

CHALLENGES OF CRISIS MANAGEMENT IN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS OF THE REPUBLIC OF CROATIA

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ABSTRACT

Educational institutions in the Republic of Croatia have increasingly been facing various crises in recent years. Therefore, the challenges of crisis management have become a significant concern for a growing number of stakeholders, especially school principals. This paper presents the results of a qualitative study conducted using semi-structured interviews to examine the attitudes of stakeholders in educational institutions regarding crisis management and crisis communication. The aim of the study was to identify the characteristics of crisis situations, as well as the possibilities and limitations of applying crisis management and crisis communication in educational institutions in the Republic of Croatia. The results of the study indicate that the existing system in the field of crisis management is unprepared. It was also found that, at the national level, there are certain protocols and regulations for handling specific crisis situations. However, the implementation and effectiveness largely depend on the leadership of the institution. Accordingly, the possibilities for implementing crisis management in educational institutions have been identified.

Keywords: *crisis management, educational institutions, Republic of Croatia*

1. INTRODUCTION

Successful handling and response to various types of crises rely on a crisis management system and crisis management itself. The effectiveness of crisis management is conditioned by an understanding of the main characteristics of a crisis, such as threat, urgency, and uncertainty (Kešetović & Toth, 2012). Crisis communication plays a significant role in resolving crises and can be both proactive and reactive. Besides successfully managing the crisis, crisis communication can also contribute to the organization's reputation. Although educational institutions are generally considered safe places, crises have become increasingly common in recent years. These crises may include natural threats such as earthquakes, floods, and fires, which arise from natural forces. Furthermore, educational institutions can also face social issues such as violence, bullying, vandalism, or even mass shootings, often stemming from social and psychological issues within the community (Gainey, 2010). For this reason, there is a growing need to implement crisis management in the daily operations of educational institutions. Accordingly, the aim of this paper was to determine the possibilities and limitations of implementing crisis management in educational institutions in the Republic of Croatia. To this

end, interviews were conducted with relevant stakeholders in educational institutions regarding crisis management and crisis communication. The research results point to various challenges of crisis management in educational institutions in the Republic of Croatia.

2. CRISIS MANAGEMENT AND EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS OF THE REPUBLIC OF CROATIA

Crises are ubiquitous and can affect any organization or institution, so educational institutions are no exception. In fact, educational institutions are places where a large number of children and young people are present daily, making them particularly vulnerable and sensitive to crisis events (Kešetović, 2012). In times of crisis, managers must act promptly to determine the cause of the crisis, find a solution, and ultimately resolve or mitigate the crisis with minimal damage, which means they must possess specific skills. According to Sučević (2016: 64), desirable characteristics of managers in crisis conditions include: 1) quickly determining clear short-term priorities and goals; 2) visibly demonstrating authority; 3) setting expectations and standards; 4) decisiveness and swift decision-making; 5) continuous communication with all individuals involved in the organization's operations; 6) building trust and confidence through transparency and honesty; 7) autocratic leadership during the urgency phase. If an organization is prepared for a crisis, crises can last significantly shorter with far fewer consequences (Kešetović & Toth, 2012). This highlights the task and purpose of crisis management. Tafra-Vlahović (2011) emphasizes that organizations should establish crisis management to avoid or mitigate the consequences of a crisis, or to prevent a crisis from occurring at all. Bernstein (2020) considers crisis management as the art of avoiding trouble when possible and appropriately responding to trouble when it is unavoidable. Different types of crisis situations require the application of different communication strategies as well as various forms and methods of communication (Rebrović Sopek & Čendo Metzinger, 2020). A particular challenge in communication is presented by the media, such as internet portals, television, and newspapers, whose interest in events in educational institutions is growing. In this context, it should be noted that mass media can influence public opinion regarding the causes of crises, the search for blame, the organization's reaction to the crisis, the resolution of the crisis, and the analysis of its consequences (Mihaljević & Mihalinić, 2014).

