

**Riding the wave: an exploration of principals' experiences leading  
their schools through and beyond critical incidents**

Submitted by

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## Statement of Authorship and Sources

This thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis by which I have qualified for or been awarded another degree or diploma. No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgement in the main text of the thesis. This thesis has not been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution. All research procedures reported in the thesis received the approval of the Australian Catholic University Ethics Committee.



Signed \_\_\_\_\_  
Barbara E Myers

Date 25 October 2013

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## Abstract

When a critical incident engulfs a school community, principals have key management roles in the incident and aftermath, as well as responsibility for successful outcomes, particularly for the wellbeing of staff, students and parents. Principals are also the conduit for communication and liaison with outside agencies, while ensuring the school still functions as an educational institution. In the past three decades in particular, researchers have considered the incidences of violence and environmental disasters in school settings and their impact on students, teachers and counsellors (Brack, Hill & Brack, 2009; Lindle, 2008). Education systems have produced policies, and researchers have written manuals, to guide schools in the management of critical incidents (Diocese of Wagga Wagga, 2009; Lerner, Lindell & Volpe, 2006). In all these approaches, the principal is identified as the key driver of all that occurs in preparation for, management of and response to a critical incident in a school. Although principals' *roles* in a critical incident appear well defined, how they *experience* the incident and how it *impacts* on them is not widely considered nor understood. This study explores a hitherto relatively unexplored facet of principalship by asking the question:

*What is the experience of principals as they lead their schools during and after a critical incident?*

The research methodology used a mixed methods approach involving an on-line survey and twelve interviews with principals. Background information on critical incidents was gathered and principals contributed their descriptions and reflections on their experiences. The principals' own voices are showcased as they describe how they felt, what they learned and what issues they encountered, including matters of preparation, training and support. Because of the focus on the *impact* of the experience, the issues involved in critical incidents were explored through four phases:

- Phase 1. Planning and preparation
- Phase 2. Critical incident and immediate response
- Phase 3. Mid term impact
- Phase 4. Long term impact

Throughout the thesis, principals' stories are presented in direct quotes and through the use of vignettes. The story of one interviewee, Mal, is used as an exemplar, providing a lens through which the issues for the other study participants are also explored. Mal's own metaphor of a surfer on a wave that must be ridden but cannot be controlled, is used to explore his experience of a critical incident. The significance of the different impacts, and the often long term nature of some of those impacts, is highlighted.



This study identified ten findings that concerned both critical incidents, and how principals experienced them. It emerged that the incidents reported by the study participants varied in perceived seriousness and in how they reflected previously accepted definitions. The obvious *dramatic events* were easily understood as critical incidents. However, another category, called *more commonly occurring events*, was identified and highlighted the importance of understanding the impact of background context and connections to the incident. This study has shown that how principals *perceived* the incident, influenced the impact that it had on them. The critical incident is as the principal experienced it and perceived it, not as it might be defined or perceived by others.

The findings of this study call for a reconsideration of the definition of a critical incident as experienced in school communities, and a clearer understanding of how such experiences impact on school leaders, especially in phase 4 (long term). Because there appears to be little recognition or understanding of the difficulties faced by principals during and after a critical incident, there also appears to be little structured preparation and support specifically designed for and available to them. The influence that a principal has on school and student performance provides an imperative for education systems to carefully consider how they prepare and support principals for the multiple roles and responsibilities they will encounter in the context of a critical incident.

This study adds to the knowledge of the impact of critical incidents on principals and gives direction to the sorts of preparation and support that educational systems could put in place to improve current practice in the management of critical incidents in schools.

## Foreword

As I write this, the world is reeling from the carnage at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut. The teachers are called heroes, because they put the safety of their students as their first priority – and some lost their lives as a result. The principal was one of those. Teachers and principals are committed to their students – they take very seriously their responsibilities to their charges. And for principals – the whole school is in their care – staff and students alike. That principal, dying with gunshot wounds, expended her last breath to warn her school community of the danger – an act that probably saved many lives.

It is, fortunately, extremely rare for educators to be called upon to make the ultimate sacrifice, but the tragedy of Sandy Hook has shown how committed teachers and principals answer the call when it comes. In carrying out this study I have often reflected on my own experience of a critical incident, of running towards a man with a gun, because of my own urgent sense of responsibility for my community. As I write the final draft, I think of interviewee Annemarie, sitting with a traumatised bus driver who was vomiting in the gutter, while she held the foot of a dying child who was wedged under a bus, and talked to him. I recall interviewee Mal who, five years later, cannot talk of a deceased student without tears in his eyes and a break in his voice – so bound up with this child's life and death that it is forever part of him.

Even in less traumatic incidents, principals have told me how they feel changed by their experiences. They have learned about themselves, they feel resentment or gratitude for the support they received, they want to share what they have learned, so that the fellowship of principals can all benefit from the learning – and they want to know that they are not alone in how they feel. The principal of Sandy Hook school will never be able to share her learning – but her sacrifice directs us to ensure appropriate and effective support for school leaders in their commitment to their students.

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## **Statement on confidentiality**

In this study, the researcher has endeavoured to preserve the privacy of the study participants and to respect the trust that they placed in the researcher. Vignettes are used to present some participants' stories as a narrative, including their own words as much as is practicable. Pseudonyms are used for the interviewees and for survey respondents whose stories are told in the vignettes. Survey respondents are otherwise identified as a number. Any identifying features of schools, contexts or systems (diocesan offices) are masked, being careful to preserve the inherent meaning of the situation. In New South Wales (Australia), system administration offices for the eleven Catholic dioceses are variously referred to as CSOs (Catholic Schools Offices), or CEOs (Catholic Education Offices). In this study, they are *all* called CSOs for consistency and to preserve anonymity.

# **1. Introduction**

This study came about as the direct result of a critical incident I experienced as the principal of a Catholic parish primary school in NSW. The experience impacted on me quite profoundly, in ways that I found very surprising. As an educator, I reflected on what I had learned about myself as a principal and as a person, and I wanted to find out about the learning of other principals who had been through similar incidents. My own experience indicated to me that while support is offered, there appeared to be very little real understanding by the school system about the impact of such incidents on principals and on school communities, and thus support was not tailored to the needs of the principal or the school. I wanted to find out how other principals felt about their experiences, and how we could improve the support.

In order to set the context, this chapter will provide an explanation of the place of Catholic parish primary schools in Australia and a description of the researcher's background, particularly the experiences and reflections that gave rise to this study. It then goes on to provide a broader context from the literature and to clarify the purpose of the study.

## **1.1 The place of Catholic parish primary schools in Australia**

In Australia, the different Catholic dioceses operate systems of schools, both primary and secondary, throughout each diocese. Systemic Catholic primary schools, while supported by the diocesan system office, are also closely associated with their local Catholic parish, and are often sited on parish grounds. In current times, many families seek a Catholic education without necessarily practising their faith in an explicit way that might connect them to the parish or the parish priest. They do often, however, have a close relationship with the principal of the parish primary school. In times of crisis, it is not unusual for families to ask the principal to help them with "church" business (ACCPA, 2005), such as funerals.

## **1.2 Stimulus for the research**

### **The researcher**

I have taught in Australian primary schools, mostly Catholic parish primary schools, for over 30 years. For 17 years I was a school principal, in three very different city schools in Adelaide and Sydney. The role of school leader has always excited me in its diversity of challenges and responsibilities, most particularly in leading and working with children, parents and teachers in the building of happy, cohesive and learning centred communities. It is the engagement

with other people and the excitement about learning which in turn excites me about the role. However there are many other facets of the job that can overtake the key area of leading for learning. In the role of principal, I have gone through periods of feeling swamped by many responsibilities, for which I had neither skill nor enthusiasm. These include the growing legislative accountabilities around compliance in many areas, financial management, competence in building and plant management, and a nodding acquaintance with the school plumbing, just to mention a few!

Many principals whom I know would claim likewise: it is very much “sink or swim”, with different educational systems offering training and support with varying degrees of effectiveness and relevance. As a principal, I developed skills and competencies in many fields that were not included in my formal education and preparation for leadership. There have been many times in those years when I needed to call upon inner resources which I did not know I had, in order to lead my community with care and capability, and there have been other times for which neither my inner resources, nor my skills and experience had equipped me.

### **Critical incident at St Joseph’s School**

The most critical testing of my leadership capabilities came in the form of a critical incident in my school. As this experience has ignited my interest in the area, and clearly influenced my thinking and writing, it is important that the reader have some appreciation of the event.

It began on a hot morning in mid December 2005. I was in the library of my school, a medium-sized, outer suburban Catholic Parish Primary School, in front of the entire school population of 400 children, their teachers and about 100 parents with attendant toddlers and babies, while we celebrated merit award winners for the year. A disturbed and angry man rose out of the group of parents, drew a loaded gun from his shorts, waved it around and cocked it. In the ensuing panic, some attentive dads wrestled the man to the floor, while the teachers quickly evacuated the children and other parents from the library and went into the classrooms, where they instituted lockdown conditions. As we did not know what was happening (for instance, was there more than one gunman?), the lockdown conditions remained until some time after the police arrived with their guns drawn, with the media in hot pursuit. Parents who had not been at the ceremony started arriving soon after, having heard of the incident via radio reports and mobile phones. As the police dealt with the issues at hand, office staff began phoning parents and answering queries while the teachers, in lockdown in

the classrooms, checked their Roll Books and managed their students and the parents who had accompanied them.

As a school we had practised our evacuation and lockdown drills as required. We had a school culture focused on safety, both emotional and physical, as a core principle and, in line with our work on distributed leadership, staff instinctively stepped up to leadership in particular areas. For instance, it was a teacher who started the evacuation with a call for *“heads down, out the door, into the classrooms, lockdown”*, while I was still absorbing the fact that the gun was real! The assistant principal immediately took over the public address system, keeping those in lockdown in the classrooms informed about what was happening and reassuring them, until police gave us permission to release the lockdown conditions an hour later.

As principal, I was the point of reference for the assistant principal, the office staff, the parents arriving and leaving, the children, the police, the media and the support people who started arriving from neighbouring schools and from the Catholic Schools Office. As principal, I dealt with everyone and everything, and felt responsible for everyone and everything.

### **Post-critical incident**

Little did I realise on that day, that this was just the beginning of a very long and extremely testing time for our school as a community, for individuals who were part of that community, and for me as principal. Staff held things together for the next five days until school holidays began. When we returned to school at the end of January the following year, it became immediately obvious that our community was still in crisis. Many children were exhibiting symptoms of anxiety and sleep disorders. Use of the library, where the incident occurred, was out of the question for quite some time due to anxiety symptoms from staff and students. Teachers were also displaying symptoms of anxiety and stress and were sometimes unable to perform their teaching duties, which in turn caused more disruption for the children. Some parents needed constant reassurance (multiple phone calls in a day, in some instances) about separation from their children. The problem of finding enough rooms in which to put the visiting counsellors developed into a full blown anxiety attack for one of the office staff.

Throughout the 12 months following the ‘gun incident’, as it became known, I not only led my community in the normal aspects of primary school life, but had to deal with issues of mental health for children, staff and parents; issues of workers’ insurance and safety audits;

media interest; police and legal interactions (in the following 18 months I attended court five times as the case went through multiple adjournments and each of these events generated more media interest); building renovations in order to improve safety of the front office; and my own stress reaction and overwhelming feelings of responsibility for everyone's wellbeing. I had not been trained for any of these responsibilities, nor did I feel I had expertise in any of them.

### **Aren't you over that yet?**

Compared to recent dramatic and violent school events in other countries (for example, the incident at Sandy Hook Elementary School), the incident at St Joseph's School seemed a fairly straightforward event: no shots were fired; no-one was physically injured, not even in the panicked evacuation; the man was having a disagreement with a family member and was suffering from a mental illness, so there was no intention to hurt anyone at the school; the man was quickly overpowered; and the police were there in 11 minutes. So, what was the big deal?

It is a natural expectation that an Australian primary school is regarded as a safe place: St Joseph's Primary School's mission statement declares: "...everyone has the right to feel and be safe" (St Joseph's Primary School, 2004). School administrators, principals and educational systems invest a lot of time, energy and resources in activities such as putting up fences, ensuring play equipment meets stringent safety requirements, training teachers and parents in child protection issues, authorising police checks on potential employees and other associated measures. However it was proven on that day that we, the principal, teachers and parents, could not stop the school from being unsafe. Individual responses to the event varied, of course, and were exhibited in many different ways. My own response was to assume responsibility for the wellbeing of every person in the school community. At the same time I was aware at some level, that I was suffering a stress reaction with anxiety attacks and disrupted sleep patterns. I continually asked myself: what should we have done to prevent, manage, and respond to this incident, in order to reduce the impact on members of the school community? How does a school principal deliver appropriate and effective support? What support can I call on to help me?

I was shocked by my own overwhelming feelings of responsibility and I felt quite unable to delegate any of that responsibility to anyone else. Added to those feelings of responsibility were feelings of guilt that I was "not coping" with the normal business of school – the learning agenda was not something we as a staff could focus on at all, so we felt that we were

letting our children down in this area. Many people, particularly my principal colleagues, kept offering to help: “*Just tell us what you need, we want to help*”, but I was so absorbed in the business of survival, that I had no idea what anyone could do to help. However, the unstinting offers of support, the baskets of fruit and flowers, were an important signal to the staff that other school communities cared about what they were going through.

My relationship with our very capable student counsellor became intense, and vital to my survival. Although he was allocated to our school for only one day a week, he became my guide through the minefield of mental health interventions. His knowledge of not only mental health issues but also of the specific culture of our community meant that the advice and support he gave was tailored to our context. He was also trusted by the staff and parents who sought his advice and guidance.

The response of the system head office (Catholic Schools Office - CSO) to the incident in the immediate short term was to flood the school with support people (clerical staff, a PR advisor, a fellow principal and a senior CSO leader), and to provide access to counsellors. These measures were extremely helpful and supportive for dealing with the immediate issues and individual needs. However, there was no concept or understanding of the effects of trauma on a school at an organisational level, nor of the long term nature of those effects. My relationship with the CSO became strained over the following 12 months as I was challenged with comments such as: “*Aren’t you over that yet?*” and: “*Maybe you need more counselling*”. There seemed to be an attitude that all that was needed was to allocate more counselling for those affected. My ability to “cope” and to lead my community was questioned, with very little acknowledgment or understanding of the complexity of the task of school leadership in this context. In my later reading and research, I realised that this is a common experience (Asmussen & Creswell, 1995; Jackson, 2003; Schouten, Callahan, & Bryant, 2004; Whitla, 2003b). I felt frustrated that there appeared to be no interest from the CSO in evaluating its response to the critical incident. I felt that I had learned a lot, and although I shared that learning with some fellow principals, the CSO did not demonstrate any interest in reviewing either my experience or the CSO response.

### **Sharing stories**

In the years following the gun incident at St Joseph’s School, I talked to several principals who had led their schools through similar difficult times. I found that, anecdotally, these principals felt that there had been little understanding by system administrations of the complexities and difficulties encountered by principals in leading their schools in post-critical

incident contexts. Principals with whom I spoke acknowledged that their CSOs expressed willingness to help, but displayed limited knowledge of the issues involved and thus had no cohesive, structured support available. These principals spoke of their eagerness to share what they had learned with other principals but also felt frustration at the lack of opportunity or a suitable forum to do so (Fein, 2001).

In talking with colleague principals about my experience, the discussions often turned to three issues:

1. The inevitability of experiencing a critical incident
2. What sort of preparations and training could be provided to prepare principals for an experience such as this?
3. What sort of support would be most helpful in recovering from a critical incident?

My own interest in these matters, born out of my experience and intensified by reflection, reading and discussion with colleagues, led me to undertake this study.

Having provided a background to the reason for this researcher's interest in this area of investigation, attention now turns to the broader research context of the issue under consideration.

### **1.3 The research issue**

In the past two decades many researchers have considered the incidences of violence in school settings, and the effect on student populations (Jordan, 2003). In some cases the effect of trauma on teachers has been studied (Graveline, 2003; Jackson, 2003), but more often it has been in the context of teachers dealing with traumatised students (Silva & Klotz, 2006; Steele, 2008; Whitla, 2003b). The use of school counsellors in schools exposed to violence also has been explored, particularly in relation to the support needed by carers to continue in the field (Brown & Bobrow, 2004; Donnelly, 2006; Whitla, 2003a). The use of critical incident management plans and crisis response teams is also advocated, particularly in the USA literature (Arman, 2000; Coleman, 2002; Poland, 1994).

However, there appears to be very little exploration of what happens to the principals of schools that have been involved in critical incidents, when the principals, themselves subject to the effects of trauma, must keep functioning and maintaining "business as usual". The issues that need to be explored are:

- How do principals describe the experience? What sort of impact does it have on them? What are their feelings?
- How do principals keep managing their schools while dealing with a traumatised community and their own trauma responses after a critical incident?
- What kinds of support are useful for principals managing schools in this context?

#### **1.4 Defining the research problem**

In the days, weeks and months following a critical incident involving a school community, a principal must not only deal with the issues surrounding post-trauma interventions and treatments for community members, but must also ensure that the school continues to function as an educational institution. In normal times, school leadership is acknowledged as a complex and difficult task. When that role is overlaid with responsibility for a community suffering from psychological stress, and can also include the involvement of police, media and legal interests, the job of school leadership becomes frightening in its layering of complexities (Asmussen & Creswell, 1995; Rowling, 2003). This can also be made even more difficult if, as is often the case, the principal is also suffering from post-traumatic stress (Fein, 2001; Lake, 2004). While most systems and schools have in place Critical Incident Management Plans (Government of Western Australia, 2009; Poland, 1994; Said, 2001), these tend to deal with the incident itself, and the management of immediate and short term trauma interventions (Lazzara, 1999). Critical Incident Management Plans themselves are guidelines for interventions for principals to put in place, for the principal is the person who must drive the actions before, during and after the incident (Florida Department of Education, 1999; Neal, 2007): but where are the manuals from systems and administrations to guide the support for the principal who is managing the critical incident and its aftermath, while he/she also continues to face the normal daily and never-ending challenges of running a school?

The comprehensive literature review that appears later in this thesis demonstrates that the principals' voices are mostly missing. In addition, there has been little recognition or understanding of the very specific difficulties faced by principals leading their schools in the aftermath of a critical incident, which is often a long-term situation. The importance of principal wellbeing for the sustained wellbeing of the school community does not appear to be widely recognised. There does not appear to be much structured systemic support specifically designed for and available to principals from the educational systems charged with supporting them and their schools.



### **1.5 The research purpose**

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of principals of Australian schools who have led their communities through critical incidents, and through the following days, weeks and months. Specifically, those purposes are:

- To investigate how principals experienced a critical incident, by hearing from principals themselves, thus addressing a gap in the research literature.
- To explore principals' reflections about the types of support they accessed or called upon, in order to improve knowledge about appropriate and effective support for principals in times of crisis
- To improve understanding of the impact that this experience can have on principals, as they are the key drivers of the educational agenda in schools, and have a pivotal role in guiding post-critical incident management.

### **1.6 The research questions**

In considering the matters that appear to need exploration in this study, the general research question is as follows:

***What is the experience of principals as they lead their schools during and after a critical incident?***

This question will be explored using the following Research Questions:

1. How do principals experience leading their schools through and beyond a critical incident?
2. What are the issues for principals as they lead their schools in the time after the incident?
3. What kinds of support are available to them and how might this be improved?
4. What was the impact of this experience on their leadership?

These questions arise out of this researcher's experience and reflection on a topic that does not appear to be well researched or well understood. The questions focus the research on the principals' experience within their professional contexts: i.e., in their schools and systems. There will not be an explicit exploration of the psychological impacts, except in general terms as described by the principals themselves, and in the literature. The significance of this study is discussed in the following section.

### **1.7 Significance of the research**

Due to the increasing incidence of violence in school settings, especially in the USA over the past ten years, research to date has concentrated on supporting students in the time after a critical incident. The mental health and wellbeing of these most vulnerable members of a school community are an obvious imperative (Brock & Cowan, 2004; Lazzara, 1999; Whitla, 2003b). The wellbeing of staff in this context is also explored in the literature (Ricketts, 2007; Ting, Sanders, & Smith, 2002), particularly around the issue of long term impacts on school counsellors (Jackson, 2003; Trethowan, 2009). There appears to be a gap in the literature about support for school principals in the time after a critical incident. Given that the role of the principal is to drive the interventions and support for the rest of the community, it would seem important that the specific needs of the principal are catered for.

An understanding of principals' emotional experience of managing a critical incident and how it affects their leadership ability during and after a crisis is important for all stakeholders in education. (Lake, 2004, p. 2)

The centrality of the principal's role in the good functioning of a school and the wellbeing of the school community is recognised in the literature on school leadership. In respect to leadership in a crisis, policy documents make it clear to principals the functions that they are expected to perform. However, there does not seem to be a discussion on how to prepare and support a principal in challenging situations and principals' voices seem to be missing from the literature. In coming to an understanding of principals' experiences, it would be useful to hear principals' own words and reflections. It would also seem important to learn from these reflections, to assist in the preparation and support of schools and principals in this context. The insurance and workplace health and safety implications alone would seem to be enough of an imperative for education administrations to look closely at this information (Janes, 2010; Schouten et al., 2004).

This study describes a hitherto relatively unexplored facet of managing critical incidents in schools: that is, how do principals experience a critical incident and what types of support are needed as they lead their school communities before, during and after a critical incident (Knox & Roberts, 2005)? The questions posed, and the analysis of principals' responses will identify the types of support which administrations and those responsible for the health and wellbeing of school principals could put in place.

## **1.8 Summary of chapters**

This chapter has contextualised the researcher's interest in the topic, presented the questions driving the study, and clarified the purpose. Chapter 2 presents a review of the research literature that is relevant to the questions driving this study. There is an exploration of the literature on critical incidents in general, and on critical incidents that have involved schools and school leaders. This chapter also serves to demonstrate the researcher's understanding of the literature. Chapter 3 deals with the methodological issues related to the study. It contains a description of the theoretical base for the selection of research methods that best fit the purposes of the study. The mixed methods research approach is explained and an overview of the data analysis process is provided. The results of the research are then described in chapter 4. This chapter includes tables that illustrate responses to the survey questions and also provides information from the interviews to further illustrate and contextualise the results. The findings of the study are explored in chapters 5 and 6, and the literature discussed in chapter 2 is used to illuminate the findings. Chapter 5 discusses the nature of critical incidents, and highlights the different types of incidents that principals report. This leads to, at the end of chapter 5, a consideration of the need to re-define critical incidents in schools. Chapter 6 focuses on how the principals describe their experiences. Using the metaphor of the surfer on a wave, this chapter explores the experience of one principal leading his school through a critical incident, in order to highlight issues common to many of the study participants. Chapter 6 also discusses the results of the study in relation to the research questions. Finally, chapter 7 presents the conclusions from this study and an identification of future research directions. This chapter concludes with some recommendations for the education sector regarding the preparation of and support for principals in the context of critical incidents.

The Appendices contain copies of documents generated in the conduct of the research and the data analysis. These examples serve to illustrate the progress of the study and the processes undertaken.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Introduction

The purpose of this research is to explore how principals experienced leading their schools through a critical incident and in the time beyond. The literature that is relevant to this study was found in the research on critical incidents in general. The focus was then narrowed to consider critical incidents involving schools, and then to school leadership in critical incidents. There is a preponderance of research from the USA on this topic, with only a limited amount from Australia and New Zealand. Thus this review contains three main sections:

1. Catastrophes, crises, disasters and emergencies: what is a critical incident?
2. Schools and critical incidents
3. Principals and critical incidents

Each is described briefly below.

*Catastrophes, crises, disasters and emergencies: what is a critical incident?* The literature on critical incidents is wide-ranging, beginning with definitions of what constitutes a critical incident and explorations of the different types. Particular reference is made to definitions and descriptions of critical incidents in policy documents of education systems (Diocese of Wagga Wagga, 2009; Lerner, Lindell, & Volpe, 2006). Descriptions of critical incidents usually involve timelines with researchers dividing the incident into either three or four phases (Arman, 2000; Jordan, 2003). Because this study's focus is concerned with the impact on the principal in the time after the incident, a 4 phase model, which allows a more directed exploration of the time after an incident, is proposed in this chapter and used to explore the full impact of a critical incident. A definition of a critical incident is proposed at the end of this section.

*Schools and critical incidents* In general, the literature on critical incidents involving schools focuses on the impact of trauma on children. Linked with this is significant research on the preparation and training of teachers and counsellors who work with children in post-trauma situations. Discussions on school violence, and the prevention of school violence form a large part of this research (Lindle, 2008). School shootings in the US, such as the events at Columbine High School and Sandy Hook Elementary School, give rise to a large body of research on the impact of such violence on students, teachers and parents. Likewise, the aftermath of natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina in Louisiana and Mississippi placed enormous pressure and distress on school communities and has generated research into the

effectiveness of critical incident planning and the role of school leaders in critical incidents (Brack, Hill, & Brack, 2009).

The medical field provides descriptions of the impact of trauma on individuals and groups, and also provides proposals for trauma interventions, most particularly in the psychological and social fields (Jordan, 2003). It is pertinent to also consider the literature on schools and wellbeing, in that a school that is already working to ensure good mental health and wellbeing for its community is well placed to achieve positive outcomes following a critical incident.

*Principals and critical incidents* In considering the research on principals in critical incidents, the focus is on principals' *roles* in the preparation for and responses to a critical incident, and in supporting the school community. Given the inherent stress of the role of principal, even without a critical incident, the literature on the management of stress for school leaders is informative in this context (Carr 2004). Research from the business sector considers the impact of critical incidents on organisations and on leaders (Paton, Smith, & Violanti, 2000). In regard to critical incidents in schools, the research describes the *role* of school leaders without exploring the impact on those leaders (Diocese of Wagga Wagga, 2009). The principal is recognised as the driver of planning, response and intervention processes in regards to a critical incident, but there appears to be a lacuna in the research on the principals' *experience* of critical incidents in schools, and on the *impact* of the incident on the principals themselves.

This chapter explores the research concerning school principals and critical incidents, beginning with a discussion of the definitions and descriptions of critical incidents found in the research literature.

## **2.2 Catastrophes, crises, disasters and emergencies: what is a critical incident?**

The literature on critical incidents describes many different types of incidents and places varying emphases on the significance of the impact of the incident. As well as the term 'critical incident', other terms are used interchangeably such as 'crisis', 'emergency', 'trauma' or 'disaster'. Some researchers use these terms to differentiate different types of events, different stages of an event or different responses to an event. These terms will be discussed in this section to illustrate the lack of consistency in terminology and definitions.

The research literature would typically characterise a critical incident as a dramatic event of great significance, involving some danger, death and/or injury, or threat thereof, which shocks

and traumatises those involved (e.g., Sheehan, Everly, & Langlieb, 2004). Commonly used definitions include the notion of disruption, often very significant, to the normal business of the society or organisation, and to the lives of those people involved (Pagliocca & Nickerson, 2001; Schouten et al., 2004). Another common factor described in the literature is that the incident exceeds the management capabilities of those involved. An example of the kind of definition described above is that of The American Academy of Experts in Traumatic Stress, which defines a crisis as

... a traumatic event that seriously disrupts our coping and problem-solving abilities. It is typically unpredicted, volatile in nature and may even threaten our survival. A crisis can present a drastic and tragic change in our environment. This change is generally unwanted and frightening, and may leave us with a sense of vulnerability and helplessness. (Lerner et al., 2006, p. 11)

In the policy documents of government and non-government education systems, the guidelines to the management of critical incidents in schools are usually prefaced with a definition. For example, many of the Catholic Schools Offices in NSW (e.g., Catholic Education Office, 1995; Catholic Schools Office Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle, 1999; Diocese of Wagga Wagga, 2009; Diocese of Wollongong, 2005) share the following definition:

A critical incident may be defined as an event which causes disruption to an organisation, creates significant danger or risk and which creates a situation where staff, students and parents feel unsafe, vulnerable and under stress. (Diocese of Wagga Wagga, 2009, p. 1)

The elements of disruption, danger or risk, and stressful feelings are identified in this definition. Other guidelines for schools differentiate between types of incidents, in terms of magnitude or cause. The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development of the State Government of Victoria (2009) offers a simple description of a critical incident (here named “emergency”) that is very specifically directed to school principals. This distinguishes between “major events” and other types of situations, by defining thus:

An emergency is any event which has an impact on your [the principal’s] ability to care for or educate children under your supervision. Unlike individual injuries, accidents or incidents, emergencies are usually major events requiring special consideration. (p. 2)

This definition squarely places the responsibility with the principal, and the only reference to impact is in regard to the care and education of children. The mention of “special consideration” is further explained in the document by linking it with the expectation of intervention and support by external agencies. Other types of crises (named as “individual

injuries, accidents or incidents”) would, presumably, be dealt with differently. Another example of differentiating between types of critical incidents comes from the Florida Department of Education (1999), which distinguishes between “natural (hurricanes, tornadoes, floods and chemical spills) and human-made disasters (shootings, stabbings, sexual battery, hostage taking, gang fights, arson, bomb threats, drug overdoses, and accidental natural death)” (p. 1). However, despite naming different causes for incidents, this document does not deal differently with them in its guidelines for management.

The terms *critical incident* and *crisis* are often used interchangeably but Flannery and Everly (2000) differentiate between them. They identify *critical incident* as the event causing stress, and *crisis* as the response to that incident. A critical incident is conceived as any stressful event that has the potential to invoke a crisis response. Thus the impact defines the incident. Other research is now coming to define the incident by the stressed or traumatic response that it evokes in members of the community. Other terms that are used interchangeably are *trauma* and *stress*. However, Anderson and Dolmage (2009), while acknowledging that the “terms have become pejorative” because of inflammatory and sensationalising media usage, clarify that: “a traumatic event is one that generates extreme stress, such that the resources of the person are overwhelmed” (p. 2). In other words, an event is traumatic if it causes a stress response. It is the response that identifies the trauma.

It thus appears that previous understandings of a critical incident as a dramatic, large scale event are broad and inconsistent, and current research focuses more on the importance of impact. This leads to consideration of events that cause negative responses in the people involved. The notion of impact as a defining characteristic of a critical incident had not been widely discussed in the research prior to the Columbine High School shootings in 1999, but is gaining stronger focus in more recent research (Gainey, 2009). For example, in her thesis exploring school crisis management from school counsellors’ perspectives, Trethowan (2009), despite excluding events that are “not extraordinary” (p. 3), names *impact* as the basis of a critical incident, by defining it thus: “A critical incident is defined as a dangerous or distressing incident that disrupts an individual’s belief system and may result in pain, suffering and possibly loss. Normal methods of coping are disrupted” (p. 196).

Jordan (2003) and MacNeil and Topping (2007a) give examples of the different types of critical incidents, with a focus on the dramatic and high publicity events. When the incident occurs, it can be over in seconds as in a bus accident, or may take hours as in a fire (Kirk & Madden, 2003). There are usually people directly involved or witnesses, but it may also be a solitary event like a suicide, which impacts in a traumatic way on other people (Cornell, 2003;

Cornell & Sheras, 1998). It may be an act of nature, such as a hurricane (Lee, Parker, Ward, Styron, & Shelley, 2008), or a deliberate and direct act of violence, as in Columbine High School (Pascopella, 2004). There may be violence in the wider community, the impact of which is felt vicariously, as was reported following the events of September 11 (Brown & Bobrow, 2004; Ochberg, 2002; Trethowan, 2009).

An example of the differentiation between critical incidents is given by Thompson (2004) who, in a manual for schools, described three different types of incidents (critical incidents, crises and terrorism) that could cause disruption, danger or risk and traumatisation. It is not clear why the author distinguishes the events in this way, as the terms are used interchangeably in the document. In some parts of the manual, the term *disaster* is also used interchangeably with the other terms. Thomson gives examples of each of these types of events as follows:

- *Critical incidents*: bomb threats, earthquake/fire/flood, chemical hazard, transport accident, hostage situation, destruction of whole or part of the school, unfavourable media attention, students witnessing a serious injury/death
- *Crises*: child sexual assault, death of student/staff member, suicide of student/staff member, school shootings, lockdowns because of intruders, violence between students, assault on a teacher or student
- *Terrorism*: assassination, bombings, random killing, hate crimes, sniper shootings, hijacking, bioterrorism (from Thompson, 2004, pp. 9-11)

As well as the big crises, what may seem to be a relatively small event can also have far reaching consequences. A graffiti attack on the school, or the theft of the canteen takings may induce feelings of high anxiety and distress, disrupt normal routines and people's feelings of safety. The American Academy of Experts in Traumatic Stress says: "it does not take a large scale, highly publicized event to create marked disruption and dysfunction in a school" (Lerner et al., 2006, p. 12).

In fact the incident may not even be initially recognised as a *critical* incident. Jackson (2003), in her study on teachers' experiences of critical incidents, notes the existence of what she calls "more commonly occurring events": that is, events or situations that would otherwise seem to be relatively common, if serious. These events, nonetheless, were reported as having had a traumatic impact, and were identified by some teachers in her study as "critical incidents". The New South Wales Department of Education and Training (2006) has changed the terminology of its policy documents and now refers to "serious incidents", to take into account those events or situations that, while they may not have an "emergency"



characteristic, may still evoke a stress or trauma response. Lerner et al. (2006) identify a category of incidents as “everyday crises”. These appear to be serious but not uncommon events in the life of a school, such as student violence, adolescent pregnancy, motor vehicle accidents and students experiencing family break-up.

Kerr (2009) refers to overlapping characteristics of critical incidents in schools, namely: “ (1) an unexpected disruption to a school’s normal routine, (2) resulting psychological upset, and (3) the need for actions that exceed a school’s customary responses” (p. 1). Kerr goes on to note that in different schools, or different contexts, some events may or may not become “critical”.

Some catastrophes would create a crisis in *any* school because the impact would overwhelm even the most capable staffs. Yet, other incidents might never even take place because of skillful prevention. Still other potential tragedies might be mitigated by collaboration between skilled professionals and community members ... factors constituting a crisis will differ among schools. (Kerr, 2009, p. 1)

The research questions of this study direct the focus towards an examination of the *impact* of the incident on the principal, and the literature supports this understanding of the importance of different elements in the consideration of critical incidents. Thus, the elements of trauma, disruption, intervention and impact appear to be widely agreed upon in the literature. For the purposes of this study, a critical incident is therefore defined as follows:

***A critical incident is a traumatic event that directly involves members of a school community, significantly impacts on that community’s wellbeing and the regular life and work of the school, and requires intervention and support by external agencies.***

As is illustrated in the literature, an understanding of the impact of critical incidents is necessary for a full exploration of this topic. Following is a discussion of the research on the impact of critical incidents.

### **Impacts of critical incidents**

Critical incidents are played out over time, sending shockwaves whose impact is difficult to predict. It may be that, like a tsunami whose genesis is unseen and deep within the earth, the impact is felt far away in time and place (Gainey, 2009; Swenson & Henkel-Johnson, 2003). The personal contexts of those involved in the incident will also influence the type and length of any trauma response. There has been much analysis of the impact of critical incidents and the exposure to violence on individuals, particularly in the history of the identification of

Post-Traumatic Stress (previously called *shell shock* or *combat fatigue*). Military research has been used to inform the structure and content of intervention for the members of Emergency Services such as Police or Fire Brigades (Sheehan et al., 2004; Tehrani, Cox, & Cox, 2002). Sheehan et al. (2004) considered various emergency service providers, “first responders”, involved in large scale critical incidents in the USA, and remarked that all were committed to supporting the personal needs of their employees, needs that were generated by the crisis. “What affects the mind affects the body, and what affects the body affects the mind” (p. 2).

The full extent of the impact of a critical incident cannot be accurately predicted, because each incident is unique in its interplay of all the factors, including, but not limited to time, location, magnitude and impact (Knox & Roberts, 2005; Ochberg, 2002; Paton et al, 2000; Trethowan, 2009). The impact on the people, who are caught up in a critical incident in some way, is also impossible to predict. Some research has identified elements that increase the likelihood of a trauma response in people dealing with a critical incident. Donnelly (2006, p. 18), MacNeil and Topping (2007a, p. 83) and Whitla (2003b, p. 123) all referred to a list of six factors that were identified by Werner, Bates, Bell, Murdoch and Robinson (1992). The six factors that increased the likelihood of a trauma response in those individuals who were dealing with the incident are:

1. Child victim(s)
2. Enormity or magnitude of incident
3. Multiple deaths or injuries
4. First experience of death
5. Being unprepared
6. Existing connection with victim(s)

The first three of these factors are recognisable as having a critical or crisis quality. These factors would immediately signal a serious event of some significance. The last three factors are linked with the context and connections of the person(s) involved. These three may be present in an obviously dramatic incident, but they could also be present in a more ‘everyday’ event, a “more commonly occurring event” as described by Jackson (2003). These factors are likely to influence people’s reactions to the incident, which may not be immediately obvious, and may take time to become evident. In this research, the focus is on the *impact* of the incident on those involved.

The medical field provides descriptions of the impact of trauma on individuals and groups, and also provides proposals for trauma interventions, most particularly in the psychological and social fields (Jordan, 2003; Swenson & Henkel-Johnson, 2003). The impact of a critical

incident on individuals can vary according to a variety of factors inherent in the victims, or inherent in the particular details of the incident; for instance, whether the victim was directly involved, or was a witness, or was a family member of someone injured, or was able to exercise some control or felt helpless and useless. Jordan (2003) identifies the different categories of victims in a school shooting and describes the process, along a timeline, of the trauma responses that each category of victim might experience. Her timeline charts the psychological needs and reactions at each stage until recovery can begin. Jordan's study makes an important contribution to the research literature because it explores the impact of a critical incident through phases that acknowledge a long term stress response. It describes a recovery process based on the identification of support needed at each stage, including the long term impacts or traumatic responses.

Experiencing a critical incident does not necessarily lead to long term mental health issues, nor need the outcomes necessarily be totally negative (Pagliocca & Nickerson, 2001; Paton et al., 2000). Some research acknowledges the possibility of positive outcomes for an individual after a critical incident. MacNeil and Topping (2007a; 2007b) identify "post-traumatic growth" as a possible consequence of a critical incident. They describe possible outcomes as in the quote following.

... learning that they [survivors of a critical incident] could handle crises effectively, and feeling that they were better off for having met this type of challenge. Crises may also bring a community closer together or re-re-orient an individual to new priorities, goals or values. (MacNeil & Topping, 2007a, p. 11)

Paton et al. (2000), in research from the business sector, look at risk factors confronting an organisation, and how organisational support could be a positive growth factor for individuals within the organisation. They maintain that it is essential to properly prepare and train staff to manage both response to and recovery from a critical incident. They propose a model (see below Figure 2.2 *A proposed risk management model for disaster stress*) which demonstrates that the resilience of the workplace and the workgroup influences the resilience of the individual, so that when a crisis occurs, the outcome for the individual could be growth, rather than distress. The model also displays how the opposite occurs: if there are factors of vulnerability in the work organisation, then these impact on the vulnerability of the individual, making a negative outcome more likely. This is a strong argument for organisational resilience (knowledge, skills, resourcing) to be developed, as well as supporting the development of resilience in workers - for optimal outcomes when crises strike. The responsibility is on both the organisation and the individual to attend to preparation and planning, in order to increase resilience. Paton et al. claim: "This paradigm

focuses attention on mitigating disaster stress risk and facilitating recovery and growth in professionals ...” (p. 178).

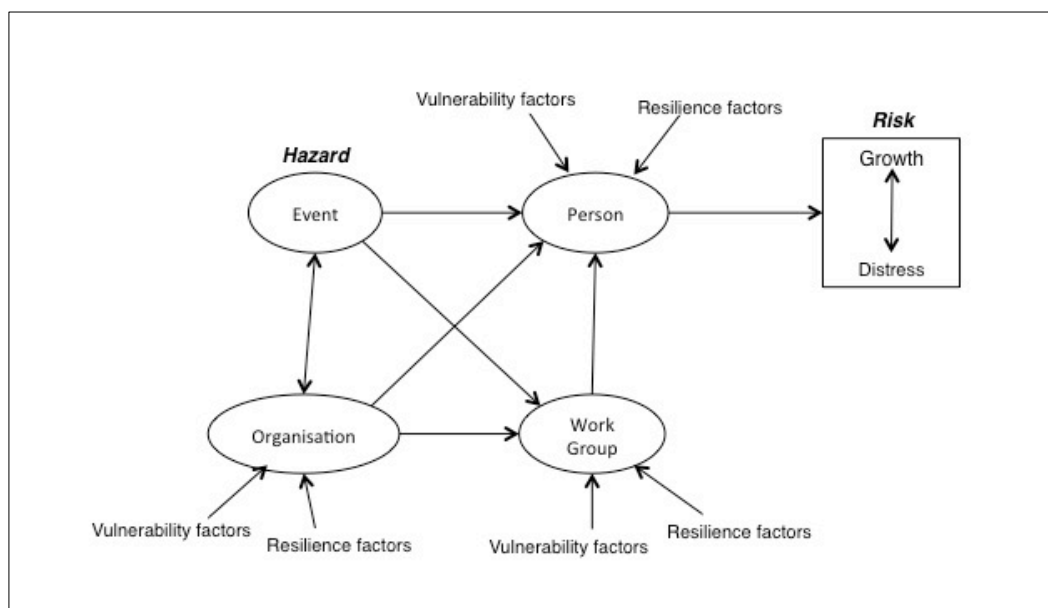


Figure 2.1 “A proposed risk management model for disaster stress”  
(from Paton et al., 2000, p. 178)

This model demonstrates how a workplace organisation may be either a buffer or a stressor for the workers in the aftermath of the critical incident, depending on the nature of the leadership and the structure of support and communication. This research is relevant for a study that is interested in the experience of principals (leaders) and their schools (organisations) (Janes, 2010; Schouten et al., 2004; Tehrani et al., 2002). It also has implications for education systems in considering their responsibilities for the development of principals’ skills and knowledge.

The research identifies disruption of normal routines and work as a significant factor that can impact on the wellbeing of a community or organisation and the individuals in those organisations (Anderson & Dolmage, 2009; Asmussen & Creswell, 1995; Lerner et al., 2006). The business of the workplace may be also significantly disrupted by the incident because of distressed, poorly performing workers, disruption or damage to supplies or plant, or indeed the loss of a client base. “... [W]orkplace communities are significantly disrupted, and the impact is costly in both human and economic terms” (Schouten et al., 2004, p. 231).

The structure of the organisation and its leadership are significant factors in determining how the impact of the critical incident may be played out (Paton, 2000; Tehrani et al, 2002). The issues of preparedness, leadership distribution, decision-making processes, even morale and

loyalty to the organisation are all factors in determining how well the organisation responds, and how well it recovers. Dutton, Frost, Worline, Lilius, and Kanov (2002) identified compassion in the leadership of organisations as critical to the recovery process: recovery for individuals and for the organisation as a whole, as described below.

... a leader's ability to enable a compassionate response throughout a company directly affects the organization's ability to maintain high performance in difficult times. It fosters a company's capacity to heal, to learn, to adapt and to excel. (p. 54)

Dutton et al. (2002) identified that the converse was also true: "Over time, if an organization will not or cannot support the healing process, employee retention will suffer" (p. 60). Education system policies sighted by this researcher acknowledge leaders' responsibilities to school communities' members, for example: "... the pastoral care of all members of the school community becomes a high priority, particularly for those most in need of help and support" (Catholic Education Office, 1995). Although the research universally emphasises the importance of preparing and training staff, there appears to be very little about the preparation of leaders to fill this role. In the school context, the *role* of the principal is clear: what is *not* clear is how the principal is prepared for this role.

Some Australian system documents attempt to identify some impacts of critical incidents (Catholic Schools Office Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle, 1999). The Diocese of Wagga Wagga (2009), in common with many other government and Catholic system documents, provides a list of actions to be followed in the time after an incident in which possible longer term impacts are acknowledged. At each phase of the incident, different issues need to be considered in terms of impact, response, support and learning. Exploration of the research literature on the phases of critical incidents follows in the next section.

### **Phases of a critical incident**

In the literature, critical incidents are usually examined in terms of different phases (Pagliocca & Nickerson, 2001). Three phases are identified, basically named as before, during and after an incident (Hosseini & Izadkhah, 2006; Jordan, 2003; Pagliocca & Nickerson, 2001). However, in considering impacts that are experienced in the longer term, some studies identify a fourth phase. Paine (2007) and Hull (2012) distinguish four phases by separating the pre-crisis time (phase 1) into two phases: mitigation/prevention, and preparedness/planning. Other researchers (Arman, 2000; Jordan, 2003) differentiate the fourth phase by splitting the post-incident phase (phase 3) into a shorter time and a longer time, in order to highlight that the traumatic impact of a critical incident can take years to resolve.

They describe the fourth phase as the long term recovery process, sometimes over years, of an organisation or individual after a critical incident. Arman (2000), Jordan (2003) and others name this long term phase as “recovery”, although a *failure to recover* does not appear to be considered.

Because the particular research focus in this study is on principals’ descriptions of their experiences, and their reflections on the impact, this study uses a four phase framework to more fully explore that experience of a critical incident. Thus, for the purposes of this study, the phases of a critical incident are named as follows:

- Phase 1. Planning and preparation
- Phase 2. Critical incident and immediate response
- Phase 3. Mid term impact
- Phase 4. Long term impact

The literature explores the issues around critical incidents through the different phases, and so the following section of this chapter will discuss critical incidents in general, and the research relating to the four phases already identified. The preparations, responses, interventions and impacts all vary according to the phase being experienced.

### **2.3 Schools and critical incidents**

In our communities, we expect our schools to be safe places for our children: safe both physically and emotionally (Pagliocca & Nickerson, 2001). However, critical incidents involving schools cover the same range as those in the general community. When the violence of society intrudes into the safe haven of the school, the dissonance between our expectations and the reality can hit parents and teachers very hard (Hull, 2012; Lindle, 2008; Ochberg, 2000).

Everly et al. (2004) give the example of the police reaction to the Columbine High School incident. Police officers involved identified that the most shocking aspect of the shooting was that society expects schools to be safe places for our children. Police reported that “... the aspect that bothers most people about the event was the brutal violation of what their expectation of what the school experience should be” (Sheehan et al., 2004, p. 11).

The particular perception of schools as safe places for children has taken a battering in recent times with traumatic and highly publicised school shootings, particularly in the USA (Cornell, 2003; Lindle, 2008). The perception of safety has given way to a heightened sensitivity to

schools as places that are vulnerable to violence. Researchers such as Lindle (2008) caution that both perceptions can be counter productive, arguing that “[t]he consequences of imagined safety, along with panic resulting from incidents of school violence or other lapses in school safety, yield school policies and rules that, perversely, may exacerbate community fears” (p. 28). Lindle and others (e.g., Gainey, 2009; Nader & Pynoos, 1993; Nickerson, Brock, & Reeves, 2006) argue for strategic, consultative and educative approaches to the planning for, response to and management of critical incidents in schools. These types of approaches do not yet appear to be widely understood or actioned.

The research on critical incidents and schools highlights the impact of trauma on children (Brock & Cowan, 2004; Thompson, 2004). Linked with this is significant research on the preparation and training of teachers and counsellors who work with children in post-trauma situations (Lerner et al., 2006; Rowling, 2003; Trethowan, 2009). Discussions on school violence, and the prevention of school violence form a large part of this research (Lindle, 2008; Paine, 2007; Tronc, 2010). School shootings in the USA, such as the events at Columbine High School and Sandy Hook Elementary School, give rise to a large body of research on the long term impact of such violence on students, teachers and parents (Asmussen & Creswell, 1995; Ochberg, 2002; Steele, 2008). Likewise, the aftermath of natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina in Louisiana and Mississippi placed enormous pressure and distress on school communities and has generated research into the effectiveness of critical incident planning and the role of school leaders in critical incidents (Brack et al, 2009; Lee et al., 2008).

It is pertinent to also consider the literature on schools and wellbeing, in that a school already working to ensure good mental health and wellbeing for its community is well placed to achieve positive outcomes following a critical incident (Rowling, 1994; Trethowan, 2009). Recent Australian Commonwealth Government support for student wellbeing initiatives such as Mindmatters (Mason & Rowling, 2005), KidsMatter (Department of Health and Aging, 2006) and the National Safe Schools Framework (Education Services Australia, 2011), emphasises the benefits of proactive approaches to positive mental health practices in schools. In a US study, Brown and Bobrow (2004) advocate the collaboration between schools and community mental health agencies in preparing for crises and assert that: “crisis preparedness would benefit from having mental health systems in place prior to the trauma” (p. 219). Similarly, programs to prevent violence and promote safety are being increasingly introduced in schools in the US, the UK and Australia (Pagliocca & Nickerson, 2001; Rowling, 1994). Lindle (2008) warns that an “impersonal” school culture, one which does not actively develop positive relationships between students, staff, parents and communities, is at risk of school

violence. She advocates the building of links between schools and local communities: “The answer to issues of school security and safety lies in the development of community” (p. 39). In addition, some research presents the notion that by educating and preparing children about the nature of critical incidents, students are not only prepared for their own safety, they are also prepared as future citizens who will be more aware of the need to work for a culture of safety (Hosseini & Izadkhah, 2006).

A Georgia State University report (Brack et al., 2009) that examined flexible ways of preparing for and responding to critical incidents, considered the impact of existing school culture on the resilience of counsellors working in schools after Hurricane Katrina. The report found that:

... the existing school environment before Katrina shaped the subsequent Katrina responses. ... those schools having less than optimal support began to grind down the school counselors. Though all the schools had difficult and troubling experiences, the less facilitative schools began to burn out the counselors. ... Though all counselors felt isolated at some point in the crisis response, the schools with a greater sense of belonging seemed better able to reintegrate and reconnect – a critical healing factor.  
(p. 3)

As the research into critical incidents and organisations has shown, the contexts that exist in schools prior to any incident was either a support or a hindrance to people coping with post incident issues: contexts in which relationships and a sense of belonging had been prioritised had more positive outcomes. This finding connects strongly with the previously discussed importance of compassion in leadership in post-incident contexts (Dutton et al., 2002).

Immediately following is a discussion of the research on critical incidents in general, and critical incidents concerning schools, as identified in the four phases.

