Crisis Intervention in Rural Schools in South Africa: Experiences of Educators

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ABSTRACT The aim of this paper is to explore the experiences of educators on crisis intervention in rural schools in South Africa. Apart from a literature review on crisis intervention in schools, the paper reports on a study in which empirical investigation based on quantitative research paradigm was used to collect data from rural educators. The literature findings revealed that crisis intervention is a critical component of school practice in many schools in South Africa. The study further on revealed that empirical findings elicited that education and training received by educators are largely based on teaching and learning aspects and school management tasks only and no particular attention to crisis intervention is evident, yet educators are expected to function as school-based crisis interveners in times of crises. The study is concluded by the submission that it is essential for educators to be trained in crisis intervention.

INTRODUCTION

Fundamental changes within the education system in South Africa became evident after 1994. The education policy development since then has shifted the education system in the country into a new direction (Duma and Mabusela 2015). Considerable restructuring occurred. The enormous expectations imposed on educators have prompted a significant change in the nature and scale of their accountability. This accountability stretches to all corners of the school, ranging from teaching and learning activities to crisis intervention, and prevention (SADTU 2015). It should, however, be noted that education and training received by educators are largely based on teaching and learning aspects and school administration tasks only and no particular attention to crisis interventions and preventions is evident, yet educators are expected to function as school-based crisis interveners in times of crises (Duma and Mabusela 2015).

France (2015) asserts that crisis intervention is emergency psychological care aimed at assisting individuals in a crisis situation. The concept of crisis intervention is novel to many educators and this lack of preparation makes the task of crisis intervention foreign and uncomfortable to most of them (SADTU 2015). There is ample evidence that schools are not immune to violence. A series of shootings in classrooms, in trains and in the buses transporting learners to schools, the high death rate due to the HIV/AIDS pandemic, political violence and other traumatic events during the past few years have underscored one of the chief responsibilities faced by school educators. Escalating crime, including violent crime against both learners and educators in many rural schools is on record (Duma and Mabusela 2015).

With the upsurge of these acts, the demand for crisis intervention services in rural schools has increased significantly. Such systematic pressures need to be matched by enhanced support mechanisms in the form of in-service education and training (INSET) programs for the educators. INSET, therefore, will not only equip educators with the tools they require for effective crisis intervention obligations, but will also promote their status as school-based crisis interveners.

Objectives of the Study

A cross-section of the field of crisis management reveals that very little research has been conducted on the views of rural educators on crisis intervention in schools. The relative unavailability of literature on this research problem is itself an indication that research has to be done in order to provide more insight and improved approaches on this issue. According to France (2015), crisis intervention is a skillful intrusion into a personal crisis to defuse a potentially disastrous situation before physical or emotional destruction occurs. It makes sense

that such a delicate exercise needs a well-trained educator in crisis intervention, who, in times of need makes quick, accurate, and critical decisions about the victim and mobilises needed resources.

Various factors strengthen the role of educators in crisis intervention in schools. These factors foster the ability of educators to evaluate information and press their own interpretation and conceptions, improve the quality of crisis intervention in schools, rationalise the crisis intervention functions and understand the legal implications of crisis intervention.

The researcher, having worked in rural schools as a principal and currently as a university senior lecturer, visiting these schools to lend support to the university student teachers, perceives that rural educators have difficult experience in crisis intervention in schools and the support from the Department of Education is not evident. The unsatisfactory state of crisis intervention services in rural schools in South Africa, begs an important question: why, after almost twenty two years since the establishment of a democratic education system, weaknesses and shortcomings in crisis intervention services in rural schools continue to persist.

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METHODOLOGY

Research Problem

The school system requires that educators play a vital role in crisis intervention in schools. The demand for crisis intervention services in schools has increased significantly. It is ironic that educators with no proper training in crisis intervention are expected to deal with the learners in crisis and have to act as crisis interveners.

The following research problem was identified:

What are the experiences of educators in crisis intervention in rural schools in South Africa?

To address the research problem, both literature study and empirical investigation based on quantitative research design were undertaken.

Literature Review

The researcher consulted literature which is relevant to the topic. This was done to provide a critical synthesis of what has already been written on the topic.

Quantitative Research Paradigm

A survey to gather questionnaire-based data in a real-life setting was used in the study. The research design included the delimitation of the field of survey, the selection of respondents (size of the sample and sampling procedures), the research instruments, namely the questionnaires, a pilot study, the administration of the questionnaires, and the processing of data.

Population and Sampling

The researcher used the simple random sampling method to select two hundred educators from KwaZulu Natal Midlands Cluster's two districts, namely Sisonke and Ugu. This method was favoured for its simplicity, unbiased nature, and its closeness to fulfilling the major assumption of probability, namely that each element in the population stands an equal chance of being selected (Kumar 2014). For ethical reasons, permission to conduct research in schools was sought from the relevant district offices.

