

# THE IMPACT OF THE NEW NORMAL ON PRINCIPAL SELF-EFFICACY

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## Abstract

*As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, a new set of conditions (the new normal) has come onto the scene, representing an unprecedented challenge to the education landscape. While the lockdown is over and schools have reopened, the return to school grounds has not returned affiliates to pre-pandemic work conditions. School principals are now faced with many new challenges related to this avant-garde work dynamic. Complexities have arisen for principals to perform routine tasks such as communicating with teachers and staff and overseeing the health and safety of their schools. Digital technology, already gaining popularity in the decade before the pandemic, has taken on a new role to enable remote learning. Principals are expected to know these digital tools, deploy them effectively, and teach their staff how to use them. This informal literature review presents current research on the impact of the new normal on principal self-efficacy, the cognitive foundation by which principals have been shown to lead more effectively. By understanding this relationship, measures can be taken to bolster principals' levels of self-efficacy in the new normal to ensure optimized student learning and teacher efficacy.*

**Keywords:** school leaders, principals, self-efficacy, schools, pandemic, new normal, digital leadership, technology leadership, instructional leadership

## Introduction

As the world emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic, principals returned to their schools facing a very different landscape. Since principals are responsible for all facets of their schools, they essentially were faced with a brave, new world (Hayes et al., 2022; see also Fernández-Collazos et al., 2021; Hafiza Hamzah et al., 2021; Hesbol et al., 2019; Håkansson et al., 2019; Skaalvik, 2020). This duty did not change because of the COVID-19 pandemic; it dramatically took on new dimensions when schools were forced to close suddenly, and students and teachers (and, of course, the subject principals) were locked down in their homes. Learning was expected to continue, and a new paradigm emerged. Online learning, a forceful modality that grew in popularity in the decade before the pandemic, suddenly moved to online remote learning. The pandemic raised the importance of including digital technology in schools (Karakose et al., 2021). Challenges with in-classroom computer learning paled in comparison to delivering effective and meaningful pedagogy over the Internet to each student's home. The role of the principal swelled with these expanding requirements, and most principals were not prepared (Shepard & Taylor, 2019).

The sudden closures of schools, the move to remote online learning, and the migration of work collaboration to an entirely virtual environment were necessary conditions to cope with the pandemic lockdown. The residue from these events has been designated the "new normal" (Pacheco, 2021). Pressley & Ha (2022) capture this state by remarking, "...schools across the country returned to learning in several different formats in Fall 2020, including virtual, hybrid, and in-person instruction" (p. 61). Teachers were instructed to teach from home using new tools, and students were expected to learn at home just as if they were seated in a classroom. These expectations resulted in increased stress, time-

sensitive responses, urgency, and a requirement for principals to garner new skills related to digital technology and virtual communication (Brinkmann et al., 2021). Communicating remotely took on a new level of complexity, as principals were no longer co-located with their staff and teachers (Azukas, 2022). Miscommunication crept into remote meetings and text messages, and principal preparation training had not prepared these school leaders for these new intricacies (Hesbol et al., 2019; Lewis & Jones, 2019).

Principals with high self-efficacy can better handle the challenges of leading their institutions (Baroudi & Hojeij, 2020). Brophy et al. (2015) stated that principal self-efficacy is vulnerable to decline during stressful situations or crises. It can be postulated that the new normal qualifies as a crisis based on the rapid onset of significant change and the effect of loss of control over previously controllable conditions (Brinkmann et al., 2021). It is hypothesized that principal self-efficacy was compromised in the new normal. If principal self-efficacy has declined, the education community will be even more challenged to promote optimal learning and maintain the goals and well-being of students, teachers, staff, and whole school environments. The return to in-person school notwithstanding, the impact on teachers' and students' emotional well-being has been recorded (Pressley & Ha, 2022). Principals must maintain effective school leadership; high self-efficacy is a mediating force.

This paper presents a synthesis of recent literature themes to showcase the impact of the new normal on principal self-efficacy. It presents a scholarly evaluation of self-efficacy and how findings in the literature encase self-efficacy learning theory. It identifies new normal factors that could impact principal self-efficacy. The literature contains gaps consistent with a burgeoning area of study, such as the new normal and principal leadership. The paper concludes with a summary of the main points and a proposition to make the findings applicable to future research.

## Method

Twenty-four sources were culled from an extensive university database collection to inform this unstructured literature review. Twelve sources reflected publication dates during the pandemic (mid-2020 through 2022), and 12 sources were published prior to the pandemic. It was necessary to include pre-pandemic sources to establish a baseline from which to compare emerging new normal conditions and to compare changes in principals' behaviors and outcomes. The sources were examined for new normal factors that could possibly impact principal self-efficacy.

