

Crisis Events in K-12 Online Learning: Educator Perceptions and Preparedness

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Abstract

Although K–12 online learning institutions may be protected from certain school safety concerns (i.e., physical violence on a student or a teacher), physical distance does not offer protection from all potential crises that may impact individual students or the online school environment. The current survey research explored educators' perceptions of and preparedness for the following crisis frequencies in the online learning environment: 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 teacher, emotional aftermath of natural disasters, and emotional aftermath of terrorist incidents. Across the sample, the crisis events were noted as occurring at least one to two times per year by some participants. Even more striking, 80–95% of participants noted having no training for recognizing the warning signs of the various crisis events in online content, and at least 1 in 4 participants in every category indicated that they felt somewhat unprepared or very unprepared to respond based on their school's current crisis plan.

Keywords

K-12 online learning, school crisis, educator preparedness

Crisis Events in K–12 Online Learning: Educator Perceptions and Preparedness

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According to *Keeping Pace with K–12 Digital Learning: An Annual Review of Policy and Practice*, there were approximately 4.5 million supplemental online course enrollments for over 2.2 million K–12 students during the 2014–2015 academic year. Within that, 275,000 K–12 students were enrolled in full-time virtual charter schools. Across the 25 state-based virtual schools, three states (Georgia, Illinois, and South Carolina) experienced over 50% enrollment growth in the most recent school year alone. Although the growth in enrollment in K–12 online learning environments has been well documented (Watson, Pape, Murin, Gemin, & Vashaw, 2015), the current literature fails to address the school safety concerns that may accompany that growth.

Popular media and academic publications are replete with articles focused on crisis planning, preparedness, and response in the traditional educational environments, but little is known about crises that impact online learning. While online learning environments are protected from some potential crises (e.g., physical violence aimed at a teacher or student) by their geographic distance between stakeholders, other crises can and will impact individual students and/or online classrooms (Tysinger, Kennedy, Tysinger, & Diamanduros, 2013; Tysinger, Tysinger, & Diamanduros, 2014). The present survey research sought to explore online educators' perceptions of the frequency of a variety of potential school crises including 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 teacher, emotional

aftermath of natural disasters, and emotional aftermath of terrorist incidents. Additionally, the study addressed teachers' perceptions of their training for recognizing signs of crisis in online student content and their preparedness for response based on their school's policy/plan in the event of the aforementioned crisis situations.

CRISIS FREQUENCY

With regard to the frequency of crisis situations impacting school settings, data suggest that 93% of teachers in traditional, brick-and-mortar schools have been called upon at some point to respond to a serious crisis situation (Adamson & Peacock, 2007). According to national statistics, child and adolescent abuse and neglect represent crises that have become unfortunately commonplace. In their report to Congress on the national incidence of child abuse and neglect, Sedlak et al. (2010) noted that "... more than 1.25 million children (an estimated 1,256,600 children) experienced maltreatment during the NIS–4 study year (2005–2006). This corresponds to one child in every 58 in the United States. A large percentage (44%, or an estimated total of 553,300) were abused, while most (61%, or an estimated total of 771,700) were neglected" (p. 5). Given the prevalence of this social issue, the probability is great that a number of these neglected and/or abused children are represented in the enrollments of online learning institutions.

Although prevalence is difficult to measure, the unexpected death of a student or teacher represents another vulnerability for the online school environment in terms of crisis response. While rates of suicidal and homicidal ideation

are not known, there were 1568 suicides and 1199 homicides among children and adolescents (ages 5–18) in the United States during the 2011–2012 school year (Robers, Zhang, Morgan, & Musu-Gillette, 2015). Additionally, deaths or serious injury related to natural disasters and terrorist incidents are also a likely source of trauma impacting the school climate and its constituents. Experts in the area of school crisis suggest that physical proximity to a crisis event is the greatest predictor of traumatic response; however, emotional proximity (like that in an online school environment with teachers and peers) is the second greatest predictor of traumatic symptomology following crises (Brock & Davis, 2008).

