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SOCIOLOGY | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Experiences with crisis management when child sexual abuse was perpetrated by staff in early childhood education: A Swedish case study

Cecilia Kjellgren^{1*}, Christina Carlsson¹ and Anette Emilson²

Abstract: Institutional child sexual abuse is a concern for children, families, and society. Limited research has explored how school leaders and municipalities handle cases of sexual abuse in educational settings. This case study examines how a municipality managed the suspicion that 19 toddlers were sexually abused by an educator at several Early Childhood Education and Care institutions (ECEC). A nine-member crisis management team was formed that included key persons from the department of education and social welfare. During the initial phase of the investigation, only the team members were informed about the suspected abuse. In individual interviews, team members were asked how the team was organised and how their plans were implemented. In addition, they were asked about their experiences of participating in the crisis management. Three themes were identified: the set-up of the crisis management, the implementation of the crisis

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

When sexual abuse perpetrated by an educator working with children is disclosed, it affects children, families, the public, and the professionals in charge. This study explores how disclosure of institutional sexual abuse of 19 three-year-old children was received and handled by the municipality in charge. The crisis management team supported by childhood education and social welfare experts experienced this case differently than other cases, applied a child perspective, and used adapted principles of crisis communication. An extensive communication plan was set up, spokespersons were appointed and information prepared and distributed for different audiences, by the crisis management team. The respondents identified valuable experiences that other crisis management teams might benefit from, including providing extensive information, to be truthful when communicating, and speaking with “one voice”. The respondents expressed concerns for the victims and their families and were all impacted by their involvement in the case.

management plan, and important experiences. The crisis team emphasised that a child perspective rather than a general crisis perspective was applied and this approach was operationalised by key people in the educational and social welfare sectors. This paper highlights the impact of this case on the respondents as well as implications for the educational sector.

Subjects: Education; School Psychology; Early Childhood; Child and Family Social Work; Community Social Work

Keywords: institutional sexual abuse; early childhood education and care; crisis management; communication; child perspective; social welfare

1. Introduction

This case study examines the experiences of organising crisis management in one municipality in Sweden where an employee at several Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) institutions was arrested for child sexual abuse. The employee, who worked for several ECEC institutions in one municipality, sexually abused several children mainly aged 1–3 years while on duty. This study aims to examine how the municipality handled the case. Specifically, the study investigates how the crisis management team was set up, how the crisis management plan was implemented, and how the crisis management team experienced their work managing the crisis.

Sexual abuse of children raises concerns and distress in society. These reactions are even more intense when the offender is a professional or volunteer employee engaged in serving and supporting children (Blakemore, Herbert, Arney & Parkinson, 2017). When parents leave their children in the care of Early Childhood Education and Care institutions (ECEC), they expect the educators and other employees to provide a safe environment. If a child in an ECEC is sexually abused by an educator, it results in extremely strong reactions on multiple dimensions, but primarily among the families who leave their children in the care of the institution (Dyb et al., 2003; Kelley, 1994). Institutional abuse is the sexual abuse of a child by an employee or volunteer working at an institution that serves children (Gallagher, 2000). In a review of the impact of institutional sexual abuse, Blakemore et al. (2017) found that families as well as the wider community can be affected by these traumas. This distress also affects former colleagues of the suspect when it is disclosed that an educator has sexually offended children in their joint care (Shakeshaft et al., 2018; Skinner, 2001). Failure to prevent institutional sexual abuse at an ECEC compromises the trust in the institution (Shakeshaft et al., 2018).

1.1. Previous research

Limited international research has explored the prevalence of institutional abuse in ECEC institutions, schools, and sports or leisure programs. In a German population study, Witt et al. (2018) identified that among participants (N = 2,437), 3.1% reported being sexually abused at an institution (e.g., school, sports club, and residential child welfare) during childhood. Shakeshaft (2004) reviewed research published 1986–2003 and found that between 7% and 10% of school children are sexually abused by a teacher or other school staff. A Swedish population study (Svedin et al., 2015) found that 21% of 18-year-olds (N = 5,839) responding to a questionnaire concerning sexual experiences, experiences of sexual abuse, and use of the internet had experienced sexual abuse during childhood and 1% percent reported that the offender was a teacher or coach.