The pandemic sources reflected primarily qualitative research design and the pre-pandemic sources on digital and instructional leadership reflected primarily quantitative design. No sources were practical, theoretical, or informational. While the method for choosing sources was unstructured, this outcome is telling. The new normal is precisely that: a new phenomenon. Concepts and relationships have yet to be discovered through phenomenological analysis. This condition enables a potent research gap discussed in the Limitations section.

## Definitions

1. *Self-Efficacy* – A skill characterized by four behaviors: quick response, intense interest, strong commitment, and enjoyment in solving complex tasks. It is bolstered by mastery of skills, social modeling, social persuasion, and psychological response (Desai, 2014).
2. *New normal* – An era created by the COVID-19 pandemic exhibited by remote/hybrid/telework, remote online learning, and virtual communication (Pacheco, 2020).

3. *Digital leadership/technology leadership* – The International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) promotes five aspects of digital leadership: Excellence in Professional Practice, Visionary Leadership, Digital-age Learning Culture, Digital Citizenship, and Systemic Improvement (AlAjmi, 2022).
4. *Instructional leadership* – Also called “leadership for learning,” a leadership style exemplified by focusing on school goals and values related to learning (i.e., assembling a learning culture); invoking tools, practices, policies, and processes to facilitate learning; and supporting the professional development of staff (Skaalvik, 2020).

### Discussion

Four themes emerged from the literature that posed possible impacts on principal self-efficacy. The first is digital leadership/technology leadership, an emerging leadership style and acumen that expects principals to possess advanced Information and Computer Technology (ICT) skills so they may keep pace with maturing computer technology to capture new learning modalities. The second is instructional leadership, a classic approach to principal leadership that experienced changes when all school participants assumed virtual roles in the new normal. The third is digital leadership training, a new requirement of principal readiness. ICT training was primarily optional before the pandemic but has become mandatory in the new normal. The fourth theme is learning theory association, another classic set of working conditions that was altered by the new normal by removing human-to-human interactions that influenced learning and social modeling for effective leadership. These four themes indicate that the principal’s operating environment was changed. The impact on principal self-efficacy is postulated in this discussion and promotes solid research opportunities for the education community.

### Digital Leadership/Technology Leadership/Virtual Leadership

Even before the new normal, classrooms were moving to online learning to accommodate digital native students (Dogan, 2018). Extensive technology was entering the classroom. Principals said it promoted student learning (Akci et al., 2019). The key here is “in the classroom.” While an occasional homework assignment was administered to students’ tablets or home computers, most computer learning occurred in the old normal: teachers and students cooperating in the same classroom, side by side. Teachers were presumably physically proximate to students during students’ online learning experiences.

The descriptor “online” bears some scrutiny. Computer online learning typically occurs through computer-supported learning environments (CSLEs) using Learning Management Systems (LMS) tools in the classroom (Schunk, 2019). Classroom computers are networked through a school intranet to report student progress (data mining and learning analytics) to a central hub to evaluate performance and shape future learning. While these tools are enabled through a school network, they are called online but not remote. An entire Information and Computer technology (ICT) infrastructure existed at the school to enable these tools. When an ICT problem emerged, the teacher would “call the ICT support staff” to report to the classroom to fix it. No particular acumen was needed.

The classroom’s proximate, in-person operating conditions were gone when the pandemic hit. Suddenly and quite unexpectedly, the burden of enabling remote online learning fell to the primary users, namely the teachers and students (Ismail et al., 2021; Pressley & Ha, 2022; Raman et al., 2014). The remote element of online learning introduced an even more complex set of challenges for all school stakeholders (Håkansson et al., 2019). The global Internet was unprepared for the demand to deliver data-intensive online learning curricula to millions of homes (Pressley & Ha, 2022). Student experiences

were less than optimal, and teachers' frustrations escalated (Hafiza Hamzah et al., 2021; Karakose et al., 2021). Teachers continued looking to their leadership to help adjust and administer online learning. These challenges naturally bubbled up to the principals, who are the proverbial captains of their ships (Brinkmann et al., 2021; Hayes et al., 2022; Hesbol, 2019). Principals' jobs were changed considerably (Sorić et al., 2021). Principals needed to maintain their competency to serve as social models for teachers. However, they were caught in the eddy of lack of training, acumen, teacher stress, technology complexity, and student distress (Akcil et al., 2019; Shepherd & Taylor, 2019).

