Cultural Reflections: Reimagining Education and Leadership in Conflict Situations and Post-COVID-19 in Kashmir

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic and the armed conflict has significantly impacted education systems worldwide, and the conflict-ridden region of Kashmir is no exception. This study, explores the role of stakeholder engagement in enhancing educational innovations within the unique cultural landscape of Kashmir. Originating from the need to address both the pandemic and ongoing conflict, this research employs a mixed-method approach to investigate the intersections of cultural reflections, educational dynamics, and leadership paradigms. The results highlight the challenges faced by the education sector in Kashmir, examining shifts in educational methodologies and how traditional practices have evolved or persisted. Furthermore, the study scrutinizes transformative trends in leadership, considering the cultural factors that shape decision-making processes and community engagement. The conclusion offers insights into the nuanced interplay between culture, education, and leadership, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of Kashmir's efforts to reimagine and rebuild its educational system in the aftermath of COVID-19 and ongoing conflict.

Keywords: Culture, School Education, Kashmir, Covid-19, Armed conflict, Leadership

INTRODUCTION

Kashmir, a region with a rich cultural heritage and diverse ethnic communities, has faced prolonged conflict and political instability. This unique cultural context influences educational practices and leadership. Post-COVID-19, studying education and leadership in Kashmir is significant due to the compounded challenges of conflict and the pandemic. The crisis has disrupted schooling, necessitating innovative leadership to ensure continuity and quality education. Understanding the cultural nuances is crucial for developing effective educational policies and leadership strategies that address the specific needs and challenges of the region, fostering resilience and promoting peace through education. The COVID-19 pandemic, an unprecedented global crisis, has not only disrupted the world's socio-economic fabric but has also cast a profound impact on education and leadership paradigms (Bhat, 2021). Undoubtedly, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is destined to be

remembered as a historic juncture. This pivotal moment could be viewed as a crucial turning point for humanity or a significant missed opportunity, marking a milestone in our narrative of planetary mismanagement. The actions we take in response to this crisis will profoundly shape the future of society, particularly in the realm of education (Haferkamp & Smelser, 1992; Hargreaves, 2003). Achieving this necessitates acting on a foundation of values and principles capable of rebuilding and fostering a fairer, more inclusive, democratic, and sustainable future. Education plays a pivotal role in this transformative process as both a shaper and product of these values (Giroux, 2003).

Understanding the potential for change requires a deep comprehension of the events, their consequences, and the underlying issues they have brought to light, sometimes exacerbating pre-existing problems. We can no longer afford to feign ignorance or deny the evident realities of the world we have played a role in shaping. For educators, the profound disruption to educational activities resulting from the pandemic is undeniable, and its repercussions continue to evoke significant concerns (Bookchin, 2022). The closure of schools, universities, and technical institutions worldwide has disrupted the lives and learning experiences of students. Despite numerous institutions creatively adapting to ensure continued learning through distance and online teaching, the unprecedented institutional lockdown undeniably impacts learners significantly. The sudden shift to distance learning has underscored and intensified existing inequalities in education (Schwab & Davis, 2018). Many teachers, including those instructing tertiary students at the university level, had minimal or no prior knowledge of online teaching pedagogy before the lockdown. Moreover, new disparities emerged among learners in contexts where a substantial portion of learners come from underprivileged areas or households without access to technology and the Internet (Ferri, Grifoni, & Guzzo, 2020). Community learning centres, vital for disadvantaged and marginalized adults, have also had to close, disrupting access to learning, although some have successfully transitioned online where infrastructure permits (Faturoti, 2022).

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework of the Study

Cultural factors, such as community values and beliefs, historical context, socio-economic conditions, and ethnic diversity, significantly influence educational practices in a region. These cultural elements shape the curriculum design, teacher-student interactions, pedagogical approaches, and the use of technology in education, ensuring that educational practices are relevant and sensitive to the community's context. Effective leadership styles, including transformational, distributed, collaborative, and crisis-responsive leadership, are informed by these educational practices. Leaders must adapt their approaches to support and enhance culturally responsive and contextually appropriate educational methods. In turn, leadership styles have a substantial impact on educational outcomes by fostering an inclusive, supportive, and innovative environment. This enables schools to navigate challenges and leverage cultural strengths for educational improvement. The interdependence of

cultural factors, educational practices, and leadership styles highlights the need for culturally attuned leadership to drive educational success in diverse and challenging contexts.

