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Responding to a Crisis

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A SCHOOL IN CRISIS

The following story was shared by a school counselor.

“It was a Monday morning in an elementary school. Teachers were coming to work at 7:30, preparing for another week of school, but this week would be different. The principal had died unexpectedly late Sunday evening. Although a few people from the district office had been notified, most teachers entered the school unaware.

“The assistant principal was on the phone making arrangements with the district office crisis team. The school counselor and a few teachers were ushering early arrivals into the teachers’ lounge. The talk was direct and quiet. The crisis team would arrive in a few minutes to assist teachers with their classrooms. The teachers and staff, even the stoic custodian, held back tears as they stood in silence. Some were thinking of their students and searching for strategies to explain the death of Ms. Hutchings. Others were numb, thinking random thoughts and finding it difficult to concentrate. It was going to be a long and intense day.

“The school’s roster listed 646 students. School started at 8:00. Students on the early bus would arrive in just a few minutes. Who would be in charge? Ms. Hutchings always greeted everyone on the intercom. She was always there. Every morning for the past 8 years she greeted students as they entered the building. To the students, she

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was as much a part of the building as the flagpole or drinking fountain. Now she was gone.

“Although the school was prepared for a fire drill—everyone could file out of the building in 3 minutes and 22 seconds—the school had never prepared for the sudden death of their principal. This elementary school was not prepared to deal with such a shock. Everything was in slow motion. Nothing felt real. Everything was out of sync; the familiarity of daily routine had been pulled out from under us. Our school was not the same.

“As promised, the district crisis team arrived at 8:00. They brought handouts on grief and death for teachers to use in their classrooms. Handouts were helpful. It comforted teachers to have a piece of paper with information. They appreciated knowing what was expected of them, what to say, and what to do.

“Even today, 7 years since that dreadful Monday morning, teachers and staff still remember the overwhelming feeling of responsibility. The district crisis team could not get to all the students and adults who needed help. At the end of the day, everyone was emotionally exhausted. There was a feeling of emptiness as the last student left the building.”

WHAT IS A SCHOOL CRISIS PLAN?

Chaos created by a school crisis, if unchecked, undermines school safety, security, and stability. To counter chaos and instability, a crisis plan provides an emergency protocol to structure and organize staff responsibilities and available resources. The purpose of the plan is to provide order and stability by pulling the school community together.

An effective crisis plan relies on all members of the team and all parts of the plan working together effectively. A well-defined crisis plan requires two basic components: preparation and follow-through. Preparation is based on predetermining effective steps and strategies to take following an “incident.” Preparation also includes adequately training staff to follow these steps in the event of a crisis. Follow-through hinges on trained staff actually putting their training into practice and following the crisis plan’s prescribed steps.

All schools are required to have a fire-escape plan. Additionally, most crisis plans include protocol for the following incidents: suicide, death, grief and loss, violence and aggression, weapon on campus, threat of violence, school shooting, gang activity, natural disaster, bomb scare, illicit drug use, abuse (sexual and physical), community or national disaster, medical emergency, campus intruder, and so on.

Getting down to basic information, a crisis plan anticipates “What if . . . ? Then this.” It organizes people and resources, defines duties and lines of authority, and reduces panic and chaos. With proper training of staff, a good plan instills confidence with its three-phase timeline of crisis intervention: prevention, immediate intervention during the crisis, and postvention services for those needing support after the initial crisis.

Ideally, crisis plans should be user-friendly, accessible and familiar to all, realistic, and tailored to individual school settings. Tailoring crisis plans includes considering potential

language and communication barriers, accounting for diverse needs of students and community, and effectively utilizing varied resources and strengths of school personnel. Crisis plans should be flexible and adaptable to the changing needs of students, schools, and communities.

COMMON PROBLEMS WITH CRISIS PLANS

Problems arise when crisis plans are not an integral part of the school's daily operations. Even though well intentioned, those formulating plans at the district level do not know specific details about each school in the district. Some of these details include the physical layout of buildings, entrance and exit routes to schools, skills of staff members, characteristics and diversity of school communities, communication needs, accessibility to community services, and strengths and weaknesses in school leadership.

Teachers and staff may have a false sense of security with nothing more than a district crisis plan in place. Although aware of the district crisis plan, they have no idea where they fit into it or what would actually happen in the event of a schoolwide crisis. Unfortunately, if adults in the school are not invested in the plan and are not trained appropriately, the plan's effectiveness is greatly reduced. When a schoolwide crisis occurs, teachers and staff who do not know what to do inadvertently increase the chaos and panic. Students sense leaders' confusion and insecurity. There is no anchor of stability and support. This vacuum places students and the entire school in a very vulnerable position.

Schools must become proactive in their efforts to create a crisis plan that fits their needs. Even when a district plan is in place, the individual school must tailor and adapt that plan. Additionally, the school must make a backup plan in the event that the district crisis team is not immediately available. This does not mean that schools must start from scratch to develop a totally new plan. On the contrary, it is recommended that schools review district plans and only make necessary accommodations or adaptations.