At present, there are no crisis frequency data specific to online learning environments, yet the dramatic increases in enrollment (particularly enrollment of students experiencing multiple risks) are likely to correspond to a greater prevalence of crisis events as well. In fact, behavioral and mental health concerns have been a primary motivator for many students who enroll in online learning institutions (Ahn, 2011; Barbour, 2012; Dickson, 2005; Huerta, Gonzalez, & d'Entremont, 2006), thereby increasing the likelihood of crisis situations in that environment. In a survey of educational programs affiliated with the International Association for K–12 Online Learning, it was found that students at risk made up a majority of the student body in 46% of the reporting institutions (Archambault et al., 2010). Archambault et al. (2010) also found that “Twenty-five percent of respondents reported that more than 75% of their enrolled students would be considered ‘at-risk’...” (p. 4). Thus, the investigation of crisis frequency in online learning environments is a critical first step in addressing crisis response needs.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR CRISIS

In the event of crisis, research from traditional school environments suggests that teacher preparedness is essential to both increasing

positive outcomes and decreasing adverse consequences. When teachers have proper training for crisis response, it increases their motivation to respond to students’ emotional needs and decreases negative emotional reactions to the crisis (Forthun & McCombie, 2011). Conversely, when teachers fail to recognize the need for additional student support, the likelihood of adverse outcomes such as anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder is increased (Brock, Nickerson, Reeves, & Jimerson, 2008). These emotional concerns additionally impact academic performance through their impairment of attention, storage, and retrieval of classroom content (Brock et al., 2008; Eaves, 2001). Although the aforementioned 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.

As with crisis frequency data, there is no published literature to offer insight into teacher preparedness for crisis response in online learning environments. While most online teachers likely studied in traditional teacher preparation programs, the crisis response resources and mechanisms in the online environment would differ from that of their university training and/or professional development due to the lack of proximity between educational institution, teacher, and student. Thus, even those educators who have had crisis awareness, planning, or response training may find a mismatch between their preparedness and the needs of the situation when teaching in the online learning environment.

CURRENT RESEARCH

Despite the growing popularity of this educational format and research that demonstrates the connection between school safety and learning, the crisis intervention literature regarding best

practices for online environments is nonexistent. A necessary first step in building that body of knowledge is determining the frequency of crisis events and teacher preparedness for response.

METHOD

Participants

Participants for the survey were administrators and teachers from a large, public online high school in the western United States. Of the 54 respondents, 41 (all noting their roles as teachers) completed most survey items. Within those participants, 80.48% were female ($n = 33$) and 19.51% were male ($n = 8$) with years of teaching experience ranging from 1–15 years ($M = 5.46$ years). With regard to educational attainment, 11 participants (26.83%) reported training at the Bachelor's level (B.A. or B.S.), 18 participants (43.90%) indicated achievement of a Master's degree (M.A. or M.S), 11 participants (26.83%) noted that they held a Master's+ or Ed.S. degree, and one participant (2.43%) had earned a doctoral-level degree in education. Respondents to the survey reported their primary teaching area as follows: English (12 participants; 29.27%), Math (5 participants; 12.20%), Social Studies (5 participants; 12.20%), Science (3 participants; 7.31%), Business (3 participants; 7.31%), Health (3 participants; 7.31%), Foreign Language (2 participants; 4.88%) and Communication (1 participant; 2.43%). Seven respondents (17.07%) chose not to report their primary teaching content area.

Instrument

The *Crisis Event Perception Survey* (CEPS) is a 37-item survey instrument that was created specifically for use on this research project. The electronically-delivered CEPS consisted of five demographic items and 32 items addressing educators' perceptions of the frequency of various crisis situations in the online learning environment 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.

In order to ensure content validity of the CEPS, it was subjected to multiple stages of review prior to use in the study. The first stage of content validity analysis included review by two experts in school psychology and school crisis response. Based on their feedback, additional items were created to address the educators' perceived preparedness for responding 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 participating online learning environment. After their review, some demographic items were removed to increase efforts toward participant confidentiality ensuring that the respondents could not be identified based on their responses.

Procedure

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was sought and attained through the researchers' home institution, Georgia Southern University. After IRB approval, the recruitment email (including study explanation and survey link) was distributed through the participating schools' learning management system to all administrators and teachers in spring 2015. Potential participants were given one month to respond before a reminder email was sent. Access to the survey was closed one week after the follow-up email.