Education and Leadership in Post Pandemic Era.

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the landscape of education and leadership has undergone significant transformations. The global health crisis prompted a re-evaluation of traditional educational models and leadership approaches, giving rise to innovative strategies for navigating the challenges posed by the pandemic. Scholars such as Fullan (2021) emphasize the need for adaptive leadership in education, highlighting the importance of resilience, collaboration, and a forward-looking vision in addressing the complexities of the post-pandemic era. Additionally, the works of (Anderson, Heesterbeek, Klinkenberg, & Hollingsworth, 2020) discuss the role of technology in shaping the future of education, focusing on digital literacy and the integration of online platforms. As educational institutions worldwide grapple with the aftermath of the pandemic, the intersection of education and leadership becomes a critical focal point for fostering resilience, inclusivity, and sustainable practices in a rapidly changing world.

People within and across different cultures and geographies are reacting differently to COVID-19. Understanding the perceptions and reactions of relevant populations during pandemics may help in communication about health risks and encourage compliance with prescribed guidelines. Knowledge, attitude, and practice (KAP) surveys can establish a baseline or evaluate intervention-related changes in public understanding, thoughts, and skills. Experts suggest that time-to-time measurement of knowledge and practices in the community may be pertinent in averting future waves of this deadly pandemic. Despite widespread efforts made by the government to implement prevention and control measures against COVID-19 in Kashmir, evaluation of public access to information, its practicability as well as a contextualized understanding of perceptions and reactions of the Kashmiri population to COVID-19 remains largely under-assessed (Ilyas, 2024).

Contextualising Kashmir

Recently, a growing body of literature has focused on the intersection of education and armed conflict, dominating discussions in education (Johnson and Van, 2006; UNESCO, 2010). India grapples with a significant issue of armed conflict, evident in the Indian Ministry of Home Affairs' statement that 223 districts across 20 states are impacted by conflict, including Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), Assam, and Punjab, where groups seek autonomy or secession (Sahni & Singh, 2010). While historically known for its religious tolerance and intellectual progress, Jammu and Kashmir has transformed into a violence-prone region, experiencing conflict since 1989 (Khan, 2016). This implies that individuals up to 30 years old have not witnessed peace in the region, leading to mistrust and fear in their interactions. The prolonged exposure to violence has instilled deep-rooted fear and anxiety.

This conflict significantly affects children's innocent minds, disrupting the present generation's existence and the aspirations of the next, leaving a substantial impact on society. The conflict's ramifications extend across all sections of the population, triggering psychological disorders among those directly and indirectly exposed to violence (JKCCS, 2016). Numerous studies highlight the conflict's adverse effects on fundamental infrastructure such as government buildings, schools, and hospitals since its onset. The conflict has directly impacted Kashmir's people, causing massive destruction in terms of government structures, educational facilities, hospitals, bridges, private homes, and shops. Between 1989 and 2002, 1,151 government buildings, 643 educational institutions, 11 hospitals, 337 bridges, 10,729 private dwellings, and 1,953 stores were reportedly destroyed in 5,268 infrastructure strikes (Shekhawat, 2009). A transformation toward peace in Kashmir requires a humanitarian perspective from both nations, given the region's geopolitical significance and connection to South Asia and Central Asia (Noorani, 2013). However, education is one of the most significant casualties of armed resistance and the state's response (Hassan, 2012)

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design: The methodology for this study encompasses a mixed-methods approach (Creswell, 2014) to comprehensively analyse the impact of community involvement in education policy and leadership in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in Kashmir. Further, the present study has used convergent mixed methods approach considering the needs of the study. This method was used to obtain first hand data about the effects of armed conflict on the overall functioning of schools and to understand the stakeholders' perspectives. The study was based on the descriptive survey method intended to understand the broad trends of experiences and factors influencing respondent's experiences in the research. The teaching and learning processes were explored and analysed to understand the effects of Covid 19 on the school education in Kashmir. The processes were explored that were taken up to sustain education and reconstruction activities in terms of teaching-learning. The study was based on the information collected through questionnaires, interviews, and field visits in the research area from the experiences of various stakeholders.

