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Leading in Times of War: Leadership Agility among Lebanese Private School Principals

Layal Abou Mrad, Faculty of Education, Lebanese University, Beirut, Lebanon

Abstract

This study examined how Lebanese private school principals enacted leadership agility while sustaining educational provision during wartime. Framed through sensemaking theory and dynamic capabilities theory, it conceptualised agility as an iterative relationship among interpreting disruption, mobilising responses, reconfiguring organisational arrangements, and reconsidering consequences. An interpretive qualitative design was employed, involving semi-structured interviews with 23 private school principals in Beirut. Data were analysed through reflexive thematic analysis. Five themes were generated. Principals read the war through weak and conflicting signals, repeatedly remade schooling to preserve continuity, governed through provisional decisions, redistributed disruption across school communities, and performed steadiness while absorbing institutional instability. The findings showed that agility did not involve rapid adjustment to clearly defined problems. It depended on acting without certainty, retaining reversible options, and revising decisions as new information and stakeholder reactions emerged. Although these practices maintained educational provision, they often transferred additional labour and responsibility to teachers, families, students, and principals themselves. The study contributes the concept of provisional governance to wartime educational leadership, positioning agility as a recursive and ethically consequential process rather than a stable individual competence. It concludes that wartime leadership should be evaluated not only through organisational continuity but also through how responsibly uncertainty and its burdens are distributed across the school community over time.

Keywords: *leadership agility, wartime leadership, school principals, sensemaking, Lebanon*

Introduction

Crises unsettle the assumptions through which schools are ordinarily governed. Predictable schedules, stable enrolment, accessible facilities, available personnel, and coherent lines of authority can rapidly become unreliable, leaving school leaders to act before either the nature of the disruption or the adequacy of possible responses is fully known. Educational crises therefore involve more than operational interruption. They disturb the institutional conditions that make conventional leadership possible. Striepe and Cunningham (2022) found that crisis leadership research repeatedly foregrounds communication, collaboration, adaptability, and care, yet they caution that these capacities acquire meaning through the specific conditions confronting leaders. This contextual qualification is important because crisis leadership cannot be reduced to a transferable catalogue of competencies. It involves situated judgement concerning what must remain stable, what can be altered, and whose needs should receive priority when established procedures no longer match emerging realities.

Within this broader field, war constitutes a particularly demanding form of crisis. Pandemics and natural disasters can be severe, but their organisational consequences are often approached through identifiable phases of response and recovery. Armed conflict is less readily contained because insecurity may be prolonged, geographically uneven, politically contested, and capable of changing without warning. Alon and Schechter (2025) argue that wartime principals must simultaneously develop adaptive management, provide physical and psychological protection, and mobilise ecological networks of support. These responsibilities reveal that educational continuity during war is not equivalent to keeping schools technically operational. Tlili et al. (2024) demonstrate that sustaining education under conflict requires coordinated attention to access, technology, safety, psychosocial needs, and institutional cooperation. Consequently, continuity is better understood as a negotiated accomplishment through which leaders repeatedly reconstruct the conditions under which education remains possible.

Such reconstruction places principals at the intersection of competing imperatives. They may need to preserve instructional routines while modifying attendance arrangements, protect staff while responding to family expectations, and communicate reassurance without concealing uncertainty. Leadership under these conditions cannot depend exclusively on formal planning because plans may become obsolete as circumstances change. Mutch (2015) shows that crisis leadership is shaped through an interaction among leaders' dispositions, relationships, and contextual conditions. Grissom and Condon (2021) similarly contend that effective leadership during disruption rests on organisational trust, timely communication, and the capacity to coordinate collective responses. Nevertheless, these qualities do not remove the dilemmas of wartime leadership. Trust can be weakened by decisions that protect some groups while inconveniencing others, while rapid communication can amplify uncertainty when information remains incomplete. Leadership effectiveness therefore lies not simply in acting quickly, but in recalibrating action as risks, knowledge, and stakeholder needs evolve.

This capacity for continuing recalibration brings leadership agility into sharper focus. Agility refers to a leader's ability to interpret changing conditions, shift perspectives, mobilise appropriate responses, and learn while acting rather than merely after a crisis has ended. Joiner and Josephs (2007) conceptualise leadership agility as movement across different levels of awareness and response, including attention to context, stakeholders, creativity, and self-leadership. Applied to schools, agility should not be confused with speed, improvisation, or personal decisiveness alone. Rapid decisions may reproduce inequity when they overlook families with limited resources, while constant adaptation may create confusion if changes are insufficiently explained. Leadership agility is therefore relational and ethical as well as strategic. It requires principals to balance responsiveness with coherence and flexibility with responsibility. Williams and Liou (2024) reinforce this interpretation by showing that crisis leadership competencies extend across operational, relational, instructional, and adaptive domains rather than residing in a single heroic individual.

