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Meaningful Crisis Leadership: Building a Healthy School Community

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Abstract

The following paper outlines a plan to support administrators in developing as crisis leaders, that uses the Meaningful Physical Education features (Beni et al., 2017; Fletcher et al., 2021), the Crisis Management and Leadership Framework (Urlick et al., 2021) and the steps for building a healthy school community (Alberta Health Services, 2024). Bringing these frameworks together can help school administration prepare and lead for crisis situations.

Keywords: crisis management; meaningful PE; community restoration

Résumé

L'article suivant présente un plan visant à aider les administrateurs à se développer en tant que leaders de crise, qui utilise les caractéristiques de l'éducation physique significative (Beni et al., 2017; Fletcher et al., 2021), le cadre de gestion de crise et de leadership (Urlick et al., 2021) et les étapes pour bâtir une communauté scolaire saine (Alberta Health Services, 2024). Le regroupement de ces cadres peut aider l'administration scolaire à se préparer et à gérer les situations de crise.

Mots-clés: gestion de crise; éducation physique significative; restauration communautaire

Introduction

Fear filled the eyes of my vice-principal as he approached my classroom door one spring morning. Forcing a smile to emanate calm, he quickly announced, “lockdown” and sped away down the hall. School lockdowns are concerning for the best of days but in this case, our school was operating amid renovations. That meant our PA systems and school phones were disconnected and all window blinds in our school were being replaced. What was I to do given these obstacles with no prior, updated review of emergency plans to school staff? I quickly ushered my students under the exterior wall of windows, in view of police vehicles and the canine unit that lined the street outside my classroom. At this time, the student with an alleged weapon had now entered our school. My class could hear the wrestling and shouting before there was a sustained silence. Thanks to a collective effort made by the teachers, they were able to assist in restraining the student who had entered the school. I wondered why the entrance doors were not locked. Many teachers in other wings of the school were not notified of this lockdown in time, including contracted technicians operating in a file room who had to learn for themselves that there was a lockdown. My cell phone was a vital tool in this situation as I notified all the teachers to "lockdown." Evidently, flawed emergency plans were administered with little to no debriefing or change in procedures following this incident. It begs the question, why?

To date, research on crisis leadership and management, as well as training in this area, are not considered priority in professional administrative training within school districts. This is largely due to the prevailing belief that school crises are unlikely events (Chatzipanagiotou & Katasrou, 2023). However, the global emergency of the COVID-19 pandemic and its negative impacts have since led to a resurgence of this research topic (Farhadi & Winton, 2020). Unprecedented measures including the swift transition to online learning for education institutions during the COVID-19 health crisis exposed lack of preparation amongst school organizations, limited resources, exacerbated well-being issues, increased teacher shortage due to burnout, learning loss, socioeconomic inequalities, and increased stress amongst principals leading during this crisis (Chatzipanagiotou & Katasrou, 2023; Parveen et al., 2022). Additionally, most training programs for school leaders and models of leadership are outdated and will require significant modification to remain relevant, self-care, and well-being being a main priority for all school leaders (Chatzipanagiotou & Katasrou, 2023; Parveen et al., 2022). Furthermore, Kwatubana and Molaodi (2021) suggested a need for school leaders to develop new competencies to support staff and the school community’s well-being during these times of crises.

As a physical educator, my (Author1 – Melissa O’Connor) philosophy is centered on supporting staff and student wellness both in and out of crises. However, with my experiences and observations, I have witnessed the wellness of the school impacted greatly based on how administrators lead schools through these times of crises. Wellness is the heartbeat of any school community and failure to prioritize this area can have a negative ripple effect amongst students, staff, and leaders (Kwatubana & Molaodi, 2021). Prioritizing wellness in schools helps to contribute to work satisfaction and, in turn, positively impacts student well-being and achievement (Spilt et al., 2011). When school leaders prioritize self-care and wellness practices, it also decreases the likelihood of chronic stress, which can lead to professional burnout (Urlick et al., 2021). Therefore, embedding wellness as an essential component towards school crisis leadership and management training, provides opportunity for collaboration and relationships to strengthen during these times (Mutch, 2020). As a byproduct, this alleviates stress amongst all (Mutch, 2020). With this focus, the school community and its leaders would be set up for success for implementing wellness principles when practicing emergency procedures (e.g., fire drills), communicating with

staff during a crisis, and debriefing post-events amongst the whole school community, which are all critical components in a time of crises. Therefore, it is time school jurisdictions revisit current crisis leadership training and professional development (PD) for school leaders to support school community wellness in times of crisis. This would better equip leaders with the knowledge and skills to successfully manage and support crisis situations.

