Crisis Management: The state of preparedness and response in selected schools in Zimbabwe

Remigio Chingara

Faculty of Education, Educational Leadership and Management, Great Zimbabwe University, email: rchingara@gzu.ac.zw

Piet Muparuri

Faculty of Education, Educational Leadership and Management, Great Zimbabwe University

Abstract

The occurrence of a crisis in a school affects the continuation of teaching and learning. Quite often, this happens when no one in the school least expects and is therefore not well prepared for it. Resultantly, the reaction to the crisis hardly ever matches the desired response. The complexity experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic as well as the increasing occurrence of other crises in schools in Zimbabwe has led to questions being asked as to whether school heads in Zimbabwe were adequately equipped with skills and competences to respond and manage crises that occur in their schools. The purpose of this study therefore was to examine the crisis management state of preparedness and response in selected schools in Zimbabwe. The study utilised the quantitative research design in which a questionnaire was administered to teachers, deputy heads and school heads attending cohort studies at one university in Zimbabwe. Findings suggest that although school heads were cognizant of what a crisis and its life cycle were, they were only using their wisdom and common sense to do so. They came into their positions without crisis management prior training and subsequently did not receive any at all. Their knowledge and compliance with risk and disaster management policy circulars available in schools did not necessarily translate into them being crisis managers, neither did it make them competent in that regard. It is therefore imperative that when dealing with crises, school heads be guided by best practice obtained through training. The study therefore recommends training for school heads in crisis management. It proposes that qualified guidance and counselling teachers, who can better use their skills and competences to address crisis recovery in schools be appointed. It further proposes that crisis plans be made mandatory in all schools.

Key words: Crisis; Crisis Management; Preparedness, Crisis lifecycle stages; Contingency Theory

Introduction

The Tynwald school bus accident in Zimbabwe on the 15th of October 2022 provides compelling evidence of why crisis management and response is important and requires knowledgeable and skilled school heads to handle so as to lessen the effects of such events (The Suburban, 21October 2022). Six learners who were on a school trip to Nyanga in Zimbabwe were killed and thirty four were injured when their bus overturned near the Pine Tree Hotel on the Rusape to Nyanga road. This is one incident that motivated this study and led to this inquiry on the crisis management state of preparedness and response in schools in Zimbabwe.

The death of a student or a teacher is traumatic particularly if it is unexpected as is normally the case with school bus accidents. Such a crisis has been known to cause emotional and social distress (MacNeil & Topping, 2007). It disrupts normal school routine and creates an atmosphere of uncertainty. The deceased will have been those that learners used to attend classes with and were close to. Surviving learners are said to experience feelings of shock, repudiation, anger and overwhelming sadness. Psychologists say that these feelings and symptoms of grief take weeks, months and even years to manifest and develop (Black, 2005). They say that people do not heal from grief on a time table but over time as the emotions of grief ease. The period of time people are given to grieve during a funeral is said to be often inadequate and is said to often touch on the initial stages of grief (NASP, 2015). Signing of books of condolences, attending the funerals or memorial services is said to be inadequate to overcome grief. Psychologists recommend the use of counsellors to help those learners and teachers having trouble to cope with the loss of a learner or teacher.

According to Duma (2014) reveals that crisis counselling and intervention is an important part of school practice in many South African schools. Be that as it may, the education and training received by South African teachers was mostly grounded on teaching and learning as well as school management aspects only. There was no particular consideration to crisis counselling, response and prevention and yet the teachers were expected to function as school

based crisis counselling counsellors and mediators in times of crisis. The study recommended that teachers be trained in crisis counselling and response.

In Zimbabwe, the Department of Psychological services, Special needs and Learner Welfare in the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education is responsible for organising and coordinating the provision of guidance and counselling services to individual as well as groups of learners at every school as well as providing direct psychological services in response to referrals and crises that affect learners during their period in school. The question is "Are school heads and their teachers in schools in Zimbabwe fully cognisent about the services offered by this department and are they utilising them?" In addition to this department, all school heads are compelled by the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education in Zimbabwe to set up guidance and counselling teams to attend to issues like those raised on. These teams are constituted through delegation and capacitated through workshops conducted by the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education periodically. The question again is whether these teams are being effective in addressing crisis situations in schools in Zimbabwe.

Quite often, school heads have been found wanting in their crisis response thereby confounding the situation and lengthening the recovery (Morrison, 2017). Weick (2010) appears to concur when he explains that the way stakeholders in a school respond to a crisis helped to solve some of the problems but also helped in creating new ones which actually ended up prolonging and making the crisis worse. The Tynwald bus accident highlights the response made by the school authorities but also informs on how the school head led in the recovery efforts of the students through providing the students at the school with requisite counselling (The Suburban, 21October 2022). This incident offers critical insights into how school heads should be skilful and competent when responding to a crisis and leading in the recovery efforts. The understanding that will be gained from this study will hopefully prove quite relevant to schools.

There apparently appears to be very little or no research on the crisis management state of preparedness and response in schools in Zimbabwe. The relative unavailability of literature on this research problem in Zimbabwe is in itself an indication that research has to be done in order to provide more insight and enhanced approaches on this issue. The importance of this problem is very clear as there has never been a more critical need for school heads in Zimbabwe to acquaint themselves with knowledge on the process to follow before, during and after a crisis

in their schools. The purpose of this study therefore was to examine the crisis management state of preparedness and response in selected schools in Zimbabwe.

It was guided by the following research questions:

- To what extent are school heads knowledgeable about a crisis and its life cycle?
- To what extent are school heads trained and competent as crisis managers?
- How do school heads respond to crisis events that occur in their schools?

The importance of this problem is crystal clear as there has never been a more critical need for school leaders to know the steps to take before and during a crisis and how to effectively respond and recover afterwards. Crises involving schools include suicide, shootings, stabbings, road traffic accidents, major fires and natural disasters which result in injury or death (MacNeil and Topping, 2007). The Oxford dictionary 1987 defines a crisis as a "critical moment or turning point in a course of life of a person, nation or an institution". This definition implies that uncertainties, absent teachers and learners, curriculum uncertainties and disrupted school times fit into the definition of a crisis. Teachers who fail to submit reports on time and are not sure if they will do so or not often say they have a crisis. A new school head may experience a situation which he or she can refer to as a crisis but to an experienced school head, it can be referred to as a normal situation instead of a crisis. As the new school head becomes more and more experienced, many of the situations which were previously deemed crises become part of the normal day to day routine in which he or she leads and manages the school.

Crises in schools have the tendency of being sudden, unexpected and affect an entire school community (Coombs, 2000). They have a low probability of occurring but when they do, they become high consequential occasions (Morrison, 2017), that can damage an organisation's reputation, breaking the emotions of its stakeholders in the process. Stakeholders need to identify a crisis as an unforeseen event which is a threat (Coombs, 2007). MacNeil and Topping (2007) offer a definition of a crisis applicable to schools by suggesting that it is a quick and unexpected event that has the potential to affect the entire school stakeholders. They further suggest that it can be any situation faced by school staff or learners triggering them to feel emotional in such a way that impairs their ability to perform.