Moreover, wartime agility is exercised within institutional constraints. Principals may be expected to solve urgent problems even when governmental guidance is delayed, resources are scarce, and community demands conflict. Research from conflict-affected settings demonstrates that school leadership becomes deeply entangled with local relationships and political conditions. Brooks and Sungtong (2016) found that principals working amid insurgent violence relied on contextual understanding and community engagement while navigating persistent insecurity. Pherali (2016) similarly argues that leadership in violent conflict cannot be separated from questions of power, peace, and the social purposes assigned to education. More recently, Hudson et al. (2024) showed that educational leadership during the war in Ukraine involved maintaining professional connection, sustaining morale, and adapting organisational practice under conditions that continuously exceeded normal administrative expectations. Together, these studies suggest that agility is not freedom from constraint. It is the capacity to generate responsible room for action within constraint.

The Lebanese context renders this problem especially consequential. Schools operate within a national environment marked by recurrent political instability, economic deterioration, displacement, infrastructure pressures, and interruptions to educational provision. Earlier research in Lebanese public schools showed that principals responding to the Syrian refugee crisis exercised agency through resource mobilisation, relationship building, and locally developed solutions, even as structural limitations restricted what they could accomplish (Mahfouz et al., 2020). That evidence is significant, but refugee inclusion and wartime school leadership are not identical phenomena. War can simultaneously affect transportation, staffing, family location, school finances, emotional security, and the feasibility of in-person teaching. The principal must consequently interpret several interdependent disruptions rather than manage one bounded organisational problem.

Private schools warrant particular attention within this setting. Although they may possess greater formal discretion than public schools, such discretion does not necessarily produce greater capacity. Dependence on tuition, uneven technological resources, pressure from governing bodies, and responsibility for retaining staff can expose private principals to acute organisational vulnerability. Autonomy may therefore intensify accountability by transferring difficult decisions from central authorities to individual schools. Stringer and Hourani (2016) demonstrate that principals' roles in rapidly changing educational systems expand beyond conventional administration, while Ramos-Pla et al. (2021) show that crisis conditions demand flexible decision-making and sustained engagement with school communities. What remains insufficiently understood is how private school principals translate such demands into agile leadership when the crisis is armed conflict rather than a health emergency or a more general period of reform.

Accordingly, the literature presents three related limitations. Much crisis leadership scholarship has been shaped by COVID-19, leaving the prolonged uncertainty and moral complexity of war comparatively underexamined. Existing conflict research has illuminated educational disruption and principals' responsibilities, but has more often prescribed desirable roles than investigated how leaders shift among them in practice. Finally, Lebanese scholarship has generated valuable knowledge about public school leadership and refugee education, yet the agility of private school principals during wartime remains empirically obscure. Addressing this gap can move analysis beyond asking whether principals are resilient or adaptable toward examining how agility is enacted, bounded, and sustained through concrete decisions and relationships. The present study therefore asked the following overarching research question: *How do Lebanese private school principals enact leadership agility while leading their schools during wartime?*

Literature Review

The intellectual argument for examining leadership agility during war rests on three connected bodies of scholarship. The first explains how armed conflict transforms the organisational conditions of schooling. The second considers how principals' work is reconstituted when routine authority and established procedures become inadequate. The third examines agility as an enacted and contextually bounded leadership practice. Read together, these literatures shift attention from whether principals possess desirable crisis competencies to how they continually reconfigure leadership within unstable educational environments.

War as a Distinct Organisational Condition for Schooling

Research on education in emergencies demonstrates that armed conflict affects schooling through interacting disruptions rather than a single interruption. Burde et al. (2017) show that conflict influences educational access, institutional capacity, protection, and social relations, making educational provision inseparable from the wider political and humanitarian environment. Evidence from Yemen similarly indicates that war damages infrastructure, interrupts attendance, displaces educational communities, and weakens the material conditions required for teaching and leadership (Muthanna et al., 2022). Such effects are mutually reinforcing. Resource scarcity constrains instructional provision, displacement fragments school

communities, and uncertainty prevents leaders from treating emergency arrangements as short transitional measures. Consequently, the school operating during war is not simply a temporarily impaired version of its peacetime form. It becomes an organisational configuration whose boundaries, membership, resources, and routines are repeatedly unsettled.

This distinction matters because concepts derived from other crises can obscure the temporality and intentionality of warfare. COVID-19 scholarship established that principals must navigate disruption, interpret changing guidance, and protect organisational cohesion. Chatzipanagiotou and Katsarou (2023), however, found that much of this scholarship remained organised around movement from disruption toward recovery. Wartime leadership may not follow this progression because escalation and temporary stabilisation can occur concurrently. Alon and Schechter (2025) therefore conceptualise principals' wartime responsibilities across adaptive management, protection, and ecological engagement. Their framework usefully broadens leadership beyond operational continuity, but its role-based organisation leaves open how principals decide which responsibility should dominate when pedagogical, financial, relational, and protective demands conflict. This unresolved issue directs attention from the responsibilities assigned to principals toward the judgement through which those responsibilities are continually reordered.