In this paper we outline a plan to support administrators in their development as crisis leaders that uses the *Meaningful Physical Education* (Meaningful PE) features (Beni et al., 2017), the *Crisis Management and Leadership Framework* (Urlick et al., 2021), and the steps for building a healthy school community (Alberta Health Services, 2024). Bringing these frameworks together can help school administrators prepare and lead for crisis situations.

Background

A *crisis*, whether localized or globalized, can be recognized as “utterly unique moments, single events that are capable of unleashing a complete rupture within the system” (Abdelrahman, 2022, p. 1156). These ruptures can be long lasting and detrimental to school communities and their members, including school leaders, teachers, students, school community members, and school jurisdictions. In 2020, the Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF, 2020) collected data on 15,000 teachers across Canada and learned that the mental health of teachers was “severely endangered”. In Alberta, the Alberta Teachers’ Association (ATA, 2021) reported that 93% of teachers were fatigued, 91% felt stressed within their work culture, and 65% were extremely concerned about their overall mental health in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Farhadi & Winton, 2020). Fast forward to 2024, a study by the CTF (2024) on the effects of the pandemic on teachers’ mental health and well-being reported there was no statistically significant change. This included anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression and, overall diminished mental health. The only reported improvements were the awareness, knowledge, and skills that can impact mental health and well-being. This is a crisis in itself! Having the right tools and leadership to navigate during times of crises grounded by research would reduce these effects substantially (Mutch, 2020).

It is also important to consider that a crisis itself covers much breadth and depth, ranging in extremity to targeting many landscapes both as external or internal events. Some examples of crises that impact schools include, but are not limited to, traumatic first aid incidents, death of a school member, fires, extreme weather events, bomb threats, school shootings, civil unrest, and, the most recent, health pandemics. Both crisis management and leadership are utilized in these situations but cannot be considered the same. With the lack of effective training in school jurisdictions presently around crisis leadership, the pressure of crisis is undoubtedly exacerbated by many school leaders who appear to be either unfamiliar with or had forgotten skills necessary to effectively lead in a time of crises. Specifically, much of school crisis leadership training is done at the entrance into the principalship and not revisited. Annual, routine fire drills and lockdowns in schools have become a checklist item instead of being given careful consideration. Self-directed, module-based training is in place within school jurisdictions (e.g., Incident Management Training, Health and Safety Awareness Training, Trauma-Informed Care e-Learning Series); however, the learning has proven meaningless due to its isolated nature and content that has not been updated to reflect evidence-based practices supported by theory and empirical data (Gonzales et al., 2022). Additionally, both scholarly work and professional conversations with mentor principals to date have exposed and acknowledged gaps in policy involving emergency preparedness plans and training (Farhadi & Winton, 2020; Gonzales et al., 2022; Urlick et al., 2021). Prior to the pandemic, provincial and national reports were already revealing insufficient support as well as a need for

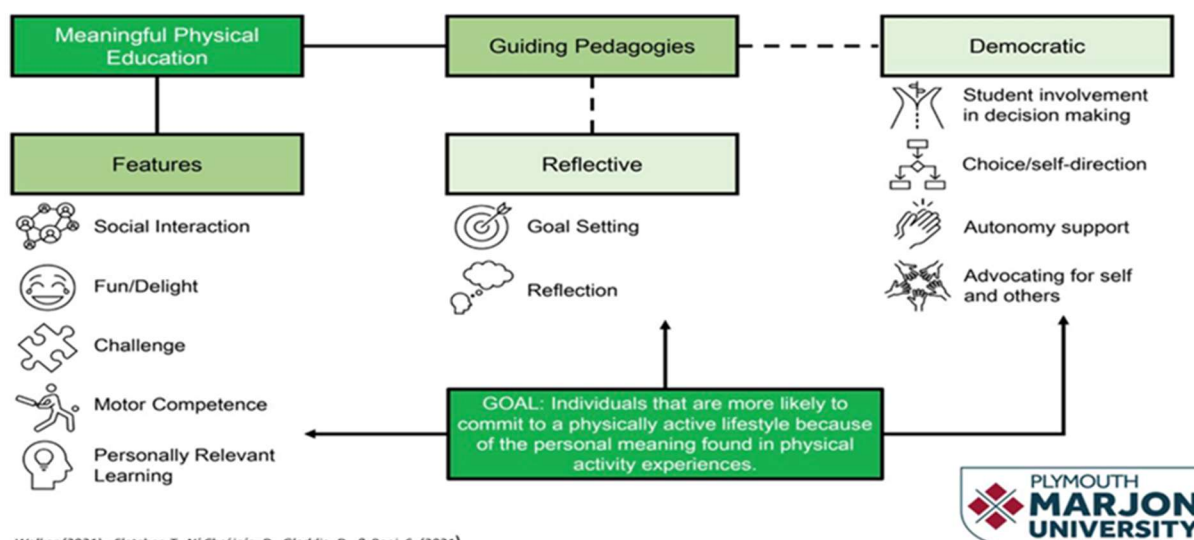
more PD for school leaders (ATA, 2019; Canadian Association of Principals & ATA, 2014). Given these facts, together with our experiences and observations, we propose an overarching plan for successful school crisis leadership programs to support administrators and to ensure a meaningful process that supports whole-school wellness.