In a clinical study of perpetrators of sexual abuse (n = 223), Turner et al. (2014) found that 17% (n = 38) of the convicted and assessed offenders had committed their abuse during work or leisure time activities. Similarly, a British clinical sample of sex offenders referred to treatment (n = 305) reported that 13% (n = 41) of the offenders had abused a child they met in their professional setting (Sullivan & Beech, 2004). Almost all these perpetrators (90%, n = 37) were aware that they were sexually aroused by children by the time they were 21 years old, often sooner. Most of these respondents (57%, n = 23)

reported that they chose their career because it gave them access to children. Typically, sexual abuse of a child begins with a grooming phase. Craven et al. (2007) identified three types of grooming: self-grooming; grooming the environment and significant others; and grooming the child.

Sullivan and Quayle (2012) found that perpetrators who abused children with whom they work were likely to groom two groups of people: the victim and people who might hinder the abuse in some way such as other staff at the institution. This group of perpetrators carefully planned their abuse, often employing convoluted plans to execute their sexually manipulative behaviour. This planning often was more complex than plans made by other sexual offenders.

In a study of sexual abuse in nurseries (2013), Wonnacott highlighted the limited research on the subject. The author emphasises that the context and culture of the nursery environment is important for the offender as the perpetrator needs to assume a position of power that enables the sexual abuse. Wonnacott, comparing two cases of sexual abuse in ECEC institutions, identified three common characteristics of the offenders: they had established informal links with the nursery manager; they had been placed in a powerful position; and they were seen as a knowledgeable person. In addition, boundaries between staff and parents were permeable and staff expressed concerns about the offender's behaviour before the abuse was discovered.

In a literature review of crisis management in schools, Knox and Roberts (2005) concluded that there is limited empirical evidence that documents the effectiveness of school crisis intervention programs. They propose a school crisis response model to improve the effectiveness of crisis management. The crisis response model has three levels: primary prevention (including activities to prevent crisis); secondary intervention (actions in the aftermath of the crisis); and tertiary intervention (long-term interventions). In addition, they concluded that participation is needed from key personnel at three levels: the regional level, the district level, and the school level. Smith and Riley (2010) suggest five steps for responding to a school crisis: 1) gather the facts; 2) implement the relevant contingency plan or quickly adopt one to meet the current situation; 3) be decisive; 4) show concern; and 5) communicate. They further highlight the importance of reflection and learning after a crisis (2010; 2012). This reflection should consider what caused the crisis, when the crisis was identified, and how could it have been prevented. Smith and Riley (2012) further identified a dearth of literature and research addressing the key role the school leader plays in a school crisis.

Limited research has examined how school leaders and those in leading positions of the municipality deal with a case of institutional sexual abuse and how crisis management teams prepare and actually act when it is disclosed that a professional has sexually abused children in ECEC institutions or schools. General guidelines on how to manage a crisis are available, but they rarely focus on the situation when sexual abuse by a professional in educational institutions has been revealed.

This study addresses the gaps of knowledge in the research field by exploring how crisis management of institutional sexual abuse is experienced by a crisis management team.

2. Crisis management—a theoretical frame

The initial knowledge and theories presented on how to manage crises originated from the business sector and was later applied in the public sector. Coombs (2012) suggests the following definition of a crisis: “The perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectations of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organisation's performance and generate negative outcomes”. Crisis management attempts to prevent or reduce the damage and harm that a crisis can cause an organisation and its stakeholders (Coombs, 2012). Several theoretical approaches address how organisations and companies should approach crisis management and communication (Coombs, 2012).

In situational crisis communication theory (Coombs, 2007), organisations are encouraged to respond to a crisis based on how the public perceives who is responsible for the crisis. If the public

believes a crisis was the result of premeditated actions, they place more responsibility on the organisation. That is, the responses to a crisis and decisions about communication are guided by the potential reputational harm that a crisis may cause an organisation. Three types of crises have been identified by Coombs (2012), the victim cluster, the accidental cluster, and the intentional cluster.

In image restoration theory (repair theory), the strategies used aim to repair the reputation that may have been damaged by the organisation's own actions (Benoit, 1997). A successful crisis resolution requires honest and ethical communication. Image restoration theory offers several crisis response strategies. The five general strategies are denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness of event, corrective action, and mortification. Several options are proposed within each of the strategies. Corrective action promises to correct the problem and to prevent further occurrence of the offensive act. If an organisation chooses to use the mortification strategy, it confesses responsibility of wrongdoing, asks for forgiveness, and apologies for the offense (Benoit, 1997).

