

Keeping Our Students Safe: Examining Perceptions of Crisis Frequency and Preparedness of Educators in a Statewide Online Charter School

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National trends indicate a need for continued crisis interventions, specifically for online settings. The purpose of this study was to examine perceptions of crisis frequency and preparedness of online educators. This research is needed to provide guidelines for detecting and responding to crisis to meet the educational needs of students in a safe school setting, specifically with the 2020 health pandemic. The methodology utilized survey data from participants (n=143) to provide perceptions of frequency and preparedness in varied crisis areas. Findings noted that in the different areas

of crisis, the percentage of educators who felt ‘very prepared’ were in need of improvement. Of these educators, indicated feeling ‘very prepared’ in the areas of neglect (45.8%), abuse (47.6%), suicidal ideations (53.1%), homicidal ideations (18.9%), unexpected death of a student (9.8%), unexpected death of a teacher (7.7%), natural disasters (18.9%), and terrorist threats (7.7%). These implications for practice suggest a need for crisis management planning and training for online settings and promotes the need for this plan to translate into professional learning that is purposeful, collaborative, and sustainable to ensure school safety. Recommendations for future research include gathering data on a wider scope from education professionals nationwide.

INTRODUCTION

Within this last decade, student enrollment in K-12 online programs has progressively increased (Roy, & Boboc, 2016; Zweig & Stafford, 2016) and with technological advancements and the growing popularity of home-schooling this will likely continue. While individuals spend the majority of their childhood in educational settings, children are particularly vulnerable to the psychological threats that crisis events have on their well-being, particularly negatively impacting mood, social interactions, and academic achievement (Kruger et al., 2018). Prior research suggested that 93% of educators working in traditional school environments have been required to respond to a crisis event and the authors assume this would also be high in an online setting (Tysinger et al., 2016). Although a shocking statistic, this may not come as much of a surprise with the rise of crisis-related violence in school settings escalating in the media in the past few decades (Payne et al., 2018). Although K-12 online learning institutions may be protected from certain school safety concerns, physical distance does not offer protection from all potential crises that may impact individual students or the online school setting (Tysinger et al., 2016). Thus, the extent to which online schools respond to crisis is in question, particularly with the current 2020 health pandemic warranting further examination.

Due to this recent health pandemic, this notion of school safety is urgent. According to Tysinger et al, (2020), the COVID-19 crisis of 2020 has denoted that in times of crisis, online learning has become the selected platform to allow education in the K-12 sector to continue safely educating our students. Additionally, the researchers noted that in this health pandemic, the online environment becomes overloaded with students who are under emotional distress due to high levels of anxiety and fear on

a day-to-day basis as educators find themselves underprepared for an alternative educational platform for content delivery. Furthermore, for online schools, the increase in number of online students and the strained daily circumstances are likely to lead to greater potential for crises. Coupled with the recent health pandemic, students are often faced with common crises that arise daily in schools. The most common crisis events that all children may experience are classified into four categories of harm to include environmental disasters; harm to physical safety, such as homicidal acts or transport accidents; harm to emotional well-being, including bereavement from death of another, being a victim of or observing abuse (sexual, physical, verbal, or neglect); and harm from hate crimes (Schonfeld & Newgass, 2000). According to the National Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence, more than 40% of children ages six to 17 have been victim to assault (e.g., assault by an adult, genital assault, relational aggression), with 63.5% of children 14 to 17 experiencing some form of assault in their lifetime (Finkelhor et al., 2015). Furthermore, over 17% of children aged six to 17 reported experiences of maltreatment in the prior year, with 38% of children aged 14 to 17 experiencing maltreatment at some point in their life (Finkelhor et al., 2015). The National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect estimated that from 2005 to 2006, roughly 835,000 children were victim to abuse and approximately 251,600 were victim to neglect (Sedlak et al., 2010). With suicide rates continuously increasing over the past two decades and suicide being the second leading cause of death for children aged 10 to 17, it can be safe to assume that the magnitude of amount of suicidal thoughts students express is following this same harmful trajectory (National Institute of Mental Health, 2019a).

With these astounding statistics, more information is warranted to uncover accurate levels of crisis frequency and preparedness as well as the safety that students are experiencing to determine how this translates to the online settings and the 2020 health pandemic brings many new challenges. Additionally, we need to further examine how prepared online schools are to respond to crisis events. Unfortunately, this data is currently scarce, and thus this study aims to address the types of training online educators need related to crisis events in an effort to ensure preparedness. Corresponding to this training, the proposed study assessed how prepared educators felt to appropriately detect signs of crisis prior to the event and to effectively respond to this given crisis. Students have the right to be ensured beyond doubt that their safety is their school districts' number one concern in meeting their educational needs. Therefore, the following two research questions guided this study:

1. What are online educators' perceptions of crisis frequency in an online K-12 setting?
2. How prepared are online educators in detecting and responding to crisis in an online K-12 setting?

