Navigating Crisis with Courage: Leadership of Head Teachers in Flood-Affected Communities of Lakshmipur, Bangladesh

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Abstract

This qualitative study investigates how head teachers in Bangladesh's Lakshmipur primary schools demonstrated leadership both during and after the 2024 flash floods. Through semi-structured interviews with twelve teachers, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with twenty parents, and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with three head teachers, the study examines how head teachers handled school operations, responded to the crisis, protected student welfare, and promoted community cooperation. The results show that by implementing emergency response plans, gathering resources, offering psychosocial support, and maintaining educational continuity through creative and situation-specific methods, head teachers became recognized as community leaders.

They provided vital insights into disaster-responsive educational leadership in vulnerable rural settings, and their leadership was marked by resilience, empathy, adaptability, and grassroots coordination. Head teachers used unofficial networks and community goodwill to restore education with low dropout rates in spite of health hazards, communication breakdowns, and infrastructure damage. The study emphasizes the potential of local leadership in promoting educational resilience and stresses the significance of incorporating school-based disaster management into national education policies. These observations add to the expanding corpus of research on crisis leadership in education, particularly in settings that are vulnerable to climate change.

Keywords: Educational leadership, head teachers, flood-affected communities, crisis management, Lakshmipur, Bangladesh, qualitative research, community resilience

Introduction

Recurrent flooding in Bangladesh, a deltaic nation vulnerable to natural disasters, interrupts education, livelihoods, and lives. Primary schooling was significantly impacted by the 2024 flash floods in Lakshmipur Sadar, an area that was not previously classified as being particularly vulnerable to flooding. Head teachers at schools are frequently on the front lines of such crises, serving as both community responders and institutional leaders. This study intends to investigate the leadership practices of Lakshmipur's head teachers both during and after the unexpected flood disaster, with a particular emphasis on their approaches to maintaining school operations and aiding impacted families. Significant difficulties were brought on by the flooding's unanticipated nature, including infrastructure damage, student displacement, and health issues. In addition to being important places for education, schools also became vital hubs for housing, relief efforts, and emotional support. It was necessary for head teachers to make decisions quickly, frequently without adequate resources or formal training. Their leadership was crucial in overcoming administrative obstacles, retaining student involvement, and rallying community support. This study highlights the unrealized potential of local educational leadership in disaster resilience and recovery by looking at their experiences.

Objectives of the Study

- To explore leadership actions undertaken by head teachers during the 2024 flash floods.
- To identify the strategies used to ensure the continuity of education and school management during and after the disaster.
- To understand the perceptions of teachers and parents about the leadership effectiveness of head teachers.

Literature Review:

Effective leadership within a school makes it possible for a positive school culture to form, facilitating the collaboration of teachers and therefore to the improved student outcomes. Leaders who can clearly formulate the vision, foster professional development, and sustain high expectations largely influence student academic success and well-being.

Bangladesh, a predominantly low-lying nation shaped by the Ganges, Brahmaputra, and Meghna rivers, is highly susceptible to flooding due to its flat terrain and monsoon climate. These frequent floods not only displace millions but also severely disrupt education, with school closures, increased dropout rates, and health issues among students hindering the country's socio-economic progress. Addressing these challenges is crucial for Bangladesh's development and the well-being of its future generations (Habiba et al., 2021). In times of crisis, school leaders go beyond administration to become pillars of stability and trust. Their calm, clear communication and inclusive planning guide schools through emergencies, fostering a united community ready to face challenges together. By involving everyone in preparedness efforts, they build resilience and ensure the school is equipped to handle disruptions effectively (F. Atillo, MAED et al., 2025).

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Flood disasters in Bangladesh severely impact both children and educational infrastructure, undermining children's rights to quality education, access to information, proper sanitation, and active participation. The destruction of schools and essential facilities disrupts learning and hampers children's overall development (Habiba et al., 2021). In rural disaster-affected settings, the proactive involvement of head teachers in health response, resource mobilization, and psychosocial support has proven essential for maintaining community trust and educational stability (Hamid Khondokar & Hasanuzzaman, 2024).

Effective leadership within schools fosters a positive school culture that enables collaboration among teachers and leads to improved student outcomes. Leaders who clearly articulate the school vision, promote professional development, and uphold high expectations significantly influence students' academic success and well-being. For instance, leadership practices in educational institutions in Bangladesh directly impact student learning outcomes and overall institutional performance (Hamid, 2023). Specifically, head teachers' leadership shapes teacher attitudes and school organizational outcomes (Jamil et al., 2024). Moreover, principals' communication skills, personality traits, encouragement, and implementation of checks and balances have been shown to significantly affect school performance (Bibi et al., 2022).