In developing, modifying, and updating a school crisis plan, several individuals representing all levels of personnel within the school must be included. From top leadership to supportive services, everyone must take an active part in discussing the needs of the school. Each person has a different perspective, depending on his or her level of training, responsibility, and experience.

Plans must be in a format that is easily accessed and understood. All teachers and staff members must have a crisis plan made available to them. Additionally all adults must receive basic training concerning their duties. Ongoing discussion throughout the school year keeps the crisis plan in a "ready" position and heightens awareness of being prepared.

One problem that requires ongoing attention is keeping crisis plans updated. If there is no grass-roots effort within the school to keep plans current, problems arise when outdated information compromises crisis intervention. Phone trees, in particular, are useless if not continually updated. However, this problem is easily remedied if a secretary is assigned responsibility to keep the phone tree updated.

WHAT IS A CRISIS TEAM?

A crisis team consists of individuals organized to work together as a unit and carry out designated duties listed in the crisis plan. The core team typically consists of school mental health professionals supported by community professionals, teachers, and school staff. Two levels of crisis teams may operate within the school: a district-level team and a school-based team. Crisis teams consider two basic student needs: physical and emotional well-being.

Specific duties listed in crisis plans should be assigned to specific individuals based on their abilities and skills in relation to crisis intervention. Meeting the needs of students and families during a crisis requires a variety of abilities. Are teachers, staff, and administrators trained in emergency medical procedures, such as CPR and first aid? Who speaks languages represented in the community? Who has strong communication skills and conflict resolution skills to assist in deescalating volatile situations? Who remains calm in the midst of chaos?

When assigning duties to individuals, it is important to consider not only their abilities and professional training in regard to crisis intervention but also their level of responsibility, availability, and familiarity with students and the school. Crisis intervention duties require varying levels of responsibility and accountability. Control is a key issue during a crisis. Who is in control of students? To whom do the students look for direction? Typically, in a school setting the principal is the key figure holding the highest position of power. Teachers hold power under the principal's lead. Crisis plans that utilize the existing hierarchy of power within schools are more likely to be effective and efficient during critical incidents.

In addition to responsibility and accountability, availability must also be considered when organizing crisis teams and assigning duties. Who is most likely to be with students when a crisis occurs? Who can get to the site quickly? Availability is a primary reason for involving teachers and school staff in all aspects of crisis plans. Teachers are with students. Realistically speaking, teachers and staff will most likely be the ones handling problems and crises as they arise.

Another important factor to consider in organizing crisis teams and setting plans in place is selecting individuals familiar with students and the school. Who is a familiar and trusted face? Who knows how to function in a school setting? Who knows the layout of the school? Who is familiar with school policy and power structure?

More specifically, the unique needs of school and community must be considered when organizing district-level crisis teams. Such teams should represent the cultures and languages of families they serve. Individuals with language skills who are able and willing should be invited to serve as interpreters on the crisis team. With adequate preparation and supervision, all school staff members, including paraeducators, are potential candidates.

Possible barriers to providing services during a crisis must be considered. Examples of barriers may include a limited number of trained professionals, particularly those who have formed ties with minority groups; limited financial resources; lack of interpreters to

communicate with non-English-speaking populations; difficulties in quickly contacting parents due to the transient nature of some families; inconsistent or nonexistent phone services in homes; and limited access to transportation.

CONTROL AND ORGANIZATION DURING A SCHOOL CRISIS

Organizing people and resources is the most important function of a crisis plan. In particular, large-scale incidents require an organized hierarchy of command. The Incident Command System (ICS) identifies five major areas of organization: management, planning/intelligence, operations, logistics, and finance administration (Johnson, 2000). In the school system, principals typically head management and are seen as the top person in the chain of command. Also involved in management are campus security officers and media spokespersons.

Teachers and staff are typically involved with planning/intelligence and operations. These functions include gathering information regarding critical incidents or emergency situations, documenting and sharing information with the principal or campus security officer, and assisting with emergency response. Teachers and staff assist with on-the-spot student needs, medical emergencies, and evacuating students or assisting with lockdown procedures.

The custodian or support staff (secretaries, cafeteria workers, and office aides) may assist the principal or administrator with the logistics function of ICS by helping to organize materials and supplies and providing other crisis workers with the supplies/resources they need to perform their duties. They lock or unlock doors, provide students and crisis team members with food and drinks, and assist in setting up group counseling or debriefing rooms. Other duties may include running errands for supplies, assisting with cleanup, gathering and collecting emergency materials, and so on.

CLASSROOM EMERGENCY KITS

Teachers can also assist by preparing an emergency box and backpack for their classroom. Each teacher should thoughtfully prepare for the specific needs of his or her class. A box might contain a first-aid kit, several blankets/sheets, and emergency food and water. Each teacher should also prepare an emergency backpack to use in case of evacuation. The backpack might be stocked with a flashlight, basic first-aid kit, class roll with updated phone numbers and contact information (in a protective plastic sheet), granola bars, several bottles of water, favorite children's book (for younger children), whistle, tablet, pencil, pen, and a walkie-talkie or cell phone. Another suggestion is to include two laminated sheets of colored paper: a green piece of paper to signal the principal from a distance that all their students are accounted for, and a red piece of paper to indicate a missing student or a need for assistance.