Hearit (2006) proposed the concept *apologia*—a discourse used when being accused of wrongdoing. *Apologia*, meaning defence or speech in defence, is not an apology per se (although it may contain one). Rather, by corporate *apologia* the organisation explains clearly and tries to convince the public of its remorse (Hearit, 2006). In an *apologia*, the person or organisation defends itself by creating a more favourable content for the allegations. Institutional *apologia* can be the case when an organisation has made mistakes or more often when an employee has committed an offense or is guilty of wrongdoing. The organisation has to apologise for what someone else has done. *Apologia* can include a denial as well as a non-denial of responsibility—i.e., justifying actions without denying full responsible for their actions (Courtright & Hearit, 2002). Hearit (2006) states that an apology used in crisis response must be truthful, sincere, voluntary, timely, address all stakeholders, and performed in an appropriate context.

Different stages in the crisis management process have been presented. Fink (1986) suggests a four-stage crisis lifecycle model to understand organisational crisis and crisis management: 1. Prodromal crisis stage (pre-crisis warning or precursor stage); 2. Acute crisis stage (the crisis becomes visible); 3. Chronic crisis stage (lingering period of self-analysis); and 4. Crisis resolution stage (resolution and learning stage). Coombs (2012) recommends that a crisis response should be quick, consistent, and open as it is important to provide useful information soon after a crisis irrespective of the damage it may cause to the reputation of the organisation. That is, a crisis management team needs to present its side of the story as soon as possible; however, acting rapidly increases the risks inaccuracies. Time pressure may pose a risk that incorrect information is distributed, inaccuracies that could make an organisation look inconsistent. Hearit (2006) suggests that the manner of communication in crisis management must explicitly acknowledge wrongdoing, fully accept responsibility, identify with injured stakeholders, and ask for forgiveness. Coombs (2012) highlights the importance of speaking with “one voice” when responding to a crisis so as to maintain accuracy and to ensure that information is consistent. Coombs argues that there could be more than one spokesperson, but they must coordinate their communication. Coombs divides the content of crisis response into three categories: instructing information, adjusting information, and managing reputation. The content of crisis response changes over time, from an immediate form of instructing stakeholders to adjusting information to serve the needs of different groups.

2.1. The case story

A man was arrested and detained as a suspect of attempted sexual abuse of a ten-year-old girl. During the investigation, the police identified images of sexual abuse of very young children, pictures taken with a mobile phone and stored on the suspect's computer. The suspect was a middle-aged educator at ECEC institutions in a mid-sized Swedish municipality (around 100,000 inhabitants). The educator was employed through the substitute educator pool, serving 50 ECEC institutions within a local area. The ECEC institutions provide care for children aged one- to five-years-old during parents' working hours.

The Head of Security of the municipality was confidentially appointed by the police at an early stage of the investigation. The police investigators cooperated with the municipality in identifying whether the sexual abuse images of young children were children who attended the ECEC institutions. The suspect had worked for three years at more than 30 institutions.

The steering committee of the crisis management and additional key persons were called by the Head of Security to a confidential urgent meeting where they received the information about the case. The municipality had a major task ahead. They needed to cooperate with the police as well as manage communication and support concerning sexual abuse in relation to children, parents, staff, and the public. After the team received the initial information, it took ten days until the prosecutor made the crime public and the crisis management was put into action.

Using the abuse images gathered as evidence, the criminal investigation identified 19 toddlers attending ECEC institutions, mainly aged one- to three-years-old, as victims of sexual abuse. None of these children disclosed the abuse. The suspect was convicted for aggravated child rape, sexual abuse, aggravated sexual abuse, and aggravated child pornography and sentenced to seven years in prison.

3. Method

A qualitative interview study was carried out to respond to the aims; how was the crisis management set up, how was the crisis management plan implemented, and how did the members of the crisis management team experience their work managing the crisis. All nine members of the crisis management team, which included five members of the regular crisis management committee, agreed to participate in the study.

3.1. Sample

In this study, five of the members of the crisis management team were regular members of the crisis management committee: the Chair and the Vice Chair of the Executive committee (within the municipality), the Director of communication, the Head of Security, and the Municipal Chief Executive. The four additional members of the crisis management team were the Director of the Department for Early Childhood Education and Care (with responsibility of early education and schools), the Chair of Board for Early Childhood Education and Care, the Communication Officer within Early Childhood Education and Care, and the Director of Department of Social Welfare. The participants are identified as respondents throughout the text.

3.2. Interviews

Individual interviews, which began six months after the case, were carried out at the respondents' workplace. A semi-structured interview guide was used. The themes of the interviews focused on how the municipality set up the organisation to deal with the crisis, how the plan and strategies were chosen, and how the case affected the team members. The interviews lasted one to two hours and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The first author of the paper conducted all interviews.