What is the Meaningful PE approach?

Meaningful PE pedagogy has been explored for over 50 years (Fletcher et al, 2021). Dewey (1938), Metheny (1968), Chen (1998), and Kretchmar (2008) were among the first scholars contributing to the foundation of this framework, and Fletcher et al. (2021) have since identified its value to the field and as an approach for teaching and learning. Based on the premise of physical educators facilitating meaningful experiences for their students, Teixeira et al. (2012) argued that enhanced meaningfulness positively impacts students via increased intrinsic motivation as well as through assisting them in implementing their experiences into future endeavors. As such, according to Fletcher and Ní Chróinín (2012), two pedagogical practices can be prioritized to allow for these meaningful learning experiences: (a) allowing democratic approaches through inclusion and student participation in decision making and (b) providing opportunities for goal setting and reflection. These processes engage both the individual and the group towards coherence. By reflecting on past experiences and building goals towards the future, meaningful experiences are shaped in the present (Dewey, 1938; Fletcher & Ní Chróinín, 2021). From the lens of Meaningful PE, this philosophical approach (a) invites democratic and autonomous choices and (b) provides opportunities for practical application. We see value in this approach not only for teaching and learning for students within physical education but also as necessary components to framing PD experiences. Furthermore, a meaningful approach for PD would further consider the initial six features of meaningful experiences: social interaction, fun, challenge, (motor) competence, delight, and personally relevant learning (Beni et al., 2017; see Figure 2). For this paper, we consider these features particularly versatile, even though their intent may be for PE; for these purposes, “motor competence” will instead be referred to as “crises competence” in our application of meaningful crisis leadership.