Review of the Literature

The purpose of this study was to examine perceptions of crisis frequency and preparedness of online educators in a statewide K-12 charter school. Thus, this overview will include educator crisis preparedness and professional learning on K-12 crisis preparation, specifically in an online school setting.

Educator Crisis Preparedness

Federal and/or state laws detailing or ensuring crisis management planning and training currently are in place nationwide, and the majority of the United States have taken this into account at the district level developing and implementing their own policies regarding school safety (Perkins, 2018). Prior research highlighted multi-phase approaches in appropriately preparing, detecting, and responding to a crisis within the traditional school system (Franklin, et al., 2006; National Education Association, 2018; Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, U.S. Dept. of Education, 2007). Accordingly, these readily accessible plans should include prevention skills used to avert or stop a crisis from occurring; protection and mitigation, actions to reduce likelihood of harm to life or property; preparedness, involving planning and training for how to respond in the face of crisis; response, actions taken during and directly following a crisis to establish safety; and recovery, actions to restore emotional and mental well-being to resonate a productive educational environment (Schonfeld & Newgass, 2000). Furthermore, effective crisis plans are suggested to encompass a multitude of settings and situations to include environmental disasters, physically harmful objects or actions created by man, times of bereavement, and threats to emotional well-being, which can potentially lead to further physical harm (Schonfeld & Newgass, 2000).

Educational crisis planning needs to include continued communication during and after a crisis (National Education Association, 2018; Schonfeld & Newgass, 2000; Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, U.S. Department of Education, 2007). Administration of individual schools and collective school districts are encouraged to initiate communication in anticipation of a crisis (Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, U.S. Dept. of Education, 2007). This expansive communication should be cohesive including common vocabulary to ensure understanding across teachers, administrators, parents, students, and the community (Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, U.S. Dept. of Education, 2007). Additionally, crisis preparation needs to include mechanisms for devising multiple roles that are geared to enhance this communication across levels of personnel impacted from these tragedies. These roles include a chair who oversees member activity prior

to, during, and following a crisis and assists in mediating conflicts, alongside an assistant chair who provides further assistance to all team members (Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, U.S. Dept. of Education, 2007; Schonfeld, & Newgass, 2000). Furthermore, support personnel need to include a media coordinator who notifies all impacted parties (e.g., students, parents, school staff, press) following a crisis, a cooperater who serves as the primary contact to partnered emergency responders, a crowd manager who coordinates transportation for emergency officials and student pick-ups, and a counseling coordinator who provides mental and emotional support throughout intervention training and crises.

Success within crisis planning and delivery has been noted to require a top-down approach with communication amounting from district-level leadership, and, furthermore, a bottom-up approach following crisis to inform all parties (Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, U.S. Dept. of Education, 2007). To ensure effectiveness and extensive safety for these plans, communication should additionally reach community first-responders, including emergency medical technicians, firefighters, police officers, and community mental health professionals (Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, U.S. Dept. of Education, 2007) as well as include active participation and buy-in by educators and staff. This partnership will ensure that during a time of crisis, all students, parents, educators, and community stakeholders are provided the necessary physical and mental care to be best prepared for, during, and after the crisis event.

However, even with this abundance of research, to date, there is minimal current evidence-based safety and intervention planning or training on a statewide or national level designated for online education (Tysinger et al., 2016). Additionally, crisis planning often neglects to address the necessary applications in these processes that are required in applying evidence-based practices prior to, during, and following these same tragedies in an online setting. With the leading cause of death being accidental injuries for children 15 to 18, it is pertinent that an action plan be formulated and set in action for when tragedy occurs (Heron, 2019), and to devise these plans, requires sound training.

Employees working in varied settings such as schools and government organizations have to be prepared for crisis situations, such as a school shooting, hazardous weather conditions, or a health outbreak, specifically here in the United States with the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, the latter is even more critical. In these situations, those impacted have to deal with unexpected occurrences, which makes it difficult to anticipate what they would need to know to plan for and combat these difficult situations. Although the creation of an effective crisis management plan is pertinent, training educators in their specific roles and continual practicing of the

steps and guidelines for various situations is crucial; additionally ensuring the safety and well-being of all impacted individuals once a crisis arises is key (Rush et al., 2014). While educators should expect themselves to feel surprised at the spark of a crisis, this repeated practice is meant to instead alleviate and diminish uncertainty for next appropriate steps (Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, U.S. Dept. of Education, 2007). A recent parallel study from the researchers noted that when examining crisis, research from traditional school settings suggests that educator preparedness is necessary to both increase positive outcomes and decrease adverse consequences (Tysinger et al., 2016). Additionally, the researchers noted that although the "...research is specific to traditional schools, students from online environments are likely to suffer the same emotional and academic concerns in the aftermath of crisis if proper planning, prevention, and intervention efforts are not implemented" (p. 42). With this gap in the literature, continued research in the areas of crisis preparedness, specifically in an online setting to develop professional learning is warranted.