Sampling and Selection Criteria: The study was carried out in Anantnag, a district in the southern part of the Kashmir valley in the state of Jammu and Kashmir (now Union Territory). A total of 115 respondents were chosen for the purpose of research by adopting the purposive sampling method. For fieldwork, the government higher secondary schools (GHSS) located in rural and urban areas were considered. A total of 30 teachers were selected to get the primary information regarding their experience throughout the service and experience related to working in Covid 19 situations. In addition, a questionnaire (which included both open and closed-ended items related to educational experience) was also administered among 50 students studying in higher secondary schools. A total of

20 Community members and 15 Parents of the selected students were interviewed to gather their experience related to the continuation and innovation of education amidst Covid-19. To gain a deeper understanding, the researcher further conducted two FGDs in different schools; these included 10 and 13 members, respectively. The selection criteria for participants in our study included a diverse range of educators, leaders, students, and community members in Kashmir. Teachers were chosen based on their experience and involvement in teaching during the conflict. Students from various academic levels and backgrounds were included to provide insights into their learning experiences. Community members, including parents and local activists, were selected to represent the broader societal impact on education. This diverse participant pool ensures a comprehensive understanding of the educational landscape in conflict-affected Kashmir.

Table 1: Details of the Respondents and Tools Administered

Serial no.	Respondents	No. of Respondents	No. of Questionnaire administered	No. of Interviews	Percentage of Respondents
1	Students	50	50	0	43.47
2	Teachers	30	25	5	26.08
3	Community Members	20	0	20	17.39
4	Parents	15	5	10	13.04
	Total	115	80	35	100

Source: Field visits conducted by Author, 2022

Sources of Data: The study used both the primary and secondary data. The collection of primary data for the research was conducted in the district Anantnag of Jammu and Kashmir. The data were gathered from educational officials, teachers, students, and parents of the selected samples in district Anantnag. The sources of the secondary data for this study were some research articles and books containing critical analyses on COVID-19 and its impact on education at the global level and at the local level as well.

Tools Used: Based on the nature of the study and the backdrops of the research questions, the tools administered were Questionnaire, Interview Schedules and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). In the context of this study, ensuring the validity and reliability of research tools was paramount. To establish content validity, our research tools, including surveys and interview schedules, were developed based on extensive literature reviews and consultations with educational experts to ensure comprehensive coverage of relevant aspects. Construct validity was ensured by conducting pilot testing and refining the tools based on feedback from participants with similar characteristics to the study population. Criterion validity was addressed by cross-referencing the tools with established measures and previous studies in similar contexts. For reliability of the tools, it was ensured that items within each section consistently measure the same construct. To evaluate test-retest reliability, we

conducted a procedure with a subset of participants, comparing their responses at different points in time to assess stability. For qualitative data from interviews and focus groups, inter-rater reliability was ensured by having multiple researchers independently code the data and compare results, thus reducing bias. By rigorously addressing both validity and reliability, it was aimed to ensure that our research tools provide accurate, consistent, and credible data to inform educational practices and leadership strategies in conflict-affected regions like Kashmir.

Procedure for Data Analysis: The data analysis for this research study included both qualitative and quantitative examination of the information gathered during the fieldwork. Thematic and narrative analysis were used to evaluate and understand the collected data. After gathering information from the field, the necessary data was modified and rechecked to ensure everything was in the appropriate sequence. The data were aggregated based on themes and sub-themes. This was immediately followed by the fieldwork data tabulation, allowing the researcher to display the study's theme-based tables. Excel sheets were used to enter and code the data for tabulation. After tabulating the data, the researcher examined them again and incorporated the pertinent information into the themes. Interviews were conducted mainly in the Kashmiri language and then were translated into English. The data were analysed to capture the phenomenon by "grasping and formulating a thematic understanding" which is not a rule-bound process but a free act of "seeing" meanings (Van Manen, 2016). Grounded in the social constructionist approach, data were not seen as representations of reality but "displays of perspectives" (Silverman, 2011).

