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Effect of Communication Practices on Crisis Preparedness in Public Secondary Schools in Kapenguria Sub County, Kenya

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Channels.

Communication has been recognised as one of the most important requirements in communicating emergency and crisis situations to all stakeholders in schools. This is because crisis situations can cause social and emotional distress to stakeholders within the school at any time without warning, and in such situations, communication is needed to ensure those affected are informed on what is happening or what needs to happen. The aim of this paper was to examine the effect of communication practices on crisis preparedness in public secondary schools in Kapenguria Sub County, Kenya. The study was anchored on situational crisis theory. The study used a descriptive research design. The target population consisted of 36 principals and 368 teachers. A sample of 36 principals and 196 teachers were selected to participate in the research through a simple random sampling technique. Data collected was analysed in qualitative and quantitative form. The communication approach used in most schools was top-bottom with less than 25.0% being diagonal/horizontal. Active crisis communication preparedness was found to be working as a guidance and counselling programme. Nevertheless, the majority of respondents said that crisis communication preparedness was significant in ensuring information was shared with all stakeholders and the damages occasioned by crisis breakout would be minimised. The study concluded that communication has a significant effect on crisis preparedness in public secondary schools in Kapenguria Sub-County. The study recommends that school stakeholders need to be trained on the importance of communication in crisis preparedness and management.

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INTRODUCTION

A crisis is a sudden emergency that may arise in any organisation, including educational institutions (Ruff & Aziz, 2016). Crises can occur in any and all organisations, regardless of size; however, educational institutions are very susceptible to crises (Mayo, 2015). In case of a crisis in schools, educational resources are destroyed, directly and indirectly, students and teachers are displaced or killed and parents' income is affected because of natural disasters (Vito & Maahs, 2015). Hence, that school is not immune to crisis and therefore appropriate interventions need to be taken into consideration to prepare and manage them for the good of the stakeholders (staff and students) through a crisis response mechanism.

One of the mechanisms used to ensure schools are prepared towards crisis is communication practices. Crisis communication has also been reported to be crucial in the prevention of a crisis and its management, as well as in ensuring that an organisation returns to normalcy promptly. Crisis communication involves unitising information aimed at identifying risk and prompting mitigation strategies focused on checking risk, harmonising support and recovery following a crisis (Mutisya & Mberia, 2018). Crisis communication is vital because it helps arrest rumours, speculation, and half-truths that may have an adverse impact on the organisation and its image. Consequently, educational institutions need to prioritise communication as a core part of preparing for crises that they may encounter.

Statement of the Problem

Schools are faced with multiple crises on a daily basis in the form of fires and bullying, resulting in traumatic experiences for teachers, students, and workers. When schools are adequately preparing

for a crisis, there is an increased likelihood that a crisis will be curbed and appropriately responded to when it emerges. Crisis management and prevention can also be achieved through communication. For example, through proper communication practices, teachers can manage students' discipline by making them understand school rules and regulations and making them know the appropriate channels for reporting issues that may lead to crises. The need for conducting this study in Kapenguria Sub County was attributable to the fact that in the past few years, there have been increased cases of crisis (e.g., damage to property and arson by students) in several schools such as Chewoyet National School (Nation Media, 2019) and Ortum Boys Secondary School (The Standard Media, 2018). One of these schools, Chewoyet National School, has experienced four dormitory fires in the last five years (Nation Media, 2019). Despite these crises, no empirical research study has been conducted to examine the role of communication practices on crisis preparedness in schools, a focus of this paper.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study was anchored on Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), which was created by Timothy Coombs in 2007. The SCCT refers to an all-inclusive, prescriptive, and contextual approach to crisis response and protection of institutional reputation (Coombs, 2012). The theory posits that those tasked with the management of crisis ought to ensure that strategic crisis responses match the level of crisis responsibility and the threat the crisis poses towards the reputation of the organisation. The SCCT is known for its context-dependency as it states that the response strategy chosen and implemented by an organisation depends on the crisis (van Rensburg et al., 2017). The theory

emphasises that ten crisis response strategies can be categorised into four broad classes (Kyrychok, 2017). First, deny response strategies attempt to delink any connection that associates the organisation to the crisis. Second, diminished response strategies are aimed at reducing the organisation's link to the crisis or focused on reducing negative stakeholders' perceptions regarding the crisis. This strategy is aimed at reducing the harmful impact of the crisis on the organisation. Third, deal response strategies attempt to enhance the reputation of the organisation by providing aid (symbolic/material) to those affected by the crisis. Fourth, bolstering plans are secondary response techniques utilised to improve the impact of the three main strategies (Coombs, 2012).

