistake is to never look back and learn from how you reacted. [trans.]” — Pn. Norhayati, Principal, 17 years

These accounts mirror Smith and Riley's (2018) observation that crisis-prone environments tend to entrench short-term thinking, and Harris and Jones's (2020) caution that pandemic-era leadership norms may have further normalised reactive postures at the expense of strategic foresight. They also suggest, however, that the dichotomy between reactive and proactive may be less clean than the literature implies: experienced leaders described reflective reaction as a legitimate, if unrecognised, form of strategic practice.

5.5 Systemic Constraints and Resource Inadequacy

Leaders consistently identified structural constraints—staff shortages, inadequate training, insufficient specialist support, and bureaucratic delays as the most persistent drivers of both crises and conflicts. En. Hassan stated this position bluntly:

“If I had two more aides, half of these incidents would never happen in the first place. I am not exaggerating. The structural causes are not mysterious; they are just not addressed.” — En. Hassan, Principal, 9 years

Pn. Zarina pointed to the gap between policy aspirations and on-the-ground realities, particularly with respect to teacher preparation:

“On paper, every teacher in this programme is qualified for special education. In reality, half of them have only attended a one-week course. When a real crisis happens, they panic, and they panic because nobody actually trained them for what to do. [trans.]” — Pn. Zarina, Coordinator, 4 years

En. Azhar focused on the absence of timely specialist support, describing how delays in psychological, occupational therapy, or behavioural assessments transformed manageable difficulties into full-blown crises:

“I refer a child for assessment in March. The appointment comes in November. Eight months. In those eight months, the child gets worse, the parents lose patience, the teacher gives up, and what was a small problem in March has become a full crisis by the time the report finally arrives.” — En. Azhar, Principal, 8 years

For Pn. Mariam, the issue was less about the absence of resources than about bureaucratic processes that consumed leadership time without producing solutions:

“I sometimes think I am paid to fill in forms about problems rather than to solve them. The same crisis generates four reports to four different offices, none of whom talk to each other, and none of whom send help. [trans.]” — Pn. Mariam, Senior Coordinator, 12 years

These accounts confirm Billingsley and Bettini’s (2019) findings on the chronic resourcing challenges in special education and resonate with Lashley and Boscardin’s (2020) argument that systemic underinvestment shapes the conditions under which leadership is exercised. They also point to a distinct bureaucratic dimension of resource inadequacy in the Malaysian context, in which leaders’ time is itself a depleted resource.

5.6 Reflective Learning as a Leadership Resource

Despite these pressures, participants described their experiences with crises and conflicts as deeply formative. Many spoke of an evolving, more nuanced approach to leadership shaped by accumulated experience and structured reflection. Pn. Fadhilah described a personal journaling practice that had become central to her professional growth:

“For the past ten years, I write one page every Sunday night. What happened, what I did, what I would do differently. Nobody reads it except me. But that page is where I have actually learned this job. The university gave me the framework; the journal gave me the wisdom. [trans.]” — Pn. Fadhilah, Principal, 22 years

En. Ibrahim, the newest leader in the sample, described how informal peer mentoring was filling the gap left by the absence of formal preparation specifically for special education leadership:

“There is a senior coordinator from another school who I call almost every week. She is not officially my mentor; we just decided we needed each other. Half of what I now know about handling parents I learned from her, not from any course.” — En. Ibrahim, Coordinator, 3 years

Pn. Siti spoke about a specific crisis episode that she described as transformative a moment that, while painful, fundamentally shifted her practice:

“There was an incident two years ago that I handled badly. A child was hurt, a parent lost trust, a teacher resigned. For months I could not even talk about it. But when I finally did, with my own coach, I understood myself as a leader for the first time. That failure taught me more than any of my successes. [trans.]” — Pn. Siti, Deputy Principal, 6 years