Ethical Considerations: Ethical guidelines for research involving human subjects were strictly adhered to. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Anonymity and confidentiality have been maintained, and participants had the option to withdraw from the study at any time.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

It is necessary for children to increase their knowledge and develop their abilities in order for them to be able to continue their normal lives and face the obstacles that lie ahead for them in the future. This may be accomplished by providing educational programmes of a high standard, which are carried out effectively by teachers and facilitators who have received adequate training and certification (Ladika, 2017). But in a certain case, when no regular classes are happening inside the schools, when there are situations that are not conducive for learning, and when the number of academic school days gets reduced to 90-110 days only in a calendar year, the responsibility of the teachers and administrative level stakeholders increases (Ilyas, 2023). COVID-19 and the armed conflict situations affected children often experience interruptions in their education.

Problems with Teaching Learning Process During Covid 19 Situations:

The confluence of conflict-related closures and the COVID-19 pandemic has given rise to formidable challenges in the teaching-learning process, particularly in regions like Kashmir facing a dual lockdown (Connah, 2021). The complexities of this dual crisis have significantly disrupted education as schools grapple with closures due to geopolitical unrest and public health measures. The already fragile educational infrastructure in conflict zones has been further strained, hindering access to online learning resources due to limited internet connectivity and the unavailability of digital devices (Dempsey, Lanzieri, Luce, Leon, Malhotra, and Heckman, 2021). The psychological pressure on students, isolated by both conflict-related restrictions and pandemic-induced lockdowns, is profound. Additionally, the uncertainty and disruptions to academic calendars undermine the continuity of learning. As educators strive to navigate this intricate landscape, addressing the multifaceted problems in the teaching-learning process becomes crucial for safeguarding the educational prospects of students amid the dual challenges of conflict and the global health crisis.

Figure 1: Challenges in Teaching and Learning During Lockdown Situations
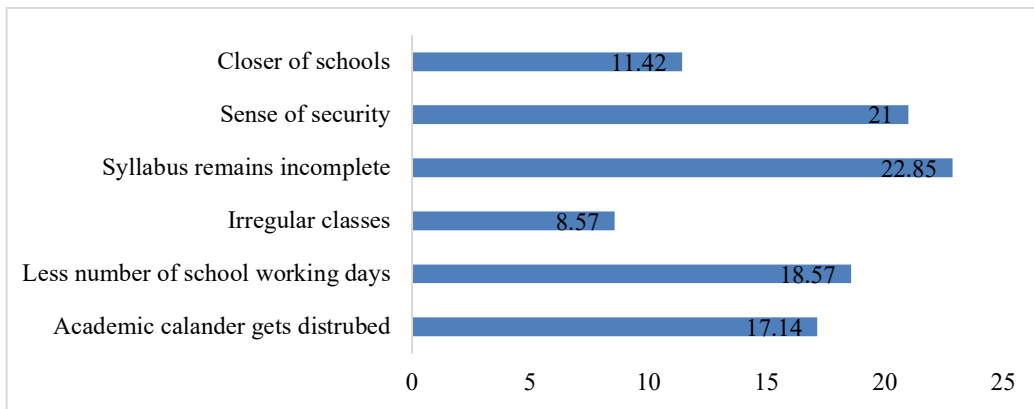
Source: Fieldwork, 2022, Kashmir

During the course of running the school, different kinds of problems come up that slow down the system and make it hard for teachers to give their all efforts. Particularly in the Kashmir Valley, the teaching-learning process is hampered severely. Classes did not happen at the scheduled time; the syllabus remains incomplete, and lack of curriculum activities are at a halt. In conflict situations, policy decisions are also delayed, which in turn affects the decision to mend the policies for improving quality teaching, developing materials, and developing the library resources in the schools. Students feel the burden of fear is hindering their progress; as one of the student participants narrated that,

> "COVID-19 has not only disrupted our education but has also compounded the existing safety concerns that have long plagued our communities. The simple act of

attending school, once a cornerstone of our daily routine, now evokes a sense of trepidation as we navigate the risks of exposure to the virus. Our parents, torn between the desire for our education and the imperative to protect our health, grapple with the decision to send us into uncertain surroundings" (Fieldwork, 2022, Kashmir)

Majority of the respondents (students) stated their concern about the constant disruption in the teaching-learning process due to untimely school closures. It is evident that the respondents (students) experience several challenges during the teaching-learning process in the classroom. First and foremost, there is less interaction between students and teachers in the classroom, it is a one-way process, and the majority of teachers read aloud the chapters without considering whether or not students are paying attention. According to the study's findings, the majority of students do not have adequate opportunity to discuss their subject-related doubts and problems with concerned teachers and seek solutions for their issues.