Digital technology for classroom online learning was already considered highly complex for many principals, who needed help to incorporate it efficiently (Baroudi & Hojeij, 2020; Schrik & Wasonga, 2019). Some principals reported that their principal training never prepared them for what was required for digital leadership. Two principals remarked they would have fared better with some form of training in company financial management because the fiscal burden of acquiring and depreciating digital assets was beyond anything they had been exposed to before (Azukas, 2022; Shepherd & Taylor, 2019). This sentiment is captured meaningfully in the principals' own words:

Joseph stated, 'The biggest thing that I had to just basically learn on my own is the finance piece. I think I took one finance course, but as a charter school leader, in a lot of ways, you're the head of a nonprofit.' John concurred, 'Educational leadership programs for leaders of online schools need to focus more on being a nonprofit leader than an education school leader. Of course, there is the academic piece, which is very important. But what you don't learn is finance, what you don't learn is marketing, what you don't learn are all the other things that go into running online school' (Azukas, 2022, p. 334).

The concept of digital leadership matured to cope with this new pedagogy. Three new responsibilities for principals defined: (a) teacher acumen (to deploy and administer these new tools) (Karakose et al., 2021), (b) acquisition of appropriate software (Azukas, 2022), and (c) teacher self-efficacy and efficacy (to ensure student learning goals were achieved) (Ismail et al., 2021; Pressley & Ha, 2022). These three responsibilities could be added to the ISTE conceptual framework for digital leadership (Akcil, 2019; see also Hafiza Hamzah et al., 2021; Karakose et al., 2021; Raman et al., 2014) to become a foundation for principal leadership in the new education normal (Pacheco, 2019).

## Instructional Leadership

Instructional leadership was a viable approach to principalship before the new normal. It is characterized by a leadership style that encourages a school's stakeholders to value, respect, and prioritize learning (Hayes et al., 2022). Instructional leadership is intended to make one's school a learning school, one that embraces learning in its culture (Hesbol et al., 2019). A solid instructional leadership style was shown to improve teacher performance and learning outcomes (Baroudi & Hojeij, 2020).

Instructional leadership is evolving to incorporate digital leadership characteristics. One characteristic of digital leadership is the digital era learning culture (Akcil et al., 2019; AlAjmi, 2022; Dogan, 2018). "For educational technologies to directly affect a student's academic success within the digital school environment, effective digital instructional leadership is required" (Shepard & Taylor, 2019, p. 66). If schools must now operate with fully integrated digital technology for learning and communication, then the school culture should necessarily inculcate digital learning, not just learning. Taking this to its logical conclusion, academic digital leadership cannot be exercised without instructing oneself and then instructing teachers and staff on how to use technology. The convergence of digital leadership and instructional leadership presents new challenges for principals to lead effectively in the new normal.

### Training for Competence in Digital Technology

The complexity of digital technology requires users to possess acumen. While acumen can be acquired by experience, trial and error (a deliberate form of experience), and asking questions, formal training has increased knowledge and proficiency (AlAjmi, 2022; Karakose et al., 2021). The decade before the pandemic saw an increase in teacher training, but there was a dearth of professional development opportunities for principals (Shepherd & Taylor, 2019). Not much emphasis was placed on preparing school leaders for this challenge (Lewis & Jones, 2019). Karakose et al. (2021) stated, "...school administrators should possess the ability and know-how to make best use of digital technology" (p. 14). Given the expanding role of communicating virtually and learning remotely, administrators must be adept at deploying digital technology (AlAjmi, 2022; Lewis & Jones, 2019).

Principals have traditionally seen their schools as their place of work - where they networked, exchanged ideas, and inculcated school culture, almost as a part of a family (Hesbol, 2019). This entire leadership ecosystem had to move to virtual, digital tools. "Every leader is now a virtual leader" (Azukas, 2022, p. 335). School leaders need to take the role of digital leadership seriously, making time for professional development (Hafiza Hamzah et al., 2021).

In the new normal, virtual communication is necessary for principals, but effective virtual communication is not a given. First, virtual communication bears a higher risk of misunderstanding. Virtual communication requires the use of digital tools, and this changes the mode of delivery of conversation from speaking to writing or from speaking in person to speaking remotely (Abdullah & Mikkilineni, 2021). Second, this type of communication requires specific digital technology (e.g., ZOOM®, MS Teams®), which can be complicated to learn and operate. Principals must be trained in virtual communication tools and aware of the challenges these tools introduce to employ them with confidence and efficacy. School leaders should take virtual communication seriously with a commitment to raising self-awareness around virtual messaging and conducting meetings, which should be kept short to limit the chance of miscommunication (Abdullahi et al., 2020; Shepherd & Taylor, 2019).