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF EACH ADULT

When teachers and staff think of their role in a crisis, they think of fire drills. Basically everyone knows how to exit the building in case of a fire. Unfortunately, other than exiting the building, most teachers and staff are unaware of their school's crisis plan. Although most plans depend heavily on district crisis teams in the event of a major catastrophe, all teachers and staff should familiarize themselves with the crisis plan specific to their school.

However, even when crisis plans are made available to teachers and staff, training is not typically provided to teach and inform them of their duties, as well as how to perform those duties. Crisis plans are frequently viewed as someone else's responsibility. Untrained and uninformed, teachers and staff do not feel confident in assisting. When a crisis does occur, they look to others for help and direction. They have no idea how they could assist in a crisis. They think crisis plans are for crisis teams. This perception must change. Each adult in the school must participate in crisis prevention and intervention.

Ideally, all school employees and volunteers should be prepared to assist with crisis intervention. With appropriate training, each adult in the school can provide emotional support to students, preventing or lessening the effects of crisis. At every level of crisis intervention, more effort must be invested in preparing individuals within schools, particularly staff who work directly with students.

On a day-to-day basis teachers and support staff are on the front lines dealing with students' emotional needs. Teachers and staff must know what to say and what to do in order to provide immediate and appropriate emotional support. When offering assistance to students in crisis, there are basic instructions (refer to Overhead 2.1, "Crisis Response Skills: Lend a Helping Hand," at the end of this chapter). On the palm is the first and foremost duty to foster during a crisis: *Stay calm*. Staying calm helps an individual to think clearly and talk softly and slowly. Students depend on adults as their anchor of security and stability.

Adults must also reassure, listen, observe, report, and control.

- *Reassure*: "I'm here for you, I care. We are in this together."
- *Listen*: Listen more than talk.
- *Observe*: Observe behaviors; gather and document information.
- *Report*: For serious matters (extreme behaviors, safety issues, abuse, and suicidal comments), report concerns to supervisors/professionals.
- *Control*: Stay in control, do not panic, know your role and take responsibility for it.

Each teacher and staff member must know where he or she fits into the chain of command. Review the crisis plan and determine which duties apply to you. Clarify these duties with your supervisor or administrator. Typically staff and teachers are involved in four major areas of responsibility:

- *Escaping to safety*. Exiting the building (e.g., fire drill).
- *Staying in the building*. Seeking shelter in the building (lockdown).

- *Keeping students safe and calm.* Assisting with immediate needs, reducing chaos, keeping order.
- *Communicating.* Providing information about students' needs to supervisors and administrators, listening for directions from principal and professionals, and communicating with students and parents.

Role plays are helpful in practicing desired skills to prepare staff and teachers to assist with crisis intervention. A suggested outline for teaching crisis skills by using role play follows:

1. Present basic information.
2. Model behavior by live demonstration or a video clip.
3. Set up a scenario.
4. Role-play and practice skills.
5. Share constructive feedback.
6. Process information and discuss.
7. Summarize main points, check for understanding.

A CRISIS PLAN IN ACTION

The following story, shared by a teacher, illustrates one school's crisis plan in action.

"It was a cold November day. Third hour had just begun as students took out pencil and paper to take a pop quiz. Suddenly, they were saved by the bell. An unexpected fire alarm was sounded. It wasn't a scheduled drill, and I wondered if I should ignore it or act. Relying on previous trainings, I expertly instructed students to go outside and line up in our preassigned location. One student grabbed our white emergency bucket with the bright pink paper flag proclaiming our room number. As we entered the hall, we fought to find a place among the mass of students being herded toward the doors.

"Cool air hit our faces as we stepped outside. Bright pink paper flags lined up next to each other in numerical order, with the students belonging to each room standing behind them. Although I would like to say that each student was perfectly behaved, standing docilely in line, this was not the case. Curious, social eighth graders tried to leave their classes to find friends, who had no more knowledge than they did about the situation. Teachers struggled to keep control of the chaos and confusion.

"Each teacher opened his or her bucket and pulled out what they hoped was a current class list. Students were accounted for, and a student runner took the message to Command Center (marked by a bright pink flag with 'Command Center' printed in big, bold letters).

"As a teacher, it is important to remain calm in crisis situations. Students clustered around me, asking if I knew what was going on. Other students came to the circle, proclaiming that their best friend's second cousin's parent's favorite pet's owner had

told them there really was a fire that had burned down the other side of the school. Smoke billowed in the air, seemingly confirming the rumors. I did my best to dispel the rumor by reassuring students that we would be informed of the facts when this information became available.

