

Psychological Effects and Strategies of Crisis — Management in School

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Abstract: Crisis is an unexpected event that can disrupt the coherence and balance in a school community. The psychological consequences of such an event are visible, not only in students, but also in teachers and can manifest themselves in different ways depending on the sufferer. Consequently, a question is born: how does each student or teacher experience such an event and which strategies should be used for the appropriate handling and reclamation of crisis and its effects. This suggestion aims at the clarification of the definition “crisis” and the ways of handling so that an operational function of school supervenes.

Key words: crisis, psychological effects, ways of management, school

1. Introduction

An undisputable event is that in the frame of a school community unexpected events may happen, events that can disrupt its normality. Those events are related to either social or personal matters and naturally, they are harmful for the school community, the students, the teachers and the administrative staff. Those unexpected events, which can be characterized as incidents of crisis, might cause conditions that are difficult to handle effectively.

The definition of “crisis” has been defined by several theorists who have focused on its characteristics. However, this definition is used mostly to describe a critical point or a break point. Many people have connected crisis with danger and threat. Nevertheless, right management and handling can be a great opportunity for a change. Since every school community can potentially be dealing with incidents of crisis, they should be properly prepared for its effective management. The purpose of the appropriate management and dealing with those incidents is the decrease of the negative effects. The management is directly connected with actions not only precautionally, but also interventions.

A plan of action plays a significant role in the management of a crisis. The plan of action aims at the softness of the impact those crises have at the school function and includes all those actions that have to be applied when a situation of crisis takes place. The school team of crisis management is in charge of the plan structure. This team deals with giving help right after the crisis. The school team of crisis management is comprised of teachers or administrative staff, too. This means that the edification and staff training is vital in order for the teachers to be in a position of being capable for their role.

People who experience a crisis often show feelings of weakness to control their life. Their reactions are intense, but can be characterized as normal due to the intense stressors that they experience. Not every person is affected by every event in the same way, while the scale of the effect depends on different factors. At this point it is essential that we mention the fact that students are more susceptible to be affected from such events, since they

do not have enhanced coping mechanisms.

In a situation like the one described above, the role of the school is very important, since it can help all the sufferers to recover slowly. Teachers can help students feel safe again and develop their emotional resilience for a potential future crisis.

2. Definitions of Crisis — Characteristics

The definition “crisis” is used to describe a variety of conditions that are related to environmental, social and psychological factors. Especially, Caplan describes crisis as a psychological destabilization and instability, since each person deals with a problematic situation, which they cannot solve with the usual strategies of problem solving, that they used till then (Wachter, 2006). During crisis, disorder prevails. The person tries to solve the problems, yet without any profitable results. Finally, balance is succeeded, a state, which can be either better or worse than their condition before the crisis. Caplan's theory is based on homeostasis. The organism tries to maintain its homeostatic balance with the environment. When this balance is being threatened by physiological or psychological powers, it tries to maintain its homeostasis by using defensive mechanisms (Poal, 1990).

Slakeu (Hatzihristou, 2008, p. 9) characterizes crisis as “a temporal state of disorder and disfunction, which can result in a radically different result; positive or negative”. On the other hand, MacNeil and Topping consider that crisis is made of an event, which can be thought of as traumatic or catastrophic and can cause severe emotional and social discomfort without warning (MacNeil, Topping, 2007).

Crises, consequently, can be characterized as a reality which first of all, every person may be dealing with, and, secondly, disturbs normality by changing the order (Hatzihristou, 2008). According to Raphael Flannay and Everl (at MacNeil, Topping, 2007) situations of crisis are characterized by:

- fast consequences of time
- changes in usual reactions of person and societies
- severe disorder
- feeling of fear and weakness
- disturbance of psychological homeostasis
- non-rehabilitation of the defensive mechanisms
- functional weakening

As a result, crises are unexpected events that might affect a great amount of people. It is not surprising that school communities often deal with a crisis incident. According to Brock, Sandoval and Lewis (at Mac Neil, Topping, 2007, p. 66) school crisis is considered to be a sudden and unexpected event, that can often be an emergency and are able to affect the whole school community. In general, during crises, the sufferer's reactions are clearly different from the usual reactions and because of that fact, the feeling of control may be diminished.