### Learning Theory Association

Complexity has been shown to affect self-efficacy (Baroudi & Hojeij, 2020). Desai (2014) stated that high self-efficacy was dependent on mastery of experiences. With no prior experiences in virtual digital leading, principal self-efficacy likely suffered during the pandemic and continues in the new normal. Hesbol (2019) found that principal self-efficacy was raised when principals treated their schools as learning organizations. This was attributed to principals taking on new mastery of experiences to ensure their schools became learning schools, providing support for professional development, and leveraging their new virtual networks to invoke support from teachers and staff. Schrik and Wasonga (2019) found that principals with high self-efficacy had a measurable impact on student achievement, a goal typically set forth by instructional leaders to catalyze learning.

Desai (2014) asserted that high self-efficacy depends on social modeling and the availability of skilled models to demonstrate that a difficult task can be done. When the pandemic separated principals from their peers (who likely were not skilled, either), the presence of social models went away. High self-efficacy is also dependent on social persuasion, the act of giving encouragement. This requires the presence of peers and colleagues to exclaim, "You can do this." The new normal exemplifies working remotely, so the availability of peers to collaborate is diminished.

Psychological response is another factor in high self-efficacy (Desai, 2014). If principals were suddenly faced with new stresses and experiences, they would likely need to take time to self-reflect and



reorder their effect in their new situations. The solitude of the pandemic would have withdrawn regular courses of support, such as coaching, to alleviate these effects. Brinkmann et al. (2021) remarked that coaching tools raised principal self-efficacy before the pandemic, but they should take on a more pronounced role in the new crisis. Lewis and Jones (2019) examined principals' self-efficacy in relation to their administering virtual instructional coaching. They found that principal self-efficacy was raised when principal candidates experienced instructional coaching. Hayes et al. (2022) found that a noble approach to self-care and dealing with stress was to seek out coaches as mentors. To summarize, the literature indicates that instructional leadership and coaching can be leveraged to bolster principal self-efficacy in the new normal.

### **Limitations and Areas for Future Research**

New normal literature included in this review primarily reflected qualitative studies. Given the short time since the onset of the new normal, this condition is not unexpected. Hypotheses have yet to be formed based on emerging frameworks that include a coalescence of modern digital skills with traditional leadership approaches. Some new normal sources were quantitative studies, but the research design did not treat principal self-efficacy as a dependent variable. In other words, according to this literature collection, principal self-efficacy in the new normal has yet to be studied quantitatively to identify variables that may impact it.

Conclusions reached in this literature review propose several hypotheses for future research. Examples include studying the impacts of digital leadership, coaching, training, and digital acumen on principal self-efficacy. Since self-efficacy is context specific (Schunk, 2019), qualitative studies can be designed to elucidate new types of principal self-efficacy emerging to cope with the new normal, such as virtual self-efficacy. This variable would be exciting to explore, given how virtual communication does not provide the same human connectedness as in-person communication (Boyatzis et al., 2019).

Potential research questions include (a) correlational studies: Is there a relationship between new normal digital technology and principal self-efficacy? Is there an impact on principal self-efficacy in the new normal? (b) cause and effect studies: How does digital technology impact principal self-efficacy? How is principal self-efficacy affecting digital acumen? Digital leadership? (c) qualitative studies: What role does self-efficacy play in accumulating digital acumen and executing digital leadership? Additionally, demographic variables such as public schools versus private/charter, affluence demographic/inner city schools versus regional, rural school leaders, geographic (the United States and the world), and higher education should be explored.

### **Conclusion**

The new normal introduced complexities to principals' daily operations by requiring digital technology to employ remote online learning, communicate virtually with staff and teachers, and enable remote and hybrid work. This new situation calls for principals to consider the importance of gaining digital leadership skills to realize school goals. The sudden change to daily operations means mastery of experiences is disrupted, seamless collaboration with peers and earning their positive feedback is lost, and new stress may emerge that has the potential to impact principal self-efficacy. This literature review revealed that coaching and instructional leadership could be two ways to bolster principal self-efficacy under these conditions. This postulation remains to be studied with empirical research. A potent research gap exists to facilitate many Ph.D. dissertations for years to come. Until research catches up with

practice, principals can experiment with coaching and leadership for learning to fortify their efforts as they navigate the new normal school world. ■

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