### **Phase 1. Planning and preparation**

The need for schools and education systems to improve crisis response planning has become very evident, especially in the last decade with increased violence and traumatic events both in schools and in communities (Ellis & Thorley-Smith, 2007; Pagliocca & Nickerson, 2001). Experience tells us that there are things that can be done to help minimise the damage or the impact. Most organisations and societies make some kinds of preparations to prevent or minimise disaster: levee banks are built, gasmasks are issued, and drills are practiced. There is a large body of literature from fields such as psychology, education, management and



government, that advises organisations on preparing for a critical incident (e.g., Ben-Ezra, Essar, & Saar, 2006; Brown & Bobrow, 2004; Jones, 2001). Leaders of organisations are expected to be prepared for an incident that may disrupt or damage the organisation's business, its workers and its clients (Janes, 2010; Roher, 2006).

Schouten et al. (2004) explore the research on the impact of critical incidents on the workplace, particularly noting disruption and distress caused to individuals and organisations (communities). They advocate for the development of critical incident management plans.

A well-conceived disaster-management plan, rehearsal of the plan, and facility inspections to ensure adequate lighting, ventilation, and firefighting and other response mechanisms would all help reduce the risk of liability in the event of a disaster. (Schouten et al., 2004, p. 233)

Thus in the first phase of a critical incident, organisations seek to prepare for the unexpected and protect themselves against any damage. This is variously called “predisaster mitigation” and “disaster management planning” (Hosseini & Izadkhah, 2006), “crisis preparedness” (Pagliocca & Nickerson, 2001), “prevention” (Jordan, 2003) or “mitigation” (Hull, 2012). In much of the literature focusing on critical incident planning and preparation, the material is organised into different aspects of planning. For example, Pagliocca and Nickerson (2001) examined US state legislative responses to critical incidents and described three functions in this initial phase: (1) a *policing function* which focuses on security (for example metal detectors) and punishment for those who breach security; (2) an *educational function* which sees workplaces positively supporting employees' wellbeing and resilience, and employing anti-bullying programs; and (3) a *crisis management function* which focuses on the preparation of Critical Incident Management Plans and the formation of Crisis Response Teams.

These approaches from business and industry appear to have influenced the way that critical incident planning is conducted in schools. School crisis response planning is not a new imperative. Schools have always prepared for critical incidents, but usually out of the public eye, on a small scale and often with questionable relevance (Pagliocca & Nickerson, 2001; Poland, 1994). In Australia, as in other parts of the developed world, planning for critical incidents in schools is partially governed by legislative requirements nominating some particular types of preparation: for example, the regular practice of lockdown and evacuation drills, and first aid training for school staffs (Day & Golench, 1997; Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2009; Diocese of Wagga Wagga, 2009). Education systems have been diligent in developing documents containing policies and procedures that

outline expectations and models for schools planning (e.g., British Columbia Ministry of Education, 1998; Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2009; Diocese of Wollongong, 2005; Virginia Department of Education, 2002). These are usually dense, wordy documents and schools are usually expected to either adopt the system policy, or develop their own, using the system documents as a model. In all of these documents, the principal is the driver, the manager of the planning and implementation processes.

In addition to system policy documents, commercially published manuals assist schools in the planning for critical incidents (e.g., Johnson, 2000; Kerr, 2009; Thompson, 2004). Many of the policies from Catholic systems in NSW refer to Said's (2001) manual that provides checklists and proformas, and also emphasises the need to attend to pre-crisis mitigation, named "spot fires" and "split hoses". The information in this manual is presented in three sections: prevention, preparation and response. Another example of a comprehensive manual is that produced by The American Academy of Experts in Traumatic Stress (Lerner et al., 2006). This publication covers a wide range of issues, including discussion on matters such as teachers dealing with traumatised children, and parent communication and engagement.

Research indicates that critical incident management planning should occur at different levels citing the importance of getting 'buy in' at a regional/district level, in order to ensure resourcing and support for the development of the plan (Hosseini & Izadkhah, 2006; Kline, Schonfeld, & Lichtenstein, 1995). Kline et al. (1995) identify 3 levels: national, district and school. Knox and Roberts (2005) nominate regional, district and school as the levels at which planning should occur. In earthquake prone Iran, the importance of national level planning is emphasised, in order that a "safety culture" (p. 69) may be built and that proper resourcing for training may be relied upon in schools (Hosseini & Izadkhah, 2006). Research also identifies the importance of collaboration with community agencies such as emergency services and local medical facilities, in order that, when a response is required, no time is lost in establishing communication or in the understanding of particular protocols (Cornell & Sheras, 1998; Lindle, 2008). In addition, the literature that focused on the school context also identifies the importance of outside agencies understanding the specific needs of a *school* community (Brown & Bobrow, 2004).

Schools and education systems evaluate the risks and determine what might be done to prevent, mitigate and prepare for a potential crisis (Cornell, 2003). Risk assessments take many factors into account, and the level of defensive preparation would relate to that assessed level of risk (Hosseini & Izadkhah, 2006; Paton et al., 2000). For example, most Australian

schools in rural areas would probably have formulated strategies for dealing with bushfires and floods (e.g., Diocese of Wollongong, 2005).

In this planning and training phase, the literature on the roles of school staff is mainly focused on supporting teachers with their students (Jackson, 2003; Virginia Department of Education, 2002), and also on the proper training and support for school counsellors (Donnelly, 2006; Jackson, 2003; Thompson, 2004; Trethowan, 2009). The research uniformly advises that the creation of critical incident management teams can be crucial in supporting school leadership in this time, by sharing responsibility for decision-making and communication (Kerr, 2009; Kline et al., 1995; Lerner et al., 2006). While attention is given to the preparation and support of school staff members, there does not appear to be corresponding focus on the types of support and preparation that might be offered to school principals. They are viewed as agents rather than clients or victims.

Pagliocca and Nickerson (2001) are comprehensively critical of the lack of evaluation of most of the legislated responses. This concern is echoed in other studies (Sheehan et al., 2004; Tehrani et al., 2002; Trethowan, 2009). Knox and Roberts (2005) point out that while many education administrations have plans in place, very little has been done to evaluate the effectiveness of these interventions. “Because school crisis management has increased in attention and need over the past decade, we hope the research needed to validate the knowledge base and interventions will be forthcoming” (p. 99). MacNeil and Topping (2007b) also point out the lack of evaluation of the many different types of response protocols, despite legislative mandates in some instances. A rare evaluation of pre-disaster planning has been done regarding schools impacted by Hurricane Katrina (Lee et al., 2008). Disappointingly for planners, this study found that if schools actually had Critical Incident Management Plans, they were mostly outdated and irrelevant to the situation.

Planning for critical incidents may be seen as having little relevance to the main function of schools. There is the danger that planning will be superficial, or too prescriptive – the need for flexibility and local level input is emphasised (Brack et al., 2009; Poland, 1994). Anderson and Dolmage (2009) caution that: “an excessively prescriptive emergency protocol might even [be] dangerous when superimposed over an emotionally and socially complex incident with deep but ambiguous, murky human implications and impact” (p. 4). Cornell (2003) also warns about over-zealous and counter-productive approaches (for example, ‘zero tolerance’ approaches) to violence prevention in US schools, and places great significance on the role of the principal in establishing a safety culture.

In advocating the practice of learning from experience, Sheehan et al. (2004) describe the exploration of “best practice” exemplars to inform organisations about appropriate/effective intervention programs. Their research emphasises the need to develop core competencies in those who would be responding to a critical incident. They assert that “critical incident education provides one of the best inoculations available to [those] facing toxic situations. If they expect something, they are better able to cope with it” (p. 12). Schouten et al. (2004) support this proposition, stating the following:

In addition to likely increasing optimal behavior and thus decreasing the risk of physical injury and property damage in a disaster, proper planning and rehearsal reduce stress by providing participants with a sense of control – and the effect spreads to the event ... understanding and perceived control had a moderating effect on perceived job stress and satisfaction in the wake of stressful events. (p. 232)

In some instances, there is positive growth for those experiencing and managing through a critical incident (Kline et al., 1995; Paton et al., 2000), particularly if the individuals feel that they have managed the incident well. This is a strong argument for ensuring effective training and preparation, to have school staff members armed with knowledge and understanding of what might happen, what responses individuals can expect and what support is available.

The literature emphasises that organisations that do not prepare for critical incidents, nor respond appropriately, leave themselves open to litigation (Johnson, 2000; Poland, 1994; Roher, 2006; Schouten et al., 2004). The appropriateness and effectiveness of the response and recovery process is now so public (via sometimes inflammatory news reports), that organisations can quickly find themselves bearing negative public perceptions of their capabilities to properly care for their people (Lindle, 2008; Vining, 2008). The necessity for schools and educational organisations to properly plan and prepare for critical incidents is well established.

Employers have multiple reasons to develop disaster-management plans and implement a program of regular review and rehearsal – ranging from altruism to business interests to the reduced risk of liability. (Schouten et al., 2004, p. 235)

There is common agreement in the literature on the need for schools to have access to relevant planning, preparation and training, in readiness for a critical incident. The literature highlights the importance of an educative approach that involves stakeholders, both in the school and wider local communities. Being appropriately trained, understanding something of the nature of the leadership role in a critical incident, and feeling supported by and connected to the wider community would provide school leaders with an improved capacity to lead through

and manage after a critical incident. The next phase of a critical incident is the incident itself and the immediate response to the incident, which forms part of the experience for those people involved.

## **Phase 2. Critical incident and immediate response**

This phase describes the incident itself and the immediate response. The incident may take many forms and may be over in seconds, or may take several hours or even days. The literature on the many differing definitions of critical incidents, and the many forms of categorisation has been dealt with earlier in this chapter. Just as incidents take many forms, so too the responses to incidents are many and varied. The immediate incident response could also take hours and possibly days or weeks to play out, for example, in the case of a flood or a building collapse.

Phase 2 is the time when the Critical Incident Management Plans, as described in system documents, are put into action. It would be rare for any plan to be totally in line with an incident. An effective response attends to immediate issues of danger and/or distress, and can also be an important factor in supporting recovery from the trauma. Cornell and Sheras (1998) write about the importance of getting the response right.

Skillful and competent crisis response is important, not only to respond to the dangers of the immediate situation, but to prepare the way for a more rapid recovery and return to normalcy. Crisis victims are at risk of long-term demoralization and post-traumatic stress reaction, which compound the adverse effects of the original event. (p. 305)

A critical incident triggers a response that is characterised by high focus and high levels of activity. The response to the incident may be ad hoc and reactive, or following some kind of plan, if there is one in place. The scene of the incident is flooded with ‘helpers’ and others connected with the organisation and its people (Cornell & Sheras, 1998). Emergency services may be required, a Crisis Response Team may be sent from outside, or formed from within (Nickerson et al., 2006). Disruption of normal work and routines is usually the immediate consequence and this is identified in the literature as one of the defining elements of critical incidents (Asmussen & Creswell, 1995; Lerner et al., 2006). The immediate response to a critical incident in a school thrusts the principal into the roles outlined in the policy documents. Liaison with emergency services such as police and ambulance, managing media and supporting distressed community members are common roles in the time immediately following a critical incident (Johnson, 2000; Kerr, 2009). Principals may already be feeling a loss of control because of the incident, and may also begin to feel overwhelmed by the influx

of people, each with a different agenda (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002; Fein & Isaacson, 2009). Rumour may be prevalent (Akbaba-Altun, 2005). Leaders will find themselves pulled in many, often contradictory directions. This phase can be a time of great psychological risk for those directly involved, as an individual's vulnerabilities may be played out in a public way (Paton, 2000).

Principals have multiple roles to fill in this phase of an incident. As well as dealing with emergency services and media, principals may also need to manage the provision of counsellors. It is now accepted practice that any community that has experienced a crisis will be supported by counsellors as part of the immediate response (Diocese of Wagga Wagga, 2009; Donnelly, 2006).

In addition to incidents directly involving the school or its community, any critical incident in the local or wider community has the potential to cause stress and dysfunction in a school (Gainey, 2009). No teacher could forget or dismiss the traumatised response of school students as they watched on television as the Twin Towers in New York came down (Steele, 2008; Thompson, 2004). There is an increasing frequency of children's exposure to violent and traumatic events (Kline et al., 1995; Trethowan, 2009). The very nature of media intrusion into our homes ensures that what happens on the other side of the world can be observed and responded to within seconds (Swenson & Henkel-Johnson, 2003). As well as obvious issues of student distress and wellbeing, principals may need to attend to matters such as the vicarious traumatising of students through exposure to media reports (Raphael, 2003; Swenson & Henkel-Johnson, 2003). Each critical incident is unique and even the best preparations cannot possibly anticipate all the possible scenarios.

However, after the site is cleaned up, the injured taken away and things supposedly 'go back to normal', those left behind, who had witnessed or been involved in the incident in some way, may still be experiencing the effects of the trauma (Hull, 2012; Jordan, 2003). Despite this, a lot of the support begins to be withdrawn in the days and weeks after the incident (Anderson & Dolmage, 2009; Jordan, 2003). The initial disruption will come to an end, but there may be significant issues in the aftermath that impact on the management of the school and the wellbeing of members of the school community for some time. Anderson and Dolmage (2009) refer to "the volume of residual effects" as "seemingly fathomless" (p. 4). Phases 3 and 4 of a critical incident are concerned with these impacts on the organisation, and on individuals who have been involved.

### **Phases 3 & 4. Mid term and long term impact**

This period after the incident and immediate response can be experienced in a mid term time span over months (phase 3), and a long term time span over years (phase 4). Some studies (Hull, 2012; Jordan, 2003) identify the long term needs of the victims in a recovery process that is quite different from the immediate short term interventions. The initial disruption (phase 2) may give way to a period that is often named as “aftermath” (Lerner et al., 2006; Poland, 1994; Thompson, 2004), in which the school works to ‘get back to normal’. While this organisational process is being worked on, individuals may also be experiencing trauma and stress reactions and these can take a longer time to resolve (Anderson & Dolmage, 2009; Whitla, 2003b). Thus the time after the critical incident is separated into two time periods, a third phase to describe the organisational aftermath (phase 3), and an overlapping fourth phase to more adequately describe the long term impact on individuals (phase 4).

In the aftermath of a critical incident, the reactions of students, staff and parents are issues that principals will need to manage (Johnson, 2000), although the mid term and long term impacts are often ignored in critical incident management plans. School leaders prioritise the needs of children in a critical incident (Kline et al., 1995; Lindle, 2008). Response and recovery processes need to involve carers and teachers (Lavercombe, 2006): if those supporting the children are skilled and knowledgeable, then the children have a good chance of positive outcomes (Brown & Bobrow, 2004). The research acknowledges that teachers (possibly with in-class support) need to be available to their students (Brock & Cowan, 2004). In order to do this, staff members, as well as being supported to care for their students, need to care for themselves (Paine, 2009; Whitla, 2003a). There is an identified danger that staff who are part of the crisis response may be vulnerable to burnout (Kline et al., 1995; Knox & Roberts, 2005). This would be true for principals as well. Whitla (2003b) offers the following advice to principals:

Leaders ... often have questions about how they can best facilitate the psychological recovery of their staff. Often ... principals have two areas of concern: taking care of the emotional needs of the members of the group, and restoring the group’s level of functioning. Typically, these will be regarded as separate tasks to be completed sequentially. However, the process of grieving and returning to work are not separate events. (p. 129)

Managing the provision of counsellors would normally be the principal’s responsibility. The need to support school counsellors with this extension of the accepted role is reflected in the literature (Donnelly, 2006; Johnson, 2000). Along with the increased use of counsellors has come research on the types of support that might be used in these contexts. ‘Debriefing’ is a

term that is often used in the documents guiding responses to critical incidents, in particular, a form of de-briefing called Critical Incident Stress Debriefing or CISD. Pagliocca and Nickerson (2001) note that the use of CISD is common in school disaster response, though the techniques have yet to be evaluated in terms of effectiveness for children and school personnel. CISD is now not supported as appropriate for dealing with victims of school crises (Bonanno, Brewin, Kaniasty, & La Greca, 2010; MacNeil & Topping, 2007b), yet the technique is mentioned in many current system documents and manuals for schools. It appears that the term ‘debriefing’ may be used generically to refer to types of counselling, especially where it relates to group treatments.

The reaction of the parent community will also be a matter for principals to attend to (Kerr, 2009; Swenson & Henkel-Johnson, 2003). In the time after a critical incident in a school, parents often express gratitude to the staff for caring for their children and the result can be “[i]ncreased parent-school communication and cooperation” (Catholic Schools Office Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle, 1999, p. 12). In the longer term (phases 3 & 4), however, that can shift: parents may experience anger, and there may be rumours and scapegoating within the community (Nader & Pynoos, 1993; Virginia Department of Education, 2002). Parents may experience a loss of trust in the school (Cornell & Sheras, 1998; Knox & Roberts, 2005).

A particular issue in phase 4 is the danger of the ‘re-triggering’ (Asmussen & Creswell, 1995), of stress and trauma reactions when the event may be kept alive by repeated media mentions, a drawn out legal process, because of a death or injury situation, the nature of some individuals’ responses and the impact on their lives, anniversaries of the incident, or the changed nature of community perceptions about safety (Anderson & Dolmage, 2009; Jordan, 2003; Lindle, 2008; Ochberg, 2000).

It can be seen from the literature that, following a critical incident involving a school, many possible impacts have been identified. Following is Figure 2.2 *Phases of impacts*, which illustrates the overlapping nature of the impact from the initial incident to the long term aftermath. The figure is based on a dramatic event as a critical incident to more clearly identify the elements of interest. As previously discussed, more commonly occurring events that evolve into critical incidents may have a more subdued starting point, or several starting points over time. However, the impacts appear to follow the same sequence (Jackson, 2003). The critical incident is represented by the wavy red line, and the orange curve is the immediate response. This phase (Phase 2. *Critical incident and immediate response*) is characterised by high levels of activity that may involve elements that cause disruption to the normal functioning of the school. Issues of safety, security, the presence of emergency



services and engagement with media may be some of the issues that need to be managed by the principal. Following the initial disruption, Phase 3. *Mid term impact*, represented by the grey curve, may include such matters as organisational adjustments, parent or community responses (both negative and positive), and dealing with mental health interventions for staff and students. As discussed, this time is often called aftermath, as these complex issues are managed (Lerner et al., 2006; Anderson & Dolmage, 2009). Phase 4. *Long term impact*, represented by the green curve, is usually experienced as working towards recovery dealing with mental health interventions. There may be recovery, or there may not, reflected in the ongoing green arrow. This phase may continue, hence the arrows on the time axis.

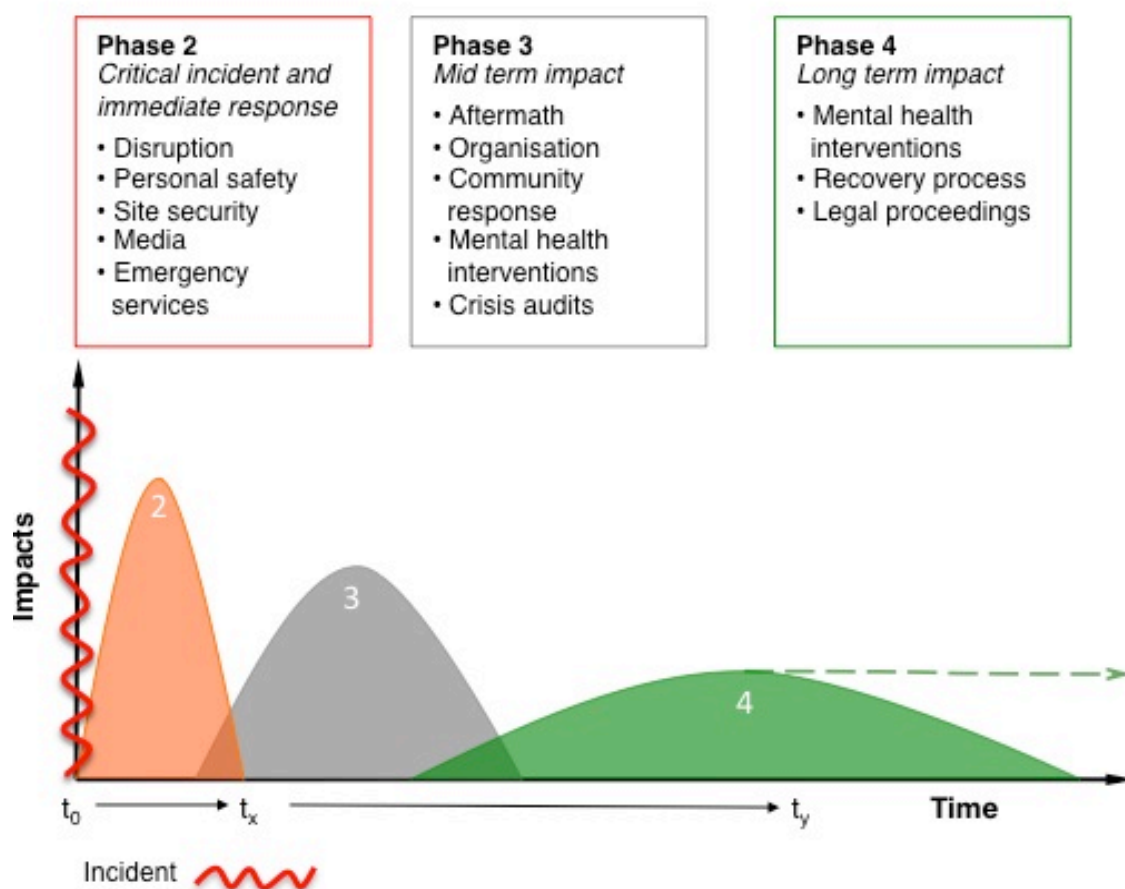


Figure 2.2 *Phases of impacts*

The figure above demonstrates the different impacts that may be experienced in each phase, and how the issues may be present in a community, or in an individual for a very long time.

Despite the critical incident and its impact on the community and individuals in the community, the school must continue to function as an educational institution: indeed, the

research tells us that getting back to normal as quickly as possible is the best thing for the recovery of traumatised people (Nader & Pynoos, 1993; Poland, 2007). The disruption to normal routines (phases 2 & 3) is one major factor, although that does not last forever. However, there may be the need for the management of a long term aftermath (phase 4), especially where issues of mental health are involved. There is a gap in the literature on the impact of critical incidents on schools as organisations, in these longer term situations. Tehrani et al. (2002) point out that:

There has been little provision to help organizations to evaluate their management systems and post trauma interventions. ... The problem for an organization is to have a means of assessing the impact of a traumatic incident on exposed employees soon after the event and at regular intervals as a way of tracking the effectiveness of the treatment and rehabilitation program. (p. 191)

It is apparent from the research that, in order to optimise opportunities for positive outcomes from a critical incident, crisis preparedness and skilled leadership are significant elements. Whitla (2003b) acknowledges that principals “will be required to provide leadership that is both sensitive and directed. Preparation to perform such a role is vital” (p. 21). This appears to be the case in the short, mid and long term: in phases 2, 3 and 4. Education systems, and the research in general, have recognised the centrality of the principal’s role in preparing for and responding to a critical incident, and in the management of post incident disruption and aftermath. Despite the policy and procedures documents developed by education systems, such as those already discussed in this chapter, there appears to be little evaluation of the usefulness or otherwise of these documents, in actual critical incidents. This need for evaluation of critical incident management plans and guidelines has already been identified (Knox & Roberts, 2005). Especially for principals, confronted by a crisis situation, it would seem important to know how often the policy documents are consulted, and how useful they prove to be.

The following section of this chapter explores the research that focuses on the role of the principal, and how the principal experiences an incident.

## 2.4 Principals and critical incidents

The essential element in crisis management [in schools] is for the Principal to communicate confidence and a take charge approach ... (Vining, 2008, p. 1)

Although leaders are subject to the same physiological responses as other people when confronted with a sudden crisis or shocking news, people generally expect leaders to control themselves and the situation, and to behave rationally. (Tarrant, 2011a, p. 65)

These quotes illustrate the situation for principals in leading their schools through and beyond critical incidents. Leaders of organisations big and small are considered to have failed if they do not ‘take the reins’ or ‘show a stiff upper lip’ (Fein, 2001; Rowling, 2003; Tarrant, 2011a).

Given the inherent stress of the role of principal, even without a critical incident, the literature on the management of stress for school leaders is informative in this context (Carr, 1994; Draper & McMichael, 1996; Green, Malcolm, Greenwood, Small, & Murphy, 2001; Phillips, Sen, & McNamee, 2007). Starratt (1990) describes school principals’ *normal* routines as reacting to one crisis after another. Flintham (2003) considered the effect on school leaders when their “reservoirs of hope” run dry, and concluded that sustainability in school leadership needed support that was tailored to develop both personal and professional resilience. Carr (1994) examined levels of anxiety and stress for Australian school principals and highlighted an important aspect of principals’ perceptions of themselves in their roles. In considering themselves (i.e., school principals) as “normal or well-adjusted”, Carr found that many of the principals in the study could not separate themselves from their professional role, as in the following quote.

[I] tend to identify with my work ... in the sense that my work and I become the same thing. Me is also my work. Now a threat to my work becomes a threat to me. (Carr, 1994, p. 31)

Patterson and Kelleher (2005) identify an overdeveloped sense of responsibility or a “stress addiction” (p. 83), particularly in situations that result in “disruption to expectations” (p. 13), as a danger for principals in the development of greater self efficacy and stronger resilience.

In considering the experiences of principals in critical incidents, the focus of the research seems to be on principals’ roles in the management of the preparation for, responses to, and support for the rest of the school community (Brock & Cowan, 2004; Steele, 2008; Whitla, 2003b). The system policy and procedures manuals viewed by this researcher detail the responsibilities of the principal in relation to all stages of a critical incident. For example, the Victorian Government’s manual for schools provides a list for the principal (called the

“Incident Controller”) of actions to be taken in the event of an emergency (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2009). This list consists of 30 dot points ranging from “Remove people from the scene to an appropriate assembly area or classroom”, to “Record details of event, including the source/s of information and make notes as information is received” (p. 14). In the same section of this manual, other responsibilities are also listed for the principal. Critical incident policy documents for the Catholic Dioceses of NSW follow a similar pattern. For instance, the policy and procedures document for the Diocese of Wagga Wagga NSW (2009), lists 12 actions to be taken by the principal in the event of a crisis. This list is followed by two other sections detailing the provision of counsellors and managing the media, activities that would also need to be coordinated by the principal.

Paton et al. (2004) discuss the need to develop “managerial capability” with appropriate training. They describe how leaders with good managerial skills can help others by acting as role models, providing feedback and supporting the transition back to work. This view is supported by McCarthy, O'Connell and Hall (2005), in a report on a study that described the process undertaken by a particular leader who led his organisation through a tragedy and into recovery and growth in the years afterwards. This leader understood that, as well as acknowledging the tragedy and supporting those suffering distress and dislocation, he needed to also articulate a clear vision and match it with future oriented action.

In addition to acknowledging the need for training in preparation for a critical incident, a report from a joint project of the University of Michigan and the University of British Columbia (Dutton et al., 2002), advocates compassion as a vital element of leadership in times of crisis:

... [C]ompassionate leaders uniformly provide two things: a “context for meaning” – creating an environment in which people can freely express and discuss how they feel - and a “context for action” - creating an environment in which those who experience or witness pain can find ways to alleviate their own and others’ suffering. A leader’s competence in demonstrating and fostering compassion is vital ... to nourishing the very humanity that can make people - and organizations - great.

(Dutton et al., 2002, p. 1)

Knox and Roberts (2005) claim that those involved in critical incidents report that nothing is ever the same after a critical incident. Some leaders, after the heightened response to a crisis, and if they feel that they have done well, might actually feel a letdown in the return to normal

routines (Paton et al., 2004). Having operated at a level “above themselves”, the literature warns of the difficulty that some people have at going back to normal.

Cornell and Sheras (1998) identified the elements of leadership, teamwork and responsibility as critical to the outcomes of critical incidents. They described several school crisis responses in which weak, uninformed and/or unprepared leadership had resulted in a worsened situation. They conclude that “[s]killful and competent crisis response is important not only to respond to the dangers of the immediate situation, but to prepare the way for a more rapid recovery and return to normalcy” (p. 305). Promoting and resourcing appropriate training and preparation of school leaders would seem to ensure that immediate and longer term impacts are minimised.

The research acknowledges the importance of the principal’s role in leading in all phases of a critical incident. However, as most of the research separates the various roles and responsibilities according to the phase of an incident that is under inspection, it is difficult to get a full picture of the size of the leadership task, from phase 1 to phase 4. Anderson and Dolmage (2009) explored the consequences of a particular incident and subsequently, were able to identify some of the issues inherent in this context. They explain that:

... collateral implications, follow-up details, and damages (especially emotional and psychological) were inestimable, no conceivable lock-down procedure manual would have been adequate, not only in terms of the consequences’ pervasiveness, variety and scope, but also in terms of their longevity and interconnectedness. (p. 4)

This acknowledgement of the complexities and difficulties in leading a school through a critical incident is rare. In the research literature, there does not appear to be a clear understanding of the depth and breadth of the responsibilities that the principal is expected to carry.

### **Principals’ experiences of critical incidents**

As already identified in this review, the research into principals’ experiences in critical incidents is limited, with much of the literature focusing on the principal as the key driver of crisis response, and the coordinator of the recovery process. However, there are some notable exceptions that make a valuable contribution to exploring and acknowledging these experiences, and thus enabling a better understanding of principals’ needs in this context. A New Zealand study by Tarrant (2011) explored a principal’s roles, feelings and learning when confronted with the deaths of 6 students and a teacher in a canyoning accident. A series of

interviews with the principal allowed Tarrant to explore the whole experience, and base the 'lessons learnt' on the principal's own words and reflections. This piece of research, and the work of the principal himself, was influential in New Zealand in legislating for improvements in crisis management support for schools, and also in understanding how to better prepare and support leaders for this situation.

A case study report from the UK explored a principal's management of the aftermath of a teacher's suicide (Macpherson & Vann, 1996). The principal described the daily progress of her community through the grief process. Based on this description, the researcher examined different micro-political styles of leadership and suggested an educative approach as being most conducive to recovery. The study found that the principal's engagement with and commitment to the community was central to the movement of grief to recovery, and to positive outcomes for the children and school staff.

The work of Maslin-Ostrowski and Ackerman (2000) on the 'wounded leader' provides some insights into the thinking of principals who have experienced a crisis or critical incident. In particular, the authors discuss the inevitability of the *wound* for school leaders, and the role of story in making sense of the experience – of the possibility of growth and positive self-realisation for the leader: "... principals cannot do it all and to begin the process of healing, they must first risk the painful realisation that they can't" (Maslin-Ostrowski & Ackerman, 2000, p. 233). Rowling's (2003) work on supporting school communities in grief and loss situations identifies the notion of "disenfranchised grief", which has particular relevance for principals. Principals feel the need to put aside their own grief and stress responses in order to lead their communities. Rowling discusses the price that school leaders can pay for this practice: a price that is borne by leaders' own long term wellbeing.

Fein (2001) explored the experiences of school leaders after school shootings, in a thesis that revealed the often long term nature of the effects of these types of experiences. He warned explicitly of the danger of assuming that because leaders "look okay", that they are okay (p. 238). However, other research, including Fein in later years (Fein & Isaacson, 2009), suggested that if leaders *appear* to cope well, or they actually *do* cope well and model appropriate coping behaviours, it bodes well for the rest of the staff, and the children in particular (Fein & Isaacson, 2009; Kline et al., 1995; Macpherson & Vann, 1996). The responsibility for skilled and compassionate leadership at this time is highlighted in the following quote.

... the importance of compassion by leadership in times of crisis, noting that the organization's compassion can be assessed by looking at the scope, scale, speed and degree of specialization of the response. (Schouten et al., 2004, p. 235)

Such are the expectations of the role of leader, and an indication of the cost to the leader of taking on these responsibilities.

As the focus of this study is the principal's experience, Figure 2.3 *Impacts on the principal through the phases* draws on the literature to illustrate the interconnectedness of the principal with the school and the external agencies, through the phases of the critical incident. Each phase impacts on, and is responded to, by the principal and other agencies. Above the *Critical incident timeline* are the factors that will impact on the principal and may determine the principal's response. The principal is both self and leader, and brings all his/her capabilities and vulnerabilities to bear on the management of a critical incident at each phase. Below the *Critical incident timeline*, the school and other agencies involved in some way in the critical incident are identified.

Figure 2.3 *Impacts on the principal through the phases* also illustrates how the school and other agencies, driven by the impact of the critical incident, focus on the principal as the decision-maker and driver of response interventions. Each of those agencies will need to liaise with the principal as they each bring their particular focus to the incident. Principals identify many of these agencies as supportive and helpful; they also identify some as distinctly unhelpful, or counterproductive. Figure 2.3 demonstrates the pressure brought to bear on the principal, and provides a synthesis of the literature that has been described in this chapter.

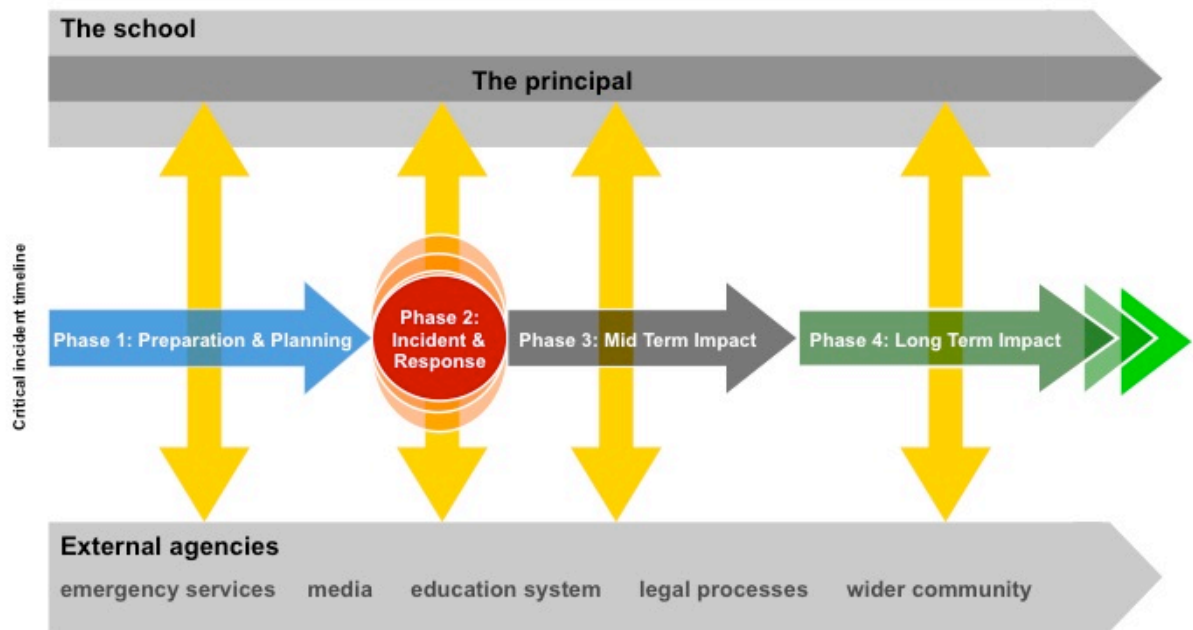


Figure 2.3 *Impacts on the principal through the phases*

Fein (2001), Maslin-Ostrowski and Ackerman (2000), Rowling (2003) and Tarrant (2011) all use individual school leaders' narratives to explore the impact of crisis experiences. The school leaders' own words and reflections are valued and acknowledged as contributing to their own healing, as well as contributing to learning. Thompson (2004), and Anderson and Dolmage (2009), also identify the link between "telling the story" and healing. Anderson and Dolmage reflect:

Victims of a traumatic event in a school recover more quickly and completely if they have a chance to tell their stories, and through open dialogue can start to make meaning of a complex and abnormal occurrence. Engaging in narratives about their reactions better equips them to understand the gains borne of their struggles. (p. 4)

The importance of reviewing an experience in order to improve accepted practice is highlighted in some of the literature. Everly and Sheehan (2004) describe the exploration of "best practice" exemplars to inform organisations about intervention programs that would be effective in aiding a community's recovery after a critical incident. They identified the components of "best practice" as: (1) early intervention, (2) complete care, (3) peer support, (4) specialised training and (5) tactical intervention. Everly and Sheehan emphasise the importance of learning from reviewing and reflecting on real experiences. This study's exploration of principals' experiences, as described by the principals themselves, is a "best practice" approach that will enable effective learning from the situation.



## 2.5 Conclusion

Although the research on critical incidents is inconsistent in definitions and terminology, the elements of trauma, disruption, intervention and impact appear to be widely agreed upon as defining characteristics. Therefore, these elements are contained in the definition of a critical incident adopted in this study. The particular significance of the *impact* of a critical incident leads to the adoption of a four phase model through which to explore the different aspects of this phenomenon.

The literature on schools and critical incidents focuses on policy and procedures documents and manuals, which are produced to guide school communities in planning for and responding to critical incidents. The research acknowledges that there has been very little evaluation of critical incident management plans. Other research in this area explores the needs of students, teachers and school counsellors and focuses on identifying the support needed for these members of school communities. The research from the business field contributes to an understanding of the impact of crises on business organisations, and offers insights into recommended best practice for leaders. The elements of disruption and aftermath appear to be significant in understanding the impact of critical incidents on organisations.

The many roles of the principal in leading a school through and beyond a critical incident are identified in the current literature. These roles require principals to be skilled, committed, resilient and compassionate in order to properly care for their communities. The research that explores the principals' own experiences, rather than their expected roles, is limited. There is correspondingly very little acknowledgement by educational administrations of leadership complexities and difficulties, nor identification of the needs of principals in the context of a critical incident. The next chapter reviews the research methodology selected to study principals' experiences of leading their schools through and beyond a critical incident.

### **3. Research Design and Methodology**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

This study explores the experiences of school principals in leading their schools throughout the phases of a critical incident. It is structured to develop an understanding of how school principals experienced the critical incidents. In developing that understanding, the study describes the types of incidents that the principals surveyed for this study experienced, explores the impact that critical incidents have on principals as leaders, and investigates the types of support which principals have found useful.

The questions posed in this research project are:

1. How do principals experience leading their schools through and beyond a critical incident?
2. What are the issues for principals as they lead their schools in the time after the incident?
3. What kinds of support are available to them and how might this be improved?
4. What was the impact of this experience on their leadership?

The purpose of this chapter is to describe and justify the research design chosen for this study and to describe the connections between the chosen research methods and the focus of the study.

First the theoretical underpinnings of the research are described. Then the methodology and research methods, linking the theory and the study's focus, are outlined. A description of the methods used to analyse the data then follows. Issues of ethics, data trustworthiness and dependability are explored and the chapter then concludes with an overview of the design of the research.

#### **3.2 Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework links the theoretical concepts that underpin the research design and thus guide the exploration of the research questions. The framework is constructed by considering the purpose of the research and, specifically, the research questions (Crotty, 1998). It consists of the chosen epistemology, which informs the theoretical perspective, which in turn informs the methodology. The chosen methodology then governs the choice and use of methods. These interrelated concepts are chosen by the researcher as those best serving to explicate the research questions. O'Donoghue (2006) explains the connections thus:

The adoption of a different paradigm can predispose a researcher to approach a research problem differently in terms of the questions asked. This situation will, in turn, lead the researcher to choose different research methodologies and research methods. (p. 12)

This research focuses upon the principals' own words as they describe their lived experience and how this experience impacted upon them. It therefore called for an approach that allowed exploration of the meanings that principals make from their experiences in leading critical incidents and how principals construct their understandings of the event in which they were involved. This approach reflects a world-view that knowledge is constructed by those who have experienced a particular phenomenon – in this case, a critical incident in a school. This understanding of the construction of knowledge is known as constructionism.

Within the epistemology of constructionism, an interpretive theoretical approach guides and directs the design of this study. Interpretive research aims to explore the world (or an incident) from the viewpoint of those who have lived it. As interpretive research, the goal of this study was to develop understandings of principals' experiences and to discover how principals interpreted their own and others' responses to the critical incident. Within the interpretivist approach, the perspectives of symbolic interactionism (understanding, making meaning) (Blumer, 1969), and phenomenology (linking meaning with behaviour) (Creswell 2003) were chosen to guide the research methodology.

Consistent with these theoretical perspectives, a mixed methods approach was purposefully chosen so that quantitative data, collected in surveys, could provide background information and context for the qualitative data, which was produced through the surveys and interviews. This allowed for the in-depth understanding of the experiences of the participants (Stake, 1994). By using methods such as surveys and multiple case studies through interviews, the researcher explored the participants' understandings and perspectives about how they responded to the critical incident, and how the incident impacted on their leadership.

The table below presents an overview of the theoretical framework of the research. Each element is addressed in detail throughout the subsequent sections of this chapter.

<b>Epistemology</b>	Constructionism
<b>Theoretical Perspective</b>	Interpretivism <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Symbolic interactionism</li> <li>• Phenomenology</li> </ul>
<b>Methodology</b>	Mixed methods Multiple case study
<b>Methods</b>	Survey Interviews

Table 3.1 *Theoretical framework*

### **Epistemology**

In the research literature, the term “epistemology” is also named a “paradigm” (Candy, 1989; O'Donoghue, 2006), a “big theory” (O'Donoghue, 2006) or a “philosophical position” (Pring, 2005). A simple definition comes from Crotty (1998) who, using the term “epistemology”, describes it as “the theory of knowledge embedded in the theoretical perspective and thereby in the methodology” and “a way of understanding and explaining how we know what we know” (p. 3).

The concept of an epistemology is useful for making sense of how the world works; for working out what counts as knowledge in a particular world-view, or identifying the lens through which the view of the world is shaped by certain understandings. In everyday life people continually make sense of the world according to their cultural values, common social norms, religious beliefs, and many other variable influences. These factors may not be explicitly understood or apparent, and indeed will change throughout a person's life, reflecting life experiences and temperament. Different epistemologies will obviously give different views of the world, or understandings of what constitutes knowledge. “Each epistemological stance is an attempt to explain how we know what we know and to determine the status to be ascribed to the understandings we reach” (Crotty, 1998, p. 18).

For example, some researchers (e.g., Boden, Kenway, & Epstein, 2005) call feminism an epistemology: the understanding of a researcher holding a feminist perspective “is shaped by certain understandings about gender, power and the position of women” (p. 41). Academic research epistemologies are expected to be explicit, rigorously defined and robust, and guide the researcher and reader in making sense of the data.

However, generally the literature has split the epistemological positions into several different stances, and the use of the terminology can be confusing with sometimes different terms for

the same paradigm, and the same term for different paradigms. A widely understood epistemology is *positivism*, also called *empiricism* (Darlaston-Jones, 2007) or *objectivism* (Candy, 1989; Neuman, 2006; Pring, 2005), and is the paradigm traditionally favoured by the scientific community, in that measurement of the known produces data to be analysed and tested. In contrast, the epistemology of *interpretivism* (O'Donoghue, 2007), sometimes called *constructionism*, takes into account that there is knowledge that cannot be reduced to numbers or “truths”, because of the belief that knowledge exists in the socially constructed meanings (or interpretations) of experiences. However, just to confuse things, some writers also name *constructionism* as a form of *interpretivism* (Gibbons & Sanderson, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 2005), or the two labels may be attributed to perspectives which are combined to then form a unified approach to research (Creswell, 2007). For the purposes of this study, however, the term *constructionism* is used to refer to the epistemology or paradigm that underpins the research, and *interpretivism* sits within that paradigm. This is further explained in the next section of this chapter.

The terms *constructionism* and *constructivism* are also both widely used and emphasise that reality is constructed by those who experience it and that there are as many ways of knowing as there are participants. Although some writers use these terms interchangeably (Lincoln & Guba, 2005), the use of the term *constructivism* is generally considered to be applied to an individual's construction of reality, whereas *constructionism* (also called *social constructivism*) acknowledges that individuals make meaning of the world through social interaction and language: reality is the product of social interaction and is constructed in communication and discourses. “Individual and collective realities correspond because of the shared use of narratives” (Stahl, 2003, p. 2880). In this research, the term *constructionism* is used to refer to both the individual and socially constructed views of the world.

A constructionist view holds that meaning is constructed in the reflection and perspective that each individual brings to their individual life experiences: that each person brings their own life stories, their biases and frameworks to make sense of what happens to them. Thus the same experience can be interpreted in significantly different ways by the individuals who live through it. Two women of the same age and social status, witnessing the same violent robbery, may have totally different reactions to that traumatic incident, reactions which will be influenced by their own life experiences, their temperaments, their social contexts and other innumerable factors. Each woman's way of making sense of the incident is as valid and worthy of respect as the other person's way. Each construction of meaning has something to say to the researcher.

In describing a constructionist approach to research, Crotty (1998) identified several assumptions:

- meaning is constructed by individuals as they engage with their world;
- individuals make sense of their world through the lens of their social and historical perspectives;
- basic generation of meaning is always based on a social context, and a constructionist researcher will generate meaning from the data given by the participants in the research.

Reality is thus co-constructed with the participants, both individually and socially; the knower and the known are inseparable; observations are value-laden and so investigations must employ empathic understanding of the participants. This has significant implications for the methodology employed in this research. “The establishment of a good level of rapport and empathy is critical to gaining depth of information, particularly where investigating issues where the participant has a strong personal stake” (Lester, 1999, p. 2).

This study’s focus is on school principals’ descriptions of leading a school through a critical incident and how they construct meaning from that experience. The individual perspectives, plus the social context and the social interactions of the participants in the critical incident, impact on the construction of meaning made by the principals. There is no objective truth about the principals’ experiences waiting to be discovered (Darlaston-Jones, 2007). Rather, the meaning given to the experience was constructed by the principals over time and explored in discourse and reflection. Thus a constructionist epistemology was chosen to underpin and guide the design of this research.

### **Theoretical perspective**

The theoretical perspective of research creates a frame through which the research process can be positioned and the coherent relationship with the research questions clearly articulated. Within the constructionist paradigm, an interpretive theoretical perspective best fits the focus of research that aims to provide a rich description of lived experience.

... [I]nterpretive accounts in research do not seek to reinterpret the actions and experiences of the actors, but rather to give a deeper, more extensive and more systematic representation of events from the point of view of the actors involved. (Candy, 1989, p. 5)

Within interpretive research, several perspectives have been identified. Hermeneutics, symbolic interactionism and phenomenology are all essentially interpretive frames that may inform research (Crotty, 1998; Lester, 1999). These approaches, while having distinct characteristics, nonetheless overlap and allow the researcher to choose aspects of each to allow a deeper exploration of the original research questions (Berg, 2007).

For this study, a phenomenological approach is the best fit of the different interpretive perspectives, and symbolic interactionism also has elements that add insights to exploration of the research questions. These two approaches guide the methodological choices in this study and aspects of both perspectives, relevant to this research, are described in the following sections of this chapter.

*Symbolic interactionism* The term *symbolic interactionism* was first coined by Herbert Blumer (1969) and is described as an appropriate perspective for researching the influence of social interactions on the individual's self-identity. At its heart are three principles that are about the nature of self, meaning and symbols. These principles are:

1. Individuals act towards things or symbols, both concrete (e.g., institutions, other people) and abstract (e.g., words, situations), according to the meaning that those things have for them.
2. Meaning comes from an individual's experience of the world and is thus (a) being constantly modified and adjusted, and (b) influenced by social interaction and social contexts.
3. Meaning is modified through an interpretive process that then directs action.

(from Blumer, 1969; Dimmock & O'Donoghue, 1997)

The implications of the symbolic interactionist approach for this study centre around the issue of the social interaction that have significant impact on the individual's view of self. For a study interested in the school principal's view of self as leader in the context of a critical incident, this approach offers some interesting insights. This is particularly focused on the symbols embedded in the critical incident through which the principal interprets, and re-interprets, the meaning of self.

*Phenomenology* aims to explore the experiences of individuals in relation to a phenomenon and provide a rich description from the perspective of that person who has lived through the experience. Creswell (2003) asserts that phenomenology is useful for studying how individuals construct meaning from social acts and for understanding how those individuals experience phenomena. In phenomenological research the "researcher identifies the 'essence'

of human experiences concerning a phenomenon, as described by participants in a study. Understanding the ‘lived experiences’ marks phenomenology as a philosophy as well as a method” (Creswell, 2003, p. 15).

Moustakas (1994) lists several principles of human science research, of which seven qualities are common to all human science research. Phenomenology is characterised by all seven of these qualities, described as follows:

1. Quantitative studies do not adequately explore human experience
2. There needs to be a focus on the whole experience not just the parts
3. There is a search for meaning rather than measurement
4. Descriptions of experience through first-hand accounts are produced
5. There is a commitment to viewing experience as data, and this is used to understand human behaviour
6. The researcher formulates questions that reflect interest and commitment
7. Experience and behaviour are viewed as integrated and inseparable

(from Fein, 2001, p. 79)

An important element of phenomenological research is the recognition that the researcher becomes engaged in a socially constructed context with the participants. Darlaston-Jones (2007) explains the importance of understanding the relationship between the researcher and the researched: “We bring to our research our world views complete with bias and prejudice – it is not possible to separate the *me* from the research. The research process then becomes one of co-construction: In partnership with our respondents we create an interpretation of his or her reality” (p. 25). By virtue of being human, the researcher is always biased, and always in the research (Lather, 1991; Walkerdine, 1997). True subjectivity is impossible to achieve in qualitative research where, into “the interpretive moment ... the researcher brings considerable conscious and unconscious baggage” (Scheurich, 1997, p. 73). This has significant implications for a study in which the researcher had herself experienced the phenomenon (a critical incident) that is being researched, and belongs to the community of research participants: what Banks calls being an “insider” (2001, p. 10).

The need for the researcher to “bracket” her own biases, assumptions and expectations is seen as critical and is referred to in the literature as *epoche* (Moustakas, 1994). *Epoche* is a Greek word meaning to stay away from, or be separate from, and requires the researcher to carefully notice, be aware of and reflect upon her own assumptions and feelings regarding the interactions with the participants and the data being produced. In addition, because the experience being described was of a traumatic nature, there was an added imperative for the



researcher to maintain focus and to be aware of researcher bias. It is an important call that impacts directly on the conduct of the research, particularly on data production through interviews. Rowling (1999), in her research on loss and grief, reflected on the relationship between the researcher and the interviewee, in interviews in which strong feelings were aroused for both participants. She identifies feeling a need to maintain an “empathic distance” from the interviewee and further cautions interviewers in this situation thus:

Staying detached is unlikely to be viewed positively by participants [interviewees], and would therefore not elicit meaningful data. What is required is compassionate analysis which intertwines the researcher’s and the participant’s emotions, as long as the emotions do not interfere with ‘real listening’. But being in and being out of the research is a fine line. (Rowling, 1999, p. 177)

Darlaston-Jones (2007) observes that in an interview situation, a constructionist paradigm “offers a deeper scrutiny of the research process and the role of the researcher and as such increases the rigour of the study” (p. 22). While the interviewer and the interviewee co-construct meaning via a respectful and empathetic connection, a phenomenological approach enables the interviewer to scrutinise his/her own part in the co-construction.