“In the meantime, students began jumping up and down in an effort to stay warm as the cool autumn air penetrated their clothing. Thinking quickly, I began to shout out commands in French. My students were soon engaged in running, jumping, turning, pointing, and singing (much to their peers’ enjoyment and their own embarrassment). One thing missing from my white emergency bucket was something entertaining to keep students occupied. They were soon bored of responding to my commands, so I assigned a student to be in charge of a stirring game of ‘Pierre Dit,’ French for ‘Simon Says.’

“While occupied with the game, I noticed several of my students were shivering, clothed in summer shorts and T-shirts. They looked nearly frozen. Luckily, as we were exiting the classroom, I had grabbed a stray sweatshirt and blanket stacked next to my desk. Several students borrowed these from me and huddled together.

“Looking around, I saw my department head standing a few feet away, talking to another teacher in the department. As she finished, she came to me and informed me that a classroom on the other side of the school had caught fire, but it was under control. We were just waiting for the fire marshal to come and let us know what would happen next. She instructed me to keep students as busy as possible until we knew if we would be sending them home or not.

“I interrupted the game of ‘Pierre Dit’ to share the latest news with my students. Excitement rippled through the class upon hearing that they might get to go home early. Nearly an hour had passed since the initial sounding of the fire alarm. Students were bored and beginning to get hungry as lunch hour approached. I gave students an assignment to write five sentences in French about what they were feeling. Sharing pencils and paper from the emergency bucket, each student quickly completed the assignment, anticipating some type of reward. Luckily, my white bucket contained enough small candies to reward each student.

“Students got colder and hungrier as time passed. Teachers were given frequent updates on the situation as members of the crisis team, armed with walkie-talkies, circulated among us. With each update, students became more excited as it was beginning to look like they would be going home early. Finally, we were instructed to move our students around the Command Center, where the vice-principal was standing on his white bucket and holding a megaphone. He outlined the situation for students, dispelling any rumors they might have heard. Only one classroom had sustained serious damage, but smoke had gotten into the heating ducts of the school, and the fire marshal had declared it unsafe for anyone to be in the building. Cheers erupted as he announced they would be going home for the day.

“Once students were quiet again, he outlined what was expected of them. Classes would be dismissed one by one to go into the school quickly and obtain necessary items from the classroom (e.g., house keys). Students were expected to take a specific route through the building; they were told not to go into any other part of the school.

Buses would line up in front of the school. Teachers were responsible for accounting for each student, making sure each student either boarded a bus or had a way home. Parents were being notified on all major radio stations in the area to meet their students on the opposite end of the school from where the buses were loading. (There was a department store with a large parking lot where parents could park while waiting.) Secretaries were notifying parents by utilizing the phone tree.

“As students were dismissed, we walked quickly to the classroom and through the school to the buses. One of my students looked at me and said, ‘My parents are out of town, and I’m staying with my grandparents. They only live a block away. Can I walk there?’ I looked at him and said, ‘You’re only wearing shorts and a T-shirt! You’ll freeze to death!’ He returned my gaze and rolling his eyes said, ‘I just stood outside for 2 hours. I think I’ll be fine.’ What could I say? He was right. I made a permission note, listing who he was and where he was going, and sent him on his way. Students boarded the buses or found their parents and safely went home.

“As I reentered the school, a crisis team member was standing by the door. The fire marshal wasn’t clear about how long the school would be unsafe. Phone trees would be utilized the following morning to let us know if we could come to school. We would be debriefed later at an emergency faculty meeting. Teachers were exhausted and grateful for a half day off. That night, I opened the newspaper to find the school on the front page. The journalist described the scene in detail, including the pink shirt and khaki pants the principal was wearing.

“The next school day, as the principal talked to the students about what had happened, he made sure to let everyone know that his shirt was salmon-colored and the pants weren’t khaki, they were expensive suit pants. The publicity surrounding the principal’s pink shirt made for great jokes at future faculty meetings.

“Several months later, our principal had a birthday. Four days before his birthday, the vice-principal announced to students that he wanted to let the principal know how much we cared. They were asked to honor their principal by wearing pink on his birthday. The day arrived and the halls were a great sea of pink. Students were united in celebrating his birth. The day of the fire was long, and repairing the school was costly, but the unity gained through the experience was priceless.”

EFFECTIVE CRISIS INTERVENTION FOR STUDENTS FROM DIVERSE BACKGROUNDS

Meeting the unique needs of students in crisis requires sensitivity and skill when planning and adapting services. Sensitivity to individual characteristics, strengths, and needs is based on an understanding of human diversity and cultural and societal influences. This understanding directly influences our perception of how a crisis affects an individual or group, how we identify problems, and how we intervene with students and families in crisis. The following incident demonstrates the significant challenges in providing crisis intervention to culturally diverse students.

The Stockton Schoolyard Shootings

On January 17, 1989, the Stockton, California, schoolyard shootings brought international attention to the devastation and chaos created by a school tragedy, including the lack of culturally sensitive services available to a diverse community (Armstrong, 1991). During morning recess, a man carrying a semiautomatic AK-47 rifle randomly shot at groups of children on the playground, killing five students. A teacher and 29 students were also wounded in the attack. The incident occurred at Cleveland Elementary School, a campus serving approximately 970 students, of whom almost 70% were of Southeast Asian descent. The majority of students' parents were non-English-speaking.

