

## Role of the Principal as a Leader for Crisis Management in Primary Schools in Mexico

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### Abstract

This work explores perceptions of both principals and teachers regarding the leader role and readiness of three Mexican primary school principals to manage critical events in their schools in the state of Yucatán. The study focusses on school communities embedded in disadvantageous social contexts characterized by poverty, family dysfunction, and violence as well as threats from natural disasters like hurricanes. Throughout in-depth interviews, principals expressed their concerns about their responsibilities and identified vulnerabilities in the case of a crisis in the school. Likewise, through focus groups we collected information on how teachers perceived the role of their principals in a crisis and their expectations and problem-solving skills in such situations. The main findings are that principals recognize the leadership they must have to resolve crises and understand they are responsible for the safety and well-being of students and the barriers they have encountered in these situations included the social context surrounding the school, institutional regulations, and a lack of training for crisis management. Specific competencies identified by the teachers for crisis management included informed decision-making, good communication, and acting quickly. Findings provide the basis for discussing the role of principals as leaders in a crisis, identifying specific training and communication requirements.

### Keywords

Crisis leadership, principals, primary school, México

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## **Rol del Director Escolar como Líder en la Gestión de Crisis en Escuelas Primarias de México**

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### **Resumen**

Este trabajo explora las percepciones de directores y maestros respecto al rol como líderes y la preparación de tres directores de escuelas primarias yucatecas para gestionar crisis en sus escuelas. El estudio se centra en escuelas inmersas en contextos sociales caracterizados por la pobreza, la disfunción familiar y la violencia, así como por amenazas de desastres naturales como huracanes. Mediante entrevistas en profundidad, los directores expresaron sus preocupaciones sobre sus responsabilidades e identificaron vulnerabilidades en las escuelas y mediante grupos focales, se recopiló información sobre cómo los maestros perciben el rol de sus directores en una crisis, así como las habilidades para resolver estas situaciones. Los directores reconocen el liderazgo que deben tener para resolver crisis y su responsabilidad en la seguridad y el bienestar de los estudiantes. Algunos obstáculos que han enfrentados en estas situaciones incluyen el contexto social que rodea a la escuela, la falta de regulaciones institucionales y de capacitación en gestión y manejo de crisis. Las competencias específicas identificadas por los maestros para la gestión de crisis incluyeron la toma de decisiones informadas, buena comunicación y acción rápida. Estos hallazgos proporcionan la base para discutir el rol de los directores como líderes en una crisis, identificando las necesidades específicas de capacitación y comunicación.

### **Palabras clave**

Liderazgo en crisis, directores, escuelas primarias, México

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Schools often confront catastrophic events or critical situations—whether they be environmental, social, or psychological — that require crisis management competences from school leaders. Research on how principals cope and manage these critical situations is important because it can prevent important costly and sometimes tragic consequences to the school community (Altinbas, Tokel & Dagli, 2019).

Schools may face environmental challenges such as hurricanes, wildfires and threats from swarms (Parks et al., 2022). In addition, crises can occur because of events such as shootings, accidents, medical emergencies and even vandalism, delinquency, and drug trafficking in the school surroundings (Hernández, 2020).

Crisis can disrupt the community's normal life, and the lack of planning and training to confront the damages can be exacerbated to include loss of human life, material loss, financial and social loss, as well as a reduction in health and life quality for students and teachers, for example, posttraumatic stress, psychological disorders and negative effects in behaviour and achievement in students (Hosseinighousheh et al., 2019; Convery, Carroll & Balogh, 2015).

Preparation to cope with such events may decrease fear, insecurity, collective hysteria and anxiety in the community (Alsubie et al., 2017). Leadership in crisis management within primary schools is a crucial aspect of a principal's role, particularly in Mexico, where schools may face a range of challenges including natural disasters, social issues, and health emergencies. Leadership is critical to face catastrophic events, difficult or critical moments, like a scholar crisis (Rojas & Gaspar, 2006 in Hernández, 2020). Principals must be scholars as well as community leaders, and they have the responsibility to act and respond in crises for safety and guard the student's integrity and welfare while they are in the school (Amani et al., 2018). Crises pose important challenges for principals because they quickly generate a situation of tension where immediate decisions and actions or solutions are required (Drake, 2018), so the leader must offer calm, hope, guidance, and s/he must make resources more efficient and guarantee open and true communication with parents and all the scholar community (Chatzipanagiotou & Katsarou, 2023; Fortunato et al., 2018).