"Upon the resumption of classes after Covid 19 restrictions, we find ourselves in a situation where teachers repeatedly instruct us to study independently due to the inadequacy of their teaching support. Regrettably, the interactions between students and teachers are limited to brief 40-minute lessons, which are often teacher-cantered..." (Fieldwork, 2022, Kashmir)

Analysing the teacher's responses to the challenges they have when teaching during Covid situations, they believe that the problems they face inside the classroom are the result of student absenteeism. The prolonged closure of the school, pupils remaining disconnected from academics, and other similar factors contributed to a lack of interest in studies among students, according to the majority of teacher respondents. When the schools open after a long gap, most students are found to forget about the lessons taught before and taking a class after so many days seems like starting all over again.

Strategies used by Stakeholders in Managing Education:

Friendly Class Environment: The field observations and the data revealed that in post-conflict situations, students and teachers faced a lot of problems in terms of adjustment and communication strategies inside the classrooms. The communication gap brought by the conflict situations hampered the smooth functioning of academic activities inside the institutions. There are trust issues among teachers and students as well. However, in order to keep all of this chaos brought on by conflict, teachers are doing everything in their power to maintain a friendly atmosphere inside the classroom. The proper training and capacity building of teachers is needed to manage a healthy relationship among teachers and students. It is not easy to control and manage the classroom situations post conflict situations. The psyche of the students has been disturbed during the lockdowns and curfews;

the violence outside their homes and schools has an everlasting impact on their personalities. So, to overcome such long-term effects, teachers must be trained and equipped with significant psychological and teaching skills as per the circumstances.

Early Morning Classes or Zero Period: Early morning classes, or what is commonly known as '*zero period'* in Kashmir, is another concept that emerged from the study's fieldwork. It means that teachers have already provided guidelines to the students that if there are any troubles in any part of the district, then classes will be arranged in the early morning hours only so that students will not be cut off from their studies. It was found from the interaction with teachers and students that this concept of *early morning classes* or the *zero period* was developed in the 2016 and 2018 uprisings along with the community classes, where schools were closed for almost six months in both cases. Teachers and students used to get up early and rush to their schools. The idea behind these *zero periods* was that there were a smaller number of people on the roads and inside the localities, it was easy to reach out to schools and attend classes for at least a few hours. Most importantly, parents were ready to support this initiative, and they accompanied their kids to school because, in these early hours, they were not busy with their work. The only difficulty in these early classes was the harsh winters of Kashmir, where the temperature goes below minus degrees.

Concept of Class Notes: There is a trend of making class notes or we can say the lecture notes prepared by the teachers for their own references. Every teacher keeps a diary of lectures that he/she delivered inside the classrooms. But in a certain situations if the schools are locked down for longer period, school administration request teachers to prepare lecture notes as per the syllabus and make sure these notes reach every students. Or at some point of time if there may be a chance to open school in between these hartals or lockdowns teachers hand over the notes to the students directly. These notes might be helpful for the students just to support the self-learning at home. In the situations like these, the role of community members becomes important in reaching out the teachers and the students. Communities have the potential to play an important role in the provision of education both during and after times of conflict. It has been observed in the field by the researcher in some communities that teachers have taken the help of Imams or Mosques to reach out the students in that particular vicinity. The material prepared by the teachers is being handover to the members of mosque committee (locally called Masjid committee) and during the Friday prayers *Imam* (who leads the Friday prayers) of the mosques make an announcement regarding the same, so that the students can meet after the prayers to get the notes.

Guidance and Counselling by NGOs: Over the past few decades, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have played a crucial role in relief and development efforts in Kashmir. Some NGOs have arranged guidance and counseling for parents and students, focusing on making children resilient. One such NGOs is the HELP Foundation, which focuses on providing quality education, empowerment,

and mental health counseling to women and children severely affected by Covid 19 lockdowns. They also offer no-cost assistance for drug rehabilitation, suicide prevention, and domestic abuse. Students in a selected higher secondary school in south Kashmir have reported that the HELP Foundation has helped them manage their stressful lives with their education. The Foundation also aims to ensure that lower-income families who want to attend college don't have to give up their dreams due to financial constraints. It has given loans to twelve talented students who could get into professional courses on their own but didn't have the money to follow their dreams because of the financial constraints on their parents during the lockdowns caused by Covid 19.