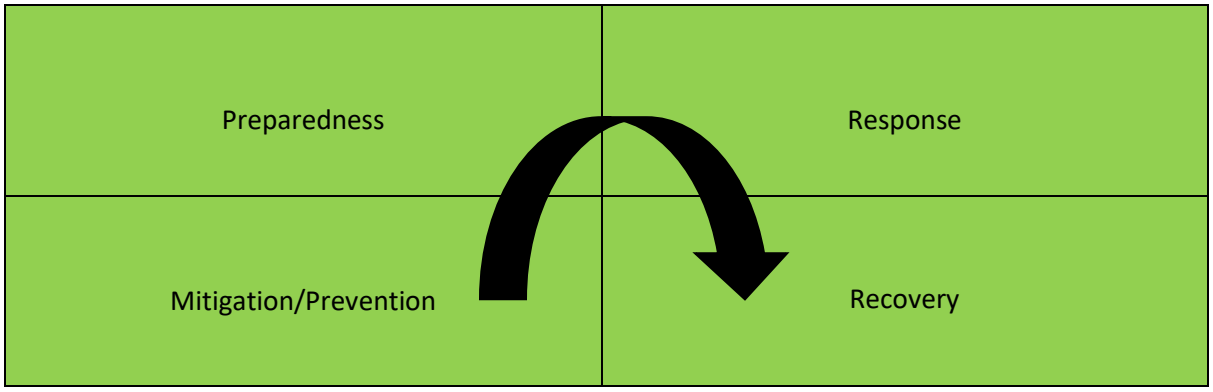
Best practice models that provide the framework of dealing with crises have been found to be those that categorises a crises. There is the Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) by

Mitchell and Everly (1995) whose key feature is that of the element of debriefing. The most widely adopted model is the Prevention, Preparation, Response and Recovery Model (PPRR) by Caplan, (1964) which Morrison, (2017) adopted and refers to as the Preparedness, Response, Recovery and Mitigation/Prevention (PPRM (P) crisis management model. This is a model that prepares for, prevents, copes with or helps one to recover from a crisis and can help school heads to better apply best practices. These two models have their own inherent problems and share of criticisms. Be that as it may, the (PPRM (P) crisis management model remains popular (MacNeil and Topping, 2007; Morrison, 2017)

In the context of Zimbabwe, it would appear that the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education pursues a crisis management model that concentrates on preparing for and responding to disasters. It is silent on crisis recovery. This is evidenced by the number of circulars from the Ministry which guide school heads on what to do in the event of specified disasters. Examples are the Secretary's Circular number 19 of 1991 which provides fire precautions and procedures. Secretary's Circular number 6 of 2023 provides guidelines on the prevention and management of bullyIng and other forms of violence at and around schools. Secretary's Circular P.54 of 2023 provides guidelines on Organisation of Educational tours for cultural enrichments, Sports, Arts and Culture.

This study is deeply informed by the contingency theory by Fiedler (1993) which asserts that there is no one way of managing a crisis. Decisions on how to manage a crisis should be made depending on the circumstances (Marker, 2020). This is particularly so because as previously alluded to, crises are not fixed, and are likely to change, often repeatedly and unexpectedly. School heads therefore have to adapt the way they manage or respond to crises so that they depend on the situation. Contingency planning becomes essential as it involves anticipation of what may happen, coupled with allocation of resources. The theoretical lens that guide this study are the four stages in the life cycle of a crisis (Fig 1) and these are mitigation/prevention; preparedness, response and recovery (Morrison, 2017).

Fig 1: The four Stages in the life cycle of a Crisis



Adapted from Morrison, (2017)

The aim of the first stage, mitigation/prevention, is to minimise the likely hood of a crisis happening and this includes taking preventative measures (Morrison, 2017). It entails taking steps to identify and eliminate or reduce the source of risk. The term mitigation used in conjunction with prevention comes in to convey an element of reducing the effects of a perceived crisis. Going by the Tynwald school bus accident in Zimbabwe on the 15th of October 2022, and as a way of mitigating against a potential crisis, the school head could have put in place measures that would have made it impossible for the bus driver to drive at night. A fire crisis can be prevented by reducing or removing readily available combustible materials through a fire guard; having fire extinguishers or smoke detector alarms. Likewise, a crisis like suicide can be reduced or prevented from happening through early identification of learners at risk of suicide or self-harm, e.g. abusers of drugs and related substances.

The second stage, preparedness, entails the speed at which an organisation dispatches off a crisis (Morrison, 2017). It involves planning, training, education and practice (MacNeil and Topping, 2007). The faster an organisation takes to dispatch off a crisis, the better and Eaves (2001) proposed that school crisis plans be made mandatory. Therefore, the level of crisis preparedness determines the crisis life. The faster it is dealt with, the shorter the crisis life span vice versa. It is desirable that schools in Zimbabwe be prepared for crises that may happen so as to quickly do away with them.

The third stage, response, entails all that is done by way of routines so as to prevent the crisis from perpetuating any further. It involves prompt implementation and the mobilisation of resources appropriate for the kind of crisis at hand.

The fourth stage, recovery, entails enacting rescue actions so as to deliver the healing power of those routines. This is the stage were those affected by the crisis are helped to find closure and usually requires professionals such as psychologists and councillors. This study therefore, explored how school heads in selected schools in Zimbabwe respond during crisis events that occurred in their schools?

Methodology

This study employed the quantitative research design. This design was selected because it advocates for the collection of reliable and accurate data quickly through the use of the survey method as was the case in this study.

The study's instrument was the questionnaire. The questionnaire was made up of three (3) parts. The first part addressed the biographical issues of the study. The second part solicited for responses relating to the problem at hand and required structured responses. The third and final part of the questionnaire had two open-ended questions which bolstered responses from the close-ended questions found in the second part of the questionnaire. The first question was two pronged. The first part wanted to find out the kind of training school heads received upon appointment if at all there was any and whether such training included crisis management. The second part wanted to find out from respondents whether teachers colleges in Zimbabwe offered crisis management as part of teachers training. The second question was two pronged as well. The first part wanted to find out the role of the Schools Psychological services department in crisis management in schools. The second part wanted to find out if the guidance and counselling syllabus being offered in schools covered all crises that occurred in schools. Because this study wanted to solicit for opinions of the respondents, it used an opinion survey.

The population of the study were all the one hundred and two (102) bachelors and masters students attending their cohort studies at one university in Zimbabwe. Suffice to say the population consisted of teachers, deputy heads and school heads. The study utilised stratified sampling to divide the population into subgroups based on position in a school i.e. teacher, deputy head and school head. Random sampling was then used on each group, selecting ten (10) school heads, fifteen (15) deputy heads and twenty-five (25) teachers.

This sample of fifty (50) respondents was considered ideal considering the rule of thumb which states that a survey sample must not be less than ten percent (10%) of the population. The sample's characteristics reflects that there were more teachers followed by deputy heads and then school heads in the population. The respondents were informed that participation was voluntary. They were encouraged to answer as honestly as possible and were assured that their answers would remain confidential. As far as this study is concerned, all ethical concerns required in human research were observed.