3.3. Analysis

The texts were read and reread by the authors. The interviews were analysed using qualitative content analysis. This method was used to organise the transcribed interviews and to obtain more knowledge about how respondents described their experiences (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992). Qualitative content analysis, used to code and categorize data, helps researchers identify patterns (Krippendorff, 2004). All researchers read the transcripts several times to capture the content. The authors independently coded and categorized the texts into themes and categories (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). Next, the authors discussed the content and categorization until consensus was reached. Three themes were identified: setting up the crisis management; implementing a plan; and important experiences (Table 1).

Respondents are numbered 1–9. They will not be presented with both number and job title to ensure the confidentiality of the respondents. However, some of the quotations are identified by

Table 1. Themes and sub themes

Themes	Sub themes		
Setting up the crisis management	A group is given the task	Different from other crises	The owner of the case
Implementing a plan	Preparation	To act and communicate	To perform external communication
Important experiences	Experiences that could be shared	In retrospect, I think	How it affects me

job title to improve understanding. The crisis management team is referred to as the team, the Director of Department of Early Childhood Education and Care is referred to as Dir ECEC, the Chair of Board of Early Childhood Education and Care is referred to as Chair ECEC, the Director Department of Social Welfare is referred to as Dir DSW, and Head of Security is referred to as Head S.

The study was approved by the Regional Ethical Review Board in Linköping, Sweden (Dnr 2015/430-31).

4. Results

The individual voices of nine respondents form a joint narrative of the crisis management process, but they also articulate individual and personal reflections and observations of what happened during the different phases. The themes and sub-themes are presented in Table 1. The initial two themes focused on the reactions after receiving the news about sexual abuse, organising the crisis management, and the implementation of the plan. The third theme deals with the individual experiences of the respondents.

4.1. Setting up the crisis management

The crisis management team was formed to develop and execute crisis management after disclosure of sexual abuse at ECEC institutions. Five experienced members of the regular crisis committee together with four specialists in education/social welfare were called to join the group. The main theme addresses the structure within the group and to what extent regular or alternative procedure rules were applied. Three sub-themes were identified: a group is given the task; different from other crises; and the owner of the case.

4.2. A group is given the task

The Head S asked the respondents to attend a confidential meeting to form a group to deal with the case. When the group gathered, they received information about the case. All the respondents revealed that they were emotionally affected by the abuse story; some were significantly affected:

At the first meeting we were told what had happened, I had speculated, but it was still overpowering. Then when I left the meeting, it was afternoon, I went home and felt the tears just flowing as I came out on the street. (Respondent 1)

Even if it was absolutely horrible and even though there were tears and misery in this group, it became like, when you meet a lot, it became so intense. (Respondent 9)

There were days when everyone, everyone had tears in their eyes, everyone, absolutely everyone. (Respondent 7)

One respondent described that the members took on different roles to balance emotions in the group:

You take on different roles in a group like this. Maybe I'm not [...] I can be emotional too, but in a group where there were many emotional people, because there were many emotional

people right away, you assume another role, if you understand – you feel like you have to.
(Respondent 7)

The members of the group also expressed concerns with one another, but they were restricted from sharing information about the case with anyone outside the group. This restriction caused worries among relatives:

The phone rang at home, all the time, at strange times and they understood that it was something. [...] My grown up daughter was visiting me said one day: mum, may I just ask you one thing, is it something that concerns you? I could say no, it's not. She just wanted to know that it was not something her mum were involved in [...]. (Respondent 3)

All the respondents mentioned that questions were raised in the group at an early stage concerning consequences if any team member might be related to one of the victims. Initially, the team did not have detailed information from the police investigation regarding what institutions the abused children attended. All the respondents raised these concerns. A procedure was set up to check if any member of the crisis management group was connected to a victim or a victim's family. The team members provided names of their children and grandchildren and the current institutions they attended to the police and the police checked for any possible connection.

We made it very clear: if someone is affected, then that person must step out. You cannot, you cannot expect someone to be capable of handling this professionally if they're affected in their own family. (Respondent 5)

4.3. Different from other crises

Members of the regular crisis management committee in the municipality had extensive experiences acting in different types of crises such as large traffic accidents, problems with water supply, and the effects of large storms, but all the respondents believed this crisis was different as it involved very young children under the care of ECEC institutions, their families, and the general public:

You could also say we're not used to this. We're used to dealing with big issues, tough cases, tough criticism, difficult decision-making. But we're not Social Services, so for us, this wasn't the same. For those of us who sat there, except for the director of social welfare, this was totally different. (Respondent 7)