Community Support to Manage Education of Children during Lockdowns:

It was found that community involvement as the adaptive and transformative capabilities at the community level that successfully buffer the negative effects of Covid 19 at the individual level. The community also plays an essential role in ensuring the safety of schools during times of crisis. The situation in Nepal demonstrated that the community's strong message on school safety ensured that schools would be places of peace (Justino, 2010). Likewise, *curfew classes* during the lockdowns in Kashmir are an example of community-based solutions to the problem of educational disruptions that has been there for a long time. During the fieldwork, it was observed that a concept of *'Curfew School / Curfew Classes'* emerged in 2016 after the post-July lockdowns were also functioning in the Covid 19 lockdowns as well, wherein some educated and dedicated volunteers started study centres in their localities at homes or at community places or occasionally at shrines to continue the education of students from class I to class XII. Even though these institutions did not serve the majority, they have been a relief for students and parents as well.

> "These curfew classes helped students maintain a connection with books and schoolwork so that when schools reopen, they had fewer difficulties understanding what they are being taught". (Fieldwork, 2022, Kashmir)

The statement emphasizes that curfew classes aim to enable students to stay engaged with their educational materials and coursework during the period of curfew or conflict-related disruptions. By doing so, the students can bridge the gap in their learning, making it easier for them to comprehend and catch up with the curriculum when schools eventually reopen. This proactive approach not only ensures continuity in education but also minimizes the challenges students might face in reconnecting with their studies after an extended interruption, ultimately contributing to their academic success.

Another initiatives by the community members to safeguard the education in the lockdowns caused by the Covid-19 or the unrest in the Kashmir are the introduction of WISE APP. The two engineers developed an application named the WISE APP, which was launched in July 2020. This application was remarkable solution to the challenges posed by Internet shutdowns and slow Internet

speeds, particularly prevalent in Kashmir. The WISE APP operates seamlessly even on 2G internet connections. What sets the WISE APP apart is its user-friendly interface, specially designed for 2G networks. It offers a complete classroom experience, eliminating the need for juggling multiple applications during teaching sessions. Unlike other platforms, it doesn't require the sharing of meeting IDs and passwords. Teachers can conduct classes, manage assignments, share educational materials, and effortlessly record attendance. The impact of the WISE APP extends beyond Kashmir, as it has garnered the support of millions teachers and thousands of students across the country. Recognizing its significance, the Ministry of Education applauded this initiative, and it earned a prominent spot in PM Atmanirbhar Bharat.

Leadership beyond COVID-19

Amidst the unprecedented challenges brought forth by the COVID-19 pandemic, Kashmir, like many regions globally, finds itself at a critical juncture in the transformation of its education system. The crisis has necessitated a re-evaluation of traditional approaches, urging countries, including Kashmir, to strategize ways to accelerate the adaptation of education systems to be more resilient and adaptable to unforeseen circumstances. In this endeavour, strong and visionary leadership emerges as a fundamental prerequisite. Leaders in Kashmir must spearhead this transformation, guiding the region towards a more robust and flexible educational framework that can withstand the disruptions posed by the ongoing pandemic and potential future crises. As schools in Kashmir prepare for eventual reopening and the rebuilding of educational capacity post-COVID, policymakers and leaders must seize this opportunity to prioritize the enhancement of learning outcomes. Central to this effort is the recognition of the crucial role played by teachers and families in shaping the educational landscape. Therefore, collaboration with these stakeholders is paramount, fostering a collective approach that prioritizes student well-being and academic progress. Concrete actions must be undertaken by policymakers in Kashmir to support and empower educational leaders in this endeavour. These actions may include the provision of adequate resources and training to school administrators, fostering a culture of innovation and adaptability, and ensuring equitable access to quality education for all students, particularly those in marginalized communities. For further guidance and evidence-based recommendations on effective leadership strategies, policymakers in Kashmir are encouraged to consult authoritative resources such as the "Transforming the Education Workforce[1]" report and the "Save Our Future White Paper – Averting an Education Catastrophe for the World's Children.[2]" By leveraging these insights, Kashmir can chart a course towards a more resilient and inclusive education system that empowers students to thrive amidst adversity and uncertainty.