Emotional intelligence is an important leadership attribute, allowing school leaders to make better decisions and inspire their followers. The success of educational institutions largely depends on the leadership skills of school heads, especially as they face challenges that require collective problem-solving (Academia, n.d.). Leadership not only shapes school culture but also directly influences teacher motivation and performance, further emphasizing the importance of leadership capacity in educational outcomes (Sukendro et al., 2023).

In addition to everyday leadership, school leadership plays a critical role in disaster management. Principals' resilience greatly influences emergency responses, whether in human-induced disasters (such as fires or armed conflicts) or natural disasters (including earthquakes, pandemics, and typhoons). These challenges necessitate proactive leadership and strategic actions. During the pre-disaster phase, principals emphasize training and capacity building, while during disasters, they implement context-specific interventions to ensure effective rescue and relief efforts (Lopez & Lopez, 2024).

Effective crisis leadership is shaped by a combination of principal traits, school culture, and external support systems, all of which influence leadership responses during emergencies (Vicente et al., 2024). Crisis conditions require school leaders to balance institutional management with the urgent needs of students, staff, and communities. This often leads to the adoption of adaptive and responsive leadership styles. Such high-pressure environments redefine the principal's role, demanding strategic decision-making that integrates health, safety, and educational continuity under rapidly changing circumstances (Butcher, 2024).

Bangladesh has made significant progress in education, achieving higher enrollment rates and gender parity at primary and secondary levels. However, communities in flash flood-prone regions face recurring disruptions due to frequent inundations. These floods cause school closures, loss of learning materials, and increased dropout rates, especially among girls, as families cope with economic hardships. Therefore, integrating disaster risk management into educational policies and practices is crucial to strengthening infrastructure and enhancing community resilience (Ibn Farid et al., 2021).

Flooding significantly disrupts the academic performance of primary school students by damaging school infrastructure, displacing families, and interrupting the learning process. To help students adapt to such disasters,

it's essential to integrate disaster education into the curriculum, enabling them to understand and respond effectively to these challenges. Moreover, maintaining well-equipped and safe school facilities enhances both the quality of instruction and students' overall academic outcomes (Kubra, 2024).

Effective administration during crises requires balancing immediate response with long-term recovery, involving all stakeholders and maintaining consistent communication. Institutionalizing disaster-risk management within educational norms and policies fosters resilience, ensuring continuity of education even in the most challenging times. This holistic approach safeguards not only school infrastructure but also the emotional and psychosocial well-being of students and staff, promoting a culture of preparedness and adaptability. Ultimately, such comprehensive preparation contributes to the sustainability of educational institutions during crises.

Methodology

A qualitative research design was adopted to capture in-depth insights from the affected educational community. This approach was chosen because it allows for a nuanced understanding of complex human experiences, particularly in crisis situations where emotions, context, and social dynamics play a critical role. The leadership actions and community responses during the floods could not be meaningfully quantified; instead, they required exploration through personal narratives, reflections, and subjective accounts. A qualitative method enabled the researchers to examine not only what actions were taken by head teachers but also how and why these decisions were made in the face of adversity.

Study Area:
Three flood-affected government primary schools in Lakshmipur Sadar were purposively selected.

Participants and Sampling:
- **KIIs:** 3 head teachers from the selected schools
- **Semi-structured Interviews:** 12 teachers (4 from each school)
- **FGDs:** 30 parents (10 parents from each school)

Data Collection Tools:
- KII guidelines
- Interview protocols
- FGD checklists

Data Analysis:

Thematic analysis was employed, thereby giving rise to patterns and categories such as emergency response, community collaboration, resilience, and pedagogical adaptation. The analysis was conducted by following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework in accordance with a structured, yet flexible, manner of analyzing qualitative data. The transcripts of the interviews and focus groups were read through and coded manually to establish key themes. Patterns exhibited across participant responses were compared, thereby establishing similar experiences and varying perspectives within and across schools. Initial coding was inductive, grounded in the participants' own words and experiences, thus allowing the themes to emerge naturally from the data. The key themes were further refined and cross-checked by a number of researchers for the purpose of increasing validity. Special attention was paid to capturing the voices of the variety of stakeholders involved: head teachers, teachers, and parents, which helped to create a holistic approach to the post-disaster education response. The inclusion of verbatim quotes from the data also added rigor to the analysis by preserving the original participants' voices.