In the Kenyan context, schools have witnessed many crisis situations linked to students' indiscipline. Some of these crises include strikes, which have led to arson, destruction of school property, injuries, and deaths (National Crime Research Centre, 2017). Another current crisis is bullying. Because of the adverse impact of these crises on students, teachers, and school property, there is a high likelihood that crucial stakeholders will lose confidence in the affected schools if there is no appropriate communication strategy during times of crisis. Such a communication approach will help address fears and bolster confidence among school stakeholders. The SCCT provides a framework that can be utilised in the choice of deal response strategies to address the management of crises in schools. The SCCT looks at how a crisis situation that occurs in educational institutions influences response strategies and how those response strategies affect the outcomes of the crisis (Coombs, 2012). This theory is useful since it suggests that at both stages of crises, the pre-crisis stage, the crisis event stage and the post-crisis stage, communication is key to ensure that concerned stakeholders are aware of what procedure to take when such an event occurs (van Rensburg et al., 2017). Hence, the way crisis communication is conducted in schools determines how the stakeholders would receive and react to it. In relation to this investigation,

SCCT provides a structure on how communication practices can be used in crisis preparedness in a secondary school crisis setting. The SCCT outlines the strategy that institutions can use to communicate with stakeholders within the school with regard to crisis response. Furthermore, the SCCT helps the schools design the communication channels preferred by school stakeholders in crisis communication, whether it is through SMS alerts or the use of the Internet, among other channels. The activation of various messages of communication helps stakeholders to protect themselves from a crisis happening in their schools. This is through the school having the system in place to provide information about the crisis, provide counselling services and take corrective action.

REVIEW OF EMPIRICAL LITERATURE

Williams (2019) reports that crisis communication systems (CCS) in educational settings have been challenged by mass casualty events including shootings, natural disasters, and health outbreaks in the United States. According to Snoeijers et al. (2014), academic institutions have every reason to avoid damaging their reputations through mismanaged crises. Mensah (2018) observed that communication plays a vital role in the success of any organisation, including secondary schools, as in this study. Hence, educational institutions have the moral duty to protect their students from harm by effective communication in a time of crisis. How well the communication message is composed determines how it will be understood and what response it will generate. However, it needs to be emphasised that for warning information to achieve the desired results, it must be short, precise, unambiguous, and timely (Owolabi & Ekechi, 2014). Ineffective communication can hinder the growth of institutions and organisations (Mensah, 2018). The sender of information must ensure the receiver gets the information without distortion. The communication process is incomplete without feedback. Administrators in secondary schools must communicate effectively if they want to achieve their goals and objectives.

The channels of communication or where messages are passed are of great importance. Moore (2015) recorded that conventional wisdom suggests effective and timely school communications increase parental involvement. Despite the technological revolution in the communication industry, fixed and mobile telephones are commonly used by a significant population as dependable and efficient communication channels. Through the telephone, quick warning messages can be sent by making calls and sending pre-determined short message service (SMS) to several people. The only disadvantage of this channel is the inability of many to access the message due to illiteracy level, especially to parents of some students (Owolabi & Ekechi, 2014). Further, the process of communication is not complete until the intended receivers receive the message and respond to it. How well the information is received depends on what information was sent, how it was packaged, the channels used and, of course, the understanding ability of the receiver (Owolabi, Oyewole & Oke, 2013).

In the secondary school, the principal is not working alone. The principal has to share information and transfer ideas and feelings through communication to enhance the collective cooperation of others within the school. The school management must not only communicate downward management in thoughts and decisions but also upward reactions and development in the ranks. In fact, in order to persuade, instruct, direct, request, inform, and stimulate, the principal must engage in upward and downward communication (Nakpodia, 2010). However, research by Gentilucci (2007) observed that crisis communication training of school principals was problematic because it overemphasised media relations and underemphasised the critical importance of immediate and personal communication with students, staff, and parents most affected by school crises. The communication network therefore, is seen as being very significant to the life of the school. It is the main avenue through which the school personnel get an opportunity to identify and

appreciate what the school is doing, the atmosphere in which it operates, and what is expected from the school and the public. On the basis of these, principals design programmes that could make or mar the school system

To appreciate the need for robust crisis communication in the management of a crisis, it is crucial to understand the value of communication during a crisis. In the era of the Internet and the presence of many social media platforms that could be used to disseminate information, it is crucial for those tasked with the management of a crisis to understand the best communication strategies (Lin et al., 2016). Plance (2012) observed that the role of the media in a crisis is changing with the landscape of technology. Their value is still apparent, but their role has been augmented by the explosion of social media. The media and emergency management organisations must learn to embrace this new technology to remain viable sources of public safety information. Social media have evolved into the fastest and most direct means to communicate with student populations (Snoeijs et al., 2014). When using social media to communicate to stakeholders about a crisis, one of the best practices is to monitor misinformation. This is because any person with a social media account can share information regarding the crisis. Misinformation arises when crisis managers and practitioners fail to provide the desired information on time. Misinformation, such as rumours, is highly likely to escalate the crisis and negatively affect the reputation of the organisation (Lin et al., 2016).