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[1] https://educationcommission.org/transformingtheeducationworkforce/
[2] https://reliefweb.int/report/world/save-our-future-averting-education-catastrophe-world-s-children

To cultivate effective instructional leadership within Kashmir's education system, it is imperative to establish comprehensive structures, policies, and processes that empower school leaders to prioritize instructional leadership over administrative tasks. This transformation involves several key steps:

Training and Capacity Building: Provide targeted training and professional development opportunities for school leaders to enhance their skills in instructional leadership. This includes training on conducting learning assessments, interpreting student-level data, and making data-informed decisions to improve teaching and learning outcomes.

Resource Allocation and Support: Equip school leaders with the necessary tools and resources to effectively carry out instructional leadership responsibilities. This may involve providing access to educational technology platforms for data analysis, instructional support materials, and ongoing coaching and mentoring.

Task-Shifting and Technology Integration: Streamline administrative processes and leverage technology to automate routine administrative tasks wherever possible. By delegating administrative activities to support staff or utilizing technology solutions, school leaders can devote more time and energy to instructional leadership initiatives.

District-Level Support and Supervision: Strengthen district-level capacity to provide coaching, support, and data analysis expertise to school leaders. District leaders should be equipped to assist school leaders in identifying performance and inclusion gaps, prioritize resources, and implement data-driven school improvement strategies.

Promoting Collaboration and Knowledge Sharing: Foster collaboration among schools and districts by establishing school networks and leveraging system leaders. Encourage schools to function as networks where system leaders and specialists work across schools to share evidence-based practices, instructional strategies, and management approaches.

By implementing these strategies, Kashmir can foster a culture of instructional leadership that empowers school leaders to drive data-driven improvement, facilitate collaboration, and ultimately enhance teaching and learning outcomes across the education system.

Conclusion:

This study provides critical insights into the interplay between cultural factors, educational practices, and leadership in conflict-affected regions like Kashmir. By addressing the unique challenges and leveraging the strengths of the local context, this research contributes significantly to the field of education and leadership. It offers practical recommendations for policymakers, educators, and community leaders to encourage resilience and promote quality education in culturally specific and

challenging environments. This study highlights the importance of culturally attuned leadership in driving educational success and peacebuilding efforts, setting a precedent for future research in similar contexts.

Navigating the complexities of education and leadership in post-COVID-19 Kashmir necessitates a profound understanding and appreciation of its rich cultural tapestry. Throughout this discourse, it have explored the resilience of Kashmiri cultural practices in the face of unprecedented challenges posed by the pandemic. From the cherished traditions of storytelling to the communal ethos of mutual support, Kashmiri culture has served as both a beacon of hope and a resilient foundation upon which to rebuild and reimagine education and leadership. Amidst the turmoil brought by the pandemic, the preservation and integration of Kashmiri cultural practices into educational frameworks emerge as imperative. These practices uphold the region's distinct identity and foster a sense of belonging and unity essential for navigating crises. Whether by incorporating local narratives into curricula or promoting indigenous languages, embracing cultural heritage becomes synonymous with fortifying educational resilience. Leadership plays a crucial role in safeguarding education during COVID-19 by promoting inclusivity, empathy, and adaptability within Kashmiri cultural traditions. Embracing cultural sensitivity and community engagement can foster equitable and sustainable educational recovery. As stakeholders collaborate to address challenges, leveraging local wisdom and resilience will help create a more inclusive, responsive, and sustainable education system. This approach ensures that post-pandemic education policy and leadership are rooted in the aspirations and needs of the Kashmiri community.

The study's findings highlight the crucial role of cultural context in shaping educational practices and leadership styles, enriching theoretical frameworks by showing how socio-cultural factors influence education in conflict zones. Practically, it provides actionable recommendations for policymakers, school leaders, and teachers, emphasizing inclusive, responsive, and resilient educational systems. It underscores the importance of community engagement and offers strategies for professional development and support for teachers. The research also offers a methodological blueprint for conducting studies in conflict zones, ensuring ethical considerations and participant safety, ultimately contributing to more effective education and leadership approaches in such challenging environments.

Conflict of interests
The authors declare that there are no competing interests.

Author's contributions
All the authors contributed equally to the theoretical development, analysis, interpretation and writing of the manuscript.

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