The research questions for this study direct the researcher to explore the described experience and context of the individual in a critical incident. The focus is on the principals’ interpretation of the incident and the impact of that experience, and the goal of the research is to explore and describe that interpretation as richly as possible. This is at the heart of interpretivism.

Thus an interpretive perspective, which aims to hear individual participants’ reflections on their experiences in order to provide a rich, deep description, is an appropriate fit for this study.

### **3.3 Research methodology**

Methodology is “the strategy, plan of action, process or design lying behind the choice and use of particular methods and linking the choice and use of methods to the desired outcomes” (Crotty, 1998, p. 3). Darlaston-Jones (2007) described how a phenomenological approach guides the selection of research methods so that “different voices [emerge] from the study and demonstrate that [participants] could share the same surface experience but the meaning attributed to that experience and the effect it had on the individual could be very different” (p. 22). In this study the researcher was interested in the phenomena of critical incidents in

schools, and specifically in the lived experiences of school principals. The important focus was to hear the voices of principals as they describe and reflect their experiences and so the methodology must allow for “holistic description and explanation” (Merriam, 1998, p. 29). In the context of this study, the chosen methodology must be able to:

1. Gather background information on the nature of the critical incidents experienced by the participants, and
2. investigate the perspectives of the participants as
  - a. they describe their experience of a critical incident and
  - b. reflect on the impact that that experience has had on themselves

It became clear to the researcher that in order to achieve these goals, the methodology needed to produce both quantitative and qualitative data. While the focus of the study is clearly on the production of a rich, thick, qualitative description, answering the research questions also called for information about the phenomena of critical incidents in NSW schools. As this issue is not currently well documented, gathering this data would aid in understanding of the principals’ experiences. This indicated the need for a methodology that could include both types of research approaches, and enable the integration of the different types of data. Denzin (2010) identifies the breaking open of either/or (qualitative/quantitative) methodological approaches in recent years in the research community, in order to consider a less restrictive approach. He says: “No-one could refute the argument that the use of more than one method produced stronger inferences, answered research questions that other methodologies could not, and allowed for greater diversity of findings” (Denzin, 2010, p. 422). The work of Denzin (2010) and Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009) in particular, led to the researcher to adopt a mixed methods approach for this study. Creswell (2008) says that the “core argument for a mixed methods design is that the combination of both forms of data provides a better understanding of a research problem than either quantitative or qualitative data by itself” (pp. 61-62).

While the gathering of background data, through the survey, required both quantitative and qualitative approaches, the interviews with participants were centred on a qualitative case study methodology. Thus the mixed methods approach included (1) a survey that had elements of both qualitative and quantitative data, and (2) open-ended interviews that were conducted through a collective case study approach. Both are described in the following sections of this chapter.

### **Mixed methods**

While the production of qualitative data is the focus of this study, the need to gather some quantitative, background information on the participants and the critical incidents they reported, led to the adoption of a mixed methods approach. Gibbons and Sanderson (2002) acknowledge that: “It is acceptable that *methods* from both the scientific and humanistic approaches can indeed be complementary in any given investigation” (p. 20). An online survey was chosen to gather the background data, as well as reflections from the participants, and to aid selection of the interview participants. It was anticipated that, because principals who have experienced a critical incident are likely to have strong feelings about it, there would be a positive response rate. Boden et al. (2005) assert that: “... where people feel strongly about an issue, a questionnaire may be a very good source of data” (p. 44). An online tool was used because of the wide geographical spread of the potential participants. While the survey focused on gathering background information on critical incidents, it contained both closed and open-ended questions. This produced both quantitative and qualitative data that set a framework for the qualitative descriptions produced by the interviews and enabled greater understanding of the context of the principals’ experiences.

The results from the survey provided background information and were also used to generate the focus questions for the interviews that followed. Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009) write that the sequential use of a quantitative survey followed by qualitative interviews is the most common form of mixed methods research. They claim that:

... this combination allows for the strengths of each strategy to be combined in a complementary manner with the strengths of the other. QUAN questionnaires can be used to inexpensively generate large numbers of responses that produce information across a broad range of survey topics. Data gathered using QUAL interviews, on the other hand, are based on a relatively small number of participants, who generate in-depth information in response to queries from the interview protocol. (p. 240)

The mixed methods approach produced both quantitative and qualitative survey data to guide the next stage of the study. As the primary goal of this study was to produce a rich (deep, complex) descriptive account of meaning making and experience, the stage following the survey required the adoption of a complementary, qualitative methodology. A descriptive, collective case study methodology, described by Stake (1994) as being designed to optimise understanding and allowing multiple types of data gathering, offered such an approach.

### **Collective case study**

Case studies are usually done by researchers who have an intrinsic interest in the phenomenon under study (Stake, 1994) and they are defined by very particular characteristics. There is a focus on a single real life issue or phenomenon (the case) that cannot be considered outside its own context. Merriam (1998) and Berg (2007) use the term “holistic” to describe both the product of case study as “a holistic description and explanation”; and the nature of the research process as “taking a holistic view of the situation” (Merriam, 1998, p. 29).

Case studies are used to undertake an in-depth exploration of a particular issue and a collective case study allows for that issue to be studied in several different sites, thus adding to the bank of knowledge. There seems to be as many definitions and types of case study as there are researchers: case studies can be described as strategies of inquiry, methodologies and research design, as well as the product of the research. Stake (1994) keeps it simple and defines it as the choice of object to be studied which encompasses “both the process of learning about the case and the product of our learning” (Stake, 1994, p. 237). There is a strong inference that the process and methods are driven by the case itself. Creswell (2007) describes case study more comprehensively as follows:

...[Case study is] an approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g., observations, interviews, audio-visual material, and documents and reports), and reports a case description and case-based themes. (Creswell, 2007, p. 73)

Another important feature of case study methodology is that a case study is a “bounded system”; that is it has defined boundaries, such as a setting, a context or even a time frame (Stake, 1994). The bounded features of this present study are: (a) all the participants have been or are Catholic primary principals who have experienced a critical incident; (b) research methods were replicated for each case; (c) the study had a defined time frame; and (d) each critical incident had a defined location and time. These aspects of this study help to overcome one of the criticisms of case study methodology: that is, it generates too much data to be managed effectively.

A common criticism of case study methodology is that because it focuses on one or a small number of cases, it is not possible to make generalisations about the findings. Although Stake (1994) argues that case study researchers cannot avoid making generalisations, the purpose of this study is not to seek generalisations from the data, but rather enlightenment in order to understand the experience and to effect the improvement of practice. This can be achieved “by examination of each case in its own right. It can also be provided through an examination

of what is common to the cases, but within the same or similar contexts” (Dimmock & O'Donoghue, 1997, p. 52). There is no intention to generalise about the principals’ responses to the incident, but in exploring and describing their experiences, responses and reflections, this study would add to the limited store of knowledge about this topic. “By studying the uniqueness of the particular we come to understand the universal” (Simmons, 1996, p. 229).

These definitions indicate that descriptive, collective case studies give an appropriate methodological direction to the exploration of the research questions in this study. A collective case study methodology facilitates insight into the experiences of principals and produces a complex and detailed description of the meaning-making that the principals engaged in. This enables further highlighting of issues for reflection, in order to make recommendations for policy and procedures.

Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009) assert that because case study research typically involves a number of data sources, it can be supported by both qualitative and quantitative methods: a mixed methods approach, such as is used in the survey phase of this study. Stake (1994) argues that case study methodology needs to be designed to optimise understanding and in doing so, allows for multiple types of data gathering strategies. This flexibility also aids the production of data that cross-references or emerges out of other information to produce a rich and complex study. This approach particularly suits this study and facilitates the emergence of the complex descriptions that are the ultimate goal.

The research questions also direct the selection of study participants and this process is outlined in the next sections.

### **3.4 Participants**

In keeping with the bounded nature of case study methodology and in order to enable in-depth exploration of the issue, the selection of participants was restricted to NSW primary principals from the Catholic sector. This group consisted of 456 principals, from which respondents would self select to participate, and so was considered a large enough sample to produce a range of contexts and experiences, while being a manageable size. In addition, there appeared to have been very little known about critical incidents in this group. The researcher works in the Catholic sector and so was familiar with the protocols in the eleven diocesan systems, an important factor in accessing the study participants. It is also possible that the researcher’s “insider” status encouraged participants to engage with the study (Banks, 2001, p.10).

The study participants formed three distinct groups: a reference group, a survey respondent group and a case study interview group. The reference group was used in consultation and to trial the survey tool and the interview format and questions. The survey was emailed to all NSW Catholic primary principals and from that pool of respondents, a case study group for interview was selected as meeting the criteria described below. The survey data and the contributions of the reference group underpin the interviews and form the central part of the study.

While the reference group comprised primary and secondary principals and school counsellors from the Catholic sector, the other two groups (survey and interview participants) were restricted to NSW Catholic primary principals. This was for two reasons. The first was to contain the variables to one state jurisdiction (NSW), and similar school type (Catholic primary). The second reason has to do with the nature of primary schools and the relationship of the primary principal to the members of the school community. These factors are described as follows:

- The age of the students. The particular vulnerability of very young children and the protective feelings of adults to young children: parents entrust their young children to the school, believing it to be a safe place that will nurture and protect them
- The significant involvement of families in the life of a primary school and the subsequent strong feelings of “ownership” and connection between the school and the parent community
- The size of the school (usually much smaller than a secondary school), hence the expectation of a high degree of familiarity between the principal and the students and their families
- The more ‘hands on’ aspect of a primary principal’s daily work, compared to that of a secondary school, with fewer or no middle managers to delegate to, and the stronger likelihood of a teaching role

The researcher considered that these factors would be likely to have a significant bearing on the ‘playing out’ of a critical incident, and the responses of the principals involved.

*The reference group* The purpose of this group was as a reference for the construction of the survey, the compilation of the interview questions and for discussion on the data analysis. At the beginning of this study, this group consisted of four principals (primary and secondary) and two school counsellors who had been involved in critical incidents that were very public and well known in NSW. They were selected through personal contact. Over the life of this

study, membership of the group changed, as some individuals became unavailable, and others became interested and involved. However, all members of this group were principals, ex-principals or school counsellors who had had an experience of a critical incident. The principals in this group were not suitable to participate in this study, as it would have been impossible to guarantee confidentiality and anonymity. Tellis (1997), in discussing exploratory case studies, recommends piloting surveys as a way of determining the final protocols. The principals and counsellors in the reference group had expert knowledge of the experience of critical incidents in schools, and the study was able to use this knowledge to establish credibility for the data collection, to pilot the survey and interview questions and, during data analysis, to check for themes and identify gaps.

*The survey respondent group* Approval for principals to participate in the study was sought and granted from the central education offices of the eleven Catholic dioceses in NSW (see Appendix B *Letter to diocesan authorities*, p. 200; Appendix C *Letter of authority from ACU*, p. 201). Ten dioceses had their own ethics protocols that had to be satisfied, and some of these processes took several months to be completed. All 456 principals of Catholic primary schools in NSW were then sent an email (Appendix D *Survey invitation*, p. 203) with an attached survey (Appendix F *Survey*, p. 205) to complete. Permission was also sought and granted from the Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia (AHISA) to invite the principals of independent Catholic schools to participate. It appeared that one principal of an independent Catholic school participated in the survey. There were 71 viable responses to the survey.

*The interview group* The information gathered through the survey helped to set the context for the principals' reflections in the interviews. The interview's intention was to explore, in depth and detail, the experiences of twelve principals. The participants in the interview group are principals of Catholic primary schools in New South Wales who responded to the email, completed the survey and volunteered to be interviewed. This is called purposeful sampling and is based on the assumption that the participants in the study have the information from which the researcher can learn about the issue (Merriam, 1998). The criteria for selection of interview participants were as follows:

- they were working or had worked in a Catholic primary school as a principal at the time of the incident
- they had had experience in leading a school through a critical incident
- through the survey, they volunteered to participate in an interview with the researcher for approximately one hour and

- they were prepared to engage with the researcher in checking the researcher's documentation of the interview

Results from the survey guided the researcher in the selection of the interviewees. For example, it was evident that some survey respondents had defined critical incidents in their own terms. It was therefore important to include some interviewees who had demonstrated an understanding of critical incidents that may have been different from the researcher's understanding. From the 31 survey participants who volunteered to be interviewed, 12 were selected for the following reasons:

- They met all the above criteria
- A range of incident types, school size and location, participant gender and years of experience, were covered
- Each of the 12 had written in a reflective way in their surveys that indicated to the researcher that they had other insights to share
- Each interviewee was available within the 6 month time frame and at a time and location accessible by the researcher
- This number offered scope for constant comparative analysis, producing a manageable amount of data (Tellis, 1997)

Survey respondents, who had volunteered to be interviewed but were not selected, were contacted by the researcher and thanked for their interest in the study.

A synthesis of the relationships between the different sources of data, from the different study participants, is presented in Figure 3.1 *Research design*. The reference group impacts on and assists in the formation of the survey tool, the interview set-up and the data analysis, and thus aids validation. The survey responses are central to the study, contain the data that establishes the context and background for the phenomenon under study, and guides selection of the case study participants. The survey responses also provide the themes for the phenomena under study, and guide the interview questions. The interviews are analysed according to these themes, in order to explore the research questions.



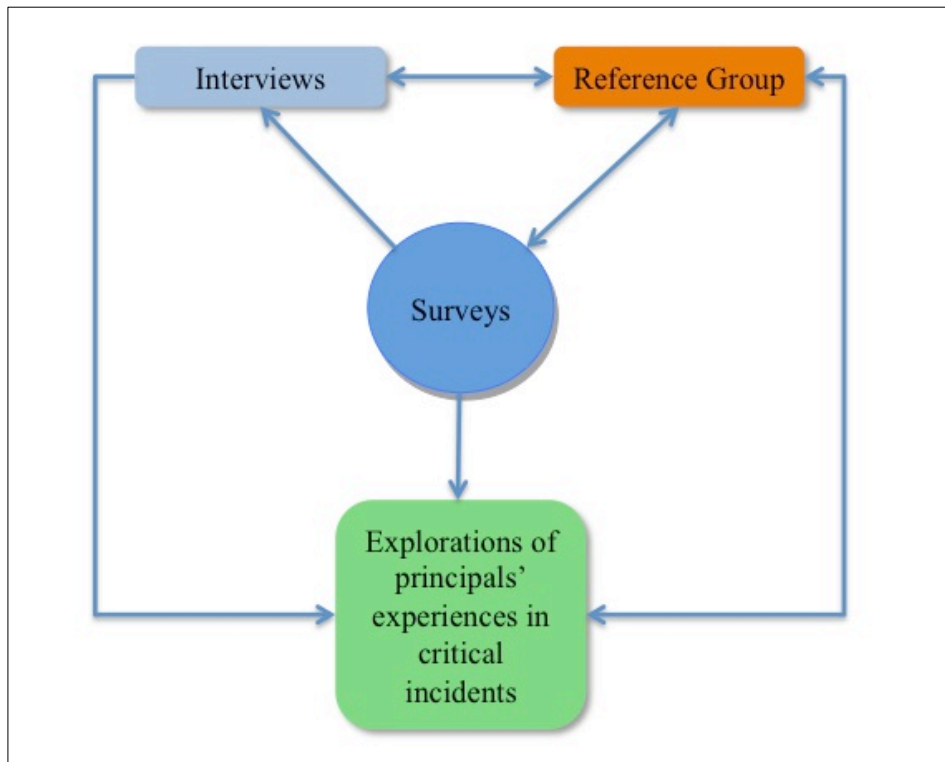


Figure 3.1 *Research design*

The iterative nature of the data collection and analysis is highlighted in this figure, with the exploration of principals' experiences of a critical incident as the end point of the complementary methods of data gathering. This is explained in more detail in the following section.

### 3.5 Data Collection Strategies

In order to answer the research questions, it was determined that a research design employing mixed methods would provide the data needed. These data were (1) the responses to an online survey using LimeSurvey, and (2) the responses given in interviews with 12 principals about their experiences. Following is an explanation of how these data sources inform and interconnect throughout the research process.

#### The survey

The use of an on-line survey tool was considered the most appropriate way of reaching principals across the state of NSW. LimeSurvey was chosen as a survey tool as it had the capacity to incorporate many different types of questions and responses, and there was technical support readily available to the researcher.

The purpose of the survey was:

- to gather information on the types of incidents in which principals have been involved
- to gather information on the types of support that principals had experienced/accessed before, during and after the critical incident
- to gather information about the principals' reflections about the impact of the critical incident on themselves and their communities
- to identify principals who may be suitable to participate in the interviews

Thus, the survey needed to capture both quantitative and qualitative data and this drove the design of the survey.

*Survey design* The survey was designed to produce both quantitative and qualitative data about the principals themselves, about the kinds of critical incidents that they had experienced, and their reflections on elements of criticality, support and impact (see Appendix F *Survey*, p. 205). The survey canvassed information in four sections, which were directly influenced by (a) the research questions and (b) elements of a critical incident as identified in the definition arrived at by the researcher (see p. 16). The four sections were as follows:

1. *The critical incident*: descriptions of the critical incidents, the elements of those incidents, and the principal's role(s) in the incidents. A Likert scale allowed participants to rate the significance of different elements;
2. *Preparation and support*: details of the support which principals accessed, and their reflections on what would have been helpful, but not available or accessed. A Likert scale allowed participants to rate the helpfulness of different types of support;
3. *Impacts and issues*: the impact that the critical incident had on the principals and on their school communities, and
4. *Learning*: any advice that principals might have for colleagues on how best to manage a critical incident, and for their CSOs about how best to prepare and support principals in the future.

The survey was piloted with members of the reference group with feedback ensuring that the text boxes were increased in number in order to allow participants to write reflectively of their experiences. From this feedback, the section on *Learning* was included. The survey consisted of 35 questions, of which 12 were text boxes in which principals could write their responses, as descriptions and reflections. The text boxes provided the *qualitative data* in the principals' own words. There were also closed questions and others asking for responses on a Likert scale, in order to determine the degree of participants' agreement. These questions produced

the *quantitative data*. The survey took respondents approximately 30 minutes to complete. At the end of the survey, participants could indicate if they were willing to be interviewed about their experiences.

*Survey administration* After piloting the survey with members of the reference group and making subsequent adjustments as described, an invitation to participate in the survey was emailed to all 456 Catholic Primary principals in the state of New South Wales (NSW) in Australia (Appendix D *Survey invitation*, p. 203). The invitation was emailed in batches over a period of 6 months, as approvals from the various diocesan offices were confirmed. All principals were emailed reminders at two intervals in the months following the original invitation (Appendix E *Survey reminder*, p. 204).

All survey responses were completed anonymously online, except one that was done manually. There were 110 surveys returned (24% response rate), and analysis of those responses showed that 39 were not usable for various reasons. Some responses were incomplete, and in others, the respondent was either not a principal of a primary school or not a principal. One respondent, who had self-defined ‘critical incident’ as meaning a ‘career turning point’, was likewise not included in the data. Five principals emailed the researcher to say that they had not experienced a critical incident and so were not able to complete a survey, but were interested in the study as they believed it was ‘*not if, but when*’ they would have that experience. Thus the response rate of all survey responses, plus all other contact emails, totaled 25.2% of the Catholic primary principals in NSW.

Several responses, though considered ‘incomplete’ by LimeSurvey, had nonetheless almost all of the responses intact and were thus included. Two Assistant Principals were included in the data because they were in acting principal capacity at the time of the incident, and were now currently principals. One principal of a K-10 Regional school was accepted as the incident concerned the primary section of the school. Similarly, the survey response of a principal of a ‘Special School’ (as described by the respondent) was also accepted. This left 71 responses that were usable.

The following tables identify the survey respondents, according to their gender, size of school and their years of experience as a principal at the time of the critical incident.

<b>Respondents</b>	<b>&lt;5yrs exp</b>	<b>&gt;5yrs exp</b>	<b>Total</b>
Male	9	18	27
Female	17	27	44
<b>Total</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>71</b>

Table 3.2 *Survey respondents by gender and experience*

Table 3.2 identifies the survey respondents, according to their gender and their experience as a principal at the time of the critical incident. A 5 year period was considered by the researcher and the reference group as a sufficient length of time for a principal to experience a range of school events and issues. Table 3.3 identifies the sizes of the schools involved.

<b>Experience</b>	<b>&lt; 100 students</b>	<b>100-250 students</b>	<b>251- 500 students</b>	<b>&gt; 500 students</b>	<b>Total</b>
< 5yrs	2	12	8	4	26
> 5yrs	3	11	21	10	45
<b>Total</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>71</b>

Table 3.3 *Survey respondents by experience and school size*

The 71 viable responses totaled 15.5% of the principals of Catholic primary schools in NSW. It must be noted that only those principals who had experienced a critical incident and were prepared to share that experience, were able to participate in the survey. This study was not able to assess the total numbers or types of critical incidents that occur in NSW Catholic Primary schools in any given year, nor was it able to determine how many principals had experienced a critical incident but did not choose to participate. This could be considered a limitation of this study, in that the survey responses cannot be confidently claimed to be all critical incidents experienced by NSW Catholic primary principals. However, more than one in six of those 456 principals reported what they considered to be a critical incident. Given that there is very little data available on the number and types of critical incidents, this number of responses makes an important contribution to filling that gap in our knowledge.

The survey responses were critical in adding to the limited store of information about critical incidents in primary schools, and in guiding the selection of the twelve interview participants. There were 31 interview volunteers (43.6% of all survey respondents), which indicated that almost half the principals who had completed the survey responded positively to the

opportunity to further tell their stories. This demonstrated that many principals who had experienced a critical incident were eager to share their reflections on the experience – indeed, there were several comments at the end of the surveys that indicated that principals felt affirmed that someone was interested in their story.

### **The interviews**

Interviews are a well-established data collection strategy in qualitative research (Berg, 2007; Bouma, 2000; Creswell, 2008). Glesne and Peshkin (1992) see the strength of interviews as providing the “opportunity to learn about what you cannot see and to explore alternative explanations of what you do see” (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992, p. 65) (see Appendix H *Interview invitation*, p. 224). Of the 31 interview volunteers, 12 were selected to ensure that they covered a range of critical experiences and contexts.

*Interview design* The interview questions followed the same format as the survey, with questions from each of the four sections as previously described. This format was trialed with some members of the reference group and, from this trial, the researcher realised the importance of using the questions just as starting points, and of guiding rather than explicitly directing the interviewee’s responses (Appendix I *Interview questions*, p. 227). The interviews contained the following elements.

1. Interviewee was informed of their rights to confidentiality, that they were able to withdraw at any time without giving a reason, and that confidential, free counselling support would be provided should they wish.
2. Interviewee was invited to describe the critical incident.
3. Interviewee told the story of the experience.
4. Researcher then asked pre-prepared, open-ended questions, focusing on the issues of support, decision-making, impact, feelings and leadership.
5. There was a consistent line of questioning for each participant, in order to maintain integrity. However, the discussions ranged according to each interviewee’s inclinations, and guidance was provided by the researcher.
6. As soon as possible after the interview, a transcript of each interview was referred back to each participant (member checking). No interviewee requested clarification or changes to the transcript.
7. Interviewee Mal participated in two extra meetings with the researcher, as his story was detailed as an exemplar case study (Flyvberg, 2006; Stake, 1994).

The questions were designed to be open-ended in order to provide opportunities for the interviewees to tell their stories in their own words, with some guidance from the interviewer.

*Interview administration* The researcher had to work within some constraints of time, distance and participant availability. Ten interviewees were interviewed in their own schools, one interviewee from a remote region was interviewed while attending a conference in Sydney, and another interview was conducted by phone. All were interviewed in the 6 months following the survey. In order to establish trust and rapport, the researcher met or spoke by phone with each interview participant before the interview. In this initial contact, the researcher briefly shared that she had experienced a critical incident as a principal (being careful to not establish that as “the benchmark” and therefore influencing the responses). The interviews were recorded and later transcribed by a professional company. All interviewees were offered a copy of their particular transcripts for further comment. Two requested a copy of their transcripts, but neither of them made any adjustments nor requested changes or clarifications.

The researcher met with one interviewee, “Mal”, on two occasions after the initial interview, while doing the data analysis and report writing. As Mal’s story was used as an exemplar and explored in detail in this study, it was important that Mal had the opportunity to read the relevant sections of the report, and discuss any concerns with the researcher. His reflections were important contributions to the researcher’s own thinking and analysis.

The incidents described by the interviewees covered a range of impacts, in terms of severity and type. The interviewees are listed by their pseudonyms in Table 3.4, with the type of incident and other elements that contributed to the impact also described.

Name	Gender	Exp	School size	Location	Incident Type	Other elements
Carol	F	<5yrs	<100	Rural	Community violence	Lockdown, police
Gillian	F	>5yrs	> 400	Metro	Parent violence	Police, legal aftermath
Gail	F	>5yrs	250-400	Metro	Child behaviour, disturbed	Police, media, negative parent reaction
Karen	F	>5yrs	250-400	Metro	Child behavior, distressed	Community factors
Annemarie	F	<5yrs	250-400	Metro	Child death, onsite, accident	Media
Charles	M	>5yrs	> 400	Metro	Child anaphylactic reaction, onsite	Ambulance
Mal	M	>5yrs	250-400	Rural	Child death, offsite, accident	Country town involvement, funeral
Sandra	F	>5yrs	> 400	Metro	Staff & family deaths, (2), offsite	Multiple, close in time, BST week
Annette	F	<5yrs	250-400	Metro	Child death, onsite, accident	Ambulance, hospital, legal aftermath
Simon	M	>5yrs	< 100	Rural	Parent death, offsite, unexpected	Isolated, lack of support
Steve	M	<5yrs	< 100	Rural	Parent arrested for murder	Isolated, inexperienced, lack of support
Trevor	M	<5yrs	100-250	Rural	Community violence	Staff involvement in aftermath

Table 3.4 *Interviewees and their incidents*

The interviews were conducted with questions following the same pattern as the surveys (see Appendix I *Interview questions*, p. 227). However, the interview questions were not closely directed, so that the interviewees had the opportunity to reflect on their experiences and add further detail. The researcher (interviewer) was conscious of having travelled the same road as the interviewees, being an “insider” researcher who had also experienced principalship through the lens of a critical incident (Banks, 2001). The researcher paid careful attention to the bracketing of her own experience, so that no assumptions were made about what constitutes a critical incident (Moustakas, 1994). Some of the interviewees commented that it was easy to talk about their experience as “you get it”, meaning that the interviewer had been through a similar experience and thus understood what they had gone through. Rowling

(1999) cautioned researchers who were interviewing participants about a grief or loss experience that too much “being in” the interview with the participant could cloud the researcher’s judgment. Nonetheless, she emphasised that an “empathic” relationship between researcher and participant in this instance, is important in enabling “the impact of the affective component of [the] research to be identified” (Rowling, 1999, p. 180). During the interviews, some of the interviewees displayed mild distress, with tears in their eyes, taking deep breaths, or asking to stop for a moment. In the interview with Sandra, an experienced principal who presented in the interview as very composed and in control, the researcher was surprised when suddenly, in the midst of discussion, she said “...*now I’m feeling like I’m getting a little bit emotional now, which is not like me ...*”. She stopped, took a couple of deep breaths, and then continued calmly with her narrative. Interviewee Mal frequently had tears in his eyes as he told his story, but was insistent that he wanted to continue. All interviewees were advised that confidential, free counselling was available to them, should they so choose. All interviewees wanted to continue with the interview and only one voiced mild concern about the issue of confidentiality. She was reassured with an outline of the confidentiality protocols already described in this thesis.

The interviews of the 12 principals add detail and substance to the survey data by allowing the participants the opportunity to tell their stories more fully and to reflect on their experiences. This purposeful sampling facilitated better understanding of the phenomena under study (Fein & Isaacson, 2009).

### **3.6 Analysis of Data**

Data analysis involves gathering information, studying it and organising it in order to make sense of it. The mixed methods approach provides cause to treat qualitative and quantitative data in ways so that each connects with and informs the other (Creswell, 2008; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). This study used constant comparative analysis, involving the integration of all the data sources. Constant comparative analysis examines the data from one case and compares themes and issues with the data from another contextually similar case (Gephart, 1999). This is a dynamic and inductive process in which data collection, analysis and interpretation all interact simultaneously, each informing and influencing the other (Creswell, 2008) and leading to insights that emerge. In this study, both types of data, qualitative and quantitative, were analysed to serve this end.

Because the surveys contained both qualitative and quantitative data, and each type of data would inform and contextualise the other, the researcher opted to code them manually, in



spreadsheet format (for examples of the spreadsheets, see Appendix J *Long term impacts and confidence*, p. 230; Appendix K *Preparation and training responses*, p. 231). This ensured (a) that the researcher became very familiar with the surveys, and the data contained in them, and (b) that the parts were not separated from the whole (Moustakas, 1994). The manual approach to the data ensured that each survey response was read and re-read many times, and that the emergent themes and patterns identified by the researcher, were true to the emphases that the principals themselves had given them. The quantitative data consisted of responses to both closed questions and Likert scales. The aim of the closed questions was to gather background information about participants, their contexts and the critical incidents they reported. The ratings scales collected participants' responses on levels of satisfaction with intervention and support, and how they viewed the significance of the incident they had experienced. This quantitative data is presented in chapter 4 as simple frequency tables.

The text boxes in the surveys provided qualitative data that expanded on and explained the quantitative data. The interview transcripts added further description, story and reflection. Close reading and recording of these thoughts and feelings was critical. As soon as was practicable after the interviews, the researcher wrote summaries of each of the interviews, highlighting the emerging themes, which were then linked back to the themes emerging from the survey data (Creswell, 2007; Stake, 1994).

Analysis of all the data was managed by assigning codes for each emerging theme. Moustakas (1994) calls these groupings "meaning units". The identification of the themes and patterns from the surveys gave direction to the analysis of the interview transcripts. As these narratives were coded, they were further analysed and re-coded as the themes and patterns emerged (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994), and integrated with the codes assigned to the quantitative data. The codes were organised by theme in spreadsheet format and frequency became a key indicator of significance.

It was important, in a phenomenological study that aims to understand the *whole* experience, to read and understand the surveys as whole texts, rather than to separate out the different parts (Lester, 1999; Moustakas, 1994). As well as the quantity of responses, the quality of the survey data and the 'fullness' and honesty of many of the responses indicated that principals wanted to talk about their experiences. Many expressed strong views and emotions in doing so. When read as a whole, very many of them formed a plea for understanding. In many of them, when the responses to all the different questions are read and linked as parts of the same narrative, the picture is quite harrowing.

The story of survey respondent 34, Anne, presented in the text box, is an example of how all the parts add to the picture. In reading the survey, Anne's distress about being "*bombarded*" by this parent was quite evident. She had sought advice from police and the CSO and rated the stress/distress caused by this situation as "*extremely significant*". As the researcher read the survey response, further detail added to the picture. When asked what support would have been helpful had it been provided, Anne listed (1) counselling options, (2) professional debriefing and (3) assistance with families. Asked to rate her satisfaction with the support provided, she responded "*very dissatisfied*", and commented "*I felt that the [CSO] gave no support. In fact I felt like I was the guilty party instead of an innocent person.*" Later in the survey, in responding to a question about the impact, Anne wrote: "*I felt quite stressed and anxious as there was no support from the [CSO] ... I felt quite alone and that apart from family and friends there was no one I could turn to for support.*" On reading further in the survey, the researcher was surprised to realise that, several years later, the threatening parent was still a presence in the school, and still causing anxiety to Anne and her office staff. Anne did not feel that her situation was taken seriously by the CSO and, without support, it seemed that she was unable to deal effectively with the parent.

### Anne's Story

Survey respondent 34, Anne, is an experienced female principal in a medium sized city school. She was subjected to an onslaught of harassment from a parent (mother) over Anne's compliance with custody orders. There were leaflets left on parents' cars; signs displayed in the front yard (across from the school) accusing Anne of "*aiding a kidnapper*"; letters handed to parents; staff, students and parents yelled at; loud music played in school hours; office staff bombarded with visits from the mother and partner; Anne's car was photographed. She writes: "*I was accused of many things by the mother*". This went on for two terms, till the parent moved out of the house.

Police and CSO advised Anne she could take out a personal AVO if she wished. "*When I asked the [CSO] to do this they refused .... There was no counselling offered*". She rated contact from the CSO as "*neither helpful nor unhelpful*". Families left the school, and "*so I was questioned as to why the numbers were down.*"

This situation occurred 2-5 years ago. When asked about the impact, Anne responded "*I still feel quite anxious when the mother comes onto the school grounds. The office staff also feel this anxiety*".

So the parent is still in the school.

Anne writes "*There was no support for the school community from the system. ... the system needs to look at how effectively they can support principals, especially to not make them feel they have done anything wrong.*"

It is only possible to truly hear Anne's voice, to understand her story, by putting all the parts of the survey together, by respecting the whole narrative. Maslin-Ostrowski and Ackerman (2000) affirmed the importance of story in understanding leaders' experiences. "Narratives provide a way of looking at how leaders deal with stressful situations and the unique nature of adaptive leadership capacities" (p. 228).

As the goal of this research study was to add to the store of knowledge of principals' experiences during the phases of a critical incident, it was imperative that data analysis be driven by the principals' own words, and that the sense of the principals' meaning-making was preserved (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). The analysis of case study evidence can be problematic because the multiple methods and descriptive nature of the data can result in large amounts of information to wade through (Eisenhardt, 1989; Lichtman, 2006; Yin, 1989). In this study, the researcher's close reading of and familiarity with the data, and the iterative nature of the manual coding of the emerging themes, ensured that the data could be managed in a coherent manner.

### **Data collection timeline**

The study was conducted in stages, allowing for the iterative nature of the data analysis (Pickard, 1998). At any one time the researcher was involved in different stages of analysis with both survey and interview data.

#### *Stage 1: Set-up (September 2010 – June 2011)*

- Apply for and obtain ethics clearance from the 11 Diocesan Offices
- Design of survey instrument
- Contact with members of reference group: pilot survey

#### *Stage 2 Survey (March – July 2011)*

- Administer survey
- Collect responses
- Begin to collate responses
- Identify interview participants

#### *Stage 3 Interviews (May – October 2011)*

- Initial contact with interview participants
- Interview questions piloted with members of reference group
- Interviews with volunteer participants
- Transcription of interviews
- Member checking of transcriptions
- Initial coding of interviews
- Continue collation of survey data

#### *Stage 4 Focused exploration of data (September 2011 – July 2012)*

- Continue coding and categorising process with data from surveys and interviews
- Compile preliminary descriptions of interviews
- Member checking

#### *Stage 5 Report writing (March 2012 – May 2013)*

- Presentations of data and emerging themes at workshops and conference
- Writing up results
- Continue member checking
- Continue referring to members of Reference Group

### **3.7 Verifications**

This study endeavours to present the explorations of the research questions with accuracy, with accountability to the participants and to the reader, and with trustworthiness (Merriam, 1998). Within the mixed methods approach used in this study, the quantitative data is displayed in simple frequency tables that can be verified by a comparison with the raw data. The qualitative data is in the form of narrative and reflection. Creswell (2007) says that validation is a strength of qualitative research “... in that the account made through extensive time spent in the field, the detailed thick description, and the closeness of the researcher to the participants in the study all add to the value or accuracy of a study” (Creswell, 2007, p. 207). In the research literature, the trustworthiness of research findings is made up of the aspects of credibility, confirmability, transferability, and dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maykut & Morehouse, 1994; O'Donoghue, 2006). These aspects of trustworthiness, in relation to this study, are described in the following section.

*Credibility* refers to the truthfulness of the research data and *confirmability* is described as having the data grounded in events, not in the researcher's own preconceptions. In this study, credibility and confirmability are verified by the following:

1. Triangulation of data from different sources (survey, interview).
2. Member checking of the data with the participants. In the 6 month period following the interviews, the researcher invited each interviewee to read the transcript of their interviews. None requested any changes, nor asked for clarification. As the story of interviewee Mal was explored in some detail in the analysis, the researcher met with Mal on two extra occasions. He was able to read the relevant sections of this thesis and discuss different aspects of the findings with the researcher.

3. Use of the reference group. The researcher trialed the survey questions and the interview questions with members of the reference group, before either tool was implemented. Minor changes were made to both tools as the result of these consultations, as described earlier in this chapter. As the researcher began the data analysis, members of the reference group were consulted for their perceptions and understandings regarding the emerging themes.
4. Presentation of data and emerging themes to members of the reference group and other researchers. This occurred at several points during the conduct of the study and involved the critiquing of the methodology and emerging themes at *Work in Progress Seminars* at the Australian Catholic University and in a presentation at *The Seventeenth Annual Values and Leadership Conference* in Brisbane in October 2012. These presentations involved members of the national and international academic and education communities. Emerging themes from the study were also workshopped with principals and colleagues from the Catholic Schools Office in the Diocese of Maitland Newcastle during 2011-2013.
5. Disclosure by the researcher of her own experiences and perceptions (bracketing). This was done in the initial invitation to the survey, and again in the first personal contact with the interviewees.

*Transferability* Although Lincoln and Guba (1985) acknowledge difficulties in the notion of transferability in the thick descriptions that come out of qualitative research, they nonetheless conclude that those descriptions can provide sufficient information that may enable readers to make a judgement about transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 316). In this study, transferability is verified by the presentation of detailed descriptions of the contexts of the cases, and detailed analysis of the survey responses and the interviews. The data from the large survey sample and the explanatory, in-depth interview data complement each other. This is critical in providing readers with the tools to assess the transferability of these research findings to other contexts.

*Dependability* relates to the reliability of the findings, and the stability and consistency of the research process over time and methods. The researcher's role and objectives, as well as the research questions, were outlined in all documentation sent to participants and to the different diocesan offices. This was confirmed in all face-to-face interviews. Rigorous coding and quality checks were made by the researcher, these being supported by members of the reference group and the researcher's supervisor. O'Donoghue (2006) talks about developing an *audit trail* that allows the researcher to take the reader through the study from beginning to end, in order for him/her to understand the process and how the researcher may have come to

conclusions. The raw data from the surveys and the interview transcripts, plus the spreadsheets and tables of synthesised data, provide the audit trail in this study that confirms the dependability of the findings.

The trustworthiness of this research is verified by the processes outlined and by the establishment of the audit trail, so other researchers and readers may follow the progress of the study to conclusion.

### **3.8 Ethical Issues**

This study was conducted according to the standards established by the Australian Catholic University Research Projects Ethics Committee (see Appendix A *Ethics Approval*, p. 199). The study also met the ethics requirements of all 11 of the NSW Catholic diocesan offices. The executive summary of this study will be sent to all diocesan offices on completion.

Particular ethical issues emerged in a study that called for principals to describe a traumatic experience that was part of their work situation. Most particularly, issues of trust and confidentiality were embedded in the methods of data collection, the content of the interviews, the dissemination of findings and, most critically, the relationship between researcher and participants. Creswell (2008) points out the importance of remaining aware of potential ethical issues throughout the whole research. The researcher was required to enter into the personal world of the participants and share (empathise with) intense reflections and feelings. There were two significant risks for the study participants: (1) the risk of distress in discussing traumatic events and (2) the risk that revelation of information may be detrimental to the participant's career or reputation. The researcher acknowledged these risks to the interviewees and explained the processes used to minimise the risks. The rights of the participants in this study were protected in the following ways:

- *Informed consent* There was full disclosure about the objectives of the research, the methods of data collection and the possible uses of the data to the participants and the relevant diocesan offices. Signed consent was obtained from the participants, and the voluntary nature of participation, plus the right to withdraw at any time, was explained.
- *Protocols around confidentiality* The confidentiality of the participants is ensured through the use of pseudonyms. The names of the schools have not been used, though details of the schools may be pertinent to the 'playing out' of the incident. Total confidentiality is difficult to ensure when situations or contexts may be

recognised, and the researcher explained to the participants the possibility of this outcome. They were made aware of this potential situation before signing consent agreements. All protocols were explained to participants and agreed upon.

- *Data protocols* All data is securely stored in accordance with Australian Catholic University and diocesan protocols. Access to the data is restricted to the researcher and those people authorised by the researcher. To ensure confidentiality of recorded interviews, only transcriptions were used in the data analysis. Data is also guaranteed to be accurate, as produced by the named sources, with no fraudulent additions, no omissions that would change the nature of the content, and no adjustments to favour a particular bias.
- *Participant involvement* Copies of interview transcripts were made available to the participants soon after the interviews. Participants were consulted before any decisions were reached regarding publication of any of the material.
- *Care for participants* Provision was made for the participants to have confidential counselling support should they have required it. All interviewees were offered this support at the time of the interviews.

Because the story of interviewee Mal emerged as a particular focus of the discussion of the results, the researcher was conscious of the need to invite him to participate further. As some of the findings could be viewed as implying criticism of the handling of the critical incident at Mal's school, it was important that Mal was comfortable with what was written in this study. On two occasions, Mal was able to read the researcher's analysis of his story, and discuss the findings with the researcher. Mal approved the researcher's description and analysis, and not only agreed with the findings, but also contributed to the researcher's reflections. This demonstrated the transparent and consultative nature of the researcher's conduct of the study.

Researchers must be vigilant in maintaining ethical standards while making appropriate accommodations for the changing nature of research and their particular project. (Creswell, 2008, p. 240)

It was important for the credibility of this study that principals' voices were heard, and that their reflections on their experiences were respected. The researcher was also alert to participants' stories that touched her own experience, and was able to bracket these situations by reflecting on them and discussing them with members of the reference group and the research supervisor. At all times during this study, and most particularly when speaking with principals and writing about their experiences, the researcher was conscious of the ethical responsibility of respect and care for the participants.

Table 3.5 outlines the research process and illustrates the timeline for the study.

Purpose: to explore and describe principals' experiences in a critical incident				
Research questions	Data gathering & analysis	Participants	Activity	Timeline
1. How do principals experience leading their schools through and beyond a critical incident?	Survey (Stages 1-2)	Reference group	Survey piloted	Sept 2010-June 2011
		Survey respondent group	Survey conducted	March-June 2011
		Researcher	Survey collated and coded	March 2011-May 2012
			Verification	Nov-Dec 2011
2. What are the issues for principals as they lead their schools in the time after the incident?	Interview (Stages 3 – 4)	Reference group	Interview questions piloted	Feb-March 2011
Interview group (12 primary principals)		Interviews conducted	May-Oct 2012	
Researcher		Interviews transcribed and coded	Oct 2011-May 2012	
		Member checking	Oct 2011-May 2013	
		Presentation at 17 <sup>th</sup> Annual Values & Leadership Conference	October 2012	
3. What kinds of support are available to them and how might this be improved?		Verification	April 2012-May 2013	
4. What was the impact of this experience on themselves and their leadership?	Report writing (Stages 4-5)	Researcher	Analysis	May 2012-May 2013

Table 3.5 *Overview of the research process*



### **3.9 Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to explore and describe the experiences of NSW Catholic primary school principals in leading their schools through a critical incident. The focus on the lived experiences of the participants required a constructionist epistemology with interpretive perspectives, particularly that of phenomenology. A mixed methods approach was used, in order to fully explore the research questions. This approach employed both quantitative and qualitative data collection tools, but with a focus on a descriptive collective case study method. Interview data from 12 principals, and survey responses from 71 principals, formed the core of the study. A reference group was used to trial the survey and interview material, and provided guidance and direction for data collection and analysis. The data was analysed using a circular, iterative process involving the identification of concepts and themes in order to provide a rich, thick description. The research design is summarised in Figure 3.1 *Research design* (p. 56).

This chapter has linked the theoretical framework to the choice of research methods that best allows for the answering of the research questions. The next chapter, chapter 4, presents the results of the data collection, and the findings are then discussed in chapters 5 and 6.

## 4. Results

*“What could they do? It was up to me to manage the situation.”*

(Survey respondent 48)

### 4.1. Introduction

This chapter presents an overview of the data and contains commentary on those results.

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of NSW Catholic primary principals in leading their schools through and beyond a critical incident. The literature review demonstrates that there is limited data on the types of incidents that principals manage, nor an understanding of how they manage, nor of the impact that this experience may have on them. In order to fully capture the picture being described by the principals, the presentation of the results will follow the framework already established by the Research Questions. These questions are:

1. How do principals experience leading their schools through and beyond a critical incident?
2. What are the issues for principals as they lead their schools in the time after the critical incident?
3. What kinds of support are available to them and how might this be improved?
4. What was the impact of this experience on their leadership?

The research questions were used to guide the structure of the survey, and the interview questions followed a similar format. Research Question 1 identifies the central issue of this study, which is to hear from the principals about their personal experiences of leading their schools through critical incidents. Common themes emerged from both the surveys and the interviews. Quotes from the surveys and the interviews are used to ensure that the principals' voices are heard in every section.

This chapter draws on both the survey responses and the reflections of the interviewees in order to illuminate the issues identified. The presentation of these results follows the pattern established in the survey and interviews. Thus, the sections of this chapter are as follows:

- 4.2 Critical incidents
- 4.3 Preparation and support
- 4.4 Impacts and issues
- 4.5 Principals' reflections

In the following presentation and discussion of the results, pseudonyms are used for the interviewees and any survey respondents whose stories are told in the vignettes. Otherwise, survey respondents are identified by a number. Any identifying features of schools, the contexts of the critical incidents, or education systems (diocesan offices) are masked, being careful to preserve the inherent meaning of the situation. In reality, system administration offices for the eleven Catholic dioceses are variously referred to as CSOs (Catholic Schools Offices), or CEOs (Catholic Education Offices). In this study they are all called CSOs for consistency and to preserve anonymity.

Direct quotes from the surveys and interviews are presented in italics, in order to highlight the principals' own words.

## **4.2 Critical incidents**

In the survey responses and the interviews, the principals gave descriptions of the critical incident in which they were involved, their reflections on the significance of the different elements of the incident, as well as information on the people involved, and their own roles in the immediate engagement following the event. Other elements, which the principals themselves identified as significant, were also included in these responses. The following sections present both numerical and descriptive information about the critical incidents identified in this study.

### **Types of critical incidents**

Five different types of critical incidents emerged in the survey data and are presented in Table 4.2.1 *Critical incidents by type*. This identifies the 71 critical incidents by type, with an indication of the number of occurrences. A feature of this grouping of the incidents is that some events are identified as belonging to more than one type of critical incident.

Incident type	Incident focus & frequency	Additional information
Death	Child (17) Staff member (9) Family member (12)	Incidents included 4 deaths (3 child, 1 staff member) that were on-site. There were also 6 murders (including 2 siblings) and 7 suicides, off-site. Some of the death incidents were multiples.
Emergency in the school	Emergency (6) Vandalism (1) Lockdown (7) Evacuation (5)	Emergencies included school fires, a gas bomb explosion and a bomb threat. Community violence, and threatening behaviour also led to emergency procedures being enacted.
Problematic behaviour	Child (9) Parent (6)	Incidents included 5 children and 4 parents exhibiting violent behaviour. There were 2 incidents with parents with mental health issues.
Emergency in local community	Accident (2) Emergency (4) Police action (4) Incident on school grounds (2)	Incidents in the local community impacted on the school. Two incidents, though not directly related to the school, occurred on school grounds.
Injury/illness	Child (7) Staff member (3)	Bus accident and gas bomb explosion involved multiple injuries.

Table 4.2.1 *Critical incidents by type*

Incidents involving deaths were the largest group accounting for 53.5% of all responses. The next largest group were incidents involving school emergencies and these accounted for 26.8% of the total. Some of the incidents involving management of emergency situations were likely to be also listed in other sections as the impact of, for example a death, disrupted normal school business. Incidents involving problematic behaviour in students and parents accounted for 21%, issues from the local community were 17%, and injury/illness (including psychological injury) accounted for 14% of responses. There were no incidents involving traumatic natural disasters reported, though local floods were identified as causing disruption and subsequent issues for school management.

There were 12 incidents that had their genesis outside the school, and these impacted on school management and on the safety and wellbeing of students and staff. This was especially noticeable in the responses from principals of schools in small rural towns. The many connections between school staff members in particular, and events in the town, created issues for principals to deal with (see Appendix G *List of critical incidents*, p. 222). The survey asked principals to consider the incidents they reported in terms of the elements that

made up the incidents. Data concerning the principals' identification of the significance of the different elements is presented in the next section.

### Elements of a critical incident

After describing the critical incident, principals responding to the survey were asked to rate on a Likert scale, the significance of six identified elements, for their incident. It was obvious that for some principals, identifying with the already named elements was just the starting point in describing the impact of the incident. Principals defined the critical incident themselves, and included other considerations in their responses. However, all the respondents identified at least two of the named elements in their described incidents. The following table presents the principals' ratings of significance of each of the named elements.

Element of a critical incident	Frequency of reports (N=71)	% who reported & rated 'significant' or greater	% who reported & rated 'extremely significant'
Caused stress and/or distress	71	96%	70%
Unexpectedness	70	86%	36%
Disruption	70	97%	73%
Death or injury	48	98%	81%
Possibility or threat of death or injury	35	86%	43%
Damage to building/plant	18	72%	56%

Table 4.2.2 *Significance of the elements of a critical incident*

Three of the defined elements of a critical incident (unexpectedness; death and/or injury; and the threat or possibility of death and/or injury) are considered to be part of the incident itself. However, the other three elements (disruption, damage, and stress and/or distress) are connected with the *impact* of the incident.

From the table above it is noted that *all* respondents named the resultant stress and/or distress as an element of their incidents – indeed, 70% rated this element as 'extremely significant'. The elements of '*unexpectedness*' and causing '*disruption*' were the next most often cited.

Incidents which involved ‘*death or injury*’, or ‘*the possibility/threat of death or injury*’ were, predictably, the most significantly rated, with 81% of those who managed such an incident, rating it as ‘extremely significant’.