Another challenge for principals and teachers is having the knowledge and skills to minimize risk and how to respond to crises, because they do not have training to resolve emergencies or manage crises at school (Potter, Pavlakis & Roberts, 2021; Orduña et al., 2021). And if they have training, the time they spend preparing and practicing crises reactions is uncertain (Drake, 2018). Furthermore, leaders in crises situations are under pressure because they lack the time to acquire and effectively process the information what cause stress and affect the capacity to evaluate the information and make decisions (Hadley et al., 2011).

In summary, the role of the principal as a leader is essential for planning and mitigating risk, as well as to effectively confront crises. Considering the importance of crises events and the role of principals for solve in these situations, the following research questions are addressed: (1) What is the Principal's role as a leader in crises events? (2) What are the characteristics of a leader in crisis management? And (3) What are the difficulties in crisis management in the schools?

### Leadership in a time of crisis

Cáceres et al. (2017) consider the principal as a leader to be person who must have the ability to properly use institutional resources, guarantee quality teaching, promote learning, encourage the development of teaching staff and supervise the safety of the educational center (Rosales et al., 2022). The leadership of the principals is an essential element for the educational organization development and the implementation of educational policy, making decisions based on the priority needs of the educational community (Rosales et al., 2022). Therefore, leadership should not be related only to occupying a position in the school but to fulfilling the desirable tasks and responsibilities of the leader. Principal's leadership focused on two roles: pedagogical and administrative (Domingo et al., 2019; Rosales et al., 2022).

Most of the literature addressed pedagogical leadership for educational improvement and student learning and the administrative role in the management process of educational organizations, to achieve the objectives and proposed improvements (Domingo et al., 2019; Rosales et al., 2022). When we focused on leadership in crises, principals are more aware of emerging threats or risks and make efforts to minimize them, respond to events and address consequences to try to restore normal life to the scholar community (Mutch, 2020). Porche (2009, on Mutch, 2020), considers the difference between crises leader and crises manager, where management involves only operational processes such as diagnosis, decision-making and use of resources. Crises leadership involves overseeing crises management, but also providing vision, direction, and big-picture thinking. Therefore, the role of the principal changes from educational or pedagogical leader to crises leader (Mutch, 2020).

Hannah and colleagues (2009) outlined a framework for examining leadership during times of crisis in extreme contexts. Their five-component typology looks at the magnitude of consequences, form of threat, probability of consequences, location in time and physical or psychological–social proximity. This framework allows for an understanding of the contextual nature of a threat to a school, whether it be COVID-19 or a Category 4 hurricane. As a leader considers the looming crisis through this five-point lens, cognition and behavioral choices become clear. Smith and Riley (2010) mention that decisive and immediate actions are required by the leader, because time is considered a limiting criterion, that is, the faster and more appropriately decisions are made, the threat decreases, not increases or is resolved.

Some characteristics associated with leaders in crises are that they must learn and communicate simultaneously and be sensitive to the uncertainty that arises, they must structure the unknown (Fortunato, 2018). The effective crisis leader most promotes and maintain safety, healthy and motivating learning environment, and scholar culture for both students and teachers. He must be responsive and direct, trustworthy, act quickly and accurately, make critical decision quickly, communicate with empathy and humanity, manage the anxiety and the frustration in face of the crisis, employ crisis recovery strategies and learn to resolve future crisis (Chatzipanagiotou & Katsarou, 2023).

Flaxman, Hancock, and Weiner (2020) mention that a leader in crisis must be characterized by knowing how to remain calm and communicate, in addition to having empathy, understanding towards workers, kindness, and sincerity. Indeed, leaders must think creatively about the clarity and frequency with which relevant information will be shared with the community. Sometimes it is necessary to reprioritize and adapt the practices used to effectively

support communities and take on a highly stressful situation, performing various roles and implementing constantly changing policies with structural constraints and limited resources (Chatzipanagiotou & Katsarou, 2023).

In general, five stages are identified for crisis management: prevention, preparation, response, recovery, and learning (Smith & Riley, 2010). In each stage the crisis leader must do some action or activities to properly manage a crisis. One of challenges for leaders is to think realistically about possible events and overcome the psychological obstacle of denial: “this is not going to happen to me.” To identify the risks, the leader need obtain information from key people such as: colleagues with experience and seniority in the school, new staff or relevant members of the school community, so the leader must conform a crisis team.