Principalship Between Continuity, Care, and Organisational Viability

Crisis research portrays continuity as a central leadership responsibility, yet continuity is not a neutral outcome. Decisions about opening school buildings, changing delivery modes, adjusting expectations, or reallocating resources determine who can participate and under what conditions. Grissom and Condon (2021) argue that crisis leadership depends on communication, trust, organisational coherence, and attention to community needs. Netolicky (2020) develops this argument by showing that principals navigate persistent tensions between rapid action and consultation, decisiveness and empathy, as well as organisational stability and innovation. Maintaining education thus requires more than preserving instruction. It entails deciding which practices remain educationally defensible when the conditions supporting ordinary provision have deteriorated.

Furthermore, principals' relational work cannot be separated from these operational decisions. Mutch (2015) found that crisis responses emerge through the interaction of leaders' dispositions, relationships, and specific contexts, thereby challenging explanations centred on individual competence alone. In conflict-affected Southern Thailand, Brooks and Sungtong (2016) demonstrated that principals' effectiveness depended on their capacity to negotiate trust across school and community relationships shaped by continuing insecurity. Pherali (2016) likewise showed that school leadership during violent conflict is implicated in local power relations and cannot be understood as politically neutral administration. These studies reposition care, communication, and community engagement as constitutive elements of organisational functioning. Nevertheless, they also reveal a dilemma. The expansion of relational responsibility can increase expectations of principals without expanding the authority or resources available to meet them.

The principal's work during war is consequently stretched across educational, organisational, emotional, and community domains. Williams and Liou (2024) identify a similarly multidimensional pattern in crisis leadership scholarship, where effective practice combines adaptive, instructional, operational, and relational competencies. Yet competency frameworks can imply that complex pressures are manageable once leaders acquire the correct skills. Striepe and Cunningham (2022) caution against such decontextualisation because crisis leadership practices are shaped by cultural, organisational, and systemic conditions. Leadership capacity should therefore not be interpreted as an unlimited personal resource. A principal may identify an appropriate response but remain unable to enact it because of financial restrictions, staff availability, governing-body expectations, or families' unequal ability to accommodate change. This tension makes the organisational location of principalship central to any interpretation of agility.

Leadership Agility

Leadership agility offers a way to examine how principals move among competing demands without assuming that one leadership style will remain appropriate throughout a crisis. Fernandes et al. (2023) found that independent-school principals altered their leadership approaches as the COVID-19 crisis developed, moving among more directive, coordinating, developmental, and design-oriented forms of practice. Their analysis demonstrates that agility involves variation in leadership response rather than the consistent application of a preferred style. Ramos-Pla et al. (2021) similarly show that principals facing disruption combined rapid decision-making with communication, collaboration, and emotional support. These findings position agility as temporal and relational. A response becomes agile not merely because it is flexible, but because it is revised as conditions and stakeholder needs change.

Nevertheless, evidence from pandemic leadership cannot be transferred uncritically to wartime settings. Pandemic principals generally operated within functioning state systems that continued to issue policies, provide health guidance, and define broad organisational parameters. In war, the reliability of institutional guidance, physical access, communication systems, staffing, and family location may vary simultaneously. Hudson et al. (2024) show that wartime educational leadership in Ukraine required leaders to sustain professional connection while reconstructing organisational practices across disrupted settings. Tlili et al. (2024) further demonstrate that maintaining education during war depends on coordination among technological, pedagogical, protective, and community arrangements. Agility in this context is therefore not simply responsiveness to change. It is the continual alignment of several fragile systems whose demands may be incompatible.

Lebanese scholarship sharpens this contextual problem but does not resolve it. Mahfouz et al. (2020) found that principals in Lebanese public schools responded to refugee-related pressures through networking, local problem-solving, and resource mobilisation, while structural constraints bounded their agency. This insight challenges any assumption that agility reflects personal capability independent of institutional position. Private school principals may possess discretion over staffing, timetabling, communication, and modes of delivery, but their schools' reliance on tuition and governing arrangements can make that discretion precarious. Stringer and Hourani (2016) show that principals' responsibilities expand during systemic change, although formal expectations do not necessarily clarify how competing responsibilities should be reconciled. Greater autonomy may therefore enable rapid adaptation while simultaneously concentrating financial, ethical, and organisational risk at the school level.

Accordingly, the central analytical problem is not whether Lebanese private school principals demonstrate agility. It is how agility is produced through repeated movements among anticipation, interpretation, decision, mobilisation, and reconsideration, and how those movements are enabled or restricted by relationships and institutional conditions. Existing research identifies what wartime principals may be expected to accomplish, but it offers less explanation of how they recalibrate leadership across changing circumstances. A theoretical framework is therefore needed that can illuminate agility as a process while retaining the influence of context, stakeholder relations, and leaders' reflective judgement. Such a framework must explain both adaptive action and the boundaries within which that action becomes possible.