Instrumentation

The questionnaire was used as research instrument. This quantitative methodology was chosen in the light of the purpose of the study, the kind of information that was required and the available resources. As McMillan and Schumacher (2006) and Kumar (2014) maintain that questionnaires permit anonymity, preclude possible interviewer biases and permit a respondent sufficient time to consider answers before actually answering. Data provided by questionnaires can be more easily analysed and interpreted than the data obtained from verbal responses and lastly, questionnaires can elicit information that cannot be obtained in other methods. The researcher believed that this kind of survey would lead to some truths about the role of learner leadership in rural secondary schools and it would provide information on whether certain generalisations presented in the literature were also true for this population.

The questionnaire was divided into four sections, with each section focusing on the aims of the study. Section 1 consisted of questions,

which focus on the biographic and general information. This section provided the researcher with an understanding and knowledge of the respondents. Section 2 had closed questions focusing on their experience on crisis intervention in their schools. The respondents were asked to rate their responses according to the following scale: *Yes, No and Unsure.* Section 3 consisted of open-ended questions, wherein respondents were asked to write down the problems they encounter in crisis intervention in their schools. Sections 4 consisted also of open-ended questions, wherein educators had to suggest ways that can improve their performance in crisis intervention in their schools.

The researcher conducted a pilot study in six schools in Ugu and Sisonke districts. The schools were part of the general population from which the sample was drawn, but not part of the sample itself. No inherent weaknesses were discovered in the questionnaires and the data solicited confirmed the questionnaires' validity and reliability, consequently there was no need to modify the questionnaires.

In the actual study, the educators were requested to complete their questionnaires which were later posted to the researcher, using the self- addressed envelope supplied with the questionnaire.

The first sample population responses were 130 (65%) respondents. After the follow-ups, 23 respondents returned the completed questionnaires to make total of 143 responses (72%). That represented a satisfying response.

Data Processing

After all the questionnaires had been received, the important task was then to reduce the mass of data obtained to a format suitable for analysis. The respondents' responses were coded and frequency distributions were generated.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

General and Biographical Profile of the Respondents

When the item of rural educators' academic qualification was analysed, it was realised that all the respondents had fully completed the information regarding general and biographical data.

Table 1 indicated that a total population of 143 (n=143) responded. This table revealed that a high proportion of rural school principals (65%) had good academic qualifications. This shows that the education level of the educator population in rural schools is improving. Duma and Khuzwayo (2015) attest that the high qualification rate can help in empowering educators with crisis intervention skills.

Table 1: Educators' academic qualifications

Teachers qualification	N	%
Below Matric (Grade 12)	0	0
Matric + 1 (M+1)	19	13
Matric +2 (M+2)	31	22
Matric+3 and above	93	65
Total	143	100

Educators' Experiences in Crisis Intervention in Rural Schools

In Table 2, educators were required to indicate their experiences in crisis intervention in their schools. The respondents were asked to rate their responses according to the following scale: *Yes, No* and *Unsure.*

The Concept of Crisis Intervention is Novel to Many Rural Educators

Table 2 revealed that a majority of the respondents (90%) indicated that the concept of crisis intervention was novel to many rural educators. This implies that most schools do not really use educators as crisis interveners. This is based on the fact that education and training received by most rural educators are largely based on teaching and learning aspects only and no particular attention to crisis interventions and preventions is evident, yet educators are expected to function as school- based crisis interveners in times of crises.

Crisis Intervention is Uncomfortable to Most Rural Educators

Table 2 further on revealed that a high proportion of respondents (90%) indicated that crisis intervention was uncomfortable to most rural educators. Educators are supposed to play a pivotal role in crisis intervention in schools. It has been previously indicated that the concept of crisis intervention is novel to many educators. This lack of preparation makes the task of

Table 2: Educators' experiences in crisis intervention in rural schools

Items		Yes	Unsure	No	Total
The concept of crisis intervention is novel to many rural educators	N	129	14	0	143
	%	90	10	0	100
Crisis intervention is uncomfortable to most rural educators.	N	129	14	0	143
	%	90	10	0	100
Educators show empathy, warmth and sincerity to learners in crisis	N	123	6	14	143
	%	86	4	10	100
Educators assess crisis situations and the learners in crises.	N	12	14	117	143
	%	8	10	82	100
Educators ensure the safety of the victim learner by minimising the physical and psychological dangers that may affect him	N	0	43	100	143
	%	0	30	70	100
Educators begin with interviewing the victim learner to counseling him.	N	43	14	86	143
	%	30	10	60	100
Educators have approaches that schools have can employ to discourage and counteract acts of school violence.	N	7	7	129	143
	%	5	5	90	100

crisis intervention foreign and uncomfortable to most of them. Escalating crime, including violent crime against both learners and educators in many schools is on record. With the upsurge of these acts, the demand for crisis intervention services in schools has increased significantly. Such systematic pressures need to be matched by enhanced support mechanisms in the form of in-service education and training (INSET) programs for rural educators (Duma and Mabusela 2015.