There were 30 principals who identified other elements that were significant in the playing out of the critical incident. ‘Other’ elements that were mentioned more than twice are listed in the table below.

<b>‘Other’ element identified as significant or greater</b>	<b>Frequency</b> ( <i>N=30</i> )
School management issues	10
Negative parent reactions	6
Emotional impact on principal	5
Contextual issues	3

Table 4.2.3 *Other elements of a critical incident*

All of these additional elements, identified as ‘other’ by the principals, are actually part of the impact of the incident, either short term or long term. Some of these ‘other elements’ are in fact already included in the original definition of a critical incident (for example, ‘emotional impact’), so it is notable that they are further emphasised by being named again. In later parts of the survey, principals also identify other issues (e.g., media, legal issues) as having significant impact, especially the different aspects of disruption and aftermath situations. Furthermore, there are additional elements mentioned elsewhere in the survey, which emerge from the data.

As previously identified, it was difficult to categorise the incidents as all were multi-layered and involved many different contextual elements. These elements added complexity to the response, management and impact of the incidents. These compounding factors are presented in the table below.

Compounding factors of a critical incident	Frequency of mention (N=71)
Long term issues (e.g., distress, legal matters)	34 (48%)
Incidents on-site	31 (44%)
Principal inexperience	26 (37%)
Police involvement	22 (31%)
Media involvement	22 (31%)
Violence	20 (28%)
Multiple incidents	13 (18%)

Table 4.2.4 *Compounding factors of a critical incident*

This table gives some indication of other factors, identified by the respondents, which appeared to contribute to the criticality of an incident. Some incidents took time (months or years) to fully resolve, and often media attention and legal issues ensured that the incident was not easily nor quickly concluded. Issues around principals' inexperience, and the involvement of police and media seem to also add to the complexities. An incident that occurred in front of members of the school community (i.e., on-site), may have an impact that *off-site* incidents may not have. The issue of violence or the threat of violence seemed to be significant, as was the situation in which more than one incident occurred close to another, or where there were several incidents over a longer time frame. The significance of these compounding elements is illustrated by the following comment from an experienced female principal, following the separate, sudden deaths of two members of the school community in a week, where there were complex family connections of both deceased persons to the school and the local community.

*“Importance of system sensitivity to local needs – incidents may become ‘critical’ in different contexts – the incident I’ve described was critical in our local community, because of the nature of the community” (37)*

All survey respondents agreed that the survey-identified elements of the critical incident were significant in their experience of their incidents, with high scores in each element. The disruption to school life, and the magnitude of dealing with a death or serious injury appeared to increase the significance for the principals. The responsibility for managing the stress and distress of members of their school community was also an important consideration for

principals. In the next section of this chapter, the complexities of each incident are further examined, with presentation of the data on the people involved in the incidents.

**People involved in a critical incident**

Principals were asked to indicate the persons involved in the critical incident, and in the immediate response to the incident. Information about those involved in a long-term context was obtained from text boxes later in the survey. ‘Long term’ was defined in the survey as more than 2 months, although many of the reported instances of long term impacts described consequences lasting for many months and even years. This broadening of the understanding of ‘long term’ will be further discussed in section 4.4 Impacts and issues.

The following table presents the data on the people involved in phase 2. *Critical incident and immediate response*, by the number of mentions made by the survey respondents.



<b>Persons involved in incident</b>	<b>Frequency of mention of those involved in critical incident (N=71)</b>	<b>Frequency of mention of those involved in the short term response</b>	<b>Frequency of mention of those involved in long term response</b>
Students	46	55	29
Staff members	36	71	43
Parents	26	64	29
Local community	12	6	6
Parish Priest	3	11	3
Police	2	33	6
Ambulance/hospital	1	19	1
Counsellors	0	55	3
CSO senior staff	0	54	3
Media	0	21	7
Principal colleagues	0	12	0
Emergency Services	0	9	0
Legal/court personnel	0	3	7
Builders/tradespeople	0	4	7

Table 4.2.5 *Persons involved in critical incident & in short & long term interventions*

Almost all incidents involved children, staff and/or parents. In all the incidents described, staff were engaged in the immediate response, including for those incidents that began outside the school, unless actually involved in the incident itself. Staff responsibility for the safety and wellbeing of the students would trigger their involvement in phase 2 (critical incident and immediate response) and phase 3 (mid term impact), and parents became involved at this time mostly through communication from the school.

As mentioned previously, there were several situations that occurred in the local community that impacted on the school and these are reflected in the above table. Parish priests were named by survey respondents as being involved in the support of staff and families after an incident, though there were 3 incidents in which a parish priest was directly implicated.

Police, ambulance, hospital and emergency services were most often involved through their responses to an incident. Where CSO staff are mentioned, this falls into two categories: senior CSO staff visiting for moral support, and counsellors and/or other staff sent by CSO to assist with members of the school community. Principal colleagues became part of the response, in their support of the principal.

Principal respondents described the involvement of people such as counsellors in the longer term, usually over months, but sometimes years. Ongoing stress and distress for students, staff and parents was the most frequently cited reason for this. Media re-visiting of the incident and the institution of legal processes are also relevant impacts in the long term. Principals who described damage to school buildings had to deal with builders and tradespeople, and these situations can take longer to resolve. It might seem likely that senior CSO staff would be involved in the longer term, as might counsellors, as they worked with principals to support the school communities. This, however, was not reflected in the data.

The information about the persons involved in the critical incident, response and aftermath, highlights multiple management complexities, over considerable periods of time - matters with which the principal would be directly engaged. Once police, media, ambulance and system authorities are added to the school community of students, staff and parents, the management, communication and pastoral roles of the principal become significant. The following section will present data on these roles filled by principals in the playing out of a critical incident.

### **The principal's role in a critical incident**

*“Too much to write about – [became] coordinator; counsellor; media spokesperson; organised funeral; visited mother in ICU etc etc.” (32)*

The next section of the survey asked principals to describe their role in the incident and response (phase 2) and the mid and long term response (phases 3 & 4). In answer to this question, some respondents named specific roles, while others described their actions in the critical incident and the aftermath. The activities that principals described fell into three main categories: communication, management and pastoral care. The following Table 4.2.6 *Roles played by principals in critical incidents* presents the roles within these categories, the frequency of mentions in the survey responses and some examples of activities. As in previous tables presenting data about the incidents, none fall into just one category. Similarly,

no principal identified just one role. All principals described multiple roles, overlapping in time and magnitude.

Role	Frequency of mentions ( <i>N</i> =71)	Examples of activities
<b>Communication</b>		
Liaison	71	Liaise with police, emergency services, DoCS; notify parents, CSO
Information	48	Provide information via letter/report/radio
Spokesperson	22	Act as spokesperson for media and legal proceedings
<b>Management</b>		
School routines	35	Investigate incident, normalise school functions, manage phones, organise in response to needs, adjust routines/timetables for crisis situation
Staff	34	Deal with extra staff (e.g., counsellors), engage casual teachers, re-organise classes, consult with staff
Safety	24	Institute and oversee lockdowns and evacuations, develop security plan, organise building/grounds work
Funerals	15	Liaise with families, organise funerals and memorials
<b>Pastoral care</b>		
Students	37	Monitor wellbeing, organise counselling, hospital visits, de-briefing
Staff	34	Replace staff, monitor wellbeing, offer/organise counselling support, de-briefing
Parents & families	32	Be available for parents, home and hospital visits, organise support (e.g., St Vincent de Paul)
Principal as counsellor	6	Act as counsellor when no counselling support available

Table 4.2.6 *Roles played by principals in critical incidents*

This survey question asked principals to reflect on their roles in the critical incident, and it is in the responses that the complexities of the principals' roles and responsibilities start to be fleshed out. From the principals' descriptions, it emerged that they took on roles that, while technically within the expectations of a principal's job description, were heightened, extended and magnified beyond usual practice. Respondent 15, an experienced female principal, explained how the communication, management, and pastoral care roles unfolded for her.

*"I directed the emergency until emergency services arrived. I also had to put procedures in place for supervision of the other classes. Those children in other classes needed to know what was happening so as not to spread rumours. I travelled to the hospital and spent all day there with students and meeting parents as they arrive as well as dealing with the media."* (15)

At the same time, principals were very sure that it was their right and responsibility to be the leader. There were many comments made about their certainty that it was their role, and no one else's, to lead the community through and beyond the incident. They looked for support from their system, from colleagues and their school community, but they knew that they ultimately carried the leadership responsibility to manage the incident – at whatever cost to themselves. As the principals described the actions and responsibilities that they took on, a sense of the urgency and focus they adopted comes through. This is displayed in the following quotes.

*"I needed to be strong and calm. I needed to give the community confidence that we would get through this (again and again). I needed to be aware of where support was needed. I needed to communicate clearly with the community"* and, later in the same survey: *"I needed to be strong for others."* (31)

*"[My role was] to corroborate the information received, to inform key personnel, to gather the school executive and compose a plan of action that informed and supported students, parents and staff."* (16)

Many principals listed their actions when responding to the needs generated by the incident. The following quote illustrates the multiple, overlapping roles played by some principals.

*"I went straight to the collapsed person and assisted other staff to place her in recovery position ... I ran to the office and instructed the secretary to call ambulance. I returned to check on patient. I checked outside that there was a clear path for the ambulance. I gave instructions for students to be removed ... I called a priest. When the ambulance left I called the whole school community together to explain ... and I led an impromptu prayer session ... I spoke to each individual on staff ... comforting them ... I*

*informed the [CSO]. I wrote a letter to parents ... I called all staff together ... engaged a counsellor ...” (22)*

One principal (44) described how the different types of incidents required her to enact different roles – naming ‘lockdown’ type situations which required *“a more directive role”* versus a *“support and guide”* role involving *“emotional connections”*, following a death. However, she named both types of incidents as critical incidents in this way:

*“Due to the impact these deaths [of parent & Parish Priest] had on the community, I treated both as a critical incident but I don’t believe this would always be the case. ... My role [in these incidents] was to support and guide. ... I see these incidents as very different from a lockdown procedure where you go into action without the emotional connections. Either being alerted by or alerting police before a lockdown puts you into more of a directive role where you constantly scan for staff and student safety.” (44)*

This principal identified both types of incidents as *critical* incidents because of the *impact* on the community, and she reflected that, whether she was required to *“support and guide”* or be more *“directive”*, it was her job to lead the community through the experience. She connected the notion of *criticality* with the *impact* on the community.

In the first section of the survey, the principals described how the incidents in their schools unfolded, identified the elements and people involved and reflected on the multiple leadership roles that they were called to fill. Multi-layered complexities impacted on each incident’s unique interplay with the community, as illustrated in Tables 4.2.3 *Other elements of a critical incident* (p. 77) and 4.2.4 *Compounding factors of a critical incident* (p. 78), and to each situation, principals bring their own competencies and perspectives. In the next section of the survey, principals were asked to reflect on the support that they had experienced, and to identify any relevant training that assisted them in leading their communities during this time.

### **4.3 Preparation and support**

The third section of the survey canvassed information about the types of relevant preparation or training that the principals had received prior to the critical incident. They were also asked to name the support they used at the time of the incident and after (during phases 2, 3 &4), the effectiveness of that support, and their satisfaction with the support they had experienced. There was also a survey question that asked them to name the types of support they would have found helpful, had they accessed it or had it been available.

### Preparation and training

The following table presents information about the types of training or preparation that the principals had experienced, prior to the critical incident. The term ‘Critical Incident Management’ has been abbreviated to ‘CIM’.

Experience	No training	CIM training	CIM policy	CIM team	Media training	Children’s mental health training	Workplace stress training	Other
< 5yrs (N=26)	13 50%	10 38.5%	7 27%	3 11.5%	4 15%	1 4%	1 4%	2 8%
> 5yrs (N=45)	9 20%	13 29%	25 55.5%	9 20%	10 22%	1 2%	6 13%	11 24%
<b>Totals</b> (N=71)	<b>22</b> 31%	<b>23</b> 32%	<b>32</b> 45%	<b>12</b> 17%	<b>14</b> 20%	<b>2</b> 3%	<b>7</b> 10%	<b>13</b> 18%

Table 4.3.1 *Preparation and training*

There are low numbers of principals identifying any training or preparation that they had experienced prior to the critical incident. There were 31% of all principals who claimed they had received no training at all, and no development of a Critical Incident Management Policy. However, a Critical Incident Management Policy was the most frequently mentioned (45% of all principals) preparation that principals had received. Typically this would have been provided by their system, or developed by the individual schools. Inexperienced principals, understandably, had lower rates of training than their more experienced colleagues. In the ‘Other’ column, principals identified varying types of preparation such as First Aid and Child Protection training, and sharing information with colleagues. One principal named previous experience in handling a critical incident as good training for managing another incident.

This study did not identify if there had been training offered by systems that the principals did not access. Twelve principals had been involved in the formation of a Critical Incident Team and all except one of these had also nominated that they had developed, or had been provided with, a Critical Incident Management Policy – the formation of the team would most likely have been part of the policy. The twelve schools that had enacted emergency procedures in their critical incidents may have done some prior training or drills, but only one principal named this type of preparation in the survey. The practice of evacuation and lockdown procedures is an activity mandated for all schools in this state, so it is likely that most principals would have engaged in these drills at some stage.

Overall, 70% of respondents had some training, but for the various types identified, fewer than 50% had accessed each. The importance of appropriate preparation and training in the management of critical incidents was mentioned often, with some principals advocating the use of scenarios to reinforce the understanding that every principal is likely to experience at least one critical incident in their career. As survey respondent 27 urged: *“Training, training and more training!”* It thus appears to be a common finding from the surveys that principals feel inadequately prepared for the roles they are expected to fill during a critical incident.

Preparation and training for principals in the expectation of a critical incident could be regarded as a preliminary support. Survey respondents were also asked about the types of support that were available at the time of the incident and in the time after (phases 2, 3 and 4). The data on these supports is presented in the next section.

### Support

Principals listed the support that they used in the management of the critical incident and also rated, on a Likert scale, how helpful they found that support. The following table lists the support elements from most helpful to least helpful.

Support accessed	Frequency (N=71)	Frequency of mentions rated ‘Helpful’ or greater
Counselling - students	51 (72%)	50 (70%)
CSO visit/presence	49 (69%)	43 (61%)
Counselling - staff	48 (68%)	44 (62%)
Debrief from CSO	47 (66%)	43 (61%)
Counselling - self	32 (45%)	24 (34%)
Debrief - professional	30 (42%)	29 (41%)
Colleague visit/presence	24 (34%)	22 (31%)
Extra staff < 1 week	18 (25%)	18 (25%)
Extra staff > 1 week	8 (11%)	8 (11%)

Table 4.3.2 *Helpfulness of accessed support*

The significant place that counselling plays in supporting communities in crisis is highlighted in the data, as is the importance of system support, both practical and emotional. Counselling

was the most common support, with 72% of all respondents accessing counselling for students and 68% accessing counselling for staff. Most rated that counselling helpful.

The issues around counselling support will be explored more fully in the next section, but the next most helpful support identified by principals was the presence of or contact from senior staff from CSO. The presence of senior staff from system offices occurred in 69% of cases, with most finding it helpful. There were many comments on exactly *how* this presence was helpful.

*“It [contact from CSO] was of no practical use but a great emotional support. Otherwise principals are expected to handle these incidents correctly and on their own and with minimal crisis counselling support.” (67)*

*“Allow the Principal to take the lead but stand close by and eliminate whatever procedural hurdles that impede progress. Be there with them – make coffee, answer phones – just be there.” (16)*

Almost all the support was likely to have been provided by systems, mostly through the provision of personnel such as counsellors or extra teaching or administration staff. Indeed it seemed that often, principals only recognised system support in the form of direct contact with someone from the CSO. They did not acknowledge that other types of support were also provided by the system. Where contact from CSO or the presence of senior staff had not occurred, principals expressed feelings of resentment and isolation.

*“I felt that the [CSO] gave no support. In fact I felt like I was the guilty party instead of an innocent person.” (34)*

*“Support by CSO senior staff would have been appreciated. ... Not one person from the CSO phoned to check in on [the school] and affirm them or offer any form of support.” (15)*

Another respondent precisely identified feeling valued when phoned by senior CSO leaders, because it contrasted so clearly with how she felt when, in another incident, her situation was *not* acknowledged by CSO.

*“Phone call from [senior system leaders]. First time it had happened & made my efforts [feel] valued by system. 6 months later had a staff member die & no contact from directors had the exact opposite effect, as I felt very alone and unvalued.” (67)*

Another frequently mentioned element of support was the debriefing with either a CSO representative or a professional agency. There were 66% of principals who debriefed with the CSO and 42% who debriefed with some other professional (e.g., Workplace Health & Safety



Agency or Department of Community Services personnel). Significantly, 41% of principals had no professional debriefing experience. Only small numbers of principals were supported with extra staff, and *all* of them rated this type of support as useful.

Principals were asked to identify other types of support that they had found useful, with many re-stating support types already listed above. Principals expressed appreciation for support from the Parish Priest and the parish community, principal colleagues, police, hospital and ambulance personnel. Many identified their staff as a great support. Interviewee Sandra, while expressing disappointment and frustration at the lack of CSO support, was surprised and grateful for her staff's acknowledgement of her leadership during a traumatic couple of weeks.

*"So the support that I really got was from the staff, in that I never indicated ever, in any way – [I never asked] 'who the hell is looking after me?' I never said that. That's the support I got, was internal. They [staff] were just beautiful in thanking me for – and they named what I had done, and that surprised me – they knew it."* (Sandra)

Overall, principals identified many different types of support, but particularly that given by counsellors and senior CSO personnel was named. Because the involvement of counsellors in the response to a critical incident is such a common occurrence, the next section of this chapter will present further data on this aspect of support.

## **Counselling**

The most frequently mentioned support for school communities in a critical incident was the provision of counsellors. As seen in the previous table, there were varying degrees of 'take up' rates of counselling for staff, students and the principal. In the survey, principals were asked to rate their perceptions of the *helpfulness* of the counselling that they accessed, for themselves, their students and their staff. For those 51 principals who used counselling support, the following graph demonstrates their perceptions of the helpfulness or otherwise of the counselling.

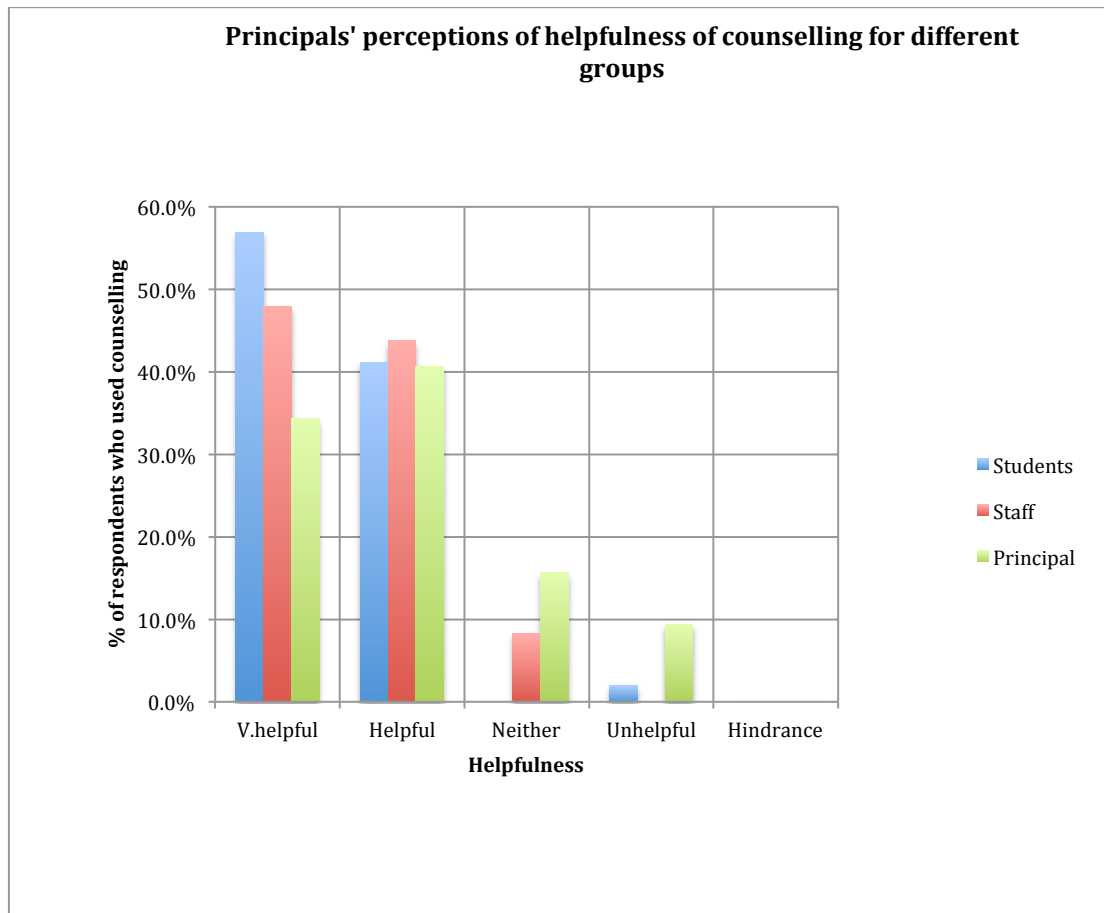


Figure 4.3.1 *Helpfulness of counselling, as rated by principals who used counselling support*

Of the 51 instances of respondents who used counselling support for students, most agreed that it was helpful, with 56% identifying it as *very helpful*, and 42% agreeing that it was *helpful*. Of the instances of provision of counsellors for staff, 92% were also identified as either *helpful* or *very helpful*. While the deployment of counsellors was largely regarded by principals as helpful for other members of the school community, particularly the students, principals expressed mixed feelings about counselling support for themselves. It is notable that 55% of principals did *not* access counselling at the time of the incident, despite managing the provision of counsellors for others in their communities. Of the 32 principals who *did* access counselling support, 24 agreed that it was helpful. In later text boxes in the survey, some principals reflected that they should have sought counselling support at the time of the incident. The principals who expressed this point of view felt that it was the CSO's responsibility to make it mandatory for them to attend counselling.

*"Make the principal have some kind of counselling."* (12)

*"Deploy professional counsellors for the principal with compulsory discussions"* (6)

Interviewee Annemarie had a different perspective. Because she had had previous counselling training, she was well aware of the benefits, but felt that if she had had counselling while still dealing with the aftermath of the incident, she might have ‘lost it’.

*“I thought I’d crack up half way through the day if I talked to them so I didn’t.”*

Annemarie felt she needed to hold her community together and could only look after herself once others’ needs had been catered for. She did use counselling support in later weeks and months. The perception that principals felt compelled to put their own needs on hold while they attend to those of the school community was common in the principals’ comments.

Many principals expressed appreciation for the support they received, and others expressed disappointment or resentment if they felt that they had not been appropriately supported. Survey respondents were asked to rate their satisfaction with the support they received and this is presented in the next section.

### **Satisfaction with support**

Principals were asked to rate their overall satisfaction with the level of support they had experienced. The following graph illustrates the satisfaction with the support accessed, as identified by gender.

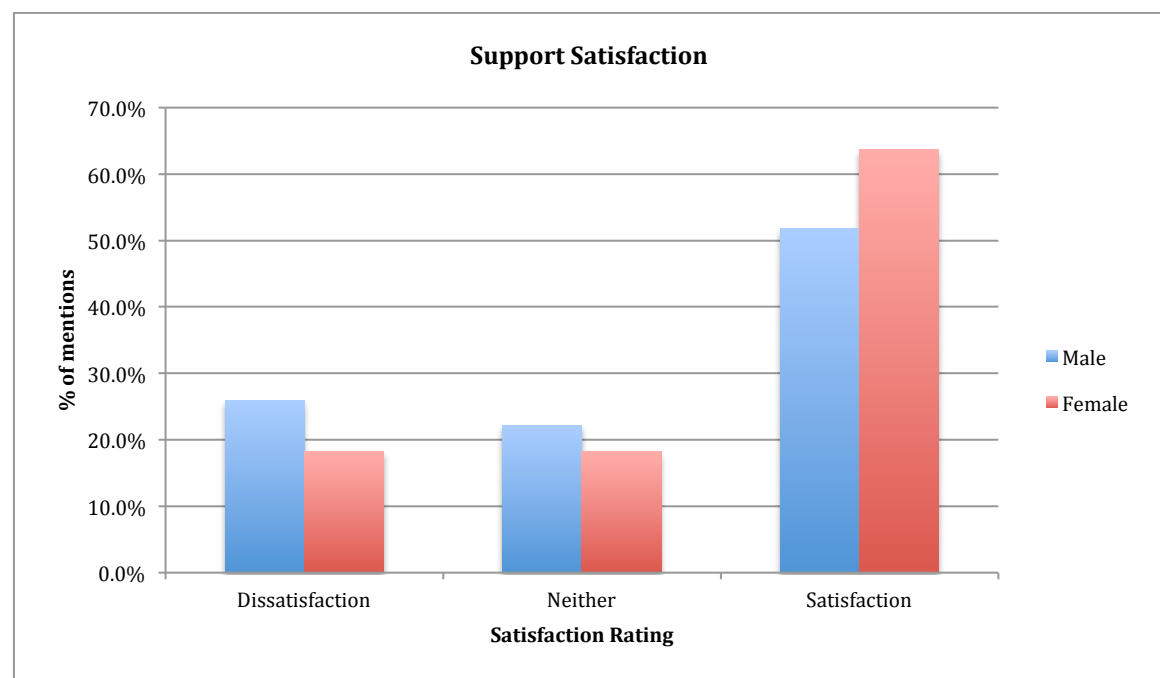


Figure 4.3.2 *Support satisfaction by gender*

Satisfaction with the support received was more likely for female principals than male principals. Just over half the male principals (52%) expressed satisfaction, and 64% of the females. Overall, 61% of principals were satisfied with the support they experienced.

*“I could not fault the support I received from Child Protection at [CSO]... [CSO] staff and principal colleagues were also supportive.” (47)*

*“The [CSO] did a very good job in providing support for my school” (12)*

There were 29 principals who expressed dissatisfaction with the support they received or who were neutral (neither satisfied nor dissatisfied), and 25 of them had either not had counselling for themselves, or had found counselling to be unhelpful. 18 of those 29 principals had not experienced the presence of senior system staff in support. There were 9 principals who had had neither counselling for themselves, nor a CSO presence, nor debriefing after the incident. It thus appears that, unsurprisingly, the less support a principal experienced, the more likely he/she was to be dissatisfied.

Although 61% of principal respondents rated themselves satisfied with the level of support they received, there were comments in later parts of the survey that revealed that many principals had suggestions about how that support could be improved, particularly in respect to support for themselves. The principals were also specifically asked to consider other types of support that may have been helpful. This data is outlined in the next section.

### **Preferences for additional support**

Principals were asked to consider the types of support that would have been helpful, if it had been available, or if they had accessed it. There were 21 principals who did not express any preference for additional support. Of those, only two claimed dissatisfaction with the level of support they received. In other words, most of those who had no preferences for additional support were satisfied with how they had been supported.

The preferences named by the principal respondents are listed in the Table 4.3.3 below.

Preferences	Frequency (N=71)
Professional debriefing	32 (45%)
Extra counselling options	23 (32%)
Assistance with families	20 (28%)
Extra staffing options	15 (21%)
Assistance with police	7 (10%)
Assistance with media	4 (6%)
Assistance with legals	3 (4%)
Assistance with finance	2 (3%)

Table 4.3.3 *Preferences for additional support*

The provision of an opportunity for debriefing, either with the CSO or a professional agency, was the most frequently named preference for additional support. 42% of the principals had used professional debriefing (see Table 4.3.2 *Helpfulness of accessed support*, p. 86) and an even higher number (45%) would have liked that sort of support (see Table 4.3.3 *Preferences for additional support*, above). Of the 41 principals who had not accessed professional debriefing in the aftermath of the incident, 24 expressed their desire to have that support.

Although not a specific question in the survey, 15 principals wrote in the text boxes expressing a desire for ongoing and/or long term support, for themselves and their communities. In particular, these principals expressed the need for ‘someone’ to be ‘checking in’ with them to see if they’re ok.

*“Such incidents have a longer term impact and consequently need on-going support”*  
(61)

*“Ensure the support continues for the staff and students as sometimes the actual impact doesn’t present itself until sometime after”* (56)

*“From a pastoral care perspective the system needs to adequately support the community and particularly the staff of the school, not only during but also after the crisis has passed. Follow-up is crucial.”* (29)

Principals made it clear in their survey responses that they considered an opportunity to debrief to be an important part of the support that should be offered after an incident. They also expressed a strong desire for support to be long term and ongoing. The issue of long term support is implicated in the recognition of long term impacts. This will be described further in the next section, which presents the data on the impacts and issues identified by principals as part of the aftermath (phases 3 and 4) of the critical incident.

#### 4.4 Impacts and issues

*“Just writing about this time brings back a flood of memories that I can’t bear to think about.”* (Respondent 47, 2-5 years after the event)

The data presenting principals’ reflections on the impact of the critical incident on themselves and their school communities comes from the fourth section of the survey and is illuminated more fully from the interview transcripts. Principals were asked to consider the length of time over which the impact was experienced, and the issues that arose in both the short and the long term, for their schools and for themselves. Principals responded in two ways:

1. by identifying the areas in which they took action as a result of the incident, usually in the context of school management; and
2. by describing the impact of the incident on themselves as individuals.

It became clear in the data from both surveys and interviews that the impacts of a critical incident could be considered in different time spans, and there were different impacts in the different phases. Impacts on the school as an organisation were largely dealt with in two time periods: the short term immediately following the incident, or in the following 12 months. However, the reported impacts on individuals, in this case the principal, revealed the need to consider an additional time period extending beyond 12 months. These time frames were not identified in the research literature, but emerged from the principals’ descriptions in this study. This meant identifying the time periods as mid term and long term. Thus, the following sections present data on the impacts on *schools* in the short term (up to 2 months), and mid term (2months–12 months); and on *principals*, in the short term (up to 2 months), mid term (2 months-12 months) and long term (12 months or longer).

### Impacts on schools

Principals were asked to name the impacts of the critical incident on their schools, and identify the length of time of this impact. In the survey, the term *long term* was defined as greater than 2 months duration. It was not possible, from the surveys, to gauge the impact on schools beyond 12 months, except in a very few responses where there were mentions of court cases or the ongoing grief of community members. Thus, this period of time (2-12 months) has been redefined as *mid term*, in order to distinguish it from the longer period of greater, those 12 months, which is discussed later in this chapter.

Some principals identified the particular impact in both the short term and mid term. At this stage of the survey, principals had not been asked about the impact on themselves. The following table presents the types of impacts on schools that were identified by principals, and the length of time that the impact was experienced.

Impact Type	Short term impact	Mid term impact
	<2 months (N=71)	>2 months & <12months (N=71)
Change routines	58 (82%)	25 (35%)
Distress-staff	55 (78%)	29 (41%)
Distress-students	53 (75%)	21 (30%)
Distress-parents	45 (63%)	22 (31%)
Police/legal interests	19 (27%)	7 (10%)
Media interest	17 (24%)	7 (10%)
Building works	8 (11%)	7 (10%)
Extra staff	6 (8%)	3
Absenteeism-students	5 (7%)	1
Absenteeism-staff	5 (7%)	1

Table 4.4.1 *Length of time of impact*

In all survey responses, there were multiple impacts and issues arising as a consequence of the critical incident, and these would have been the principal's responsibility to manage. The need to change school routines was the most commonly identified impact in the time immediately after the incident, though it decreased as time went on. Staff and student stress/distress was almost as frequently named in the short term. Principals identified the most frequent mid term impact as that on their staff, with 41% of the respondents concerned that

staff were still experiencing stress/distress up to 12 months after the incident, and 30% were concerned for their students. The principals' concern for their staff members is illustrated in the following quotations.

*"Mental health of staff was a priority" (74)*

*"I still worry that perhaps the duty teacher was more traumatised than I had realised at the time and this makes me realise just how easily the "main characters" might overlook the "minor characters" ..... " (73)*

Police and media engagement was, predictably, mostly short term. Principals who had dealings with police often commented on the support and help that the police offered. Principals who reported media interest described the media intrusion as increasing the stress for those involved. The experience of dealing with legal proceedings in the aftermath of a critical incident meant that anxiety and stress were sustained for a longer period of time. At the time of subsequent legal proceedings, media often revisit the issue. Work or repairs on school buildings became an issue when buildings had been damaged in the incident, or where works were undertaken to improve security or function following an incident.

15 principals described situations in which the aftermath was as stressful as, or more stressful than, the initial incident. For example, interviewee Gail described an incident involving a child with a knife that she felt was handled well at the time of the incident, and was under control. However, the next day, parent gossip and media attention erupted and made the following 9 months more difficult to manage than the incident itself.

Similarly, several principals described how community reactions after the incident were stressful to resolve and required careful management. This seemed to be particularly difficult in small communities. Interviewee Trevor was the principal of a school in a small country town when an incident occurred involving police and a family from the school. While there was distress and disruption to deal with at the school over several days, the following weeks and months revealed the enmeshment of a staff member with others in the town. This enmeshment impacted on the school and became very stressful for the principal to manage. Trevor said in his interview:

*" ... the problems became far worse at the school and in the town because of that teacher's involvement with that family, and the ins and outs of the relationships. ... in fact it was the more difficult of the whole situation to handle ... It was more the personal developments that were going on outside school that were difficult. So around the court case time it was more the staff member that caused the difficulties."*



When responding to the questions about the elements of the critical incident, some principals had identified ‘negative parent reaction’ as an important aspect to which principals had to respond (see previous section). Managing community response, particularly gossip, added to staff stress. In several instances, like the one referred to in the quotation below, the principals identified a resultant tarnishing of their school’s reputation.

*“My story went to the local paper and was damaging to the school. There was constant tension around the school, lots of groups of parents, shocking rumours.” (47)*

The data thus revealed that the contexts of the incident, the school and the community influenced the principals’ experience and the impact on them. Overall, 43 principals (61%) named the impact on their schools lasting for up to 12 months. Some principals identified 12 months or longer for the ramifications of an incident to be played out, in particular, 7 with legal proceedings and 7 with building works. All of these impacts on the school required the attention of the principal, and highlight the complexities of school leadership in this context. The next section presents data on the changes that the principals were required to make, or occurred in their schools because of the critical incident.

#### ***Changes in schools because of critical incident***

In considering the long term impacts on their schools, principals were asked to identify the changes they had made in their schools, or which had occurred as a result of the incident. This data is presented in the following table.

<b>Changes that occurred or were made because of incident</b>	<b>Frequency (N=71)</b>
Changed school routines	44%
Increased awareness of mental health issues	24%
Changes to security awareness & procedures	16%
Changed staffing arrangements	9%
Changed building/grounds arrangements	9%

Table 4.4.2 *Changes in schools because of critical incident*

Of the principals participating in the survey, 48 (68%) experienced or made some sort of long term or permanent changes in their schools after the critical incident. The most frequent type

of change was to school routines and procedures with 44% of respondents identifying this as a consequence of the critical incident. It appears from the data that there was little difference between experienced and inexperienced principals, nor between male and female principals, in the changes they made in their schools after a critical incident.

As discussed in the previous section, some survey respondents described situations in which managing the consequent changes was as stressful, or more stressful, than the initial incident. For example, survey respondent 51 explained that when her school had to be re-located for over 5 months following an explosion. She wrote that: “... *this caused major organisational issues and had an enormous impact on me personally as principal and on all staff and students*”. In this instance, it appeared that the principal and school community experienced the critical incident as the relocation of the school, as well as the initial electrical explosion. The two situations, one a consequence of the other, created long term issues for the principal to deal with.

The increased awareness of mental health issues appeared to be as a result of principals’ management of the counselling needs of staff, students and parents, and perhaps their own mental health needs. Beyond identifying this as an issue in response to a direct question in the survey, principals did not elaborate on this any further.

In summary, the impact that the critical incidents had in the schools was experienced as organisational disruption of many types, heightened awareness of matters such as security and mental health, and the responses of individuals in the community. These responses, in turn, had an impact on the management of usual business as, for example, distressed teachers were not able to perform to expected standards and may have to be replaced by short-term casual staff.

As has been discussed in previous sections of this chapter, the changes that happened as a result of each critical incident were the responsibility of the principal. Some of the changes, for example to building security, may have been mandated by other authorities, such as Workcover (an Australian government authority that regulates and monitors workplace safety). The principal as leader becomes ever more ‘loaded up’ with issues in addition to the normal expectations of their role. The data on how principals describe the impact of these extra responsibilities on themselves is presented in the next section of this chapter.

### Impacts and issues for principals

Following the questions about the impact of the incident on the school, principals were asked to describe the impact on themselves. Responses were in two formats. Although there were only 41 responses to the direct question, within all 71 surveys there was information about how principals engaged with the incident, what actions they took and how they felt at the time of the incident and in the aftermath. This information was contained in the text boxes, with principals describing the impact in their own words, as well as in responses to other questions. The data reveals that principals experienced both positive and negative impacts from the experience of leading through and beyond a critical incident. In some cases, respondents detailed aspects of both types of impacts for themselves.

The table following, Table 4.4.3 *Impacts on principal*, lists the types of issues that principals identified as having an impact on themselves, and the frequency with which these issues were mentioned in the surveys. All principals identified more than one impact.

Impacts on principals	As identified in responses to text & direct question (N=71)
Managing disruption to school routines	60 (85%)
Stress, exhaustion (self)	50 (70%)
Felt responsibility to support distressed staff	35 (49%)
Felt responsibility to support distressed students	35 (49%)
Felt responsibility to support distressed family members	24 (34%)
Growth in confidence	16 (22.5%)
Stress associated with organising funeral and/or memorial	15 (21%)
Stress associated with dealing with negative community reaction	6 (8.5%)
Decrease in confidence	6 (8.5%)
Anxiety dealing with legal issues	5 (7%)

Table 4.4.3 *Impacts on principal*

Some of the issues that are identified in Table 4.4.3 are, not surprisingly, matters that had impact on the school and are also identified in Tables 4.4.2 and 4.4.1. The principals' naming of many of these issues as *personal* as well as professional impacts, comes out of their understanding of and commitment to their leadership roles. Although 16 principals named an increase in confidence (a positive impact), all these principals also named negative impacts.

### ***Disruption and exhaustion***

The impact most frequently identified by the principals was their concern about managing the disruption to normal school routines, with 85% of all respondents identifying this aspect of the aftermath. Principals commented on the need to get things back to normal, while still dealing with the after effects of the incident on the community. The data in a previous section of this chapter demonstrated that, as a consequence of the incident, 44% of respondents had changed school routines, while 32% managed changes to staffing, security and/or building works. The word "*exhaustion*" was used in many of the responses, linked to the notion of "*stress*" and the overwhelming nature of the tasks that principals faced. It was also sometimes linked to the level of support that the principal had experienced.

*"I was exhausted and distressed in leading a school community through an incident such as this" (25)*

*"... [I experienced] ongoing exhaustion – with no system support" (37)*

Managing the consequences of the incident, and trying to get things back to normal was identified as causing stress, particularly if principals were still trying to 'hold it together' in front of others. Many principals said that they don't know how they did what they did, but they were proud of the way they coped, as illustrated by the following quotes:

*"I felt very stressed at the time but I had to minister to everyone else. I seemed to operate instinctively. Many expressed how calmly and confidently I handled the situation, even if I didn't feel it myself." (22)*

*"The demands of dealing with so many facets of the tragedy were enormous. I am very proud of how I led ... [I] have no idea of how I coped." (20)*

Only one principal indicated that they would have happily handed over the reins to someone else if they could have (8). All other principals were very clear that they considered that it was their responsibility to lead their school communities in the time of crisis. The issue of principals' satisfaction or otherwise with the level of support has been discussed in a previous section of this chapter (see Figure 4.3.2 *Support satisfaction by gender*, p. 90). The 21 (30%) principals who were not satisfied with the level of support also identified resultant stress and resentment.

*“ [I was] quite stressed and anxious as there was no support from the [CSO] ... I felt quite alone ... ” (34)*

### ***Leadership confidence***

When specifically asked to rate their confidence in their capability to manage the incident, and the impact after the incident, the survey responses demonstrated that principals held a firm commitment to their leadership roles, even if they weren't sure where the confidence came from.

As Table 4.4.3 *Impacts on principal* (p. 98) shows, 16 principals described a personal growth in their confidence managing the incident and its aftermath. This figure is made up of 7 who were confident managing the incident and had increased confidence afterwards, and 9 who were not confident before, but confident afterwards. Table 4.4.3 also shows that there were 6 principals who identified a loss of confidence: three whose confidence decreased from very confident to confident, two who went from confident to not confident, and one principal who was very confident managing the incident but not confident in handling the impact afterwards.

Some principals identified a growth in confidence in their capability, while simultaneously acknowledging the stress that they had experienced, or were still experiencing. For example, two principals who were new to their schools at the time, felt that their successful handling of the incident helped establish their professional credibility with their community. Survey respondent 21, a female principal in her first year of principalship, described how she coped:

*“ I think I pretended to feel confident even though it was a completely new situation for me ... I hope not to have to deal with a similar situation again ” (21)*

Not all inexperienced principals had a growth in confidence. Interviewee Steve was in his first year of principalship, in a country town in which he had only lived for 9 months. He spoke of low confidence in his ability to handle a sensitive situation, concern about what he saw as *“losing a little bit of control”*, and appeared to be unsure about how to support his staff as well as a distressed family. *“There wasn't a lot of support that we knew [we could access] – we didn't really know what to do”*. Although he was grateful for CSO support by phone, he expressed a wish that there had been someone else to take over. Steve responded in the survey that although he was *“quite confident”* in his capacity to deal with the incident as it occurred, he *“did not feel confident”* to manage the impact in the time afterwards. Inexperience, a loss of confidence, and low levels of support were contextual factors that were significant in contributing to Steve's ongoing distress about his perception of his performance.

There were also differences in how principals described their confidence in phases 2 and 3. Figure 4.4.1 illustrates principals' confidence levels in managing the incident and managing the impact in the time afterwards.

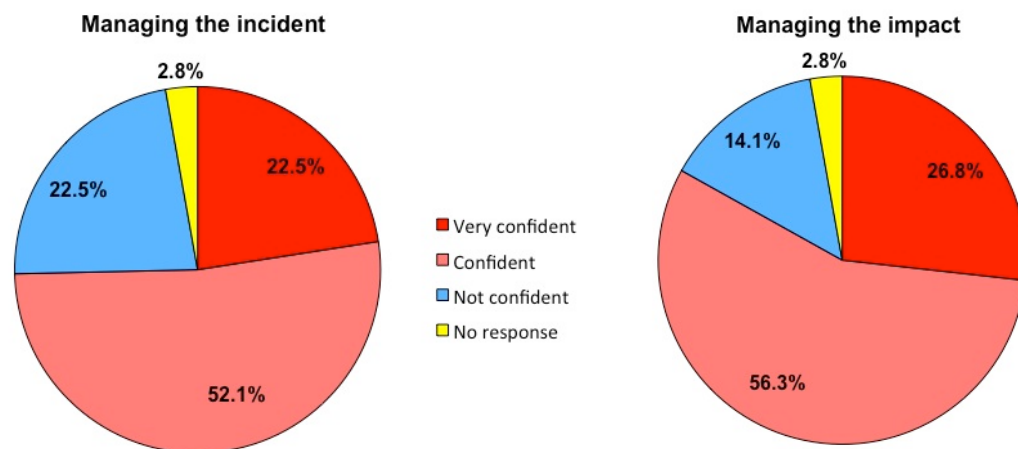


Figure 4.4.1 *Confidence managing incident and impact*

The figure above shows that 74.6% of principals were confident or very confident in their capability to manage the incident as it occurred, and 83.1% acknowledged that they were confident managing the impact in the time afterwards. Within each group there were principals who identified either an increase or decrease in confidence in managing the impact.

Confidence in handling the incident and the time afterwards seemed to have little bearing on the reported impact of the incident. More than 50% of the survey respondents expressed concern about their leadership capability even as they affirmed their confidence in their capability to manage and to lead.

### ***Supporting staff, students and families***

As identified in the previous section on the impact on schools, principals named the wellbeing of their students and staff members as one of their prime responsibilities. An equal number of survey respondents identified feelings of responsibility for staff as for students (49% for both categories), although they wrote in more detail about their responsibility for staff. This feeling of responsibility for staff was linked to the need to support staff mental health issues in the aftermath of the incident, and also to acknowledge staff vulnerability in dealing with distressed or aggressive parents. The following quotes demonstrate the principals' feelings of responsibility for their staff's emotional wellbeing.

*“Managing the emotional response of staff (anger, frustration, weariness, stress), dealing with unknown factors.” (51)*

*“We had to move on and many [staff] found this very difficult” (48)*

Principals described their involvement in supporting distressed families, particularly when it concerned the death or serious injury of a child. They also acknowledged their responsibility to prioritise the wellbeing of students and to ensure that appropriate support was available for them. Several principals described how they personally supported a distressed family for many months after an incident. Some examples are illustrated in the quotes below.

*“There was ongoing impact as the family relied on me for support until the child was eventually integrated back at school – overall for over a year.” (25)*

*“Everything fell on my shoulders: emotional, social, physical, financial support of the children [after murder/suicide of parents]” (10)*

This support for families is also illustrated by the number of principals (21%) who were involved in preparing funerals and/or memorials for deceased students or staff members. The data thus reveals that, in many instances, principals reported overwhelming feelings of responsibility for their communities. It was not something that they felt they could delegate.

Some principals reported situations in which they did not feel able to satisfactorily support distressed students and family members. Interviewees Steve and Simon describe their feelings of inadequacy to deliver this support.

*“I guess it’s [managing a critical incident] out of the framework of being an educator. So not being a counsellor, what’s the right thing to say [to children]? When do you say it? ... There were times when I thought, I hope I’ve done the right thing and haven’t caused any damage. Even though you might do it accidentally, that doesn’t really help you, I don’t think.” (Simon)*

*“There wasn’t a lot of support that we knew – we didn’t really know what to do. ... it just left us feeling a little bit out on a limb and second-guessing as to what may – what support we may be able to offer [the family] ... I felt really vulnerable that it was a position that I was in that I had limited control over ...” (Steve)*

Both these principals were in small, isolated country towns and while both expressed appreciation of CSO support by phone, they also indicated that they felt isolated and out of their depth. It is notable that in both these cases, professional counsellors were not available in the town, nor were they sent from the CSO.

### ***Legal issues***

Usually legal issues in the form of court cases happened in the 12 months or longer after the incident, and 5 principals expressed their anxiety about this experience (see Table 4.4.3, p. 98). Again, this would be outside the usual experience of a school principal. For example, interviewee Annette indicated that she did not have system support when required to appear in court. In answer to the survey question asking her to name any support that “might have been helpful, but was not provided?” she responded: “*senior personnel from [CSO] to support in court*”. She elaborated in her interview:

*“... there should be somebody from the office there to support a principal when they have to appear before a court. That was probably the only thing that didn’t happen that should have happened. That’s actual physical support. I know there were phone calls, [but] ...”*

As might be expected, all principals reported some personal stress, anxiety or distress as a result of the incident. The issue of dealing with disruption and the ensuing aftermath is the most commonly identified issue for principals after the incident. However, it appears that this impact on their schools was mainly resolved in the 12 month period following (phase 3), except for legal proceedings. However, the long term negative impacts (phase 4) seem to have been experienced by the principals as individuals. The data on this long term period is presented in the next section.

### **Long term negative impacts on principals**

Some of the consequences of the critical incident, identified in the previous sections of this chapter, were described by some principals as still being experienced years after the event. These impacts were particularly associated with their personal stress and distress. It appeared that most of the issues to do with school management were resolved in a 12 month period. However, the data on the stress/distress impact on the principals indicated a ‘mid term’ time period that was more than 2 months and up to 12 months, and a ‘long term’ period that was 12 months or more. The data on the impact on principals is thus presented in these three time periods to allow inspection of the emotional impact on principals in the long term.

Following is Table 4.4.4 *Length of time of negative impact on principal*, which presents data of the impact on the principals in the short, mid and long term.



<b>Principals</b>	<b>Short term impact</b> <i>&lt; 2 months</i>	<b>Mid term impact</b> <i>2months - 12months</i>	<b>Long term impact</b> <i>12 months or longer</i>
Males (N=27)	6(22%)	12(44%)	9(33%)
Females (N= 44)	11(25%)	16(36%)	17(39%)
Inexperienced (N=26) ( <i>&lt; 5yrs experience</i> )	8(31%)	11(42%)	7(27%)
Experienced (N=45) ( <i>&gt;5yrs experience</i> )	9(20%)	17(38%)	19(42%)
<b>Totals</b>	<b>17(24%)</b>	<b>28(39%)</b>	<b>26(37%)</b>

Table 4.4.4 *Length of time of negative impact on principal*

In reporting the length of time that impact of the critical incident was sustained for them individually, 24% of respondents identified a short term impact only. The remaining 76% of principals named impacts beyond the initial 2 month period, including 37% who described impacts that were experienced for 12 months and longer. The data revealed that inexperienced principals were more likely to report short and mid term impacts, with only 27% describing long term impacts. However, 80% of *experienced* principals reported impacts in the mid term and long term phases, with 42% describing long term impacts. There were no notable differences between male and female respondents.

#### ***Incident types and long term impact***

The surveys were also inspected for data on the types of incidents that resulted in short, mid or long term negative impacts for principals. The incidents had been categorised in the initial stages of data analysis (see Table 4.2.1 *Critical incidents by type*, p. 75). Further reading of the data indicated two other groupings of incident types, these being situations involving multiple events, and incidents involving violence. Following is Table 4.4.5 *Incident types by impact length for principal*, which displays the incident types previously identified in Table 4.2.1, plus the two other categories, by the impacts in the different phases.