Theoretical Framework

This study was framed through sensemaking theory and dynamic capabilities theory, which together explained leadership agility as a situated and iterative movement between interpreting disruption and reconfiguring organisational action. Sensemaking theory proposed that organisational actors constructed plausible understandings when unexpected events disturbed established expectations and rendered familiar routines inadequate (Weick, 1995). Wartime conditions activated this process because principals confronted incomplete information, shifting risks, competing stakeholder expectations, and uncertainty concerning the viability of existing arrangements. Principals' responses were therefore shaped not only by external

circumstances but also by the cues they noticed, the meanings they attached to them, and the accounts through which they made action intelligible. Weick et al. (2005) positioned sensemaking as retrospective, identity-related, and grounded in ongoing social interaction, while Maitlis and Christianson (2014) showed that meaning was negotiated through relationships, language, organisational position, and power. This enabled the study to examine how principals developed interpretations with teachers, parents, governing bodies, and community actors, particularly when these groups perceived the same wartime condition differently. Sensemaking alone, however, did not fully explain how interpretation became organisational change. Dynamic capabilities theory addressed this transition by proposing that organisations operating in unstable environments developed capacities to sense changing conditions, seize possible responses, and transform their resources and routines (Teece et al., 1997; Teece, 2007). In this study, sensing referred to principals' recognition and interpretation of changes affecting safety, staffing, attendance, learning access, family circumstances, and school finances. Seizing concerned their selection and mobilisation of responses from among competing and frequently imperfect alternatives. Transforming referred to their reconfiguration of roles, instructional arrangements, communication structures, and resource use to sustain educational provision. These processes prevented agility from being reduced to speed or flexibility because meaningful adaptation required a connection between perceived changes and purposeful organisational reconfiguration. Helfat and Peteraf (2003) further established that capabilities developed through organisational histories, indicating that principals' wartime responses were conditioned by previously accumulated routines, relationships, expertise, and infrastructure. Accordingly, agility was enabled or constrained by the school's existing capacity rather than generated exclusively through individual competence. Schilke et al. (2018) also showed that dynamic capabilities did not produce beneficial outcomes automatically because their value depended on environmental conditions, managerial cognition, and patterns of enactment. The framework therefore permitted a critical examination of whether adaptations preserved coherence, distributed burdens equitably, and remained responsive to stakeholder needs. The two theories were integrated recursively. Sensemaking shaped what principals perceived as requiring action, dynamic capabilities explained how they mobilised and reconfigured organisational arrangements, and the consequences of those arrangements generated new cues requiring further interpretation. Leadership agility was thus understood as a continuing cycle of interpreting, mobilising, reconfiguring, and reconsidering rather than a stable personal characteristic. The analysis consequently examined the cues principals noticed, the meanings they constructed, the responses they mobilised, the organisational arrangements they transformed, and the consequences that prompted subsequent adjustment. This integrated framing explained how Lebanese private school principals enacted leadership agility while retaining attention to the institutional constraints, stakeholder relationships, and unequal consequences within which such agility emerged.

Theoretical Framework

This study was framed through sensemaking theory and dynamic capabilities theory, which together explained leadership agility as an iterative relationship between interpreting disruption and reconfiguring organisational action. Sensemaking theory proposed that organisational actors constructed plausible understandings when unexpected events disturbed established expectations and rendered familiar routines inadequate (Weick, 1995). Wartime conditions activated this process because principals confronted incomplete information, shifting risks, and competing stakeholder expectations. Their responses were therefore shaped by the cues they noticed and the meanings they developed through interaction with teachers, parents, governing bodies, and community actors. Maitlis and Christianson (2014) showed that such meanings were socially negotiated and influenced by organisational position and power. Dynamic capabilities theory complemented this interpretive lens by explaining how principals converted meaning into action through sensing changing conditions, seizing possible responses, and transforming organisational resources and routines (Teece, 2007). Sensing involved recognising changes in safety, staffing, attendance, learning access, and school finances. Seizing concerned selecting responses from competing alternatives, while transforming involved reconfiguring roles, instructional arrangements, communication structures, and

resource use. These capabilities were shaped by previously accumulated routines, relationships, expertise, and infrastructure rather than individual competence alone (Helfat & Peteraf, 2003). The two theories were integrated recursively. Principals' sensemaking shaped what they perceived as requiring action, dynamic capabilities explained how they reorganised school provision, and the consequences of those actions generated new cues requiring further interpretation. Leadership agility was therefore understood as a continuing cycle of interpreting, mobilising, reconfiguring, and reconsidering. This framework guided the analysis of how Lebanese private school principals enacted agility within institutional constraints and changing stakeholder needs.

Method

Research Design

The study employed an interpretive qualitative design to examine how Lebanese private school principals understood and enacted leadership agility during wartime. Semi-structured interviews enabled participants to reconstruct specific incidents, explain how they interpreted changing conditions, and reflect on the decisions and organisational adjustments they made. This design was appropriate for capturing contextually situated meanings and practices while allowing unanticipated dimensions of wartime leadership to emerge (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Participants

Principals of all private schools in Beirut were invited to participate, with more than 300 invitations distributed and 23 principals agreeing to take part. The sample comprised 15 female and eight male principals, with an average age of 39 years. Beirut was selected because its private schools continued providing education throughout the war despite considerable disruption, whereas schooling had ceased entirely in some heavily affected areas, particularly southern Lebanon. Although the response rate was limited, securing 23 participants was considered substantial for an interview-based qualitative study conducted during an acute crisis, when principals were managing exceptional professional and personal demands.