One of the techniques that can be used is brainstorming to identify the possible risks (Smith & Riley, 2010). Risk assessment is a tool for crisis response planning, so the crisis leader and crisis response team should focus on identifying the risks most likely to occur in the school, with the goal to mitigate them or prepare to face them. In the preparation stage, contingency plans or protocols are established for crisis management and the response crisis team are conformed. This team is headed by the school principal as a leader. Leader must consider the weakness and strengths of each of team members because in a crisis, they will be their main support.

Team members must work together, know the activities and roles the must perform in a crisis (described in the protocol), train in crisis management and response, conducted drills periodically and haver regular meetings to discuss the student’s needs during response and recovery phases. It is the responsibility of the leader to supervise all activities and processes (Dwyer et al., 2015).

The creation of a prior plan or protocol on how to handle crises will allow scholar leaders and staff to make decisions under pressure in tense and unpleasant situations (Lussier & Achua, 2011). Lussier and Achua (2011) mention that the plan must include: 1) the designation of the crisis leader, 2) creating crisis response team and 3) risk assessment. The designation of the leader (principal) is the recognition of the main responsible person for the crisis management, as well as identify potential risks and threats, maintain control, and monitor the plan execution. The leader’s main tasks are to delegate tasks and responsibilities, to verify the staff keep incidents records, to monitor behaviors and risks of the scholar staff, to identify environmental patterns and trends and to coordinate the crisis team activities. The leader’ qualities must include expert knowledge and real experience in dealing with crises, having influence people, generosity, pragmatism, power, manage resources, position, and courage for face a tense situation.

In the response stage (when the crisis is occurring) the actions established by the leader and crisis team can dramatically decrease or significantly increase damages (Fortunato et al., 2018). To determine readiness to respond to a crisis, these five should be considered: quality of the crisis plan, access to crisis management information, preparedness for rapid response, effective communication, and effective crisis leadership.

In the school context, the person responsible in the institutions is the principal as a leader, so if something happens, he must give a timely response at same time he need keep an eye on staff and students well-being (Mutch, 2020). Coombs (2006, in Fortunato et al., 2018) mention three actions to consider in an effectively response: be fast, consistent, and open. A quick

response is an active response because it reflects that the severity is recognize and the situation can be controlled. Currently, most information can be spread in seconds by the social media, so the uncertainties and fake news can generate hysteria abroad therefore, internal quick actions and effective communication are essential.

After a crisis occurs, the next stage is Recovery or turn to normality. Many times, recovery involves time, efforts and it can have high costs (Convery et al., 2015; Fortunato et al., 2018), especially, when it is massive or there is a large impact, for example, an earthquake or hurricane. In this stage, some important elements are learning, prevention culture and resilience.

Recovery requires both leader and crisis team analyze actions carried out in before stages (prevention, preparation, and response) and crisis damages, then, they must propose strategies for the community recover. The leader, together crisis team must work and make the necessary efforts to achieve the community recover. The leader is the key for community school resilience so he must have the ability to resist, absorb, adapt, and recover from crisis effects in a timely and effective manner (United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, UNDRR, 2009). Leadership is characterized by providing a vision of a positive future (Mutch, 2020). But sometimes leader needs to look for help outside the school, for example, government or associations, so his ability for demand resources is very important in this stage, however, the community must be involved in this stage and their help and participation can improve the school and return to normality more quickly (Hardy et al., 2019).

We can learn from our decisions and actions done, so the last stage is the learning. Both leader and crisis team and the community must evaluate, through dialogues, the protocols and how the crisis was managed, and all process about (Dwyer et al., 2015). The leader must self-assess your role as a leader and crisis manager, reflect on your strengths and weaknesses and consider improvement strategies.

This stage allows make necessary adjustment to existing protocols for improvement it and start the process again, the crisis cycle. We can identify the risk and potential crises and consider the feedback from crisis teams and the community. As learn process is the prevention culture because will allow us to be prepared before crises occur, so we need to consider the safety, prevention, resilience, and training for school crisis management.

Although the principals' role in a crisis is constating changing, and they should respond differently, they must respond every time because everyone looks to them. A review of the literature about crises leadership and developed a list of the traits good leaders have (e.g., adaptable, relationship-oriented, trusted) as well as the behaviors they possess (e.g. demonstrating empathy, reassurance, and managing their emotions) (Mutch, 2020).