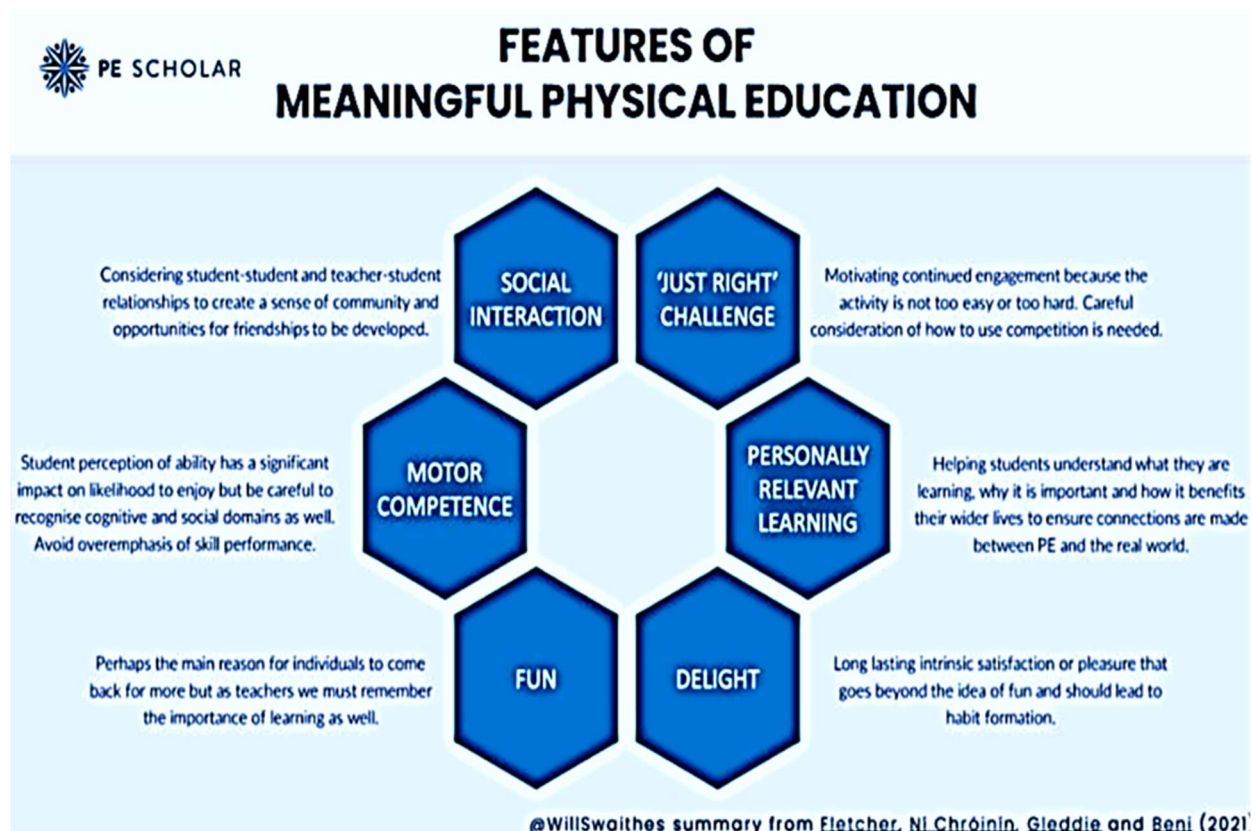
Figure 1

Meaningful Physical Education (MPE) Approach



Note: From “Meaningful PE Infographic” by N. Walker, 2021, Plymouth Marjon University. Reprinted with permission.

Figure 2
Key Features for Practical Application of MPE Framework



Note: From "Book Review: Meaningful Physical Education-an Approach for Teaching and Learning," by W. Swaithes, 2022, PE Scholar. <https://www.pescholar.com/insight/book-review-meaningful-physical-education/>. In the public domain.

What is the Crisis Management and Leadership Framework?

Urlick et al. (2021) developed a conceptual framework that helps today's administrator prepare for crises through the lens of crisis leadership. Consisting of four elements, each one contributes to restoring the community, which plays a substantial role in any school (Chatzipanagiotou & Katsarou, 2023; Mutch, 2020; Urlick et al., 2021). These elements include *leader intentions*, *crisis management*, *crisis leadership*, and *community restoration* (Urlick et al., 2021; see Figure 3). This framework helps administrators understand roles around crisis leadership and management that need to be embedded in planning to support meaningful learning.

Leader Intentions

Administrators must consider three elements to help guide and explain their intentions and actions related to the crisis. They include values, ethics, and spirituality (Urlick et al., 2021). Thus, having shared values amongst the school community helps create transparency with a common vision assisting with guiding decisions that factor in aspects of spirituality. This can be demonstrated by having respect, empathy, and care for one another, which is particularly important. Having leaders adopt an ethic of care approach helps to address intention effect and

foresight effect during a time of crises (Bauman, 2010). Great emphasis is placed on preserving the trust and compassion amongst groups of people within a school community and the impact of actions towards one's feelings (Bauman, 2010; Enrich & Carrington, 2018).

Crisis Management

Crisis management can be defined as the operational management of an organization during a crisis (Mutch, 2020). Crisis management can be grouped into two subcategories: *stages* and *actions* (Urlick et al., 2021; see Figure 1). Interwoven in each subcategory, Mutch (2020) identified systems of diagnosing, planning, decision making, organizing, controlling, and leading to be essential. However, to have successful crisis management requires effective communication, a consistent theme that underpins this notion (Chatzipanagiotou & Katsarou, 2023; Farhadi & Winton, 2021; Jin et al., 2017; Mutch, 2020; Urlick et al., 2021).