One of the main characteristics of the crisis is that the person experiences very intense feelings that constitute inhibitory factors in deploying the existing potentials that each person disposes. During a crisis, or after that, the person experiences an intense stressor, which is related to the subjective awareness of the person (Hatzihristou, 2012). Reactions such as emotional disorder, fear, sadness and meta-traumatic stress can be observed in the whole school community. Naturally, the consequences of a crisis can cause other than physical damages, psycho-social problems; which is why the proper handling of a school crisis is necessary for diminishing the negative effects (UCLA Centre, 2016).

Finally, we often consider as crises events that are related to a) illness or trauma, b) violent or unexpected death, c) threatening death or injuries, d) war actions, e) natural disaster, f) industrial damage (Hatzihristou, 2021).

2.1 Crisis Discrimination

Although crises should be categorized in different ways, most theorists distinguish two types of crisis; the developmental or evolutionary and occasional. The developmental or evolutionary ones refer to events which are connected with the person's transition from an evolutionary stage to another one like adolescence or the start of school life (Katsaros I., 2008). The occasional crises are sudden events, which can affect the whole community and need direct handling (like natural disasters, accidents, etc.) (Kiriakou, 2016).

Finally, according to Baldwin (at Hatzihristou, 2012) the taxonomy of the crises should occur with basic criterion not the kind of danger, but the effect on the person and suggests 6 categories of crises:

- 1) Crises that happen due to the idiosyncrasy of the person. They are crises in which the person gets involved. However, they do not have the appropriate information to overcome them.
- 2) Crises that happen because of predicted transitions of the circle of life. They are crises that happen during the transition of a developmental stage to another.
- 3) Crises that emerge from traumatic events. They are crises that are caused by extreme stressors and can cause trauma.
- 4) Developmental crises — crises of maturity. They are crises that are related to personal matters, the solution of which leads to emotional maturity.
- 5) Crises that are connected to psycho-pathology. They are crises that happen to persons that already have a psycho-pathology and in this case, help from experts of mental health is required.
- 6) Emergent psychiatric situations. They are crises during which total mental and conceptual functions of the person have been disturbed and as a result the person has trouble in solving different situations and also is incapable of taking any responsibilities.

2.2 Factors That Contribute to Crisis Incidents

People who experience a crisis often show intense feelings of weakness to control their lives. How much an incident affects the person has a lot to do with the way the incident becomes understood. A very important role acquires the fact that a crisis is considered a dangerous state because of the lack of time of adjustment in it (Diroddo Btock, 2021).

It is obvious, therefore, that incidents of crisis do not affect all the people in the same way. Two of the basic notions for understanding people's reactions to incidents of crisis, are vulnerability and mental endurance. Vulnerability refers to the diminished ability of the person to cope with incidents of crisis, while mental endurance is the ability of the person to adjust and survives in inclement conditions. Every person disposes those two notions which define the grade of effect of the incident in every person (Hatzihristou, 2012).

During a stressful situation, children are vulnerable in a great way since there are a lot of factors that contribute to their psychological morbidity such as the gender, the grade of exposure to the event, the lack of family members or relatives, parents' separation, proximity to traumatic events, lower educational level and socio-economic state of the family (Kar, 2009).

The definition "mental endurance" is made of and is connected with two factors; the factors of riskiness and the protective factors of the person and environment (Hatzihristou, 20214). The factors of riskiness constitute

variables that increase the chances of having problems in different developmental sectors and children's adjustment (like divorce, abuse, natural disasters, some kind of illness, poverty, etc.). On the other hand, the protective factors constitute variables that decrease the chances of positive response. Every protective factor can contribute to the prevention of negative effects.

To sum up, mental endurance affects and alters depending on the conditions. Because of this fact, a child might show mental endurance and deal with a stressor successfully some time in their life, but they may react negatively in other events.