Given the importance of the principal as an educational leader, it is essential to also understand their role as a crisis leader based on experienced situations, as well as to identify the characteristics of the principal that facilitate or support, and those that hinder, the identification of risks and the ability to confront and resolve crisis situations in primary schools.



## Methodology

This study is based on a qualitative methodology through case studies, using interviews with principals and focus groups with teachers in three schools in the same municipality in Yucatán. The approach was chosen to explore the role of principals in crisis situations and to gain a deeper understanding of crisis leadership.

### Participants and Data Collection

Empirical data were collected from two types of participants: principals, as case studies, and teachers, who provided confirmatory information for data triangulation. The cases involve three principals from three public primary schools in Yucatán, Mexico, all located in the same area near Mérida, the state capital. Each principal was contacted through a snowball sampling process, in which inquiries were made about schools that had faced adverse situations and whose principals had dealt with such events. The inclusion criterion was that the principals had held their position at the same school within the same municipality for at least three years, as it is one of the three municipalities with the highest number of people living in poverty and the fifth in extreme poverty in Yucatán (National Council for the Evaluation of Social Development Policy [CONEVAL], 2022), thus considered a vulnerable area. Three principals from three schools were selected and interviewed, along with six to eight teachers from each school who participated in focus groups. In total, twenty-three participants were interviewed: three principals and twenty teachers.

The principals participated voluntarily through informed consent. The perspective of the teaching staff was included because they know and work closely with the principals and had prior experience with a school crisis, which allowed them to speak about leadership in crisis situations. The principals informed the teachers about the project, and the teachers were able to decide whether or not to participate. Following the research team's invitation conveyed through the principal, participant recruitment was voluntary. Table 1 provides some characteristics of case studies; the participants were identified with pseudonyms.

**Table 1**  
*Characteristics of Participating Cases*

Pseudonyms	Gender	Age	Years of service	Years as principal at the school	Code
Mariela	Female	60	41	8	P1
Pedro	Male	41	15	11	P2
Carmen	Female	41	8	3	P3

### Data Analysis

Empirical data were analyzed using inductive content analysis (Elo & Kyngäs, 2018). During the reading process, relevant data were identified and coded that addressed the aim of the paper, and eventually resulted in content-related categories. Coding began by identifying keywords

pertaining to how participants talked about the role of principals in crisis management loosely based on the typology developed by Hannah and colleagues (2009) (see Table 2).

**Table 2**

*Codes and Categories Example*

Key Issue	Codes	Categories
Due to traffic problems, we as a school and parents decided to close the street when student enter and leave...	Solve problems- probability of consequences	Responsibilities for crisis management

## **Ethical Considerations**

The protection of participant data was considered as a critical ethical aspect. Participants were informed that the data provided would be confidential, and informed consent was obtained from principals in writing and verbally from the teachers. In all cases, the autonomy of their willingness to participate and answer questions was considered and they were informed that they could leave the interview at any time.

## **Results**

From the data analysis, we identified three categories: Principal's responsibilities for crisis management, principal's competencies for crisis management, and difficulties for crisis management. We describe the main findings (preliminary results) in this section.

### **Principal's Responsibilities for Crisis Management**

Research question number one asked: What is the Principal's role as a leader in crises events? Responsibilities refers to the obligation to comply with the activities and function designed for the work position. While the duties of a principal are set and most focus on organizing the school, supervising the work of teachers and providing quality education, the principals we interviewed also mentioned specific responsibilities for crisis management. The participants agreed on the following six responsibilities for principals in a crisis: safeguarding the well-being of students, solving problems effectively, making informed decisions, communication with the school community, minimizing risks with prevention measures, and considering measures to protect the decisions.

#### ***Safeguard the Well-being Students***

In addition of the principal's responsibility to organize and supervise student learning, they also supervise and ensure the safety of the school environment, even if a crisis does not occur (Rosales-Eguía et al., 2022). In the interviews, principals mentioned that when a crisis arises, the students must be prioritized because they are minors. When they are inside the school or in



the surroundings wearing the school uniform or during the school-home-school journey, principals are responsible for guaranteeing and safeguarding student well-being. These responsibilities include complying with school regulations, providing immediate attention in the event of a catastrophic situation, and accompanying students if something happens. In this regard, the principals said:

<sup>1</sup>P1: “My children have the right to have a safe space, a comfortable space... As principals, we must guarantee the security...”