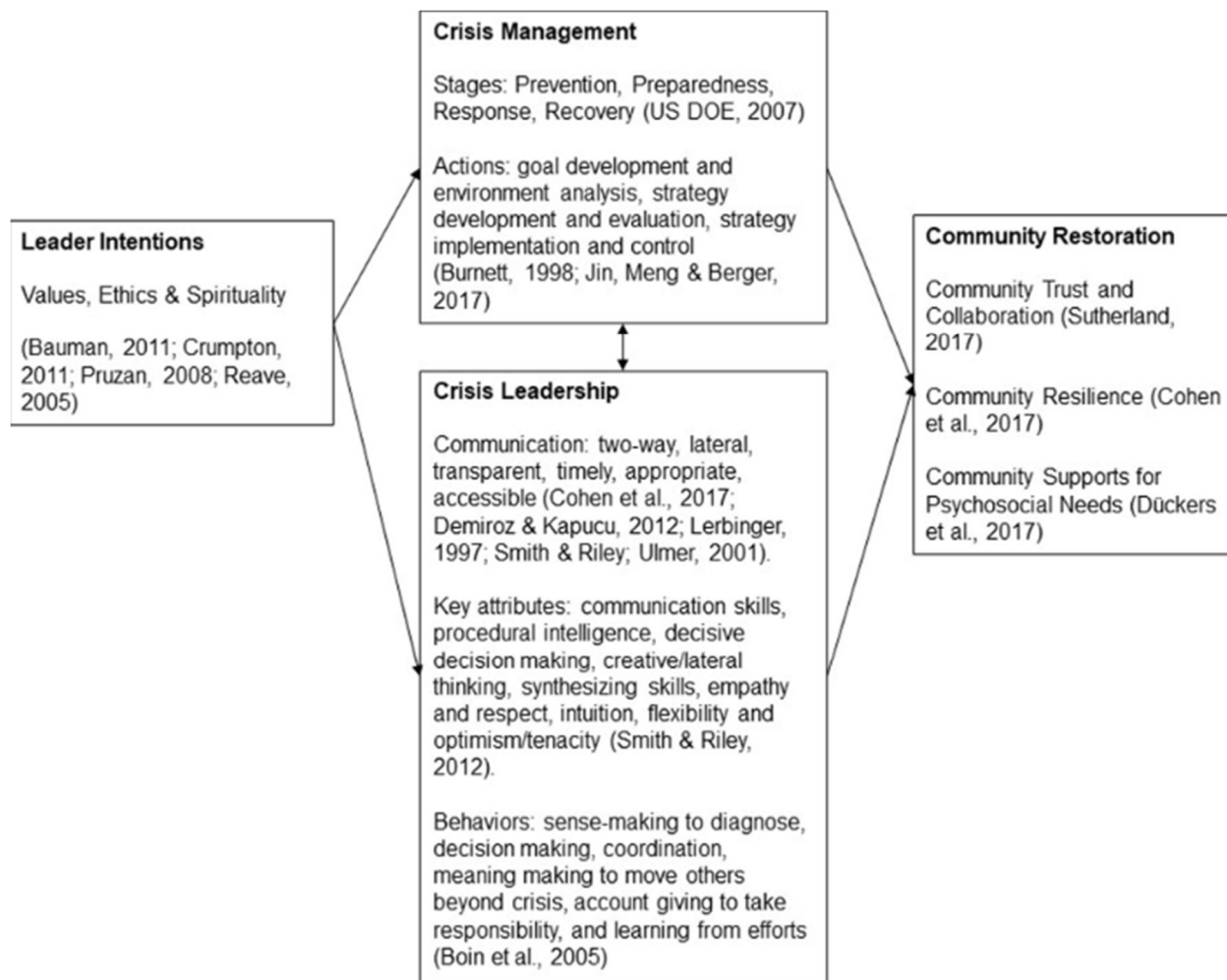
Crisis Leadership

Successful crisis leadership recognizes emerging threats, initiates effective plans to reduce risk, and overcomes consequences leading to a re-stabilization of normalcy (Boin et al., 2010). Characteristics that contribute to this delivery are represented in the framework's subcategories of *communication*, *key attributes*, and *behavior* (Urlick et al., 2021). Mutch (2020) asserted that crisis leadership values "vision, direction, and big-picture thinking" (p. 4); therefore, crisis leadership is an overarching guide that includes crisis management of school teams and protocols. Leithwood and Day (2007) espoused four key practices effective leaders engage in: "Building a vision and setting directions for the school; understanding and developing people; designing the organization so that it incorporates structures to support collaboration and productive working relationships; and managing the teaching and learning programme" (as cited in Enrich & Carrington, 2018, p. 122). It is obvious you cannot have one without the other. Managing and leading work hand in hand. Additionally, communication from administrators needs to feature transparency and a mutual exchange in order to achieve a collaborative, democratic, leadership approach.