It was my absolute response; it was one of the biggest crisis management tasks that our municipality has probably ever had and hopefully will ever have. We have had some crises that have resulted in good crisis preparedness over the years, but not like in this case. We've had a train accident and that's serious in every way; we've had storms and water crises. But this was a bigger and more profound tragedy, that's the fact. (Respondent 5)

One respondent expressed that the team identified that they needed knowledge in addition to the regular crisis management skills to deal with a case like this:

You can call it a dilemma if you want, we think we have all the skills ourselves [...] we need to think about that we can get into difficulties if we do not have access to the right skills.
(Respondent 5)

4.4. The owner of the case

The members discussed their roles during the initial stage of setting up the crisis management. The team agreed to distribute the roles differently in this case than what was customary as this crisis was different than general crisis management procedures that the team had previously dealt with. As the department of ECEC was the employer of the suspect and in charge of running the ECEC institutions serving children and their parents, it was decided that the representatives of the Department of ECEC were given a key role in the crisis management team:

It was immediately established at the meeting that the Department of Early Childhood Education and Care owns this case. But the rest of us serve as a support function for them. So that was clarified right away. (Respondent 6)

The case was owned by Early Childhood Education and Care. They would front first, if this should escalate perhaps it could be relocated to the political leadership of the municipality. I think it was a good decision that it was with the administration in charge of the employment of the man in question, in charge of Early Childhood Education and Care and with whom the children stayed. (Respondent 3)

In summary, the respondents were called to a meeting where they received information about a case of institutional sexual abuse and formed a crisis management team. Although emotionally affected by the severity of the case, they were required to do intense work in a short period. Respondents were not allowed to discuss the case with anyone outside the group, so they only had one another to turn to for support. Respondent agreed if any team member was personally affected by the crisis he or she should leave the group. Compared with other cases of crisis management, respondents believed that this case was different as many very young children and their parents could be affected. The respondents agreed to give the department of ECEC a key role in the crisis management as it is the employer of the suspect as well as the provider of ECEC.

4.5. Implementing a plan

The team started to work on a plan by forming strategies and developing a timeline. When the prosecutor annulled the confidentiality and published information on day 10, the crisis management plan was put into action. Initially, the case was communicated internally; thereafter, information was passed to the public through the web and other media. Three sub-themes were identified: preparation, to act and communicate, and to perform external communication.

4.6. Preparation

The respondents described their hard work planning and managing the crisis and preparing communication. The group members talked about the principles of communication:

There was no discussion [...]. but we agreed very early on about having as much transparency as possible. We actually did. I have to say so, and that's not making anything up really; we actually agreed on this. (Respondent 4)

Never lie, do not lie to the media; do not lie to co-workers. You don't have to tell the whole truth if you can't, but in any case, never lie. It was like a mantra, that we would not deceive anyone. (Respondent 3)

Respondents prepared information—information about the actual case, lists of institutions where the suspect worked, where to turn to for crisis support and questions, and answers concerning sexual abuse:

We met every day. Maybe not everyone in the group, but there were different constellations. Can we write this or in this way? Then there was a lot of discussion about when the prosecutor would release the information and we would inform our heads and principals, and everyone working in the organisation. (Respondent 3)

Everything should be quality assured; we should be as open as possible and provide as much information as possible, because we thought that even though these are horrible things we're giving out, information still keeps the calm. (Respondent 9)

The respondents explained how they planned to provide temporary information desks in city hall and at four other sites in the municipality where concerned parents and citizens could go for information about the case and other support the municipality was providing. The respondents

prepared for the support work by scheduling several social workers to take calls and to meet visitors to address their questions, concerns, and needs:

I believe it was about 40 social workers at least who were scheduled in crisis groups and at these information sites. And then of course, all the social workers working with children and young people were also prepared to meet referred families. (Dir DSW)

In this stage of the process, the respondents calculated that 1000 children and their parents had met the suspect when he worked as an educator, a fact that could raise concerns in many families. As no other evidence than abuse images were present in the case, some parents could be concerned that their children were not identified in the evidence. Theoretically, the number of families that could ask for support could be enormous.