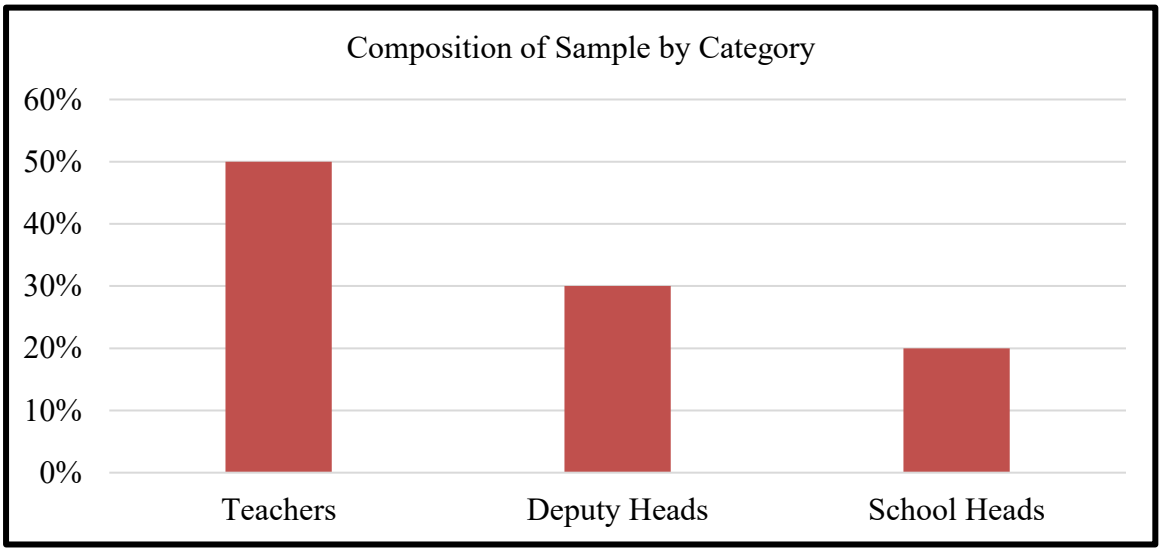
The researchers distributed the same questionnaire to fifty (50) respondents and they were given a day to complete them. The response rate was one hundred percent (100%) because all the respondents were gathered in one place and follow up was very easy in addition to the interest and enthusiasm brought by the study. The study touched on an area in which they were directly affected as school leaders and most of them alluded to have fallen victim to a crisis of some sort in their schools.

Findings and Discussion

The study set out to examine the crisis management state of preparedness and response in selected schools in Zimbabwe. This section is presented in two sections namely the presentation of findings and the discussion.

Presentation of findings

Fig 2. Composition of Sample by Category



Teachers constituted 50% of the sample and deputy heads were 30% of the respondents and deputy heads were 20%. The sample fully represents both categories fairly in the school system as all schools in Zimbabwe have one school head, one deputy head and as many teachers.

Table 1. Respondents by Gender

Category of Responses	Heads		Deputy Heads		Teachers		Totals	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Female	7	70	10	67	15	60	32	64
Male	3	30	5	33	10	40	18	36
Totals	10	100	15	100	25	100	50	100

There were more female heads, deputy heads and teachers than their male counterparts (64%: female; 36%: male). This is not surprising because most schools in rural districts neighbouring major urban centres are traditionally staffed with more female heads, deputy heads and teachers than male ones.

Table 2. Composition of Respondents by Age

Category of Responses	Heads		Deputy Heads		Teachers		Totals	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
< 30	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
30 – 40	0	0	8	53	15	60	23	46
40 – 50	7	70	3	20	8	32	18	36
>50	3	30	4	27	2	8	9	18
Totals	10	100	15	100	25	100	50	100

The 30 to 40 year age group dominated the survey with a 46 % representation. The 40 to 50 year age group followed at 36 % representation. The under 30-year age group and the over 50 year- age group had 0 % and 18% representation respectively. The 30 to 50-year age range lies within the decision-making, achievement and fulfilment age range, which implies that they are in a better position to offer credible opinions.

Table 3. Composition of Respondents by Professional Qualifications

Category of Responses	Heads		Deputy Heads		Teachers		Totals	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Diploma in Education	0	0	0	0	19	76	19	38
Degreed	10	100	15	100	6	24	31	62
Totals	10	100	15	100	25	100	50	100

All the respondents were in possession of professional qualifications with all heads and deputy heads having degrees. This is not surprising because all school heads and deputy heads were actually doing their Masters degrees in Educational Leadership and Management.

Table 4. Composition by Working Experience

Category of Responses	Heads		Deputy Heads		Teachers		Totals	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
< 5	2	20	4	27	6	24	12	24
5 - 10	3	30	6	40	12	48	21	42
10 – 15	3	30	3	20	4	16	10	20
> 15	2	20	2	13	3	12	7	14
Totals	10	100	15	100	25	100	50	100

The survey found that 42% of the respondents had a working experience of between 5 and 10 years, followed by 24 % who had an experience of less than 5 years and 20 % who had 10 to 15 years working experience. Only 14% had over 15 years' experience.

Table 5. Knowledge of what a crisis is

a) A crisis is an event that causes severe emotional and social distress to occur at any time and without warning.
b) A crisis is a sudden, unexpected event that has an emergency quality and has the potential to impact to impact on the entire school community.
c) A crisis is considered as any situation faced by staff or students causing them to experience unusually strong, emotional reactions that may interfere with their ability to perform at the scene or later.
d) A crisis is an unforeseen event which is a threat

Findings indicate that 80% of the teachers in this study were able to successfully pick out all the sentences that define the word "crisis" listed in figure 4. Only 20% failed to do so. School heads (100%) and deputy heads (100%) were equally able to do likewise. These findings suggest that teachers, deputy heads and school heads in this study are cognisent of what a crisis is.

Table 6. List of crises that occur in schools as noted in this study

• Death of a teacher/staff member/stakeholder • Death of a learner • School Bus Accidents • Drug abuse • Shortage of water • Absenteeism/Long term illness of a teacher • Natural Disasters e.g. roofs blown away by wind/Buildings destroyed by a cyclone • Shortage of teaching and learning materials • Shortage of teachers' accommodation • Huge transfer of learners to other schools at one time • Electricity outages/Load shedding	• Shortage of teachers • Fainting of a learner or teacher • Poor performance by learners • Robbery • Suicide/Attempted suicide • Bullying • Understaffing/Overstaffing • Disease outbreak • Fire outbreak • A teacher transferring and is not replaced • Shortage of school furniture/classrooms • Network Challenge • Sexual Harassment • School debt • Strike/Demonstration • Huge staff turnover

Table 6 is a list of the crises identified by all the respondents in this study. These conform to some of those crises identified by MacNeil and Topping (2007) which include suicide, shootings, stabbings, road traffic accidents, major fires and natural disasters which result in injury or death. Knowledge of these crises is very important as it helps school heads to plan for them and dispatch them off as quickly as possible.

