
Guest editorial: Global wartime school leadership: from metro schools to roadside graduations

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505

In recent years, schools across multiple regions of the world have increasingly operated in the midst of war, forced displacement, political violence and chronic insecurity. In many conflict-affected settings, schooling no longer occurs exclusively within stable institutional environments but also in shelters, temporary facilities, evacuation centers and improvised learning spaces shaped by chronic uncertainty and collective trauma (Gutman, 2024). Under such conditions, school leaders are required not only to sustain instruction, but also to preserve routines, emotional continuity and community trust in contexts where safety, stability and even the physical infrastructure of the school cannot be taken for granted. Emerging scholarship has begun to acknowledge that leadership in conflict-affected settings extends far beyond conventional understandings of crisis management; it involves moral decision-making, emotional survival and the reconstruction of belonging under prolonged insecurity (Dryden-Peterson, 2022). Nevertheless, much of the educational leadership literature continues to focus primarily on relatively short-term disruptions, such as natural disasters, organizational crises or the COVID-19 pandemic (Harris and Jones, 2020; Schechter *et al.*, 2024), while far less attention has been devoted to the lived realities of school leaders operating under ongoing armed conflict and chronic instability.

Responding to the gap in the literature, this special issue, *Wartime School Leadership*, foregrounds voices and cases from regions experiencing active conflict, chronic insecurity and societal disruption. It brings together ten contributions from eight geopolitical settings affected by war, insurgency, displacement and prolonged instability across Latin America, Eastern Europe, Africa and the Middle East. Collectively, these studies illuminate the diverse and deeply human realities of school leadership under conflict while expanding existing understandings of wartime educational leadership as an adaptive, relational, emotional, community-based and morally situated practice. These studies call for a *Global Wartime School Leadership* that protects, connects and inspires – even in the darkest times (see Figure 1).

The special issue includes two accounts of school leadership within radically destabilized wartime realities: Rodríguez-Gómez's research on leadership under guerrilla control in rural Colombia, alongside Hrynevych and Fadzieieva's analysis of school leadership during the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war. Although emerging from very different geopolitical conflicts, both contexts reveal how war transforms leadership into a process of negotiation, improvisation and protection as conventional institutional boundaries collapse. Theoretically, the two accounts extend adaptive leadership beyond technical problem-solving by portraying principals as negotiators, protectors and community stabilizers operating within fragmented wartime systems. However, while the Colombian case highlights leadership under a "dual political order" shaped by tensions between state authority and insurgent control, the Ukrainian case presents wartime leadership as a hybrid practice combining flexibility, coordination and reform-oriented vision.

In rural Colombia, Rodríguez-Gómez describes forms of "protective leadership" in which school leaders navigated armed pressure through partial compliance, silence and negotiation. One participant assigned harmless cleanup work after guerrillas demanded public punishment for two students who stole bottles of soda, while in another instance she negotiated with a



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Figure 1. Global wartime school leadership: schools as spaces of life, learning and hope

commander to allow a recruited student to return temporarily to school, insisting that “he should first become educated before serving properly”. In Ukraine, schools operate in underground metro stations and fortified subterranean classrooms, while principals travel across dangerous regions to deliver diplomas to displaced graduates in improvised roadside ceremonies. The study further suggests that war did not simply interrupt educational reform, but in some cases accelerated flexibility and localized adaptation within the broader New Ukrainian School Reform process. Across both contexts, schools emerge as fragile communal spaces attempting to preserve protection, routine and hope during armed conflict. Whether through quiet negotiations with guerrillas in Colombia, or symbolic roadside graduation ceremonies in Ukraine, wartime educational leadership emerges as deeply relational, morally complex and inseparable from the preservation of civic life.

Two other interrelated studies focus on educational leadership amid mass displacement following the October 7 attacks in Israel: Alon and Schechter’s article on displaced school principals leading fragmented communities across the country and Katzman and Goldratt’s study of the rapid establishment of educational frameworks inside evacuation hotels and temporary shelters. Taken together, the two articles move beyond traditional understandings of school leadership tied to stable institutions and physical school buildings. Instead, they frame leadership during displacement as the reconstruction of belonging, educational routine and communal life after the collapse of a shared educational space. In Alon and Schechter’s work, school leaders describe attempting to sustain school identity after students, teachers and families had been relocated to hotels and temporary housing sites across the country. Leadership increasingly shifted from managing institutions toward sustaining dispersed communities, with principals describing how they no longer “managed schools” but rather supervised communities struggling to remain connected despite collective displacement. Consequently, educational leaders emerged as “stable anchors” responsible for projecting calm and reassurance amid collective dislocation. Katzman and Goldratt describe a related form of wartime leadership emerging through civic improvisation after communities were evacuated and many formal leaders had been killed, kidnapped, displaced or called to military reserve

duty. The collapse of formal structures was encapsulated in the metaphor, “the storm raged. There was no captain, so the sailors took the helm”. Hotel lobbies became kindergartens, dining halls became classrooms and outdoor spaces became improvised learning environments. The study introduces the concept of “adaptive stability”, describing leadership that attempts to preserve trust and routine while continuously improvising under rapidly changing conditions. Together, the two accounts reframe educational leadership during wartime displacement not as the preservation of institutions, but as rebuilding belonging, emotional stability and communal life under conditions of uncertainty and loss.