Institutions engaged in education, social care, healthcare, and nutrition in the Republic of Croatia include kindergartens, primary and secondary schools, art schools, student dormitories, adult education institutions, as well as higher education and scientific institutions. According to current laws in the Republic of Croatia, these institutions are managed by a governing council and committee, while the principal is the executive and professional leader of the institution responsible for legal compliance. The principal, in the modern environment, solves complex problems similar to those in profit-oriented enterprises, requiring continuous learning and systematic development in the field of leadership (Hitrec, Jurčev & Đaković, 2009, according to Resman, 2004). Since the principal cannot be an expert in all areas, it is crucial to involve other employees in school management, especially during crisis situations. Furthermore, the safety and protection of children and young people in the Republic of Croatia are also prescribed by the Act on Primary and Secondary Education. According to this act, Article 67 states that schools are obliged to create conditions for the healthy mental and physical development and

social well-being of students, prevent unacceptable behaviors, ensure the safety and health of students, create conditions for the success of each student in learning, monitor social problems and phenomena among students, and take measures to eliminate their causes and consequences (NN 87/08, 86/09, 92/10, 105/10, 90/11, 5/12, 16/12,

86/12, 126/12, 94/13, 152/14, 07/17, 68/18, 98/19, 64/20: Art. 67). Besides the Act, there are specific protocols related to handling violence among children and youth and initiating psychological crisis interventions in the education system (Vukošić Popov, 2020). A school crisis involves all stakeholders of the institution, from employees, students, and their families to community members and others who have a special interest in the school's well-being, in other words, a crisis involves society as a whole (Liou, 2016 according to Krauss, 1998; Seeger, 2002). Despite the fact that the field of crisis management is still not sufficiently researched and studied in education, practitioners and scholars suggest that organizations learn from successful cases to more effectively handle unexpected crises (MacNeil & Topping, 2007). It is important to emphasize that crisis management, regardless of how carefully planned, cannot fully develop a single solution that will assist in a crisis (Tafra-Vlahović, 2011). It is also crucial to note that crisis management is not something undesirable, but a vital and integral part of responsible organizational management, where many business decisions involve assessing risks and opportunities in an environment of increased uncertainty and rapid changes (Osmanagić Bedenik, 2010).

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

The aim of this paper was to identify the characteristics of crisis situations and the possibilities and limitations of applying crisis management and crisis communication in educational institutions in the Republic of Croatia. To achieve these objectives, an exploratory study was conducted using semi-structured interviews with stakeholders of educational institutions in the Republic of Croatia. The research was conducted on a sample of a total of 13 respondents representing educational institutions in the Republic of Croatia, 1 respondent from the Ministry of Science, Education and Youth of the Republic of Croatia, 8 respondents employed in educational institutions as teaching, non-teaching and administrative-technical staff, 2 final-year high school students, and 2 parents whose children attend primary and/or secondary school. The interviews were conducted from April to June 2022. Table 1 presents the general information about the respondents.

Table 1: General information about the respondents

Role/Position	Gender	Age	Highest Level of Education	Years of Experience
Head of Department at the Ministry	Female	anonymous	University Degree	anonymous
Principal	Female	57	University Degree	29
Principal	Male	61	University Degree	37
Primary School Teacher	Female	42	University Degree	16
Teacher of Economic Subjects	Female	37	University Degree	12
Kindergarten Teacher	Female	32	University Degree	9
Social Pedagogue	Male	28	University Degree	3
Administrative Staff - Secretary	Female	46	University Degree	8
Technical Staff - Janitor	Male	53	High School Diploma	26
High School Graduate	Male	19	3rd Year of High School	/
High School Graduate	Female	18	3rd Year of High School	/
Parent 1	Female	44	University Degree	19
Parent 2	Female	37	College Degree	10

Source: Processed by the authors based on research results

The study predominantly involved female participants with higher education qualifications. The examined staff of educational institutions were mostly experienced individuals with over 8

years of work experience. The parents were also experienced, while the students were adults nearing the end of their high school education.