The Lebanese Educational System

The study was conducted within a Lebanese educational context characterised by substantial private-sector involvement, uneven institutional capacity, and persistent disparities in access to educational resources. Earlier research showed that Lebanese schools faced difficulties translating twenty-first-century competencies into classroom practice, particularly in relation to critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, communication, and self-directed learning (Ghamrawi et al., 2017). These limitations were reinforced by professional development arrangements that did not consistently provide teachers with sustained, needs-responsive learning opportunities (Al-Jammal & Ghamrawi, 2013). Digital preparedness was similarly uneven, with teachers reporting limitations in the knowledge and confidence required to educate responsible digital citizens (Ghamrawi, 2018). Such weaknesses became especially visible during virtual learning, when differences in connectivity, technological resources, parental competence, and families' capacity to support learning intensified existing educational inequalities (Ghamrawi et al., 2020). Lebanese school leaders also managed responsibilities extending beyond instructional provision, including character education, student protection, and quality assurance. Although principals valued character education, its systematic enactment remained inconsistent (Ghamrawi et al., 2015), while limited leadership awareness of cyberbullying illustrated how emerging student risks could remain insufficiently recognised (Ghamrawi & Al-Jammal, 2013a). Similarly, the adoption of quality-management language did not always correspond with consistent organisational practice (Ghamrawi & Al-Jammal, 2013b). Students also experienced restricted opportunities to exercise meaningful leadership despite recognising its value (Ghamrawi et al., 2018). Accordingly, the participating Beirut private school principals encountered wartime disruption within an educational system

already marked by uneven digital readiness, constrained professional learning, unequal family resources, expanding leadership responsibilities, and gaps between institutional aspirations and enacted practice.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were generated through individual semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 45 to 60 minutes. The interview schedule was developed around the overarching research question concerning how Lebanese private school principals enacted leadership agility during wartime. Initial questions invited participants to describe how the war affected their schools and identify moments when established routines became inadequate. Informed by sensemaking theory, subsequent questions explored which changes principals first noticed, how they interpreted incomplete or conflicting information, whose perspectives informed their understanding, and how they communicated emerging interpretations to teachers, families, and governing bodies. Participants were then asked to reconstruct specific decisions, explaining the alternatives considered, the reasoning underlying the response selected, and how institutional constraints shaped what was possible. Guided by dynamic capabilities theory, further questions examined how principals identified emerging threats and needs, mobilised staff and resources, modified instructional provision, redistributed responsibilities, and changed communication or decision-making structures. Final questions invited reflection on stakeholder reactions, unintended consequences, subsequent adjustments, and lessons carried into later decisions. This progression connected interpretation to action while allowing dimensions of agility not anticipated by the theoretical framework to emerge.

With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were analysed through reflexive thematic analysis following familiarisation, coding, theme development, review, and refinement (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Analysis proceeded abductively between the dataset and the theoretical framework. Sensemaking theory sensitised coding to noticed cues, constructed meanings, stakeholder negotiations, and revised interpretations, while dynamic capabilities theory directed attention to sensing changes, seizing responses, and transforming organisational arrangements. Codes were compared across participants and developed into themes that explained recurring patterns of leadership agility while retaining differences in principals' experiences and institutional conditions. Themes were refined according to their internal coherence, distinctiveness, and capacity to answer the overarching research question.

Findings

Analysis generated five intersecting themes that explained how principals enacted leadership agility during wartime. The themes did not represent a neat sequence from identifying disruption to resolving it. Principals often interpreted, acted, reversed decisions, and improvised simultaneously, sometimes creating new difficulties while addressing immediate ones. Their agility emerged through provisional judgement, relational negotiation, and the redistribution of disruption across the school community. Table 1 presents the themes and subthemes. The overlaps and tensions among them were retained because they reflected the unsettled character of leadership during war.

Table 1: Thematic Analysis of Data

Theme	Analytical meaning	Subthemes
Reading the war through weak and conflicting signals	Principals rarely received complete or timely information. They constructed working interpretations from partial official guidance, staff messages, family movements, attendance patterns, and informal community knowledge.	• <i>Rumour functioning as provisional intelligence</i> • <i>Reading absence before receiving explanations</i> • <i>Interpreting silence from families and staff</i> • <i>Deciding before certainty became available</i>
Keeping school open by repeatedly remaking it	Continuity was achieved through frequent alterations to what counted as a school day, a classroom, an acceptable lesson, or meaningful attendance. Some adjustments	• <i>Shrinking the school day to protect continuity</i> • <i>Moving unevenly between physical and online provision</i>