P2: “If something happens on the periphery of the school and they have their uniform, it involves me because it is my responsibility to take care of their well-being”

P3: “At school you have to see the well-being of the children before anything else... part of my role is to see that the minor is safe...”

Student safety was indeed listed as the most important responsibility of the principal, but they also are expected to be effective problem solvers in a crisis.

### ***Solve Problems Effectively***

In catastrophic or crisis events, time is a limiting factor, and the speed of the response can increase or decrease the damage (Smith & Riley, 2010). In these situations, principals can discern between situations that require an immediate solution and those that do not. For example, it is recognized that principals must act immediately, analyze alternative solutions, organize support teams, and implement strategies to resolve conflict situations, such as training the staff for crisis management. Some of the comments made were:

P1: “In those cases you must act immediately, for example, when I arrived at the school, the building was destroyed, there was no place to sit at the school and I went to the church to look for benches...to lend them, no way. We must resolve at that moment, do something...”

P2: “We have to solve the traffic problem and we as a school and the parents reached an agreement to close the street... we act, we must intervene at that moment...” “we immediately take him to the hospital”

P3: “at the time the student commented it we spoke with the parents, but we also had to immediately report this incident to the DIF, PRODENNAY, SEGEY and the prosecutor's office...”

Importantly, teachers also mentioned that it is also the responsibility of the principal to train staff on how to manage an emergency. Training in school safety for principals and teachers is fundamental to knowing what to do in crisis situations. However, only one school of the three in the study had administered a first aid course for teachers and practiced periodic emergency evacuation drills. P2: “we have first aid training and courses periodically... We also have civil protection courses...” “we have done drills, just like that... of gunshots and fires.”

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<sup>1</sup> The P1 designations belongs to Principal 1, P2 to Principal 2 and P3 to Principal 3.

### ***Make Informed Decisions***

In crisis situations, decision-making is a primary action with limited time, and while it can minimize the situation, it can also exacerbate it. The main responsibility for these decisions lies with the principal. Principals and teachers recognized that the primary decisions-makers are the principals, but within this process, it is important to investigate, gather information from witnesses, and seek evidence to make an informed decision.

P1: "...when possible, I don't make hasty decisions, I say, let me investigate, give me time to investigate and review my protocols" "As a principal, your job is to make decisions. You must analyze pros and cons based on the information you gather."

P2: "...considering all the information we made that decision... the principal is responsible"

P3: "at all times it is the responsibility of the principal to make the decisions on what to do... for example in the case of the girl I had to decide not to hand her over to the guardian, I had to call the police..."

When the crisis involves students, the principals recognized their role as decision-makers, not only in terms of saying what to do, but also in investigating the involved parties and verifying protocols to make the best decision. Although they know that time is crucial, they aim to gather as much information as possible. P2: "You have to find out what happened, who was involved, who witnessed it... have all the arguments so that when the parent comes, we don't create a bigger conflict. P3: "Many of the decisions are based on the existing protocols"

Consistent with the five-component typology of Hannah and colleagues (2009), leaders agreed they needed to assess the form of the threat and the probability of the consequences. However, the principals added a need to be effective communicators as part of managing a crisis.

### ***Communication with the School Community***

A key aspect of efficient crisis management is communication, both within and outside the school. Principals recognize the importance of always maintaining contact with parents, especially when a conflict situation arises. Communication with parents is an aspect that was mentioned constantly and which the principal linked to the other identified responsibilities, as they consider communication to be two-way. Principals emphasized that parents (or guardians) are the first to be informed in the event of an incident at the school and must always approve or agree to any action taken at the school to resolve crises. They acknowledge the need to communicate with the relevant authorities about what is happening within or around the institution, to seek support in matters they cannot resolve or simply to inform. One concern mentioned was communication with parents, as the first thought when something happens to students is how to inform the parents.

P1: "Parents are aware of the situation because I need their approval... we always try to maintain contact with the parents."

P2: “We inform the mother, they are notified... but we do think about what we are going to say and how we are going to say it.” “We have had meetings with the mayor to inform him about the situations... we call the ecological police and notify them.”