Community Restoration

Crisis events do not occur in isolation but influence the whole school community. For administrators, they must understand that trust, collaboration, resilience, and support resources for the entire community are central to their role in times of crisis, not just daily. According to Sutherland (2017), crisis response and their outcomes hinge on organizational behaviors, thus impacting the dynamics within a community. These dynamics influence community trust and are the foundation for collaboration and resilience. With crises, trust is often disrupted. To preserve trust, Sutherland suggested that pathways of communication should be open, competent, honest, reliable, and benevolent amongst school community members. As reported by Dückers et al. (2017), response and recovery planners must include the use of social support to build resiliency, trust and attend to the psychosocial needs of community members. They also urged that mental health and psychosocial support be areas that leaders and school community members must focus on when a community experiences a crisis.

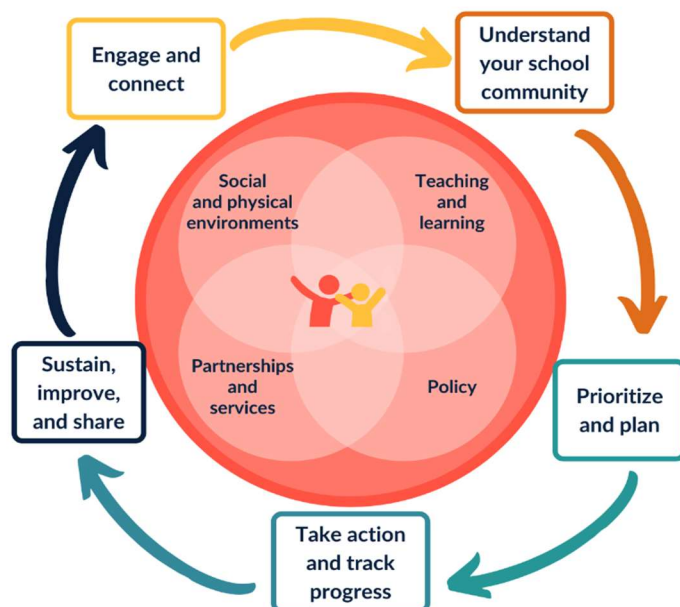
Figure 3
Crisis Management and Leadership Framework



Meaningful Crisis Leadership

A one-off module, which is common for crisis training, will not support the ever-changing school environment and crisis events that could occur in schools. Evidence from effective PD literature suggests learning for educators should be ongoing and sustained, focused on learners' needs and interests, be hands-on with social interaction and within learning communities (such as a school community), context based (within administrators' schools), enhance both knowledge and skills, and facilitated with care and sustained support (Tannehill et al., 2021). Moreover, learning in a school community needs to be grounded in the school environment, supported long-term, and practical in nature. Therefore, the following section uses the steps for building a healthy school community (see Figure 4) described by Alberta Health Services (2024) for administrators to organize and lead thoughtful professional learning on crisis management that emphasizes both *meaningful experiences* with a *healthy school community* approach to achieve long term impact.

Figure 4
Steps for Building a Healthy School Community



Engage and Connect

The initial step to leading is engaging and connecting with the school community to demonstrate the priority (crisis management) and plan in a collaborative way. Starting with a team approach to develop shared goals and visions supports transparency and open communication; two-way communication can promote trust, shared values, and stability to a school community (Chatzipanagiotou & Katsarou, 2023; Urick et al., 2021). Aligning with democratic approaches discussed in Meaningful PE, leaders should consider the multiple perspectives of the community in planning sessions so members feel valued and respected.

With relationships being central to leading with purpose, creating a shared vision, mission, and goals is essential. As a community, it is important to explore and share your values, especially when it comes to crisis management. Sharing values such as compassion, care, empathy, respect, spirituality, and ethics (Urick et al., 2021) can play an important role during challenging times. These values also contribute to a healthy school community, and it is important to consider how they will be embodied and integrated into your planning process. Meaningful PE also identifies how important social interactions are in learning; leaders should provide an opportunity for experiences to be shared, relationships to be built, and trust to be fostered. These elements need to be intentional in community building and planning. Working alongside others and having community collaboration supports the resilience of a team, leading to a healthier environment (Urick et al., 2021). Social interaction is vital to building a healthy school community (Fletcher & Baker, 2015). With little to no communication amongst learners embarking on crisis training, critical thinking skills are not improved. In fact, an isolated approach to learning increases the likelihood of meaningless experiences that diminish retention. Mutch (2020) claimed that, to build and restore a community during a crisis, togetherness across different sectors is crucial. Mutch discovered school community groups with strong relationships and a sense of community, established prior to crisis events, were able to gather resources, access support, and mobilize a

response in a timelier manner. Harris et al. (2018) claimed collaborative inquiry should include the “voices of authority, practitioners, school leaders, students, researchers, and those beyond the school gate” (p. 143). Therefore, social interaction and bringing together the school community should be a key foundation for meaningful crisis leadership and management.