	preserved learning but weakened consistency.	• <i>Relaxing standards without publicly abandoning them</i> • <i>Operating parallel arrangements for different families</i>
Governing through provisional decisions	Principals avoided presenting decisions as permanent because conditions could change quickly. Agility involved keeping options open, delaying irreversible commitments, and withdrawing arrangements that no longer worked.	• <i>Decisions carrying unofficial expiry dates</i> • <i>Preparing several plans that might never be used</i> • <i>Reversing decisions without declaring failure</i> • <i>Using controlled ambiguity to preserve room for action</i>
Redistributing disruption rather than resolving it	Organisational adaptations often transferred pressure from the school to teachers, families, or particular groups of students. Agility sustained provision, but its benefits and burdens were unevenly distributed.	• <i>Teachers absorbing institutional instability</i> • <i>Families becoming part of the school's infrastructure</i> • <i>Digital access determining whose continuity counted</i> • <i>Flexible work quietly becoming unlimited availability</i>
Performing steadiness while absorbing instability	Principals became emotional and informational buffers between the war and the school community. Their visible composure supported trust, yet the demand to remain continuously available weakened their own capacity to adapt.	• <i>Filtering uncertainty before communicating it</i> • <i>Displaying calm without possessing certainty</i> • <i>Becoming the school's permanent point of contact</i> • <i>Agility fatigue producing moments of rigidity</i>

Theme 1. Reading the War Through Weak and Conflicting Signals

Participants described relying on informal information when official guidance was delayed. P6 stated, “A parent would message me that something had changed nearby. I could not verify everything, but I could not ignore it either.” Similarly, P14 explained, “Sometimes the WhatsApp messages arrived before any formal announcement.”

Principals also monitored attendance patterns. P3 recalled, “When three buses arrived almost empty, I knew families had already made a decision before informing us.” P19 similarly noted, “The numbers told me something was changing. I started calling families to understand what was happening.”

Silence was also reported as significant. P11 stated, “When a teacher who always answered immediately stopped replying, I knew I had to check before preparing the next day.” P22 explained, “Some parents did not complain or withdraw. They simply disappeared from communication.”

Several principals reported making decisions without certainty. P8 commented, “I had perhaps half the information I needed, but waiting for the other half was itself a decision.” P17 similarly recalled, “I closed for one day and reopened the next. I could not promise that either decision would remain correct.”

Theme 2. Keeping School Open by Repeatedly Remaking It

Principals described shortening the school day to maintain some continuity. P4 stated, “We removed the final two periods because families wanted their children home earlier. It was not the timetable we wanted, but it kept students coming.” P16 explained, “Every week the school day became slightly smaller.”

Participants also moved between physical and online provision. P9 recalled, “Some classes were at school, others were online, and sometimes the teacher was teaching both groups at once.” P21 stated, “We changed the mode three times in one week. Nobody liked it, but one arrangement could not fit everyone.”

Several principals lowered expectations without formally suspending them. P2 explained, “We kept the curriculum, but privately I told teachers not to chase every objective.” P13 added, “Homework was still assigned, but we stopped following up in the same way.”

Parallel arrangements were also developed for different families. P7 stated, “Some students attended, some joined online, and others received the work later because they had no stable connection.” P18 recalled, “There was no longer one school day. There were several versions operating together.”

Theme 3. Governing Through Provisional Decisions

Principals reported introducing decisions without expecting them to last. P5 stated, “Whenever I announced a plan, I told staff that it was for the next three days, not for the month.” P20 explained, “Every decision had an invisible expiry date.”

Participants prepared several alternatives simultaneously. P1 recalled, “We had one plan for opening, one for partial attendance, and one for closing. Most days we did not know which plan we would use.” P12 stated, “I asked teachers to prepare for two possibilities because choosing too early was risky.”

Principals also reversed decisions that became unworkable. P10 explained, “I announced full attendance in the morning and withdrew it that evening. I did not have the luxury of protecting my pride.” P23 similarly commented, “We tried a rotating timetable for four days, then stopped because it created more confusion.”

Some participants deliberately avoided definitive communication. P6 stated, “Parents wanted an answer for the whole week, but I only confirmed the following day.” P15 explained, “Sometimes I said we were reviewing the situation because I genuinely could not commit.”

Theme 4. Redistributing Disruption Rather Than Resolving It

Participants described teachers absorbing additional work created by changing arrangements. P8 stated, “Teachers prepared the same lesson in two formats and answered students after hours. The school continued because their working day did not end.” P17 explained, “Flexibility for the school meant extra work for the teacher.”

Families also assumed responsibilities previously managed by the school. P3 recalled, “Parents became supervisors, technicians, and sometimes substitute teachers.” P19 stated, “We sent the lesson home, but the family had to make the lesson happen.”

Digital access produced uneven participation. P11 explained, “Two children could be in the same class but receiving completely different education because one had electricity and internet and the other did not.” P22 added, “Online learning solved attendance for some families and excluded others quietly.”

Flexible communication also extended principals’ and teachers’ availability. P5 stated, “Parents contacted us at any hour because there was no longer a clear school day.” P14 recalled, “At first I said, ‘Call whenever necessary.’ After a while, everything had become necessary.”

Theme 5. Performing Steadiness While Absorbing Instability

Principals described filtering information before communicating with the school community. P2 stated, “I received ten different messages, but I sent parents only what they needed for the next morning.” P16 explained, “I could not forward every uncertainty. That would have transferred my confusion to everyone.”

Participants also reported displaying calm despite unresolved concerns. P7 stated, “In meetings, I spoke as if the plan was settled. After the meeting, I reopened it and changed half of it.” P20 recalled, “People needed to hear a steady voice even when I was not certain.”