Armstrong, the school psychologist assigned to Cleveland Elementary, described the confusion of frightened parents rushing onto the school grounds trying desperately to locate their children. Because of the language barrier, communicating with parents was difficult. The panic escalated as parents realized police and emergency medical crews were transporting unidentified children to the hospital. For several hours, parents were uncertain if their children were safe, missing, injured, or dead. For mental health professionals in the school and the community, this tragic incident created the overwhelming challenge of providing emergency mental health services to an ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse school and community.

James and Gilliland state that "although crisis intervention is never easy, cultural insensitivity may make it even more difficult" (2001, p. 26). Moreover, Romualdi and Sandoval (1995) assert that "communities most in need of services often include a high concentration of ethnically and culturally diverse students and families. Service provision, as a result, must be culturally appropriate and reflect growing population trends" (p. 309).

CURRENT SCHOOL DEMOGRAPHICS

Ethnic Diversity

The changing demographics in North American schools highlight the increasing need for cultural sensitivity in providing appropriate emotional first aid for students. The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2002) reported that during the 2000–2001 school year, approximately 40% of the 47 million children and youth enrolled in public education in the United States comprised students of color: 17% African American, 16% Hispanic, 4% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 1% Native American/Alaska Native. Students of color outnumber European American students in six states (California, Hawaii, Louisiana, Mississippi, New Mexico, and Texas), and many urban areas such as Washington, DC, currently report that minority students outnumber European American students (NCES, 2002).

In sharp contrast to student diversity, a large majority of teachers (84%) are European American. Only 9.9% of teachers are African American and 5.4% are Hispanic (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002). A national shortage of minority teachers is particularly evident in special education, which employs 9.7% African American, and only 2.4% Hispanic teachers (U.S. Census Bureau). Even more striking than the ethnic mismatch between student and teacher populations is the fact that almost 95% of school psychologists are European

American (Curtis, Grier, Abshier, Sutton, & Hunley, 2002; Curtis, Hunley, Walker, & Baker, 1999).

Linguistic Diversity

Further compounding the complexity of meeting students' diverse needs is the fact that almost 9 million school-age children—17% of all U.S. students—speak a language other than English in the home (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). California and Texas have a particularly high proportion of linguistic diversity. For example, based on the 2000–2001 language census, one-fourth of California's 6.1 million students speak a language other than English in the home.

During the 2000–2001 school year across the nation, only one-third of the needed “English learning” teacher positions as filled with appropriately trained and certified specialists (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2002). The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) report that, similar to the shortage of teachers with expertise in language skills, only 10% of the association's members are fluent in a language other than English (Curtis et al., 1999).

Providing services to students who speak a language other than English is further complicated by the ever-increasing number of languages spoken. In Chicago, students in public schools represent approximately 200 languages (Bracken & McCallum, 1998; Pasko, 1994). Examples of other urban school districts with over 50 languages represented in the student body include Palm Beach, Florida; Tempe, Arizona; Plano, Texas; Des Plaines, Illinois; and Knoxville, Tennessee (Bracken & McCallum).

MATCHING SERVICES TO MULTICULTURAL NEEDS

Cultural sensitivity must be applied to all areas of service provision, including crisis intervention. In providing services to children and families in crisis, cultural sensitivity and awareness of diverse needs are particularly important. Recognizing and tailoring crisis intervention to fit the needs of diverse student populations will positively impact the quality of services provided in schools and communities.

In order to provide effective and sensitive emotional first aid to students of diverse backgrounds, mental health providers, teachers, staff, and administrators must take responsibility for increasing their personal awareness and understanding of student diversity issues and concerns. Those responsible for school crisis plans must consider and incorporate their community's diverse characteristics and needs during the formulation stage.

Understanding the unique needs of students requires a basic knowledge of how children and adolescents function in relation to their peers, school, family, community, and world. Sue and Sue (2003) use a diagram of three concentric circles to describe a tripartite framework for understanding the development of personal identity. The innermost circle represents the individual level, comprised of those characteristics unique to the person, such as his or her genetic makeup and specific life experiences. The next level, the group

level, includes the similarities among people who share the “social, cultural, and political distinctions made in our society” (p. 13). The final, universal, level is composed of the commonalities that exist among all human beings.

The group level of personal identity is of particular importance in understanding the implications of cultural diversity. Sue and Sue (2003, p. 7) explain that, through socialization, participation in cultural groups can “exert a powerful influence over us and influence our worldviews,” shaping the way that situations and events are perceived and interpreted. In the National Strategy for Suicide Prevention, culture is defined as “the integrated pattern of human behavior that includes thoughts, communication, actions, customs, beliefs, values, and institutions of a racial, ethnic, faith, or social group” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001, p. 197).