P3: “We are responsible for calling the authorities, providing information, calling the parents, and making a report of the events... all appointments with parents or guardians, problems, protocols, the reports are done by the principal.”

Something mentioned by the teachers is the importance of communication between the principal and the teachers, as sometimes parents speak directly with the principal without the teacher's knowledge, which can lead to communication problems about how the events occurred or the omission of information. One of the principals and the teachers talked about the need to create spaces for dialogue between teachers and principals to discuss these incidents or crises that occur or may occur at the school.

### ***Minimize Risks with Prevention Measures***

As part of the crisis management process, risk identification is crucial, and principals acknowledge that it is their responsibility to identify and minimize risks. To this end, they also have the responsibility to involve the entire educational community and parents in minimizing risks or, if necessary, to manage resources to do so. Actions such as practicing drills and implementing strategies within the teaching and learning process to prevent and minimize situations that could generate a crisis, such as violence, were recognized. These include linking social risks or problems with school tasks and projects, though they also point out that there are very difficult problems associated with the social context.

P1: “Of course, I am always preventing accidents the school...”

P2: “There are spaces that can be dangerous in the school... there are risk areas... but we try to address them, either with a campaign or project closure, or we form brigades...”

P3: “We try to work with the students and parents on the main issues that affect us, but it is difficult.”

Many of the situations that can arise in the school could have been mitigated with a healthier relationship with parents and community members. To this end, the principals considered ways for minimizing risks by promoting better school-community relationships. This can involve organizing school activities with the community, offering workshops, and fostering human and emotional values between families and educators.

P1: “We create workshops for parents, invite them to meetings, try to maintain contact with the parents...” “...we link emotional and human aspects with school projects, because many times children need to express all the problems they carry...”

P2: “When something is trendy or a problem arises, like the suicide in the park, we try to use that news and hold small talks or a campaign to raise awareness with the students, and then we did one as a parents' school, where we also campaigned with them...”

P2: “We organize recreational activities with the parents; it’s not all work, so that everyone gets to know each other and knows how to react... the parent must be involved in schoolwork.”

Healthy school-community relationships are critical to ensuring a foundation for good communication with parents and families during and after a crisis.

### ***Consider Measures to Protect your Decisions***

Some of the comments that emerged from the principals, which are a priority to consider for both them and the teachers, include taking care of aspects of human rights and the children's perspective. For this reason, in any situation that occurs at the school and the agreements made, it is important to have evidence through documents signed by guardians or parents, such as logs, reports of events, and additionally, to not invade the privacy of the minors, ensuring their confidentiality so that no greater consequence or problem arises, for example, with Human Rights Commission, because these are situations of complaints or demands that could arise. Similarly, always have witnesses when making agreements with parents and to support the accompaniment of the minor in case it is necessary to transfer them to another institution.

P1: “They have to register everything, we write down everything that happens at the school... while I was meeting with the mothers, a teacher was in charge of write all the comments they made.”

P2: “We take a photo of the child, why? Because it is evidence... when you have files and reports, they back you up.”

P2: “We have a binnacle where we write down everything; this gives us support and evidence... for all the reports and agreements, a written document is made for the parent to sign in agreement, so we have evidence and are protected in any situation that parents may present.”

P3: “Someone always accompanies me, whether it’s the teacher or a janitor, because you need to have a witness so that nothing happens during the transfer... we also need to protect ourselves in those situations”

P3: “...the teachers have their incident sheet, which is a protocol we follow at the school as an internal agreement, so that everything is written down and with evidence, and to see if it is the first or second time that conflicts occur.”

In short, the teachers and the principals agreed that there are clear responsibilities in a crisis that fall on the shoulders of the school leader. There was less consensus, however, on the competencies principals had to fulfill these responsibilities.

### **Principal's Competencies for Crisis Management**

Research question number two asked: What are the characteristics of a leader in crisis management? When discussing the characteristics or competencies that a leadership principal should have, it is more related to promoting learning and supervising school operations.

However, when specifically identifying the competencies of a leader in a crisis situation, some competencies are linked to the crisis management process. The principals mentioned the competencies they need to be able to solve or react to an unforeseen situation. The competencies described by all the principals were to: act quickly, make informed decisions, maintain calm, know the current protocols and regulations, maintain effective communication, have a positive attitude, and maintaining connections and support networks.