3. Psychological Consequences

Children, after an incident of crisis, show intense reactions, some of which can be characterized as normal due to the state they experience. Those reactions may appear right after the stressful event or they may be delayed. Nevertheless, each person differs concerning the time they need to handle and cure from a traumatic event. Usually, the symptoms gradually decrease as time passes by and the person comes back to normality within 2 or 4 weeks (Toronto catholic district school board, 2006). Depending on the developmental stage and the level of cognitive and sentimental maturity, the psychological reactions to children is expected to be different from the adults.

Table 1 Common Reactions (Adjusted From Chicago Public School 2012)

Sentimental reactions	Cognitive reactions	Physical reactions	Impersonal/Behavioural reactions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shock • Anger • Despare • Sentimental numbness • Fear • Guilt • Depression • Short temper • Hypersensitivity • Feeling of incompetence • Feeling of disconnection with reality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decreased concentration • Decreased ability of making decisions • Decreased memory • Decreased self-esteem • Demanding thoughts • Discomfort 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tireness • Insomnia • Sleeping disorders • Decreased immune response • Headache • Decreased appetite 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alienation • Social withdrawal • School deficiency • Nerves • Behavioural regression • Agressiveness

3.1 Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

As mentioned, the majority of children will recover the normal function in a short time. Nevertheless, only a short number of children that shows persistence and more intense reactions are likely to suffer from more severe disorders, including the Post Traumatic Stress Disorder(PTSD) and in many cases medical help is required. The PTSD is a disorder that occurs after the exposure to a traumatic event, threatens the mental and physical integrity of the suffering person and is connected with feelings of stress, insecurity, terror, awkwardness(Stafford, Schonteld, Keselman, Ventevoe, Stewart). It is a painful experience that can change the way the sufferers see the world, the way they take in information and the ways of reactions to the environment making them realize their fragility (Toronto catholic district board, 2006).

Children with PTSD can have a combination of symptoms. Those symptoms may seem similar to other neurological disorders, for this reason special care is required. The typical symptoms of PTSD include impulsiveness, sentimental numbness, prevention of social responsibilities, sleeping disorders, aggressiveness, school failure, delay in development. PTSD symptoms can start either in a direct time after the incident or after

years. They can be categorized in 4 types of symptoms: 1) repetitive flashbacks, 2) avoidance, 3) negative changes in thought and mood, 4) increased excitation (Perry, 2007).

3.2 Frequent Strategies That Are Used in a Crisis

When the child or adolescent deals with a stressful event, 2 ways of management are usually used. The first way is the strategy of avoidance and has short-term results, while the second is the strategy of management and has long-lasting results. The strategies of avoidance include refusal, regression, alienation and impulsive tension, while the strategies of management include altruism, humour, repulsion, expectation of the next incident and substitution (Hatzihristou, 2014).

3.3 Consequences in Teachers

At this point, it is essential that we mention that in view of an intense stressful event, apart from the children, teachers might be affected, too. In a situation of a crisis teachers are mostly those who are in charge of dealing with the traumatic event and make some decisions.

Teachers have to support children and it is not always understood by the rest of the administrative staff, parents, but even themselves the fact that they themselves can be victims of a crisis (Hatzihristou, 2012).

A stressor can influence differently each teacher and depends on their personality, as much their environment. A very important consequence related to teachers is the Syndrom of Professional Breakdown. During this syndrom, intense physical and psychological exhaustion are shown. Teachers suffer from stress, have trouble during the teaching process and generally loses their interest for the process of learning (Hatzihristou, 2012). The consequences of the syndrom are located in an individual level, in the intrapersonal relations, but also in school level.