Professional Learning on K-12 Crisis Preparation in an Online School Setting

Although certain components of training techniques for traditional settings can be replicated within online school environments, there remains great uncertainty in applying these techniques for such high-stake problems for differing environments. Additionally, minimal research addresses online K-12 educators' perceptions of their received training to appropriately prepare and respond to moments of suspected crisis in an online platform. In a parallel study, through analysis of educator perceptions in the western United States, noted was great variation in the perceived level of preparedness and training for differing crisis situations (e.g., child abuse or neglect, suicidal or homicidal ideation, student or teacher unexpected death, environmental disasters, and terrorist events; Tysinger et al., 2016). Specifically, educators reported receiving training in these identified areas in traditional settings from university programs, district professional development training, professional conferences, and/or online training. However, few educators noted receiving training geared to an online program and over half of the educators suggested unpreparedness to appropriately detect or respond in these crisis events in an online setting (Tysinger et al., 2016).

With enrollment in K-12 online courses increasing during the last decade, only a select number of states (Kansas, Maryland, Vermont, Virginia, and District of Columbia) require online specific training prior to instructing in an online platform (Zweig & Stafford, 2016). The number of K-12 students enrolling in full-time online and blended school settings continues to grow and for the 2017-2018 school year, nearly 300,000 students were enrolled across 501 full-time virtual schools, and an additional 132,000

students were enrolled in 300 blended learning schools, which is an increase of 2,000 and 16,000 students over the past two years (Tate, 2019). With homeschooling on the rise and with the recent health pandemic, these numbers are projected to be significantly higher.

Districts continue to be challenged with the question of how to develop professional learning plans that are *purposeful, collaborative, and sustainable* in nature, and this is no different in the area of crisis preparedness to detect and effectively respond to crisis in varied areas. Purposeful, collaborative, and sustainable professional learning has been referred to as “continuous, job-embedded professional learning that is designed to meet a specific need identified within an annual process of a systematic comprehensive needs assessment” and this needs to be the focus of preparing educators for crisis events (McBrayer et al, 2019, p. 31). Online educators should develop new methods of implementing a stimulating and safe learning environment for all students (Barrett, 2010). Compared to traditional environments, online educators are at a greater disadvantage with the absence of visual cues that occur in face-to-face interactions. As such, this may lead to lower abilities to monitor student emotional or behavioral states leading up to varying crisis (Davis & Rose, 2007). Beneficial crisis intervention plans should entail guidelines for appropriately responding to crisis and specified roles of participating team members (Schonfeld, & Newgass, 2000). Further research is warranted to spark professional learning opportunities (management and training) in online education to provide adequate assistance to all areas of the student including academic performance and emotional well-being (Zweig & Stafford, 2016). These findings suggest further research is warranted in an effort to delve deeper into these challenges of crisis preparedness, specifically in an online platform.

METHOD

Research Design

This quantitative study utilized survey methodology to ascertain educators’ perceptions of crisis frequency and preparedness of educators in a statewide K-12 online charter school.

Setting

Great Charter Academy (GCA), a pseudonym, is a public K-12 online charter school in the southeastern region of the United States. GCA serves a statewide (urban, suburban, rural) attendance zone and, according to their website, GCA offers the benefits of a traditional brick and mortar school without the building. Students access lessons and live classes via an online

learning management system. Parents and students are partnered with certified teachers who instruct and guide student progress and achievement. In the online classroom, students participate in synchronous experiences via direct instruction from their teachers. During the school day, parents provide support and guidance to their students while in the safety and security of their own home. GCA is a tuition-free, online, accredited, public charter school. The school is designed to meet the needs of a diverse range of students who seek a rigorous academic program through a flexible online school experience, with access to school services such as clubs, activities, counseling services, and college advising. At the time of the study, the school served a student population of approximately 11,000 students which was comprised of approximately 48% Caucasian, 44% Black/African-American, 4% Latino, and 3% Asian/Pacific Islander students.

Participants

A survey was sent to 457 educators including those that identified as administrators, teachers, or other. A total of 227/457 (49% response rate) educators returned the online survey. Of the total surveys returned, 143/227 were completed with both demographic and survey questions, making them viable data points for the purposes of this study with a 63% response rate. General demographic information was gathered from the participants. Within this sample of 143 participants, 91.6% were female and 8.4% were male educators. The majority of participants (68.3%) had received a specialized graduate education (e.g., master of arts, master of science, or educational specialist degrees), whereas 30.3% had received a bachelor's degree and 1.4% had received a doctoral degree. The majority of participants reported holding a teaching position (69.2%), 19.6% reported holding a position in administration, and 11.2% reported holding another school staff position (e.g., counselor, school psychologist, Family Success Liaison). Within these roles, 67.1% of the participants have been working for zero to five years in their positions, 30.6% have six to 10 years of experience in their position, and 2.8% have 11 to 13 years of experience in their position.