It has also been emphasised that cooperation with the public and other organisations is a critical aspect of crisis communication. Social media platforms enable an organisation affected by a crisis to cooperate with the public, groups, and diverse agencies. Social media allows an organisation to share relevant information with the media, government, and the general public, thus creating a cooperative environment strategy (Lin et al., 2016). Moreover, when utilising social media for communication of a crisis, the crisis

managers should actively engage in dialogue with stakeholders and the victims. Through such platforms, crisis managers address stakeholders' concerns and respond to victims' requests for help promptly (Lin et al., 2016). Because of the potential of social media to disseminate information in real time and address questions raised by stakeholders, organisations should integrate the use of social media into crisis-related policies. When crisis managers want to share information with the public, an issue that continually arises is source and credibility perception (Zoonen & Meer, 2015). Information is highly likely to be seen as being credible if it is coming from an official social media account of the organisation or the manager of the same organisation. Several investigations have been done pertaining to communication channels used in educational institutions around the world. In Ontario, Canada, Mensah (2018) examined the communication process between senior administrators and faculty members in one university. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather data from senior administrators and faculty members. Findings revealed channels of communication used and preferred by both administrators and faculty. Some of these channels included emails and face-to-face interactions. Though email was the most used channel of communication in the case study, participants preferred face-to-face interactions. This was preferred because it allows communicators to give live feedback interpreted through body language and facial expressions.

In the US, Pleggenkuhle (2017) measured strategic communication by conducting a communication audit of the fastest-growing school district in Iowa, interviewing 10 school leaders and analysing essential communication products, including 26 web pages and 10 district newsletters. Results suggest district communication products expressed brand themes of excellence, heritage, relationships, and innovation, but inconsistently across communication products. Moore's (2015) phenomenological study documented 16 parents' perceptions of communication between teachers

and parents at 2 K-8 schools in the American Southwest. Semi-structured interviews were used. Findings revealed that both schools lacked effective communication tools, inhibiting the ability to reach students' families and negatively impacting participation. This means that in case of crisis, communication may not reach the parents well as envisaged as a result of a lack of effective communication tools established by schools. In Nigeria, Alimasunya, Inyang and Anake's (2019) study was to establish how secondary schools in the study area have put in place five evacuation/safety plans as a measure of fire disaster preparedness, also to determine whether secondary schools train teachers, workers, and student inappropriate response procedure in case of fire incident. A descriptive design method was adopted for this study. The result from the study revealed that fire disaster preparedness among secondary schools in Port Harcourt was very inadequate as there was inadequate firefighting equipment, inadequate structures built to fire safety standards, inadequate training for secondary schools' stakeholders, as well as inadequate five evacuation plans.

Apondi (2014) assessed forms of communication in Nairobi secondary schools. The study was carried out in public secondary schools in Nairobi County. A descriptive survey research design was adopted for the study. The target population was members of the students' council, teachers, and deputy principals. The study found that the following forms of communication are used in schools: school parliaments or barazas, assembly hall announcements, members of the student's council and reporting to relevant authorities. Communication tools used in secondary schools in Nairobi County include notice boards, suggestion boxes and end-of-year reports, school calendars, minutes, internal memos, students' notice boards and message boxes. The study also found that one of the roles of the members of the student council is to communicate the students' needs to the relevant authorities. Some of the needs communicated include complaints about the quantity of food given to students, missing lessons by some teachers, absenteeism, harsh