Educators Show Empathy, Warmth and Sincerity to Learners in Crisis

It seems that most educators (86%) in this survey were congruent that educators show empathy, warmth and sincerity to learners in crisis. Showing empathy, warmth and sincerity to learners in crisis does not translate into crisis intervention action plans, training rural educators in crisis intervention will equip them with the tools they require for effective crisis intervention obligations. Crone et al. (2015) are of the opinion that schools should build positive behaviour support systems to prevent the escalation of crises in schools.

Educators Assess Crisis Situations and the Learners in Crisis

Table 2 further on revealed that a high proportion of the respondents (82%) indicated that educators did not assess crisis situations and the learners in crises. Assessing the crisis situations is a crisis intervention skill which crisis in-

terveners have to acquire and possess. This is confirmed by James and Gilliland (2013) who astutely pointed out that educators as crisis interveners need to have good communication skills, conflict management skills and confrontation management skills so as to effectively assess crisis situations and the learners in crises.

Educators Ensure the Safety of the Victim Learner by Minimising the Physical and Psychological Dangers that May Affect Him

Once again, Table 2 revealed that a majority of the respondents (70%) indicated that educators do not ensure the safety of the victim learner by minimising the physical and psychological dangers that may affect him. Ensuring the safety of the victim learner by minimising the physical and psychological dangers that may affect him is a basic crisis intervention skill required of crisis interveners, which most educators do not have. James and Gilliland (2003) pinpoint six steps in basic crisis intervention skills. These steps are designed to operate as an integrated problem solving process.

✓ *Step 1* = Defining the problem: defining and understanding the problem from the client's viewpoint.
✓ *Step 2* = Ensuring the safety of the client: the intervener has to keep the client safe and try to minimize the physical and psychological dangers that may affect the client.
✓ *Step 3* = Support Provision: the client must be informed that the intervener is there to support him and cares a lot about him.
✓ *Step 4* = Exploring alternatives: the intervener assists the client to acknowledge that

many alternatives exist and that some are better than others.

✓ *Step 5* = Execution of plans: this step involves designing action plans that will provide the client with an opportunity to restore his emotional equilibrium.

✓ *Step 6* = Getting appropriate commitment: this step involves the intervener obtaining the commitment from the client before terminating the crisis intervention session.

The abovementioned crisis intervention skills are also endorsed by Thompson (2015) as he asserts that these skills may assist in putting crisis intervention theory into practice.

Educators Begin with Interviewing the Victim Learner to Counseling Him

Table 2 further on revealed that more than half of the respondents (60%) indicated that educators do not begin with interviewing the victim learner to counseling him. This aspect is very important in the crisis intervention process. It is part of the good communication skills which must be possessed by crisis interveners. Sandoval (2013) pointed out that crisis intervention requires a special kind of communication. Proficiency in communication skills is indispensable in crisis intervention, beginning with interviewing the victim to counseling him.

For this reason, the crisis intervener needs to integrate effective communication skills with relevant intervention techniques. France (2015) posits that poor communication between the intervener and the client can hinder the process of crisis intervention. This assertion is supported by Roberts and Ottens (2008) as they accede that the communication skills of the intervener should reach the level of excellence, as he needs to understand clients' messages and must possess skills and abilities which, inter alia, include identifying and understanding the levels of listening, identifying barriers to listening, promoting communication and providing feedback.

Educators have Approaches that Schools have Can Employ to Discourage and Counteract Acts of School Violence

In conclusion, Table 2 revealed that a high proportion of the respondents (90%) indicated that educators do not have approaches that schools can employ to discourage and counter-

act acts of school violence. Although it is not always possible to prevent some acts of violence, it is nevertheless important for schools to explore and address school violence. These days acts of school violence are increasing at an alarming rate. While the rise in school violence can be attributed to violent learners, there are also instances where individuals who are not part of the school community commit acts of violence on school premises. In instances where learners themselves are involved, the element of bullying is prevalent. Although no known intervention plan can guarantee a prevention of such tragedies, nevertheless the school should have approaches that the educators can employ to discourage and counteract acts of school violence.