In addition to understanding the definition of cultural diversity, becoming knowledgeable about changing demographics in U.S. schools and, more importantly, in individual schools and communities heightens cultural awareness in planning and providing effective crisis intervention. Acquiring this knowledge can be accomplished by annually reviewing the NCES (nces.ed.gov/), which provides accurate up-to-date information on the breakdown of ethnic and language diversity nationally and by state. Information is also readily available from local school districts, which can provide a quick overview of local diversity, on both a district and individual school level. Schools typically provide the public with school district statistics, including percentages of “free and subsidized school lunches” and language and ethnic breakdowns.

PLANNING AND CONDUCTING A MULTICULTURAL NEEDS ASSESSMENT

A second step involved in tailoring crisis intervention to culturally diverse populations is to conduct a needs assessment of the school and community. Responding to specific populations in a personalized manner requires knowing their needs and their resources. A needs assessment may include, but is not limited to, the following questions:

- What languages are spoken in the school and in students’ homes?
- What cultures are represented in the school district?
- How do people from these cultures cope with crisis?
- What are their natural coping skills?
- What resources currently exist and which organizations can be called upon and utilized during a crisis?

An additional but often overlooked variable to consider is the diversity of spiritual and religious beliefs. Belief systems hold important implications for how families perceive a crisis, how they choose to deal with it, and most importantly, how they seek and accept assistance from mental health professionals. Commenting on the importance of understanding belief systems and the spiritual needs of those in crisis, Pedersen (2003) reported

on the devastation caused by the earthquakes that hit Taiwan during the 1999–2000 year and survivors' attitudes toward crisis counselors. Though crisis mental health services were available, there was not a demand for counseling intervention. In fact, Pedersen stated that victims were “not interested in counseling” and, in fact, saw “talk therapy” as “making the problem worse” (p. 397). Rather than seeking or accepting professional counseling services, survivors were in need of Buddhist priests to conduct ceremonies resolving spiritual issues surrounding the death of family members. Suffice it to say that, in advance of a crisis, alternatives to traditional mental health services must be considered, explored, and accessed.

Mental health providers can suggest changes in the organizational structure for providing intervention once they recognize the specific differences in how individuals from diverse backgrounds perceive and deal with crisis. Understanding the uniqueness of cultural backgrounds and tailoring interventions to compliment natural support systems of family, friends, and community will create better services and healthier, more productive, outcomes.

STAFF TRAINING ACTIVITY: SENSITIVITY TO STUDENT DIVERSITY

Staff members can discuss the information from Handout 2.1, “Diversity in Our Schools” (at the end of the chapter), and compare their school’s statistics with the national statistics on student diversity. The goal is to equip all staff members with the ability to answer these questions:

- “What is the ethnic breakdown of students in our school district?”
- “How many languages are spoken in our school district?”
- “What are the religious beliefs represented in our school district? How could our school involve ministers and clergy to assist with crisis intervention?”
- “In case of emergency, how would our school contact parents who do not have telephones?”
- “In regard to crisis intervention, how can our school make accommodations for students from diverse backgrounds? Identify some unique needs of students and families in our school and community.”

STAFF TRAINING ACTIVITY: REVIEWING YOUR SCHOOL'S CRISIS PLAN

Purpose: To familiarize staff members with their school’s crisis plan.

Suggestion: Invite a member of the district crisis team or someone who is responsible for the school crisis plan to assist with this staff activity.

Materials for each person

- Pencil and paper
- Handout 2.2, “Questions about Your School Crisis Plan” (at the end of the chapter)
- School crisis plan

If possible, provide all participants with a copy of the crisis plan. If this is not possible, provide each group (below) with a copy of the crisis plan.

Instructions

- Break into groups of five.
- Provide each group with pencils, paper, school crisis plan, and Handout 2.2.
- Read these directions aloud: “Answer the questions on the sheet identified as ‘Questions about Your School Crisis Plan’ [Handout 2.2]. Each question is worth 1 point. Double the points if you know the answer to a question without referring to your school crisis plan. The group earning the most points wins the game. You have 15 minutes to complete this activity.”
- Determine which group has earned the most points and announce the winner. Discuss the correct answers.
- Summarize: “It is important to have a basic understanding of your school crisis plan. Know your responsibilities and how your role fits into the crisis plan.”

Assignment: “Highlight information in the crisis plan that applies to you.”

STAFF TRAINING ACTIVITY: ROLE-PLAYING CRISIS SCENARIOS

Purpose: To provide opportunities for problem solving. Role plays help staff members think through their individual responsibilities and what they would do in case of student emergencies. This activity also familiarizes staff with the school’s crisis plan.

Materials for each person

Pencil and paper
Handout 2.3, “Role-Playing Crisis Scenarios” (at the end of the chapter)
School crisis plan

If possible, provide all participants with a copy of the crisis plan. If this is not possible, provide each group (below) with a copy of the crisis plan.