3.4 Support to Children by Teachers in Situations of Crisis

Teachers in the modern school community apart from providing knowledge, they are called to deal with unexpected incidents that affect not only students, but themselves, too. Most of the times the teacher stands at the cutting edge and has to support children. According to Sandoval (at Hatzihristou, 2012) the basic principles of consultance in cases of crisis are:

- 1) We start consulting immediately. Due to the intense situation the child experiences, there are times they cannot handle easily everything they feel. For this reason, consulting should start so as the child won't feel mental pain and disorder.
- 2) The child should feel the interest and efficiency of the supporter. At this step, complacency plays a vital role. The child needs an adult that can be in position of dealing with a situation of crisis providing insurance, which at this point of their life is missing.
- 3) We listen carefully to the events. The teacher who will take on the children's support will have to collect as much information as they can, because the handling of the problem will be faster this way, once we know what the children think.
- 4) Reflection of the children's feelings. The aim of the teacher is to tease out of the child exactly how he felt considering the incident by making it clear that every feeling is normal.
- 5) We help the child understand that the crisis has occurred. Children sometimes use refusal as a defensive mechanism. This strategy, can help the child initially, however it may complicate their adjustment afterwards. So, when teachers support students, they should help them through suitable questions to

explore the facts that are connected with the crisis, without panicking them.

- 6) We avoid putting the blame. At this point, our aim is for the child not to focus on who has the blame, but to take on initiative and enhance their self-esteem, in order to be able to overcome the incident.
- 7) We do not provide false complacency. During the process of supporting the students, teachers should maintain realism and trustworthiness. Students have to realize that a traumatic event affects everyone and feelings of sadness and disappointment will arise. However, teachers can concentrate on the fact that a situation like that is temporary and everything will come back to normal very soon.
- 8) It is really important that the child takes on action. The adult providing support sometimes needs to encourage the student to return to his daily routine and activities, so as to gain an energetic role in his life.

4. Crisis Management — Intervention

In order for a school community to function normally, prevalence of balance, tranquility, control are required. Nowadays, school communities more and more frequently have to deal with incidents that can disrupt balance and cause negative effects. As a result, there is a need to manage those incidents aiming at diminishing the negative effects. This kind of management, at a school level, is directly related to actions of prevention and intervention. As prevention we shall consider taking measures for tracking and gradually decreasing or eliminating such dangers. Naturally, this requires some kind of preparation, which includes suitable planning, training and practical exercising, in order for the school community to function properly (MacNeil, Topping, 2007).

Respectively, intervention refers to actions which occur and the first psychological support given to a person or a group of persons who deal with a temporary loss of ability of dealing with a problem or a situation (Poal, 1990). Rapoport (at Poal, 1990) mentions that intervention has 4 main goals: 1) alleviation of symptoms, 2) restoration of the person's function at a better level, 3) understanding of the incidents that have led to lack of balance and 4) specifying of corrective measures that can be taken.

A plan of action also plays a vital role in the effective crisis management in the school community. In this plan, there is every action that has to be applied, when situations of crisis occur. The plan of action aims at prevention and preparation aiming at diminishing the impact of crises at the school function. The accomplishment of this target becomes reality by creating a group of management school crisis. Their responsibilities will be predetermined within the plan of action (Chicago Public School, 2012).

4.1 Group of Crisis Management

In order for a plan of action to exist, there has to be a Group of Crisis Management. In the process of creating a plan of action, specific directional measures are followed considering how every school unit will handle an incident of crisis. However, every school will have to be considered as a living organism that has its own needs. Therefore, the headteacher of the school, seeing its needs and its available resources, shapes the appropriate plan of action by assigning the corresponding duties and responsibilities to the members of the Group of Crisis Management.

The members of G.C.M. should be actually interested in handling a crisis and its consequences and not just "serve" their duties. Apart from that, the members of the group should be trusted by the students, but also allocate the ability to remain calm in strained situations by making correct decisions. Naturally, the members of G.C.M. should also acquire specific knowledge in order to handle such situations. Therefore, training of the teaching staff

constitutes a very important part (Educational Psychology Service Seation, 2016).

4.2 Levels of Crisis Organization

According to the bibliography we have available we can distinguish 4 levels of organization for the handling of crises in a school community: a) prevention, b) preparation, c) handling, d) recovery (US Department of Education, 2007).

Prevention: It is about the measures and actions that can be taken with regard to diminishing or decrease of the consequences of a crisis. There are various educative programs that can help us and also give the opportunity to teachers and students as well to get informed about what exactly a crisis is and how it can be a limiting factor in our daily routine.