We didn't want to make people more helpless than they were, that parents actually have an enormous ability – and we wouldn't go out saying we're offering help to everyone, but information about how to act as a parent in this situation. This could be traumatic for the parents, but this is not primarily the trauma of the children, so we have to deal with them so that they don't worry their kids. (Dir DSW)

Respondents recall that during the phase of developing the plan for managing the crisis they worked under the pressure that at any time the case could be revealed in the media:

Every single night when we went home we had the thoughts, are we going to open the newspaper tomorrow and it's there [...] but every day it was ok, if it happens we will go ahead with this, we somehow had a plan all the time. So if it leaks out this is what we can tell, if it does not leak out we continue and prepare. So it went on [...]. (Respondent 3)

4.7. To act and communicate

Respondents describe that on the tenth day after the team set up their work, the prosecutor notified the municipality that he was going to release the news that day about an ECEC educator being held in custody as a suspect of sexual abuse of several toddlers at different ECEC institutions. The crisis management group put their plan into action. The political representatives were the first group to receive information.

I told about backgrounds what had happened, what was the ongoing criminal investigation, what we knew about this person and it was important to emphasize that there were no suspicions raised from the organisation. I can probably say that they were taken, it was pretty quiet, there were not that many questions really, it was not. (Respondent 4)

Dir ECEC recalled that two days in advance he had called all the heads and principals of the ECEC and school units within the municipality to a meeting the same day:

I started to excuse the short notice of two days for calling to this meeting and said: 'What I'm going to tell you about has shaken me and is going to shake you. The police have informed the municipality that an employee in his 40s has been detained for sexual abuse of children. He has been employed for three years and we are tracking the extent of the number of institutions at which he has worked'. It was traumatic; some cried, they were in shock [...] we have 59 ECEC institutions and he had worked at about 30 of them. (Dir ECEC)

Some of them were outraged. [...] Some others began to blame themselves – I didn't see why, have I missed something? Some thought, I have children too. [...] It was the whole spectrum. Somebody was worried, how are we going to handle this huge mission to get it out? (Respondent 2)

During the ten days, the respondents prepared written information for staff and parents. The principals and heads were supposed to inform their staff the same afternoon or evening.

We handed out materials and then the heads and principals sat outside and started to discuss how to reach out to all ECEC employees before the parents arrived the next morning. There were 800 employees that had to be informed before the end of that day. They started phone chains to get staff there and ready at 6:30 the next morning, when the first parents would come and drop off their kids. We knew which institutions were affected, where he had worked, and at those locations, they received one set of written material and other institutions received another set to hand out to parents early in the morning. Then I don't know exactly what happened that morning; to be sure, there were a lot of emotions. (Respondent 3)

4.8. To perform external communication

The prosecutor released a short statement about the case before the municipality invited the media to a press conference. The Chair ECEC and Dir ECEC presented the news and how the institutions and the municipality were affected, and the Dir DSW talked about supporting concerned families. The material that had been prepared was made available to the media:

At the press conference, we had all the written material; everything was on our website when the press came. All the information was neatly bundled so all they had to do was take it. There were lists of what ECEC institutions he had worked at and which schools. (Respondent 6)

Once everyone had spoken, the chair said, now it's the media's turn to ask questions. At first, it was very, very silent; no one said anything. (Respondent 3)

In summary, the respondents described how they prepared their actions in anticipation of the prosecutor's disclosure of the case to the public. Respondents took different roles in making detailed plans, producing written information, organizing crisis support, and scheduling the way information was provided to different groups. The principles of communication were discussed and agreed on within the group: to speak honestly about what could be told and that the Chair ECEC and Dir ECEC were the ones who would be the spokespersons.

4.9. Important experiences

The theme identifies how respondents experienced being a member of the crisis management team of an actual case. Respondents reflected on the extreme events that occurred six months earlier and on their experiences with crisis management with the aim to help other municipalities prepare for a similar event and to provide insight into how the events affected them personally. Three sub-themes were identified: experiences that could be shared; in retrospect, I think; and how it affects me.

4.10. Experiences that could be shared

Respondents expressed that it was crucial that they had preparation time as the police and prosecutors needed their help profiling the suspect. Time to prepare strategies and to prepare psychologically before receiving reactions from others:

Time helped us, of course. If we woke up to this one Monday morning, we would not have managed it so. We had time to think; we had time to think it through properly. (Respondent 4)

Some respondents identified experiences that could be shared with others who might need to manage a similar crisis:

First, not to be dragged into panic. I saw that as my main task, from social services, to calm people. That's something we can help with. We're so used to meeting people in crisis, and people who are angry and demand answers, and we can help reduce their anxiety. And you can't make people more helpless, but rather, to view them as competent. (Dir DSW)

Agree on responsibilities: in this case, it was the ECEC board and administration. I think that's very important, because otherwise there could easily be two bodies in charge and misunderstandings. (Respondent 4)

All the information that we prepared, the informational material for parents, questions and answers about sexual abuse. I think, we had the material produced and it would be wise for other municipalities to have a basic text like this to just be able to pick up. (Respondent 1)

4.11. In retrospect, I think

Two paths were made apparent. One path involved whether the team and other involved professionals did enough for the victims and their families. The other path concerned feelings of betrayal and despondence that this event happened and whether it is possible to prevent institutional sexual abuse.

