



Managing secondary schools in crisis and insecurity: Evidence-based strategies, leadership practices and school continuity in conflict-affected areas of Nigeria

Dr. Igatta Thomas Ogbonna¹, Dr. Nweke Ebere¹, Dr. Nweke Ebere², Dr. Okonkwo Benjamin Chigozie¹

¹ Department of Education Management Charisma University, Montana State, USA

² Department of Education Management Enugu State University of Science and Technology (ESUT), Enugu, Nigeria

Abstract

This study examined crisis leadership, school safety practices, and school continuity and resilience in insecurity-affected secondary-school contexts in Nigeria. Using a quantitative cross-sectional correlational design and 200 observations, the study conceptualised crisis leadership through crisis decision-making, community engagement and communication, and psychosocial-support leadership; school safety practices through physical security, emergency planning, and monitoring/early warning; and continuity through attendance, learning continuity, and overall school resilience. The observed data showed a consistent positive pattern between stronger crisis-management capacity and stronger school continuity/resilience. However, the crisis-leadership and safety-practice measures were extremely closely aligned in the supplied dataset, limiting their statistical separation and preventing a defensible conventional mediation claim. The study therefore concludes that stronger crisis leadership and school-safety capacity are associated with stronger educational continuity and resilience, while the proposed mediating role of safety practices requires validation with independently measured data. Policy implications emphasise crisis-leadership development, structured community communication, psychosocial-support capacity, operational emergency planning, early-warning arrangements, and monitoring of attendance and learning continuity.

Keywords: Crisis leadership, school insecurity, school safety practices, school resilience, learning continuity, community engagement, psychosocial support, Safe Schools Initiative, secondary education, Nigeria

Introduction

Education is a fundamental human right, a mechanism for human-capital development, and an important institution for social stability. Yet in conflict-affected societies, schools increasingly operate in environments characterised by armed violence, displacement, kidnapping, destruction of infrastructure, and persistent threats to students and education personnel. The Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA, 2024) ^[3] documented thousands of attacks on education and incidents involving the military use of educational facilities during 2022-2023, underscoring the continuing vulnerability of education systems in conflict settings.

The consequences of attacks on education extend beyond physical destruction or immediate injury. Persistent insecurity can reduce attendance, accelerate teacher attrition, increase parental reluctance to send children to school, interrupt academic calendars, intensify psychosocial distress, and contribute to long-term learning loss. Contemporary education-in-emergencies thinking therefore treats educational continuity as part of a broader resilience system in which schools must be able to anticipate, withstand, respond to, and recover from crises (GCPEA, 2024; UNICEF, 2024) ^[9, 10, 11].

The challenge is particularly consequential in Nigeria. Over the past decade, the education system has operated within a complex security environment involving insurgency in the North-East, banditry and mass abductions in the North-West, kidnapping and communal conflicts in parts of the North-Central zone, and other forms of localised violence. UNICEF (2024) ^[9, 10, 11] reported continuing school closures and severe out-of-school burdens, demonstrating that

insecurity is not merely a temporary emergency but an enduring educational-management problem.

The changing security environment has expanded the responsibilities of secondary-school principals. Conventional school administration emphasises instructional supervision, staff management, student discipline, resource allocation, curriculum implementation, and school-community relations. In insecure environments, principals may additionally be required to assess threats, make rapid decisions under uncertainty, coordinate evacuations, communicate with parents and security actors, manage disrupted school calendars, support traumatised learners and personnel, and determine how schooling can safely continue.

In the present study, crisis leadership is conceptualised through crisis-oriented decision-making, community engagement and communication, and psychosocial-support leadership. School safety practices are conceptualised through physical security measures, emergency and evacuation planning, and monitoring and early-warning arrangements. School continuity and resilience are reflected in student and teacher attendance continuity, learning continuity during crisis, and overall school resilience.

Nigeria has undertaken policy initiatives through the Safe Schools Declaration, the Minimum Standards for Safe Schools, and financing arrangements for safer schools. Nevertheless, UNICEF assessments indicate uneven implementation, including weaknesses in infrastructure and early-warning capacity. This implementation gap makes school-level leadership and safety practices important empirical variables rather than assuming that national policy automatically translates into effective local practice.

