The impact of critical incidents on school counsellors
Report of a qualitative study

Margaret Donnelly BA MA DipEd

Senior Education Officer
Diocese of Broken Bay, Sydney,
Australia

Louise Rowling PhD, MA, MEd, DipEd

Associate Professor
Faculty of Education and Social Work,
University of Sydney, Australia

Although schools are usually regarded as places for academic learning, they are not immune to traumatic incidents and other upsetting emergencies. Crisis events, which frequently involve bereavement, can occur either within the local community or globally and may significantly affect school communities, disrupting their equilibrium and normal functioning. Students and teachers may not be able to attend classes or concentrate on their studies and teaching. As key health workers, school counsellors are often the first ports of call for support for those grieving the loss of a member of the community.

One of the school counsellors' roles is to provide counselling and support, especially during times of grief and loss. As well as turning to their parents, teachers, fellow students and others within the community, students will look to the school counsellor for help and reassurance. Members of staff who are also likely to have been personally affected by the same crises that are confronting their students may need guidance and support. The school community is often a place where young people and parents seek, and connect with, support.

In Australia, counsellors and psychologists are employed in the government and non-government sectors of education to provide counselling and educational support to both primary and secondary students. For the purpose of this article the term school counsellor is used to refer to both counsellors and psychologists. Roles and qualifications are not consistent within sectors or across the country. In each state it is the government sector that employs the largest number of counsellors. For example, in 2005 in New South Wales the government sector employed over 800 school counsellors (including full-time, part-time and casuals) and provided services to 2,200 schools (including 1,600 primary schools, 400 secondary schools, central schools and schools for special purposes). Many counsellors are also employed in the non-government education sector (Catholic and independent) in the same area.

Although this study considered counsellors working in school communities, the findings are applicable to others working in caring professions and palliative care. Similarly, those working in bereavement care can be required to provide nurturing support to those who are grieving in other communities, eg hospitals, hospices.

Crisis events in school communities

A critical incident is broadly described as an event which impinges on an organisation, creates significant danger or risk, lies outside the range of ordinary day-to-day experiences and which, in a school, creates a situation where staff, students, parents and families feel under stress, vulnerable or unsafe. Critical incidents often involve the death of someone within the school community, ie student, staff member or parent. Sometimes these deaths are anticipated, while others are unexpected and can be more tragic.

ABSTRACT

Traumatic events connected with a school can seriously affect everyone involved – students, staff, parents and the local community. School counsellors can come under considerable pressure and may themselves need support. This study looked at the experiences of Australian school counsellors who are employed in both the governmental and non-governmental sectors. The authors conclude that leadership is of paramount importance, coupled with a good management plan and clear communications between all parties involved. They believe that their findings could be of help to others working in the caring professions and in palliative care.

A school crisis not only brings chaos that undermines the safety and stability of the entire organisation, but exposes students and staff to loss and traumatic stimulus that threaten their sense of security, safety and power. The usual coping strategies used by the school are greatly challenged and those within the school community question why this crisis occurred and wonder if it will happen again. The sudden and unexpected nature of the crisis event contributes to the psychological and emotional impact on the principal, teachers, staff, students, school counsellor and parents,

as well as family members and the broader school community. As a result, a wide range of poeple may experience grief, psychological trauma and strong emotional reactions.

Literature review

While studies have considered the effects of critical incidents on principals (Rowling, 2003) and teachers (Rowling, 1995; Jackson, 2003), there is little research available that explores the experiences of school counsellors. Work that has been done has mainly looked at burnout and the stress of the overall demands of the job (Huberty, Huebner 1988; Huebner, 1992; Huebner, 1993; Grunsell, 1993) and not specifically focused on their experience of critical incidents and the impact of such events.

Although school counsellors may have received some training in the management of traumatic incidents, grief and bereavement, they themselves are not immune to being affected by these events. However, in some states in Australia, there is limited planning and few procedures implemented to support counsellors in these situations (Whitla, 2003). The critical incident being managed could be a counsellor's first experience of dealing with grief, loss and trauma, in an organisation as well as within themselves. Alternatively, it may not be a first experience but could tap into past professional and personal traumas, stresses and memories of loss and grief. A compounding factor for school counsellors in managing incidents is that they perceive themselves as professionals whose role is to be specifically responsible for helping others and who should keep their own emotions in check (Rowling, 2003). Those working in bereavement care with the wider community may experience the same perceptions.

THE STUDY

The 21 school counsellors who volunteered for this study worked, or had worked, in both government and privately run schools in the primary and secondary sectors in New South Wales, Australian Capital Territory and Queensland. Participants either responded to a flyer distributed at the 2003 national conference of the

Australian Guidance and Counselling Association (AGCA), the major national organisation for counsellors, or to an invitation published in the AGCA newsletter and that of the Association for Independent Schools School Counsellors, or through snowballing (participants recommending their colleagues to participate in the study).