Fig 3. Professional Identity

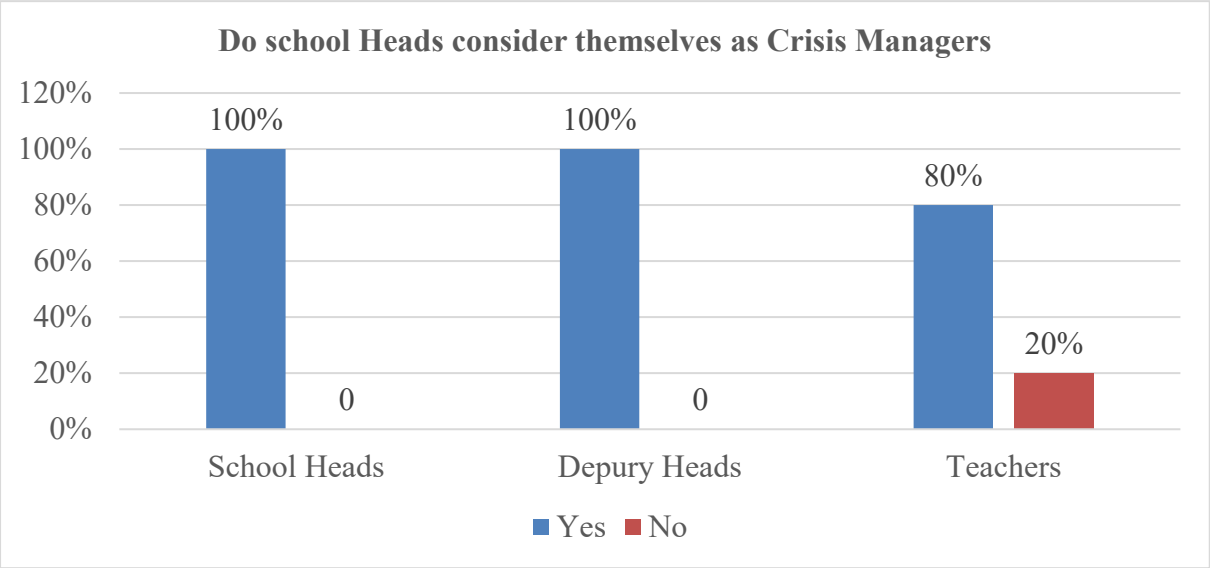
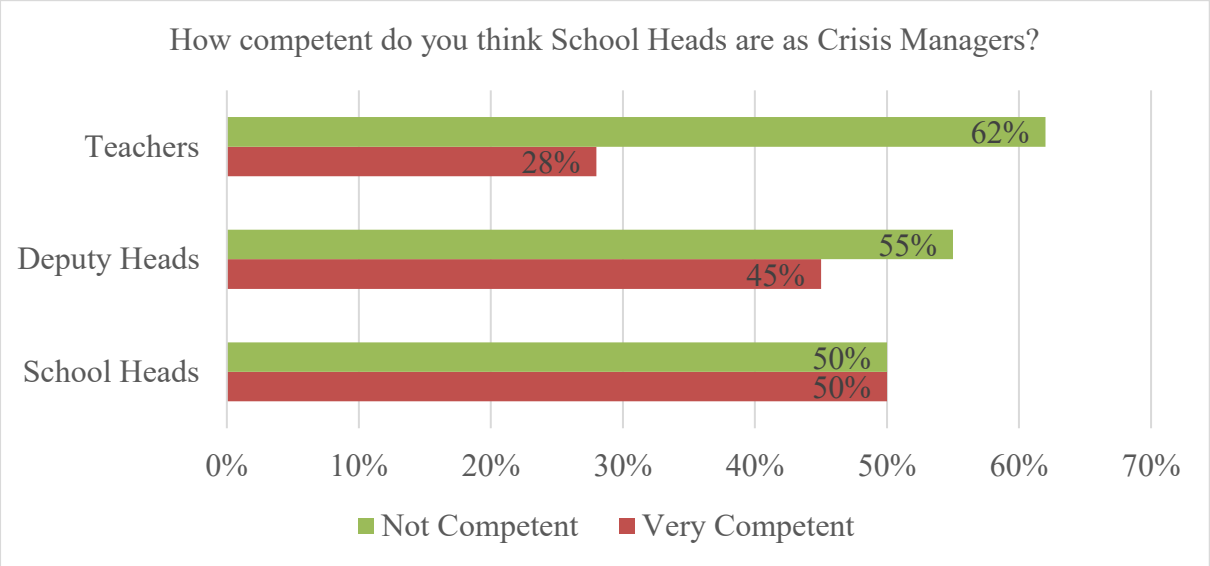


Figure 3 indicates that the majority of respondents in this study (School heads (100%); Deputy Heads (100%) and Teachers (80%) consider school heads to be crisis managers Only 20% of the teachers did not view school heads as crisis managers.

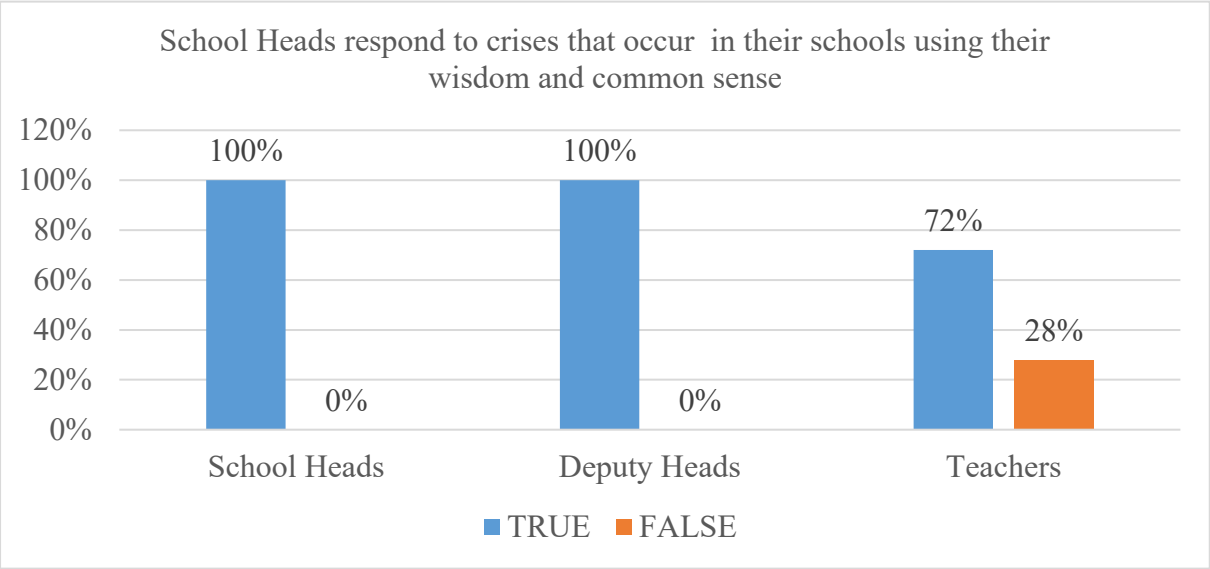
Fig 4. Professional Competence



Findings as depicted by Fig 4 show that 50% of the school Heads feel very competent as crisis managers. However, 50% of the same feel they are not competent. 55% of the deputy

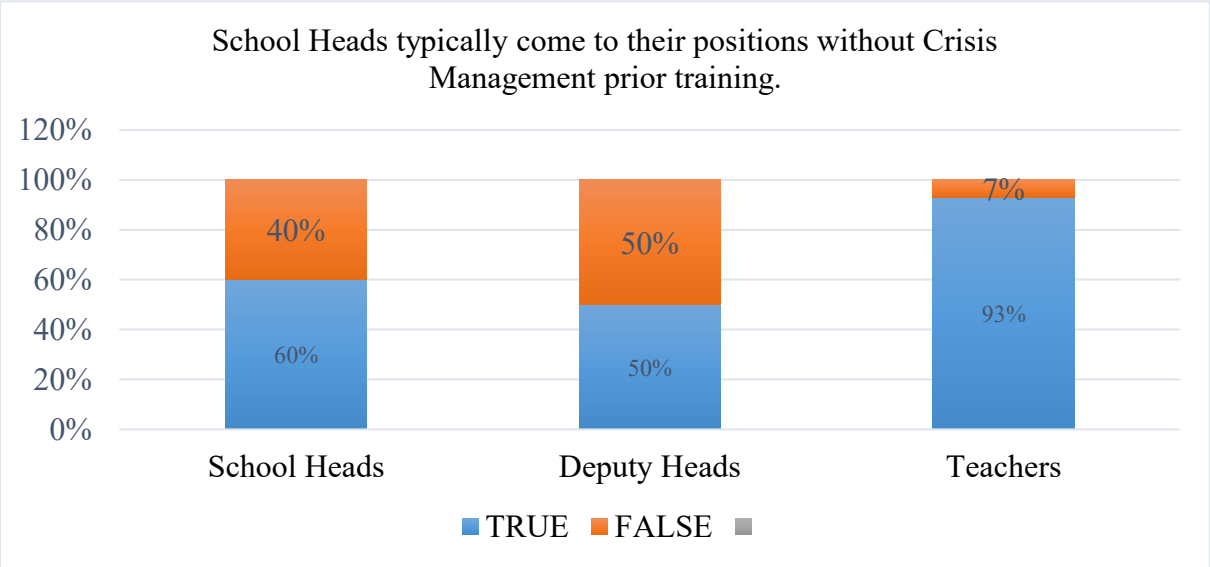
heads felt they were not competent whilst 45% felt they were competent. 62% of the teachers felt that their school heads were not competent. Only 28% felt they were competent.