Against this background, the study examines whether stronger crisis leadership is associated with stronger school safety practices and greater school continuity/resilience in insecurity-affected secondary-school contexts in Nigeria. It also considers contextual differences associated with school type, geopolitical zone, and crisis type. Importantly, the empirical relationships are treated as questions to be tested rather than predetermined findings.

1. Objectives of the Study

Examine the influence of crisis leadership on school safety practices in insecure secondary-school environments.

Determine the influence of school safety practices on school continuity and resilience.

Examine the relationship between crisis leadership and school continuity and resilience.

Determine whether school safety practices mediate the relationship between crisis leadership and school continuity and resilience.

Assess the contributions of crisis decision-making, community engagement and communication, and psychosocial-support leadership to school resilience.

Examine variations in school resilience according to school type, geopolitical zone, and predominant crisis type.

2. Research Hypotheses

H1: Crisis leadership has a significant positive relationship with school safety practices.

H2: School safety practices have a significant positive relationship with school continuity and resilience.

H3: Crisis leadership has a significant positive relationship with school continuity and resilience.

H4: School safety practices significantly mediate the relationship between crisis leadership and school continuity and resilience.

H5: Crisis decision-making, community engagement and communication, and psychosocial-support leadership significantly predict school resilience.

H6: School resilience differs significantly across school types, geopolitical zones, and crisis contexts.

Review of Related Literature

1. Conceptual Overview

Managing secondary schools in areas affected by insurgency, banditry, kidnapping, communal violence and displacement requires administrative capacities extending beyond conventional school management. The present study is built around crisis leadership, school safety practices, and school continuity and resilience. Recent Nigerian evidence shows that armed violence, abduction and displacement constrain access to education while prompting adaptive local strategies for sustaining learning (Oxford Policy Management, 2025) ^[7].

2. Crisis Leadership in Insecure School Environments

Crisis leadership involves leadership under conditions of uncertainty, urgency and threat. Effective crisis leadership requires situational awareness, flexibility, communication, stakeholder coordination and organisational stability. Kaul *et al.* (2023) ^[5] identify adaptability, communication, collaborative decision-making and strategic problem solving

as central to school leadership during disruption. Williams and Liou (2024) ^[12] similarly identify crisis-specific competencies extending beyond conventional principalship.

2.1 Crisis Decision-Making

Decision-making is central to crisis leadership because school leaders may need to determine whether schools should remain open, initiate evacuation, modify operating hours or suspend activities temporarily. Effective decisions depend on timely information, risk assessment, stakeholder coordination and the capacity to revise responses as conditions change.

2.2 Community Engagement and Communication

Community engagement provides mechanisms for information sharing, trust building and collective action. Relevant stakeholders include parents, School-Based Management Committees, traditional leaders, local authorities and legitimate security institutions. Community participation is particularly valuable for early warning and crisis communication, although partnerships require clear governance and safeguarding procedures.

2.3 Psychosocial-Support Leadership

Exposure to violence, kidnapping, displacement and bereavement can reduce concentration, attendance, motivation and teacher effectiveness. Trauma-informed leadership promotes psychological safety, supportive relationships and appropriate referral mechanisms. Psychosocial support is therefore treated as a leadership responsibility within crisis-responsive school management.

3. School Safety Practices

School safety practices comprise physical security, emergency and evacuation planning, and monitoring and early warning. Nigeria's Minimum Standards for Safe Schools provide a national framework, but implementation remains uneven. UNICEF (2024) ^[9, 10, 11] reported that assessed schools met only a proportion of the standards on average, highlighting a gap between policy commitment and school-level operational capacity.

3.1 Physical Security Measures

Physical security includes perimeter protection, secure access and other protective infrastructure. Such measures can reduce vulnerability but cannot substitute for communication, emergency procedures and threat monitoring. Physical protection should therefore be one component of an integrated safety system.

3.2 Emergency and Evacuation Planning

Emergency planning specifies responsibilities, evacuation routes, assembly points, communication procedures and accountability arrangements. Preparedness reduces uncertainty during crises and should also include procedures for maintaining or restoring learning when normal attendance becomes unsafe.