This research looked for factors that reflected the impact and outcome of critical incidents for school counsellors. The counsellors' experiences were identified through in-depth semi-structured interviews. All interviews were audio-taped and later transcribed. Thirteen of the 21 counsellors participated in a follow-up interview to clarify issues they had raised. These follow-up interviews gave greater depth of understanding and assisted in clarification of emerging concepts and interweaving themes.

Transcripts of all interviews and case summaries were sent to participants. Participants were encouraged to check their transcripts and respond. Some participants maintained contact with the researcher throughout the research process providing further insights and reflections. This iterative process allowed for a deeper understanding of the school counsellors' experiences of critical incidents and the meaning they assigned to these experiences.

Twelve themes arose from preliminary analysis of the data. These could be grouped under three main elements that reflected other areas of trauma and stress, as described in Saakvitne and Pearlman's (1996) and Pearlman's (1999) triad: the worker, the work and the workplace. The framework that emerged involved three elements – the **workplace** (school or system), the **work** (management of critical incidents), and the **worker** (the counsellor- professional self and personal self) – as well as a number of components, many of which were themes from the data analysis such as conflict, confronting work and experience (see diagram on p13). Along with the elements, four threads emerged namely: **leadership, stress and trauma, expectations**, and **reflection and integration**. These threads weave through the elements and the components, providing linkage. The complex and dynamic nature of the school counsellors' experiences means that no two parts of the frame-

work ever interrelate in exactly the same way. The nature of critical incidents, the people involved and the various workplaces create different combinations and therefore interrelate in differing ways in each incident.

The thread, leadership, interweaves throughout the three elements and is reflected in components of quality practice and management, the role of the counsellor, conflict, relationships and professional respect for the worker. Aspects of stress and trauma are examined through the components of crisis management, conflict, the nature of the incidents, relationships, experience, personal emotions and grief.

The thread, expectations, identifies how the school counsellors perceived others' expectations of them as well as their own expectations of themselves during their work of managing critical incidents. Reflection and integration are represented through the components of support structures and processes available to the school counsellors during and after critical incidents, experience, identity and the personal and professional experiences of critical incidents. Whilst the threads are described through these specific components, they recur through many of the components, indicating their primary importance in understanding the phenomena.

A key finding, as the diagram indicates, is that whilst the threads are reflected in a number of components, a key thread was leadership. That is, when the leadership in the school functioned competently during the normal school activities, the school community also functioned well. This carried over to times of crisis; competent leadership made a difference to outcomes. Leadership also affected the level of stress and trauma experienced by the school counsellors.

In the first element, the workplace, the school counsellors emphasised the need for strong leadership from the principal during times of crisis in their schools. Competent leadership resulted in the school counsellors feeling safe and reassured them that the incident would be managed well and therefore they could perform their work to the best of their ability and their workload would be manageable. The school counsellors' role in the workplace and the principal's professional expecta-

tions of the school counsellors during critical incidents emerged as critical factors in their experience.

The second element of the framework, the work (ie the management of critical incidents), is explored through an analysis of the various factors that made some incidents impact on counsellors more than others. In their professional caring role the school counsellors' work sometimes touched their personal or private self, bringing it into their working lives. Conversely, things that were happening in their own private lives affected them in their professional work. Therefore, the worker element of the framework is divided into two categories: the counsellor's professional self and their personal self.

The professional components include the school counsellors' role in the workplace, their early and past experiences of incidents, respect for their professional skills, and the expectations of others as well as of themselves about how they will perform in their work role (eg not cry, be stoic and available to those in their care). The components under personal self consider the counsellors' core beliefs and include the management of their own emotional reactions and grief, their identity, relationship with others involved in the critical incidents, their personal supports and their own expectations of themselves.

The thread of stress and trauma emerges from all three areas of the workplace, the work and the worker. Some incidents were more traumatic than others for the school counsellors and therefore impacted on them differently. The counsellors' perceptions of the expectations of others, especially the principal and senior managers, as well as their own professional and personal expectations of themselves, were important in determining how they were able to perform their duties. Expectations, therefore, thread through and draw these concepts together.

Reflection on their workplace, the work and themselves as a worker was an important process for school counsellors. The reflection and integration thread therefore draws together various processes and practices that the school counsellors found helpful in integrating their lived experiences of critical incidents into their professional and personal lives. The findings that follow elucidate this framework under the three elements.

What is needed to support school counsellors?