Findings

The thematic analysis of interviews and focus group discussions revealed five key themes: (1) Crisis Management and Emergency Shelter Coordination, (2) Infrastructure and Sanitation Response, (3) Health and Psychological Wellbeing, (4) Academic Continuity and Community Engagement.

1. Crisis Management and Emergency Shelter Coordination

During the flood, water levels rose to nearly four feet. The school, positioned on higher ground, became a critical shelter for displaced families. At one point, the school accommodated 56 families totaling around 300 individuals for 22 days. Initially overwhelmed, the head teacher took initiative by contacting the Red Crescent, local doctors' associations, the local government offices, and former students to secure food, medicine, and supplies. One of the head teachers stated, "At first, I struggled to provide food. I reached out to the Red Crescent, my former students, medical network, and later posted on Facebook. Eventually, food and supplies started coming in."

To avoid chaos, a registry system was implemented. Family heads were called individually for aid distribution, ensuring equity and transparency. The school became not just a shelter but a community coordination hub. The teacher mobilized volunteers, including alumni and local political groups, to maintain order and hygiene.

According to a head teacher, "We created a registry to ensure fair distribution. I didn't allow anyone to distribute aid randomly. Everything was centralized."

A teacher from another school confirmed the head teacher's pivotal role, "Our head teacher was the first to stay at the school when the floodwater started rising. She stayed overnight with families, cooked meals with us, and coordinated everything."

From the community's perspective, the school became more than just a shelter. One parent in an FGD shared, "We didn't feel like we were in a disaster. The teacher made sure every family received food, medicine, and dignity."

2. Infrastructure and Sanitation Response

Flooding severely damaged school infrastructure, particularly ground-floor toilets, furniture, and the shelter building. According to one head teacher, "The ground-floor toilets were completely underwater, and motors were destroyed. I wrote to the Public Health Department and secured floating toilets. We tied them to the school pillars."

Cleaning was an enormous challenge. Another head teacher noted, "We needed eight laborers just to remove the waste. We used around 10 kilograms of bleach, and I hired a cleaner to work three shifts daily." When asked about recovery support, a head teacher responded, "We informed the education office about the damage and furniture loss." One parent commented on the classroom environment, "The walls have peeled, the smell lingers, and many chairs are broken—but the teachers still try to teach as best as they can."

3. Health and Psychological Wellbeing

Health issues were reported by all three schools, particularly during and immediately after the floods. One head teacher stated, "About 25 to 30 percent of our students fell sick—fever, rashes, diarrhea. I myself developed severe skin allergies and had to go to Dhaka for treatment."

According to a teacher, "Students were afraid and many showed signs of anxiety. We visited their homes, talked to them, and tried to reassure them."

One parent emphasized the emotional toll on children, "My son kept asking when we could go home. He cried at night. The teachers really helped him feel safe again."

Though there were no trained counselors, psychological support was provided informally. One teacher said, "We tried to help them laugh again—telling stories, playing games, and just listening to them."

4. Academic Continuity and Community Engagement

Despite the crisis, no student dropouts were reported in any of the three schools. As one head teacher explained, "Even though classes were suspended for 22 to 23 days, we maintained contact. I assigned teachers by area to visit students and stay in touch via phone."

A teacher added, "Some of us traveled by boat to reach students. We made sure they didn't feel forgotten." One parent recalled, "Teachers visited us, reminded us of the new exam dates, and gave out books that were lost in the flood." Community members played a role as well. As one teacher shared, "Former members of the managing committee helped us track families and students. Without them, it would've been much harder."

Another parent said, "Even though the school was damaged, the teachers' dedication made us confident to send our children back."

Discussion

The findings from this study illuminate the critical role of school leadership, particularly head teachers, in sustaining educational and humanitarian functions in the aftermath of a sudden-onset disaster. The flash floods of 2024 in Lakshmipur Sadar exposed systemic vulnerabilities but also revealed the capacity of individual actors—teachers, parents, and especially head teachers—to adapt, respond, and recover.

Leadership in Crisis Situations

In both school-based and community-wide responses, head teachers were identified as key players. They coordinated humanitarian efforts and provided psychological support in addition to their administrative responsibilities. Head teachers showed situational and adaptive leadership by quickly turning schools into shelters and organizing food, sanitation, and medical services. Their resourcefulness in the lack of official disaster preparedness structures is further demonstrated by their use of personal networks, such as former students and professional contacts, to secure aid.

Infrastructure Vulnerabilities and Local Solutions

The reported infrastructure damage, which includes submerged toilets, damaged motors, and useless furniture, highlights how vulnerable public education facilities are to climate-related disasters. Despite these obstacles, head teachers took immediate action, locating floating restrooms and arranging for cleaning staff instead of waiting for outside help.