Fig 5. Responding to crises that occur in schools



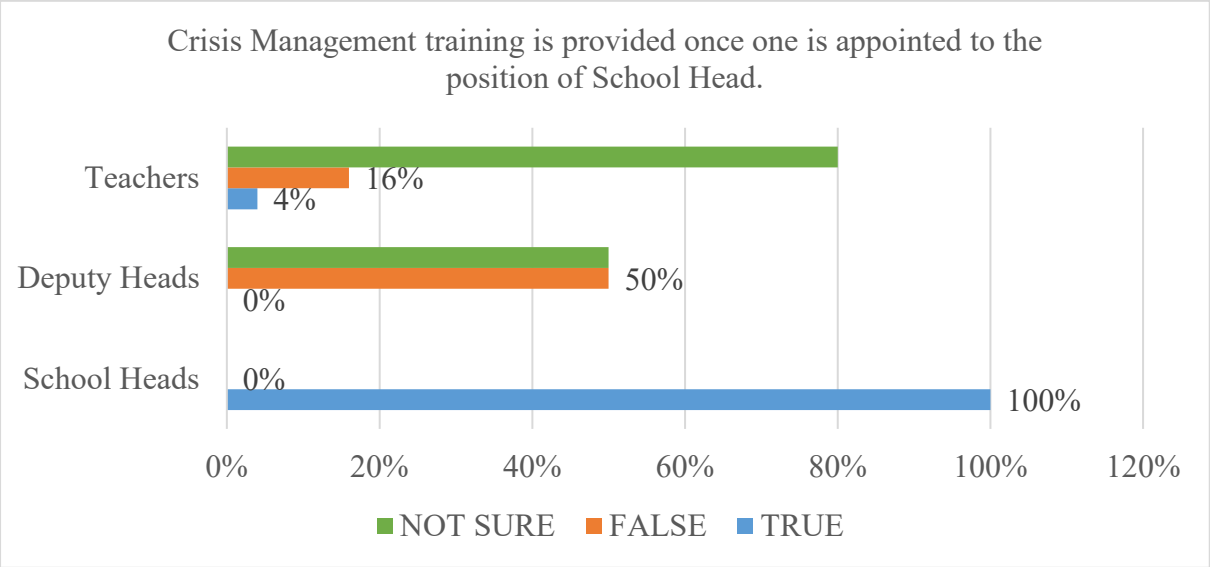
Findings as depicted by Fig 5 indicate a rather unsettling discovery. School heads (100%) and deputy heads (100%) in this study ALL agreed that they used their wisdom and common sense to respond to crises that occurred in their schools. 72% of the teachers concurred and only 28% of them not concurring.

Fig 6. Crisis Management training status of School Heads prior to appointment



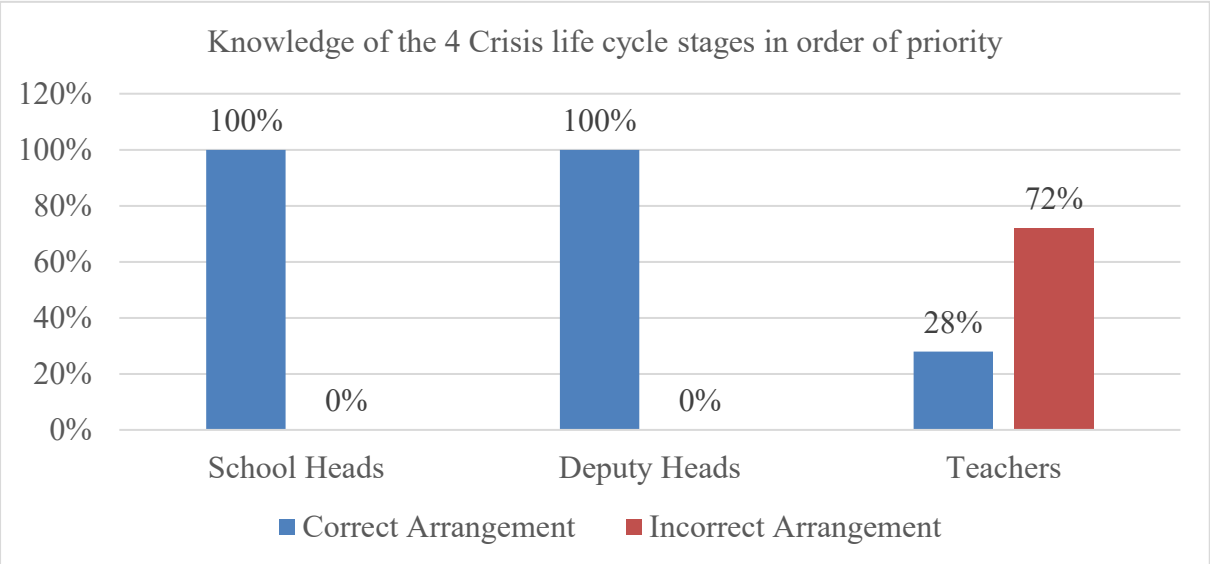
60% of the school heads in this study agreed that it was true that they came into their positions without crisis management prior training. 50% of the deputy heads concurred while 93% of the teachers further concurred.

Fig 7. Crisis Management training after appointment



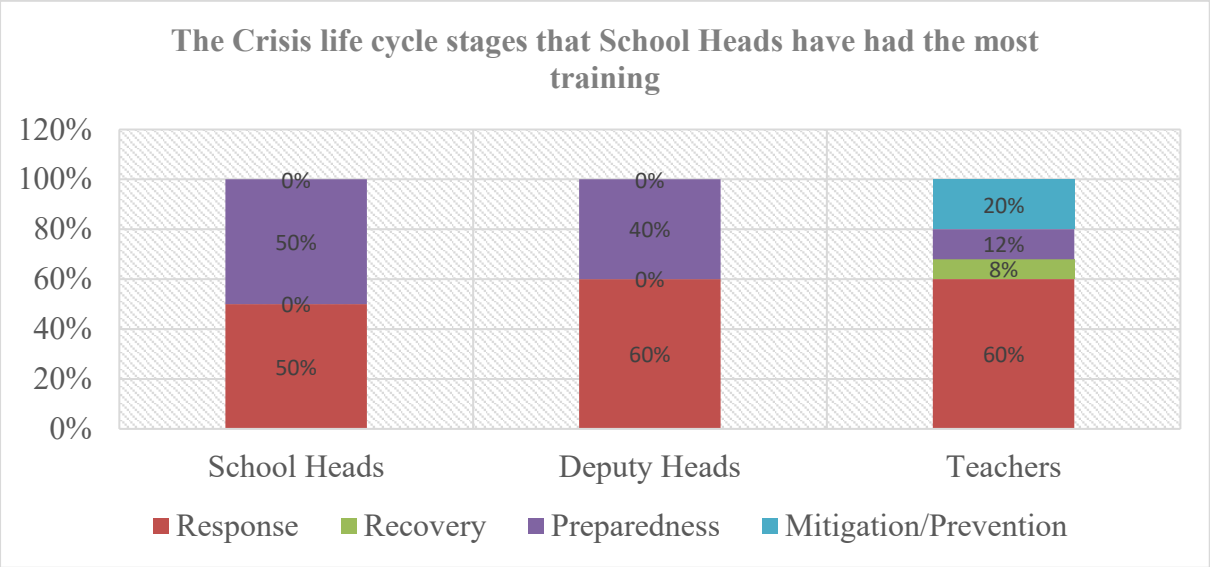
100% of the school heads in this study agreed that it is indeed true that they were provided with crisis management training once they were appointed to the position of school head. 50% of the deputy heads concurred whilst 80% of the teachers were not sure.