For most respondents, a crisis is an unexpected and unpleasant event that generally disrupts regular operations or changes emotional states, causing individuals to feel threatened. One respondent additionally noted that a crisis is a dangerous situation with an uncertain outcome. When discussing the types of threats and crises that educational institutions face today, respondents' answers varied. One respondent believes the biggest crisis in education is the safety and mental health of children, which is frequently discussed. Respondents also pointed out issues within the Ministry itself as the responsible institution, stating that the Ministry is undermined by inadequate staffing, lower salaries than in schools, and general dissatisfaction among employees. Some respondents highlighted a lack of qualified staff as one of the pressing problems in the education system. One respondent noted the difficulty in finding certain teaching and non-teaching staff, leading to the hiring of inadequate personnel due to a lack of applicants. This shortage of staff reflects the failures of crisis management, which is currently showing its shortcomings. One respondent mentioned frequent problems with parents and violence among children, while another highlighted conflicts among staff and between teachers and parents. One respondent identified workplace bullying by colleagues as a threat. The same respondent noted that the abuse of children by some staff, which often goes unaddressed even when reported to superiors, is an even greater threat. Additionally, one respondent considered teacher demotivation and the lack of system support as the current major crisis in the education system. Other respondents pointed out the increased risk of adolescent suicidality.

Some respondents were very critical of teachers, viewing "bad teachers" as a crisis in education. One respondent stated that teachers unjustifiably complain about working conditions and lack of motivation. Other respondents noted that schools are constantly exposed to various crises, such as inadequate financial investments. In this context, similar problems were seen during the pandemic and earthquakes, as well as school violence and student suicide attempts or completions. Additionally, family crises are a threat to the society in general. All respondents believed that crises negatively impact people and work, particularly affecting interpersonal relationships and communication, as well as work organization within educational institutions. Respondents warned that crises affect the quality of teaching and the achievement of educational outcomes. Accordingly, crises have a significant impact on mental and physical health. When asked how educational institutions handle crisis situations, respondents said it depends on the institution itself, indicating that there are "better and worse schools," often depending on the leadership and available resources. Many respondents felt that educational institutions poorly handle crises, adapting on the fly, as seen during the pandemic and the

Zagreb earthquake. In crises like disrupted interpersonal relationships, teacher motivation, and poor student performance, some respondents said that educational institutions do not manage at all. One respondent noted that principals often expect the Ministry to resolve a specific crisis, even though the institution should handle it internally. Accordingly, the Ministry, due to communication issues, faces daily complaints from principals about parents and staff, parents about principals, teachers, and staff, and staff about principals and other employees. One respondent warned that problems in Croatia are resolved *ad hoc*, meaning that when a problem

arises, those responsible are called upon, specific forces are mobilized, and instructions are given on how to act. A minority of respondents stated that institutions handle crises well, considering they are not specialized in crisis management. However, almost all respondents believed that educational institutions are not adequately or at all prepared for crisis situations. Some respondents mentioned pre-announced evacuation drills, which began after the Zagreb and Petrinja earthquakes but noted that these drills are gradually being neglected.