Instrument

This study utilized a Crisis Event Perception Survey (CEPS), which is a 37-item survey instrument that was researcher-created and confirmed to adhere to the needed validity and reliability of survey research (Tysinger et al., 2016). The researchers ensured content validity of the CEPS in an earlier study via a two-stage process. The first stage of content validity analysis included review by two experts and based on their feedback, additional items were created to address the educators' perceived preparedness for respond-

ing to the various crisis events based on their school's current policy. The second stage of review was conducted by administrative and counseling staff members from the online school participating in the study. After their review, questions were removed in an effort to ensure participant confidentiality.

The CEPS consisted of five demographic items and 32 items that examined educators' perceptions of the frequency of various crisis events in the online charter school setting as well as their preparedness for responding to each type of crisis. The crisis events explored in the survey included suspected child/adolescent neglect, suspected child/adolescent abuse, suspected student suicidal ideation, suspected student homicidal ideation, unexpected death of a student, unexpected death of a fellow teacher, student emotional responses to natural disasters, and student emotional responses to terrorist incidents. The survey questions inquired about how many times per year the specified crisis area was suspected (never, 1-2, 3-4, 5-6, and greater than 6), if and where participants received their varied levels of training (no training, university-based teacher education program, local/district in-service or professional development, teacher professional organization conference, online webinar or training, and other) as well as how well prepared they felt to respond to the suspected area of crisis (very prepared [4], somewhat prepared [3], somewhat unprepared [2], and very unprepared [1]).

Data Collection

The CEPS instrument was delivered electronically via Qualtrics™, an online survey platform. Prior to contacting potential participants and administering the survey, the researchers received permission from their Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the GCA school district Head of School. Contact with potential participants occurred through email as the survey was distributed electronically and on a one-time basis. Creswell and Creswell (2018) suggested a four-part survey request to include an advance notice alerting potential participants of the survey, a notice requesting participation in the survey, a follow-up notice, and personalized contact to all non-respondents. Considering these recommendations, and to obtain a high rate of response, the researchers followed three of the four-part invitation to the survey over a four-week period (no personal contact was made with non-respondents as surveys were completely anonymous). First, the researchers sent a recruitment email to all potential participants explaining the details of the study and confirming correct contact information. Second, and one week following the recruitment the researchers sent an invitation email to all participants requesting their participation in the survey. This email indicated the purpose and significance of the research, anonymity assurance, implied consent, and a link to the survey using Qualtrics™. It clearly addressed

that the survey was anonymous, of voluntary nature, and that no participant would be identified. In addition, the email outlined the rights of the participant, including the right to opt out of the survey after having started their responses and the right to skip over questions during the survey. As a third contact and one week following the invitation email, the researchers sent a reminder and follow up email to potential participants of the survey. The researchers made a fourth contact one week later as an additional and final reminder. The survey closed one week following the final reminder email. The typical completion time for the CEPS was noted to be about 10-15 minutes.

Data Analysis

Analysis of data was broken down across the eight areas of crisis presented in this study (i.e., neglect, abuse, suicidal ideation, homicidal ideation, unexpected death of a student, unexpected death of a fellow teacher, natural disasters, and terrorist events). Descriptive statistics were utilized to measure the frequency that the participants had suspected these forms of crisis while working in an online educational setting, the types of training received to prepare for these crisis, and how prepared these educators felt in handling these situations based on their prior training opportunities.

FINDINGS

The findings provide tentative insights and information regarding the mechanisms involved in better understanding perceptions of crisis frequency and preparedness of online educators. Thus, the current study contributes substantially to the literature on the topics relevant to educational leadership to include neglect, abuse, suicidal ideation, homicidal ideation, unexpected death of a student, unexpected death of a teacher, natural disasters, and terrorist events. It is important to note that in the area of educators' training, participants could select more than one type of training and select all that applied.

Neglect

From measuring descriptive statistics of frequencies with the 143 participants, the majority had suspected at least once that a student was a victim to neglect. Specifically, 50.3% ($n=72$) suspected student neglect one to two times, 13.3% ($n=19$) suspected student neglect three to four times, 2.1% ($n=3$) suspected student neglect five to six times, and 2.8% ($n=4$) suspected student neglect more than six times. Pertaining to training received in recognizing signs of neglect with a student, 81.8% ($n=117$) of participants reported receiving specific training in the area of neglect for an online setting. Of those who had received training for detecting signs of neglect, 36.4%

($n=43$) of participants reported receiving training through university-based teacher education programs, 88.8% ($n=104$) received training within their district or local level (e.g., in-service trainings or professional development sessions), 22.4% ($n=26$) received training from professional organizations, 58% ($N=68$) received online trainings or webinars, and less than 1% ($n=1$) received another form of training. In regard to prior training based on current school policies, less than 50% of participants at 45.8% ($n=65$) felt 'very prepared' to handle a case of suspected student neglect. Additionally, 45.8% ($n=65$) of participants felt 'somewhat prepared', 6.3% ($n=9$) felt 'somewhat unprepared', and 2.1% ($N=3$) felt 'very unprepared' to handle a situation involving suspected neglect towards a student.