The African contributions shift attention to educational leadership in contexts marked by chronic insecurity, institutional fragility and marginalization, as seen in the study by Adeoye on wartime leadership in conflict-affected regions of Nigeria and that of Kyambade, Namatovu and Nangoli on school leadership within minority displaced communities in Uganda. Both contributions move the discussion of wartime educational leadership away from formal managerial frameworks toward forms of community-based survival leadership emerging under weak state presence, chronic insecurity and social marginalization. In both studies, schools survive through collective improvisation, relational trust and locally embedded networks of care and protection.

In Nigeria, Adeoye uses hypothetical wartime simulations to examine leadership decision-making under extreme uncertainty, exposing how principals responded to armed incursions, school closures and severe shortage of resources. Classes were relocated to mosque compounds after nearby gunfire, school weeks were compressed into only a few “safe” days and, in the words of one principal, “survival” itself became the timetable guiding everyday schooling. Responsibility for sustaining schools increasingly extended beyond formal leadership structures. Parents organized volunteer night patrols to guard school compounds, village leaders offered churches as temporary classrooms and women from local communities brought mats for displaced children to sit on during lessons. One female principal described greeting traumatized children individually each morning, believing that hearing the words “you are safe here” might be the only comfort some children would receive that day.

Kyambade and colleagues offer a different perspective on leadership within minority and displaced communities in Uganda, where schools serving Batwa, Karamojong and refugee populations operate amid armed conflict, state neglect and longstanding exclusion. The article portrays schools less as formal institutions and more as community survival infrastructures sustained through relational trust and cultural legitimacy. School leaders described learning local dialects, attending community gatherings and negotiating cultural norms in order to gain acceptance within ethnically diverse communities. As one participant recalled, “At first, the parents didn’t trust me because I’m not from their ethnic group”. Leadership authority in these settings was therefore culturally negotiated rather than automatically granted through formal position alone. The two African contributions conceptualize educational leadership as community survival governance emerging amid insecurity, marginalization and state absence, where schools are sustained through collective care, adaptive improvisation and deeply relational forms of leadership under conflict.

Another pair of studies explores leadership in relation to trauma, spirituality, grief and emotional holding during prolonged national crisis. The first, by Gutman, Reichel, Shenhav and Glanz, explores supervisory leadership in religious schools during the 2023–2025 October 7 war; the second, by Cohen Zada, investigates leadership in bereaved school communities during the same period. Conceptually, both contributions move beyond conventional understandings of crisis management and foreground educational leadership as a profoundly relational, emotional and moral practice centered on sustaining meaning, faith, belonging and collective resilience against the backdrop of ongoing trauma. They also challenge traditional assumptions about professional distance in leadership by presenting vulnerability, emotional openness and shared grief as central resources for rebuilding trust and community cohesion, grounding these ideas in highly concrete, culturally embedded and emotionally charged practices.

Gutman and her colleagues introduce the concept of “Trauma-Sensitive Entrepreneurship” (TSE), a hybrid framework combining trauma-informed leadership with teachers’ entrepreneurial behavior. Rather than separating emotional stabilization from educational innovation, the study demonstrates how healing and adaptive creativity emerged simultaneously within religious school communities. Supervisors described creating “call circles”, sending individualized letters to students and preparing “learning care packages” for families coping with reserve duty and displacement. One supervisor reflected that “the classroom must become a sanctuary”, while another recalled that following October 7 “there was no professional dialog between us at all, only human conversation”. Staff meetings became spaces for emotional processing, grief and collective support rather than bureaucratic supervision alone.

Cohen Zada explores a related but distinct dimension of leadership within bereaved communities, conceptualizing principals as “wounded healers” navigating continually “between the sacred and the mundane”. Principals described moving constantly between memorial ceremonies, grieving families and collective mourning on the one hand and schedules, grades, staff meetings and pedagogical continuity on the other. One principal reflected, “the same day I managed a routine staff meeting about schedules and logistics and in the evening, I led a memorial ceremony for a student who had been killed”. Another admitted that he “didn’t have the privilege of breaking down, even when my heart was broken”. The study powerfully depicts grief becoming integrated into the organizational and symbolic life of schools during wartime. Routine meetings evolved into emotional “breathing spaces”, while schools established memorial gardens, recipe books, art exhibitions and commemorative spaces intended not only for mourning, but also for collective growth and renewal, creating spaces “not where people come only to cry, but where the school continues to grow out of the bereavement”.