<b>Incident Types</b>	<b>Short term impact on principal (N=17)</b>	<b>Mid-term impact on principal (N=28)</b>	<b>Long term impact on principal (N=26)</b>
Child death	1	7	9
Parent death	3	4	4
Parent behaviour	1	3	4
Child behaviour	2	4	3
Staff death	2	4	3
Child injury	1	2	3
Damage/disruption to school (e.g. fire, flood, vandalism)	6	3	2
Emergency procedure enacted	5	6	1
<b>Incident types by group</b>			
Multiple events (deaths/injuries)	2	2	9
Events involving violence	4	8	8

Table 4.4.5 *Incident types by impact length for principal*

It is the nature of some incidents that they are represented in more than one category: for example, an incident of aggressive parent behaviour led to a lockdown for the school, so this would be categorised in two sections. Following is a discussion on the impacts of the types of incidents identified in the table above. Some of the categories have been collapsed for this discussion, for example the issue of death as a critical incident.

### ***Impact of death***

Table 4.4.4. (p. 104) illustrated that 26 principals described a long term impact (37% of respondents), and Table 4.4.5 above further reveals that the majority of those principals who identified long term impact had dealt with incidents involving the deaths of children, staff or parents. Of the 37 incidents involving death, over half identified a long term impact. Three of the 17 child death incidents were on-site, two being the result of accident and one from

sudden illness. The other 14 child deaths were as the result of illness, accident and one murder incident in which two children were murdered by their grandfather.

The deaths of staff members also included a sudden on-site death, and two reported incidents involving the sudden death of a parish priest. The incidents of parent death were all unexpected events, with five deaths by violence, one accidental death by drowning of two parents (one of whom was also a staff member), and six deaths by sudden illness. Four of the parent deaths by violence involved multiple deaths.

It did not appear to make any difference to the impact on the principal if the death was expected or not. Although it might be presumed that a death at school would have greater impact than a death off-site, there did not appear to be significant difference in the reported impacts.

### ***Impact of child victims***

In particular, the data strongly indicates that an incident involving the death or injury of a *child* was the most frequently identified long term, negative impact for the principal, accounting for 41% of all reported long term impacts for principals. The data also reveals that of all incidents involving the death or injury of a child, 52% resulted in a long term impact for the principal. A principal's sense of responsibility for the safety and wellbeing of their students is powerfully illustrated in the following words from interviewee Annette.

*"... parents send their child to school, and they expect that child to come home that afternoon, and that if anything does happen to them that is untoward, then I'm the one who is responsible. I guess, yes, that's very clear for me now."* (Interviewee Annette speaking about the death of a child in a sport accident at school)

Other incidents involving children that were identified as having significant impact on the principals include problematic child behaviour, including aggressive sexualised behaviour, violence towards self and/or others and uncontrollable behaviour that put self and/or others at risk.

### ***Impact of problematic behaviour***

Incidents involving aggressive, confronting and/or distressing behavior by a child or parent accounted for 27% of the reported long term impacts. Parent behaviour that resulted in a long term impact included a parent arrested for murder; four incidents of parents who had physically and verbally threatened the principal over several months; and a parent who reported to the principal her intention (the parent's) to commit suicide. Some of the parent

behaviour may have been due to mental illness and four principals were especially concerned about the long running campaigns targeting them that were conducted by parents. The following quote illustrates how one principal experienced a loss of confidence in her ability, due to the ongoing situation.

*“I do not think my initial expressions of concern about this parent were taken very seriously in the beginning [by the CSO] ... Initially I felt reasonably confident in my skills to manage the situation but the man concerned became increasingly aggressive and threatening which made me question my ability to manage.” (19)*

For the four principals whose incident involved aggressive and threatening behaviour by a parent, the stress and tension actually built up over months. These principals all felt that, initially, they could manage the situation and described how their confidence was eroded over time.

Some students’ behaviour in this category included physical and sexual aggression towards other children at school, and behaviour that put self and others at risk of harm. Principals dealing with these situations also expressed concern and feelings of responsibility for the wellbeing of all the children involved.

*“ [I felt] distress for the children involved (especially the accused)... There was constant tension around the school, lots of groups of parents, shocking rumours.” (47)*

### ***Impact of damage and disruption***

Damage or disruption to school buildings and routines seems to have been managed with low impact over time, with over 50% of these incidents having only short term impact. Similarly, it seems that when principals were required to enact emergency procedures of lockdown or evacuation, that these incidents were managed with relatively low impact. Principals are very familiar with drills of this nature, being mandated to practise them regularly. It is possible that a response to a critical incident which involved one of these emergency procedures kept issues within the principals’ regular role responsibilities: that is, they remained in control of what was happening in their schools.

### ***Impact of multiple events***

Of all the incidents that principals identified as resulting in a longer term impact, 35% were part of a series of multiple incidents. For the purposes of this study, a multiple event was defined as a single incident with more than one victim, or more than one incident in a school community over a period of time. Multiple events included the following scenarios:

- A bus crash which resulted in several students being injured and hospitalised

- A father who killed a mother, then suicided in front of the children, who were students at the school
- A gas bomb in the school with several children unconscious and hospitalised
- Death of a staff member (not at school) and the sudden resignation of the principal in a couple of weeks
- Multiple sudden deaths and cancer diagnoses involving staff and parents over a 12 month period
- Unexpected deaths of a teacher and a staff family member in the one week, followed by mandated national testing that was held on the day of the teacher's funeral

Of the 13 multiple events, nearly 70% resulted in a long term impact. One principal, involved in a series of traumatic events in her school community, reflected on the impact.

*"Multiple crises, as happened here, create a cumulative effect and there is no space to grieve or come to terms with [each] event." (10)*

### ***Impact of violence***

In a similar fashion, 40% of incidents involving violence resulted in principals experiencing a long term impact. These accounted for 31% of incidents in this longer term category.

Incidents that were grouped in this category included police actions, murders and suicides involving school community members, and aggression and threats made against the principal by a parent.

### ***Emotional impact***

The results show that involvement in managing a critical incident was a strongly emotional experience for many principals. In the surveys, the principals' initial descriptions of the incidents were typically brief and matter of fact: for example, *"Father killed mother and then committed suicide with the children present"* (10); *"Young child collapsed and died in the ambulance before it left the school grounds"* (61). However, as they progressed through the survey, responding to the questions and reflecting on their experiences, the principals began to open up and their language became more emotional. They called it:

*"a profound experience" (23); "a burden" (16); "a very difficult and complex situation" (12); "emotionally draining ... time consuming, ... physically and mentally draining" (46); "extremely complex" (12); "incredibly stressful" (1); "something I couldn't grasp" (16); "a very stressful time" (19); "a tragedy" (20); "extremely traumatic" (28); "a year of mourning" (31); "shock, trauma, hysteria and grief" (40);*

*“traumatic”* (40); *“overwhelming”* (16, 44); *“guilt, anxiety, stress”* (49); *“emotionally draining”* (53, 67).

In telling the story of the incident, some details were obviously very clear for the storyteller. Interviewee Annette described how *“my heart was beating furiously”*, while other details, especially in the aftermath she described, were hazy. Interviewee Annemarie described in detail how she made a cup of tea for the distraught bus driver, but couldn’t recall the name of her Assistant Principal at the time of the incident.

Principals described their feelings about their responsibilities to their communities, the support they had received or not received, and their own emotional states. The identification of “exhaustion” as a factor is noted in a previous section. Some principals acknowledged that while the school had *“moved on”*, they were still suffering.

*“The impact is still there for me. The school has moved on in a sound manner.”* (16)

During the interviews, several interviewees also experienced strong emotions as they described the event they had experienced. There were 52% of the respondents who commented on the emotions that surfaced while they were completing the survey. These strong feelings are obvious in the following quotes.

*“Even doing this survey has been a sad experience – the death of the boy, shock of the bus driver, anxiety of the parents, students and staff will remain with me forever.”* (23)

*“Five years later we are building a memorial to (the deceased). I have cried most of the way through the completion of this survey... It was literally the toughest week of my life. I know I have not fully been able to get over it.”* (20)

In summary, the data on the impact of the critical incident on *schools* mainly indicates two periods of time: a short term of less than 2 months, and a mid term of 2 to 12 months. These impacts are described as:

1. managing changes to school routines and environment that were brought about by the incident, and
2. supporting staff, students and families.

However, when principals considered the impact on *themselves*, their reflections reveal *three* distinct periods of time: the short and mid term impacts that are described as managing the school context, and a long term impact of 12 months or more. When describing this *long term* impact, principals identified the issue of personal stress and distress, which they experienced for sometimes years after the incident. It is notable that the different phases display different impacts for the community, and for individuals.

### Summary of data on impacts and issues

The impacts and issues that the principals identified were in most cases inseparable from the critical incident itself, with many principals describing far-reaching and long term consequences, especially for themselves. Some principals described changes to school routines and procedures made as a result of the incident, and their increased awareness of mental health or security issues. A few named positive impacts, particularly in building community, and in their growth in confidence in their own leadership. Beyond 12 months, a few principals identified legal issues, the ongoing distress of some community members, and the organisation of funerals and memorials as matters they were responsible for. However, as part of the *aftermath*, as distinct from the incident itself, the issues for schools were generally experienced as short term (less than 2 months) and mid term (more than 2 months, and up to 12 months). Table 4.4.1 *Length of time of impact* (p. 94) illustrates how the disruption factors decreased over time.

In considering the impact of the incident on themselves, many principals described how proud they were of how they had led their communities during a difficult time. Many were still engaged with other people's needs and requirements long after the incident occurred. There were 26 responses that demonstrated an awareness of a long term, *chronic* impact on principals' own emotional wellbeing. Some principals described how the incident and its consequences were still impacting on them, for 12 months and sometimes for years afterwards. Survey respondent 16 says, "*the impact is still there for me*" about an event that occurred 2-5 years ago.

All the survey respondents made use of the text boxes to record their thoughts and feelings about different aspects of their lived experiences. The interview transcripts further revealed in greater detail, principals' reflections and sense-making. The next section of this chapter presents the results of these reflections.

### 4.5. Principals reflect

*"Do I really want principalship? Do I want that level of responsibility? ... It makes you question yourself whether or not you want to follow that career path. Most definitely."*

(Interviewee Annette)

The last section of the survey asked principals to consider what they would advise colleagues about managing an incident, and what they would advise their systems about supporting principals in this context. The final question of the survey asked principals if there was

anything else they would like to comment on. These questions gave the principals the opportunity to reflect on their experiences and to share this in their own words. The interviewees were particularly reflective and had the time to elaborate on their feelings and the impact of their experiences.

There were 90% of principals who responded to at least one of these questions, and the responses indicated that they had thought carefully about it. Some of these responses were very heartfelt and reflected strong feelings. Several responses identified that the process of doing the survey had induced sad feelings in them, and some indicated gratitude for the opportunity the survey had afforded them to tell about their experiences. The principals displayed an eagerness to share their learning with their fellow principals, as well as the opportunity afforded by the survey to acknowledge the important role that colleagues can play in support of each other. All principals who responded to these questions indicated that they expected their systems to play a substantial support role in all phases of the incident, from training and preparation to ongoing, long term support for themselves and their school communities.

The following sections outline the principals' advice to their colleagues about managing leadership through a critical incident, and then their advice to their systems about the support role that their system could play for schools and principals. While these reflections might be considered to be personal to the individual experiences, they nonetheless provide a synthesis of the needs of a principal leading in the context of a critical incident. The final section presents the reflections of some principals about their experiences, when asked if there were any further comments that they would like to add to their survey responses.

### **Advice for colleagues**

*"Stay cool, pray hard, put children's needs first, communicate clearly to all ..."* (73)

62 (87%) principals answered this question and advised their colleague principals on what they had learned from their own experiences. Some principals provided very detailed answers, as illustrated by respondents 1 and 13 who gave lists of priorities as follows:

*"1. You are not alone – seek system help quickly. 2. Whilst it is important to be timely in addressing incidents, take the longer view and think about managing next week, next month, in three months and a year down the track. You don't have to have all the answers right now. 3. Learn from the incident and make changes to your school that will benefit all."* (1)



*“1. Trust in your own skills 2. Look to your trusted support network 3. Take a deep breath and calm self before speaking on the matter 4. Provide open and honest communication 5. Be present for all involved – perpetrator and victim.” (13)*

The advice to colleague principals fell in two main categories: advice about managing an incident, and advice about accessing support. The following two tables present this data by gender and by experience.

### ***Advice about management***

Table 4.5.1 presents data on the various aspects of managing a critical incident that were identified by survey respondents as important for their colleagues to understand.

<b>Principals (N=62)</b>	<b>Plan &amp; prioritise</b>	<b>Care for &amp; trust self</b>	<b>Refer to experts</b>	<b>Take time, stay calm</b>	<b>Communication is important</b>
<b>Experienced (43)</b>	29(67%)	16(37%)	12(28%)	13(30%)	8(19%)
<b>Inexperienced (19)</b>	12 (63%)	3 (16%)	7(37%)	2(10%)	5(26%)
<b>Female (37)</b>	25(68%)	9(24%)	14(38%)	9(24%)	9(24%)
<b>Male (25)</b>	16(64%)	10 (40%)	5 (20%)	6 (24%)	4(16%)
<b>Totals</b>	<b>41(66%)</b>	<b>19(31%)</b>	<b>19(31%)</b>	<b>15(24%)</b>	<b>13(21%)</b>

Table 4.5.1 *Advice to colleague principals about management*

The majority of principals who contributed advice on managing the critical incident (66%), emphasised the need to be prepared before the event and to prioritise the needs of the community: *“Put students and staff welfare first when making decisions”* (41). 22 principals spoke of the importance of having a plan or policy in place before the incident, or taking the time to put one in place during and after the incident. For 10 of those principals, the establishment of a pastoral care team or a critical incident management team, as part of the plan, was important. 15 principals referred to the need for readiness: *“Practice (sic) drills. Raise the discussion point on an occasional basis. Foster clear communication with staff so that they are clear on their responsibilities”* (70).

All the respondents affirmed that they believed it was the principals' responsibility to lead their school communities, and that they should trust their instincts, while remembering to care for themselves. Male principals were more likely to advise care for self, while more female principals emphasised the helpfulness of calling on 'the experts', or a critical friend. Experienced principals were more likely than inexperienced principals to advise care for self, and take time, stay calm. Inexperienced principals, not surprisingly, were more likely to advise calling for expert assistance. Respondent 75, an experienced male principal, gave advice of a reflective nature and implied that a critical incident was an opportunity for the demonstration of leadership capability.

*"Accept that it will take your time and focus for a period of time ... make people the focus. A genuine chance to lead."* (75)

Respondents advised their colleagues that they could take time, even in the middle of an incident, to *"take a deep breath"* in order to collect their thoughts. Interviewee Charles spoke of how, once the immediate danger had passed, he went into his office *"and just collapsed"*. He continued: *"Well, everybody else was traumatised so once I'd got a bit of energy back, I went out and helped them settle the whole thing as well."* Charles was an experienced principal and he appeared to give himself permission to take some private time and space, in order that he could then continue to support others. The data shows that experienced principals were three times more likely than their inexperienced peers to advise that colleagues should take their time and stay calm. This is illustrated by the following quote from another experienced male principal.

*"Gather good people close to you and share the load. Create a space of quiet refuge for people to use. Take times of quiet to grieve yourself, along with others."* (16)

Many of the principals responding to this question were particular about the need to care for themselves, with more than 30% advising of the importance of trusting oneself, and of monitoring one's own wellbeing.

*"Be aware that while you are getting on with the job, to monitor your own health, wellbeing."* (57)

Principals also advised their colleagues to expect that support be forthcoming from their CSO. While they affirmed that it is the principal's responsibility to lead in a crisis, the advice also indicated that principals should look for support, not only from the CSO, but also from their staff members and colleagues in the educational community. This data is presented in the following section.

### ***Advice about support***

All those who responded to this question stressed that principals needed to insist on CSO support, and to also use staff and colleagues for support. The CSO support identified here was not specific, just encouraging principals to “*demand consultant and CSO support*” (67).

<b>Principals</b> (N=62)	<b>Use CSO support</b>	<b>Use staff for support</b>	<b>Use principal colleagues' support</b>
<b>Experienced (43)</b>	16(37%)	13(30%)	7(16%)
<b>Inexperienced (19)</b>	6(32%)	4(21%)	5(26%)
<b>Female (37)</b>	16(43%)	10(27%)	8(22%)
<b>Male (25)</b>	6(24%)	7(28%)	4(16%)
<b>Totals</b>	<b>22(36%)</b>	<b>17(27%)</b>	<b>12(19%)</b>

Table 4.5.2 *Advice to colleague principals about support*

Table 4.5.2 illustrates that female principals were more likely than male principals to advise the calling of support from the CSO. Respondent 47, an experienced female principal, advised her colleagues to be insistent about the need for CSO support.

*“Definitely seek assistance from the personnel at CSO; if not satisfied, go higher until you feel confident in the action you take.” (47)*

The importance of using the principal’s own staff in support was emphasised, particularly in both keeping communication open, and in using others’ expertise as the principal leads. While experienced principals were more likely to advocate using staff for support than inexperienced principals, they were not as likely to suggest using colleague principals. It may be that experienced principals have confidence in the team they have already built in their schools. The following quote from an experienced principal indicates this scenario.

*“You can’t do it alone, but your leadership must be strong. Get a good team around you to help you plan your immediate and long term responses.” (20)*

Likewise, making use of the experience and goodwill of colleague principals was identified as an important source of support, particularly by inexperienced principals.

*“Speak to fellow principals and involve them during the incident. They are a wealth of knowledge.” (5)*

During the interviews, the principals were insistent that principal colleagues needed to understand the inevitability of experiencing a critical incident, and to be aware of what needs

to be in place beforehand. The interviewees expanded on the need for preparation more fully. Charles, a very experienced principal, warned his peers and, by implication, his system, about the need for principals to be mentally prepared and skilled for leadership in this kind of situation.

*“If I was talking to other principals I’d be saying ... it’s not if an event happens in your school, it’s when it happens – and it will happen. Something of rather some magnitude will happen and you’ve just got to prepare yourself mentally, you’ve got to have some strategies ready to go. ... You’ve just got to have the skills to keep it all together for that time knowing that after it’s over you can then go and fall apart.”*

In summary, principals advised their colleagues to have faith in their own abilities, but to insist that support be forthcoming from staff, colleagues and most especially, from their system leadership. In the following section, principals clearly articulate exactly how that critical system support should be delivered.

#### **Advice for school systems**

*“Allow the principal to lead but stand close by and eliminate whatever procedural hurdles that impede progress. Be there with them. Make coffee, answer phones – just be there.” (16)*

There were 82% of survey respondents who answered the question asking if there was any advice they would like to give their systems about how to support principals in the management of critical incidents. Of those who answered this question, all were specific in identifying types of support and also how that support should be delivered. This advice fell into four categories and is presented by gender and experience in Table 4.5.3 *Advice for school systems* below.

<b>Principals</b> (N= 57)	<b>Acknowledgement: “take it seriously”</b>	<b>CSO support: immediate &amp; ongoing</b>	<b>Follow-up, esp. long term</b>	<b>Improved training &amp; preparation</b>
<b>Experienced</b> (40)	34(85%)	27(67%)	12(30%)	8(20%)
<b>Inexperienced</b> (17)	13(76%)	8(47%)	4(24%)	6(35%)
<b>Female (33)</b>	28(85%)	20(60%)	11(33%)	10(30%)
<b>Male (24)</b>	19(79%)	15(62%)	5(20%)	4(17%)
<b>Totals</b>	<b>47(83%)</b>	<b>35(61%)</b>	<b>16(28%)</b>	<b>14(25%)</b>

Table 4.5.3 *Advice for school systems*

The most frequent advice (83% of those responding to this question) was a plea for systems to take the incident seriously, and to acknowledge that the principal and the community had been through a significant experience. As described in the previous section, principals clearly felt that their systems not only had a responsibility to offer the usual counselling support, but that CSO support should include a system leadership presence in the school, personal contact with the school staff, and an acknowledgement of the significance of the incident. Many principals felt that their CSOs did not fully understand the impact of an incident on their schools and/or on themselves. The resentment expressed when the principals believed that the support was not adequate has been described in a previous section of this chapter. This resentment is demonstrated by the emotional language used by some principals in responding to this question. “*Listen to the needs of your principals*” and “*Think of us as human beings who also need help*” were the heartfelt pleas of survey respondents 5 and 7.

Principals also had firm ideas about how that system support should be delivered. As identified in Table 4.5.3 *Advice for school systems*, over 60% of those responding to this question identified the need for system support to be immediate, easy to access and ongoing for as long as needed. The principals clearly expressed that CSO should have a presence at the school as soon as possible, but cautioned that principals should have the lead in their own schools, and the CSO should not take over leadership responsibility. A plea for system leadership to respect principals in their own schools is articulated in the following quote by an experienced female principal.

*“Hear what principals are saying – support them as they request – they are in the thick of it and know the needs of their community.” (22)*

Pleas for CSO support to be available in the long term were made by some principals and were echoed in other parts of the survey. Likewise, the provision of improved preparation and training for principals, and the opportunity for professional debriefing were identified here, issues that were also named earlier in the survey.

*“It would have been nice to have someone come and discuss what had happened and how I felt I handled [it] as a principal.” (24)*

One case that highlights this issue is that of interviewee Charles, who spoke of how he had received neither acknowledgement nor direct support from his system office. As an experienced principal, he stressed that systems need to support their principals in the time after the critical incident, and he reflected on how that support might be delivered.

*“First of all you [the system] ask them [the principals] – what do they need? They will tell you what they need. Some will need big help, some say ‘I can handle this, this and this, but I’d really love you to do that’. At least someone [from the CSO] come out and say ‘We’re interested in you. Now it’s all over, what do you need to survive and keep going?’ – and be able to do that for them.”*

Charles maintained that principals know what they need in terms of support. This is not necessarily every respondents’ point of view. Some respondents talked of not knowing what they wanted or needed at the time – it was only in hindsight and upon reflection that it became clear to them what they required. What was clear from all respondents was the need for system presence and acknowledgement.

Survey respondent 1 contributed another list of priorities for systems to consider, and this reflects the advice given in the surveys:

*“1. Give support when asked. 2. Recognise the enormous personal stress this places on an individual [principal] and their family that doesn’t necessarily end when the incident is resolved. Offer counselling. 3. Develop processes and brief principals in crisis management. Knowing who to call, what to do next and knowing the resources available is a great help.” (1)*

The principals who responded to this section of the survey contributed reflective and clearly articulated advice to their colleague principals, and to their system leadership. They affirmed their right and responsibility to lead their communities. They also emphasised that no-one should expect to lead in this context without support. Many respondents expressed the desire

to share their learning, to have an opportunity to review and evaluate the happenings around the incident. Principals who had experienced a critical incident demonstrated an eagerness to share their reflections with colleagues and systems, with the hope that this learning would benefit all in the educational community.

### **Further reflections**

There were 20 responses to the final question in the survey, which asked if there was anything else on which the respondent would like to comment. Five of those 20 were very brief responses thanking the researcher, for example: *“Thank you for asking”* (16). Some principals gave more detail about their incidents and further reflected on the long term impact that they themselves were experiencing.

The issues that the principals raised in this opportunity to reflect are as follows:

- nine principals gave more advice to colleagues, particularly about the importance of seeking support
- six principals further emphasised the criticality of their incident, particularly the issue of multiple incidents
- five principals named the suffering they were still experiencing: *“unpleasant memories”* (73), *“flood of memories”* (47), *“I have not fully been able to get over it”* (20)
- five principals emphasised the long term nature of the impact of the incident
- four principals gave further details about their incident
- three principals expressed gratitude to those who had supported them

Principals named their pride in their staff teams, and occasionally regretted the lack of acknowledgement for their staff by the CSO. They spoke about the need to keep their staffs fully informed about what was happening during the incident, and to be alert to their needs, as well as to the needs of the children.

*“Despite the tragedy, a critical incident managed with good intent and teamwork brings good as well as negative consequences. Full and open communication with the school community is more key than I realised for many years.”* (49)

4 principals in response to this last question, noted that they *“dealt with it well”* (31).

*“One of the good things was as a staff we sat down and reviewed how we did things. Not everything was 100% but we got most things right.”* (24)

These reflections further illustrated the desire of those who participated in the survey to share their experiences and learn from them. The expressions of gratitude to the researcher for the opportunity to tell their stories, and their re-emphasis of the long term nature of the impact that the incident had had on them, were expressed in strongly emotional language.

Respondent 23 called the incident “*a profound experience .....[that] will remain with me forever.*”

#### **4.6 Findings and conclusion**

This chapter has presented the data gathered in the surveys and interviews that illustrated the experience of principalship in the context of a critical incident. The data identified the wide ranging nature of critical incidents in school contexts, and gave principals the opportunity to reflect on the impact of that experience on their school and on them personally.

The surveys and interviews thus provided ten findings that concern both critical incidents, and principals’ experiences. Findings 1–4 identify expanded understandings about the nature of critical incidents, and what makes them critical. Findings 5–10 are concerned with how principals in this study describe the experience of leading their schools through a critical incident, and particularly identify the support that they would find helpful. These findings are as follows:

1. *Current understandings of critical incidents in schools are inadequate.* Principals describe many different types of incidents as critical incidents. These include:
  - a. dramatic events
  - b. more commonly occurring events, including:
    - i. events in which elements of context and connection play a significant role
    - ii. multiple serious events or situations
    - iii. ongoing situations that build up over time
  - c. aftermath as part of an incident, including
    - i. funerals and memorials
    - ii. situations in which elements of context and connection play a significant role
    - iii. significant parent/community response
2. *Principals defined a critical incident by the impact on themselves.* It appears that for many principals in this study, the defining element of an incident or situation, what



makes it ‘critical’, is the resultant feelings of stress/distress. Principals in this study report both positive and negative impacts.

3. *Existing context has a bearing on the impact of the incident.* The context associated with the school, the incident, the principal, the level of support and previous history will have a bearing on how the incident is experienced. Some incidents are immediately critical: that is, because of their nature, high stress is experienced immediately. Some are events or situations that are serious but not unexpected in the life of a school. These events may accumulate in number or intensity to provide a ‘tipping point’ into a high stress impact. Other relatively common events or situations may cause significant impact because of the background contexts of the principal, the school community and/or the incident itself. In particular the connections between and among members of the community appear to be significant in raising the level of stress and distress.
4. *The impacts are different in the different phases.* In general, the impact in phase 2 (*critical incident and immediate response*) and phase 3 (*mid term impact*) is experienced by the school as disruption, and by some members of the community as stress and distress. The goal is to ‘get back to normal’ and this appears to be generally achievable in this time frame, often with some support from systems and/or local communities. The long term impact, experienced in phase 4, is less well understood and, where present, is reported by principals as emotional distress for themselves.
5. *Disruption is the most commonly identified element causing stress to principals in phases 2 and 3 of a critical incident.* Management of the disruption requires principals to assume multiple roles, for which they may not feel adequately trained or supported. Principals also feel pressured by the goal of getting things back to normal.
6. *In dealing with some critical incidents, principals report being overwhelmed by the level of responsibility they feel.* Principals affirm that leadership in a critical incident is their responsibility and that, at times, they feel overwhelmed by the intensity of those feelings.
7. *In dealing with critical incidents, principals frequently put their own needs on hold.* The intense feelings of responsibility lead principals to put their own needs aside until things at school have settled down. Then, often some months or even years afterwards, principals report long-term emotional issues for themselves.
8. *Principals can feel inadequately trained for the roles they are expected to assume after a critical incident.* Despite the policy documents and procedural manuals

prepared by systems, principals report that they feel unprepared and unskilled for leadership in a critical incident.

9. *Principals can feel inadequately supported in the time after a critical incident.*

While some principals felt that the support in the immediate response was helpful, many were critical of inadequate support in the time after an incident. Principals identified the support that they need in terms of:

- a. who should be providing it (CSO, colleagues, outside agencies);
- b. what it should look like (debriefing, counselling, staffing, financial help, CSO presence & acknowledgement);
- c. how it should be delivered (immediate, easy to access, ongoing, non-judgmental, as long as needed).

10. *Principals reported that there appeared to be few opportunities to systematically review and evaluate the response to and intervention in the critical incident.*

Principals expressed a desire to share their experiences with colleagues, and to share their learning, in order to improve professional practice and to validate the experience. They named the need for professional debriefing with their systems after the incident.

As the findings identify two separate areas for consideration, the implications for our understanding of both critical incidents and school leadership in a critical incident context will be discussed in two chapters. Chapter 5 explores the nature of critical incidents as described by the principals in this study, what makes these incidents critical, and the importance of context and connections in the experience. Chapter 6 focuses on the principals' experiences, discusses the impact of the experience and considers the principals' reflections on how they could be better supported.

## 5. The nature of critical incidents

### 5.1 Introduction

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of principals who have led their schools through a critical incident. There is a gap in the research about how principals describe this experience, the impact that it had on them and what they think about the kinds of support that they received. Another dimension of this study is enhancing understanding of how principals define a critical incident, and what they consider are the elements that make the incident ‘critical’. The principals’ reflections on their experiences, and data on the types of incidents, contribute to our understanding of the impact on the principals and their schools.

As outlined in the previous chapter, the findings identified two distinct areas of significance: the nature of critical incidents, and the principals’ experiences. The next two chapters provide a discussion on these areas of interest, and commentary on the findings that emerged. The discussion is structured with close reference to the literature in this field as presented in chapter 2. This chapter begins with a discussion of findings 1-4 (pp. 119-120) that are concerned with critical incidents. There is an exploration of the different types of critical incidents, how they become critical, and a consideration of an expanded definition. Chapter 6 then explores the themes and issues in connection with findings 5-10 (pp. 120-121), which focus on the principals’ experiences.

### The research questions and findings

The data were gathered through an online survey of all Catholic primary principals in NSW, and interviews with 12 of those principals. As the data analysis was underway, the emerging findings were discussed with members of a reference group and were also tested in workshop presentations involving school principals and counsellors, members of the academic community of the Australian Catholic University, and academics from other universities, both national and international. Discussions from these presentations aided in the synthesis of the information and demonstrated the education community’s interest in this study.

The research set out to investigate the question: *What is the experience of principals when their schools are involved in a critical incident?* The following four questions identified different facets of the experience, and were the investigation points for the study:

1. How do principals experience leading their schools through and beyond a critical incident?

2. What are the issues for principals as they lead their schools in the time after the incident?
3. What kinds of support are available to them and how might this be improved?
4. What was the impact of this experience on their leadership?

However, in the process of the research, an unanticipated issue arose for the researcher. Although a definition of a critical incident had been provided for the survey respondents (see Appendix D, *Survey invitation*, p. 203), it became apparent that some of the incidents described by the principals did not substantially fit that definition. As there is very little data on the types of incidents in primary schools in NSW, it seemed important to explore this aspect of the principals' perceptions, in order to better understand their descriptions of their experiences. Thus, the following additional questions were explored through the collected data:

Research Question 5. What types of critical incidents do principals report?

Research Question 6. What makes these incidents 'critical'?

As indicated, there were four findings from the data analysis (pp. 119-121) that give direction to the exploration of these particular Research Questions. These findings are:

1. *Current understanding of critical incidents are inadequate*
2. *Principals defined a critical incident by the impact on themselves*
3. *Existing context has a bearing on the impact of the incident*
4. *The impacts of a critical incident are different in the different phases*

The variance in the significance of the different elements of a critical incident, as identified in the original definition, challenged the initial position adopted by the researcher. Thus, the issue of the types and nature of critical incidents, as explored through Research Questions 5 and 6 and identified in findings 1-4, will be discussed in this chapter, in order to provide a background context for the discussion of the principals' experiences in chapter 6.

Vignettes taken from the surveys and interviews will be used to further illustrate the themes under discussion, and to ensure that the principals' own voices are heard. Lester (1999) supports the use of vignettes and direct quotes in phenomenological studies in order to keep "faithful to the participants" (p. 4). How critical incidents may be categorised, the issues around what constitutes a critical incident, and the place of context and connections in the understanding of the impact of a critical incident, will be discussed in the following sections of this chapter.

## Definitions, elements and phases

At the beginning of this study, a definition of a critical incident was arrived at after a review of the current literature (e.g., Kerr, 2009; Lerner et al., 2006; New South Wales Department of Education and Training, 2006; Sheehan et al., 2004), and is as follows:

*a traumatic event which directly involves members of the school community, significantly impacts on that community's wellbeing and the regular life and work of the school, and requires intervention and support by external agencies.*

This definition contains the following criteria:

- Trauma (sudden, unexpected, inducing feelings of vulnerability/fear/helplessness)
- Significant impact on the community's wellbeing (resultant stress/distress)
- Significant impact on the regular life and work of the school (resultant disruption)
- Requires intervention/support by external agencies

In line with this definition, particular elements were identified in the survey invitation and the survey. This information was provided to principals as a means of allowing them to consider their experience of a critical incident against the definition, when deciding whether or not to respond to the survey. The elements of a critical incident, as outlined to the survey invitees, are as follows:

1. Unexpectedness
2. Caused disruption to normal school routines
3. Involved death or injury
4. Involved the threat or possibility of death or injury
5. Caused damage to school buildings, plant or grounds
6. Caused significant stress and/or distress

It was expected that a critical incident would contain most of these elements to a significant degree and all incidents reported in the survey identified at least two of the named elements as significant. However, in some responses, it appeared that several of these elements were not present, or present to only a minimal degree. In addition, principals named other elements that they considered to be important in the experience of a critical incident. Thus the data from the surveys and interviews raises questions about the proposed definition of a critical incident.

Embedded in the initial definition is the implication that the *impact* of the incident is actually *part of* the initial incident. The current literature commonly identifies three phases of a critical incident, these being (1) the preparation or training, (2) the incident itself, and (3) the immediate response. However, some research also makes reference to the possible longer-

term nature of the impact (Jordan, 2003; Paine, 2009). This study considered how the principals described their experiences of the incident, and the *impact* at the time of the incident, and in the time following the incident. The length of time that the principals experienced the impact was a key consideration that came out of the research questions. Therefore this study factored four phases into the questions asked in both the survey and the interviews. These phases are defined as follows:

Phase 1. Planning and preparation

Phase 2. Critical incident and immediate response (up to 2 months after the incident)

Phase 3. Mid term impact (2 months to 12 months after the incident)

Phase 4. Long term impact (12 months and longer)

A critical incident would thus typically consist of elements of both the initial event (phase 2) and the impact, which is experienced through phases 3 and 4.

The following sections discuss the issues raised by Research Questions 5 and 6, concerning the types of critical incident reported in the study and the elements that make an incident ‘critical’.

## **5.2 What is a critical incident and why is it critical?**

Because there is a lack of available information about the types of critical incidents occurring in NSW primary schools, an important goal of the online survey was to understand the scope of this issue. Media reports (Anderson & Dolmage, 2009; Lichtenstein, Schonfield, & Kline, 1994; McManus, 2005) and anecdotal evidence suggest that schools are involved in a variety of incidents that, on reflection by those who have an understanding of school contexts, would indicate that careful management was required by the principal. The following sections of this chapter explore the nature of the critical incidents as described by the principal, and discuss the issue of criticality.

### **What is a critical incident?**

The types of critical incidents that emerged from the data in this study are identified in Table 4.2.1 *Critical incidents by type* (p. 75). They are grouped in five categories: (1) deaths, (2) emergencies in the school and (3) in the community, (4) problematic behaviour by students or parents, and (5) injuries or illness to students or staff members. None of these critical incidents were large scale events, such as the Victorian bushfires of 2009, or the school shootings reported in the USA. In fact, it seemed that many of the reported incidents were

quite small and domestic in nature, in that they were particular to the specific community and contained within that community. However, as the principals told their stories, they revealed why they considered the incident was critical for them. This information is an important contribution to the knowledge of the experience of critical incidents in NSW Catholic primary schools.

Grouping the incidents by general ‘type’ led the researcher to consider how the research literature identified different types of critical incidents. Cornell and Sheras (1998), in analysing the responses to five different school crises, note a difference between an “individual crisis” as in, for example, a student episode of self harm; and a “school crisis” which may involve a wide range of school personnel. While they identify differences in the scale of the response, they make the point that an “individual crisis” can very quickly “mushroom and have a school wide impact, substantially changing the nature of the crisis ...” (p. 306). Several incidents reported in the present study followed this pattern. Trethowan (2009) differentiates between “developmental crises and situational crises” (p. 2). Trethowan notes that developmental crises or “life stresses” are a normal part of maturation: the kinds of events and situations that, while stressful, might be expected to be a normal part of living a life. Trethowan asserts that only situational crises are “extraordinary”. In discussing situational crises, she also uses the terms “traumatic incidents”, “major crisis” and “crisis situation”, and these are the incidents that require “crisis management”. In this present study, the researcher noted that several incidents could be called “developmental crises” under this definition. These are incidents such as confronting child behaviour, situations that would be stressful, but not unusual in the normal work of a principal.

MacNeil and Topping (2007a), from a different perspective and using different criteria, identify “event trauma” and “process trauma” and describe them as follows: “... ‘event trauma’ [is] associated with a sudden unexpected event and ‘process trauma’ [is] related to the multitude of secondary adversities associated with the event” (p. 3). This implies that there must be an “event trauma” before there can be a “process trauma”. Again, some of the incidents reported in the present study are recognisable under this definition with some principals, for example interviewees Gail (see *Gail’s Story*, p. 136) and Trevor (see quote from Trevor, p. 95), identifying the aftermath, or “process trauma”, as being at least as traumatic as the initial incident.

Even some of the survey respondents expressed doubts about what a ‘proper’ critical incident was, despite the definition given in the invitation. In the vignette at right, Mandy comments that her experience “*may not be considered to be a critical incident*”, perhaps in reference to the definition supplied. The “*year of mourning*” experienced by Mandy’s community could certainly be described as multiple, dramatic critical incidents, even though she might not have recognised this. She nonetheless contributed to the survey in an example of the principals’ desire to tell their stories, which was such a feature of the survey responses (Anderson & Dolmage, 2009; Fein, 2001; Maslin-Ostrowski & Ackerman, 2000). To Mandy, and to others, their experiences obviously felt like critical incidents, even though all of those incidents might not have exactly or substantially matched the definition. Mandy defined the situation she experienced by the impact that it had on herself and on her community, not by the elements listed in the definition.

### **Mandy’s Story**

Survey respondent 31, “Mandy”, is an experienced principal of a large metropolitan school. She described a horror year containing a “*series of deaths in our school community which seemed like a critical incident year.*”

The year began with the drowning deaths of a teacher and her husband in the January holidays – they were also parents of children at the school. During that year, four other parents died suddenly of various illnesses, a young student was killed in a car accident and his brother seriously injured, and two staff members were diagnosed with cancer.

Mandy calls this “*a year of mourning*”, and says “*I needed to be strong and calm.*”

Although there was counselling for staff and students, Mandy did not access any for herself. She expressed appreciation for CSO support, which included visits and debriefing.

In concluding her survey, Mandy reflected: *I realise that what I have written about may not be considered to be a critical incident, but for us it was a series of critical and very sad instances. I think we dealt with it well.*”

While principals in this study reported many incidents that would conform to the original definition, such as accidental deaths onsite or community violence on the school grounds, there were twenty-one other incidents that did not substantially match the definition. There were six death events after known illnesses, and four sudden deaths of parents and parish priests. All of these were off-site. Eleven incidents categorised in this study as problematic behaviour or emergency situations (see Table 4.2.1 *Critical incidents by type*, p. 75) are also examples of this type of incident. Sometimes it appeared to be a matter of degree. For example, a parent discovered running naked around the school oval is a very different proposition to a parent confiding in the principal an intention to commit suicide and to harm the children. Likewise, an incident involving flooding in the town that caused a problem with school buses, is on a different scale to a police shooting of a parent on the street outside the school. One could be regarded as a serious event, though within the normal scope of school life, whereas the other fits the expected definition of a critical incident. While the experience of death is always confronting, the expected death of a community member through a known illness might be regarded as a relatively normal event compared to the accidental death of a



student in a sports lesson. The categorising of both of these types of incidents as *critical* indicates the need to explore the elements that might have led the principals to staking this claim.

As already noted, much of the research into critical incidents in schools focuses on the dramatic and traumatic incidents (e.g., Jordan, 2003; MacNeil & Topping, 2007b; Thompson, 2004). There does not appear to be general recognition of other types of incidents that may result in trauma responses, and require support and intervention in a way similar to dramatic incidents. Several studies specifically exclude any other types, such as Donnelly (2006) who defined critical incidents as being “outside the range of ordinary day-to-day experiences” (p. 5), Cornell and Sheras (1998) who claim that “[c]rises are by definition rare and often unexpected events” (p. 297) and Trethowan (2009) who used the term “extraordinary” (p. 2) when describing critical incidents. While Lerner et al. (2006) acknowledge that it “does not take a large scale, highly publicized event to create marked disruption and dysfunction in a school” (p. 12), their manual for school administrators focuses on strategies for dealing with larger scale, more obviously traumatic incidents.

However, Jackson (2003) found that “more commonly occurring events can be regarded as potentially stressful and disruptive to individual and school functioning” (p. 181). Jackson defined critical incidents by the self-reported degree of impact on those individuals involved. She concluded that when “more commonly occurring events” had significant, long term consequences for those involved, they could be defined as *critical incidents*. From a phenomenologic perspective, the meaning constructed by the principals, about the phenomenon they had experienced, influenced their actions and perspectives: they acted in the world they perceived (Moustakas, 1994). The principals’ experience and behaviour are integrated and inseparable. The critical incident is as the principal experienced it and perceived it, not as it might be defined or perceived by others. This is demonstrated very clearly in the survey responses and especially in the interviews.

It appears from the literature that separating the incidents into recognisable types, or identifying different elements, are helpful strategies in understanding the complex issues at work. However, as has been noted, the literature is not consistent in determining how the incidents are categorised (that is, what criteria are used), nor on the labelling of different types of incidents. In the formation of the definition of critical incidents for this study, the weight of evidence in the research literature did not include the notion of more commonly occurring events, nor the emphasis on ‘impact’ as a defining characteristic in the definition. However, as this study has revealed and as Jackson (2003) points out:

... the definition of what constitutes a critical incident in a school needs to be expanded to include the more commonly occurring events which, potentially, can evoke stress, grief or trauma responses in individuals and organisations. This argument emphasises individual differences in responses to critical events, and [leads to an examination of the] ways of dealing effectively with the varying character and intensity of such responses. (p. 2)

In this study, Jackson's (2003) identification of two general types of critical incidents as *dramatic events* and *more commonly occurring events* originally appeared to be but one way of categorising critical incidents (Lerner et al., 2006; New South Wales Department of Education and Training, 2006). However, as the data analysis for this study proceeded and both dramatic and more commonly occurring events became recognisable in the principals' descriptions, this categorisation was adopted in this study. In addition, the identification by Jackson and others (Flannery & Everly, 2000), of the place that *impact* plays in the experience of a critical incident, is also supported by the data in this study and reflected in the findings.

The analysis of the data revealed that both *dramatic* and *more commonly occurring* or *serious* events or situations were identified as critical incidents. While there was some commonality to the factors involved in the different types incidents, there were also differences. In the survey responses, principals named what they believed to be the significant elements of both types of critical incidents. This will be discussed in the next section in order to explore how both types of incidents are experienced as critical incidents.

### **What makes an incident critical?**

While different labels for different aspects of an incident can be confusing, they nonetheless help to isolate and identify some of the inherent complexities. Acknowledging these complexities further emphasises the need to identify the issues involved in a critical incident, in order to better respond to and support those who experience them.

The identification of some of the reported incidents as 'critical' challenged the assumptions of the researcher about what constitutes a critical incident. While 52% of respondents reported an incident involving a death, these events ranged from sudden deaths at school (which would conform to the definition) to the expected death of a staff member due to illness (which would seem to be outside the definition, particularly as such events are likely to be neither unexpected nor disruptive). All principals reporting a death, regardless of the degree of

suddenness or proximity, rated this element as extremely significant (see Table 4.2.2 *Significance of the elements of a critical incident*, p. 76).

From the literature, the element of *unexpectedness*, linked with the notions of *trauma* and *shock*, was considered to be a fundamental part of a critical incident (Cornell & Sheras, 1998; Jordan, 2003; Thompson, 2004). The expected death of a member of the school community from a known illness, while a sad event, would certainly stretch the notion of *unexpectedness*, but for many principals, this type of incident was very significant and they identified it as ‘critical’. There were five child deaths and three staff deaths that fell into this category. Thus incidents involving a death encompassed both dramatic and more commonly occurring events. It seems that a death, whether expected or not, resulted in impacts such as stress, distress, and disruption.

In the vignette at right, Charles’ reflections highlight the impact of a dramatic incident, a near death event, on a very experienced principal who has dealt with many serious and confronting situations in his career. Even though the child survived, it was the closeness of death, both physically (“*in my arms*”) and medically (“*his breathing getting fainter*”), that impacted so powerfully on Charles. In his long experience as a principal he had been confronted by incidents more dramatic than this one, but it was the impact of the close physical context that proved most significant for him. Asmussen and Creswell (1995) explored the impact of a “near miss” incident in which, while there was the threat of death, no deaths eventuated. Asmussen and Creswell concluded that because of close physical proximity to the threat of death, “the trauma of no deaths is as great as if deaths had occurred” (p. 10). Charles’ reaction to the near death of a student would support this finding.

#### **Charles’s Story**

Interviewee Charles is a very experienced principal in a large metropolitan school. He described an incident in which “*A child had an anaphylactic reaction. Went unconscious. Nearly died in my arms. He was taken to hospital and regained consciousness some hours later.*”

In his interview, Charles described how he held the child and watched “*his eyes closing and I noticed that his breathing was getting fainter.*”

Although the outcome of this incident was a happy one, Charles acknowledged the shock was still with him, 2 years later. The researcher asked him why, from all the incidents in his long experience as a principal, this was the incident he chose to describe for this study. He responded:

*“This was death. ... all these other things are minor. The death is major. I’ve never had a death. [pause] In my arms. [pause] Yes, that’s the real thing.”*

When the incidents involving death and/or serious injury were combined, 81% of these were rated as *extremely significant*. Other elements that the principals rated as *extremely significant* were the elements of disruption (73%) and of causing stress and/or distress (70%).

Unexpectedness as an element was rated by 86% of respondents as *significant* or greater. These elements were all identified in the original definition and confirmed in the literature.

Another type of incident that challenged the initial notions of critical incidents was the identification by fifteen principals of confronting child and parent behaviour. As previously noted, eleven of these incidents appeared to be relatively normal occurrences, particularly the management of student behaviour. Problematic behaviour by parents, involving violence or the threat of violence, highlighted the physical and sometimes psychological vulnerability of principals and their staff members, as expressed by two principals in the quotes below.

*“I think it’s the scariest thing that I’ve had happen. Particularly [when] he threatened me.”* (Interviewee Gillian after dealing with an aggressive parent during a long term custody dispute)

*“I became very concerned for the school about front office vulnerability”* (Respondent 28, after threats made to school staff during a custody dispute)

Similarly, school emergencies, which accounted for 27% of reports, included a gas bomb explosion that resulted in children being hospitalised, to an instance of vandalism during the night. A high level of severity, which might have led to the incident being recognised as critical, was not immediately obvious when considering some of these incidents.

The principals also identified additional, contextual elements, not contained in the original definition, that they reported as significant in the experience of a critical incident. Table 4.2.3 *Other elements of a critical incident* (p. 77) and Table 4.2.4 *Compounding factors of a critical incident* (p. 78) both identify other factors that the principals believed added complexity and trauma to the incidents they described. These additional factors, as named by the principals, were:

1. *Impact on the principal*. This is described as emotional/psychological, and long term. Although this is already identified in the given definition as ‘stress/distress’, the possible long term nature of this impact has not been fully recognised in the research to date.
2. *Negative parent reaction*. This could be classed as part of ‘disruption’.
3. *School management issues*. This is already identified as ‘disruption’.
4. *Inexperience of the principal*
5. *Multiple incidents* in the same community
6. *Involvement of other agencies*, especially media

The principals reported that these kinds of factors influenced how the incident was experienced, and the impacts were felt by members of the community. The factors of impact on the principal, negative parent reaction and school management issues (factors 1, 2 and 3) are recognisable as being already included in the original definition, and as elements of dramatic events. Negative parent reaction, school management issues and principal inexperience (factors 2, 3 and 6) would contribute to the disruption of normal school life. However there are other aspects of these factors that are not recognised in the literature, but identified in this study.

The long term nature of the emotional impact (phase 4) and the management of a negative parent reaction are named as significant issues in this study but not identified as possible elements of critical incidents in previous research. These issues impact quite directly on the principals. How a parent group might react to an incident would be part of the background context to the situation and managing this reaction would be the responsibility of the principal (Whitla, 2003b). Other contextual issues, such as principal inexperience, the occurrence of multiple incidents and the involvement of other agencies (factors 4, 5 and 6), might be regarded as ‘process trauma’, as identified by MacNeil and Topping (2007a). Being new to leadership (factor 4) may increase the anxiety of the principal and impact on the many issues that the principal would be expected to manage. Multiple incidents (factor 5), whether large or small, take a toll on the resilience of those dealing with them (Flintham, 2003; Said, 2001; Whitla, 2003b). The intervention of outside agencies (factor 6) is included in the original definition, but principals differentiated between police/emergency services as being very supportive, and the media, which principals found to be intrusive and increasing the stressful nature of the incident (Anderson & Dolmage, 2009). The issue of media adding to, or even defining the incident, is well recognised in the research. Fein and Isaacson (2009) write of “the media’s constant aggressive attention to the crisis [as being] second only to the [crisis] itself in its potential to traumatize” (p. 1338).

The different impact factors, reported by the principals in this study, reflect those identified by Werner et al. (1992) in their much-quoted study (see Chapter 2 Literature review, p. 17). The six factors identified by Werner et al. help explain how some more commonly occurring events could have such significant impact. The first three factors are: (1) child victims, (2) enormity of incident and (3) multiple deaths/injuries. These are immediately recognisable as critical: that is, they are dramatic events that display what could be called *immediate criticality*. The significance of child victims, and death events has already been noted in the data. The other three factors are linked with the context and connections of the person(s) involved. These are: (4) first experience of death, (5) being unprepared and (6) existing

connections with the victim(s). These three may be present in an obviously dramatic incident, but they could also be present in a more everyday event, a “more commonly occurring event” as described by Jackson (2003). It is in this latter situation that these context and connection elements, when accumulated, can tip the impact of a more commonly occurring event into the critical category, for the individual concerned (Bonanno et al., 2010). This effect could be called *accumulated criticality*.