Instructions

- Break into groups of five (role-playing in smaller groups is more comfortable for participants).
- Provide each group with pencils, paper, school crisis plan, and copies of Handout 2.3.
- Read these directions aloud: “Read the role-play scenario. Although you are provided with some information, the information is limited. Assign parts and role-play for 2 minutes. It does not have to be perfect. After the role play, discuss the choices

that were made. Identify three things that went well, and identify one thing that was particularly difficult in the role play. What makes a situation like this tough to handle?”

- Review the questions listed at the end of each role play.

Following the role plays, summarize: “It is important to have a basic understanding of your school crisis plan. Know your responsibilities and how they fit into the crisis plan.”

Assignment: “Review your school’s crisis plan. List your responsibilities in helping with the following situations: school lockdown, helping a student who is upset and crying, responding to a student’s suicidal comments, and reporting abuse.”

The following information will assist the instructor with the discussions following each role play.

Note: During crisis situations you typically do not have the luxury of time. The role plays in this exercise are designed to give you an opportunity to “think on your feet,” problem solve, and experience the immediacy and intensity of feelings associated with crisis situations.

Role Play 1: You are the secretary for an elementary school. You are talking with a student (Tami) who was recently in an automobile accident (3 weeks ago). Although Tami suffered only minor injuries, the father and younger sister were seriously injured and died soon after the accident. The student is in the office crying. Role-play how you would respond to this situation. Consider the following questions:

- *What information is missing from this scenario that would influence your response?*

The student’s age is an important factor to consider. Other factors affecting your response as a helper include how well you know the student and situational factors such as what triggered her crying. It is also important to consider the time of day. If this is at the end of the day, you should also think about getting the student ready to go home safely. If the incident occurred at the beginning of the day, you would consider helping the student return to class.

- *How busy/noisy is the office area?* You may be very busy answering the phone and helping other students and teachers. As the secretary, you must understand that it is OK to ask the counselor or other available adult to assist. A student who is upset and crying may feel overwhelmed by the lack of privacy and embarrassed by others asking them “What’s wrong?” On the other hand, the student may enjoy extra attention in the busy office area.

- *What strategies could you use to calm this student?* Listening to Tami is important. Let her know that she is not alone, that you are there for her. Use the basic listening skills discussed in Chapter 4.

- *If Tami settles down, stops crying, and goes back to class, would you still need to tell anyone about her visit to the office?* It is important to keep the teacher and counselor updated on Tami’s needs.

- *What would you do if Tami did not calm down and stop crying?* It is not your responsibility to solve Tami’s problem. You can assist by listening and showing support for

her, but for more serious problems, your responsibility is to refer her—or any student in a similar situation—to the counselor.

- *Would you refer this student to the school’s mental health professional (counselor, social worker, or school psychologist)?* Refer Tami if the crying is intense or if she needs additional assistance beyond what you can offer. Always keep the counselor and teacher updated on your observations of students who are at risk for emotional difficulties.

Role Play 2: You are a teacher at the middle school. It is 3:00 (right after the junior high bell rings to release students). Three friends of a 14-year-old girl come into your classroom and tell you that they are concerned about Jessica because she told them that she “did not think life was worth living any more.” They say Jessica has progressively become more withdrawn and sad over the last month. As a teacher, what would you do? Consider the following questions:

- *What advice should you, as the teacher, give to Jessica’s friends?* It is important for friends to be supportive of each other, but for something this serious, adults need to help. The friends should be commended for expressing their concerns to an adult. Tell the students that you will talk with the counselor and call Jessica’s parent/guardian. Let them know how lucky Jessica is to have such great friends. Also let them know that when someone is as depressed as Jessica, he or she may need more help than friends can give. It is important that you check back with Jessica’s friends during the week. Ask the counselor to meet with the friends and provide support for them, if needed.

- *Does the school crisis plan tell teachers what to do when a student makes suicidal statements?* Read the school crisis plan to determine what is appropriate to do in this type of situation. If the plan does not include this important information, talk with the school’s mental health professional and clarify what teachers and staff should do when a student talks about suicide.

- *Do you have a positive relationship with Jessica and her parent/guardian? Are parent/guardian emergency phone numbers available in the office?* When teachers and parents have a good relationship, it is much easier to call parents when problems arise. Teachers can be supportive in encouraging parents to seek professional help for students. Parents must always be notified when there are concerns about a student’s safety.

- *Can you contact the school’s mental health professional and express concerns?* Mental health professionals in the school provide support during difficult situations such as this. When teachers hear or learn of students making suicidal comments, they must always express their concerns to the counselor. If the counselor is not in the building, teachers should report their concerns to the principal. Suicidal comments require immediate attention. Suicidal comments should NEVER be discounted.

- *What should you do if the student has already left the school?* You should check to see if the mental health professional is still in the building. This is a serious problem requiring immediate attention. If the counselor or school psychologist is not in the building, you should follow directions given in your school’s crisis plan. There may be an emergency number listed in the crisis plan. (Emergency numbers are also listed in the phone book.) As soon as possible, inform the parent/guardian about the student’s comments.