This special issue concludes with two studies describing schools as humanitarian and emotional survival spaces amid prolonged societal collapse and war in the Middle East: Adams, Salha and Arar address school leadership amid destruction and displacement and Mahfouz and Bassaj describe educational leadership amid overlapping crises of war, economic collapse and institutional paralysis. Although emerging from different contexts, both studies move beyond conventional understandings of crisis management and position schools as humanitarian and emotional infrastructures operating amid displacement, destruction and prolonged instability. In these contexts, leadership is no longer centered primarily on academic achievement or organizational efficiency, but on sustaining dignity and communal survival under conditions where instability becomes normalized and schools increasingly absorb functions traditionally associated with welfare systems and humanitarian organizations.

In the study by Adams and colleagues, schools were transformed into humanitarian shelters where classrooms housed displaced families and playgrounds were full of tents for civilians who had lost their homes. One school leader explained that “schools became shelters for thousands of families... playgrounds are filled with tents”, illustrating how educational leaders became coordinators of safety, shelter and emotional care alongside education provision. Another participant reflected that “the appearance of students and staff is a great achievement”, while another compared school leadership during war to “being the father of a big family lost in a storm in the middle of the ocean”. Formal assessments were often abandoned entirely, as maintaining children’s psychological connection to schooling became more important than academic assessment. When technological infrastructures collapsed, schools shifted toward emotionally supportive and play-based forms of learning intended to preserve routine and emotional stability.

The contribution by Mahfouz and Bassaj foregrounds a different dimension of leadership amid chronic societal crisis, where instability is no longer experienced as temporary disruption but as the permanent condition of schooling. Participants repeatedly described crisis as an ongoing reality rather than an exceptional event; one remarked that “there is no year without a

crisis". Schools simultaneously functioned as educational institutions and humanitarian shelters, with children studying beside mattresses used by displaced families. Wartime leadership increasingly required educational leaders to assume multiple roles simultaneously, becoming "a teacher, counselor, guard, builder" while also calming terrified children through microphones during nearby bombings until, instead of screaming, the students began singing together. The reopening of damaged schools emerged as a powerful symbolic act of continuity and collective endurance, with one school leader describing the sound of the school bell ringing again as a sign that life and communal routine could continue despite the ongoing crisis. These accounts depict schools during wartime not merely as educational institutions, but as humanitarian, emotional and civic survival spaces struggling to preserve social cohesion amid prolonged disruption and collapse. Across the Middle Eastern contexts explored in these contributions, wartime educational leadership emerges as inseparable from the broader struggle to sustain dignity, care, belonging and hope during enduring turmoil.

The ten studies included in this special issue were selected to illuminate the wide range of educational realities, moral dilemmas and leadership practices emerging across diverse conflict-affected contexts. As illustrated in [Figure 1](#), *Global Wartime School Leadership*, the contributions portray schools as humanitarian, emotional and civic survival spaces struggling to preserve continuity amid violence, displacement and prolonged instability. Throughout this issue, leadership appears less as a managerial function and more as an effort to sustain protection, belonging, dignity and collective endurance under conditions where ordinary educational routines can no longer be taken for granted. The articles foreground multiple dimensions of wartime leadership, including adaptive negotiation under violent disruption, leadership amid displacement and institutional collapse, community-based survival leadership in marginalized settings and emotionally and spiritually grounded leadership during collective trauma and bereavement.

The studies presented here indicate that wartime educational leadership differs fundamentally from leadership during more conventional crises. Unlike temporary emergencies that assume institutional continuity and eventual recovery, the contexts explored throughout this special issue are shaped by chronic insecurity, repeated displacement and the normalization of uncertainty over extended periods of time. Leadership therefore extends beyond organizational management and toward emotional holding, humanitarian coordination and the preservation of communal meaning. By bringing together contributions from Latin America, Eastern Europe, Africa and the Middle East, the special issue broadens emerging discussions of crisis-sensitive and trauma-informed educational leadership ([Bush, 2021](#); [Harris and Jones, 2020](#)). At the same time, it builds upon recent international scholarship examining educational leadership in zones of armed conflict and prolonged instability ([Gutman, 2024](#)). Rather than framing wartime leadership simply as leadership practiced under extreme conditions, these studies reframe wartime educational leadership as the ongoing improvisation of educational, emotional and civic continuity under chronic instability. Across these contexts, underground stations, shelters and temporary spaces become naturalized sites of schooling, while leadership increasingly relies on trauma-responsive and meaning-making practices to sustain hope, belonging and collective resilience.

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