Abuse

Approximately half of the participants at 52.4% ($n=75$) had never suspected physical, sexual, or verbal abuse occurring towards a student. However, 41.3% ($n=59$) of educators did suspect abuse one to two times, 5.6% ($n=8$) suspected abuse three to four times, and less than 1% ($n=1$) suspected abuse five to six times. In regard to training, 83.9% ($n=120$) of the participants stated that they had received some form of training in the area of abuse in an online setting. Of these 34.3% ($n=41$) received training through university-based teacher education programs, 92.3% ($n=111$) received training within their district or local in-service training or professional development sessions, 24.5% ($n=29$) received training from professional organizations, 55.2% ($n=66$) received online training or webinars, and 1.4% ($n=2$) received another form of training. In regard to prior training based on current school policies, less than 50% of the participants at 47.6% ($n=68$) felt 'very prepared' to handle a situation of suspected childhood abuse. Additionally, 43.4% ($n=62$) felt 'somewhat prepared', 8.4% ($n=12$) felt 'somewhat unprepared', and .7% ($n=1$) felt 'very unprepared' to handle a situation involving suspected abuse towards a student.

Suicidal Ideation

More than half of the participants at 55.9% ($n=80$) reported suspecting suicidal ideations from students at least once. Specifically, 49.9% ($n=71$) of the participants had suspected suicidal ideations one to two times, 13.3% ($n=19$) suspected suicidal ideation three to four times, and 2.8% ($n=4$) of participants suspected suicidal ideations more than five times during their career as an educator. In regard to training, 91.5% ($n=131$) of the participants stated that they had received some form of training pertaining to detecting suicidal ideations in an online setting. This training included 30% ($n=39$) receiving training through university-based teacher education programs, 90.2% ($N=118$) receiving training within their local or district

in-service training or professional development sessions, 28.7% ($n=38$) received training from professional organizations, 55.9% ($n=73$) received on-line training or webinars, and 2.1% ($n=3$) received another form of training. In regard to prior training based on current school policies, more than 50% of the participants at 53.1% ($n=76$) felt 'very prepared' to handle a crisis situation regarding student suicidal ideation. Additionally, 38.5% ($n=55$) felt 'somewhat prepared', 6.3% ($n=9$) felt 'somewhat unprepared', and 2.1% ($n=3$) felt 'very unprepared' to handle a situation involving suspected suicidal ideation from a student.

Homicidal Ideation

A high percentage of the participants at 89.5% ($n=128$) have never suspected homicidal ideations from a student, and only 10.5% ($n=15$) suspected homicidal ideations one to two times in their career, with none expecting any more than two occurrences. Regarding training, only 45.5% ($n=65$) of the participants had received any form of training in suspecting and managing crisis related to homicidal ideations in students in an online setting. Specifically, 20.3% ($n=13$) reported receiving training from university-based teacher education programs, 51% ($n=33$) receiving training within their local or district in-service training or professional development sessions, 16.1% ($n=10$) received training from professional organizations, 29.4% ($N=19$) received online training or webinars, and less than 1% ($n=1$) received another form of training. In regard to prior training based on current school policies, less than 20% of participants at 18.9% ($n=27$) felt 'very prepared' to handle a case of suspected student homicidal ideation. Additionally, only 35.0% ($n=50$) of the participants reported feeling 'somewhat prepared', 22.4% ($n=32$) feeling 'somewhat unprepared', and 23.8% ($n=34$) feeling 'very unprepared' to handle crisis pertaining to homicidal ideations in students.

Unexpected Death of a Student

A majority of the participants at 62.9% ($n=90$) had never encountered an unexpected death of a student. However, 32.9% ($n=47$) of the participants had encountered an unexpected death of a student one to two times, 3.5% ($n=5$) of participants had encountered an unexpected death of a student three to four times, and less than 1% ($n=1$) of participants had encountered an unexpected death of a student more than four times. Only about a fourth of the participants 25.2% ($n=36$) had received training in recognizing signs and appropriate means to handle an unexpected death of a student in an on-line context. Specifically, 11.2% ($n=4$) reported receiving training from university-based teacher education programs, 39.2% ($n=14$) received training within their local or district in-service training or professional development sessions, 9.8% ($n=4$) received training from professional organizations,

14% ($n=5$) received online training or webinars, and 1.4% ($n=1$) received another form of training. In regard to prior training based on current school policies, less than 10% 9.8% ($n=14$) reported feeling ‘very prepared’. Additionally, 25.9% ($n=37$) of the participants reported feeling ‘somewhat prepared’, 37.1% ($n=53$) of participants felt ‘somewhat unprepared’ and 27.3% ($n=39$) of participants felt ‘very unprepared’ to handle crisis pertaining to unexpected death of a student.