Throughout the research, the school counsellors detailed recommended quality practices in the management of critical incidents in school communities. These quality practices included:

- good leadership in the school community
- ongoing clear communication between the leadership team, the school counsellor and the broader school community
- establishment of a school crisis management team of which the school counsellor is an integral member
- a clear and precise crisis management plan including 'vulnerability maps' of those at risk within the school community
- evaluation of the crisis intervention procedures and management plan
- a debriefing with colleagues or supervision on their experience of the critical incident
- post-crisis intervention support for all those affected by the critical incident, including the school crisis management team members (principal, school counsellor etc).

Diagram Framework showing the complex interrelationships of school counsellors' experiences of critical incidents
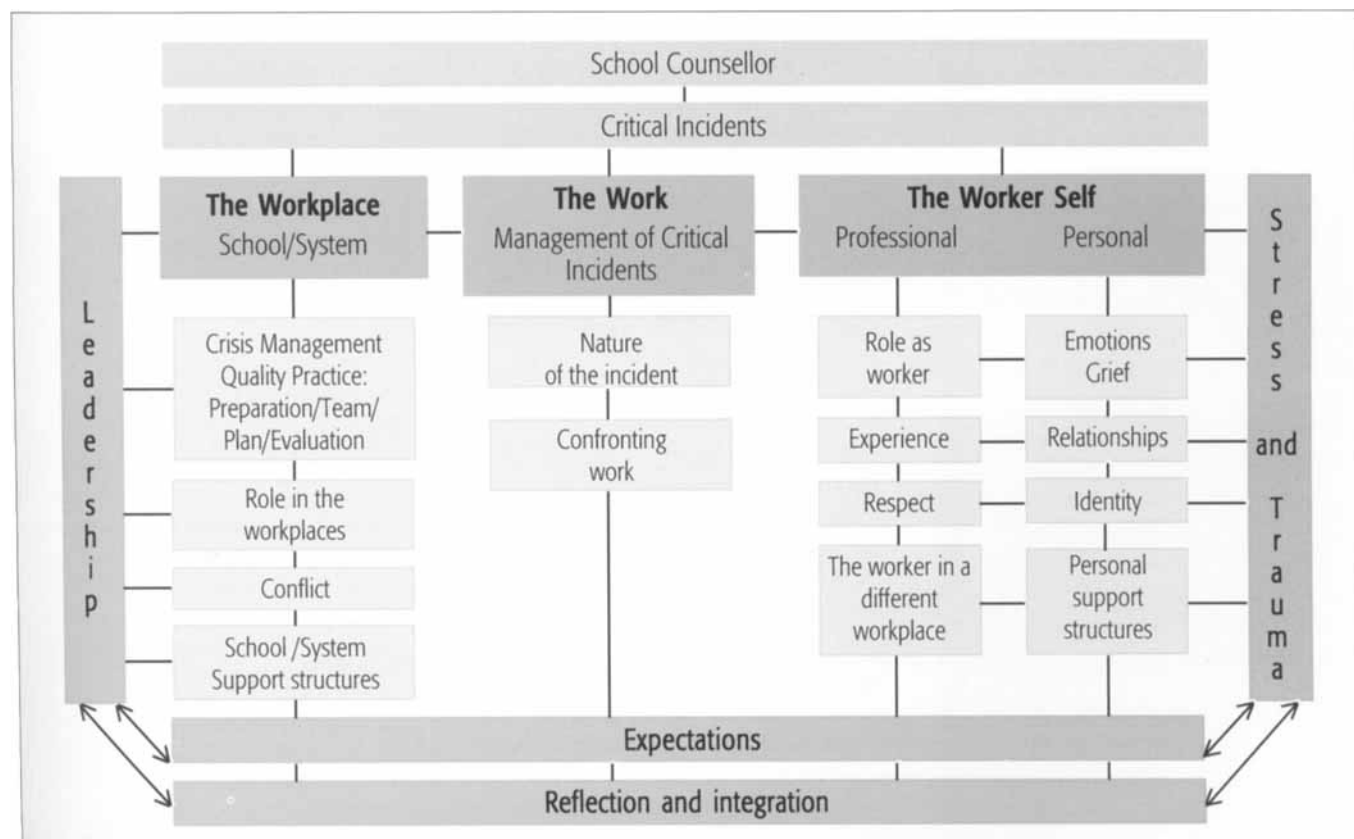
When these quality practices are established in schools, the role of the counsellor in the management of critical incidents can be clearly articulated. Training and development in crisis management is recommended for the school leadership team in conjunction with the school counsellors. Team building and team training strategies would assist in establishing good communication and direction for the team members. Each member's role within the team needs to be clearly outlined and written in the school plan. This assists the school counsellor in knowing their role and what is expected of them and what is expected of others in the management of the critical incident. This role could differ between schools depending on team members' skills. Good leadership, team management and support in managing critical incidents are vital for the wellbeing of school counsellors as well as others.

