

## THE ROLE OF SCHOOLS IN TIME OF CRISIS

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**Abstract:** This article explores the multifaceted role of schools in times of crisis, emphasizing their function as community anchors before, during, and after disasters. Through a comprehensive analysis of global experiences, including natural disasters and terrorist attacks, it highlights how schools provide critical support in disaster preparedness, immediate response, and post-crisis recovery. Key areas of focus include the importance of crisis management training for educators, the integration of psychosocial support programs, and the role of schools as communication and support centers. The article underscores the significance of collaborative efforts between schools and disaster response agencies to enhance community resilience and effective disaster management.

**Keywords:** Education, leadership, communication, crisis, principal.

### Introduction

On October 7<sup>th</sup>, a terrorist attack was launched on the State of Israel, resulting in the tragic loss of many civilians, including men, women, and children. Following several days of recovery, residents were evacuated from numerous settlements and began the arduous task of rebuilding their lives. In this context, the education system, particularly schools, has played a crucial role in the reconstruction of communities over the past year.

This article aims to explore the role of schools as community anchors, emphasizing their importance before, during, and after disaster events. Schools are not just educational institutions; they are pivotal community resources that contribute to local knowledge, identity, and social cohesion. By creating safe and supportive environments, schools can help children and families navigate the emotional and practical challenges posed by crises.

Drawing on insights from global experiences with severe disasters, both natural and man-made, this article examines how schools have responded to and recovered from such events. It highlights the importance of preparedness, effective crisis management training for educators, and the integration of psychosocial support programs into school curricula. Moreover, it underscores the significance of schools as communication centers and their collaboration with local and national disaster response agencies.

## **Methodology**

The methodology for this article involves a comprehensive literature review and case study analysis. The literature review encompasses scholarly articles, reports, and books focusing on the role of schools in disaster preparedness, response, and recovery. The case studies include detailed examinations of schools' responses to natural disasters in New Zealand and Japan, as well as the recent terrorist attack in Israel. Data was collected from various sources, including academic journals, government reports, and firsthand accounts from educators and community members. The analysis focused on identifying common themes and best practices in school-based crisis management and support strategies.

## **The Role of Schools as a Community Anchor – The Day Before the Disaster**

Schools hold a significant role in the community beyond being educational institutions. They are central community resources contributing to the development and maintenance of local knowledge and identity [1]. Schools are considered essential spaces for gathering communities, fostering social cohesion, and serving as intergenerational investments that help maintain populations in rural areas. Schools are places where different generations can unite and impact community well-being [2]. Literature emphasizes that schools have a unique history and characteristics tied to their location, offering special experiences to the community and aiding in preserving local identities. Generally, schools are integral components of the community fabric, playing a crucial role in maintaining social connections, cultural heritage, and community resilience [3].

Schools can create safe and supportive environments where children feel secure and cared for. This includes fostering trust between students and teachers, providing emotional support, and promoting a sense of belonging, which are critical during both routine times and crises [4]. To build a safe environment, open communication channels between schools, children, and families must be established. Schools should keep parents informed about their children's well-being during and after traumatic events, provide regular updates, and offer support resources [5].

Educators and school staff need specialized training in crisis management to respond effectively to traumatic events. This training can help teachers understand children's vulnerabilities, provide practical and psychosocial support, and manage their responses during crises. Educators and school leaders should receive training in self-care to cope effectively with their reactions and support peers in crisis situations. Building supportive elements and coping skills can help educators provide better care for children and maintain their well-being [6].

It is important for educational staff to integrate psychosocial programs into the school curriculum. These programs can help build resilience in children before adverse events occur and enhance coping skills, emotional expression, and support during challenging times. Schools should provide opportunities for children to engage in individual and group activities that allow them to express their feelings, share experiences, and learn coping strategies. Activities such as drawing, play, drama, storytelling, and music can help children process their emotions and support each other [7].

The physical structure of schools also holds great importance. Planning or upgrading school buildings to ensure they provide adequate protection for the school population in case of a harmful event based on the school's geographical location and risk assessment [8]. Flexible design of school facilities should be ensured so they can be used in various community ways, including during emergencies [9].