punishment, a list of areas students want to be improved in the school, changes in the school routine and welfare of the members of the student's council. The present study focused on how communication channels were used in crisis preparedness in schools, an issue that the cited studies failed to establish, especially in the Kenyan scene.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study utilised a descriptive research design. This design addresses how, where, when, what, and who questions and how they are linked to the phenomenon of interest to the study or the research problem (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2019). The proposed study was delimited to Kapenguria Sub-County in West Pokot County. The Sub-County (also known as Kapenguria constituency) is one of the Sub Counties of the larger West Pokot County in the North Rift region of Kenya. The target population for this study consisted of all principals and teachers of all public secondary schools within Kapenguria Sub-County. The constituency is comprised of 36 secondary schools headed by 36 and 368 teachers employed by TSC. The respondents (principals, teachers, and student leaders) were selected through a simple random sampling technique. The study utilised simple random sampling in the selection of both principals and teachers of Kapenguria Sub-County public secondary schools. Simple random sampling refers to a primary sampling method involving the selection of a group of

respondents (a sample) from the target population by random chance (Babbie, 2015). Therefore, each of the potential participants has equal opportunities of being in the final sample. The selection of the sample size was made through the use of the Yamane formula of sample size determination. Through the formula, the final sample size consisted of 192 teachers and 33 principals. Data in this study was collected using a questionnaire and interview schedule. The questionnaire (for teachers) mainly collected quantitative data, whereas the interview collected mainly qualitative information (for principals). The interview schedule and questionnaire were subjected to validity and reliability tests before being administered in the field. Quantitative data from the questionnaire was analysed using descriptive statistics. Coding of data and entry was done with the help of Statistical Product and Service Solutions (SPSS 26.0). Analysis of data was done using frequencies and percentages. Thematic analysis was used to analyse interview data (transcripts). This is a process that results in the documentation of patterns or themes in qualitative data (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The study sought to know various communication platforms used in schools. Therefore, the teachers were asked to indicate how communication happened in their schools. Their responses are provided in *Table 1*.

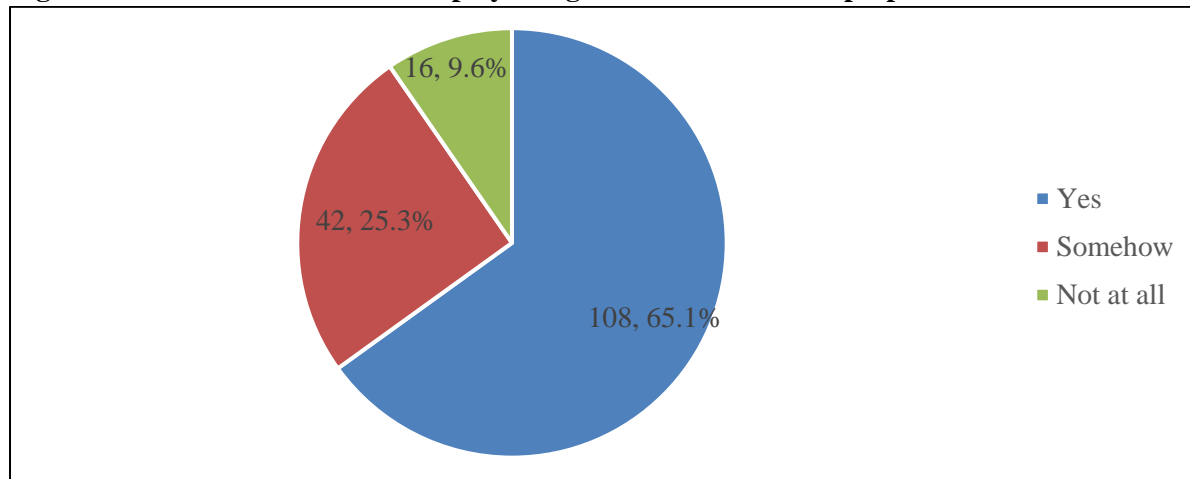
Table 1: How communication happens in secondary schools

Approach	Frequency	Percent
From top to bottom	96	57.8
From bottom to top	33	19.9
Diagonal/horizontal	37	22.3
Total	166	100.0

Results in *Table 1* show that in school 96 (57.8%), communication was from the top of the school management to the lower levels. Further, 33 (19.9%) of teachers reported that communication in their school was from the bottom (lower level) to the top management level. Lastly, 37 (22.3%) of teachers indicated that the communication approach in their school was through

diagonal/horizontal formations. The results show that the main communication approach used is the conventional top-bottom.

The respondents were asked to give their opinion on whether communication played a pivotal role in crisis preparedness in schools. The responses are provided in *Figure 1*.