RESULTS

Perceived Crisis Frequency

Through the CEPS, participants reported their perceptions of frequency of various crisis events in the online learning environment. With regard to suspicion of child/adolescent

neglect, nearly half the sample ($n = 20$; 48.78%) noted that online student content led them to suspect neglect approximately 1–2 times per year on average. Another 7.32% ($n = 3$) of the sample reported suspecting child/adolescent neglect 3–4 times per year on average, and one participant (2.43%) noted suspected child/adolescent abuse 5–6 times per year. Seventeen respondents (41.46%) indicated that they had never suspected child/adolescent neglect based on online student content. However, 93% ($n = 38$) of all participants also noted that they had never been trained to recognize signs of child/adolescent neglect in online student content.

Although 24 respondents (61.54%) reported that they had never suspected child/adolescent abuse based on online student content, 13 participants (33.33%) indicated that they suspected child/adolescent abuse 1–2 times per year. One participant (2.56%) noted suspected child/adolescent abuse 3–4 times per year on average, while one other participant (2.56%) suspected child/adolescent abuse greater than 6 times per year. Of the 39 participants who responded to the child/adolescent abuse items, 34 sample members (87.18%) had received no training for recognizing signs of child/adolescent abuse in student online content.

In response to CEPS items related to suspected student suicidal ideation, 17 of 40 participants (42.50%) suspected student suicidal ideation at least one time per year on average based on students' online content with 15 teachers (37.50%) suspecting suicidal ideation 1–2 times per year, one teacher (2.5%) suspecting suicidal ideation 3–4 times per year, and one teacher (2.5%) suspecting suicidal ideation greater than 6 times per year. Despite the frequency of suicidal ideation, most respondents ($n = 33$; 80.49%) indicated that they had received no training for recognizing suicidal thoughts or tendencies among student within their online course contributions.

In considering student homicidal ideation, most participants ($n = 35$; 85.37%) indicated

that they had never suspected a student to be homicidal based on his/her online course content. However, six participants (14.63%) noted that they suspected homicidal ideation approximately 1–2 times per year on average; yet, 95.12% of participants ($n = 39$) had not received training for recognizing signs of homicidal ideation in students' contributions to the online classroom environment.

Although the reported frequency of unexpected student death is small, four participants (9.76%) indicated that there is at least one death on average per year. One participant (2.44%) reported greater than three unexpected student deaths per year. Thus, 36 of 41 respondents (87.80%) had never experienced the unexpected death of a student in the online learning environment. With regard to preparedness to respond, 85.00% ($n = 34$) had not been trained to respond to the emotional aftermath of an unexpected death of a student in the online learning environment.

Similar to previous findings, few teachers in the sample had experienced the unexpected death of a colleague. However, three participants (7.50%) noted an average of one death per year among the teaching staff, and 92.68% ($n = 38$) indicated that they had not received training to respond when the unexpected death of a peer does occur.

Across the sample, eight participants (19.51%) stated that they encounter students' emotional responses to natural disasters approximately 1–2 times per year, but 80.49% of survey respondents indicated that they had never experienced responding to such an occurrence. In the event of a natural disaster, 92.68% of the teachers in the sample noted that they had received no training for responding to students' emotional reactions in the online learning environment.

Participants also responded to items addressing the frequency of student emotional responses in the online learning environment to terrorist incidents. Six teachers (14.63%) noted

that they encountered emotional responses to terrorism approximately 1–2 times per year on average. One participant (2.44%) reported emotional responses to terrorism approximately 3–4 times per year, and one respondent (2.44%) stated that he/she had responded to the aftermath of terrorist incidents approximately 5–6 times over the course of the school year. Despite the frequency of needed response, 38 of 40 participants (95.00%) reported they had no training to deal with the emotional aftermath of terrorist incidents in their online classroom.

Perceived Crisis Preparedness

Survey results also highlight participants' perceived preparedness for the aforementioned crisis events. Although the teachers within the sample reported receiving training for responding to crisis events from a number of credible sources (e.g., teacher preparation program, local/district in-service or professional development session), their reported preparedness for responding based on their school's policy varied greatly based on the particular crisis event. According to the results, teachers felt most prepared to respond to suspected child/adolescent neglect (48.78% very prepared or somewhat prepared), suspected child/adolescent abuse (46.15% very prepared or somewhat prepared), suspected suicidal ideation (46.34% very prepared or somewhat prepared), and the emotional aftermath of natural disasters (41.46% very prepared to somewhat prepared).