3.3 Monitoring and Early Warning

Early-warning systems identify and communicate emerging threats. UNICEF (2024) ^[9, 10, 11] reported significant gaps in early-warning capacity among assessed Nigerian schools. Effective systems require not only information collection

but also rapid communication to persons authorised to take protective action.

4. School Continuity and Resilience

School continuity is the capacity to maintain or restore educational activities despite disruption, while resilience refers more broadly to the ability to absorb shocks, adapt and recover. Resilience should not be equated with keeping a school physically open under all circumstances; safe temporary closure may itself be an appropriate crisis response.

5. Safe Schools Policy and Implementation in Nigeria

Nigeria's response includes endorsement of the Safe Schools Declaration, development of the Minimum Standards for Safe Schools and financing frameworks for school protection. The key empirical issue is whether these policies translate into functioning school-level safety practices and continuity outcomes.

6. Relationships Among the Study Variables

The literature supports the proposition that effective crisis leadership strengthens safety practices and that stronger safety practices are associated with continuity and resilience. The central conceptual model is Crisis Leadership → School Safety Practices → School Continuity and Resilience. Because the design is cross-sectional, indirect effects require cautious interpretation.

7. Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored primarily in Complex Adaptive Systems Theory, complemented by crisis leadership and organisational resilience perspectives. Schools in insecure settings comprise interconnected actors whose responses depend on adaptation, information exchange and coordinated action. These perspectives support the expectation that leadership capacity and safety preparedness contribute to continuity.

8. Empirical Review

International studies emphasise adaptability, communication and strategic problem-solving during school crises (Kaul *et al.*, 2023; Williams & Liou, 2024) ^[5, 12]. Nigerian evidence is more developed around insecurity and Safe Schools implementation, with UNICEF assessments documenting persistent gaps in safety standards and early-warning systems. Recent work in northern states also documents educational disruption alongside community coping and alternative learning arrangements.

9. Research Gaps

Research has focused more on attacks, closures and national safety policies than on specific leadership competencies required under persistent threat. Community engagement and psychosocial-support leadership remain insufficiently tested, and few studies have examined school safety practices as a mediating mechanism between crisis leadership and school continuity across multiple Nigerian insecurity contexts.

10. Conceptual Model of the Study

Crisis Leadership comprises crisis decision-making, community engagement and communication, and psychosocial-support leadership. School Safety Practices

comprise physical security, emergency planning, and monitoring/early warning. School Continuity and Resilience comprise attendance continuity, learning continuity and overall school resilience.

Methodology

1. Research Design

The study adopted a quantitative cross-sectional correlational design. Crisis leadership constituted the predictor construct, school safety practices the mediating construct, and school continuity and resilience the outcome construct. Geopolitical zone, school type and crisis type were included as contextual variables.

2. Study Area and Context

The study focused on insecurity-affected secondary-school contexts, particularly in Nigeria's North-East, North-West and North-Central geopolitical zones, where insurgency, banditry, kidnapping, communal conflict and displacement have affected educational management and continuity.

3. Population, Sample and Unit of Analysis

The analytical sample consisted of 200 observations (N = 200) associated with public, private and community-school contexts. The observation/respondent constituted the unit of analysis. The available dataset does not identify professional respondent categories or establish that each observation represents a distinct school.

4. Variables and Measurement

Substantive variables were measured on five-point Likert-type scales. Crisis Leadership Index (CLI) was the mean of LEAD_CRISIS, LEAD_COMM and LEAD_WELL. School Safety Practices Index (SSPI) was the mean of SAFETY_PHY, SAFETY_PLAN and SAFETY_MON. School Continuity and Resilience Index (SCRI) was the mean of CONT_ATTEND, CONT_LEARN and SCHOOL_RESIL. SCHOOL_RESIL was also retained as a stand-alone outcome.

5. Contextual Variables

ZONE was coded 1=North-East, 2=North-West, 3=North-Central, 4=Other; SCHOOL_TYPE was coded 1=Public, 2=Private, 3=Community; and CRISIS_TYPE was coded 1=Banditry, 2=Insurgency, 3=Kidnapping, 4=Communal conflict. Categorical variables were to be dummy-coded in multivariable models.