Unexpected Death of a Teacher

While a great majority of the participants 85.3% ($n=122$) had never encountered an unexpected death of a teacher in their school, still 14% ($n=20$) had experienced this one to two times and less than 1% ($n=1$) had experienced this more than two times. Educators received the least amount of training for managing a teacher death, with only 11.9% ($n=17$) of participants reporting any type of training on the unexpected death of a teacher in an online setting. Participants reported receiving training on managing unexpected teacher death with 4.9% ($n=1$) receiving training from university-based teacher education programs, 14.7% ($n=2$) receiving training within their local or district in-service training or professional development sessions, 4.2% ($n=1$) receiving training from professional organizations, 5.6% ($n=1$) received online training or webinars, and 1.4% ($n=1$) received another form of training. In regard to prior training based on current school policies, less than 10% of participants at 7.7% ($n=11$) felt ‘very prepared’ to handle crisis pertaining to unexpected death of a teacher. Additionally, 23.8% ($n=34$) of the participants reported feeling ‘somewhat prepared’, 35.7% ($n=51$) feeling ‘somewhat unprepared’ and 32.9% ($n=47$) feeling ‘very unprepared’ to handle crisis pertaining to unexpected death of a teacher.

Natural Disasters

Participants suspected student emotional responses from natural disasters more frequently than any other form of crisis at 76.2% ($n=109$). Specifically, 60.1% ($n=86$) suspected emotional response to natural disasters one to two times, 9.1% ($n=13$) suspected emotional responses three to four times, 4.2% ($n=6$) suspected emotional responses five to six times, and 2.8% ($n=4$) suspected emotional responses more than six times. Only 32.2% ($n=46$) of participants had received any form of training in suspecting these emotional responses to natural disasters in an online setting. Of those who had received training for detecting emotional responses to natural disasters, 10.5% ($n=5$) of participants reported receiving training through university-based teacher education programs, 36.4% ($n=17$) received training within their district or local level (e.g., in-service trainings or professional development sessions), 9.1% ($n=4$) received training from professional organizations,

18.2% ($n=8$) received online trainings or webinars, and 3.5% ($n=2$) received another form of training. In regard to prior training based on current school policies, less than 20% of participants 18.9% ($n=27$) reported feeling 'very prepared' to handle crisis pertaining to natural disasters, 35.7% ($n=51$) reported feeling 'somewhat prepared', 32.9% ($n=47$) reported feeling 'somewhat unprepared', and 12.6% ($n=18$) reported feeling 'very unprepared' to handle crisis pertaining to natural disasters.

Terrorist Threats

The majority of participants at 83.9% ($n=120$) had never encountered students' emotional responses to terrorist threats. Out of those who had encountered these emotional responses, 14% ($n=3$) had encountered these once or twice, 1.4% ($n=1$) had encountered these three or four times, and less than 1% had encountered these responses more than four times. Only a small portion (14% $n=20$) of participants had received training for preparation in encountering these emotional responses from students in an online setting. Of those who had received training for detecting emotional responses to terrorist events, 5.6% ($n=1$) of participants reported receiving training through university-based teacher education programs, 19.6% ($n=4$) received training within their district or local level (e.g., in-service trainings or professional development sessions), 6.3% ($n=1$) received training from professional organizations, and 8.4% ($n=2$) received online trainings. In regard to prior training based on current school policies, less than 10% with 7.7% ($n=11$) of the participants reported feeling 'very prepared' to handle crisis pertaining to terrorist threats, 25.9% ($n=37$) feeling 'somewhat prepared', 28.7% ($n=41$) feeling 'somewhat unprepared' and 37.8% ($n=54$) feeling 'very unprepared' to handle crisis pertaining to terrorist threats.

In summary, the findings are intended to provide baseline data regarding the level of frequency of crisis and the preparedness of online school educators to address the need for crisis management planning and training. Table 1 details the levels of reported preparedness across these crisis events. Thus, the study contributes substantially to the literature on crisis preparedness and preliminary findings revealed that educators are detecting crisis and their preparedness needs to be heightened.