### **Schools' Response to the Community in Times of Crisis: Conclusions and Lessons**

According to professional literature, schools have a central role regarding their disaster preparedness role. They can play a crucial part in disaster preparedness by being part of the planning and preparedness process within the community [8]. First, by serving as sites and facilitators of learning and preparedness activities to ensure that students and staff are well-prepared for potential disasters [10]. Integrating disaster learning within and outside the curriculum can help students develop a better understanding of disasters and how to respond effectively [11].

Following earthquakes and tsunamis in New Zealand and Japan, there were several similarities in the responses of schools in both countries. Research indicated that schools prioritized the safety of students, teachers, and staff by implementing evacuation procedures to ensure everyone's safety during disasters [12]. Prioritizing students' immediate needs, such as medical care, shelter, warmth, food, water, and emotional support, ensured their well-being and comfort after a disaster.

Schools in New Zealand and Japan demonstrated resilience and a strong sense of community by converging to support each other following natural disasters. Schools in both countries had to quickly adapt to the new circumstances brought by the disasters, showing flexibility in their approaches to education and community support. This included addressing the emotional needs of students, teachers, and staff affected by the traumatic events and demonstrating care and compassion in their responses [13].

These similarities highlight the universal values of care, resilience, and community support evident in the responses of schools in New Zealand and Japan following the earthquakes and tsunamis.

Often, schools will act as first responders or response centers following an event, providing immediate assistance and support after a disaster [14]. Schools can also serve as care centers for staff, students, and families, offering emotional support and resources during and after a disaster. In many cases, they become places of calm and security during disasters, providing a sense of stability and support for children and young people [15]. Being at the heart of the neighborhood, schools become community response centers for providing immediate assistance and resources to disaster victims [16].

Due to their direct and ongoing connection with the community, schools can act as communication centers for disseminating important information and updates to the community during and after a disaster. Their communication methods are often updated, allowing them to use various communication channels such as text messages, social media, and websites to maintain contact and provide information when traditional communication channels are disrupted [17].

It is important to establish collaboration with local and national disaster response agencies to integrate schools into broader disaster response strategies and ensure coordinated efforts during crises. Preparing teachers and school leaders for their roles in crisis management and ensuring the necessary skills and knowledge to support students and the community during and after a disaster will greatly assist various local and national entities [18].

Developing emergency plans and scenarios in cooperation with the local community, relevant government agencies, and disaster response organizations is essential [19]. Providing professional development for school leaders in crisis planning and management will ensure they are ready to lead during emergencies. Providing professional development for teachers and school staff on school-based emergency response and recovery strategies will enhance their ability to support students and the community [20].

It is also important to involve children and youth fully in all aspects of preparedness, response, and recovery planning to ensure their needs and perspectives are considered. Building resilience and self-efficacy in the everyday culture of the school and long-term planning will create a proactive approach to disaster preparedness [21].

Educators can share knowledge about disasters in a safe environment to help children understand and relate to the events. By providing information and fostering a sense of control or agency, teachers can help children manage their fears and develop coping strategies [22].

Additionally, teachers can model calm and effective coping strategies to help children manage their emotions and perceive the disaster as a challenge rather

than a threat. By regulating their emotional responses and providing a safe learning environment, teachers can empower children to cope effectively [6].

The importance of leadership roles during crises is crucial, with teachers and principals playing key roles in providing support, guidance, and a sense of calm to students and the school community.

By implementing these strategies and interventions, educators and school communities can play a critical role in promoting the emotional and social development of children after a disaster. These approaches focus on building resilience, providing support, and fostering coping skills to help children navigate challenging situations effectively.

### **The Day After – Community Response Post-Crisis within Schools**

Research indicates that schools can make a significant contribution to the sense of completeness within the institution following disasters. The research highlighted the significant role of schools in supporting coping, positive adaptation, and recovery of children from disasters through trust, communication, training, and creating a supportive environment [23]. Schools first adapted their rules to meet children's needs, such as allowing them to carry mobile phones to communicate with parents during emergencies. Immediate communication with parents after aftershocks provided security and peace of mind for both children and parents [6].

Additionally, schools led the system in trust and support. Schools became a trusted environment where children felt cared for, leading to increased trust in the school and the education system. Trust relationships in schools were emphasized as essential for effective disaster response [4].

Schools play a key role in training children in effective coping strategies and providing ongoing support for collective coping. Teachers and principals who demonstrated sensitivity to children's needs and helped them cope with post-disaster pressures significantly influenced children's academic functioning and return to routine [23].