In this study, incidents in country towns appeared to have many of these context and connection factors that, when added together, created a crisis effect for the principal. *Sandra’s Story* (p. 142) and *Simon’s Story* (p. 141) are examples of this. In particular, the close community connections and low levels of available support are contextual matters that directly affected the aftermath (phase 3) of the incident, and the long term impact on the principal (phase 4). Another example is the reported instances of ongoing parent threats against the principal, as described in *Anne’s Story* (p. 65). It was the accumulation of small instances that built up to a distressing situation for the principal. This effect will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

Investigating the issues around what makes both dramatic and more commonly occurring events into critical incidents reveals that these two types of incidents display different pathways to criticality. The elements of both dramatic and more commonly occurring events that contribute to *criticality* will be discussed in the following sections of this chapter, along with the notions of *immediate criticality* and *accumulated criticality*. This leads, in this chapter, to a revised definition of a critical incident.

### ***Dramatic events***

Dramatic events are easy to recognise as critical incidents. They are typically sudden and unexpected, often involve violence and/or high levels of community involvement, and those involved would experience immediate elevation of stress levels. These incidents are likely to have significant media coverage, high disruption and the involvement of external agencies such as police. They would be immediately understood to be critical incidents and would display *immediate criticality*. While Jackson (2003) did not identify particular elements of dramatic events, she gave examples that would fit this categorisation. These included: “major accidents involving multiple fatalities and/or serious injury, or emergency or threatening situations such as a fire, explosion, bomb threat or armed intruder ... other large scale events involving death, injury, assault, or misadventure, or events where students or staff witness serious injury or death” (p. 1).

The dramatic events in this study, listed as follows, conform to Jackson's examples. Dramatic events described by the principals were:

- Deaths and serious injuries on-site
- Deaths by violence or accidents, off-site but involving members of the school community
- School buildings damaged or destroyed through fire or vandalism
- Community violence resulting in police presence at school
- Emergency procedures enacted in response to a bomb threat or a police warning

All of these incidents were characterised by suddenness and unexpectedness, and a subsequent disruption to the work of the school, criteria already identified in the original definition. The vignette *Annemarie's Story*, at right, is one of the dramatic incidents described in this study. It conforms to the traditional notions of a critical incident. There was the sudden, traumatic death of a child, witnessed by students and staff; the involvement of police, ambulance and media; disruption to the school's functioning; and high levels of stress and distress. Also significant is the long term nature of the impact (phase 4) on the principal.

### Annemarie's Story

Interviewee Annemarie was an inexperienced principal of a medium sized suburban school. She wrote: *"Senior students were having sport close to the road. A bus was turning into our street and knocked a child on a bike. The child was killed. The bus driver [was] upset and our students shocked."*

The boy was a student from the nearby public school, and known to many of the students. Annemarie heard the crash and went onto the street. The child was wedged under the bus, and Annemarie *"sat on the road and held his foot and kept speaking to him till the ambulance arrived. After the boy left the scene, I sat on the gutter with the bus driver for a long time then brought him into school where he had a cup of tea and called his wife."*

Annemarie spoke of how she felt compelled to stay with the boy and wrote that she *"bonded in a way to the boy, you know, just holding his foot for ten, 12 minutes."*

While Annemarie stayed with the boy and then the bus driver, school staff managed issues with the class that witnessed the accident, and the parents who turned up to check on their children. A parent assisted with the hordes of media that attended the scene.

Annemarie spoke of nightmares *"of the blood and the vomit [on the road]"*, which she experienced for years afterwards.

Critical Incident Management Plans developed by institutions often give similar examples of dramatic events in their definitions of critical incidents (Diocese of Wagga Wagga, 2009; Government of Western Australia, 2009). The dramatic incidents in this study, as listed above, were immediately recognisable as critical, displaying elements that would signal immediate criticality (Donnelly, 2006; MacNeil & Topping, 2007a; Said, 2001). They affirm Jackson's categorisation and fit the generally accepted definition of a critical incident.

The elements that were identified in the original definition of a critical incident thus proved adequate in relation to recognising dramatic events. In the more commonly occurring events, some of these elements could be identified, although sometimes to a lesser degree. However, in attempting to understand how these other types of incidents came to be regarded as critical, close examination revealed that there were other factors common to this type of incident. These will be discussed in the next section.

### ***More commonly occurring events***

In every identified critical incident described in this study, there were complex, interconnecting factors that led to substantial impact on the school, and/or on individuals in the school (Janes, 2010; Johnson, 2000; Whitla, 2003b). As was noted in the data analysis in chapter 4, none of the incidents described in the survey responses could be categorised in a single category. This was especially the case for these more commonly occurring events. This category includes incidents that might be regarded as an expected part of the life of a school, like an instance of child aggression, or the death of a parent. These types of incidents, while requiring careful attention and possibly some intervention or support, would usually be within the normal expectations of the life of the school, and the role of the principal.

The more commonly occurring event as a critical incident was reflected in the data with 30% of the described events fitting this category. These types of incidents were as follows:

- Child behaviour: distressed, disturbed, aggressive
- Parent behaviour: distressed, disturbed, aggressive
- Expected and unexpected deaths of community members from illness, off-site
- Multiple commonly occurring events, particularly concerning parent behaviour

When considered against the original definition, there were several issues that became apparent. The element of unexpectedness, so evident in dramatic incidents, was sometimes not present in these incidents, particularly in the expected deaths of parents due to illness. The management of confronting student or parent behaviour would, on the surface, appear to be a normal part of a principal's work, rather than a crisis situation. Some of the more commonly occurring events displayed minimal trauma initially, but the aftermath was particularly difficult. It appeared that contextual factors could produce a more intense aftermath, the 'process trauma' previously identified by MacNeil and Topping (2007a). Incidents that resulted in media attention or negative community reactions, and the ongoing situations of parent harassment of principals were reported to be especially stressful (Anderson & Dolmage, 2009).



Negative media attention was another contextual factor identified by the survey. *Gail's Story*, at right, illustrates how media attention, because of the connections with another incident in the public domain that was both close in time and type, escalated a commonly occurring event into the critical category. Added to this was the fact that there was little support from the CSO, as there was a separate crisis in the region that had been prioritised by the CSO. Thus, this incident's criticality was increased by the accumulation of the following elements of context and connection:

- It was close in time and close in type to a dramatic critical incident in the public domain
- there was intense media attention;
- there was a negative parent reaction; and
- there was little support from the CSO.

Gail was very explicit about the impact of this incident on the community, and on herself. She says that it took the following year for the community to move on, as the boys moved into high school, but that family relationships were fractured and parents remained hypervigilant about student safety. For herself, Gail expressed that she felt that she handled the situation well, despite the minimal support from the CSO. Because she was new to the school and had no previous links with the community, Gail reported that she gained credibility with the community for displaying strong, assured leadership. In this situation, the context worked positively for the principal. This type of positive impact is also reported in the literature (MacNeil & Topping, 2007b; Paton et al., 2000).

As this study is focused on the experience of the *principal*, it needs to be noted that every principal will bring to a situation their own history, and their personal factors of capability, risk and resilience (Fein, 2001; Flinham, 2003; Paton et al., 2000). Whether incidents are initially dramatic or more commonly occurring, these contextual elements, especially those of connection, will have direct consequences for the individuals involved and on how the incident plays out in phases 3 and 4.

### Gail's Story

Interviewee Gail is an experienced principal of a mid-sized suburban school in a very multicultural area. She wrote in her survey: *"Yr 6 student brought a kitchen knife to school. Showed a couple of his friends ... Student indicated that he had it to protect himself from \*\*\* who was mean to him. Incident occurred days after student [was] knifed and killed in another interstate school."*

Gail was confident in dealing with the initial incident and was working with the families of the two boys. Police arrived at the school at dismissal time, which started a parent panic. The media turned up at the school the next morning, having been notified by a parent at the school. Gail identifies "*media exaggeration*" as "*very significant*", as was the "*heightened anxiety of the parents*".

Gail acknowledged that the other, fatal incident "*was actually going to make our incident seem worse than it may have been to parents ... That's exactly how the media portrayed it.*"

She writes that after the incident, there was a negative "*community perception re safety of the school*".

The incidents described by the survey respondents had complex and varying factors influencing the impact. The factors included (a) the broad *context* of time, place, situation and persons involved, both before and after the incident, and (b) the particular element of *connection* between and among the broader elements. These events became critical incidents because of *context* and points of *connection* – an accumulation of factors that increased the *criticality* and consequently, resulted in significant impact on the community, and/or on individuals in that community (Jackson, 2003; Lerner et al., 2006). Examining the background context and the points of connection of both incident and principal proved to be illuminating in coming to an understanding about why these commonly occurring events had such an impact on the principals.

### **5.3 Context and connections**

As demonstrated in the stories of the study's participants, there were many situations in which the context and connections involving the incident itself, the school, the community and/or the principal had a direct bearing on the impact experienced by those involved. These elements had the ability to interrelate and accumulate, and to thus intensify the stress and distress experienced by the principals. The more commonly occurring events in this study, described by the principals as critical incidents, display accumulated elements of context and connection. It is possible that the more commonly occurring events are less likely to be understood as critical incidents by the governing systems, and thus the principals are likely to be relatively unsupported (see *Simon's Story*, p. 141). Interviewee Simon says, "*No-one really thought it was much of an incident*". The elements of context and connection interrelate and accumulate, and can turn a more commonly occurring event into a critical incident. This accumulated criticality can lead the principals to experience similar kinds of impacts as in those who experienced the more dramatic events (Jackson, 2003; Lerner et al., 2006).

The contextual elements of school, community, support, the principal's own personal context, and the previous history of all these elements can influence how an event is experienced. The following diagram (Figure 5.1 *Context and connections*) illustrates the different contextual elements that form the background to a situation in a school.

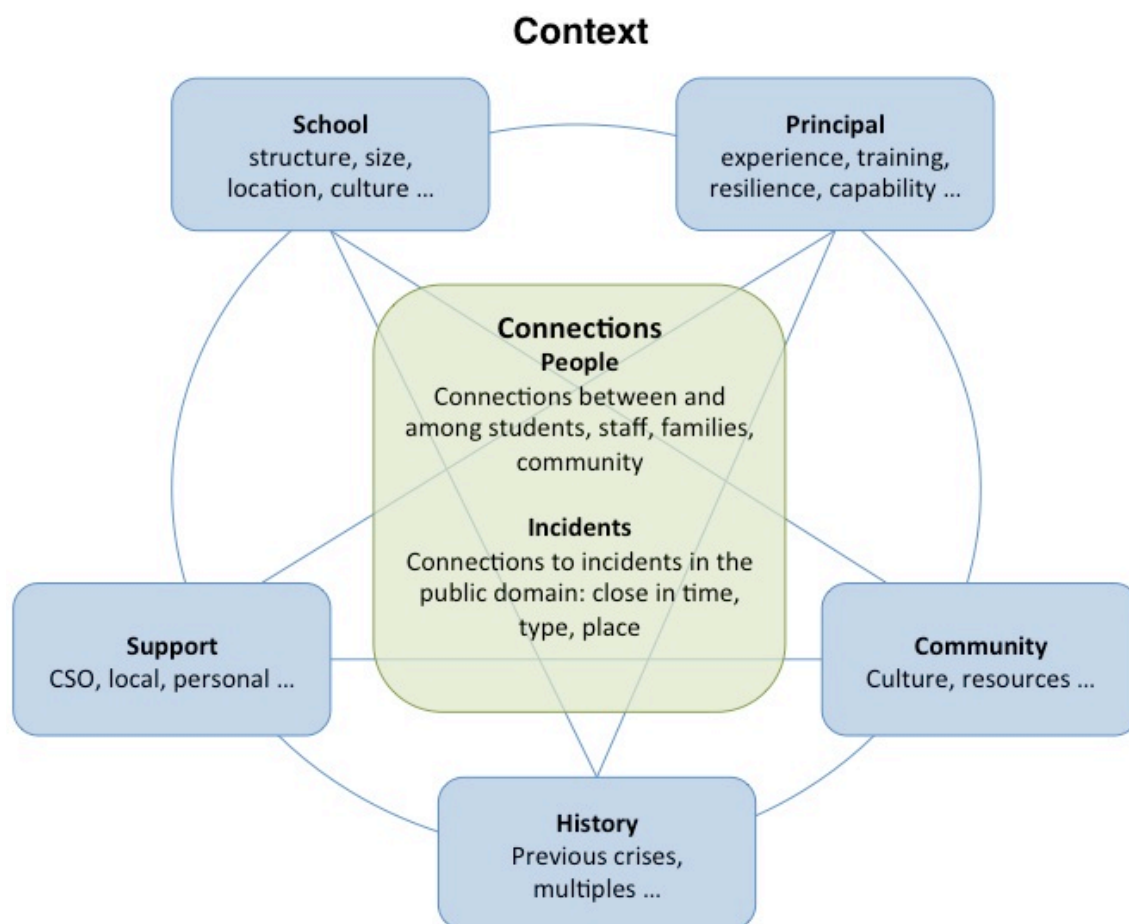


Figure 5.1 *Context and connections*

In Figure 5.1 the different elements are linked by the circle and the intersecting lines, in order to demonstrate that they interact with each other. The specific contextual element of *connections* is sited within the context circle. All these contextual elements have a bearing on the experience, through all phases of the incident. Figure 5.1 illustrates the multi-factored aspect of the background context in critical incidents. A further explanation of the identified contextual elements follows.

*School contextual factors* could include the following:

- The presence or absence of middle leadership is directly related to the size of the school, thus impacting on the responsibilities that the principal must carry alone. This was reflected in the comments of some principals of small schools, and interviewees Simon and Steve in particular.
- The geographical location of the school, particularly its isolation, may result in the absence of external support (e.g., counsellors) for the principal and the school (see *Simon's Story*, p. 141).

- The internal school culture (e.g., whether there is a collaborative, consultative approach to decision-making, or if there is a predominance of young, inexperienced staff) will influence how an incident might be perceived, how it might be processed, and how the principal might experience support. Interviewee Karen spoke about the collaborative culture in her school and how, because of that, she felt supported through the incident she described. Survey respondent 43 made the point that because support may not be forthcoming from elsewhere, building a supportive culture in the school is a more realistic way of managing an incident. This is widely supported by the literature (e.g., Paton et al., 2000; Tehrani et al., 2002).

*The principal's contextual factors* could include:

- The level of leadership experience, both in terms of years in leadership roles, and experience in managing other critical incidents could impact in both positive and negative ways. Some principals, for example interviewees Mal and Gail, expressed how the successful management of an incident increased their confidence in their ability to manage any other serious event. However, while it might be assumed that more experienced principals would be more confident in their leadership, Table 4.4.4 *Length of time of negative impact on principal*, (p. 104) demonstrates that there was a greater percentage of experienced principals who reported long term impacts than their less experienced peers.
- The type and relevance of training and preparation that the principal has experienced may have an impact on the confidence and capabilities with which the principal approaches the management of the critical incident and aftermath. Principals named this as a significant issue for them (see Table 4.5.3 *Advice for school systems*, p. 116).
- The principal's own personal resilience is always going to be variable, depending on many factors. This is demonstrated in the comments of some of the interviewees (Simon, Steve) in describing their feelings of inadequacy (Fein & Isaacson, 2009; Flinham, 2003).
- Leadership capabilities in general, and leadership style will impact on the approach and strategies that the principal may bring to bear on the task of leadership in this context. This will be influenced by the other factors already named, such as the school culture and personal resilience. The importance of leadership style and competencies is well supported in the literature (e.g., Brack et al., 2009; Dutton et al., 2002).

*Community contextual factors* could include:

- Expectations and perceptions arising from the community. The particular nature of Catholic primary schools existing in parishes gives rise to expectations from the community, and from the principals themselves, about how far the responsibilities extend (ACCPA, 2005). This is reflected in the number of principals who were involved in, or responsible for funeral arrangements. Other types of communities may have expectations born out of their own cultural, ethnic and religious contexts. (Lindle 2008).
- The presence or absence of support structures within the local community (e.g., hospitals, emergency services) and the socio-economic background of the community (Brown & Bobrow, 2004). The supply of counsellors in some rural communities is an example cited by some of the survey respondents.

*The historical context* of the incident could include previous experience of critical incidents that may have sensitised members of the community or, conversely, given them confidence. The impact of multiple serious incidents within a school or local community could result in a heightened response and an accumulation of stress factors. Interviewee Sandra described such a scenario, as did survey respondent 31. Whitla (2003b) refers to a community's and also individuals' "history" (p. 35): that is, any previous experiences that may be in the background of a critical incident. Sometimes, these incidents may not be particularly 'critical', but experienced in a sequence or over a period of time, could tip a community or individuals into the critical zone. The situations of parent aggression targetting the principal (for example, *Anne's Story*, p. 65) are examples of this phenomenon.

*The support context* is implicated in the other factors. Certainly, principals name the availability of appropriate support for all members of the community as important for recovery from a critical incident. As previously detailed in this document (see Table 4.3.3 *Preferences for additional support*, p. 92), the principals clearly name their preferred support, including acknowledgement by and presence of CSO personnel, appropriate preparation and training, long term counselling support and the opportunity to debrief after the incident.

*Connections* between and among people and incidents have consequences for how the incident is experienced. In a primary school community, there are likely to be complex and multi-layered relationships between and among staff and parent groups, especially with the possibility of some members of staff also being parents of students (see *Sandra's Story*, p. 142). This is also true for community relationships, particularly in country towns where the

principal and staff are likely to live in the town. The connections between incidents can also have a bearing on how the critical incident is perceived. As illustrated in *Gail's Story* (p. 136), the superficial similarity of a relatively minor incident to a recent major incident caused an over-reaction by parents and media. Of course, in some instances, strong connections could provide support within the community, as was reported by several principals (Anderson & Dolmage, 2009; Hull, 2012). Sandra and Mal (see *Sandra's Story*, p. 142, and *Mal's Story*, p. 152), while identifying long term stress and many contextual implications, also acknowledged the importance of the community support that was extended to them.

The accumulation of context and connection factors can provide a tipping point into a stress response. The vignette at right, *Simon's Story*, illustrates this. If there is a previous history of loss in a community or for the principal, then a seemingly unremarkable incident could prove to be this tipping point. Within a town or suburban community, if there have been earlier issues of conflict or disruption, then the school could be the focus of a negative community reaction to an otherwise minor event. These elements of context and connection can interweave and accumulate to a critical degree, resulting in significant impact on the principal and/or the whole school community, sometimes long term.

In describing how more commonly occurring events can be experienced as critical incidents, Jackson (2003) gives examples that include:

... commonly occurring deaths, including those that have occurred outside of the actual 'boundaries' of direct face to face school responsibility (such as the death of a student, colleague or family member outside of school hours) ... [and] events such as professional misconduct or conflict, or vandalism and theft ... (p. 104)

### Simon's Story

Interviewee Simon was an inexperienced principal of a 3 teacher school in a small country town. He described the unexpected death of a parent though illness.

Being a small, isolated town, there were many points of connection between staff and families, so every aspect of this death was very public in the local community. "... *the whole town hears the ambulance sirens.*" Simon reported that he had lost his own father at a very young age and that he identified with the bereaved children.

Simon voiced his concern about his own perceived inadequacy in supporting the grieving children. He said "*I hope I've done the right thing and haven't caused damage. Even though you might do it accidentally, that doesn't really help you, I don't think.*"

Simon was also anxious about supporting his staff, and about his responsibility to speak appropriately when asked about the death. He expressed dismay that he did not feel he had the skills to support his community. "*I knew I just didn't know. It's not from lack of trying, but it's just I don't know.*"

In addition, Simon expressed feeling isolated and unsupported. He wrote:

*"No-one [from CSO] really thought it was much of an incident. I think this was because we are a small rural school far, far away (in the eyes of the CSO) from the city. Out of sight out of mind."*

Simon's experience of the death of a parent might seem to be a serious, but not unusual episode of normal school life. However, the contextual elements surrounding the principal and the school led the principal to experience significant distress and guilt about his handling of the situation. His inexperience, his own history of loss, plus the isolation and lack of support or acknowledgement from the CSO were important elements in leading to this incident being experienced as a critical incident. The impact on the principal of this not unusual event was quite profound.

Jackson (2003) recognises that some death incidents are a normal part of school life. Although principals rated incidents involving death as the most significant (as discussed previously in this chapter), it is apparent that the context and connections of the death need to be taken into account in order to understand how a death, such as described in *Simon's Story* and in *Sandra's Story* (at right) might have such an impact.

It was apparent that in some cases, because the system did not recognise the critical nature of the situation, support was not forthcoming. Both Simon's and Sandra's stories illustrate this aspect of the more commonly occurring event. The lack of support added to the principals' distress and appeared to be a factor in raising the criticality of the incident for them. Jackson's examples of more commonly occurring death events as critical incidents are recognisable in this and other incidents reported in this study.

### **Sandra's Story**

Interviewee Sandra is an experienced principal of a large outer suburban school. In her survey, she wrote bluntly "*Child of secretary died; 5 days later teacher died.*"

In her interview, Sandra described the sudden death of her secretary's young adult son: a young man who had been a student at the school, who lived nearby and was a frequent visitor to the school. He was well known to the staff, some of whom had taught him, some of whom had been his friends and classmates.

This tragic death was followed within a week by the death of a loved teacher who had been battling cancer for some years, but whom staff had not expected to die. The community had been very involved in supporting this teacher through her illness. Her two children had been students at the school, her sister-in-law was also on the staff and her husband was a teacher at the secondary school across the road.

Sandra had experienced cancer herself and said that "*my own life story*" meant that she was "*able to be a good friend to her [the teacher] at that point in time.*" Sandra "*was with her the night before she died*".

The young man's funeral was "*on the Friday and she [the teacher] died on Sunday*".

Adding to the grief were two other matters. The teacher's funeral was on the day of national testing, and CSO refused permission for the test to be scheduled so that all staff could attend the funeral. Staff expressed anger at this decision. Secondly, the end of that week was Census day and the secretary, whose skills and knowledge were required to complete it, was away, due to her son's death.

Several times in her interview and survey, Sandra speaks of "*exhaustion*". She pleads

*"Importance of system sensitivity to local needs – incidents may become 'critical' in different contexts – the incident I've described was critical in our local community because of the nature of the community."*

In this study, some principals themselves identified particular contexts and connections that influenced how the principal and the community experience the incident (Bonanno et al., 2010; Donnelly, Hull, 2012). Interviewee Sandra, in the vignette above, describes how important community connections can be. As is also illustrated in *Simon's Story*, the context and particularly the connections between and among members of the community were important factors in the experience of the incident. Sandra describes the lack of support from her system. She believed that the CSO did not recognise the situation as a critical incident because they did not understand how the local context, and the connections between and among members of the community, contributed to the impact on that community. As well as the grief felt by the community for the deaths, the lack of system support and the resentment felt by the staff, were extra issues that Sandra had to deal with. Thus were the stressors accumulated, the incident criticalised and the impact heightened.

It is beyond the scope of this study to identify the positive or negative influences that the different elements of context and connection may have on the impact of the incident. Further research could examine elements such as principal inexperience, isolation, previous training or experience, capability factors, and the level of support, in relation to the impact of incidents on principals.

Another contextual factor, identified in this study, is the issue of multiple incidents (See Table 4.2.4 *Compounding factors of a critical incident*, p. 78). Even if the incidents are of a small scale, they can have a cumulative impact on the principal and the school community. If the incidents occur in a short space of time, there's no time to 'get over' the first incident before the next one hits. If several incidents occur over a longer period of time, then there's an accumulation of stress and disruption.

The previously presented vignette, *Mandy's Story* (p. 127), illustrates the situations that can occur in schools, how multiple incidents can accumulate and add to the stress and distress experienced by a principal. However, what is of particular interest in Mandy's story is her identification of the accumulation of stressors that led to a significant impact on her, and on her community. If the impact is a defining element of a critical incident, as this study has found and is supported by Jackson (2003) and others (Flannery & Everly, 2000; Johnson, 2000), and these contextual and connection elements contribute to the impact, then identifying these elements is important in understanding what makes the incident a *critical* incident for the principal.



The data in this study linked some particular contextual factors with a long term impact described by principals. For example, Table 4.4.5 *Incident types by impact length for principal* (p. 105), reveals that for any incident involving a child's death, 46% of those principals named a long term impact. Similarly, 31% of principals reporting an incident involving violence identified a long term impact. Bonnano et al. (2010) also identified a link between contextual factors and the resultant impact, particularly the severity and length of time of the impact. They categorised these contextual factors as either risk or resilience (i.e. either positive or negative), and described some of the possible variables. They concluded that: " ... it is the combination or additive total of risk and resilience factors that informs disaster outcomes" (Bonanno et al., 2010, p. 24). Cornell and Sheras (1998) support the notion that stressors can accumulate over time. They acknowledge that: "many crises begin as [merely] difficulties ... or a seemingly isolated problem that can escalate over time. From this perspective a crisis is more usefully conceptualized as a process than an event" (p. 297). The gradual accumulation of these factors seems to be important in raising the bar of criticality – the notion of *accumulated criticality*.

Thus separated into two types of critical incidents, it can be seen that dramatic events and more commonly occurring events display different elements that contribute to their criticality. Dramatic events conform to the accepted definition of a critical incident, displaying *immediate criticality* that is recognisable to all. In contrast, more commonly occurring events do not conform to the accepted definition, or conform to a lesser degree. They are characterised by less well recognised elements of context and connection that may accumulate to create higher level of criticality than might otherwise be expected.

What was consistent across all the survey responses for both types of incidents, was the principals' identification of the stress and distress in the time after the incident. The principals themselves defined the incidents they described by the impact they experienced. The impact, a consequence of the experience of the incident plus, sometimes, elements of context and connection, is the defining element of a critical incident. This understanding has come through the particular data gathered in this study, and leads to the need to evaluate the current accepted definition of a critical incident. This will be dealt with in the next section.

#### 5.4 A new understanding of critical incidents in schools

As has been discussed, there are many definitions and explanations of what is, and what is not, a critical incident. It appears that the terms ‘critical’ and ‘incident’ do not cover all situations that result in a significant impact on the principal. Incidents that are customarily describe as critical, that is the dramatic events, are labeled thus because of the sudden increase in stress and distress to an unusually high level. Unexpectedness, suddenness and immediate high stress are implied by the term ‘critical’. The term ‘incident’ implies an instant in time, a ‘one-off’ event. There were 70% of the principals in this study who described these types of critical incidents. However, others have described situations that could certainly result in high stress, but would not necessarily be recognised as ‘critical’, or an ‘incident’. The principals identify these phenomena by the impact that they themselves experienced. These are situations in which contextual factors, or an accumulation of contextual factors, have played a significant role.

In this study, the identification of such a wide range of critical incidents challenges some of the accepted understandings of incidents in schools. The notion of an incident being able to be cleanly defined is not sustained, as the complexities of each incident become apparent in the principals’ descriptions (Brack et al., 2009). It was a feature of the principals’ responses that while they certainly identified with the elements presented in the survey, there were other factors in their situations that had profound impact on them and their communities. It appeared that the principals’ *perceptions* of criticality, how they experienced and made meaning of the incident, were strongly influenced by contextual factors such as isolation, inexperience, and connections between and among community members. This finding demonstrates that current understandings of critical incidents are not well understood by the principals themselves, or their system leadership.

In some of these cases, stress levels were suddenly raised to a high level because of factors such as the closeness of relationships or the previous history of the community. In other cases, a series of situations gradually increased the principals’ stress to unsustainable levels until one more event became a tipping point. In some situations, the aftermath was as stressful or more stressful than the original event. These situations, not always recognisably *critical* nor necessarily even *incidents*, are what Jackson (2003) calls “more commonly occurring events”.

Jackson’s (2003) study of the management of critical incidents and teachers’ responses supports the notion of the impact defining the event. She found that “a wide range of events can be regarded as critical incidents, and that the relevance and severity of the event is determined by the impact experienced by individuals or the school community as a whole,

rather than by any a priori list of events” (Jackson, 2003, p. 180). In other words, the incident’s *criticality* stems from its impact, rather than because it fits a prescribed definition, or contains pre-defined elements. Jackson’s research supports an important finding of this study: that the impact of the incident, as experienced by individuals or the community, is an integral part of the incident and may be the defining characteristic of the incident.

A concise definition is supplied by the Catholic Schools Office of the Diocese of Parramatta (1997) in a now superseded edition of their policy on the management of critical incidents. Although this document explicitly excludes incidents that only involve a small number of people or on an individual, this definition nonetheless gives prominence to the impact that is felt by members of the community.

A critical incident can be defined as any situation faced by members of the school community that causes them to experience unusually strong emotions which have the potential to overwhelm their ability to cope, either then or later. (p. 3)

This definition could be extended thus:

*A critical incident can be defined as any situation or series of events, faced by members of the school community, that causes them to experience unusually strong emotions of stress or distress that have the potential to overwhelm their ability to cope, either then or later. This can include the following:*

- *Obvious dramatic incidents;*
- *Multiple incidents over time;*
- *An accumulation of more commonly occurring, serious events;*
- *A more commonly occurring event or situation which proves to be a tipping point, into a high stress reaction, because of context and connections;*
- *Process trauma equalling or exceeding the trauma felt by the initial incident.*

## **5.5 Conclusion**

The two types of incident which came to be recognised in this study as critical incidents are the dramatic and the more commonly occurring or serious events. Although both types of incidents have elements that cause them to be regarded as critical, those in dramatic events are more immediately identifiable and most closely conform to the traditional definition of a critical incident. The elements in more commonly occurring events may not be as easily observable and require closer inspection in order to identify them (Cornell & Sheras, 1998). It

was the naming of these types of events as critical incidents that first alerted the researcher to the need to review the original definition used in this study.

The understanding of the term ‘critical incident’ is highly subjective and defined by the person who experiences it. This study has shown that principals understand the term to mean an event or situation that has resulted in significant impact on them, and/or on their community. The impact may be experienced at the time of an incident or it may gradually build up. The impact may also continue to be experienced in the weeks, months or years after the incident. Thus a consideration of a broader definition of a critical incident is offered. This new definition highlights the importance of *impact*, particularly in reference to emotions and to the ability to cope. Having explored the issues raised by the questions about the nature and types of critical incidents, the next chapter continues the discussion that now focuses on the principals’ experiences of critical incidents.

## 6. The principal's experience

### 6.1 Introduction

The previous chapter discussed the issues raised by the questions about the nature of critical incidents, as explored through Research Questions 5 and 6, and identified in findings 1-4. Chapter 6 focuses on findings 5-10 that deal with the principals' experiences (see pp. 119-121).

The exploration of this issue is guided by the following 4 original research questions (referred to as the Research Questions). These are:

1. How do principals experience leading their schools through and beyond a critical incident?
2. What are the issues for principals as they lead their schools in the time after the incident?
3. What kinds of support are available to them and how might this be improved?
4. What was the impact of this experience on themselves and their leadership?

These Research Questions allowed the principals' descriptions of their experiences to be the focus of the exploration. The questions were framed so as to gain some understanding of the impact of the incident on the principals, and to identify both the issues that were encountered and the sources of support. Findings 5-10 identify the themes that emerged from this exploration. They are:

5. *Disruption is the most commonly identified element causing stress to principals in phases 2 and 3 of a critical incident.*
6. *In dealing with some critical incidents, principals report being overwhelmed by the level of responsibility they feel.*
7. *In dealing with critical incidents, principals frequently put their own needs on hold.*
8. *Principals can feel inadequately trained for the roles they are expected to assume after a critical incident.*
9. *Principals can feel inadequately supported in the time after a critical incident*
10. *Principals reported that there appeared to be few opportunities to systematically review and evaluate the response to and intervention in the critical incident.*

This study's focus is on the principals' understandings of and reflections on their experiences. As a study using an interpretivist perspective, it has been important to acknowledge that the meaning given to the experience of a critical incident is constructed by the principals themselves (Candy, 1989; Creswell, 2003). Because principals' voices have been missing from much of the research literature on critical incidents in schools, the researcher has endeavoured to give weight to the principals' own words in the data analysis and discussion of results (Moustakas, 1994). In the surveys and interviews, the principals demonstrated that they appreciated the opportunity to tell their stories. For some, it was a validation of their experience. Survey respondent 60 wrote: "*I don't think anyone was particularly interested*", and survey respondent 7 echoed the sentiment: "... *no-one really thought it was much of an incident*".

While excerpts from the surveys and interviews have been presented in the data analysis and discussion so far, these reflections have been somewhat segmented. It seems important, in a phenomenological study that aims to come to an understanding of the whole experience, to explore a principal's account of the whole experience (Lester, 1999; Moustakas, 1994). Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski (2002), in their work on *woundedness* in school leadership, acknowledge the healing power of telling the story: "By telling a story, leaders can endow their experience with meaning. ... By bearing witness to the leaders' stories, we acknowledge and name leadership wounding" (p. 96). As the work of Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski (2000, 2002) identifies, both the telling of the story and the acknowledgement of the story "can be used by leaders to make sense of their crises of practice and aid the healing and growth of leaders" (2000, p. 228). It would seem, therefore, that it could also lead to better understandings of leaders' needs by those charged with supporting them.

In chapter 5, issues concerning the nature of critical incidents were discussed. In particular, the elements that contribute to more commonly occurring events as critical incidents were explored. As has been discussed, when more commonly occurring events are defined by the principals as critical incidents, the level of seriousness of the incident has been heightened by elements of context and connection. These elements, while they can criticalise more commonly occurring events, are present in all critical incidents.

In the next section of this chapter, the story of interviewee Mal will provide the lens through which the issues for principals generally are explored. Flyvberg (2006), in discussing the generalisability of case studies, identifies *paradigmatic cases* as those “that highlight more general characteristics of the society in question” (p. 232). Mal’s story is a paradigmatic case, an exemplar that enables the researcher to shine a light on the various aspects of his experience, in order to recognise similar aspects in other cases. This is not necessarily to generalise about how principals experience a critical incident, but to come to an understanding of the whole experience, not just the parts. Stake (1994) claims that by examining these exemplars or, as he names them, *instrumental case studies*, readers “are shown how the phenomenon exists in a particular case. ... Illustration as to how the phenomenon occurs in the circumstances of a particular exemplar can be valued and trustworthy knowledge” (p. 242).

Although Mal’s story is an example of a dramatic critical incident, it illustrates many of the findings of this study relevant to all the reported incidents. Mal’s story enables an exploration of many of the issues raised by the Research Questions, and identifies many of the threads of the experience that are common to other participants’ experiences; issues and threads that are recognisable in both dramatic and commonly occurring incidents. In the section that follows the exploration of Mal’s story, additional issues that are relevant to the Research Questions will be discussed.

## 6.2 Riding the wave: one principal's experience

Interviewee Mal lives in a coastal town and is a keen surfer. He used the image of being caught on a wave and having to ride it, to describe his experience of dealing with the aftermath of a student's death. This arresting image resonated in the researcher's mind with the descriptions of the experiences of other study participants and so it was included in the title of this thesis. In his interview, Mal explains how he felt at the time, but from the reflective viewpoint that he has come to in the intervening years.

*"... you ride the wave of the week, right at the top of the wave where you need to be, but that's because of you as a leader. You as a person is in there, but everything you have to deal with yourself is put away. That's hidden where it needs to be hidden so you can get on with your job of leading. When that part's over, there should be something that says – that allows for people in leadership to not just say 'Are you OK?' – but to know that you are not."* (Mal)

Like surfers who are confronted with the sort of wave they have never ridden before, principals in this study experienced a ride on a wave that took them, threatened to overwhelm them, and then delivered them to somewhere different from where they had started. Mal's experience highlights many of the significant aspects of critical incidents for principals that have been already identified in the research literature, and in this present study. These features include:

1. Death of a child
2. Significant disruption
3. Intense media involvement
4. Many contextual connections for the principal in the community
5. Involvement in the funeral
6. Significant long term impact (phase 4)

These elements identify Mal's experience as fitting the definition of a dramatic critical incident. His story is presented in the text box following and then, using his imagery of the surfer on the wave, different aspects of this experience for Mal and, to some extent, for the other study participants, will be discussed. Other aspects of Mal's experience, common to other participants, will also be discussed.



## Mal's Story

Interviewee Mal is an experienced principal of a medium sized school in a country town. He describes the overwhelming aftermath of the accidental death of a student on the weekend. The child's family was well known and involved in the school, and in the local community. This generated a very public and intense grief response in the town. In addition, because of some particular circumstances surrounding the accident, there was *"widespread involvement of media from across NSW"*.

**Phase 1. Preparation and training.** Although Mal and his staff had developed a Critical Incident Management Plan for the school, he did not refer to it in his survey or interview. Mal gave credit to his years of leadership experience in enabling him to lead during this crisis. He said: *"I don't know about specific training, there's certainly no such thing as crisis training for principals."*

**Phase 2. Critical incident and immediate response.** Mal was informed of the death on Saturday evening. He called his leadership team and other staff together the next day, and they worked *"... so that when we hit school on the Monday morning we had the resources and plan to deal with all that had to be dealt with."*

During the week that followed, Mal and his team dealt with the traumatised response of the students, staff and parents, as well as intense media and community attention. *"I spent time with the family each day to help them prepare the funeral."* He met with his executive team twice daily to plan, debrief from that day, and to prepare for the next.

Mal's son was in the same class as the deceased child, and his wife was a teacher at the school. Mal reports that he found it difficult to have any respite from the situation even when he went home.

The funeral was held at the end of that week, in the school grounds. It was attended by hundreds of people from the town and a large media contingent, including a helicopter overhead. Mal walked with the funeral procession to the cemetery. The wake was also held at the school.

Mal named counselling for students and staff as *"very helpful"*, but did not access it for himself. In his interview, Mal regretted this, and said that he wished *"someone"* had made him have counselling at the time. He writes: *"The CSO observed from afar pleased with how well I was doing."*

Mal reflected: *"... both the school and me personally were seen as the focus for the community outpouring of grief. We had people 'all over us' until after the funeral. ... people from all over the country (Australia) emailed, rang or called in to share their personal stories with me. ... I had to deal with the media day and night. It was literally the toughest week of my life. I know that I have not fully been able to get over it."*

**Phase 3. Medium term impact.** This phase was worked through during the rest of the year (9 months), as the community grieved, and the deceased child's class mourned her while transitioning to high school. Mal explains: *"It absolutely, definitely impacted on the whole year and I know that - how it impacted on the quality of teaching, it impacted on the quality of learning."*

**Phase 4. Long term impact.** In the six years since the child's death, Mal continued his contact with the family as a younger sibling was still at the school. A Coronial Inquiry went for *"two or three years"*. Five years after the death, when the sibling was in Year 6 and would then be leaving to go to High School, the family donated the funds for a memorial sports facility to be built at Mal's school. This facility was 'opened' with a blessing, a liturgy and the presence of the deceased child's classmates, now in their final years of secondary school. The facility is known by the child's name \*\*\*\*\*'s Gift, and has pink goal posts. There are other memorials to the deceased child in other places in the school. It is apparent that phase 4 is still continuing.

Mal speaks as a leader who is confident in his leadership and proud of what he gave, and still gives, to his community. Even in asking for support, his focus is on his responsibility to his community. He says: *"To know that while you might have done a good job as leader, you had done something very tough and very emotional and very draining. So there needs to be real support somehow given to that leader so that the leader continues to give that to his community."*

Mal's experience of leading his school through and beyond a critical incident is explored through the imagery of the surfer on the wave. Highlighting different aspects of Mal's story, the surfer's experience, allows common threads to be identified in the stories of other principals, and enables the Research Questions to be explored.

Researcher's commentary on the wave analogy is in bold italics. Discussion on that particular aspect of the analogy then follows.

***Choosing to ride the wave. When the wave first lifts the surfer, there is a split second of time to choose to ride it or not but, once committed, the surfer is on it till the end.***

Mal spoke about embracing the leadership of this experience. He could have chosen to delegate the responsibility, or to defer to others, but he was emphatic that the leadership was his (Fein & Isaacson, 2009; Tarrant, 2011b). As identified in the data, most respondents in this study affirmed their leadership and advised their colleagues to trust their own instincts (see Table 4.5.1 *Advice to colleague principals about management*, p. 112). As previously reported, only one principal in this study expressed a desire for someone else to take over. 83% of principals affirmed their confidence in dealing with the incident, both before and after the event. Survey respondent 75 advised colleagues: *"Accept that it will take your time and focus for a period of time ...a genuine chance to lead"* (75). Mal urged his fellow principals: *"You can't do it alone, but your leadership must be strong"*, and survey respondent 22 wrote: *"Everyone is looking to you for leadership at that time. Breathe."*

There were 14 principals (20%) who described a personal growth in their leadership capacity, and many more who expressed pride in how they lead their communities (Paton et al., 2000; Rowling, 2003). Reflecting on the impact of the experience on his leadership, Mal says: *"... my threshold of anxiety is much higher, I suppose. [But] Nothing panics me ever ... I know I can deal with stuff. I suppose it does teach you that. That [experience] would have taught me that I can deal with anything."* This quote demonstrates that managing a critical incident can increase or confirm confidence and a sense of being able to cope with other events.

Although Mal spoke of needing more CSO support, he clearly articulated that it was not to hand over leadership or control of the situation, but to stand beside him, to care for him and acknowledge him, so that he could continue to lead. His focus was on leadership. This was echoed by other participants in their advice to their systems. Survey respondent 16 wrote:

*“Allow the principal to take the lead but stand by and eliminate whatever procedural hurdles that impede progress. Be there with them – make coffee, answer phones – just be there.”*

The business management field identifies the importance of leadership *presence* and *compassion* in times of crisis: important for the recovery of individual members, and also for the long term survival and prospering of the organisation itself (Dutton et al., 2002; McCarthy et al., 2005; Schouten et al., 2004). Mal’s very obvious option for leadership during this week of crisis and beyond appeared to fill both these criteria. Overwhelmingly, principals in this study demonstrated that they, too, understood this, perhaps instinctively (Fein, 2001; Macpherson & Vann, 1996; Tarrant, 2011a). As leaders, they were present to their communities, and demonstrated their feelings of responsibility for the welfare of their communities. However, for principals, themselves employees who needed support, appropriate system presence and compassion appeared to be less consistently experienced.

***Riding with confidence. Once on the wave, the surfer must ride with confidence and ignore any fear, or he may falter. Although the surfer may feel, or pretend to be, in charge “right at the top of the wave where you need to be”, he is actually on the edge of losing control the whole time.***

Mal was conscious that he had to present himself as being in charge. He emphasised that his own self was “*put away*”, while he got on with the “*job of leading*”. He articulated the paradox expressed by many of the interviewees: “*I am very proud of how I led ... [I] have no idea of how I coped.*” This was a commonly described situation for principals in this study. Fein (2001) defined the accepted model of school leadership as one that emphasises stoicism and service. He writes: “The expectation for leaders to be heroic, dispassionate and supremely confident may be unrealistic in the face of a crisis ... yet leaders held these expectations for themselves” (p. 136). The principals in the present study demonstrated this as they wrote about needing to be “*strong for others*” (31) and “*... trying to always remain calm and in control of my emotions*” (21). Tarrant (2011a) explored the issue of leader vulnerability in a crisis, and noted that:

[a]lthough leaders are subject to the same physiological responses as other people when confronted with a sudden crisis or shocking news, people generally expect leaders to control themselves and the situation, and to behave rationally. (p. 65)

Principals in this study expected this of themselves, and had feelings of guilt if they judged that they had not met this standard (see also Rowling, 2003). Interviewee Steve was embarrassed by what he perceived as his failure to control himself by “*breaking down*” (crying) with a distraught parent. He says: “*I guess I always like to hold it together and I*

*didn't manage that*". Interviewee Charles retreated to his office for a "tear or a cry", before emerging to comfort distressed staff. Keeping a tight control on a situation that was in danger of being out of control appeared to have been the strategy for many principals. Over half the principals in this study did not access counselling for themselves at the time of the crisis, even though many acknowledged that it had been helpful for students and staff. Interviewees Mal and Annemarie (see *Annemarie's Story*, p. 134) offer an insight by explaining that they feared that they would not be able to 'hold it together' if they saw a counsellor. Mal says: "... it [seeking counselling] *wasn't a part of my makeup to do that, but it should have been something that was encouraged and it wasn't.*" Annemarie sought counselling support later – Mal did not and, in later years, regretted this.

These findings confirm the significant impact of principals' fear of losing control, as identified by Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski (2002). They explain:

Nothing frightens school leaders as much as feeling helpless and impotent. Whatever the reality of the circumstances, the *feeling* of helplessness is a source of deep wounding. School communities, for their part, are equally unforgiving in these domains. Excusing a lack of achievement based on circumstances out of their control brings little solace to school leaders who believe that they are supposed to be in control. (p. 51)

Similarly, Rowling (2003) identifies a significant impact for principals and teachers in the 'putting away of self', and calls it *disenfranchised grief*. She writes: "Professional expectations disallow the personal response and force individuals to believe that they must 'rise above' their natural inclinations" (p. 155). Mal, and others in this study, exemplify this thinking (Jackson, 2003).

***Mutual support and responsibility. The surfer can't control the wave; he just has to try to stay upright, no matter what it deals him. Other surfers riding the same wave can offer reassurance; show a different line in the wave. Equally, the surfer may feel responsible for his companions' safety.***

Mal sought to impose some control on the week with twice-daily briefings with his staff and the bereaved family, and by rising each day at 4 am to put a plan together. He spoke about the focus he had to exercise, just to keep going. "*How I got through that week I'm not too bloody sure, but it was a necessity.*" Similarly, other principals described how, in phase 2, they just did what needed to be done, without being certain about where their capability came from. Survey respondent 1 wrote: "... I was operating on a "one step at a time" basis ... It turned out I actually had the skills. If asked beforehand if I could handle such an incident I would

*probably have had my doubts!*” The principals in Fein’s (2001) study spoke about the reality of having to make multiple decisions with no time to think about them. Interviewee Annette put it this way: *“Because I had to act & make decisions immediately I had no time to feel either confident or not confident. I just did what I perceived needed to be done.”* Tarrant (2011a) calls this “reactive leadership” and points out that “this may be the only option at times” (p. 75).

Mal’s companions on the ride were both support for him, and a responsibility. He expressed his appreciation for and pride in his ‘team’: a mixture of his school middle leaders and some parishioners. His meeting with them every morning and afternoon was important organisationally but, perhaps, even more important to debrief what each day had thrown up at them. The team helped to ‘steady the board’, so that Mal could ride more assuredly. This was evident in the data showing that principals acknowledged many sources of support in the time of the crisis (phase 2) and afterwards (phase 3). They were grateful to their teams, and also expressed their appreciation of parish priests, colleagues and members of the community (see Table 4.3.2 *Helpfulness of accessed support*, p. 86). Interviewee Annette was especially grateful for the presence of a principal colleague from another school. *“Oh, it was just lovely to see somebody there who was a colleague, but I also guess, someone not from the school as well. I was able to tell him everything and talk to him about it. He was fantastic.”* The presence of someone who could stand beside her, acknowledge the pain but not take over, was obviously extremely important.

At the same time as valuing the support given by others, principals felt burdened by their responsibility for the wellbeing of their staffs, students and parents – they were concerned that the appropriate support was in place for the community, and they worried about their own capabilities in giving support to those in need (Macpherson & Vann, 1996). While Mal spoke of the collegial support that he experienced from his staff thus: *“... we really cared for each other and we looked after each other”*, he also named the responsibility that he took on: *“They [staff] needed my support and they needed my leadership so they got it”*. Other principals described feeling burdened by the responsibilities, and felt alone. Brack et al. (2009) warned that principals could become isolated by the weight of activity and responsibility surrounding them during a crisis. Survey respondent 43 acknowledged this: *“There is always the sense that you are largely alone when dealing with these issues”*. He reflected on how to mitigate this situation and wrote: *“... it is best to build support capacity within the school community prior to an incident.”* This principal understood that support should come from those around him and, in his survey, noted the need to review and learn from the school’s response to the incident, and to build that learning into staff training.

In particular, principals named their feelings of responsibility for staff and student wellbeing. Principals reported the distress of staff and students almost equally in the short term but were still particularly concerned for staff distress up to 12 months after the incident. When asked specifically about options for support, 24% of principals wanted extra staffing in order to release and support their own staff members. When principals were asked for advice for their systems, of the 57 responses there were 14 (25%) specific mentions about extra support being needed for staff, and 2 mentions for students. *“Never to underestimate the effect it can have on staff”*, writes survey respondent 44. It may be that principals consider that there is already a lot of support available for children, but that the needs of the adults can be overlooked. In a school, the principal’s ‘class’ is the staff – take care of the staff and they then take care of the students. It may be easier for principals to name concern for staff wellbeing rather than identify their own need for support (Fein, 2001; Ochberg, 2000; Rowling, 2003). Respondent 40 says: *“I was at a loss to know if what I was doing for staff was what was the best for them.”*

These results about principals’ feelings of responsibility for their staff members reflect previous findings by Paine (2009), Whitla (2003b) and others about the need to care for the caregivers. While much of the literature (e.g., Jackson, 2003; Johnson, 2000; Macpherson & Vann, 1996; Nader & Pynoos, 1993) identifies the principal as the person who is expected to support staff members who have been involved in a critical incident, principals in this study make it clear that there has been minimal, if any, training to prepare them for this role: hence, their anxiety about filling this role satisfactorily. Similarly, there does not appear to be a focus from systems to support principals either in the leadership role with training, or in the role of staff member needing support. Macpherson and Vann (1996), examining the centrality of the principal’s role in the management of the aftermath of a critical incident, assert: “[t]here is an obligation on those who make decisions to be sensitive to how others are affected and to the effectiveness of feedback processes” (p. 35). As important as it is for principals to care for school staff, it would seem equally important for education system leadership to care for principals.

***Rocks and rip in the water. There may be rocks or rips that cannot be seen until the surfer on the wave is upon them: these may threaten his stability and safety.***

Although Mal worked to keep a tight control of the wave of the week, there were some things that he couldn’t foresee until they were upon him. The media, in particular, added to a significant stress load by their demands on him. He explains that he did not feel able to refuse the media as he sought to *“protect the staff and the family”*. He admits that *“the media was a real hard thing [to manage]”* and further describes that he *“got set up pretty badly by the*

\*\*\*\* [newspaper]”. Mal did not elaborate any further on what happened but reflected: “*I didn’t like that they’d used me like that*”. He had realised, on reflection, that he did not have the skills to deal effectively with the media.