Table 1
Reported Levels of Educator Preparedness Across Various Crisis Events

	Very Unprepared	Somewhat Unprepared	Somewhat Prepared	Very Prepared
Neglect	2.1% (n=3)	6.3% (n=9)	45.8% (n=65)	45.8% (n=65)
Abuse	0.7% (n=1)	8.4% (n=12)	43.4% (n=62)	47.6% (n=68)
Suicidal Ideation	2.1% (n=3)	6.3% (n=9)	38.5% (n=55)	53.1% (n=76)
Homicidal Ideation	23.8% (n=34)	22.4% (n=32)	35.0% (n=50)	18.9% (n=27)
Unexpected Death of a Student	27.3% (N=39)	37.1% (N=53)	25.9% (N=37)	9.8% (N=14)
Unexpected Death of a Teacher	32.9% (N=47)	35.7% (N=51)	23.8% (N=34)	7.7% (N=11)
Natural Disasters	12.6% (N=18)	32.9% (N=47)	35.7% (N=51)	18.9% (N=27)
Terrorist Threats	37.8% (N=54)	28.7% (N=41)	25.9% (N=37)	7.7% (N=11)

Note: N=143

DISCUSSION

Overall, the findings suggest that the identified online school is comprised of educators who are prepared to some extent for varied crisis, but further knowledge and evidence-based practices and strategies are needed to be prepared beyond a reasonable doubt and this will be needed in the form of purposeful, collaborative, and sustainable professional learning (McBrayer et al., 2018). Findings noted, the only area where more than 50% of the educators felt very prepared for crisis was in the area of detecting and responding to suicidal ideations. The next level of preparedness with slightly less than 50% in the areas of neglect (45.8%) and abuse (47.6%). Other areas of crisis preparedness were below 20% with homicidal ideations (18.9%) and natural disasters (18.8%) and of even greater concerns were the three areas of less than 10% for crisis preparedness in the areas of unexpected death of students (9.8%), unexpected death of a teacher (7.7%), and terrorist threats (7.7%).

We arguably agree, preparedness to some extent is unacceptable to our students, our parents, the schools, and the community. This notion is supported by the findings of high frequencies that educators are subject to during a variety of crisis events, such as apparent neglect of a student, suicidal ideations from a student, and emotional responses to natural disasters. However, the amount of training required for educators in online programs seemed to deviate drastically across these different crisis events. For example, although respondents suspected emotional responses from their students occurring from a natural disaster far more frequently than other crisis

events, educators, collectively, received less training on this for an online platform than detecting abuse or neglect towards a student or a student expressing homicidal or suicidal thoughts. Furthermore, educators received the least amount of training, overall, for responding to an unexpected death of a fellow teacher, followed by minimal training in responding to emotional aftermath of a terrorist event. Thus, further research via a deeper dive into the data is warranted to address these challenges and areas in need of training. We, as a society, are failing to provide the mandatory safety students need, and this must be the driving force of continued research in this area to inform practice.

The leading cause of death being accidental injuries for children ages 15 to 18, it is pertinent that an action plan be formulated and set in action for when this tragedy occurs (Heron, 2019). Although it appears that training in some areas of crisis management planning is considered at a non-beneficial level, it is important to note that other areas suggest adequate training of educators. These crisis events appear to be based on current areas on the rise (e.g., student suicidal thoughts, abuse towards a student, neglect towards a student). Furthermore, even with focus in training in these areas, the rates of suicide are steadily increasing in the United States leading our youth to danger. In the past decade, there has been a 56% increase in suicide amongst school-aged children, and further increasing by 23% with teen-focused television shows, including “13 Reasons Why”, addressing suicide through streaming sites in the past year (Curtin & Heron, 2019; National Institute of Mental Health, 2019b). Although rates of childhood abuse have declined substantially over the past two decades (sexual abuse by 54% and physical abuse by 55%), childhood neglect has only decreased by 13% (Giardino, 2016). These decreases in abuse and neglect may be due to heightened awareness and training of educators and caregivers; however, this should remain a focus in training to ensure a continual increase in awareness and decrease in childhood harm.

Educators may have received training during their careers, but their level of perceived preparedness is too low for school leaders, teachers, parents, school staff, and community to adequately ensure school safety beyond a reasonable doubt. Lower levels of suspecting crisis may be due to the sample consisting of a high number of new educators who have not had to experience a state of crisis yet or could be due to a lack of training, which coincides with a lack of confidence in ability, in how to detect crisis in students and peers. In the majority of crisis situations participants did not feel ‘very prepared’ to handle these situations. This confidence level of abilities in our educators is too low for comfort when this work is dealing with the lives of children, parents, school staff, and the community as a whole. Thus, the findings of this study further support earlier research (Tysinger et al., 2015)

that highlighted a dire need for professional development related to crisis response in the online learning environment. Additionally, the researchers have called for the specified training of school psychologists to respond in the event of crisis in the K–12 online learning environment, and these findings confirm that educational leadership and teacher preparation programs need to follow suit to support the emotional well-being of our students and avoid the negative outcomes associated with crisis events (Tysinger et al., 2015). Administrators and policy makers must look at current safety plans in all of the areas noted in this study to better understand how to provide purposeful, collaborative, and sustainable professional learning to aid our educators in being prepared for all levels of crisis (McBrayer et al., 2018). Continual focus into these areas is pertinent to increase training geared particularly to online platforms and educator preparedness is important to ensure the physical and mental safety of all students.