### ***Act Quickly***

Some of the problems that occur in the school are considered crises and must be solved immediately, or at least the decision-making should be immediate, as there is little time to address the crisis. The principals identify this competency as the ability to react or act quickly, which is important because acting can reduce or at least not exacerbate the problematic situation.

P1: “I had to solve it at that moment, otherwise the fight would have gotten bigger... so I grabbed her hand and stopped her... we took him to the hospital immediately...”

P2: “We must have the ability to react, not to freeze, be open-minded and know what to do. You must have the vision to react positively and not negatively.”

P3: “When the child told us, we immediately informed the mother, but something that surprised me was that she took it very naturally, so we had to contact the authorities...”

### ***Make Informed Decisions***

Informed decision-making is a process that involves gathering information and evaluating alternatives to make conscious and effective decisions. The principals initially considered the actions dictated by the protocols; however, they also emphasized the importance of obtaining information about the events to make better decisions.

P1: “I don't make hasty decisions; I say, I'm going to find out...”

P2: “You have to be informed about everything that happens at the school to make appropriate decisions.”

P3: “But it is important to have knowledge of the protocols to make your decisions...”

### ***Maintain calm***

One of the first recommendations in crisis situations is to maintain calm. Especially in a leadership position, the leader is expected to have the most control over the situation, maintain emotional balance, and think calmly to make better decisions. The principals considered that the sense of calm is important to act more effectively and reflect this calm to others.

P1: “Even though I felt scared inside and was saying, God help me! I couldn't show it; I had to appear calm and think better.”

P2: “You must remain calm and be equanimous at all times.”

P3: “Emotions should not play a part in it.”

### ***Know the Current Protocols and Regulations***

Protocols represent a set of rules or actions established by different authorities to address, resolve, or manage various situations. The principals mentioned that every action or decision they make must be in accordance with the established protocols. They recognize the importance of knowing all the updated protocols related to their teaching and administrative duties. Ignorance of these protocols does not justify not acting according to them. Therefore, part of the principal's job associated with this competency is to research, read, and stay updated on all protocols, as well as know the limits of their work.

P1: “Knowledge of the protocols gives us the guidelines to act in certain situations.”

P2: “... then we activate the corresponding protocols to follow up and solve it.” “We have a protocol to follow, or rather, several, and we have to know them all to know what to do... you have to inform yourself about the new existing protocols, civil protection, SEGEY, and other authorities.”

P3: “It is important to master the protocols... you have to follow the protocol exactly as it is...”

### ***Maintain Effective Communication***

In crisis situations, effective leaders must prioritize maintaining open, accurate, and clear communication with other educational agents, as it affects the reduction or increase of damages. Honest communication can help maintain trust in the principal's leadership. Principals mention that they must communicate with parents, especially during unexpected situations. The competency of knowing how to convey information is important for the reaction of parents. They also recognize the importance of communication with the teachers themselves.

P1: “I think one of the things that has helped me is that we always inform the parents.”

P2: “You have to know how to handle parents, think about how you are going to tell them things.” “Whether conflicts are resolved or not, I have to be informed.”

P3: “You have to stay informed and also inform the parents and other authorities.”

### ***Positive Attitude***

A positive attitude could be considered as the optimism or positive outlook when facing a situation. The principals consider this positive approach important because it personally helps them to participate in problem-solving and find the good aspects in not-so-good situations.

P1: “I always think that I am here for a reason, I have a duty to the children, so I must fulfill my responsibilities.”

P2: “You have to solve things in a positive way and work with opportunity areas to resolve problems.”

P3: “You always have to find a way to move forward together, as a school team.”



### ***Maintain Connections and Support Networks***

In adverse situations, it is important to consider the people or institutions that can help in the solution, maintaining connections with them before any situation occurs. The principals mention the importance of the work team they have and interact with daily.

P2: "We try to maintain connections with municipal authorities and the police for any situation, as well as with the teachers; fortunately, we have a good team of teachers."

P2: "...when we cannot solve it ourselves, then we move to the next instance, which would be the zone supervisor or the corresponding authority, but you need to know the numbers and the relevant authorities."

P3: "You have to have a good relationship with your work team and the other authorities."

### **Difficulties in Crisis Management**

The third category of analysis was understanding how participants perceived difficulties in crisis management, which was aligned to research question number three: What are the difficulties in crisis management in the schools? The findings fell into the following areas: social contexts, training for crisis management, and institutional regulations.