6. Instrument Reliability and Validity

Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, while construct validity was evaluated through theoretical correspondence and inter-item/inter-construct relationships. Correlation, VIF and tolerance diagnostics were used to detect excessive overlap among measures.

7. Data Preparation and Screening

The dataset was screened for missing values, duplicate IDs, coding errors, out-of-range values and potential outliers. Regression assumptions included residual diagnostics, linearity, homoscedasticity and multicollinearity.

8. Method of Data Analysis

Frequencies and percentages described categorical variables, while means and standard deviations summarised

substantive measures. Pearson correlations assessed bivariate associations, regression analysis estimated predictive relationships, and mediation analysis was specified using a 5,000-sample bootstrap with 95% confidence intervals. Statistical significance was evaluated at $\alpha=.05$.

9. Mediation Analysis

The proposed model was Crisis Leadership (X) → School Safety Practices (M) → School Continuity and Resilience (Y). Paths a, b, c and c-prime were specified, with the indirect effect calculated as $a \times b$. Because the study is cross-sectional, any indirect effect would be interpreted as an indirect association rather than definitive temporal causation.

10. Group and Contextual Analysis

Differences in resilience were examined by school type, geopolitical zone and crisis type. The proposed advantage of community schools with strong community engagement was treated as an empirical question rather than an assumed finding.

11. Ethical Considerations

The study framework emphasised voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity and secure handling of data. Findings were reported in aggregate form, and operational security information capable of increasing risks to schools or participants was to be avoided.

12. Methodological Considerations

Interpretation takes account of the cross-sectional design, limited sampling metadata and the regular numerical structure of several measures. Conclusions are therefore based on the observed 200 cases and are not predetermined by initially expected coefficients.

Results and Discussion

1. Overview of the Analysis

Analysis focused on CLI, SSPI and SCRI, with particular attention to the structure of the data before interpretation of regression and mediation relationships.

2. Profile and Pattern of the Study Variables

The dataset comprised 200 observations from public, private and community-school contexts and represented banditry, insurgency, kidnapping and communal conflict. Higher leadership scores generally coincided with stronger safety practices, attendance continuity, learning continuity and overall resilience.

3. Crisis Leadership and School Safety Practices

Inspection of the dataset showed that the safety indicators were constructed in an essentially deterministic pattern relative to the leadership indicators: $\text{SAFETY_PHY} = \text{LEAD_CRISIS} - 0.30$; $\text{SAFETY_PLAN} = \text{LEAD_COMM} - 0.30$; and $\text{SAFETY_MON} = \text{LEAD_WELL} - 0.30$. Consequently, $\text{SSPI} = \text{CLI} - 0.30$. The correlation between the composites therefore approaches 1.00. H1 is

directionally supported, but the magnitude cannot be interpreted as ordinary independent empirical evidence.

4. Crisis Leadership and School Continuity/Resilience

Higher crisis-leadership scores consistently coincided with stronger attendance continuity, learning continuity and overall resilience. The pattern supports the associational proposition that crisis-management capacity is relevant to educational continuity in insecure settings.

5. School Safety Practices and School Continuity/Resilience

Stronger physical-security measures, emergency planning and monitoring/early-warning arrangements generally coincided with stronger continuity outcomes. The direction supports H2 at the associational level and reinforces a multidimensional conception of school safety.

6. Test of the Proposed Mediation Effect

Because SSPI is essentially a constant transformation of CLI, the two constructs contain the same statistical information. Entering both simultaneously creates perfect or near-perfect multicollinearity, so their unique effects cannot be separated. The proposed mediation is therefore not empirically identifiable with the present data structure.

7. Community Engagement and Psychosocial Support

High community-engagement and psychosocial-support scores coincide with stronger resilience outcomes. The evidence supports the relevance of these leadership dimensions but does not establish that community-school status itself causes greater resilience.

8. Differences Across Crisis Contexts

Observable contextual differences occur across zones and crisis types, but these categories overlap substantially in the dataset. The results should therefore be interpreted as contextual patterns rather than causal effects attributable independently to geography or crisis category.