Fig 8. Knowledge of the 4 crisis life cycle stages in order of priority



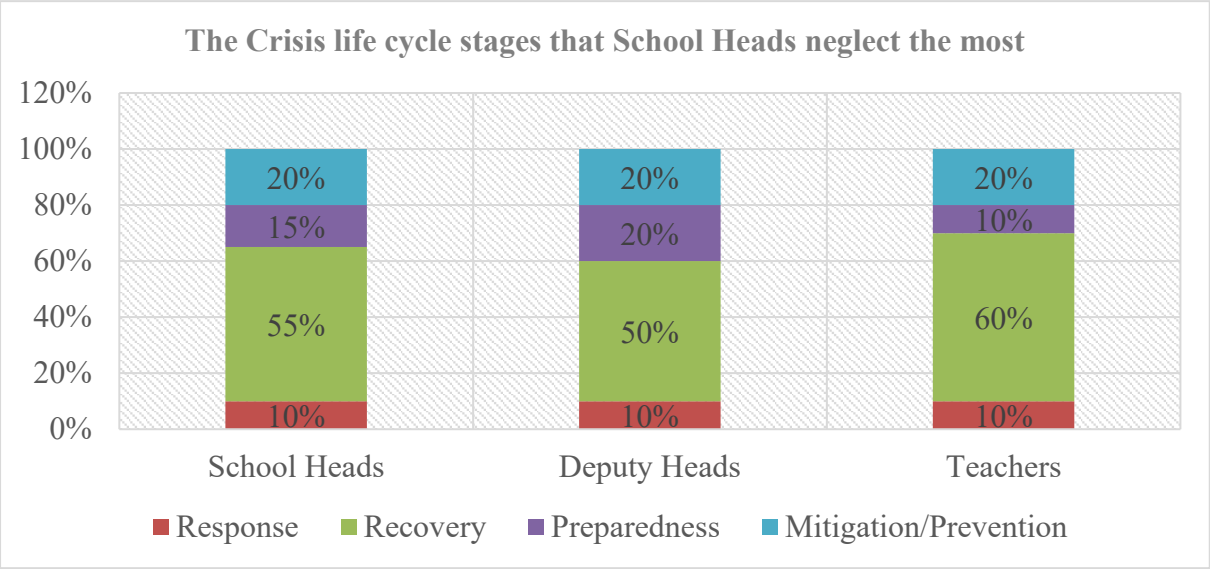
Respondents in this study demonstrated knowledge of the 4 life cycle stages by indicating their correct order of priority. School heads and deputy heads (100%) all identified the correct arrangement while 72% of the teachers failed.

Fig 9. Crisis life stages school heads have had the most training



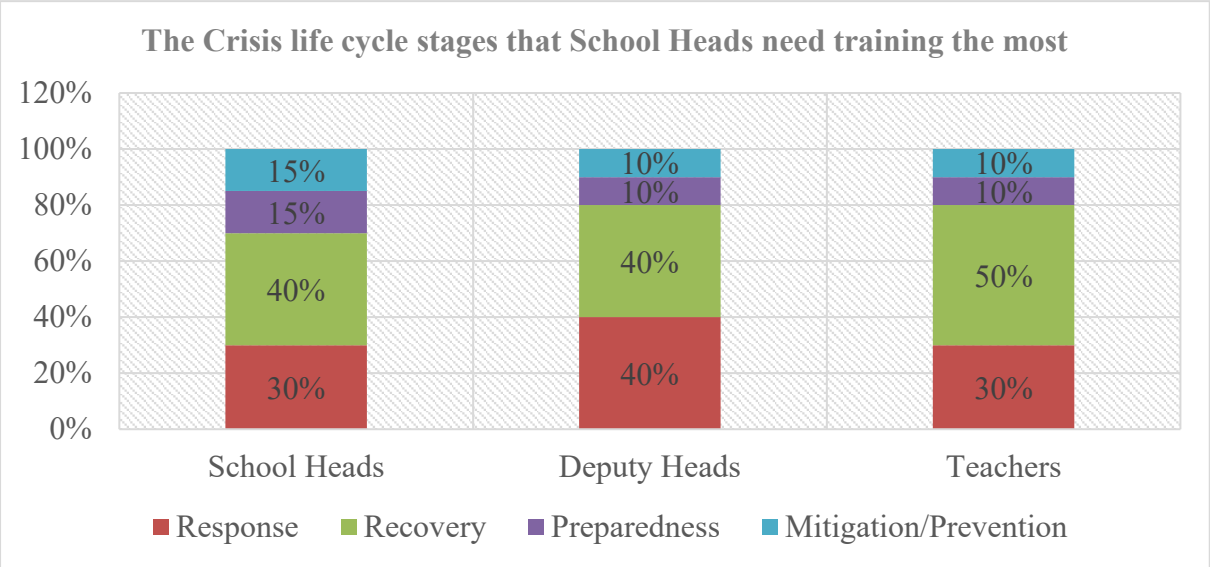
Evidence from Figure 9 indicates that school heads have had most training in crisis preparedness (50%) and response (50%) respectively. Collectively, crisis preparedness and crisis response constituted 100% of the training for school heads. However, 60% of the deputy heads in this study indicated that school heads had most training in crisis response whilst 40% indicated that they had most training in crisis preparedness. Collectively, crisis response and crisis preparedness constituted 100% of the training for deputy heads. It is quite interesting to note that both school heads and deputy heads do not indicate any training in crisis recovery (0%). On the same vein, 60% of the teachers indicated that school heads have had most training in crisis response followed by mitigation/prevention (20%) followed by crisis preparedness (12%) and finally crisis recovery at 8%. Only a small percentage of teachers (8%) indicate that school heads have had training in crisis recovery. The implication here is that school heads have had most training in crisis response followed by crisis preparedness and then crisis mitigation/prevention and finally crisis recovery.

Fig 10. Crisis life stages school heads neglect the most



Evidence from Figure 10 indicates that school heads neglect crisis recovery and crisis mitigation/prevention the most. 55% of the school heads indicated that they neglected crisis recovery the most followed by 20% who indicated that they neglected crisis mitigation/prevention the most followed by 15% who indicated that they neglected crisis preparedness the most and finally 10% who indicated that they neglected crisis response the most. Thus, crisis recovery and crisis mitigation/prevention constitutes the crisis life stages that school heads felt they neglected the most. However, 50% of the deputy heads indicated that they neglected crisis recovery the most followed by crisis mitigation/prevention and crisis preparedness at 20% respectively and finally crisis response at 10%. 60% of the teachers indicated that school heads neglected crisis recovery the most followed by 20% who indicated that school heads neglected crisis mitigation/prevention the most and finally crisis response and crisis preparedness at 10% respectively. The implication here is that school heads neglect crisis recovery the most followed by crisis mitigation/prevention and then crisis preparedness and finally crisis response.