Limitations

The researchers would like to acknowledge the limitations of our study. First, the measures were all self-report surveys and information could have been skewed. We note that although the sample was large enough to demonstrate statistically significant results, a larger sample size may have yielded more stable results. The sample included a whole district population, and was non-random, thereby limiting the generalizability and representativeness of the findings to other samples of this population. Although the role that an educator fills within a school greatly influences their perception, the researchers presented the data in aggregate form as we were collectively examining the preparedness of the educators in online settings (administrators, teachers, other). In the future we plan to further disaggregate via more specific demographic questions. The perceptions of these educators could potentially not be reflective of the actual number of incidents since the teacher and student are physically separated, and interaction are often focused on academics. For this reason, their perceptions are likely to be lower (underrepresented) actual incidents. Our research design was cross-sectional and non-experimental in nature, and hence, it is understood that no causal claims can be drawn from our data.

Implications for Practice

Overall, these results provide an understanding for the need of specified training and crisis management planning for K-12 programs that are fully online, and this plan needs to translate into purposeful, collaborative, and sustainable professional learning to address the specific challenges of the online environment (McBrayer et al., 2018). These results can further develop our prior understanding of the criteria and policies for current training of

educators in online educational environments for K-12. Further, awareness is needed to better implement evidence-based practices in various stressful states of crisis. As suggested in prior research, training modules should be structured with a hierarchical train the trainer approach allowing leaders for each school to have ample expertise in these crisis situations (Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, U.S. Dept. of Education, 2007; Perkins, 2018) and this in turn, will help them best prepare all constituents to address crisis preparedness effectively.

School leaders need to engage in a variety of professional learning, including attending conferences, seminars, online training programs, meetings with emergency responders, and district-wide meetings, in order to ensure they are up-to-date on evidence-based practices for safety and security for their school's students, parents, and staff and these need to translate to all community stakeholders. These district-wide meetings should also encourage understanding across programs and provide consultation to ensure each school is getting the necessary support from personnel within the field of education and the community, such as emergency responders and mental health professionals. Additionally, this supports the need for communication around training for all constituents that may be affected by crisis events. It is imperative that we address the problem of crisis preparedness and the conduit needs to be adequate crisis planning through professional learning that is purposeful, collaborative, and sustainable, particularly as we currently experience unprecedented times with the 2020 health pandemic.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future steps are suggested to gather information regarding safety preparedness across a variety of educational settings including both online and traditional to capture the perceptions of all educators who are directly engaging in work with students to ensure school safety as a norm and not an exception. These preliminary findings gathered from one identified school are intended to provide researchers with insight into areas where educators felt unprepared to detect or respond to various crises in the specified online setting. However, it is important to note that as stewards for student safety we must ensure that this is a nationwide norm to enact comprehensive safety measures on a broader scale. Thus, we propose two viable recommendations for future research with outcomes believed to have a positive impact on school safety in both online and traditional settings.

The first recommendation for researchers is to develop and implement professional learning that is purposeful, collaborative, and sustainable, in order to provide evidence-based practices to educators for preparedness that is beneficial to online and traditional settings. By hearing from the voices

of all educators and community supporters, the development of professional learning, such as virtual professional learning modules may result in increased knowledge within multiple platforms, by experts trained in school safety. Additionally, further information gathering from those associated with school districts such as school leaders, teachers, school support staff, school counselors, school psychologists, and the community will be beneficial to strengthen crisis management planning and training.

Our second recommendation focuses on an interdisciplinary approach to partner educational leaders with school psychologists, clinical psychologists, clinical counselors, and other field experts. Partnering educators with faculty and staff from educational leadership, teaching and learning, criminal justice, and nursing benefits universal safety measure practices. We need to communicate with our community partners such as the police force and private counselors and psychologists to continue this research from a broader scope. All students have the right to learn beyond a reasonable doubt in a setting that is safe and conducive to learning. The goal is to continue this work by collecting a nationwide data set to ascertain all educators' perceptions of crisis preparedness and this needs to be approached as a collective effort with school districts, institutions of higher education and our community partners. In turn, this information can inform professional learning opportunities that have been noted as being necessary to ensure school safety.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study align with national trends indicating a need for crisis training and management planning for educators, specifically for online settings, and more specifically given this 2020 health pandemic. The purpose of this study was to examine perceptions of crisis frequency and preparedness of online educators in a statewide, online K-12 charter school. The findings revealed preparedness to some degree, suggesting necessary reform of educator crisis training to uphold a safe school environment. Findings from this study should be utilized to inform federal and state laws and policies to ensure crisis preparedness across school districts. Furthermore, crisis intervention is needed to provide guidelines for appropriately detecting and responding to crisis to ensure we are meeting the educational needs of students in a safe school setting. Undoubtedly, there is a need for continued research on a nationwide level to address the need to ensure school safety. The findings from this study are a call for the urgency to make crisis preparedness of the utmost importance (in the case of this study very prepared) for all educators, in all situations the norm.

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