Understand Your School Community

What works well in your crisis management and organization already? What challenges have you as a community experienced or do you foresee that could arise as issues? What are the roles and responsibilities of members in the school community prior, during, and after crisis events? Leaders need to prioritize getting to know the community and then determine appropriate measures for communication (mutual exchange) as this is considered a monumental part of crisis preparation for today’s leader (Bauman, 2010; Chatzipanagiotou & Katsarou, 2023; Jin et al., 2017; Kwatubana & Molaodi, 2021; Mutch, 2020; Smith & Riley, 2012). Collaboration amongst school community members, not only in engaging and connecting with them but also having them get to know one another, is critical during times of crisis as organizations lean on each other for support, networking, and resources (Jin et al., 2017; Mutch, 2020; Urick et al., 2021). Communication then is a catalyst for strong community collaboration and relationship-building.

We see communication and collaboration as requirements when preparing to lead and to create a democratic environment to lead within (Fletcher & Ní Chróinín, 2021). Democratic approaches to training initiatives allow principals and school community members to accurately voice ideas or concerns relative to their school to assist with the development of emergency preparedness protocols. For instance, some schools require more surveillance and security than other schools based on demographics, size of school, or enrollment numbers. Busy schools often do not have the time to brief staff that are hired part way through the school year on emergency protocol, leaving them to assume procedures, rather than be informed and part of discussions on the protocols. Instilling a more democratic approach to training situations, where training is ongoing and involves school staff’s input on needs, would reflect a more unified learning experience, where everyone in the community is aware of protocols and can communicate regularly and in an emerging way to new staff. When members in a school community know they are part of a team and have practiced communicating their ideas and sharing their voice by getting to know everyone, the whole team then has confidence that all areas of concern are represented and valued leading to a more successful implementation.

To achieve a more democratic environment around crisis interventions in schools, time needs to be dedicated to the training in order to build relationships among staff to share their voice and communicate in a positive manner. The importance of time has been recognized as an essential condition in cultivating healthy school communities, particularly in a busy school environment where multiple priorities and competing interests often arise (Storey et al., 2016). While much of this approach requires time out of a school day to practice these skills, the benefits of having a more cohesive emergency preparedness program far outweigh the cons for school jurisdictions.

Prioritize and Plan

In developing an action plan, the team needs to establish protocols, policies, roles, responses, recovery plan and advocacy initiatives around crisis management (Urick et al., 2021). There is value in leaders bringing the community together to unpack previous crisis experiences and give community members choice and autonomy to establish roles for moving forward in planning procedures. For instance, aligning with democratic approaches, using collaborative case analysis to examine past mistakes in crisis scenarios as a team could foster more authentic learning.

Learning and planning for crisis situations should also be context-based and personally relevant (with some fun). Having learning be personally relevant and based in their contexts helps to target what is being learned, why it is important, and how it relates to broader aspects of the learners' lives (Beni et al., 2021). From Author 1's (Melissa O'Connor) experience in leading emergency preparedness in-services for city employees in years past, providing scenario training which closely mimicked real-life crises proved both personally relevant and meaningful. Although these in-services were mandatory, participant engagement remained high given the seriousness of the topic. This was attributed to activities and scenarios being fun and engaging. In Author 1's experiences leading training, it was evident that staff looked forward to mock emergencies as it was a time to demonstrate their proficient skills. We see value in recognizing this goes beyond simply having fire drills in schools, but actually unpacking a variety of scenarios (e.g., medical emergencies or injuries, severe weather conditions, post-trauma school community support) as a team to support feelings of preparedness, increased confidence, and enhanced efficacy to enact a plan to work through unexpected events.

When planning, using "fun" activities for learning can be done by creating and presenting the most realistic and dynamic scenarios to staff with all school community members involved. We are not making light of the possible scenarios or simulations for crisis events but a sense of delight could be achieved if a team comes together and completes a task with success. When all members feel like they fulfilled their roles and as a team they can rally together for positive outcomes. One example of making these mock scenarios more realistic and fun would be bringing in emergency crews such as fire departments and the community constable. Members of the team would be learning from individuals with special skills, which could heighten the intrigue. The learning that is taken away from these types of in-service experiences could be applied towards the future and their intention to impact staff intrinsically so that the aspect of "delight" - or sense of pride and preparedness - lives on. This would further help to shift staffs' habit formation to include skills necessary to lead in times of crises, in and out of their contexts.