Despite the fact that participants felt more equipped to respond to the aforementioned crisis situations than others, more than half the sample indicated feeling somewhat unprepared or very unprepared to respond in every crisis category. In fact, teachers report the least confidence in their preparedness to respond to suspected homicidal ideation (29.27% very prepared or somewhat prepared), unexpected death of a student (34.15% very prepared or somewhat prepared), unexpected death of a fellow teacher (26.83% very prepared

or somewhat prepared), and the emotional aftermath of terrorist incidents (26.83% very prepared or somewhat prepared).

DISCUSSION

The findings from the current research are consistent with published literature suggesting that although online learning environments will not experience certain crisis events (i.e., those involving physical proximity such as violence on a student/teacher) that threaten traditional brick-and-mortar schools, they are not immune to many other crisis situations such as suspected child/adolescent neglect, suspected child/adolescent abuse, student suicidal ideation, student homicidal ideation, unexpected death of a student, unexpected death of a teacher, emotional aftermath of natural disasters, and emotional aftermath of terrorist events (Tysinger, Diamanduros, & Tysinger, 2015; Tysinger et al., 2013; Tysinger et al., 2014). Although the very nature of crisis would suggest that it should be infrequent, every crisis event under exploration in this survey was endorsed as occurring at least once per year by some teachers in the online learning environment. This is consistent with results from the traditional school environment where Adamson and Peacock (2007) found that 93% of teachers in their study had responded to at least one serious crisis situation. Thus, it becomes critical for online schools to address educator preparedness and crisis planning to a greater degree.

To date, there are no objective data regarding the prevalence of crisis events in online learning environments (Tysinger et al., 2014). However, this first look at educator perceptions of crisis frequency suggests that further investigation is warranted, particularly in the area of suspected child/adolescent neglect which was demonstrated as having the greatest frequency among the crisis events explored in the survey with nearly 50% of participants indicating that they suspect child/adolescent neglect one to two times per school

year on average. While it is known that the online learning environment is an attractive educational alternative to a variety of students from high-risk groups including those with chronic physical and/or mental health concerns, those who have been removed from traditional school due to disruptive behaviors, and those who are serving house arrest sentences (Ahn, 2011; Barbour, 2012; Dickson 2005; Huerta et al., 2006), it is not known if those students from high-risk families (e.g., domestic violence or substance abuse in the home) may also seek online enrollments for their children in an effort to reduce the probability of discovery and legal intervention.

Regardless of the actual frequency of crisis situations, they are bound to impact the online learning environment at some point and research suggests that the key to intervention with any crisis event or student at risk is the caring and supportive online teacher (Borup, Graham & Drysdale, 2014; Borup, Graham, & Velasquez, 2013; Velasquez, Graham, & Osguthorpe, 2013). However, the current research may have revealed one of the greatest barriers to teachers' provision of emotional support—that is, their lack of training in recognizing warning signs within student online content. Despite reporting a variety of professional development related to crisis events in general, 80–95% of respondents indicated that they have no training for recognizing signs of crisis within online content across all event categories. Should educators receive the proper training for crisis awareness in online content, there is a significant probability that perceived frequency data may increase as well, since most respondents report never having suspected most crisis events in their online classrooms. Yet, even when they are aware of crisis situations, greater than one in four participants reported that they feel somewhat unprepared or very unprepared to respond based on their own school's crisis intervention plan. Thus, there appears to be a dire need for professional development

related to crisis response in the online learning environment.

While Tysinger et al. (2015) have called for the specific training of school psychologists to respond in the event of crisis in the K–12 online learning environment, it is recommended that teacher preparation programs follow suit to avoid serious consequences and promote emotional well-being across virtual student bodies. At present, there appears to be a frightening dearth of preparedness for crises among educators in K–12 online learning environments. Although the consequences for lack of preparedness for online, school-based crisis may be serious, research from traditional school environments suggests that teacher professional development can counteract many of the most serious symptoms in the aftermath of crisis (Forthun & McCombie, 2011).

The current study offers an initial glimpse at perceived crisis frequency and teacher preparedness in the K–12 online learning environment, yet its limitations include those inherent with small sample sizes and survey research. Since the survey is based on educator perceptions rather than more objective crisis frequency data, it is possible that the reported frequencies could represent under- or over-estimates of actual crises. Future research should attempt to access crisis frequency data through school's administrative logs or samplings of actual online content. With regard to preparedness, it is possible that some participants may have chosen not to participate out of fear of acknowledging their lack of preparedness in this area. Subsequent research should address perceptions of preparedness both pre- and post-professional development specific to recognizing signs of crisis within online content.

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