After an incident, evaluation of the school's crisis management plan and intervention processes, and review of team members' roles, are recommended for quality practice in crisis management. A checklist could be designed and referred to when evaluating the school crisis management plan and intervention procedures. It is recommended that this evaluation or operational debriefing is facilitated by a senior counsellor. This will help all members of the crisis team to be objective about their role in the processes. This evaluation should occur as soon as possible after the school community has returned to normal activities.

Although it is a stressful time for all those within and associated with the school community, when given appropriate training, support and adequate resources, school personnel are able to provide supportive services, short-term counselling and appropriate referrals to community services for those affected in their school community (Schonfeld, Newgass, 2001). These recommendations are also applicable to those providing bereavement care services in other areas in the community. ●

margaret.donnelly@cso.brokenbay.catholic.edu.au

Based on a paper presented at the Seventh International Conference on Grief and Bereavement in Contemporary Society, 12 -15 July 2005, London, UK.

References

GRUNSELL L (1993). School counsellors in New South Wales – a study of their work and occupational stress factors. Attending and corresponding members of the school Counsellors' Special Interest Group and its industrial subcommittee. Sydney, Australia

HUBERTY TJ, HUEBNER ES (1988). A national survey of burnout among school psychologists. *Psychology in the Schools;* 25: 54-61.

HUEBNER ES (1992). Burnout among school psychologists: An exploratory investigation into its nature, extent and correlates. *School Psychology Quarterly;* 7(2): 129-136.

HUEBNER ES (1993). Professionals under stress: A review of burnout among the helping professions with implications for school psychologists. *Psychology in the Schools;* 30: 40-47.

JACKSON C (2003). A salutogenic approach to the management of critical incidents: An examination of teachers' stress responses and coping, and school management strategies and intervention. Unpublished PhD thesis. Swinbourne University of Technology, Hawthorn, Victoria, Australia.

PEARLMAN LA (1999). Vicarious traumatization protecting the front line. Paper presented at the Vicarious Traumatization: Protecting the Front Line conference.

ROWLING L (1995). The disenfranchised grief of teachers. *Omega;* 31(4): 317-329.

ROWLING L (2003). *Grief in School Communities – Effective Support Strategies.* Maidenhead, Berkshire, UK: Open University Press.

SAAKVITNE KW, PEARLMAN LA (1996). *Transforming the Pain – A Workbook on Vicarious Traumatization for Helping Professionals.* New York: WW Norton.

SCHONFELD DJ, NEWGASS S (2001). *The School Crisis Response Initiative of the National Center for Children Exposed to Violence.* Yale, CT, USA: Yale Child Study Center.

WHITLA M (2003). *Crisis Management and the School Community.* Melbourne, Australia: ACER Press.

BOOK REVIEW

Childhood Bereavement
Developing the curriculum and pastoral support

Nina Job, Gill Frances

London: The National Children's Bureau
2004, 71pp
£16.00 pb
ISBN 1 90478 7142

Childhood Bereavement is written in an accessible style without compromising its credibility. Information is well presented with a limited use of technical language. Importantly, childhood bereavement is linked into current UK frameworks and agendas such as mental health, National Healthy School Standards and personal, social and health education, and focuses on a comprehensive approach, similar to that advocated in *Grief in School Communities**.

Grieving and mourning practices across cultural groups are described and the need for schools to be alert to accommodate these in the care and support of individuals as well as in school management practices. Whilst 'getting school back to normal' is important to re-establish the safety and predictability of school life, the authors point out that there is no exact time that can be set for grieving and ongoing support is needed for as long as the young people need and want it.

As well as clear, up-to date information throughout the book, four case studies of how schools managed differing bereavement events provide practical insights and excellent guidance for school communities. In particular, the case study of a school for young people with severe learning disabilities provides specific practice-based wisdom for school personnel catering for a specific population.

The contribution of curriculum on loss and grief is illustrated by exemplar lessons for each UK Key stage, providing concrete illustration for teachers and demonstrating the importance of matching content to developmental level.

One important omission is consideration of the impact of bereavement on the professional role of school personnel. However, this book gives an excellent example of 'joined up' thinking, placing bereavement within the wider policy and practice agendas. Whilst it is based on UK policy and educational practice, it provides a useful guide as to how to integrate grief into mainstream activity. ●

Louise Rowling
Associate Professor, University of Sydney

* ROWLING L (2003). Grief in School Communities: Effective Support Strategies. Maidenhead, Berkshire, UK: Open University Press.