Preparation: It is related with advanced planning which will lead to a co-ordinated and efficient handling of the crisis. Each school needs a plan which will be adjusted to its own unique characteristics.

Handling: It includes actions that occur during a crisis. When an incident as such occurs the existing plan of action is getting applied. During a crisis, there might be an imponderable factor, which is why there has to be immediate evaluation of the situation and selection of the most suitable way of handling.

Recovery: It aims at the restoration of normality in the school unit, but also the rebound of the students, teachers and administrative staff.

Actions and intervention in an incident of a crisis include actions that are developing in three phases. The first phase is located when the crisis is in progress, the second phase is right after the incident, while the third phase is about regularization of the situation.

4.3 The Role of School After the Crisis

After a crisis the role of the school and teachers is most of the times defining for the students' balance. After an incident as such, students might be vulnerable to external impacts and in need of support. A prompt intervention in the school unit is of great importance and can happen in different ways.

One of the main priorities of a school unit is the teachers themselves. In order to provide the needed support, making the students feel better, they will have to understand and handle their own feelings and reactions towards the event. Since the teachers are in position of supporting the students, before the re-opening of the school a necessary action is the prosecution of a meeting in which every matter concerning the event must be analyzed. Therefore, teachers will be prepared to give figurative answers in students' questions helping them express their feelings and thoughts (Notional Education Association).

With the school re-opening a basic action is the reinstatement in the daily routine in the shortest possible time. The reinstatement of this routine in the school learning on the one hand helps the development of feelings of safety and protection, on the other hand, is an attempt of interpretation and realizing of the incidents (Papakostas, 2006).

The support in school level can happen in different ways. One way is the school activities. All the activities and actions that can be conducted will have to be modified, so as to correspond to the academic and developmental level of every student (School Health Programs Department). Those activities should teach students how to apply skills of problem solving that are down to intense stressful factors. Also, they will have to encourage them to develop positive methods of management that increase the ability of managing anxiety tracing which strategies fit in every occasion (National Association of School Psychologists, 2017). In younger ages, the activities that combine games help children to familiarize and incorporate new experiences. Furthermore, teachers

can read stories to children about families that have dealt with anxious situations and altogether managed to overcome them (School Health Programs Department).

As far as older children's concern, in order to familiarize with trauma, teachers can assign a project, in which students have to select photographs, abstracts from newspapers and in general information about disasters or other traumatic incidents, aiming at a conversation about crisis. Also, at the subject of History teachers can mention historical events of crises giving students the opportunity to analyze different cases of crises and realize that after a crisis, normality can be achieved. Finally, it would be very useful if time would be given in class for the students to develop a plan of crisis management for school, or home, or even the community, in order to achieve a feeling of safety and feel more prepared for a forthcoming crisis (Moore, Susan, 2015).

At this point, it is essential to clarify that teachers are not experts of mental health. Teachers cannot cure, they can only offer support. A basic factor in the field of support is communication.

5. Conclusion

Schools, apart from the place of teaching, constitute a defining factor for the promotion of children's mental durability. The school community forms a frame in which students spend a lot of time and because of that it can consist a stimulus for creation and development of natural durability. A fundamental factor for its development constitutes the creation of an environment that its characteristics are warm and intrapersonal relations and seeking of skills of the students (Hatzihristou, 2008).

The creation of a secure school environment is considered necessary for the mental balance of students and teaching staff and for the promotion of teaching process. For the creation of a secure school environment crisis management and intervention are basic elements. As a result, schools should be properly prepared, having shaped an advanced plan of action, to handle an unexpected event that can disrupt their normality.

In order for the above targets to be achieved, not only teachers, but the whole school community have to be frequently informed so as to transmit valid knowledge to students. On the other hand, students should be familiarized with the notion of crisis and natural disaster, in order to react properly in a forthcoming crisis. The edification and proper briefing helps everyone handle a critical event making them not to feel confusion and loss of control. Therefore, prevention, planning and recension constitute the most basic actions for the management and handling of a crisis.

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