Other principals (31%) also named the media as increasing the stress, and of even creating a situation worse than the original incident. Only 20% of principals identified that they had received some training in managing media. As described in an earlier chapter, interviewee Gail felt that the media response heightened the criticality of the incident, by making “*our incident seem worse than it [actually] may have been*”. The negative parent response in this situation was fuelled by inflammatory media reports, and had the effect of increasing both the length of time and the intensity of the principal’s management of the incident (Fein, 2001; Rowling, 2003).

Negative parent reaction as an issue was identified by 6 of the survey respondents, who described rumour spreading, public criticism of the school or school community members, and excessive or unwarranted panic and hysteria. Nader and Pynoos (1993) explain that a common source of parent anger and fear is “the school’s failure to guarantee a protective shield” (p. 8). While the parent and community response in Mal’s situation was not critical of the school, it was certainly intense and it needed careful and sensitive management: it could not be ignored. Other principals also described parent involvement in the aftermath, of the sort that Mal experienced, which would also need to be managed by the principal. The nature of our society is such that any event that impacts on children, and most events in schools will do just that, will elicit an intense parent response (Cornell & Sheras, 1998; Johnson, 2000).

Another rip in the water to be navigated could be the principal’s own level of resilience. A personal history of loss or grief can be an important variable in a critical incident (Jordan, 2003; Paine, 2009). Mal spoke about losing his parents and best friend a couple of years prior to the child’s death, but emphasised that: “... *that week [of the child’s death] was the toughest of my life*”. Similarly, survey respondent 29 described a link between a school incident, in which “... *we had two students die in accidents twelve months apart*”, and his own grief, when he wrote: “*I had lost two close family members at about the same time. It was a dreadful period in my life*”. This principal’s context of personal loss makes him more vulnerable when the school he is responsible for experiences loss and grief. Jordan (2003) identifies proximity to a loss/grief situation as a way of measuring the impact experienced. Respondent 29, like Mal, had close proximity in several contexts, plus the additional factor of child deaths; a factor that has already been identified as eliciting a trauma response (Werner et al., 1992). Paine (2009) further advises:

It is often difficult for principals to recognize that their own history of trauma and loss may prevent them from fully taking on the leadership role in a crisis. Principals need to take stock of their own emotional capacity to cope and be realistic about the duties they can perform. These can be highly visible, such as speaking at a student's funeral or managing a large parent meeting, or intimate and intense, such as offering support to a distraught parent. Luckily, principals do not have to – and should not – be the only leaders in their schools. (p. 14)

The intensity of this experience did not allow Mal any time or space for himself. He led the community's ritual of grief in both private and public ways. His own resilience levels appear to have been breached by the overwhelming nature of this event, and although he relied on others in the management of this aftermath, he was the *only* leader. As he said at the end of his interview: "*I didn't deal with it on my own: I just had to lead on my own.*" This was how he understood the situation and his role in it.

***Skill and experience will help the surfer ride the wave. However, whether the surfer survives it intact or damaged will also be influenced by the wave itself – even very skilled, experienced surfers get dumped, or worse.***

Mal describes himself as an experienced, confident leader. He appears to have strong, positive connections in the community in which he and his family has lived for many years. The wave was Mal's to ride and he displayed confident and assured leadership, but just as no one wave is exactly like another, this incident had complex contextual issues and connections, different from any other incident. It contained many of the elements, identified in this present study, that raise the level of a stress response in the principal (see Table 4.2.3 *Other elements of a critical incident*, p. 77, and Table 4.2.4 *Compounding factors of a critical incident*, p. 78). The data from this study also indicates that experienced principals were more likely than their inexperienced colleagues to have longer-term impact (see Table 4.4.4 *Length of time of negative impact on principal*, p. 104). This may be because experienced principals more comprehensively understood the nature of their responsibility to their communities, or it may be a result of accumulated stress over a leadership career. Flintham (2003) describes how experienced principals can "self empty" their "reservoirs of hope", their stores of resilience, after an accumulation of stressful and challenging situations over a career. He names this "self-emptying" as the "price of principalship" (pp. 75-76).

Mal's knowledge of and commitment to his school and local communities was a two edged sword. The community turned to him for leadership and he states that he did not let them down: "*The school did a bloody good job at supporting that family and in supporting the*



*community and giving people what they needed ... What we did was a gift to that family and it was a gift to this community*". However, this responsibility, and the absolute commitment Mal displayed in taking it on, resulted in some significant hurts for him. The distress that he still feels is evidence of the depth of the wound (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002).

In addition to the impact of the context and connections, and in common with 68% of study participants, Mal reported that he had received no specific training in crisis management. Although his school had developed a Critical Incident Management Plan, this plan did not appear to have had any influence on his management of the incident. Instead, Mal spoke about his years of leadership as developing his confidence and capability. He also acknowledged that his sure understanding of and commitment to his community, built up over the years, enabled him to do what needed to be done. This was further emphasised by interviewee Annette who explained: "*... you're acting from instinct but the instinct also comes from years of life, but also of being involved in schools, and understanding [that] the first principle of a school is to keep the kids safe.*" Like Mal, Annette did not refer to her school's Critical Incident Management Plan in reflecting on the incident in which she was involved. 45% of survey respondents reported that they had a Critical Incident Management Policy (see Table 4.3.1 *Preparation and training*, p. 85). As there was no question in the survey that specifically asked if principals followed a Critical incident Management Plan, it is not possible to determine if principals did or did not use it. The survey responses showed that 66% of principals who responded to this question, advised their colleagues on the importance of having a plan in place, even though none mentioned following a plan as their incident occurred (see Table 4.5.1 *Advice to colleague principals about management*, p. 112). Studies that examine school responses to critical incidents also report a lack of relevance for many established policies and plans (Kerr, 2009; Pagliocca & Nickerson, 2001). For example, considering the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, researchers reported that if a school had had such a plan, it was found to be irrelevant to the situation in which school leaders found themselves (Lee et al., 2008).

***Surviving the wave. The surfer doesn't know how far, or for how long the wave will carry him.***

As Mal has discovered, the death of this child was only the start of a very long and distressing journey – one that Mal acknowledges he is still on, years later. In this present study, 37% of participants acknowledged a long term impact: that is, 12 months or longer, and those reporting this named it as stress, guilt, "*a higher level of anxiety*" (49), a "*more heightened awareness*" (27). In considering the types of incidents that evoked this long term response, the death of a child accounted for 46% of these. Multiple events and those involving violence

(some of which included a child's death) accounted for the next most often cited, with 35%, and 31% respectively. It is perhaps not surprising that principals feel this way: the first responsibility of a school leader is to keep children safe (Lindle, 2008; Ochberg, 2000). Even when the child's death is unrelated to the school, principals like Mal, who feel strongly connected to the child and the family, can experience acute and long lasting distress. Ochberg (2000) points out that, after a traumatic event, "staff members cling to their posts out of mixed feelings of obligation, loyalty and guilt that weigh heavily and slow their recovery" (p. 1). Researchers such as Carr (1994), Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski (2002), Flintham (2003), and Macpherson and Vann (1996), report that principals often have difficulty in separating themselves from the role. Respondent 16, another very experienced principal, described how, although his school had "*moved on in a sound manner*" after the murder of two siblings, he was still distressed 2-5 years later: "*The impact is still there for me.*" Like Mal, respondent 16 is still, years later, in the same school in which the critical incident was experienced. Like Mal, he does not appear to have separated himself from the role of principal, the person responsible for student safety.

***After the ride: tending to the injuries. When the wave has come to an end and the surfer is back on shore, it is time to take care of the injuries.***

In his interview, Mal spoke at length about how he had felt 'abandoned' by the CSO. He tells how hard it was to have 'business as usual', on the Monday after the week of turmoil, and in the months that followed. He says that he wished someone had checked up on him, had made him attend counselling.

*"I guess that's one of my biggest worries is that the stuff you internalise, because you have to internalise it, doesn't get dealt with. ... I wish, when it was over, someone would have realised that: my God, that must have been huge - what can we do to support this individual in coming down from that place, or coming out of that place or whatever? ... So there needs to be real support somehow given to that leader so the leader continues to give that to his community."*

The study reveals that 41% of respondents had no debriefing experience, either from their CSO or a professional provider, after their incidents. Table 4.3.3 *Preferences for additional support* (p. 92) shows that 45% of all survey participants named the need for professional debriefing after the incident. Of the 21 more commonly occurring events reported in this study as critical incidents, 15 had not had professional debriefing, and four of those had also not had counselling. Two other study participants (12, 14) agreed with Mal's strongly worded opinion that CSO should provide compulsory professional debriefing or counselling for principals after critical incidents. In the aftermath of the Columbine High School shootings in

the USA in 1999, the local community mental health centre followed its established policy of mandatory debriefing for all staff (Johnson, 2000). Fein (2001) agrees that compulsory debriefing would ensure that all school leaders would then have access to support.

Leaders were particularly vulnerable to trauma effects because they felt responsible to attend to tasks first and themselves second, if at all. Also the culture of leadership in school seems to promote service to others and stoicism in a crisis. These cultural norms suggest that school leaders have no cultural or organizational structures for receiving support during extreme crises. ... Debriefings (although viewed as intrusive by some leaders), if mandatory and held more than once, might provide opportunities to effectively process traumatic experiences. (Fein, 2001, p. 238)

When asked what types of support they would have preferred, 45% of principals in this study named *professional debriefing*, and 38% named *extra counselling options*. Of the 29 principals who were not satisfied with the level of support they experienced, the most frequently identified preference for additional support (76%) was the opportunity to have professional debriefing. The next most frequently mentioned preference by this group (52%) was extra counselling options. Again and again, principals wrote of the need for their system leadership to “follow-up” – to acknowledge the trauma of the event, to demonstrate the value of the relationship, and to offer support (Fein & Isaacson, 2009).

***After the ride: telling the story. Like many who have experienced something unusual and challenging, surfers want to tell the story of the ride.***

Mal and the other interviewee volunteers patently wanted to tell their stories. There was an eagerness to share and to explain – even as tears flowed and voices faltered. The perceived need to ‘unburden’, to tell the story, emerged even before the interviews, as the survey responses began to be analysed. As previously reported, the high number of interview volunteers indicated that survey respondents were keen to tell their stories, and many responses indicated gratitude that someone was interested in their experiences. Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski (2002) use principals’ stories to provide an exploration of their experiences of “wounding” in leadership. Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski explore the healing power of telling the story: a healing for the principal, and an improved understanding for those hearing the story. As one survey respondent commented, being given the opportunity to tell the story was appreciated.

*“Even doing this survey has been helpful – thinking that someone out there cares about the impact such events have on those who are closely tied up with the trauma. Thank you.” (18)*

Mal and the other interviewees appeared comfortable in the interviews and although some showed signs of emotion, none wanted to stop, or even pause in their telling. All had reflected on their experience and had ideas about how things could be improved – especially regarding support for themselves and their communities. After the interviews, some of the interviewees apologised for displaying some emotion, and commented that they felt quite okay in talking to the interviewer (researcher), because they knew that she understood, having been a principal and having led a school through a critical incident herself (Rowling, 1999).

All the principals who responded to this study indicated that they were tested and challenged by the experience of leading their schools through and beyond a critical incident (Fein & Isaacson, 2009). Metaphorically, the wave tested their stability and their skills, challenged them with unknown and unpredictable conditions, threatened them with a dumping – and they survived to tell about it. All the interviewees agreed that they had learned from the experience: about themselves and about the responsibilities of leadership, the “post-traumatic growth” identified by MacNeil and Topping (2007). Also like a surfer who has ridden a challenging wave, principals wanted to tell others about the ride – to share their feelings, and the sense of having been tested and come through. They also clearly wanted to name what they had learned, and what they needed to successfully ride the next wave that might come along (Fein, 2001; Tarrant, 2011b).

### **Other issues**

Mal’s story enables many of the issues revealed by the other study participants to be highlighted and explored. However there are two very particular aspects of Mal’s experience that require some further discussion and commentary. These issues are (a) the funeral and memorials, and (b) the long term nature of the impact of this experience on Mal himself. Both these matters are experiences shared to some extent by other study participants. In Mal’s case, his experience demonstrates an extreme of response (phase 2) and impact (phases 3 & 4). This illustrates both the impact on the individual and the broader understandings emerging from the study.

#### *Funerals and memorials*

While the initial critical incident was the accidental death of a student, Mal’s narrative focuses on the week following the death, a week in which he was intensely involved in the organisation of the funeral. The funeral was held in the grounds of the school, not in the local church: a very unusual occurrence. Mal says that the decision to hold the funeral and the wake in the school grounds was his, in consultation with the deceased child’s family, as they felt

that the church (which is nearby) would not be big enough. Close involvement in the planning and execution of a funeral is not unusual for a principal of an Australian Catholic school (ACPPA, 2005; Diocese of Wagga Wagga, 2009). In this study, 15 principals mentioned involvement in the organisation of funerals and/or memorials and, as there was no specific question in the survey in relation to this issue, there may well have been more.

However, to hold the funeral in the grounds of a school, rather than the church, would be very unusual. Mal describes this as a “*gift*” to the family and the community. He says it was “*a community event, ... it was a national event and it was very tough*”. It is easy to see how, at the time, this could have eventuated: the principal acted out of compassion for a bereaved family who turned to him for support. In most of the policy documents of Catholic systems in NSW sighted by this researcher, there is advice given around a school’s involvement in a funeral or memorial service, following a critical incident (e.g., Catholic Education Office, 1995; Diocese of Wagga Wagga, 2009). However, in none of these documents is the possibility of a funeral being held in the school grounds canvassed. A phenomenological study such as this has the capacity to surface deep issues that are “not always comfortable” (Lester, 1999, p. 4) for participants and researchers to expose. This is one such matter. There must be questions about the wisdom of holding a child’s funeral in a place meant for another purpose entirely: a place for generations of children to learn and grow.

For Mal, it seems that the child’s death and funeral is now forever linked with the school itself, part of his intense feelings of responsibility for the grief of the family and the community. The memorials to this child, (a floor tile in an outdoor learning space, a sculpture installation in the garden, as well as the sports facility), further emphasise this. Current research on schools dealing with post trauma situations make recommendations about appropriate and positive ways of memorialising deceased members of school communities, with an emphasis on looking forward and acknowledging that, in time, communities move on (Kerr, 2009; Rowling, 2003; Whitla, 2003). In his interview, Mal comments on the advice he had received from a senior CSO leader about a more appropriate placement of the memorials, thus demonstrating that he is aware of others’ concerns about this matter.

In his interview, Mal describes how later that same year, he helped organise two other funerals for members of the local community. He says: “*In this community, people come to me for that sort of stuff*” and “*I’m very good at running funerals*”.

### *Unresolved grief*

Another issue requiring some additional attention is the long term nature of Mal's distress, and his stated resentment and disappointment at what he sees as lack of care from his CSO. In his thesis on the emotional experience of school leaders managing critical incidents, Lake (2004) describes his concern for the principal. He asks:

But what happens to the principal? The principal is the head teacher and administrator of the school and as such may not see the need for personal help, be too busy organizing after a tragedy to consider his or her needs, and or feel that he or she must project an aura of strong leadership in a time of crisis and therefore not take advantage of available programs [of support]. (p. 1)

This description appears to closely fit Mal's situation. He organised support for all in his community: counsellors were available for students and staff; timetables were re-organised so that staff could comfort and support each other, their students and families; expectations of staff were modified to take into account their distress; a drop-in centre was organised for parents needing support. Fein's (2001) study on school leaders who had been involved in school shootings in the USA, reports that the data from his research:

... suggest that exclusively focusing on tasks, excessive impression management, and ignoring one's own emotional and mental state may contribute to rather than mitigate trauma effects. ... Such actions, although seemingly necessary at the time, and perhaps even in the best interests of their schools and districts, may have long-term negative consequences for leaders themselves. (p. 138)

Although Mal's attention to detail, his compassion and decision-making was everywhere for others, it does not appear that anyone filled that role for him. Although he briefed CSO personnel, and senior CSO leaders attended the funeral, it does not seem likely that, at the time, Mal would have accepted advice to care for himself. He writes in his survey: *"I was seen to be doing the job well and, thus, was left to do it. As a community leader this was my responsibility"*. His expressed desire for compulsory debriefing or counselling reveals that, in hindsight, he now understands that he, also, needed someone to care for him and to make some decisions for him that he was not able to make for himself. He says:

*"I'd done what I wanted, what I needed to do, but there was no-one there to hold me up after that. ... I know now that I didn't even ask for help – but it wasn't offered either."*

Mal continued to speak passionately about the need for principals to care for themselves and to build their resilience. He described efforts he had made in his region in recent times to ensure that colleague principals had opportunities to build their resilience: *"... you can grow as a person if you become aware of who you are. If your inner strength is strong and allowed*

*to grow then you are going to be much better at what you do. ... we [the system] should be growing them [principals] as people.”.*

Mal is not unaware of how this issue still lives with him. In his interview he comments:

*“It’s funny that I can run a school, I can be in school and [someone will] bring it [the child’s death] up, and it’s automatically really, really raw and really, really hard ... (pause) ... and I don’t know why.”*

The issue of the long term nature of some of the principals’ reported impacts is a major finding of this study. It seems that the issue of self-care, or “care for the carers” is usually advocated in connection with providing support for counsellors and first responders (Kerr, 2009; Whitla, 2003a). Recognition of the possible impacts in phase 4 is not identified in the system policies cited by this researcher. In exploring Mal’s experience, many of the threads running through the descriptions from all the study participants are exposed and acknowledged. Other threads will be discussed in the next section, which will explicitly consider the four original Research Questions and explore issues not yet identified.

### **6.3 Answering the research questions**

The findings that emerged from the principals’ descriptions and reflections on their experiences enable the four original Research Questions to be answered. The presentation of the experience of one principal, in Mal’s story, has enabled the exploration of many of the significant issues raised by the Research Questions. In the following section, additional issues will be discussed, with reference to the data from this study and to the research literature.

In exploring Question 1, it became apparent that principals describe their experiences in terms of the impact that it had on them as leaders, and as people. Thus Research Questions 1 and 4 explore similar issues, and so both these questions will be discussed together, followed by discussions with reference to Questions 2 and 3.

## **Describing the experience and the impact**

*How do principals experience leading their schools through and beyond a critical incident?*

*What was the impact of this experience on themselves and their leadership?*

Principals describe the experience of leading a school through and beyond a critical incident with very emotive language, focussing on the impact of the incident on their communities and on themselves. In considering Research Questions 1 and 4, the data leads to the particular issues of: (a) emotional impacts experienced, and (b) learning from the experience.

Discussion on these issues follows in the next section.

### ***Emotional impacts***

*“Although I received counselling, the nightmares continued. It was a long time before I could overtake a bus.” (23)*

For the study participants, the most intense feelings that they described seemed to be the overwhelming feelings of responsibility for their schools and members of their community, and the personal distress that stayed with them, long after the incident. This is reflected in the research literature on principals who have been through a critical incident in their schools (Arman, 2000; Fein, 2001; Ochberg, 2000; Rowling, 2003).

It is apparent in reading the survey responses and the interview transcripts, that once the incident erupted, it was all encompassing, all absorbing and stressful. As has been noted elsewhere, the most common word used to describe the impact is “*exhaustion*”. Principals wrote and spoke about the impact on themselves, both in the midst of the experience, and in the months and years later. They used ‘emotion’ words and phrases such as:

*“incredibly stressful ... impacted powerfully” (1); “inner stress, very anxious” (4); “extreme fatigue” (5); “increased levels of anxiety” (8); “everything fell on my shoulders” (10); “I was on my own” (11); “shock, grief, burden of leading others” (16); “I have cried through this survey” (20); “great sadness” (21)*

The words “*exhaustion*”, “*trauma*” and “*stress*” were written in the surveys and emphasised in the interviews multiple times, with 52% of principals commenting on their feelings and emotions. In the text boxes of the survey, more than 50% of participants expressed concern about their leadership capabilities, even though over 74% also expressed confidence in their handling of the incident (see Figure 4.4.1 *Confidence managing incident and impact*, p. 101). As already discussed, principals were more likely to describe strong feelings of distress and a long term impact, if children’s deaths or injuries were experienced. There is no doubt that all



principals who responded to this survey recognised that they had been through an intense experience that challenged and changed them (Fein & Isaacson, 2009).

Principals were concerned to be present to their communities. As illustrated by Mal's story, principals felt strong ownership of the response to the critical incident, and for the wellbeing of all in their communities.

*"I needed to be strong and calm. I needed to give the community confidence that we would get through this (again and again). I needed to be aware of where the support was needed. I needed to communicate clearly with the community."* (31)

It may be that only when everyone and everything else is catered for, can principals acknowledge and identify their own emotional needs. This putting aside of one's own emotional needs, the notion of "disenfranchised grief" (Rowling, 2003), was well reflected in the data. Fein and Isaacson (2009) assert that this comes about as a result of the school leaders' own perceptions of what leadership should entail, as well as society's expectations of stoicism in leadership. They describe this finding as a "sad implication ... that no matter what their personal concept of "leadership" entailed, many of the [study] participants felt a heavy sense of failure that they "had not done enough", even many years later" (p. 1342). It appears that the inability to let go or to request support for themselves resulted in a heavy price that principals paid in phase 4 – feelings of resentment, of feeling undervalued, and feeling that they had somehow failed. Survey respondent 18 wrote about a perceived failure on an issue of confidentiality:

*"I felt absolutely terrible and still do"* (18)

Many principals, despite their distress, described how they were proud of what they had been able to do for their communities, and how they felt their leadership had strengthened, they had learned about themselves, and they had established credibility in their communities.

### ***A learning experience***

*"It turned out I actually had the skills"* (1)

*"I think I've learnt a lot ... I've learned more how the system works and that you have to be persistent with the police and be insistent [with CSO]... Seek help early. Seek help early, be insistent"* (Interviewee Gillian)

Principals reported that they were changed by their experience. While 6 respondents (8.5%) reported a decrease in confidence after the incident, 16 principals (22.5%) reported a personal growth in their confidence levels (see Figure 4.4.1 *Confidence managing incident and impact*, p. 101). In the surveys, principals identified changes that they had made in their schools, or

that had occurred as a result of the incident. These changes indicated principals' learning about how best to manage an incident, and about themselves (see Table 4.4.2 *Changes in schools because of critical incident*, p. 96). These included:

- 24% of survey respondents reported an increased awareness of mental health issues. This refers to both a situation that may have been caused by someone suffering a mental illness, as well as the need to manage mental health issues for staff and students, following an incident.
- Improved understanding of critical incident management – especially the issues of communication, building team support, having processes already in place, knowing where to go for help. *“The situation tested my skills. I was able to keep a level head and manage the situation with competency”* (70).
- A desire to share the experience with others, to help other principals prepare for a critical incident. *“I knew what sort of support to offer Principals going through similar situations. I would know how to deal with similar issues ...”* (38).
- Improved confidence in own leadership: *“more heightened awareness ... more proactive than reactive”* (27); *“The experience builds inner strength”* (4).
- Establishing credibility with community: *“Presented an ‘in control’ demeanour to new school community”* (13).
- Community ‘coming together’ as a result of the incident: *“there was such a thankful, grateful feeling in the community – an appreciation of the people around us.”* (31)

Respondent 49 reported a heightened attention to student mental health and well being, as well as work with students and staff about reporting other students who may be ‘at risk’. *“Programmes for educating and responding to depression and signals of distress”* were instituted at the school after the tragedy. She also reflected on a growth in her own leadership capabilities: *“Despite the tragedy, a critical incident [that is] managed with good intent and teamwork brings good as well as negative consequences. Full and open communication with [the] school community is more key than I realised for many years”* (49).

In summary, the principals described the experience of a critical incident as an exhausting, life-changing, overwhelming experience; a chance to lead that challenged their perceptions about their capabilities. They named the impacts of this experience as a growth in capacity, improving credibility, and long term feelings of guilt, resentment, distress and anxiety.

## **Describing the issues**

*What are the issues for principals as they lead their schools in the time after the incident?*

The major issues identified by the principals in this study are those concerning (a) the management of the disruption to normal routines, and (b) the need to take on intensified roles and responsibilities for which they were not prepared, and did not feel supported. Table 4.2.2 *Significance of the elements of a critical incident* (p. 76) and Table 4.2.3 *Other elements of a critical incident* (p.77) demonstrate that the management of the consequent aftermath had a major impact on principals, and particularly intensified the roles and responsibilities that they took on. Contextual issues (see Table 4.2.4 *Compounding factors of a critical incident*, p. 78) also added to the overload of responsibilities. A discussion on the issues of disruption and aftermath, roles and responsibilities follows in the next section.

## ***Disruption and aftermath***

Critical incidents usually have an immediate effect of interrupting the normal business and routines of the school. In some instances, this initial disruption can continue for some weeks and months and the aftermath can then influence the rate at which school life can return to normal (Anderson & Dolmage, 2009; Lerner et al., 2006). Some of the incidents reported in this study indicate that the aftermath was actually more disruptive than the original incident. Johnson (2000) acknowledges that “[t]he critical incident itself may pale in comparison to the organizational crises that follow” (p. 103). Whitla (2003) points out that some current disaster theories use the degree of disruption as the defining element of a critical incident (p. 34). In this present study, 97% of study participants identified the issue of disruption as significant in varying degrees. In addition, when asked to name other significant elements, they named school management issues, negative parent reactions and contextual factors – all matters that would be disruptive to the normal life and work of the school. Aspects of disruption, different in every situation, can make the goal of ‘getting back to normal’ very difficult to achieve (Kerr, 2009; Poland, 2007).

The business of a school is the delivery of quality education and care for students. Disruption means that that delivery is interrupted at best, and derailed or halted at worst. Rowling (2003) and others (Anderson & Dolmage, 2009; Fein & Isaacson, 2009) warn of the importance of achieving a balance between getting routines back to normal, and allowing for changed circumstances. The breadth of the disruption and the length of time it continues can have significant impacts for students and staff (see Table 4.4.1 *Length of time of impact*, p. 94). This study found that 30% of principals reported that students were still suffering distress, and

41% identified that staff were suffering distress up to 12 months after the incident. Disruptive elements of building changes, media interest and police or legal matters were identified by 10% of participants in that same time frame. The most frequently mentioned disruption was that of changes to school routines: 85% of respondents were concerned about this up to 2 months after the incident, and 35% were still dealing with it up to 12 months afterwards.

The research literature identifies the principal as integral to the goal of returning routines to normal as soon as possible. Nader and Pynoos (1993) detailed the optimal responses to a critical incident in a school setting and observed “that strong leadership by the principal in the aftermath of a traumatic event is critical to the recovery of the school milieu” (p. 4). This will be at a time when the principal is dealing with his/her own responses to the incident. In this study, the following forms of disruption to the education and care of students were noted.

*Disruption to use of buildings.* There may be damage to the school building or parts of the school may be a crime scene and therefore off limits. Survey respondent 57, reporting a fire that destroyed the administration block, wrote: “*total loss of admin created significant disruption to the management of the school. [I] felt responsibility for ensuring that the school continued to operate effectively for students, parents and staff. ... I feel it took about a year to fully get past the situation, what with rebuilding etc.*”

*Disruption to staff performance.* The most reassuring thing for children is, of course, that the adults whom they trust keep on acting normally. Pagliocca & Nickerson, (2001) report that “Research has demonstrated that children’s crisis reactions are significantly affected by the responses of their parents and other important adults” (p. 383). However, the teachers may also be suffering their own stress reactions and be unable to function ‘as per normal’ (Jackson, 2003; Trethowan, 2009): there may have to be substitute teachers, classes may have to be rearranged, or teachers may need significant support. The principals in this study reported that the mental health needs of staff and students were a priority for them. Respondent 45 wrote of the effort required for her to keep “*maintaining calm and dignity during the week [of the sudden death of a teacher] while supporting staff and students as needed.*”

*Disruption caused by support/intervention processes.* In phases 2 and 3 especially, the school can be flooded with extra people ranging from the supportive (police, counsellors), the helpful (extra staff), the anxious (parents needing reassurance), to the intrusive (media). The principal needs to liaise with all these people, manage their various needs (e.g., rooms to work in,

lunch), while still keeping tabs on what is happening for the staff and students (Johnson, 2000; Kerr, 2009).

*Disruption to academic programs.* There may be a need, possibly long-term, to adjust academic requirements and expectations for the students, national testing and accountabilities notwithstanding (Gouwens & Lander, 2008; Kline et al., 1995). This may be because of teachers' and students' mental health situations, and also the teachers' capacity to deliver the educational agenda under disruptive circumstances. As previously discussed, interviewee Mal admitted that the aftermath of the incident had negative repercussions on the performances of both students and staff. It would seem reasonable to assume that dealing with the types of issues listed above, at the same time as providing effective management and educational leadership, would be a significant challenge for a principal who might also be suffering from the impacts of a critical incident. However, while 37% principals in this study reported stress and distress lasting longer than 12 months, Mal was the only respondent to report on the impact of this emotional response on his educational leadership role.

*Disruption to parent/school relationships.* As has been noted, parents will react strongly to any situation concerning their children (Lindle, 2008; Nader & Pynoos, 1993). Whether this reaction is angry and critical of the school, or distressed and looking for support, principals will need to manage it. Respondent 58 managed the aftermath of a bus accident in which several students were injured, and wrote of her need to “*Re-build a relationship of trust with the parents of those students*”.

What has not been clear in the literature to date is an understanding of the many different facets of disruption that this study has identified. Schools are complex organisms and a disruption in one part will effect other parts: exponentially, disruption in the functioning of several aspects of school life can have a significant impact on the goal of ‘getting back to normal’. Gouwens and Lander (2008) and Lee et al. (2008) report that the widespread disruption to many facets of school life after Hurricane Katrina, meant that expectations about school management and educational outcomes, in relation to both staff and students, had to be adjusted. Both reports also identify a lack of relevant planning for the *aftermath* of a critical incident. While the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina was a larger scale event than any reported in this present study, the importance of understanding the many different ways in which aftermath can impact on the life and work of a school holds true.

Rowling (2003) cautions that the extent to which school leaders may be able to quickly return routines to normal “is dependent on the distress they are experiencing and, as a sequela, the

amount of support in any form they do or do not receive” (p. 33). Understanding the impact of disruption to many facets of school life would be a signal to CSOs about the types of support that would be useful/helpful for a principal in an aftermath situation. The issues around support are discussed later in this chapter.

Managing the different aspects of the critical incident and its aftermath requires principals to take on different roles, and magnifies their responsibilities. This will be discussed in the next section.

### ***Roles and responsibilities***

Much of the literature on critical incidents in schools describes the roles that principals are expected to perform in all phases of an incident. Nickerson et al. (2006) assign the principal the title of ‘incident commander’ (p. 68) and the Government of Western Australia’s Department of Education (2009) identifies the principal as the ‘incident controller’ (p. 5). Critical Incident Management Plans are written for this eventuality, indeed some of the educational authorities write their manuals for only this eventuality (New South Wales Department of Education and Training, 2006; Virginia Department of Education, 2002).

Even apart from plans and policies developed by education authorities, previous studies of leaders who dealt with critical incidents, addressed their *roles* in responding to the incident, rather than investigating their experiences (Fein, 2001). It appears from the data in this study that principals took on a range of roles wholeheartedly, in spite of their personal concerns about their capabilities and skills. Survey respondent 53 described her commitment as *“emotionally draining as you have to lead with great confidence and you need to be strong for everyone- you have to hold the community together and keep it functioning as normal as possible.”* She played the role expected of her, and that she expected of herself. In phase 2, as critical incidents unfolded, principals became the coordinators of the response effort. Fein (2001) describes how this situation unfolded for principals in his study:

School leaders made hundreds of decisions about a whole range of issues after the [incident], often with little or no information ... They felt responsible for restoring order and for easing the pain and suffering they witnessed. Most of the responsibilities they faced would rarely have come up under normal circumstances. Additional responsibilities added to their load, which was experienced as pressure, added weight and anxiety or guilt. (p. 229)

These other roles and responsibilities were taken up by the principal, in line with community expectations, regardless of any prior training, preparation or readiness for critical incident

management. The principals described stepping up into roles that absorbed them and took all of their energy and focus (see Table 4.2.6 *Roles played by principals in critical incidents*, p. 82). Some were magnified versions of their normal roles (for example, the pastoral care of students and staff), and others were completely outside of normal expectations (e.g., media spokesperson). Six principals took on the counsellor's role when there were no counsellors available for their communities.

Simultaneously, the principal is expected to support the affected members of the community and co-ordinate the support and recovery process: possibly with some or all of the elements of disruption identified in the previous section (Gouwens & Lander, 2008). Whitla (2003b) advises that all these issues should be attended to together. Fein and Isaacson (2009) describe the multiple roles and responsibilities thus:

... leadership tasks changed dramatically in response to [a critical incident]. In the face of extreme chaos and ambiguity, these leaders restored order, cared for those in their charge, dealt with overly aggressive members of their communities and the media, intervened in the inevitable internal conflicts that continually arose, and steered their organizations through the storms as best they could. Much of their routine work still had to be accomplished as well. (p. 1342)

In summary, principals in this study named issues of management and capability as being the most challenging for them in the aftermath of a critical incident. Principals described how supporting the mental health and wellbeing of staff and students, and dealing with parents and outside agencies such as media and courts, took them away from their core business. Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski (2002) point out: "Excusing a lack of achievement based on circumstances out of their control brings little solace to school leaders who believe that they are supposed to be in control" (p. 51). Principals in this study reported feeling underprepared and under-supported for the multiple management, communication and pastoral care roles that they undertook at this time, and this added stress and guilt to their load.

The many elements of disruption had ripple effects in many parts of school life. In their responses to questions about how support might be better delivered, principals were very explicit in their reflections. This will be explored in the following section.

## **Support before, during and after an incident**

*What kinds of support are available to principals and how might this be improved?*

Frank DeAngelis has been the principal of Columbine High School since before the shooting tragedy that made the name of his school a byword for critical incidents in schools. Since that time, he has been a mentor and supporter of other principals in the USA experiencing tragedies. He spoke after the Sandy Hook Elementary School massacre (O'Brien, 2012, p. 4):

*"It's a reminder of how vulnerable we are as a society. I don't even think they know what they need right now. What they need to remember is how much support is out there."*

Principals in this study were very appreciative of the support that they had received, and very explicit about the support that they had not received. Many principals (39%) did not rate the support they received during and after their reported incidents as satisfactory and regardless of their satisfaction rating, all principals in this study had suggestions on how preparation and support could be improved. They identified what support should be provided, how it should be delivered, and who should be involved in the support. It seemed that the issues of most concern were: (a) 'being taken seriously', needing acknowledgement, presence and follow-up from the CSO; (b) being appropriately trained and prepared for the management of a critical incident; (c) support should be based on working with the principal; and (d) support should be easily available and on-going, for as long as needed.

The principals identified different types of support that was needed at different times. An exploration of the issues of support in the different phases of a critical incident follows in the next section of this chapter.

### ***Support in phase 1 (planning and preparation)***

*"Training, training and more training!" (27)*

*"There is always a sense that you are largely alone when dealing with these issues and that it is best to build support capacity within the school community prior to an incident" (43)*

A notable statistic to come out of this study was that 31% of participants indicated that they had received no critical incident management training. Of the inexperienced principals (that is, those who had less than 5 years experience), 50% had not had any training. This study did not canvas what training or preparation might have been available, but not accessed. The data from this study, and the research literature, identify two particular types of preparation that need to be considered in this context. The first is about awareness raising and skill



development around critical incident management. Typically, this aspect of preparation involves the development of a critical incident management plan. The second type of support involves the development of inclusive, collaborative and compassionate cultures in schools. These two aspects of preparation will be discussed in the following section of this chapter.

The policies from the different education systems advocate the development of Critical Incident Management Plans, which usually include the formation of teams to deliver leadership during a critical incident (e.g., Catholic Schools Office Diocese of Maitland Newcastle, 1999; Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2006). While 45% of study participants reported that their school had a Critical Incident Management Plan, in none of the responses did principals refer to the plan in describing their actions during and after a critical incident. Presumably, principals would have led the development of such a plan in their own schools, or perhaps the plan was developed by the system, and ‘badged’ for each school. Some principals made reference to using a team, the formation of which may or may not have come out of a specific planning document. The formation of a critical incident management team is advocated in most of the policy documents and support literature (e.g., Diocese of Wollongong, 2005; Said, 2001). The effectiveness of critical incident management plans and/or teams was not specifically canvassed in this study, and so it is difficult to gauge the influence that they might have had on the principals’ management of their incidents. This aspect of support would bear further exploration.

Some principals in this study made comment about the culture of the school being important in dealing with a critical incident, especially in the aftermath. Interviewee Karen spoke about relying on an inclusive, collaborative staff culture, saying: *“I think that’s the way it has to work. We have to help each other and support each other when there is a crisis and they do that. ... Have a good relationship and be good to them. Love your employees”*. This sentiment was echoed by Mal in his descriptions of the team he relied upon. The research literature in recent years recognises the importance of a positive, inclusive school culture, both for student wellbeing and education outcomes. Legislation around Workplace Health and Safety (WHS) and child protection has led to an increased awareness in schools of how issues such as building and grounds security, custody disputes and school violence can impact on the community. Proactive work on managing student behaviour, particularly issues of bullying and violence, has ensured that very few principals would be unaware of the need to build school cultures based on safety, inclusivity and positive mental health and wellbeing practices (Department of Health and Aging, 2006; Education Services Australia, 2011). The literature has linked these kinds of collaborative, inclusive and compassionate cultures with improved outcomes after a critical incident. Brack, Hill and Brack (2009) found, after Hurricane

Katrina, that “schools with a greater sense of belonging seemed better able to reintegrate and reconnect – a critical healing factor” (p. 6).

Linking these proactive approaches to successful outcomes for schools experiencing crises, would help to build awareness and improve understanding of the recovery processes in school communities.

***Support in phase 2 (critical incident and immediate response)***

*“Do not leave the Principal to manage alone!” (49)*

*“Act quickly and ensure there is a presence in the school for support” (32)*

As a critical incident unfolds in a school, there will be some type of response or intervention from, for example, emergency services, the CSO, community groups – or just from the school community itself. It appears from the data in this study that most principals operated from instinct as their critical incidents unfolded. The lack of comment on the use of Critical Incident Management Plans indicates that referral to a plan or agreed protocol was not at the forefront of principals’ minds. It is more likely that, as reported in this study, principals go with their ‘gut feeling’, acting from instinct and a strong commitment to the care of their community. Survey respondent 4 wrote: *“I was only operating with gut instinct and had no prior “training” as such. Just experience and a calm head.”*

There were 69% of principals who expressed gratitude for the presence of senior CSO personnel in phase 2, with comments noting the importance of this *“great emotional support”* (67), a validation of something important happening in the community. In contrast, when there was no CSO presence or acknowledgement, principals in that situation expressed feelings of resentment, and of feeling unvalued and isolated.

The provision of counsellors for students and staff is a common way in which CSOs support schools as a response to a critical incident, and principals expressed their appreciation of this (see Figure 4.3.1 *Helpfulness of counselling, as rated by principals who used counselling support*, p. 89). In most cases in this study, counselling support was provided by systems, either through the onsite school counsellor, by calling for counsellors from other schools to assist, and through the provision of workplace assistance programs. Over 90% of principals in this study agreed that the counselling support provided for students and staff was helpful. In practice, however, some of the provision of counselling for staff and students can be problematic. Many rural and regional communities suffer a shortage of counsellors, a situation that can make it difficult to deliver prompt support. In addition, if there are local

counsellors, they are likely to be well known community members – thus possibly compromising feelings of vulnerability and the issue of confidentiality, especially for staff. Respondent 33 made the point that her staff needed “*support from an external counselling service rather than [local] CSO staff*”. Six principals acted as counsellors themselves, because there were no other options they felt able to access. Although some of these principals had had some training, the appropriateness of providing counselling for your own staff and students is questionable to say the least.

Principals expressed appreciation for the support of parish priests and parish/town communities. Appreciation for emergency services personnel, especially police, was also strong. One principal wrote: “*The presence of [CSO] personnel, police and ambulance personnel at follow-up event [funerals, memorials and debriefings] was mutually supportive*” (16). Some principals mentioned significant support from their own staffs, and from colleagues in other schools, in the immediate time following a critical incident. They expressed appreciation for visits, phone calls, flowers, cards and emails. One inexperienced principal wrote: “*I was extremely lucky to have a visiting principal who was onsite [at the time of the critical incident]*” (52).

There were 17 principals (24%) who identified that the provision of extra staffing in the immediate time after an incident, would have been helpful in order to support or release school staff who needed respite, or who had to attend to post-incident matters. 20 principals (28%) would have found help with families in distress to have been useful. Principals urged their colleagues to seek and accept support wherever it is offered (see Table 4.5.2 *Advice to colleague principals re support*, p. 114). As respondent 45 urged: “*... seek assistance from the personnel at CSO; if not satisfied, go higher until you feel confident in the action you take.*”

### ***Support in phase 3 (mid term impact)***

“*... continue to have support available at short notice. Look after the school leaders who have to hold the community together.* (31)

As the time went by after an incident, principals voiced concerns that support appeared to be withdrawn when they felt it needed to be ongoing. Many spoke of the need for follow-up – for themselves personally, and for members of their school communities. Some spoke of feeling that CSO didn’t take it seriously, and so didn’t understand the need for ongoing support. Rowling (2003) notes that the level of support that staff do or do not receive significantly impacts on their recovery from trauma symptoms. Fein (2001) points out:

There ... seemed to be a tendency to assume that leaders were “okay” if they looked okay. Efforts to support leaders after a crisis might include special leave, access to free counseling, and follow-up months afterward, even when leaders seemed to be functioning normally. (pp. 238-239)

This advice is certainly supported by interviewee Mal’s reflections, and by others in this study such as interviewees Sandra and Charles.

The issues of disruption have been discussed in a previous section, and the management of the mid term aftermath clearly challenged many principals. As Mal says about CSO support: “... *they didn’t watch long enough*”. Schouten et al. (2004) make the point that just knowing that support is available can make a difference for some: “... it is the offer of support and services that is most important, rather than their utilization” (p. 235). They also contend that the *compassion* displayed by employers is an important factor in helping those who have been involved in a traumatic event: “... an organization’s compassion can be assessed by looking at the scope, scale, speed, and degree of specialization of the response” (p. 235). Principals themselves identified the types of support they would find helpful from the system, for example: staffing support, adjusting academic expectations, and follow-up phone calls or visits.

Survey Respondent 29 indicates that he was not confident either before or after the incidents, and finishes the survey with a plea: “*From a pastoral care perspective the system needs to adequately support the community and particularly the staff of the school, not only during but also after the crisis has passed. Followup is crucial.*”

Only 45% of principals accessed counselling, and of those, 25% of them rated it unhelpful, or neither helpful/unhelpful. The identified desire for compulsory debriefing or counselling has been noted elsewhere. The high number of principals who named the need for *debriefing* after an incident would seem to further emphasise this aspect of the principals’ experiences. It may be that the term *debriefing* has a positive, professional characteristic, while *counselling* had a more negative connotation. In the literature, the issue of the effectiveness of particular types of debriefing has differing points of view (Luna & Johnson, 2004; MacNeil & Topping, 2007b; Steele, 2008). However, for this study, it is enough to note that the participants articulated their understanding of the need for some form of follow-up, professional support, and that it needed to be encouraged, if not mandated, by their systems for it to be effective.

#### ***Support in phase 4 (long term impact)***

The further we move from the event, the broader the range of responses becomes.

(Paine, 2007, p. 8)

As has been noted elsewhere in this thesis, because there appears very little understanding of the long term impacts of critical incidents on principals, there appears to be very little in the way of structured support. Principals whose critical incidents might be categorised as *more commonly occurring events* seemed to be particularly at risk. They frequently reported dissatisfaction with their system responses, and the lack of support or acknowledgement. It seems that there are many instances where systems do not recognise the more commonly occurring events as critical incidents and, subsequently, principals reported low level support and significant impact on themselves, the school and on members of the school communities. Respondent 1, who reported an incident that would be called a *more commonly occurring event* (a child behaviour matter), highlighted his feelings: *“The incident occurred 4 years ago. As recently as March this year, the implications of the incident resurfaced and required a specific response from me. ... I am still managing the implications. Systems need to recognise this.”*

Principals named a need to review current Critical Incident Management documents, as well as the desire to debrief/review the management of the incident. Respondent 61 writes: *“I have some levels of anxiety around crisis management and being prepared for the future ... there is anxiety around the possibility of it happening again. I have further concerns around adequately supporting the parents.”* The need to review and evaluate plans for and responses to critical incidents has already been noted in previous chapters of this thesis. The principals affirmed the need to learn from their experiences.

There are particular matters that will occur long after the incident itself. Legal action usually eventuates months or years later and can have the effect of stringing out the timeline of resolution and recovery into phase 4. There is also likely to be re-awakened media interest if a school is involved in legal action, and this re-visiting of the original incident can re-traumatise those who had been involved (Asmussen & Creswell, 1995). Principals who were engaged in legal action following the critical incident named this as being extremely stressful, and also expressed the desire to have explicit professional and/or CSO support in these situations. Respondent 31 advised the system leadership: *“... continue to have support available at short notice. Look after the school leaders who have to hold the community together.”*

Respondent 20 wrote: “*Be present to them [the principals]. Know what support they need and ensure it is provided. Ensure they have access to professional debriefing and counselling services. The follow-up must be on-going and long term.*” While principals appreciated the support that they received during and after critical incidents, they had much advice to offer about how this support could be improved, starting with more relevant training and preparation, and including recognition of the potential long term impact. There is much that can be done to make the support more effective and relevant.

Fein and Isaacson (2009) conducted research into the ‘emotion work’ of school leaders following a school shooting. They clearly identified that school leaders and the systems that support them had missed opportunities to link the *values* we applaud in supportive, caring leaders, with the *roles* we expect leaders to fill in crisis situations. They concluded that:

A society that values effectiveness, responsibility and civility requires strong leaders. We must collectively support individuals with these values to consider leadership challenges by giving them permission to be human, and then steadfastly supporting them when they are human. (p. 1344)

The principals in this study demonstrated their humanity in empathy, compassion and commitment to their communities. Acknowledging the importance of these values and supporting the development and sustainability of this type of leadership, is the challenge faced by education systems.

## **6.4 Conclusion**

This chapter has discussed in depth the experience of a critical incident from the principal’s perspective. Using Mal’s story as an exemplar, the discussion drew on the principals’ own words to identify and explore the issues that arose in this critical incident, and others. The four original Research Questions provided the framework for discussion on the findings that emerged from the data and the research literature. The findings of this study, as outlined in chapter 4, identify how current understandings of critical incidents, and the impact of critical incidents on principals, are inadequate. It is clear that principals in this study feel that the systems charged with supporting them in their leadership roles, do not have adequate processes and structures to deliver that support.

The disruption that critical incidents created in schools, in short, mid and long term, drew the most comment on the need for more appropriate support, and for that support to be ongoing and non-judgmental. It is clear that no matter whether the critical incident was a dramatic or

more commonly occurring event, or a series of incidents, principals described the impact on themselves and their communities in very emotional terms. They report being changed by the experience, in both positive and negative ways. Almost all study participants expressed pride in their achievements in serving their communities in times of crisis, even while they acknowledged deep wounds to themselves. The principals were clear in their reflections on the support that they needed, and how it should be delivered.

In the following chapter, the implications for policy and planning, and for further research, are discussed.

## 7. Conclusions and recommendations

*“I felt terrible, worried the whole day, watching, nervous, thinking – at one level you think, oh this can’t possibly happen, but then you hear of situations where angry fathers throw children off bridges and nobody expected Martin Bryant to do what he did, so at one level you think, oh this can’t happen. On another level you think, well, it’s happened in the past. Why won’t it happen to me? [speaker’s emphasis]”*

(Interviewee Gillian reflects)

### 7.1 Introduction

The overall purpose of this study was to improve understanding of how principals experience a critical incident, thus filling a gap in the research. Throughout this study, there has been a conscious effort to present the principals’ own descriptions and reflections and to allow their stories to direct the discussion. The principals expressed their appreciation of the opportunity to tell their stories, and their own words have been showcased throughout this document.

This chapter will present a brief summary of the findings and discuss the major conclusions and recommendations. The chapter concludes with some suggestions for further research and a reflection on the researcher’s experience through the conduct of this study.

### 7.2 Summary of major findings

There are two groups of findings, as outlined in chapter 4 and explored in chapters 5 and 6. The analysis of the data and the following discussion has led to (1) a reconsideration of the definition of what constitutes a critical incident in a school, and (2) increased knowledge and a deeper appreciation of the impact that that experience can have on a school leader. These findings will be summarised in the following sections of this chapter.

#### **Critical incidents in schools**

Critical incidents are defined by the people who experience them, in this case – the principals who participated in this study. It proved useful to consider the significant elements of a critical incident through the 4 phases, and it became clear that different impacts were experienced in the different phases of the identified incident. Disruption to the school, and welfare considerations for members of the school community, were the two major issues experienced in phases 2 and 3 (i.e., up to mid term impact). These matters were largely



attended to during this time frame. The impacts in phase 4 (long term impact) were predominantly concerned with long term emotional issues for the principal.

In exploring the incidents that the study participants reported, it emerged that the incidents varied in perceived seriousness, and in how they reflected the commonly accepted definitions. The obvious *dramatic events* were easily understood as critical incidents, immediately displaying dramatically critical elements, called in this study *immediate criticality*. Some of these stories made harrowing reading in the surveys and interviews. In addition, some principals described other types of incidents: serious but not unusual events, named in this study as *more commonly occurring events*, following Jackson's (2003) identification of this phenomenon. The principals' naming of more commonly occurring events as critical incidents required further exploration. It emerged from the data that elements inherent in the incident's *context*, especially the *connections* between and among the different contextual elements, led to an *accumulated criticality* being experienced, in which all the contextual elements accumulated and combined to overwhelm the principal.

The significance of context and connections was identifiable in both dramatic and more commonly occurring incidents. These included: multiple events (of both dramatic and more commonly occurring types); an accumulation of more commonly occurring events in which one becomes a 'tipping point'; and overwhelming disruption in the time after an incident (either a dramatic or more commonly occurring event). The contextual elements had the effect of heightening the criticality of the incident.

This broadening of the understanding of the different sorts of incidents that can have a significant impact on the principal, has led to a reconsideration of the accepted definition of critical incidents in schools. This is an unanticipated finding of this study.