According to a number of respondents, the education office's tardiness in providing assistance highlights a structural weakness in institutional readiness. However, the local initiatives show that, given autonomy and community trust, decentralized problem-solving is possible.

Health and Psychological Impacts

Both infrastructure and student wellbeing suffered as a result of the floods. Anxiety and emotional distress were also common, as were high rates of illness, including skin conditions and diarrhea. By making house calls and offering stability and assurance, teachers took on the role of informal caregivers. Many students struggled to cope with the disruption of their daily routines and being uprooted from their homes, expressing feelings of fear and confusion. In response, educators used games, storytelling, and one-on-one interactions to help kids feel more normal. These small, caring deeds became essential instruments for emotional healing in the absence of professional counselors.

Continuity of Education through Community Engagement

All three schools managed to prevent student dropouts in spite of a nearly month-long suspension of formal classes, which is a noteworthy accomplishment in the wake of a disaster. Proactive communication techniques like home visits, mobile outreach, and unofficial community networks were mostly to blame for this. A strong dedication to the education and well-being of students is demonstrated by teachers' readiness to use their own resources and efforts, such as taking a boat trip. Furthermore, the cooperation of teachers, local business owners, and former members of the school managing committee shows that educational continuity during emergencies is a collaborative, community-driven process. It also demonstrates how crisis leadership is dispersed among various actors with specialized knowledge and access rather than being hierarchical.

Recommendations

Based on the insights gathered from head teachers, teachers, and parents during and after the 2024 floods in Lakshmipur, the following recommendations are proposed to strengthen disaster resilience and leadership in the education sector:

1. Develop Disaster Preparedness Training for Head Teachers and Staff

Structured training in crisis management, emergency shelter coordination, and psychosocial first aid should be provided to head teachers. At the school level, planning workshops and simulation exercises can improve preparedness.

2. Establish Emergency Education Response Funds

During emergencies, schools should have access to a special emergency fund so they can take care of basic repairs, food, cleaning supplies, and temporary restrooms without having to wait for drawn-out government processing.

3. Strengthen School-Community Partnerships

Encourage active cooperation between community leaders, NGOs, alumni, and schools. Creating official networks ahead of time can help with crisis coordination more quickly.

4. Integrate School Health Services into Disaster Response Plans

Health departments should establish protocols to deploy mobile medical teams to schools after disasters. Additionally, partnerships with local private practitioners should be formalized.

5. Provide Psychological Support for Students and Staff

Provide professional mental health support referral systems and incorporate training on trauma-informed teaching practices. Children's emotional recovery activities and safe spaces should be part of the post-disaster recovery process.

6. Reinforce School Infrastructure in Vulnerable Areas

Raising and flood-proofing schools in flood-prone areas should be a top priority for the government. Upgrades to the infrastructure should include reinforced classroom structures, waterproof storage, and raised tube wells.

7. Create Guidelines for Equitable Relief Distribution within Schools

Formal guidelines should be introduced to support school leaders in managing shelters and distributing aid transparently and equitably, drawing on the best practices demonstrated by head teachers in this study.

8. Recognize and Support Female Leadership in Crisis

Special attention should be given to empowering female school leaders, who have demonstrated remarkable leadership in male-dominated environments. Gender-sensitive policies should be promoted in disaster preparedness programs.

Conclusion

The Lakshmipur Sadar flash floods of 2024 exposed Bangladesh's primary education system's weaknesses as well

as its extraordinary resilience. Without official disaster procedures, head teachers' leadership—with assistance from other educators, parents, and community members—ensured that schools continued to serve as both educational establishments and emergency shelters.

This study demonstrates the critical role head teachers played in crisis response, including organizing shelter, allocating aid, keeping the area sanitary, and providing academic and emotional support to students. No student dropouts were recorded in spite of logistical difficulties, health issues, and infrastructure damage; instead, learning continuity was preserved through creativity and community involvement.

These schools' experiences show that head teachers serve as both frontline crisis responders and administrative leaders. School leaders must be included in national disaster preparedness plans because of their ability to rally support, uphold order, and foster students' emotional resilience.

To protect education for children who are at risk, it will be crucial to invest in community-based planning, school infrastructure, and local leadership as climate-related disasters become more common. Lakshmipur's lessons make a strong case for bolstering disaster-resilient school leadership in Bangladesh and elsewhere.

Author Declaration

The authors confirm that this manuscript has not been previously published and is not under consideration for publication elsewhere.

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