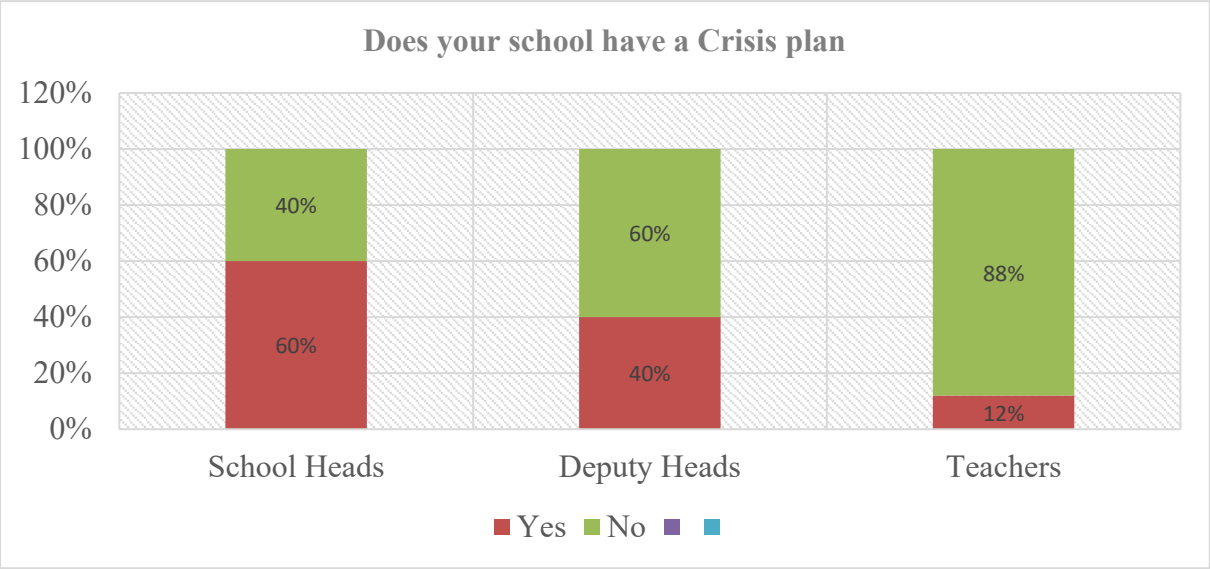
Fig 11. Crisis life stages school heads need training the most



Evidence from Figure 11 indicates that school heads needed training the most in crisis recovery and crisis response. 40% of the school heads indicated that they needed training the most in crisis recovery followed by 30% who indicated that they needed training the most in crisis response followed by 15% who indicated that they needed training the most in both crisis preparedness and crisis mitigation/prevention respectively. Thus, crisis recovery and crisis response constitutes the crisis life stages that school heads felt they needed training most. However, 40% of the deputy heads indicated that school heads needed training the most in crisis recovery and crisis response respectively followed by 15% of the deputy heads who felt school heads needed training the most in crisis mitigation/prevention and crisis preparedness respectively.

50% of the teachers indicated that school heads needed training the most in crisis recovery followed by 30% who indicated that school heads needed training the most in crisis response and finally crisis response and crisis mitigation/prevention at 10% respectively. The implication here is that school heads need training the most in crisis recovery followed by crisis response and then crisis mitigation/prevention and crisis preparedness respectively.

Fig 12. Availability of a crisis plan in the schools



As Figure 12 demonstrates, the majority of respondents in this study attest to the unavailability of crisis plans in their schools (School heads (40%); Deputy Heads (60%) and Teachers (88%). Interestingly though, 60% of the school heads confirmed having crisis plans in their schools; something that seems to be refuted by both deputy heads (60%) and teachers (88%). When asked whether the crisis plans included crisis preparation, planning, training and practicing, both the teachers (88%) and deputy heads (88%) denied this. Only 12% of the teachers and 12% of the deputy heads alluded to the existence of the crisis plans. Surprisingly, 72% of the school heads denied that the crisis plans that they supposedly had in their schools included crisis preparation, planning, training and practicing. When asked whether the crisis plans that they supposedly had in their schools included measures to mitigate/prevent against some crises which occurred in their schools, school heads (68%), deputy heads (80%) and teachers (72%) denied this. These results seem to suggest that there are no crisis plans in schools in this study despite some school heads, deputy heads and teachers attesting to their availability.

Findings through the open ended questions provide stunning revelations about the preparation and competence of teachers and school heads in so far as crisis management is concerned. The following are verbatim quotes which express the views of the majority of respondents in

this study. When asked about the kind of training they received upon appointment as school heads and whether such training included crisis management, one school head had this to say:

> *It depends really on the province you will be deployed to. But generally all new school heads receive orientation through a leadership styles module. Crisis management no.*

When asked if teachers colleges in Zimbabwe offered crisis management as part of teachers training, one teacher had this to say:

> *There is a cross cutting module called Disaster Risk Reduction Management (DRRM) which is taught to students as part of their teacher training. I am not sure if it is related to crisis management but disaster management.*

When asked about the role of the Schools Psychological services department in crisis management in schools, one school head had this to say:

> *It provides evidence informed crisis intervention, suicide prevention, information on referrals in schools and brief supportive counselling to learners who are in emotional distress.*

Finally, when asked if the guidance and counselling syllabus being offered in schools covered all crises that occurred in schools one deputy school head said:

> *The guidance and counselling syllabus focused mostly on child marriages and the different types of abuse prevalent in schools and at home.*

Discussion

The study set out to examine the crisis management state of preparedness and response in selected schools in Zimbabwe. In an effort to interrogate all the research questions, this section is presented in three sections. These are Knowledge of a crisis and its life cycle, Training and Competency status and Crisis Response in schools. Teachers constituted the majority of the respondents followed by deputy heads and finally deputy heads. The sample fully represents both categories fairly in the school system as all schools in Zimbabwe have one school head, one deputy head and as many teachers. There were more female heads, deputy heads and teachers than their male counterparts. This is not surprising because most schools in urban and rural districts neighbouring major urban centres are traditionally staffed

with more female heads, deputy heads and teachers than male ones. The 30 to 50 year age groups dominated the survey. This age range lies within the decision-making, achievement and fulfilment age range, which implies that they are in a better position to offer credible opinions. All the respondents were in possession of professional qualifications with all heads and deputy heads having bachelors' degrees. The survey found that the majority of respondents had the requisite working experience to better offer their professional opinions on the subject at hand.

Knowledge of a crisis and its life cycle

The majority of respondents in this study were able to identify the definitions of the word "crisis" from a given list (Table 5). This suggests that they are cognisent of what a crisis is. To buttress this assertion, the respondents went on to provide a list of the crises that occurred in their schools (Table 6). The list conforms to some of the crises identified by Macneil and Topping (2007) which include suicide, shootings, stabbings, road traffic accidents, major fires and natural disasters which result in injury or death. Knowledge of these crises is very important as it helps school heads to plan for them and dispatch them off as quickly as possible. Equal consistency was also found in the majority of the respondents' knowledge of the four life cycle stages of a crisis. They demonstrated knowledge of the 4 life cycle stages by indicating their correct order of priority (Fig 8). This is an important finding because if the leadership within a school is not cognizant of what the crisis stages are, then the ability to prepare and train for these stages becomes impacted. Rouse (2024) is of the view that knowledge of these key components of crisis management helps to promote emergency preparedness as a top priority in schools.