### **Principals' experiences in critical incidents**

The second group of findings concerns the experiences of principals. Principals described the experience of leading a school through and beyond a critical incident as exhausting, and as a life-changing experience. Their stories illustrated how seriously they took their responsibilities to lead and care for their communities. In many cases, they expressed pride in how they led in challenging circumstances. Many also described how they felt overwhelmed by the different roles they were expected to fill, and the responsibilities they took on, often for situations in which they felt inadequately trained and supported.

Principals in this study reported low levels of training and/or preparation for leadership of a school experiencing a critical incident. Examination of policy documents produced by diocesan education systems (CSOs), which dealt with the management of critical incidents, revealed that while there were many expectations of principals explicitly detailed, there did not appear to be any indication of how principals are prepared for these roles and responsibilities. In this study, participants felt that they were underprepared and under-skilled for leadership in this context.

The study participants expressed appreciation for the support that they and their school communities received at the time of a critical incident and immediately afterwards. The presence and acknowledgement of CSO leadership at this time was particularly valued. Counselling support was also seen as important for students and staff, although it was noted that many principals did not access counselling or professional debriefing for themselves.

It appeared that the overwhelming feelings of responsibility to attend to the tasks at hand led principals to put their own needs on hold. This finding is supported in the literature (Fein, 2001; Paine, 2009; Tarrant, 2011; Trethowan, 2009), and the notion of disenfranchised grief, as described by Rowling (2003), was evident in many principals' responses. Some paid the price for not attending to their own support needs, reporting long term emotional distress. It appeared from this study that the long term stress and distress that many principals identified is not well understood nor acknowledged by the research or the education systems. Many principals in this study considered that counselling or professional debriefing for principals should be supported and encouraged, if not mandated, by system leadership.

Study participants were explicit in detailing the support that they considered should be available in the event of a critical incident. They believed that there should be CSO presence that allowed the principal to lead, and that also demonstrated moral support and acknowledgement of the seriousness of the situation. They indicated that they felt that other types of support, especially counselling and de-briefing, should be immediate, easy to access, ongoing and non-judgemental. Where there was minimal or no support, principals expressed feelings of resentment towards their system leadership, or guilt about their own perceived failures.

In phases 2 and 3, principals in this study described how the disruption of normal school business was difficult to manage. They explained how managing the disruption required them to take on multiple roles and responsibilities that took them away from their core business, while still experiencing pressure to 'get things back to normal'. The disruption took many

forms and included matters such as: mental health and emotional issues for staff and students; the need to change routines or procedures to cope with new realities; building work; confronting parent reactions; media interest and legal proceedings. Some study participants complained that they did not feel that they were ‘taken seriously’ by their system leadership, and that much of the support was withdrawn in phase 3, as there appeared to be little understanding of the possible long term challenges faced in this context.

Principals in this study identified some positive impacts of the experience of leading through a critical incident. A majority of participants reported feeling at least confident in their leadership, although some acknowledged that they surprised themselves with their capabilities. It appeared that most principals demonstrated great compassion and commitment, with some reporting that their leadership during a critical incident helped establish credibility with the community.

The numbers of survey responses, and the stories told in those surveys, clearly indicated to the researcher that principals valued the opportunity to tell of their experiences. Some expressed a desire to share their learning, in order to improve understanding of critical incidents in schools as they felt they had learned some important lessons. Participants in this study reported that they had experienced few opportunities to review and evaluate their own and their system’s responses to the critical incident.

The findings about critical incidents and the impact they have on principals suggest a number of significant implications and recommendations that are relevant for both policy and practice in the education systems charged with supporting schools and school leaders. These are outlined in the next section of this chapter.

### **7.3 Recommendations for practice**

During a critical incident involving a school, and in the days, weeks and months following that incident, a principal must not only deal with a potentially traumatising situation, s/he must also ensure that the school continues to function as an educational institution. In normal times, school leadership is acknowledged as very demanding. When that is overlaid with responsibility for a community suffering from psychological stress, disruption to normal functioning, as well as the possibility of police, media and legal interests, the job of school leadership becomes increasingly difficult and complex. This study provided a forum for principals to describe and to reflect on the impact of this experience. It is clear that study participants felt that the systems to which they belonged (1) did not understand the impact of

such an experience on themselves and (2) could improve the preparation and support that is currently available. The principals' reflections, and the findings of this study, lead to the following recommendations.

***1. Education systems need to review current understandings of what constitutes a critical incident. This should include acknowledgment of the importance of context and connections in assessing the impact of an incident, and an awareness of the possible long term nature of that impact.***

As this study has demonstrated, systems would benefit from reviewing their current understandings of what constitutes a critical incident. There is an imperative to improve awareness of the importance of context and connections in understanding how an incident, whether dramatic or more commonly occurring, may impact on a school community and its principal. This leads to a call for system leaders to know their principals' and schools' contexts, and to never presume that all is fine because it 'looks fine'. Recognising and acknowledging that many different types of incidents or situations may cause principals to suffer potentially long term impacts, would assist systems to more readily and effectively intervene and support.

***2. Education systems need to improve the preparation and training of principals to carry out the multiple roles and responsibilities outlined in system policies***

The need for structured preparation and training is clearly identified in this study, and supported by the research literature (e.g., Ellis & Thorley-Smith, 2007; Pagliocca & Nickerson, 2001; Schouten et al., 2004). Current policy documents developed by Australian education systems appear to focus on the principal's multiple roles and responsibilities in managing a critical incident. There is a need for critical incident policy documents to also include specific strategies on how principals are to be prepared and trained for leadership in a critical incident. These strategies could include the following:

- Providing education on the effects of trauma: what's 'normal' in an abnormal situation? Fein (2001) says: "Current and future school leaders who are educated about trauma will be better able to understand how stressful events will impact on themselves and others. ... some basic understanding of trauma may mitigate harm to themselves or to their charges ..." (p. 238).
- Assisting schools to develop their own critical incident management plans that include the formation of a school-based team, are collaborative and consultative in nature, and are reflective of their own school context and culture

- Providing training for principals that includes (1) critical incident scenarios, and (2) strategies to assist interactions with parents, media, police and other agencies
- Supporting principals who have had experiences of critical incidents to share their learning with colleagues. This would need to be done with sensitivity for the wellbeing of the principal.

This study calls for system policy documents to also include clear guidelines about appropriate formal responses to tragic situations, in particular the issue of funerals and memorials. It may be helpful for principals to be able to refer to established and accepted protocols when faced with distressing situations.

***3. Education systems need to review the support that is given to schools experiencing a critical incident to ensure appropriateness, ease of availability and long term availability. There needs to be a clearer understanding of how the provision of appropriate support facilitates positive outcomes.***

*Presence of system leadership* The most significant support noted by principals in this study was the presence of their system leaders. While principals were clear on their own responsibilities to lead their communities, they described how the presence of system leaders acknowledged the seriousness of the incident, and implied support and engagement. Education system leaders are urged to not underestimate the value of their presence at the time of an incident, and of personal follow-up in the time afterwards.

*Ongoing provision of counselling support* As was noted in this thesis, the most common response of education systems when faced with a critical incident in a school is to supply counsellors for members of the community. While counselling support is needed and appreciated, many principals in this study were concerned about the availability of counsellors, especially in small towns, and that counselling support needed to be available in ongoing and sometimes long term contexts.

*Provision of counselling and debriefing for principals* The need for principals themselves to access counselling support is already noted. Systems are encouraged to put specific support structures in place for principals that might include mandating a minimal amount of counselling, professional debriefing, provision of extra leave and the availability of long term counselling.

*Practical support to manage disruption* The management of disruption in the time after a critical incident is identified as a significant stressor for principals. In order to re-establish

good order and support the process of getting back to core business, it would benefit systems to carefully consider practical support for the principal, particularly focusing on the responsibilities that might be outside a principal's expertise. This could include financial support, trained personnel to help with families in distress, and appropriately qualified personnel to support with media or legal situations.

***4. Education systems need to institute formal processes of review and evaluation after a critical incident and provide opportunities for school leaders and others to share and learn from the experience***

In the time after a critical incident, there is a need for schools, principals and systems to formally review and evaluate their responses to the incident. This evaluation should be done with sensitivity to individuals' situations and with a focus on (1) validating the learning gained, (2) increasing understanding of critical incidents in schools and (3) improving preparation and support.

While it is widely accepted that schools that experience a critical incident need support to overcome the impact of that incident, there appears to be little recognition or understanding of the very specific difficulties faced by principals in this often long term situation. Thus there also appears to be little structured systemic preparation and support specifically designed for and available to principals. The significant place that a principal holds in the life of a school, and the influence that leadership has on school performance in all areas, provides an imperative for education systems to carefully consider how they prepare and support principals for the multiple roles and responsibilities that they will encounter. This imperative is even stronger when a school community experiences a critical incident. The vulnerability of principals, and therefore their schools, in this scenario is well demonstrated through the findings of this study.

**7.4 Recommendations for further research**

This study has contributed to knowledge about the experiences of principals leading their schools through and beyond critical incidents, an area that had not been previously deeply researched. As the study has been limited to NSW Catholic primary principals, there would be value in extending both the type and number of participants in a similar study, particularly involving principals of secondary schools, and those from government schools.

The findings of this study also gave rise to other matters that would merit further research.

These matters include:

- Increasing the knowledge about critical incidents in schools in Australia, considering types and frequencies
- Possible gender differences in how principals respond to the challenges of leadership in a critical incident
- Possible differences in how experienced and inexperienced principals respond to the challenges of leadership in a critical incident
- Any relationship between particular factors (e.g., rural and remote schools, principal in/experience) and the outcomes of a critical incident
- Any relationship between the types of support accessed, and the long term impact of the incidents
- The use and usefulness of system policy documents (e.g., critical incident management plans) in critical incidents in schools
- Apparent difficulties with the definition of a critical incident that was supplied to the study participants. An invitation to principals to participate in research on critical incidents using a broader, different definition might elicit responses from more/other principals.

### **7.5 Summary of study**

When a critical incident engulfs a school community, principals have key management roles in the incident and aftermath, as well as responsibility for successful outcomes, particularly for the wellbeing of staff, students and parents. Principals are also the conduit for communication and liaison with outside agencies, while ensuring the school still functions as an educational institution. While principals' roles are well defined in system policy documents, how principals are prepared for and supported in these roles is not clear. Principals' voices have been missing from the research into critical incident management. In addition, how they describe the experience and how it impacts on them is not widely understood.

This study asked principals to describe in their own words how the experience of a critical incident impacted on them: how they felt, and the issues they encountered, including matters of preparation, training and support. Principals also described the often long term nature of the impact of that experience.

The findings of this study call for a reconsideration of the definition of a critical incident as experienced in school communities, and a clearer understanding of the impact of such experiences on school leaders. This study adds to the knowledge of critical incidents in schools and the impact of critical incidents on principals. It gives direction to the sorts of preparation and support that educational systems could put in place to improve current practice in school management and in leadership formation and development.

## **7.6 Conclusion**

The context in which the impetus for this study grew was outlined at the beginning of this thesis. As a researcher, I am very aware of how embedded I am in this study and how my own story and context has driven the direction and focus. My journey in conducting the study has been a consuming experience, one in which I learned something new every day, whether I was reading other research and reflecting on others' insights, analysing the survey responses or listening to participants tell their stories. It was humbling to have so many people place their trust in me, in the way they honestly and bravely told of their fears and tears. My engagement with the participants and their stories has enabled me to make sense of my own story. Like those principals, I am proud of how I led my community and, like them, I wish that I had been better prepared and supported. I am changed by the experience.

When the surveys started to come in, I was often astonished at the stories that were told and how the pain came through so clearly. I felt sad that so many of the study participants had not been able, or had not felt able to access counselling support for themselves, when there were so obviously many unhealed wounds. I felt sad that principals carried so much resentment that their systems seemed to have missed the opportunity to support them and acknowledge their experience.

In working in three different Catholic education systems in my career, I know that there would have been much goodwill and genuine attempts, on the part of the CSOs, to support principals who had been through a critical incident. The principals in this study said it best: they wanted to be taken seriously, they wanted their CSOs to acknowledge the significance of the experience (whether it fitted the definitions or not), and they wanted the opportunity to share what they had learned so that others would not have to suffer the same struggle.

Like every principal in this study and, I suspect, principals everywhere, I feel intensely every media report of a school experiencing a crisis – whether it's a tragedy like Sandy Hook with



international coverage, or a graffiti attack on a local school where the principal spends the weekend scrubbing walls. Principalship can be a lonely job. My hope is that this study will encourage education systems to pay closer attention to the needs of their principals – from relevant training and preparation, to long term support and acknowledgement.

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## Appendix A Ethics approval



### Human Research Ethics Committee

#### Committee Approval Form

**Principal Investigator/Supervisor:** Associate Professor Michael Bezzina Sydney Campus

**Co-Investigators:**

**Student Researcher:** Barbara Myers Sydney Campus

**Ethics approval has been granted for the following project:**

Leading through a crisis: an exploration of principals' experiences while leading schools through critical incidents. (Leading through a crisis)

**for the period:** 20 January 2011 to 30 June 2011

**Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) Register Number:** N2010 60

**The following standard conditions as stipulated in the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans* (2007) apply:**

- (i) that Principal Investigators / Supervisors provide, on the form supplied by the Human Research Ethics Committee, annual reports on matters such as:
  - security of records
  - compliance with approved consent procedures and documentation
  - compliance with special conditions, and
- (ii) that researchers report to the HREC immediately any matter that might affect the ethical acceptability of the protocol, such as:
  - proposed changes to the protocol
  - unforeseen circumstances or events
  - adverse effects on participants

The HREC will conduct an audit each year of all projects deemed to be of more than low risk. There will also be random audits of a sample of projects considered to be of negligible risk and low risk on all campuses each year.

Within one month of the conclusion of the project, researchers are required to complete a *Final Report Form* and submit it to the local Research Services Officer.

If the project continues for more than one year, researchers are required to complete an *Annual Progress Report Form* and submit it to the local Research Services Officer within one month of the anniversary date of the ethics approval.


Signed:

..... Date: 20.01.2011  
(Research Services Officer, McAuley Campus)

## Appendix B Letter to diocesan authorities

15 Kemp St  
Salamander Bay 2317  
Ph: 02 49791239 (w)  
0438271977 (m)

28<sup>th</sup> February 2011

  
Catholic Education Office Sydney  
PO Box 217  
Leichhardt NSW 2040

Dear 

Re: [Research Project: Leading through a crisis: an exploration of principals' experiences leading schools through critical incidents](#)

I am an Assistant Director of Schools in the Maitland Newcastle Catholic Schools Office, and also a Doctor of Education candidate at the Australian Catholic University. In furthering my studies, I am applying to all 11 Catholic Dioceses in NSW to conduct an on-line survey of Principals of Catholic Primary schools and some follow-up interviews of 4-6 of those principals. Please find attached an application to conduct this research in the Archdiocese of Sydney.

Please also find attached the following documents in support of the application:

1. ACU Ethics Committee Approval
2. Copy of Research Proposal
3. Copy of letter to Survey Participants
4. Copy of letter to Interview Participants
5. Paper copy of on-line survey

These documents, along with the Application Form, have also been posted to you. Thank you for your consideration of this application. Please feel free to contact me if any further clarification of my research proposal is required.

I look forward to your earliest response.

Yours sincerely

Barbara Myers

## Appendix C Letter of authority from ACU



Australian Catholic University Limited  
ABN 15 050 192 660  
Strathfield Campus  
25A Barker Road  
Strathfield NSW 2135  
Locked Bag 2002  
Strathfield NSW 2135  
Phone 02 9701 4000  
[www.acu.edu.au](http://www.acu.edu.au)

### INFORMATION LETTER TO SURVEY PARTICIPANTS

***Leading through a crisis:  
principals' experiences of leading  
their school communities through a critical incident***

Principal Supervisor: **Dr Michael Bezzina**  
Research Student: **Barbara Myors**  
Doctor of Education Program, ACU Strathfield

Dear Principal,

**As a principal, have you led your school through a critical incident?**

Previous research about critical incidents in schools has focused on the impact of the incidents on students and school counselors in particular. When the principal is mentioned in the research reports, it has generally been in the context of the role that the principal plays in the management of the incident, and of the aftermath. What has been missing are the voices of principals in describing how the experience was for them, and their reflections on the impact of the incident on their school communities and on their own leadership.

You are invited to participate in an on-line survey that is part of a research project aimed at improving understanding of the impact of critical incidents on NSW Catholic primary principals. While doing the survey, you will be asked to reflect on your experience and on the learning that you may have gained from that reflection. The survey will take approximately 30 minutes to complete and your responses will be anonymous.

Completion and return of the survey will indicate consent to participate in this part of the study.

At the end of the survey there is an option for you to volunteer to participate in an interview, in which the issues will be further explored. Please consider volunteering for this opportunity.

This research project also aims to give direction on the types of preparation and support that could be offered to principals by their administrations. In particular, an exploration of the issues for principals in the time after a critical incident will assist in supporting the needs of the school community in the recovery phase.

I am happy to answer any questions that you may have regarding any of these issues or procedures. Questions should be directed to the following:

**Dr Michael Bezzina**

Ph: 02 9701 4357  
School: Education Leadership  
Campus: ACU Strathfield

**Barbara Myers**

Ph: 0438 271 977  
School: Education Leadership  
Campus: ACU Strathfield

This study has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at the Australian Catholic University. Any questions you may have regarding the conduct of the research should be directed to the following:

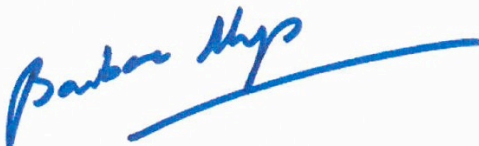
Chair, HRC  
C/- Research Services  
Australian Catholic University  
Strathfield Campus  
Locked Bag 2002  
Strathfield NSW 2135  
Tel: 02 9701 4093  
Fax: 02 9701 4350

Any complaint or concern will be treated in confidence and fully investigated and you will be informed of the outcome.

If, after participating in the survey, you are interested in the findings of the research project, an Executive Summary will be freely available. Please contact me at [b.myors@bigpond.com](mailto:b.myors@bigpond.com) for the summary.

Thank you for considering this opportunity to contribute to research that will assist the wellbeing of colleague principals.

Yours sincerely



Barbara Myers



## Appendix D Survey invitation

Dear Principal,

### **Principals and Critical Incidents** *An invitation to share your experiences*

A principal's job is a complex and demanding round of interactions, decisions, conversations, reflections – and that's just a normal day! Sometimes however, an incident occurs that requires a principal to deliver extraordinary focus and attention and takes you, in your role of leader, to a different dimension of leadership.

As a principal, I have experienced leading my school through such an incident. I found it to have a significant impact on my school, and on myself as a leader. As an EdD candidate at the ACU, I am conducting research to hear from other principals who have been in that situation – and to determine how best our education systems could support us and our schools in critical situations.

**Have you had such an incident that was**

- **Sudden, unexpected, out of the blue**
- **Involved death or injury – or the possibility of death or injury**
- **Significantly impacted on your community, or on some members of your community**
- **Significantly impacted on you as a leader?**

If you answered 'yes' to any of the above points, I am interested in your reflections about the incident in order to add to the body of knowledge about principals' experiences in critical incidents.

**You are invited to participate in an on-line survey that will be emailed to you in the next week.** All NSW Catholic Primary Principals are being invited to participate and your responses will be anonymous. If you are also interested in being interviewed about your experiences (separate from the survey), please consider nominating yourself.

Please find as attachments an official letter from the ACU outlining details of the research project, and a letter from your Diocesan office giving approval for this to occur in your Diocese.

Please feel free to contact me at any time for further details or clarification.

I look forward to hearing from you

Yours sincerely



Barbara Myers  
[b.myors@bigpond.com](mailto:b.myors@bigpond.com)  
Mob: 0438 271 977

## Appendix E Survey reminder

Dear Colleagues,

Recently I sent you a link to a survey that explores the experiences of Primary Principals leading their schools through a critical incident. To those who have already responded – than you very much, your reflections are a valuable insight into this relatively unexplored aspect of the principal's role.

If you haven't yet responded, can I encourage you to do so?

If you have deleted, but would now like to participate, just let me know and I can re-send the link.

If you would prefer a paper copy of the survey, I can send that as well.

If you would like to talk to me about the survey, or about the research project, or your own experiences, please ring or email.

The information from this research project will help all of us in our leadership roles. Your experiences and reflections will be valuable in improving our understanding of what happens for principals, and what preparation and support would be most useful in times of crisis. Primary principals, I believe, have a particular perspective which includes direct engagement and connections with families, and a heightened sense of responsibility for the wellbeing of all in their communities. I would like to ensure that I am able to include **your** experiences and learnings in this study.

Thank you – I look forward to hearing from you

Regards

Barbara

Barbara Myors  
Assistant Director  
Catholic Schools Office  
Diocese of Maitland Newcastle

Mob: 0438 271 977

## Appendix F Survey

Online Research at ACU -

<https://apps.acu.edu.au/surveys/admin/admin.php?acti...>

Notice: Undefined variable: answertext in /home/evanw/limesurvey/admin/printablesurvey.php on line 1615

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this survey. Your contribution will help build understanding of how principals experience critical incidents and how this impacts on their leadership role. The data will also guide systems on how best to support principals in the times before, during and after a critical incident.

The survey is organised into the following sections:

- Background information
- The critical incident and immediate response
- Preparation and support
- The impact of the critical incident
- Learnings from the critical incident.

At the end of the survey, there will be an option to volunteer to participate in an interview with the researcher. This will be an opportunity for you to further contribute to the understanding of principals' experiences of leadership at this time. Please consider volunteering for this opportunity.

Please answer the questions as honestly and fully as possible by writing in the blank spaces provided or by ticking the appropriate box. This survey will take approximately 30 minutes to complete and your answers will be anonymous.

There are 35 questions in this survey

### Background Information

#### 1 [B1]Please indicate your age group (required)

Please choose **only one** of the following:

- ☐ under 30      ☐ 30 – 39      ☐ 40 – 49  
☐ 50 – 65      ☐ over 65

#### 2 [B2]Please indicate your gender (required)

Please choose **only one** of the following:

- ☐ Female      ☐ Male

#### 3 [B3]For how many years have you been/were you a principal? (required)

Please choose **only one** of the following:

- ☐ less than 5 years  
☐ 5-10 years  
☐ 10-15 years  
☐ more than 15 years

#### 4 [B4]How many principalships have you held? (required)

Please choose **only one** of the following:

Online Research at ACU -

<https://apps.acu.edu.au/surveys/admin/admin.php?acti...>

- ☐ I have held one appointment
- ☐ I have held two appointments
- ☐ I have held three or more appointments



## Critical incident and response

The questions in this section are concerned with the actual critical incident and the response time immediately after.

### 5 [C1] Please describe the school in which you experienced a critical incident. Please tick all that apply. (required)

Please choose all that apply:

- ☒ Less than 100 students
- ☒ 100-250 students
- ☒ 250-500 students
- ☒ More than 500 students
- ☒ School in a city/suburb
- ☒ School in a regional town
- ☒ School in a rural/remote setting
- ☒ Systemic
- ☒ Congregational

### 6 [C2] When did the critical incident occur? (required)

Please choose only one of the following:

- ☐ In the last 12 months
- ☐ 1 - 2 years ago
- ☐ 2 - 5 years ago
- ☐ More than 5 years ago

### 7 [C3] Who was involved in the critical incident? (required)

Please choose all that apply:

- ☐ Students
- ☐ Teachers
- ☐ Other school staff
- ☐ Parents
- ☐ Other:

### 8 [C4] Please briefly describe the critical incident in which you were

**involved: what happened? (required)**

Please write your answer here:

**9 [C5]Who was involved in the immediate response to the incident? (required)**

Please choose all that apply:

- ☐ Police
- ☐ Ambulance, paramedics or medical staff
- ☐ Fire or Emergency Services
- ☐ Media
- ☐ Parents
- ☐ Staff from Catholic Schools Office
- ☐ Staff from other schools
- ☐ Other:

**10 [C6]What was the immediate response to the incident? How long did this last? Please describe in 200 words or less. (required)**

Please write your answer here:

**11 [C7]What was your role in the incident and in the immediate response? What did you do? Please describe in 200 words or less. (required)**

Please write your answer here:

**12 [C8]Consider the elements which may have been part of the critical incident that you experienced. Please indicate on the scale the significance of each element. (required)**

Please choose the appropriate response for each item:

	Extremely significant	Very significant	Significant	Little significance	Not applicable
The incident caused disruption to school routines	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The incident was a sudden, unexpected event	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The incident involved death or injury	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The incident involved the threat of death or injury	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The incident involved damage to buildings/plant /property	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The incident caused stress and/or distress to those involved	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**13 [C9]Were there any other elements of the critical incident which were significant? (required)**

Please choose **only one** of the following:

- ☐ Yes ☐ No

**14 [C9a1]Please name the element which was significant.**

**Only answer this question if the following conditions are met:**

° Answer was 'Yes' at question '13 [C9]' (Were there any other elements of the critical incident which were significant?)

Please write your answer here:

**15 [C9a2]How significant was it?**

**Only answer this question if the following conditions are met:**

° Answer was 'Yes' at question '13 [C9]' (Were there any other elements of the critical incident which were significant?)

Please choose **only one** of the following:

- ☐ Extremely significant  
☐ Very significant  
☐ Significant

**16 [C9b1]Please name the element which was significant.**

**Only answer this question if the following conditions are met:**

° Answer was 'Significant' or 'Very significant' or 'Extremely significant' at question '15 [C9a2]' (How significant was it?)

Please write your answer here:

**17 [C9b2]How significant was it?**

**Only answer this question if the following conditions are met:**

° Answer was 'Extremely significant' or 'Very significant' or 'Significant' at question '15 [C9a2]' (How significant was it?)

Please choose **only one** of the following:

- ☐ Extremely significant  
☐ Very significant

☐ Significant

## Preparation and support

In this section, you will be asked about the types of preparation and training you may have received before the critical incident, and the support you may have accessed/received after the incident.

### 18 [P1] Prior to the incident, did you receive any preparation or training for dealing with a critical incident? (required)

Please choose **only one** of the following:

- ☐ Yes ☐ No

### 19 [P2] If you answered yes to the previous question, what was the preparation or training that you received?

Please choose **all** that apply:

- ☐ Crisis Management training  
☐ Writing of Critical Incident Management Policy  
☐ Formation of Critical Incident Team  
☐ Media Response training  
☐ Training for dealing with mental health issues in children  
☐ Managing stress in the workplace training  
☐ Other:

### 20 [P3] What support was provided after the incident? How helpful was the support? Please tick as many as applicable and indicate on the scale. (required)

Please choose the appropriate response for each item:

	Very helpful	Helpful	Neither helpful nor unhelpful	Unhelpful	Hindrance	Not applicable
Counselling for students	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Counselling for school staff	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Counselling for you	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Extra staff for a short time (less than a	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

	Very helpful	Helpful	Neither helpful nor unhelpful	Unhelpful	Hindrance	Not applicable
week)						
Extra staff for an extended period (a week or more)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Visit/presence of senior Catholic Schools Office personnel	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Visit/presence of colleague principals	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
De-briefing with Catholic Schools Office personnel	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
De-briefing with another agency or professional	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**21 [P3.1] Are there any other forms of support you received or used?**Please choose **only one** of the following:
☐ Yes      ☐ No
**22 [P3.2] If you answered yes to the previous question, please briefly describe the support in the space provided and indicate its helpfulness.**

Please write your answer here:

**23 [P4] On reflection, was there any support that you believe might have been helpful, but was not provided? In the comment space, please indicate how that support would have been helpful.**

Please choose all that apply and provide a comment:


- ☐ Extra counselling options
- ☐ Extra staffing options
- ☐ Professional de-briefing
- ☐ Assistance with families
- ☐ Assistance with police/courts/media
- ☐ Financial assistance
- ☐ Other: please specify

**24 [P5]Overall, how satisfied were you with the support provided to you?  
(required)**

Please choose **only one** of the following:

- ☐ Very satisfied
- ☐ Satisfied
- ☐ Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
- ☐ Dissatisfied
- ☐ Very dissatisfied

Make a comment on your choice here:





## Impact of the critical incident

In this section, you will be asked to consider the impact of the critical incident on yourself and on the school. There will be questions regarding impact in the **short term** (up to two months) and **long term** (more than two months).

### 25 [I1] In the short term (up to two months) after the critical incident, what were the main impacts on your school? (required)

Please choose **all** that apply:

- ☐ There were no impacts (please do not tick any other answers)
- ☐ Change to school routines
- ☐ Anxiety/distress in students
- ☐ Anxiety/distress in staff members
- ☐ Anxiety/distress in parents
- ☐ Absenteeism of students
- ☐ Absenteeism of staff members
- ☐ Media interest
- ☐ Police/legal interests
- ☐ Building works/repairs
- ☐ Presence of extra staff (eg Counsellors)
- ☐ Other:

### 26 [I2] In the short term, what were the main impacts on you as a principal?

Please write your answer here:

### 27 [I3] In the long term (two months or more afterwards), what were the main impacts on the school? (required)

Please choose **all** that apply:

- ☐ There were no impacts (please do not tick any other answers)
- ☐ Change of school routines (permanent or temporary)
- ☐ Continuing anxiety/distress of students
- ☐ Continuing anxiety/distress of staff members
- ☐ Continuing anxiety/distress of parents
- ☐ Continuing absenteeism of staff and/or students
- ☐ Continuing media interest
- ☐ Continuing police/legal interests
- ☐ Building works/repairs
- ☐ Continuing presence of extra staff
- ☐ Other:

**28 [I4] In the long term, what were the main impacts on you as a principal? For how long did these issues impact on you and your school?**

Please write your answer here:

**29 [I5] What changed at your school because of the critical incident? Tick all that apply and provide a comment which describes each. (required)**

Please choose all that apply and provide a comment:

<input type="checkbox"/> Nothing changed (please do not tick any other answers)
<input type="checkbox"/> School routines or procedures
<input type="checkbox"/> Staffing arrangements
<input type="checkbox"/> Building/grounds arrangements
<input type="checkbox"/> Security vigilance/procedures

<input type="checkbox"/> Awareness of/dealing with mental health issues
<input type="checkbox"/> Other: please specify

## Learnings from the critical incident

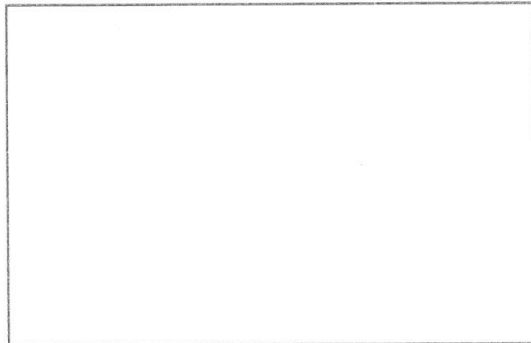
In the following section, you will be asked to reflect upon your experience in leading the school through a critical incident.

**30 [L1] In reflecting on the critical incident, to what extent do you feel that you had the capacity (skills and experience) to manage the incident as it occurred? (required)**

Please choose **only one** of the following:

- ☐ I felt very confident in my capacity (skills and experience)
- ☐ I felt quite confident in my capacity (skills and experience)
- ☐ I did not feel confident in my capacity (skills and experience)

Make a comment on your choice here:

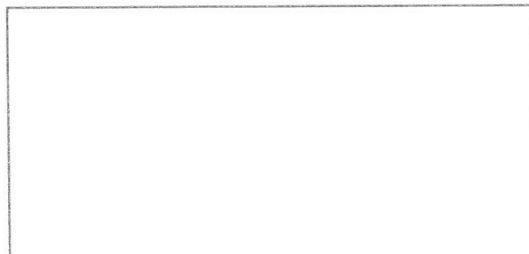


**31 [L2] To what extent were you confident in your capacity (skills, experience, support) to manage the impact of the incident in the time afterwards? (required)**

Please choose **only one** of the following:

- ☐ I felt very confident in my capacity (skills, experience, and with support)
- ☐ I felt quite confident in my capacity (skills, experience and with support)
- ☐ I did not feel confident in my capacity (skill, experience and with support)

Make a comment on your choice here:



**32 [L3] As you led your school in the time after the critical incident, to what extent did you feel that your education system was responsive to the needs of your community? (required)**

Please choose **only one** of the following:

- ☐ I felt the system was totally responsive to our needs
- ☐ I felt that the system was moderately responsive to our needs
- ☐ I felt that the system was not responsive our needs

Make a comment on your choice here:

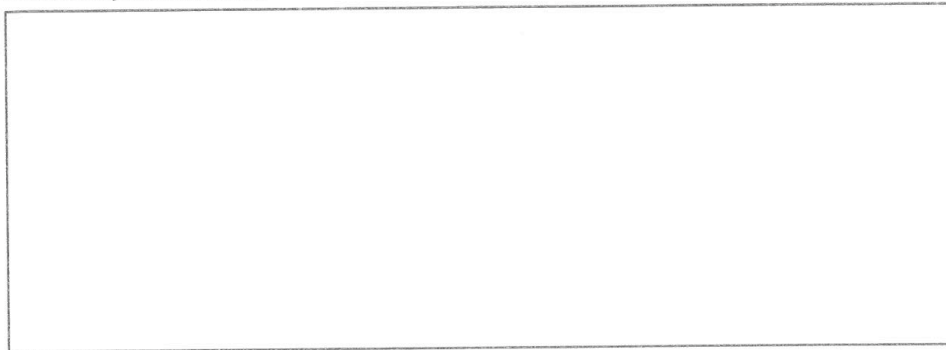
**33 [L4]In reflecting on the critical incident, what advice would you give to other principals about managing a critical incident?**

Please write your answer here:

**34 [L5]What advice would you give to educational systems about**

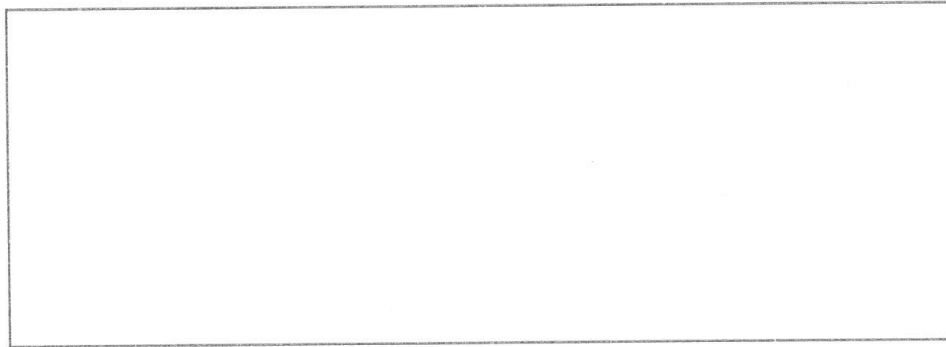
**supporting principals in the management of critical incidents?**

Please write your answer here:



**35 [L6]Is there anything else that you haven't been asked that you would like to comment on?**

Please write your answer here:



Online Research at ACU -

<https://apps.acu.edu.au/surveys/admin/admin.php?acti...>

{ENDMESSAGE}

23.06.2011 – 00:00

Submit your survey.

Thank you for completing this survey.

## Appendix G List of critical incidents

ID no	Critical Incident
1	Child sex play in toilets
3	Gas leak in neighbourhood
4	Parent shot dead by police, offsite
5	Child death, cancer
6	Child death, cancer
7	Sudden death of mother
8	Parent arrested for murder
9	Child on roof, uncontrollable
10	Father killed mother, suicided in front of children
11	Child anaphylactic reaction
12	Long running dispute with parents
13	Child with knife
14	School bus accident, students trapped
15	Gas bomb, students unconscious
16	2 students murdered by grandfather
18	House fire
19	Parent aggression & threats against principal
20	Accidental child death on weekend
21	Death of staff member, resignation of Principal
22	Staff member died @ school
23	Staff, students witness child killed in bus accident
24	Vandalism, blood in classrooms
25	Student in car accident, fete day
26	Sudden death of child in holidays
27	Assaulted woman took refuge in school
28	Aggressive behaviour, threats by parent
29	Accidental deaths of 2 students in 12 months
30	Parish Priest arrested
31	Multiple sudden deaths & cancer diagnoses
32	Parent murdered, another assaulted
33	Fire in classroom during day
34	Parent aggression & harrasment of principal
35	Death of staff member, long illness
36	Student threatening behaviour
37	Sudden deaths in community, close in time
38	Student death after illness
39	Sudden death of Parish Priest
40	Student killed in car accident
41	Flash flood in town
42	Student aggression to students & staff
43	Student injured, suspected spinal injuries
44	Deaths in community - parent, PP
45	Sudden death of staff member over weekend



46	Student killed in car accident
47	Students assaulted by other students
48	Student death, cancer
49	Student suicide
50	Flood in district
51	Elect explosion, no power for 3 days
52	Death of parent
53	Student death, long illness
56	Student death in house fire
57	Fire destroyed Admin block
58	Bus accident, students injured
59	Parent threats to child safety
60	Elect fire in toilets
61	Student death at school
63	Cyber bullying
64	Bomb threat
65	Parent disturbed behaviour
66	Parent suicide
67	Parents: 1 suicide,1 attempted suicide
68	Student aggressive behaviour to other student
69	Fire in classroom during day
70	Escaped prisoner, school lockdown
71	Parent suicide
72	Teacher suicide
73	Body discovered hanging in tree on school oval
74	Student death at school, sport accident
75	Murder/suicide of student's family members
76	Student absconds, staff search

## Appendix H Interview invitation



Australian Catholic University Limited  
ABN 15 050 192 660  
Strathfield Campus  
25A Barker Road  
Strathfield NSW 2135  
Locked Bag 2002  
Strathfield NSW 2135  
Phone 02 9701 4000  
[www.acu.edu.au](http://www.acu.edu.au)

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### INFORMATION LETTER TO INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

***Leading through a crisis:  
principals' experiences of leading  
their school communities through a critical incident***

Principal Supervisor: **Dr Michael Bezzina**  
Researcher: **Barbara Myers**  
Doctor of Education Program, ACU Strathfield

Dear Participant,

You recently participated in an on-line survey about critical incidents in schools and indicated that you would be prepared to be interviewed about your experience. This survey is part of a research project that aims to explore the experiences of NSW Catholic primary school principals who have lead their schools through a critical incident. To further explore the issues identified in the survey, you are invited to participate in an interview in which the focus will be on your own experience of a critical incident.

If you accept this invitation, you will be interviewed by the researcher, Barbara Myers. The interview will take approximately one hour and will be conducted at your school, or at a venue nominated by you. The interview will be audiotaped and the researcher will also take notes. The questions will be open-ended in order that you may respond in your own time and in your own way. After the interview, the researcher may wish to contact you to clarify issues that arose in the interview. You will also be given access to the notes, transcripts and the draft report of your interview so that you may rectify or clarify any omissions or misunderstandings.

 The information gathered from the surveys and interviews will aid understanding of the impact of

critical incidents on principals and give voice to their unique experience. It will also give direction to the types of preparation and support that could be offered to principals by their administrations. In particular, an exploration of the issues for principals in the time after a critical incident will assist in supporting the needs of the school community in the recovery phase.

If at any time during or after your participation you wish to withdraw from the project, you are free to do so without having to justify your decision or give a reason.

Confidentiality will be ensured during the conduct of the research and in any report or publication that may arise from it. Pseudonyms for individuals and their schools will be used in the final report to preserve your anonymity. However, because information about the critical incident you experienced may be in the public domain and members of your community may already know details, there is the possibility of deductions being made that may compromise your anonymity.

I am happy to answer any questions that you may have regarding any of these issues or procedures. Questions should be directed to the following:

**Dr Michael Bezzina**

Ph: 02 9701 4357

School: Education Leadership

Campus: ACU Strathfield

**Barbara Myors**

Ph: 0438 271 977

School: Education Leadership

Campus: ACU Strathfield

I will provide feedback to you on the results of the project when it is completed.

This study has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at the Australian Catholic University. Any questions you may have regarding the conduct of the research should be directed to the following:

Chair, HRC  
C/- Research Services  
Australian Catholic University  
Strathfield Campus  
Locked Bag 2002  
Strathfield NSW 2135  
Tel: 02 9701 4093  
Fax: 02 9701 4350

Any complaint or concern will be treated in confidence and fully investigated and you will be informed of the outcome.

---

If you agree to participate in this project, please sign both copies of the Consent Form (enclosed), retain one copy for your records and return the other copy to the Principal Supervisor or Student Researcher.

.....  
Principal Supervisor

.....  
Student Researcher



## **Appendix I Interview questions**

### **Leading through a crisis: principals' experiences of leading their school communities through a critical incident**

Researcher/interviewer: Barbara Myors  
Doctor of Education Program, ACU Strathfield

#### **Interview Questions**

Introductory script:

Thank you for agreeing to meet with me. As you realise from the survey you completed, I am conducting research into the experience of principals who have led their schools through a critical incident. I was involved in a critical incident in my school in 2005 and I am particularly interested in how other principals describe that experience. I am also interested in how it may have impacted on you and the kinds of support, personal and professional, which were available to you. I was particularly interested in your responses to the survey because .....

I will be taking notes and recording this interview. Do you agree?

Please be assured that you may withdraw from this interview at any time, without giving any reason. If you wish to access some professional support, I am able to give you the phone number of a confidential, free counseling service.

I will be asking you to elaborate on some of the answers you gave in the survey – this will help me to really understand how the experience was for you.

1. In your role as principal, did you have any training or preparation for handling a critical incident?
2. Could you please tell me what happened during the critical incident?

3. What did you, as principal, do during the critical incident?
4. How do you think you performed as a leader?
5. What happened in the time immediately after the critical incident?
6. During the next couple of weeks?
7. Longer term?
8. What supports were available for you at these times?  
(personal, professional)
9. Upon reflection, are there any other types of support that you feel might have been helpful to you?
10. In what ways did the incident impact on you in the immediate aftermath?
11. In the longer term?
12. How did you manage that impact?
13. What advice would you give to other principals about managing a critical incident?

14. What advice would you give to your System about supporting principals in the management of a critical incident?
15. Is there anything else you feel that you haven't been asked that I ought to know about?

## Appendix J Long term impacts and confidence

ID	Sex	Syrs	Confidence	Lt.impact	Curr.ment	Funeral	Memorial	Long Term detail
1	M	Exp	Inc	Yes	Yes/4y			Neg. parent reaction (P's reputation)
3	F	N.exp	Inc					
4	M	Exp	Pos	Yes	Yes/9y			Experience built 'inner strength'
5	M	Exp	Neg			Yes		"Listen to the needs of your principals"
6	M	Exp	Pos				Yes	
7	M	Exp	Pos					"Think of us as people ....."
8	M	N.exp	Dec	Yes				
9	M	N.exp		Yes/9m				
10	F	Exp	Pos	Yes	Yes			Multiples (12deaths in 2years)
11	M	Exp	Inc					"I learnt so much ....."
12	M	Exp	Pos	Yes/12m				"Make the principal have ....counselling"
13	F	Exp	Pos	Yes/12m				Positive - established credibility w community
14	M	Exp	Pos					
15	F	Exp	Pos	Yes				Increased,ongoing vigilance
16	M	Exp	Inc	Yes	Yes	Yes		Follow-up events (funerals, court etc)
18	F	Exp	Pos	Yes	Yes			"I felt absolutely terrible and still do."
19	F	Exp	Dec	Yes	Yes			"I still remain concerned ..", security
20	M	Exp	Pos	Yes	Yes/5y	Yes	Yes	"I know I have not fully been able to get over it."
21	F	N.exp	Inc	Yes/3m				
22	F	Exp	Inc					
23	F	N.exp	Pos	Yes	Yes/12y			Nightmares "blood on the road"
24	M	N.exp	Pos					
25	F	Exp	Pos	Yes/12m				"...family relied on me ....for over a year."
26	M	Exp	Pos					
27	F	Exp	Pos	Yes		Yes		"More heightened awareness" [security]
28	M	N.exp	Dec					
29	M	N.exp	Neg	Yes	Yes			"It was a dreadful period in my life."
30	F	Exp	Pos	Yes		Yes		"Reduced confidence in clergy"
31	F	Exp	Pos	Yes/12m				Positive - pulled community together
32	M	Exp	Pos			Yes		
33	F	N.exp	Pos					
34	F	Exp	Pos		Yes			"Still feel quite anxious ...", felt blamed by HQ
35	F	Exp	Pos					
36	F	N.exp	Neg					
37	F	Exp	Pos	Yes/12m	Yes			"on-going exhaustion .. with no system support"
38	F	Exp	Pos					Positive - learnt from the experience
39	F	N.exp	Pos	Yes/12m		Yes		"lack of ... support in the community"
40	F	N.exp	Neg					
41	F	N.exp	Pos					
42	M	N.exp						Unresolved issues
43	M	N.exp	Dec					
44	F	Exp	Pos			Yes		
45	F	Exp	Pos			Yes		
46	F	Exp	Pos			Yes		
47	F	Exp	Inc	Yes/12m	Yes			".... I [still] can't bear to think about [memories]"
48	F	Exp	Pos	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	"It was up to me ..."
49	F	Exp	Inc	Yes		Yes		"The sense of guilt remains"; better skills
50	F	Exp	Pos					
51	F	N.exp	Pos	Yes/12m	Yes			"enormous impact on me personally ..."
52	F	N.exp	Inc					
53	F	Exp	Pos			Yes		Positive- improved community relations
56	F	N.exp	Neg	Yes				
57	M	Exp	Pos	Yes	Yes			"..incidents have medium to long term impact.."
58	F	N.exp	Inc					
59	M	Exp	Pos	Yes/12m				damaged relationship with parent
60	F	N.exp	Pos					"I don't think anyone was particularly interested"
61	F	Exp	Pos	Yes	Yes			anxiety, concern, "I had little personal support"
63	F	Exp	Pos	Yes				Raised awareness
64	F	N.exp	Pos	Yes				
65	F	Exp	Pos					
66	F	N.exp	Pos	Yes/2m				
67	M	Exp	Pos	Yes				family support; raised awareness
68	M	N.exp	Pos	Yes				Slow resolution process
69	M	Exp	Pos					
70	F	Exp	Pos					skills & experience gained
71	F	N.exp	Neg	Yes				needed personal support, & how to support others?
72	M	N.exp	Pos					"Do not forget your own health & wellbeing"
73	M	Exp	Pos	Yes	Yes			reawakened unpleasant memories, still concern for teacher
74	F	N.exp	Pos	Yes/yrs	Yes			Guilt, parent's anger, court case
75	M	Exp	Pos					
76	F	Exp	Pos					

### Legend

**L.t.impact** Long term impact

**Curr.ment**

Mention of current impacts



## Appendix K Preparation and training responses

ID	Sex	Syrs	100-250	PriorTr	CIMTrain	CIMPPolicy	CI Team	Media Tr	MH Child	Man.stress	Other
1	M	Exp	Yes		Yes						Child Protection training
3	F	N.exp	Yes	No							
4	M	Exp	Less	No							
5	M	Exp	Yes	No							
6	M	Exp	More			Yes	Yes				
7	M	Exp	Less	No							
8	M	N.exp	Yes	No							
9	M	N.exp	More		Yes	Yes		Yes	Yes		
10	F	Exp	Yes							Yes	
11	M	Exp	More								Anaphylaxis training
12	M	Exp	More								PART training
13	F	Exp	More	No							
14	M	Exp	Yes	No							
15	F	Exp	More		Yes						
16	M	Exp	More								Provided w policy
18	F	Exp	More			Yes					Sharing policies w colleagues
19	F	Exp	More			Yes	Yes				
20	M	Exp	More			Yes					
21	F	N.exp	Yes	No							
22	F	Exp	Yes								CPR training
23	F	N.exp	More		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes			
24	M	N.exp	Less			Yes					
25	F	Exp	Yes		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes			
26	M	Exp	More		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
27	F	Exp	Yes		Yes	Yes				Yes	
28	M	N.exp	Yes		Yes						
29	M	N.exp	Less	No							
30	F	Exp	More		Yes	Yes					
31	F	Exp	More			Yes				Yes	
32	M	Exp	More					Yes			
33	F	N.exp	More	No							
34	F	Exp	More	No							
35	F	Exp	More			Yes	Yes				
36	F	N.exp	Yes	No							
37	F	Exp	More		Yes	Yes	Yes				
38	F	Exp	More			Yes					Previous similar experience
39	F	N.exp	Less	No							
40	F	N.exp	More	No							
41	F	N.exp	More	No							
42	M	N.exp	Yes		Yes			Yes			
43	M	N.exp	More			Yes					Colleague mentoring
44	F	Exp	More			Yes	Yes	Yes			
45	F	Exp	More		Yes	Yes					
46	F	Exp	More								Trained as a counsellor
47	F	Exp	Yes			Yes					
48	F	Exp	Yes	No							
49	F	Exp	More	No							
50	F	Exp	More	No							
51	F	N.exp	More		Yes	Yes					
52	F	N.exp	Yes			Yes					
53	F	Exp	More		Yes	Yes	Yes				
56	F	N.exp	More	No							
57	M	Exp	More		Yes	Yes				Yes	
58	F	N.exp	Less	No							
59	M	Exp	More			Yes		Yes			
60	F	N.exp	Yes								Fire drill
61	F	Exp	More			Yes					First Aid course
63	F	Exp	More			Yes	Yes	Yes			
64	F	N.exp	Yes		Yes						
65	F	Exp	More								Talking to staff
66	F	N.exp	More		Yes		Yes				
67	M	Exp	Yes		Yes			Yes			
68	M	N.exp	Yes		Yes			Yes			
69	M	Exp	More		Yes	Yes					
70	F	Exp	More			Yes					Engagement w HQ OHS officer
71	F	N.exp	Yes	No							
72	M	N.exp	Yes		Yes	Yes	Yes			Yes	
73	M	Exp	More		Yes	Yes		Yes		Yes	
74	F	N.exp	More	No							
75	M	Exp	More		Yes	Yes		Yes			
76	F	Exp	Yes			Yes		Yes			

### Legend

**100-250** School enrolment  
**PriorTr** Prior training  
**CIMTrain** Critical incident management training  
**CIMPPolicy** Critical incident management policy

**CI Team** Critical incident team  
**Media Tr** Media training  
**MH Child** Child mental health training  
**Man.stress** Managing stress training