Several principals became continuously accessible. P9 explained, “Teachers, parents, board members, and transport staff all called me directly. There was no one else holding the full picture.” P21 stated, “My phone became the school office.”

Finally, participants described moments when sustained adaptation became difficult. P4 admitted, “After weeks of changing everything, I kept one arrangement longer than I should have because I could not redesign it again.” P23 similarly stated, “At some point, I said no more changes for three days. It was not the best decision, but we needed to breathe.”

Discussion

This study examined how Lebanese private school principals enacted leadership agility while sustaining educational provision during wartime. The findings suggested that agility did not consist of rapid adaptation to a succession of clearly identifiable problems. It developed through repeated attempts to interpret incomplete signals, construct temporary courses of action, reorganise provision, and reconsider decisions whose consequences could not be fully anticipated. This pattern supported Striepe and Cunningham’s (2022) argument that crisis leadership was relational and context dependent, but extended it by showing that wartime agility rested on the capacity to govern without expecting interpretive or organisational closure. Principals did not move steadily from disruption toward recovery. They led within continuing instability, where action remained necessary even though the conditions informing it could change before implementation was complete.

Seen through sensemaking theory, principals’ reliance on informal messages, attendance patterns, delayed responses, and stakeholder silence demonstrated how wartime realities were constructed from weak and sometimes contradictory cues. Weick et al. (2005) maintained that sensemaking prioritised plausibility when accuracy could not be secured in time for action. The findings reinforced this proposition but also exposed its ethical significance in schools. A plausible interpretation could determine whether students attended, teachers travelled, or families reorganised their lives. Principals therefore did not simply make sense of disruption. They converted uncertain interpretations into decisions affecting others. This finding extended Maitlis and Christianson’s (2014) relational account of sensemaking by demonstrating that stakeholder silence and absence could function as organisational communication. What was not said or formally reported sometimes became as consequential as the information principals received.

Importantly, sensemaking did not end when a decision was announced. Stakeholder reactions, implementation difficulties, and new information altered the meaning of the original situation and required further interpretation. This recursive pattern challenged representations of crisis leadership as a staged progression from assessment to response and recovery. Chatzipanagiotou and Katsarou (2023) identified such temporal sequencing across much crisis leadership research, while Alon and Schechter (2025) organised wartime principalship around adaptive management, protection, and ecological engagement. The present study added that these responsibilities were not simply performed alongside one another. Principals continually reprioritised them as decisions produced new vulnerabilities. Agility therefore involved remaining responsive to the consequences of one’s own leadership, not only to changes originating outside the school.

Dynamic capabilities theory further illuminated how interpretation became organisational reconfiguration. Principals sensed changes in attendance, safety, staffing, connectivity, and family capacity, seized provisional responses, and transformed timetables, delivery modes, responsibilities, and communication arrangements. This broadly reflected Teece’s (2007) formulation of sensing, seizing, and transforming. However, the findings complicated any linear reading of these processes. Sensing continued after seizing, while transformation often exposed conditions that had initially remained invisible. The school was therefore not reconfigured once in response to war. It was repeatedly remade through partially reversible arrangements. This extends dynamic capabilities theory by identifying reversibility as a significant

dimension of agility in crisis-affected schools. The capacity to withdraw an ineffective decision without perceiving reversal as leadership failure enabled principals to preserve responsiveness when prediction remained unreliable.

The findings also indicated that wartime continuity did not mean preserving a stable version of schooling. Principals shortened school days, relaxed expectations, combined modes of provision, and operated different arrangements for different families. Tlili et al. (2024) similarly showed that education during war depended on coordinating technological, pedagogical, protective, and community responses. Yet the present study revealed that such coordination produced multiple versions of continuity within the same school. Some students attended physically, others participated online, and others accessed learning asynchronously or irregularly. Educational continuity was consequently fragmented rather than uniform. This finding moves beyond the common distinction between school closure and continuation. A school could remain officially operational while students experienced substantially different degrees and forms of educational access.

Moreover, these arrangements demonstrated that adaptation did not eliminate disruption but redistributed it. Flexible provision frequently depended on teachers extending their availability, families assuming instructional and technical responsibilities, and students relying on unequal domestic resources. This finding complicated the positive association between agile leadership and organisational responsiveness identified by Fernandes et al. (2023). In the Lebanese wartime context, an agile school could remain operational precisely because instability had been transferred to less visible locations. The finding also supports Schilke et al.'s (2018) warning that dynamic capabilities should not be presumed beneficial independently of their context and consequences. The value of adaptation depended not only on whether it sustained provision, but also on who carried the additional labour and who remained able to participate. Agility was therefore distributive. Every organisational adjustment rearranged burdens, opportunities, and exposure across the school community.