9. Discussion of Major Findings

Three substantive conclusions emerge. First, stronger crisis-management capacity accompanies stronger continuity and resilience. Second, school safety is multidimensional and includes preparedness and early warning in addition to physical protection. Third, community and psychosocial dimensions are relevant components of crisis-responsive school management. The data provide stronger evidence for an integrated leadership-and-safety capability than for a sequential mediation mechanism.

10. Overall Interpretation

The 200-case dataset supports the conclusion that stronger leadership-and-safety capacity is associated with greater school continuity and resilience. It does not support reporting the predetermined $\beta=.64$ and $\beta=.59$ values as actual findings, and the deterministic relationship between leadership and safety composites prevents a defensible conventional mediation test.

11. Summary of Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Proposed Relationship	Evidence	Decision
H1	Crisis Leadership -> Safety Practices	Positive but essentially deterministic relationship	Direction supported; magnitude not independently interpretable
H2	Safety Practices -> Continuity/Resilience	Strong positive pattern	Supported at associational level
H3	Crisis Leadership -> Continuity/Resilience	Strong positive pattern	Supported at associational level
H4	Leadership -> Safety -> Continuity	X and M essentially perfectly collinear	Mediation not identifiable
H5	Leadership dimensions -> Resilience	Higher dimension scores coincide with greater resilience	Supported descriptively
H6	Contextual group differences	Observable differences with substantial category overlap	Partial/context-dependent support

Conclusion and Recommendations

1. Conclusion

The study examined crisis leadership, school safety practices, and school continuity and resilience in insecurity-affected secondary-school contexts in Nigeria. The findings showed a consistent positive pattern between stronger crisis-management capacity and stronger attendance continuity, learning continuity and overall resilience.

Community engagement and psychosocial-support leadership also moved positively with resilience. The evidence supports strengthening these dimensions as part of crisis-responsive school management, but it does not establish that community schools are inherently more resilient than other school types.

The proposed mediation relationship requires caution. Crisis leadership and school safety practices were extremely closely aligned in the supplied dataset, limiting their statistical separation. The study therefore does not claim that school safety practices were independently established as a mediator.

Overall, the empirically defensible conclusion is that stronger crisis leadership and school-safety capacity are associated with stronger educational continuity and resilience in insecurity-affected secondary-school contexts.

2. Recommendations

Strengthen principals' crisis decision-making capacity (LEAD_CRISIS) through targeted professional development in threat assessment and timely school-level response.

Institutionalise community engagement and crisis communication (LEAD_COMM) through structured communication with parents, SBMCs and relevant community stakeholders.

Strengthen psychosocial-support leadership (LEAD_WELL) by incorporating basic competencies for recognising and responding appropriately to distress among students and personnel.

Improve physical school-safety measures (SAFETY_PHY) through periodic context-specific assessment of existing protective arrangements.

Make emergency and evacuation planning operational (SAFETY_PLAN) through clearly defined, regularly reviewed school-level procedures.

Strengthen monitoring and early-warning arrangements (SAFETY_MON) so that emerging threats are identified, communicated and acted upon promptly.

Monitor student and teacher attendance continuity (CONT_ATTEND) as an indicator of crisis-management effectiveness.

Include learning continuity (CONT_LEARN) explicitly in school crisis planning and restoration procedures.

Use overall school resilience (SCHOOL_RESIL) as an integrated management-performance indicator combining leadership, safety, attendance and learning continuity.

Use independently developed measures of crisis leadership and school safety practices in future studies so their direct and indirect effects can be estimated reliably.

3. Policy Implications

School-safety policy should integrate leadership development and operational preparedness. Physical security should be accompanied by crisis decision-making, community communication, psychosocial support, emergency planning and early-warning arrangements. Safe Schools implementation should be evaluated at individual-school level using functional safety and continuity indicators.

4. Suggestions for Further Research

Future research should use independently validated measures and more naturally varying field data. Longitudinal and multilevel designs would help determine whether changes in leadership precede improvements in safety practices and continuity. Further work should also examine whether relationships differ by school type, geopolitical zone and crisis type.

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