DISCUSSION

The study revealed that crisis is omnipresent in communities riddled with crime, violence, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, rape and sexual assault, death and illness, substance abuse and so forth. Consequently, stress experienced by learners from these communities increases, thus leading the learners to increased emotional distress. Frost et al. (2015) assert that crisis intervention has been with us the first time one individual in crisis was helped by another. This assertion is also assented by Greenstone and Leviton (2002), as they describe crisis intervention as the act of interrupting the downward spiral skillfully and as quickly as possible and, in so doing, of returning the individual to a pre-crisis level of coping.

In this study Sandoval (2013) and Gilliland (2013) mentioned that there are strategies that schools can use to prevent various forms of crises from occurring such as :

✓ *Educational workshops* which consist of intensive training on topics that generate feelings and emotions. They are aimed at preventing and stopping mental problems that can occur in future. The content of these programs assists the children to reveal their feelings about what is happening in the social environment of the classroom and tries to liberate them from anxiety that may develop from crises that may emanate in the classroom.

✓ *Anticipatory guidance which* involves introducing a learner intellectually   to events that might happen in future and assist him to prepare realisable coping strategies. This type of guidance assists learners to adjust

to novel settings and informs them on what can be anticipated, both emotionally and mentally.

✓ *Screening programs which* involve establishing procedures to recognise learners that are vulnerable to dangerous situations and to give them specially needed help at the right moment. Screening programs involve issuing questionnaires to learners to establish precisely who is at high risk of not coping.

✓ *Consultation*: In this instance, services of expert psychologists are enlisted to interact with educators to assist them in dealing more effectively with the learners in crisis. These experts provide the educators with best crisis intervention strategies that they can employ when dealing with learners in crisis.

Myer (2001) and Thompson (2015) identify distinct elements involved in crisis intervention, namely :

✓ *Time-Limit Dimension:* crisis limit is time limited, with the time span of not more than six weeks. This call for the interveners to set up appointments with a victim long enough to ensure his physical and psychological safety. Meetings should be designed to help the victim regaining a sense of psychological equilibrium and self-protection.

✓ *Single –Issue Dimension:* the treatment should address a specific issue and try to assist the victim resolve only that concern. This means that the crisis intervention process must be focused on setting and maintaining factual goals. Interveners must concentrate on immediate needs and deal with symptoms that are related to the crisis only.

✓ *Treatment - Dimension:* treatment must concentrate on the client's returning to a pre-crisis level of functioning. The interveners must use their energy on what must be done to initiate the process of resolving the crisis.

Brook et al. (2010) astutely pointed out that crisis intervention is a technique intended to lessen immediate pressures and to restore clients to a level of adjustment. The fundamental goal of helping an individual who is undergoing a crisis is to intervene in such a way as to restore him to his previous level of functioning (Robinson et al. 2013; France 2015; Sandoval 2013).

Since this paper intended to explore the experiences of educators on crisis intervention in rural schools in South Africa, it became obvious that educators encounter the following problems when attempting to effect crisis intervention in their schools:

✓ educators do not have techniques, strategies, and skills needed to help the learners in crisis,

✓ schools are increasingly becoming places where traumatic events occur and the problem of crisis intervention in schools does not avail itself to simple solutions,

✓ crisis is omnipresent in communities riddled with crime, violence, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, rape and sexual assault, death and illness, substance abuse and so forth,

✓ communities expect schools to provide crisis intervention services.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the experiences of rural educators in crisis intervention in schools. Although all the participants were supportive of crisis intervention in schools, their experiences also illuminate challenges associated with crisis intervention. One of the great challenges is lack of training of educators in crisis intervention skills and strategies as they are expected to be crisis interveners at all costs. In conclusion, it needs to be mentioned that the victims of crises face serious problems. Effective crisis intervention education is an important component in addressing these problems. If crisis intervention were incorporated into the teacher-education curriculum, educators would be better prepared to assume their roles as crisis interveners in schools.

RECOMMENDATIONS

From this study the following recommendations are made:

✓ Training programs for educators to function as school – based crisis interveners should be established. These programs will provide a means of ensuring that educators receive extensive training in all aspects of emotional first aid and crisis intervention,

✓ There should sustained involvement and commitment of all social structures with an interest in education, such as the church-

es, law-enforcement agencies, parents, the private sector and learners themselves,

✓ The creation of safer schools. The crisis of violence and death in schools calls for the creation of safer schools. It should be noted that violence in schools comes from various angles such as bullying, gangs and violent learners. School safety must therefore be approached from both immediate and long-term perspectives and must always incorporate intervention strategies,

✓ Controlling school access to outsiders. It is important that all schools be fenced and have monitored gates. The services of security guards or school cops should be enlisted to check on all people entering the school. In some instances, metal detectors can be used to screen for weapons.

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