The research indicates that schools providing stability, routine, consistency, safety, and security for children led to the perception that teachers were reliable support sources who guided children in coping strategies. Peer support and open communication channels between schools, children, and families were crucial for effective coping [21].

Overall, the reopening of schools after a disaster was perceived as a positive sign of recovery, helping children return to normal routines and fostering a sense of hope and improvement [24].

## **Results**

The findings from the literature review and case studies reveal several critical roles that schools play in times of crisis. Before disasters, schools act as community anchors, fostering social cohesion and providing emotional support through open communication channels. During crises, schools transform into first-response centers, offering immediate assistance such as shelter, medical care, and emotional support. Post-crisis, schools contribute to the community's recovery by providing stability, routine, and a sense of safety. Effective crisis management training for educators and the integration of psychosocial support programs into curricula are essential for building resilience in students and staff. The collaboration between schools and disaster response agencies enhances the effectiveness of emergency plans and ensures coordinated efforts during crises.

## **Discussion**

The role of schools in times of crisis is multifaceted and extends beyond their primary educational function. As community anchors, schools play a vital role in fostering social cohesion and resilience before disasters occur. Crisis management training for educators and the integration of psychosocial support programs into school curricula are crucial for preparing both students and staff to handle crises effectively. During disasters, schools often become first-response centers, providing immediate assistance and emotional support to the affected community. The adaptability and quick response of schools in New Zealand and Japan during natural disasters highlight their central role in disaster response. Post-crisis, the reopening of schools symbolizes a return to normalcy and recovery, reinforcing trust in the education system and providing continuous emotional and psychosocial support. Collaboration with local and national disaster response agencies ensures that schools are integrated into broader disaster response strategies, enhancing the overall effectiveness of emergency plans. Leadership in schools, particularly from teachers and principals, is critical in guiding and supporting the community during and after crises.

## **Conclusion**

The role of schools in times of crisis cannot be overstated. They serve as critical infrastructure for the community, providing not just education but also stability, safety, and emotional support during and after crises. The experiences from various global disasters, including terrorist attacks, earthquakes, and tsunamis, illustrate the multifaceted role schools play in disaster preparedness, response, and recovery.

### **Community Anchors Before Disasters**

Before disasters strike, schools act as community anchors. They are places where local identity and social cohesion are fostered. By maintaining open communication channels, providing emotional support, and offering a safe environment, schools build trust and resilience in students and their families. The importance of integrating crisis management training for educators and embedding psychosocial support programs into school curricula cannot be understated. These measures prepare both students and staff to handle crises effectively.

### **Immediate Response During Disasters**

During crises, schools often transform into first-response centers. They provide immediate assistance such as shelter, medical care, and emotional support. The case studies from New Zealand and Japan highlight the prioritization of safety and the provision of immediate necessities. Schools' ability to adapt quickly and address the emotional and physical needs of the community demonstrates their central role in disaster response.

### **Post-Crisis Recovery**

In the aftermath of disasters, the reopening of schools symbolizes a return to normalcy and recovery. Schools support the community by offering stability, routine, and a sense of safety. Trust in the education system is reinforced as schools provide continuous emotional and psychosocial support. Effective coping strategies taught by educators help children and families navigate post-disaster challenges.

### **Collaboration and Preparedness**

Collaboration with local and national disaster response agencies ensures that schools are integrated into broader disaster response strategies. This coordinated effort enhances the effectiveness of emergency plans and ensures that schools can continue to support their communities during crises. Involving children and youth in preparedness activities empowers them and ensures their needs and perspectives are considered.

### **Leadership and Resilience**

The role of leadership in schools during crises is critical. Teachers and principals provide guidance, support, and a calming presence. Their ability to model effective coping strategies and maintain a supportive environment significantly impacts the community's recovery. Building resilience and self-

efficacy in students through everyday school culture and long-term planning creates a proactive approach to disaster preparedness.

In conclusion, schools are more than just educational institutions; they are pillars of community strength and resilience. By preparing for, responding to, and recovering from crises, schools play an indispensable role in the well-being and recovery of communities. Their contribution to disaster management underscores the need for continued investment in training, infrastructure, and collaborative efforts with disaster response agencies.

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