SUGGESTED READING

- Athey, J., & Moody-Williams, J. (2003). *Developing cultural competence in disaster mental health programs: Guiding principles and recommendations*. Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
- Brock, S. E., Sandoval, J., & Lewis, S. (2001). *Preparing for crisis in the schools: A manual for building school crisis response teams* (2nd ed.). New York: Wiley.
- Canter, A. S., & Carroll, S. A. (Eds.). (1999). *Crisis prevention and response: A collection of NASP resources*. Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.
- Johnson, K. (2000). *School crisis management: A hands-on guide to training crisis response teams* (2nd ed.). Alameda, CA: Hunter House.
- Pitcher, G. D., & Poland, S. (1992). *Crisis intervention in the schools*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Poland, S., Pitcher, G., & Lazarus, P. J. (1999). Best practices in crisis intervention. In A. S. Canter & S. A. Carroll (Eds.), *Crisis prevention and response: A collection of NASP resources* (pp. 69–86). Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.

WEBSITE

nces.ed.gov/

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES).

Diversity in Our Schools

Ethnic Diversity of Students:

40% of U.S. students are students of color.

- 17% African American
- 16% Hispanic
- 4% Asian/Pacific Islander
- 1% Native American/Alaska Native

Students of color outnumber European American students in six states: California, Hawaii, Louisiana, Mississippi, New Mexico, and Texas.

Ethnic Diversity of Teachers:

- 84% European American
- 9.9% African American
- 5.4% Hispanic

Ethnic Diversity of Teachers in Special Education:

- 87% European American
- 9.7% African American
- 2.4% Hispanic

Ethnic Diversity of School Mental Health Providers:

- 95% of school psychologists are European American
- 10% speak another language

Linguistic Diversity of Students:

Students speaking a language other than English in the home:

- 17% of U.S. students
- 25% of California's students

Number of Languages in Schools:

- 200 in Chicago schools
- 50+ languages in Palm Beach, Florida; Tempe, Arizona; Plano, Texas; Des Plaines, Illinois; and Knoxville, Tennessee

Information is from the following websites: National Center for Educational Statistics; U.S. Bureau of the Census.

Questions about Your School Crisis Plan

- Where is the crisis plan located?
- Do all teachers have a copy of the crisis plan in their classrooms?
- When was the crisis plan last revised?
- Which person or persons in this school are in charge during a schoolwide crisis?
- What types of crises are covered in your school's crisis plan?
- Are there any duties outlined specifically for you?
- During a lockdown, what are your responsibilities?
- What is the custodian responsible for during a lockdown?
- Does your school have a phone tree? If so, how does it work? Is the phone tree up-to-date?
- Does your school have a crisis team? If so, who participates on the crisis team?
- Does your crisis plan say anything about reporting suspected abuse?
- If a news reporter covers a school crisis, with whom should he or she talk?
- Does your school's crisis plan provide information about referring a student who is talking about suicide?
- Who helps with medical emergencies?
- Are there secret or confidential code words the principal uses to alert staff to the presence of an emergency over the intercom?
- Does the crisis plan include any information on natural disasters (e.g., flood, tornado, earthquake)?

Role Playing Crisis Scenarios

Note: During crisis situations you typically do not have the luxury of time. The role plays in this exercise are designed to give you an opportunity to “think on your feet,” problem solve, and experience the immediacy and intensity of feelings associated with crisis situations.

ROLE PLAY 1

You are the secretary for an elementary school. You are talking with a student (Tami) who was recently in an automobile accident (3 weeks ago). Although Tami suffered only minor injuries, the father and younger sister were seriously injured and died soon after the accident. The student is in the office crying. Role-play how you would respond to this situation.

Questions to consider:

- What information is missing from this scenario that would influence your response?
- How busy/noisy is the office area?
- What strategies could you use to calm this student?
- If the student settles down, stops crying, and goes back to class, would you still need to tell anyone about the student’s visit to the office?
- What would you do if the student did not calm down and stop crying?
- Would you refer this student to the school’s mental health professional (counselor, social worker, or school psychologist)?

ROLE PLAY 2

You are a teacher at the middle school. It is 3:00 (right after the junior high bell rings to release students). Three friends of a 14-year-old girl come into your classroom and tell you that they are concerned about Jessica because she told them that she “did not think life was worth living any more.” Her friends say that Jessica has progressively become more withdrawn and depressed over the last month. As a teacher, what would you do?

Questions to consider:

- What advice should you, as the teacher, give to Jessica’s friends?
- Does the school crisis plan tell teachers what to do when a student makes suicidal statements?
- Do you have a positive relationship with Jessica and her parent/guardian? Are parent/guardian emergency phone numbers available in the office?
- Can you contact the school’s mental health professional and express concerns?
- What should you do if the student has already left the school?

Assignment: Review your school’s crisis plan. List your responsibilities in helping with the following situations: school lockdown, helping a student who is upset and crying, responding to a student’s suicidal comments, and reporting abuse.

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CRISIS RESPONSE SKILLS

LEND A HELPING HAND



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