Possibly if we could have offered them even more. Then they are [...] people are different. Some just want to put the lid on it and some, some want to scream it out. (Respondent 7)

Many think the municipality handled this really well in relation to the majority, like staff and parents. But, what has been done for those who are affected? What has been done for the victim's family and how are things going for them today? (Respondent 5)

Could also be families who indirectly were [...] who might have needed [...] I think we can say that [...] cannot more than hope that those who have needed counselling, support in various ways have found a way to get it. (Respondent 4)

Respondents raised concerns about the offender, how this could happen, and whether signs were missed. In addition, some respondents wanted to know how to make the organisation safe:

How the hell can these kinds of things happen? (Respondent 7)

Every day I had this feeling that someone was going to turn over a stone and find something under it. Like some parent, some employee, someone a child spoke to, to someone and it hasn't come out. [...] We had that feeling. There was no such information, nothing. On the contrary, he was very well-liked. (Respondent 3)

We can work in every way to ensure safe and secure institutions. But we will never, in any organisation, be able to guarantee it, because there are perpetrators. We will never be able to, and that's also a terrible message to give, but I would say that no organisation can make those guarantees. (Respondent 5)

4.12. How it affects me

Respondents all concluded that they have been affected by these experiences:

I carry this with me and it will come up. When you look back on your career, this will take its place. That's just the way it is. (Respondent 7)

It affected me in that when you can figure out how much one person can destroy, it's so obvious here. The welfare sector is kind of built on trust. Every parent must feel safe when dropping off their child. You cannot have another starting point; you ought to feel really safe. (Respondent 4)

I recently became a grandmother and when I held that child in my arms, I thought, no one's going to hurt you. Then it came. How could this happen to small children? Doing something like that – and then it became really personal. (Respondent 3)

In summary, the respondents reflected on their experiences participating in the crisis management. Having time to prepare for the crisis management was seen as an advantage. Respondents also thought they had gained some knowledge that could be useful for people who must deal with similar situations: to define and agree on responsibilities; not to panic; rely on the principles of communication; and prepare information for parents. Respondents expressed some doubt that they did enough. They also raised issues about the offender and the difficulties understanding the behaviour and preventing it from happening. Finally, respondents reflected on how they were affected by this experience. In different ways, they talked about how they had been affected and how the event forever will follow them.

5. Discussion

This case study was designed to explore how the crisis management was planned and implemented when institutional sexual abuse was disclosed. This study explored how the crisis management was set up, how the plan was implemented, and what the respondents experienced. Three of the main themes identified will be discussed: the crisis as the result of disclosure of institutional sexual abuse differs from other crises; a child focus in the management of the crisis; and how this kind of thing can happen.

The crisis as the result of disclosure of institutional sexual abuse differs from other crises organisations might experience. Although the regular team members of this case had experiences with crisis management such as major traffic accidents, they experienced this case as particularly painful. Typically, crisis management professionals need to gather knowledge about sexual abusers and abusive behaviours when managing issues of sexual abuse of young children. The management team were not involved in the details of the individual cases but exposed to their internal images of sexual abuse of toddlers as well as their own feelings of discomfort. The presence of a social welfare expert was an important resource for the team members. That presence helped the team to form plans on how to approach worried families, how to relate to parents in general who are upset by the events, how to approach families whose children were abused and who need qualified support, how to build trust among the community, and how to deal with abusive experiences. The crisis management of this case affected the members of the team in several ways, such as being painfully aware that sexual abuse exists and being aware of the calculated grooming skills of an institutional offender, as identified in previous research (Sullivan & Quayle, 2012).

Applying theoretical perspectives, Hearit (2006) discusses the role of institutional apology, which acknowledges and apologises the role of an organisation involved in criminal offenses an employee committed. For example, representatives of an organisation caring for children who have been abused under their charge must rebuild trust without being defensive, relying on truth and sincerity, and volunteering their apology without the perception that the apology is an attempt to protect their own interests. Coombs (2012), in his discussion of his theoretical approach to responsibility of intentional wrongdoing, increases responsibility for the organisation and the expectations of the organisation. In this case, the organisation cannot be held responsible for an employee who sexually abused children in the workplace without detection. Nonetheless, organisations need to take extensive responsibility for communicating and dealing with the crisis. As Coombs states, the response to a crisis has to be guided by the potential reputational harm of the organisation. This issue is also addressed in Benoit's (1997) repair theory, specifically the use of corrective actions and mortification. In this case study, the respondents communicated to the public that they were taking measures to prevent the possibility of further abuse and apologised for the abuse without making excuses.