#### ***Social Contexts***

Since the schools are in areas considered socially disadvantaged, the social problems reported by school administrators are very similar. The principals believe that this context of violence, dysfunctional families, economic disadvantage, and parental neglect affects the ideology and behavior of the students, which can also be a risk for crisis situations and obstacles or difficulties in managing and solving school problems. Some of the comments they mentioned were as follows:

P1: "The context is a bit difficult; children often behave violently because their parents are also violent. They are people who often have addictions, and the children are in contact with that as well... when something happens, some parents become violent and yell at the school or try to get into fights, like the mothers that day..."

P2: "Some teachers and principals are afraid of the school, they are fearful..."

P2: "Some parents are confrontational... many parents believe that we don't take care of the children and want to blame us... some parents don't understand the regulations and become aggressive, they start yelling..."

P2: "Many times, parents bypass us and go to complain because they disagree with the decisions made."

P3: "It still has characteristics of a rural community, dysfunctional families, economically segregated context, most are low-income..."

P3: "For example, violence has been normalized... in sexual matters, what surprised me is that the mother took it naturally... parents usually resolve everything with violence, not only among themselves but also by threatening teachers; they are confrontational..."

### ***Training for Crisis Management***

To effectively manage crises, it is crucial that school staff receive training on how to act and have access to updated protocols. Training plays a critical role in equipping educators and principals with the skills and knowledge needed to handle crisis situations appropriately. However, not all teachers and administrators have this type of training. P1: "We lack the training to solve these problems, and often we don't know if what we're doing is correct." P3: "We don't have the necessary training for these situations."

### ***Institutional Regulations***

Within the established processes or protocols, the participation or responsibility of various entities is determined, but sometimes, external entities do not fulfill their obligations. Regarding crises that occur at school, or some risks related to school infrastructure, the principals mention that it is their responsibility to manage these issues with different entities, but responses are often not prompt or attention is only given after a crisis has occurred. Sometimes they feel that this also affects their role as leaders, as they recognize that they have limitations in solutions that are not their responsibility.

P1: "Reports are always made, or requests are submitted, but they don't pay attention to us, only after the parents posted it on Facebook did, they call me immediately to ask what was needed... and they also scolded me, but I had to do it."

P2: "Sometimes the Secretaria puts us in a difficult position because it does not fulfill its function, for example, we filed the report, then months passed, and it was not repaired, and the hole was just cordoned off... after the child fell, I sent the photo, obviously I erased the child's face, all dirty... then they came to repair it, and the problem was solved."

P3: "One of the problems is that, for example, the DIF does not work in the afternoon, so I have to apply another protocol, I had to call the education councilor and the police... and I've had to leave the prosecutor's office at 11 at night."

## **Conclusion**

Although principals do not identify conflictive or catastrophic situations as school crises, they see some of them as normal problems that they know it is their responsibility to minimize or resolve; otherwise, major problems may arise. One aspect that all participants keep in mind is to follow established protocols. All administrators are aware of the responsibility they assume by being heads of an institution, working with various and different teachers, and being responsible for minors. Beyond student learning, principals must also prioritize preserving the students' safety, physical and psychological well-being, and ultimately safeguarding their lives. One responsibility that emerged from the information and is not considered in the literature is about protective measures regarding decisions made. As public officials, they feel they can be

accused or intimidated by parents, which is why they always seek to have evidence of everything that happens in the classroom, school, and surroundings.

Regarding the characteristics or competencies of leaders in crises, those identified by the principals align well with what the literature establishes for an effective crisis leader.

The main difficulty participants identified is the social context. Since the schools are in a socially disadvantaged area, the problems, or rather the normalization of many actions by parents and students, can cause conflict situations or problems that may escalate. However, they are also aware that there are things they cannot change; they can only support them and promote values, norms of coexistence, and reinforce them with school tasks or projects.

These results contribute to reflecting on the crises that occur daily in schools and how principals and teachers resolve them despite the difficulties involved, as well as reconsidering the creation and/or implementation of formal action protocols to address crises in schools and ensure the safety of children. Similarly, the results suggest the need for training for both principals and teachers to manage crises effectively in schools. Scientific interest in principals' preparation to confront threats and crisis in primary schools is emerging in Mexico and further research is needed to adequately train and prepare principals to develop risk assessment, prevention and most importantly to act efficiently as leaders during critical events.

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