While staff and members of the community team are often evaluated and timed on their response and execution of skills in these types of planning or training sessions, implementing scenarios and activities that fit the "just right" challenge aspect of meaningful experience is important (Fletcher et al., 2021). Specifically, in Author 1's experiences, staff members tend to come away from in-services confident in their refined skills in crisis leadership, emergency preparedness, first aid treatment, and all secondary assessments when the challenges they completed met their skill level and were purposeful. As a community, you need to determine "crisis competencies" and set goals as a team to better understand the priorities, skills and possible situations that might occur in *your* context so that drills, tests, procedures and plans can be outlined appropriately. For example, if you live in a community that has had recurring natural disasters (e.g., earthquakes, floods), the skills and procedures for these crisis situations might be different from a community that has more harsh weather conditions (e.g., -40° Celsius weather). Or, the age group of students (e.g., Kindergarten to Grade 6 versus Grades 7-9) and community influences (e.g., instances of drug use in the community identified by the police) might shift school priorities in their professional learning needs and the action plan for these crisis events.

Take Action and Track Progress

As identified in the "prioritize and plan" section, it is clear that crisis events could be in flux based on multiple factors. Therefore, it is critical to have ongoing learning occur, progress tracked, and action documented to have continuous learning and development. Regularly checking in on community members' roles and how the plan is *living* - being operationalized and

implemented - in the environment is critical. In crisis situations, leaders need to diagnose issues and have clear guidelines on who is making decisions during different situations (Urick et al., 2021). With communication being central to a leader's role, it is imperative that everyone practices communication before, during, and after crises so that it can be clear, concise, accurate, timely, and relevant to reduce or prevent threats (Smith & Riley, 2012). Since you cannot anticipate when a crisis event might occur in your school community, it is important to be always ready to take action and to track progress; having regular communication about new opportunities or check-in as a team helps strengthen a community to be prepared.

Sustain, Improve and Share

Aligning with democratic approaches, collectively debriefing scenarios and post crisis situations is also an essential component for crisis management and leadership (Urick et al., 2021). Reflection as a whole community and evaluation of protocols and situations need to occur to ensure a cycle of improvement and to sustain a positive healthy community. For instance, following the COVID-19 pandemic, some school jurisdictions had little to no debriefing done with school leaders regarding their leadership that occurred during this time (ATA, 2022). The lack of follow-up and debrief to unpack crisis situations is an issue for future implementation (Urick et al., 2021). In our experiences, debriefing as a school team seldom occurs and, if done, is often conducted via email or over the PA system. Reflective time in schools and purposefully debriefing the experience can allow for more conscious and lasting learning to occur. Feller and Franklin (2023) described reflective practice as necessary for principals as a power tool to be strong leaders. Research on the sustainability of healthy school communities also highlights the importance of evaluating, sharing, and celebrating the achievement of set goals. To foster ongoing improvement and create a sustainable healthy school community, it is crucial to assess which strategies worked well and which did not, while also analyzing the reasons behind these outcomes. Furthermore, recognizing successes and planning strategically for future initiatives is essential (Stolp et al., 2015; Storey et al., 2016).

Conclusion

At the core, crisis leadership and management *are* (or should be) part of professional learning. Taking a meaningful approach to required learning, rooting it solidly within the crisis management and leadership knowledge base, and then implementing it within a healthy school community is an opportunity for school leaders. It is an opportunity to engage with the community, work alongside others, be relational and ethical, prepare for crises, and, above all, find meaningfulness in preparing for what we all hope will never happen.

Utilizing the steps to building a healthy school as an outline, school leaders working on plans to lead and manage in times of crises can ensure engagement, community development and uptake whilst leaving space for meaningful learning based on sound crisis management principles. In this way, the human element is prioritized and treasured, reflection on past actions is encouraged and new ways forward can be found.

When I (Author1 – Melissa O'Connor) reflect back to that morning our school managed that lockdown, I think a lot of undue stress and panic would have been removed had we followed the above frameworks and tools. Collectively speaking as a team to devise an emergency plan that considered our renovations prior to renovations occurring would have mitigated chaos. The risk of the school community's lives could be reduced and the wellness of all could have been preserved, sustaining trust and faith in the leadership during a time of crisis.

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