Keeping a child focus in crisis management was identified as necessary. Different aspects of child focus were addressed by giving professionals and the chair of ECEC as well as a key person from social welfare an important role as the voice of the crisis management. Appointing the director and chair of ECEC as the spokespersons for communicating the crisis conferred a significant importance as they are seen as experts on children and education. When

spokespersons are perceived as authorities and trustworthy it increases the effectiveness of the crisis communication (Coombs, 2007). If a general communication officer had been given the duty to speak with the media, the public might not have trusted the ECEC's management as this may have sent a message that the ECEC were avoiding responsibility and possibly trying to cover up their culpability. Furthermore, the ECEC representatives expressed empathy for those affected, a response that was viewed as credible. Their knowledge and expertise meant they could credibly manage follow-up questions from media concerning early education. As highlighted by Coombs (2012), to be accurate and consistent, speaking "with one voice", is vital for crisis communication. In this case, the two spokespersons were well-prepared and coordinated, so the risk of making communication mistakes was reduced, lending even more credibility to the crisis management.

One respondent initially burst out "How the hell can these kinds of things happen?". The department of ECEC had followed the routines carrying out criminal record checks when the educator was employed and found no irregularities. As one respondent stated, stones may need to be turned over regarding the information about the offender; however, no such information emerged. According to Wonnacott (2013), the culture and the relationships within institutions play a role in institutional abuse. In her study, offenders were described as being powerful and knowledgeable, which was present also in this case. Former concerns raised among staff about the offender's behaviour (as identified by Wonnacott) were not present in this case. On the contrary, in this case the educator had a very good reputation, was a valued colleague, and was a requested substitute educator. When a skilled and experienced substitute educator arrives to help an institution that is missing staff due to illness, that substitute is praised as a rescuer. To be a temporary member of different staff teams could possibly have been the offender's strategy. It ensures appreciation by colleagues and families while reducing the risk that an abusive pattern could be observed by colleagues. As concluded by McAlinden (2006), sex offenders tend to seek situations where it's possible to access children and different institutions may constitute environments where sexual abuse of children can occur.

There is no completely safe way to identify a potential perpetrator (Price et al., 2013). Moreover, a perpetrator in a school system may operate in an even more sophisticated way than sexual perpetrators in general (Sullivan & Quayle, 2012). There is a need for more regular actions among organisations responsible for children in schools to improve prevention of sexual abuse. As Shakeshaft suggests (2018) local school board policies need to be developed that include procedures about hiring staff, ongoing training of school staff on sexual abuse, supervision, and how to respond when sexual abuse of children is suspected. In addition, Erooga (2012) proposes that strategies need to be improved for strengthening the child protection perspective within child serving organisations to prevent institutional sexual abuse.

This research has different implications. The findings indicate that professionals who are experienced in general crisis management may be insufficiently prepared to handle cases of institutional sexual abuse. Although such cases are uncommon, crisis management professionals need to have a plan for accessing knowledgeable and experienced child abuse specialists when needed. Dealing with institutional sexual abuse involving young children as the victims was a painful experience with wide-ranging consequences for the respondents. This kind of experience may result in secondary traumatisation that must be taken seriously. Members of a crisis management team may need professional help to reduce the risk of long-term emotional consequences. This study identified the need to communicate from a child's perspective, with care and empathy for the children and their parents first and foremost, rather than with a strictly formal and defensive attitude. This type of approach could prevent even greater outrage and loss of confidence among the public. Finally, the findings highlight that even when applying safety strategies, such as criminal record checks when employing staff in child serving organisations, the risk remains that individuals with a sexual interest in children will be hired, until improved safety routines for identifying risk individuals have been developed. This is something that organisations in charge of children's education or leisure activities need to be prepared for.

5.1. Final words

This study has limitations as it only examines one case. Furthermore, in the present case there was some time for preparation of the crisis management before the suspected abuse became public, a condition that may be atypical. However, research rarely focuses on how crisis management has been organized in cases concerning institutional sexual abuse. This study contributes with knowledge on the planning and implementation of crisis management in a case of institutional sexual abuse. Furthermore, this study highlights the importance that educational as well as social welfare expertise be given key roles in crisis communication and the importance of maintaining a child perspective during crisis management.

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