Training and competency status

Findings suggest that school heads in this study came into their positions without crisis management prior training (Figure 6). This is quite problematic because intervening in a crisis is an adept intrusion into a particular event to resolve a potentially ruinous occurrence before physical or emotional damage occurs (Morrison, 2017). It therefore makes sense that such an intricate exercise is done by well-trained school heads, who as a matter of necessity can make fast, precise and crucial decisions so as to address the crisis situation. Be that as it may, findings reveal that school heads were only provided with crisis management training once upon being appointed to the position of school head (Fig 7). However, the majority of respondents were not sure whether the purported training for the school heads included crisis

management (Fig.7). Interestingly, school heads are said to have had most training in crisis response and crisis preparedness (Fig 9) and were thus in need of more training in crisis recovery (Fig 11). Although school heads were found to be crisis managers (Fig 3), they however were found to be incompetent in that regard (Fig 4). This is regardless of the fact that knowledge of crisis management in schools has a significant impact on the achievement of goals (Davis (2023). Training helps in equipping school heads, deputy heads and teachers with tools, knowledge and practical skills so that they can effectively manage crises when they occur.

Results from the open ended questions provide compelling evidence of why there were inconsistencies in this study. For instance, upon appointment, a school head was required to attend an induction which covered leadership styles and policy circulars that provide guidance on what to do in the event of certain disasters occurring in their schools. Examples are the Secretary's Circular number 19 of 1991 which provides fire precautions and procedures. Secretary's Circular number 6 of 2023 provides guidelines on the prevention and management of bullying and other forms of violence at and around schools. Secretary's Circular P.54 of 2023 provides guidelines on Organisation of Educational tours for cultural enrichments, Sports, Arts and Culture. It therefore follows that the training that was referred in Fig 7 could have been the induction mentioned earlier. It thus can be concluded that school heads in this study did not receive any training in crisis management. Their competence as crisis managers could have been determined on the basis of their compliance with the policy circulars cited earlier on. These however do not cover all the crises as identified by the respondents (Table 6).

Crisis Response in schools

It is quite astonishing that crisis management training is ignored in the development of teachers in Zimbabwe as teachers colleges do not offer it as part of teachers training. Rather, teachers colleges offer a cross cutting module called Disaster Risk Reduction Management (DRRM), which in terms of both content and application is different from crisis management. It is therefore not surprising that there was this strong and rather unsettling level of agreement (Fig 5) that, in most cases, when dealing with crises, school heads in this study used their wisdom and common sense. Such knowledge could have been derived from their ability to comply with the policy guidelines mentioned earlier on. These policies provide guidelines on how to mitigate/prevent and respond to some crises but are very silent on how to recover

from them. This could also explain why school heads were found to be neglecting crisis recovery the most (Fig 10). Crisis recovery is the stage were those affected by the crisis are helped to cope with emotional and social distress (MacNeil and Topping, 2007) so as to find closure and usually requires professionals such as psychologists and councillors. Psychologists recommend the use of counsellors to help those learners and teachers having trouble to cope with loss in its various forms. In this study, most of the teachers delegated to handle the guidance and counselling portfolio in schools did not have requisite qualifications to do so. In as much as schools were found to be offering guidance and counselling in primary schools, it focused mostly on child marriages and the different types of abuse prevalent in schools and at home at the expense of all the other crises. The Schools Psychological services department's role in crisis management in schools was found to be that of providing evidence informed crisis intervention, suicide prevention, information on referrals in schools and brief supportive counselling to learners who were in emotional distress. However, it was found that not many school heads were aware of this important role and were often directed to it only after the occurrence of a major crisis that attracted media attention in a school.

The majority of respondents attest to the unavailability of crisis plans in schools (Fig 16). Whilst the majority of school heads confirmed having the crisis plans; the majority of both deputy heads and teachers refuted this. The only logical conclusion for this could be that what they were probably referring to as crisis plans could have been the disaster and risk management plans that are a requirement in schools in Zimbabwe. To further support this assertion, the alleged crisis plans did not include crisis preparation, planning and training and practicing neither did they include measures to mitigate/prevent against some crises. This can only mean that there are no crisis plans in schools in this study.

Conclusion

Intervening in a crisis is a skillful invasion into a particular event to resolve a potentially ruinous occurrence before physical or emotional damage occurs. It therefore makes sense that such an intricate exercise be done by well-trained school heads, who as a matter of necessity can make fast, precise and crucial decisions so as to address the crisis situation. These need the support of equally well trained guidance and counselling teachers capable of providing emotional support. School heads who are cognizant of what a crisis is as well as its stages have the ability to train and prepare for it and its stages in an impactful manner. Knowledge

and compliance with risk and disaster management policy circulars does not necessarily translate into knowledge about crisis management. It is possible that school heads can use their wisdom and common sense to respond to crises. However, this does not make them crisis managers neither does it make them competent in that regard. It is therefore imperative that when dealing with crises, school heads be guided by best practice obtained through training.

Recommendations

This study recommends training for school heads in crisis management. It proposes that teachers delegated to teach guidance and counselling be appointed to those positions on merit. It also proposes that school crisis plans be made mandatory in all schools.

Implications for further study

This study ought to be replicated on a larger scale and should focus on the training of school heads in crisis management with such training focusing much more on crisis recovery.

References

Black, S. (2005). Research: How teachers and counsellors can reach out to bereaved students. When children grieve. American School Board Journal, 192, 28–30. Retrieved from http://www.asbj.com/

Caplan G (1964) Principles of preventive psychiatry. New York: Basic Books.

Coombs, W.T and Holladay, and W.J. (2000): Crisis management: Advantages of a relational perspectives. In J.A. Ledingham and S.D. Bruning (Eds.) Public relations as relationship management: A relational approach to public relations, 73-93. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.

Davies, G (2023). The Necessity of Crisis Management Training for Today's and future leaders; Learning Management. https://engagedly.com

Duma, M.A.N (2014). Crisis Counselling and Intervention in Rural Schools in South Africa. Mediterranean Center of Social and Educational Research Vol 5 No 27

Eaves, C. (2001) The development and implementation of a crisis response team in a school setting, International Journal of Emergency Mental Health, Vol 3, no 1, pp 35–46.

Fieldler, F.E (1993). The Contingency model: New directions for leadership utilisation in Matteson and Ivancevich (Eds) Management and Organisational Behaviour Classics (pp 333-345).

MacNeil, W and Topping, K. (2007). Crisis Management in Schools: Evidence-based prevention. Journal of Educational Enquiry, Vol 7, No 1, p64 - 94

Marker. A (2020). Models and Theories to Improve Crisis Management. Accessed on https://www.smartsheet.com/content/crisis-management-model-theories.

Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education MOPSE (2023). Secretary's Circular number 19 of 1991

Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education MOPSE (2023). Secretary's Circular number 6 of 2023

Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education MOPSE (2023). Secretary's Circular P.54 of 2023

Mitchell J T and Everly G S (1995) Critical incident stress debriefing: an operations manual for the prevention of traumatic stress among emergency services and disaster workers. Ellicott City, Maryland: Chevron Publishing.

Morrison, S.R (2017) Leading during a Crisis: Are School Leaders Prepared? North Eastern University Doctoral Thesis.

NASP School Safety and Crisis Response Committee. (2015). Addressing grief: Tips for teachers and administrators. Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists. Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists

Nherera, D. (2022). Government to assist families of Tynwald students, The Suburban, 21 October 2022, suburban.co.zw.

Oxford Dictionary (1987).Oxford University Press

Rouse, J (2024). The importance of Crisis Management & Emergence Preparedness for Superintendents; Public School Works, Support @publicschoolworks.com

Weick, K. E. (2010). Reflections on enacted sense making in the Bhopal disaster. Journal of Management Studies, 47(3), 537-550.