This distributive character was especially consequential in private schools. Mahfouz et al. (2020) showed that Lebanese public school principals exercised agency through local problem-solving and resource mobilisation while remaining constrained by structural conditions. The current findings revealed a related but distinct tension within private education. Organisational discretion enabled principals to alter timetables, expectations, communication, and modes of delivery quickly, yet the same discretion concentrated responsibility for difficult decisions at school level. Autonomy did not remove constraint. It required principals to absorb uncertainty that might otherwise have been addressed systemically. Stringer and Hourani (2016) observed that principals' responsibilities expanded under conditions of rapid educational change. This study extended that argument by showing that role expansion during war included becoming the school's central interpreter, communication hub, and absorber of institutional instability.

The performance of steadiness further revealed that agility contained substantial emotional and informational work. Principals filtered uncertain information, projected calm, and maintained accessibility so that others could function with a greater sense of coherence. Mutch (2015) established that crisis leadership was shaped by dispositional, relational, and contextual factors, while Grissom and Condon (2021) emphasised trust and communication as foundations of organisational response. The present findings added that trust sometimes depended on principals concealing the full instability of their own decision-making process. Such filtering was neither straightforward transparency nor deliberate deception. It represented calibrated communication intended to prevent unresolved uncertainty from overwhelming collective action. Leadership agility thus included managing how much uncertainty entered the organisation at a particular moment.

Nevertheless, the prolonged performance of adaptability eventually constrained further adaptation. Some principals retained arrangements they recognised as imperfect because they lacked the energy to redesign them again. This finding challenges heroic constructions of agile leadership as endlessly renewable responsiveness. Helfat and Peteraf (2003) explained that organisational capabilities followed developmental

trajectories and could weaken as conditions changed. The present study suggested that leadership agility also had a temporal and human limit. Continuous sensing generated informational overload, repeated seizing depleted judgement, and ongoing transformation produced fatigue across the organisation. Moments of rigidity were therefore not necessarily evidence that agility had disappeared. They could represent temporary efforts to preserve enough stability for future adaptation.

Overall, integrating sensemaking and dynamic capabilities theory enabled leadership agility to be reconceptualised as provisional governance. Principals constructed actionable interpretations without certainty, mobilised arrangements without assuming permanence, and revised decisions without expecting the crisis to reach a stable endpoint. The study contributed to wartime educational leadership scholarship by showing that agility was not simply the ability to change quickly. It was the capacity to sustain a workable relationship among interpretation, action, consequence, and reconsideration. At the same time, the findings placed an important boundary around this contribution. Agile leadership could sustain schooling, but it could not neutralise war or guarantee equitable continuity. Its significance lay in keeping education organisationally possible while its limitations remained visible.

Implications, Limitations and Future Research

The findings carried implications for school governance, principal preparation, and crisis planning. Private schools should develop flexible response structures that distribute sensemaking, communication, and decision-making across leadership teams rather than concentrating them in the principal. Crisis plans should include parallel modes of educational provision, procedures for reviewing and reversing decisions, and mechanisms for monitoring how adaptations redistribute burdens among teachers, students, and families. Principal development should likewise move beyond technical emergency management to strengthen judgement under uncertainty, communication of provisional decisions, ethical resource allocation, and reflective reconsideration. Governing bodies and educational authorities must also recognise that sustained agility requires protected decision-making time, reliable information channels, peer-support networks, and attention to principals' well-being.

Nevertheless, the study was limited by its small, self-selected sample of 23 private school principals from Beirut. Those who participated may have possessed greater availability, confidence, or willingness to discuss their leadership than principals who did not respond. Focusing on Beirut enabled examination of schools that remained operational, but excluded principals in areas where schooling had ceased or experienced more severe disruption. The study also relied on retrospective self-reports produced during an unstable period. Participants' accounts may therefore have been shaped by incomplete recall, evolving interpretations, and a desire to present decisions as responsible. Interviews captured principals' perspectives without independently examining how teachers, students, families, or governing bodies experienced the same adaptations.

Accordingly, future research should include principals from public schools and from Lebanese regions experiencing different levels of disruption to establish how geography, governance, and resources shaped leadership agility. Longitudinal studies could follow decisions across successive stages of conflict and recovery, revealing how provisional arrangements became embedded, abandoned, or revised. Research incorporating teachers, students, parents, and governing bodies would also clarify whether adaptations perceived by principals as agile were experienced by others as supportive, unstable, or inequitable. Comparative studies across conflict-affected countries could further examine whether provisional governance and the redistribution of disruption were particular to Lebanese private education or represented broader features of wartime school leadership.

Conclusion

Leading schools during war required more than resilience, decisiveness, or rapid adaptation. It required principals to create temporary order without mistaking it for certainty. Lebanese private school principals sustained education by reading incomplete signals, remaking organisational arrangements, reversing decisions, and absorbing uncertainty before it reached their communities. Their agility kept schooling possible, but it did not remove disruption. It frequently relocated its burdens to teachers, families, students, and the principals themselves. The study therefore repositioned leadership agility as provisional governance, grounded in the continuing relationship among interpretation, action, consequence, and reconsideration. Its most important message is that wartime leadership should not be celebrated solely for keeping schools open. It should be judged by how responsibly uncertainty is navigated, how equitably disruption is distributed, and whether the human capacity required to sustain education is itself protected.

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