To timely identify threats and take preventive measures, most respondents felt that educating educational institution staff is crucial. Respondents emphasized developing communication skills and recognizing and resolving conflicts between parents and the institution, as well as within the institution itself. Two respondents mentioned collaboration with associations that could support educational institutions while other suggested increasing evacuation drills to enhance rational responses and provide a sense of security. Several respondents stressed that support must come from the top, namely the Ministry, the institution's founders, and the principal as the executive and expert leader. They believed that their support is essential and that they need to make decisions and plans, set clear rules, and oversee their implementation. One respondent felt there should be oversight of teachers' work, while another emphasized the need for better and more effective support from the entire education system. Regarding crisis management in educational institutions, as well as the existence of laws, regulations, and provisions governing this, most respondents believed such crisis management does not exist or that they are not familiar with it. However, they hoped for its existence. On the other hand, some respondents mentioned the existence of a crisis protocol and a protocol for handling violence. One respondent warned that these protocols are more reactive to already occurring situations. Another respondent stated that the validity and effectiveness of protocols depend on the principal and the expert team making decisions in such situations. The same respondent noted that their institution has security protocols for most crisis situations, such as procedures for when a child runs away from the institution, in case of an earthquake, or when a violent parent arrives, and that these protocols were created by a team of institution staff. Half of the respondents were aware of an evacuation plan that includes various natural disasters such as fires, floods and earthquakes. Ultimately, it is important to highlight that all respondents believed educational institutions should have crisis management in place, with some mentioning the need for establishing a crisis intervention team and addressing other crisis management issues. When asked about crisis communication, respondents stated that communication is the most important and crucial aspect, with some considering it decisive. They generally believed that it is impossible to respond effectively in such situations without communication. One respondent believed that communication must be well-structured and that the person leading it must know the exact effects of such communication. The same respondent noted that school staff are poorly trained for such situations. One respondent emphasized that in crisis communication, it is crucial not to withhold information, while another added that information should be carefully formulated to avoid causing panic. Almost all respondents observed that communication in educational institutions is mostly one-way, from the top down, meaning instructions come from the top and are followed accordingly.

Finally, one of the goals of this study was to identify the possibilities and limitations of introducing and implementing crisis management in educational institutions in the Republic of Croatia. Most respondents believed that the knowledge and experience gained during the pandemic and earthquakes could be used to prepare for future crises. One respondent said that preventive measures should be taken when everything is fine – analyzing situations, training, and strengthening human capacities. Another respondent added that having more plans for different types of crises would allow for better preparation. However, some respondents disagreed, stating that it is impossible to prepare for unpredictable crises. All respondents identified the education system as the main limitation in managing educational institutions in Croatia. Some mentioned that the system is slow, cumbersome, and burdened with bureaucracy. Some respondents pointed out the lack of laws, regulations, and decisions to facilitate the work of those interested in crisis management. One respondent complained about communication with the top and the freedom to make decisions, also noting insufficient education and general awareness. Additionally, respondents mentioned a lack of qualified staff, lack of support from the local community and associations, and poor cooperation with parents. One respondent added that certain problems are often covered up, downplayed, and ignored.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

The results of the conducted research indicate that the education system in the Republic of Croatia is unprepared in the field of crisis management, despite the existence of certain protocols and regulations for handling specific crisis situations. The research showed that educational institutions are unprepared for crises and that the success and effectiveness of crisis management largely depend on the leadership of the institution. The study determined that successfully addressing a crisis requires trained personnel and crisis teams within institutions who regularly practice pre-established crisis response plans and crisis communication. Some of the fundamental limitations identified include the lack of theoretical-practical knowledge in crisis management, inconsistent policies from relevant institutions, inadequate financial investments in the education system, inefficient top-down communication, and insufficient autonomy of principals in decision-making. Accordingly, possibilities for applying crisis management were established. Therefore, the primary focus should be on continuous education of all stakeholders involved in the educational process, especially those in managerial and operational positions. It is also necessary to introduce clear protocols for handling different crisis situations with periodic drills for those that are feasible and necessary. Establishing crisis teams within institutions and ensuring clear and effective communication at all levels, with an emphasis on crisis communication, are crucial. In conclusion, educational institutions in recent years have increasingly faced various crises. Their success in managing crises largely depends on the preparedness of leadership and staff. They are key to successfully overcoming crises through the application of crisis management. However, to ensure effective crisis management, reliance cannot solely be on the existence of crisis management models. Instead, crisis management plans must be regularly revised, and updated.

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