En. Kamal described a more collective practice: regular informal "after-action" conversations

with trusted colleagues, which he viewed as critical infrastructure for organisational learning, even though they appeared on no policy document:

“Every Friday afternoon, three of us sit down for half an hour and just talk through the week. No agenda, no minutes, no report. Just: what did we see, what did we learn, what are we worried about. That half-hour is probably the most important meeting I have all week, and it does not exist on any timetable.” — En. Kamal, Deputy Principal, 7 years

These accounts echo the findings of Cobb (2020) and Theoharis and Causton (2020) regarding the centrality of reflective practice in equity-oriented school leadership, and suggest that informal communities of practice may serve as critical, if often invisible, infrastructure for leadership development. Notably, none of the reflective practices described journaling, peer mentoring, after-action conversations were institutionally mandated; all were created by leaders themselves to fill the gap between formal preparation and the realities of practice

Discussion

The findings of this study extend existing literature in three important ways. First, by foregrounding the multidimensional and emotionally laden nature of crises in special education, the study challenges narrowly procedural conceptions of crisis management and supports calls for more relational and ethically attuned frameworks (Hauseman et al., 2020; Smith & Riley, 2018). Leaders in this study did not experience crises as bounded events to be managed through checklists, but as densely woven situations requiring sustained ethical and emotional engagement.

Second, the centrality of stakeholder translation work resonates with inclusive and social justice leadership scholarship (DeMatthews et al., 2020; Theoharis & Causton, 2020), suggesting that conflict management in special education is best understood as an exercise in mediating competing moral claims rather than as mere dispute resolution. This has implications for how leadership preparation programmes conceptualise their core curriculum: programmes that emphasise compliance and instructional management without cultivating relational and dialogic capacities are likely to leave graduates underprepared for the realities of the role (Boscardin & Lashley, 2019; Pazey, 2020).

Third, the study’s contextual grounding in Malaysian special education settings highlights the need for culturally and systemically situated theorising. The salience of family honour, religious values, and hierarchical communication norms shaped how participants navigated conflict, in ways that may not be fully captured by frameworks developed in Western contexts (Hashim et al., 2020; Yong & Mohd Yunus, 2022). This supports Tintoré et al.’s (2022) call for greater geographic and cultural diversification of school leadership scholarship.

Practical implications include the need for sustained, context-sensitive professional development that integrates emotional, ethical, and procedural dimensions of leadership; the establishment of structured peer-support and mentoring networks for special education leaders; and the strengthening of system-level resourcing to reduce the structural drivers of crisis and conflict (Grissom et al., 2021; Lashley & Boscardin, 2020). The prominence of self-organised reflective practices in this study—journaling, informal mentoring, after-action conversations suggests that policy could productively recognise, formalise, and resource what leaders are already doing in the margins of their working lives. Policy implications include rethinking accountability frameworks so they reward proactive prevention as much as reactive response, and ensuring that leadership preparation pathways for special education are appropriately funded and designed.

This study has limitations. The sample of twelve participants, while appropriate for phenomenological inquiry, is geographically and contextually bounded; the findings are intended to offer analytic rather than statistical generalisability (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). Future research could productively extend this work through cross-cultural comparative studies, longitudinal designs

that track leaders' development over time, and participatory studies that include the perspectives of students, parents, and frontline staff alongside those of leaders.

Conclusion

This qualitative study has examined how school leaders in special education settings experience and manage crises and conflicts. The findings underscore that such leadership is multidimensional, emotionally demanding, and deeply ethical work, often performed under conditions of structural constraint. Leaders draw on relational, reflective, and improvisational competencies to navigate volatile situations, frequently in the absence of formal preparation or systemic support. Strengthening special education leadership therefore requires more than procedural toolkits: it demands sustained investment in the ethical, emotional, and contextual capacities of those who occupy these challenging and consequential roles.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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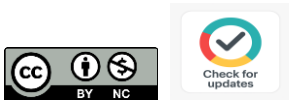
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