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Crisis at school

The more or less daily messages we hear about violence and accidents demonstrate that peaceful school life can very suddenly be disrupted by shocking events. Even if the dramatic event does not take place at the school itself, the impact can be all too clear. School leaders and teachers are often expected to undertake activities that have nothing whatever to do with their day-to-day work. This also often involves situations in which stress levels and emotions run very high and the capacity to deal with this effectively can be significantly undermined. Processing this type of occurrence is a serious business; members of staff and teachers have their own emotions to deal with and, on occasion, it is no longer clear who the professional is. Sometimes, pupils can demonstrate sudden leadership qualities or become extremely proficient at supporting fellow pupils and teachers. In times of confusion and chaos, certain people can excel themselves far beyond their expectations or, indeed, demonstrate themselves to be less decisive than they had imagined.

Schools that have been part of such drastic events point, without exception, to the need to be prepared in some way. The method of dealing with crisis situations requires a delicate touch even though feelings of despondency and powerlessness will be running high at the time. Nobody likes preparing themselves for threatening situations. The school, however, bears responsibility for the wellbeing of the teachers and the pupils and preparation for this type of extreme event is part of that responsibility. Human suffering, inherent in disasters, cannot be avoided entirely but the manner in which the school responds before, during and after shocking events can determine subsequent reactions, how the trauma is processed and the restoration of ordinary life.

The school is caught unawares by a pupil's suicide: there were very few signs beforehand and it was an enormous shock

The school leaders decided not to publicise the method of suicide as this could give other pupils ideas. They thought it was best to pay as little attention as possible to the death.

In the meantime, however, the rumour-mill had started to turn. The pupils were upset and sad, their teachers lacked information and were inconvenienced and parents rang the school to find out how they would prevent this from happening again.

Eighty percent of the schools in the Netherlands have a crisis protocol but this is often inadequate if a dramatic event takes place. No protocol can ever deal with a school leader who is murdered in cold blood or a fire, such as in Volendam, in which hundreds of school pupils were involved. In extreme situations, the reality is always more bizarre than can what can be predicted by any protocol.

Nonetheless, a good protocol does provide a guideline if the school is involved in dramatic events. It provides guidance in times of panic and helps schools gain an oversight of the aspects involved in a catastrophe, even if this only involves the need to form a crisis team and which people will be involved.

Huge disasters and calamities cannot be practised but there are other crisis situations, that do not instantly turn the school completely on its head, in which a protocol would be a useful tool.

A pupil aged 15 had been missing for several days. People began to think in terms of the worst case scenario.

The school leaders drew up various protocols for the various moments at which they could receive the bad news: at the weekend, in an evening and if the message came in during the school day.

When the news finally came in, alongside all of the grief, the fact that the various officials in the school knew exactly what to do provided a sense of security.

Communication and after-care play an extremely significant role in this type of protocol.

How do you ensure that communication to parents, colleagues and pupils is transparent?

How do you ensure that the crisis team's information head-start does not lead to bungling among the teachers who do not feel they are being listened to? How do you avoid teachers telling their own story in each class? How do you make sure that parents know that their child is still safe at school?

How do you ensure that your contact with the media takes the right line?

These components of crisis communication are precisely the aspects that determine whether (or not) personnel, parents, pupils and the environment feel listened to and recognised.

After news that a family murder had taken place, and that two children from the school had been involved, the school immediately formed a crisis team

All information from the police and judiciary was processed by the crisis team and they took the interests of the pupils, personnel and parents into careful consideration.

These considerations, however, were not communicated to the personnel; the members of staff occasionally read about decisions the crisis team had taken in the newspapers before hearing it at school...

Despite the care taken by the crisis team, personnel did not feel that they had been considered to a sufficient degree.

When a disaster involves a school, the attention paid to pupils is usually sufficient but teachers and school leaders who are part of the crisis team are often forgotten because it seems as though they have everything under control and are managing the situation effectively.

Six months after the event at a school, those involved are often still dealing with heightened emotions and are doing so without much attention having been paid to them.

At school, the supervision of a terminally ill pupil was managed by a very committed teacher. She had intensive contact with the pupil and his parents and invested a great deal of effort in methods to prepare the children and allow them to process the events.

When the youngster finally died, she led the entire farewell process, contributed towards the funeral and maintained contact with the parents.

The school was extremely proud of her.

Four weeks after the death, something snapped for the teacher: school (life) had returned to normal and the teacher only then noticed how alone she had been and how her own ability to process the event had been left behind while the school had been working through the event.

Unambiguous advice for schools in certain crisis situations is not possible. Every situation, school culture and prior history demands different interventions. In some situations, some pupils and teachers want to get back to the timetable and the fixed structure of lessons as quickly as possible. Others cannot bear to think of lessons and just want to talk and talk. Schools often seek rituals in order to put an unsafe situation 'to bed' and make a new start together.

In Littleton, America, the school board wanted to break-up after a violent shooting incident involving several pupils. The remaining pupils, however, did not want to; they wanted to celebrate their graduation at their own school. They decided together - as a ritual, they chose to paint the school together and, as a result, give the place a new and safe appearance.