

Critical Incidents: A Local Authority Response

**Cardiff University
DEd Psychology
2014**

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This work has not been submitted in substance for any other degree or award at this or any other university or place of learning, nor is being submitted concurrently in candidature for any degree or other award.

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Abstract

Since May 2008 (following the spate of young people apparently taking their lives within one local authority in Wales) *Talk to me, the national action plan to reduce suicide and self harm in Wales 2009-2014* (WAG, 2009) promoted a strategic approach to developing targets for a reduction in suicide. The current research aimed to add to existing literature and research to help inform a major incident response plan to reduce suicide and suicide attempts. The study involved a single case relating to a critical incident that took place in one local authority in Wales during 2008 and 2009 involving a suicide cluster. Information gathered from professionals from three organisations involved in the critical incident response included school staff, school counsellors and educational psychologists.

Data were collected through group interviews. The methodology was qualitative in nature which investigated the interaction between the various agencies to the critical incident and levels of responding in terms of the processes and procedures that were followed at the time. An analysis was undertaken firstly, in the form of grounded theory, which allowed theory to emerge from the data. In addition soft systems methodology was utilised to develop a rich picture based on the experiences of those organisations involved in the critical incident response.

The expected outcome was that the current research will help improve effective collaborative responses to a critical incident in one local authority in Wales, which will lead to a decrease in referrals to agencies as a result of early intervention approaches and appropriate referrals. The current research was an exploratory study which gathered rich data that may help with early intervention. At a wider level it was considered that the findings of the research may provide greater understanding of and insight into the dynamics of inter-agency co-operation in critical incidents, which may inform future protocols, procedures and policies at regional and national level.

From the grounded theory analysis, categories emerged which were interpreted through relevant psychological theory. The analysis showed that there was a difference in the way school staff, educational psychologists and counsellors' responded to the critical incident. No new theory emerged from the grounded theory analysis possibly due to methodological limitations and a small sample size. A number of key change issues were extrapolated through SSM, including three issue based systems and one primary task. The future plan, as outlined in stage 6 of SSM, is for feasible and desirable changes to current systems to be debated between the senior management within the three organisations.

There were a number of limitations to the current study, particularly with respect to the grounded theory data collection and data analysis. The use of an abbreviated version of grounded theory may have reduced the breadth of analysis as there was no iterative process in the data collection. The socially sensitive nature of the study prevented the researcher from reporting participants' verbatim; this may have prevented others from interpreting the data. One positive aspect of the design was that the group may have acted as a debriefing. Throughout the study every effort was made to overcome any potential barriers that the researcher's status as an educational psychologist in the local authority may have had on the research process.

In the current study, implications for educational psychology practice have been identified when supporting schools during a critical incident response. The study highlights the importance of increased educational psychologist involvement in emergency planning at different levels and identifies the need to enhance psychological support and training offered to school staff. The current research suggests that greater multi-agency collaboration and communication is required during a critical incident response. There is a need for additional empirical research to inform future critical incident response. Finally, continued development of an integrated model of crisis response for school psychologists is paramount.

List of abbreviations used within the study

APA	American Psychological Association
CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service
CDC	Centres for Disease Control
DCTP	Disaster, Crisis and Trauma Psychology
DfES	Department for Education and Skills
EFPA	European Federation of Psychologists' Association
EP	Educational psychologist
EPS	Educational psychology service
ICRN	International Crisis Response Network
IPA	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
ISPA	International School Psychology Association
LA	Local Authority
NOVA	National Organisation for Victim Assistance
PFA	Psychological First Aid
PTSD	Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
SP	School psychologist
SSM	Soft systems methodology

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