Figure 1: Whether communication plays a significant role in crisis preparedness

Results in *Figure 1* show that 108 (65.1%) of teachers agreed that communication performed a significant role in managing crises in their schools in case they happen. A quarter, 42 (25.3%), said that it sometimes plays a pivotal role, while 16 (9.6%) believed that communication does not play a pivotal role in the management of crisis in their schools. This means that the majority of teachers (over 90.0%) believe that communication is essential for crisis preparedness and management in public secondary schools in Kapenguria Sub-County. The reasons given for this pivotal role were that it helps to pass information to stakeholders who are able to respond immediately (41.0%), and it helps to address rumours and misunderstandings that come out when a crisis happens (4.8%). Other teachers reported that communication is vital in addressing the crisis since it ensures that schools have a proper plan with regard to combating a crisis. Other teachers indicated that crisis preparedness is dependent on the communication framework in place. Teachers also said that having communication helps to create awareness of the crisis, solutions to address the crisis and precautions stakeholders need to undertake to avoid damages and negative effects of the crisis. In relation to students, discipline level has improved because of regular communication between teachers and parents to address students' cases in schools.

One of the principals (No. 10) interviewed said the following with regard to communication during crisis:

When a crisis happens, at the beginning, the first responders collect information and communicate any important information with the intention of properly and adequately evaluating the crisis.

This means that schools have laid up the procedures for communicating in case a crisis happens in their schools. According to another principal (No. 20), they preferred one-on-one communication with stakeholders when a crisis occurred:

We prefer face-to-face communication where possible but do understand that there will be occasions where information is shared by other communication mediums depending on the severity of the crisis.

Moreover, through open-ended questions, the researcher asked the teachers to indicate how communication impacted crisis during pre-crisis, crisis response and post-crisis stages. The results are presented in *Table 2*.

The result in *Table 2* shows that 94 (56.6%) of teachers said that through communication preparedness, the crisis is prevented and stopped from escalating in schools. Further results show that a significant 17 (10.2%) of teachers felt that crisis communication preparedness in place makes schools prepared to respond to imminent disasters that may occur. Further, 20 (12.0%) mentioned that through proper communication, everyone is aware, and possible measures are

sought to address the situation when they arise. This means that from teachers' point of view, communication is an integral part of pre-crisis, crisis response and post-crisis stages in public secondary schools in Kapenguria Sub-County. Despite the positive benefits of communication

towards crisis preparedness in schools. The teachers were asked to highlight some of the challenges that affected the crisis communication process in schools. The results are presented in *Table 3*.

Table 2: How communication impacts pre-crisis, crisis response and post-crisis stages

Impact	f	%
Prevent/stop a crisis from escalating/happening	94	56.6
Create awareness	7	4.2
It impacts a lot	5	3.0
Helps on preparedness for imminent disaster	17	10.2
Makes the crisis resolution process easy	11	6.6
Make all aware and find out the possible measures to curb the situation in case it arises	20	12.0
Failure to explain or help in averting a crisis	6	3.6
Moderate	6	3.6
Total	166	100.0

Table 3: Challenges experienced in crisis communication in schools

Challenge	Frequency	Percent
Poor channels used	73	44.0
Lack of sufficient channels of communication	23	13.9
Poor network coverage	15	9.0
Delays in passing information	14	8.4
Poor timing of communication	12	7.2
Lack of embracing new methods of communication technology	9	5.4
Sometimes, the crisis presented might be downplayed by those in authority	8	4.8
When communication is directed from the top	6	3.6
Distorted messages	6	3.6
Total	166	100.0

Results from *Table 3* indicate that the main hindrance towards effective communication preparedness, as reported by 73 (44.0%) of teachers, was poor communication channels that their schools have adopted to communicate crisis information. This means that the channels that schools have chosen for communication are not effective in disseminating information on crises in their schools. This is evidenced by 23 (13.9%) of teachers reporting that their schools do not have adequate channels for communication, and this makes crisis preparedness not effective. Poor network coverage was also cited as a challenge experienced in crisis communication preparedness in schools. This is because in most

areas of Kapenguria Sub-County (interior), poor network coverage is a problem that affects schools and residents at large. Delays by those responsible for the dissemination of crisis information were also mentioned as a challenge towards crisis preparedness in schools. The problem of poor timing of communication and distorted messages were other challenges that were experienced in schools. Further, it was found out that the school board of management is reluctant to embrace new communication mediums, which appears to slow down the way schools are prepared to handle and manage crises in public secondary schools in Kapenguria Sub-County, Kenya.

From the above-mentioned challenges, the teachers were asked to give their suggestions on what needs to be done to improve crisis

communication preparedness in schools. Their responses are provided in *Table 4*.

Table 4: Improving Communication Practices on Crisis Preparedness in Schools

Measures	f	%
Raise awareness of crisis communication preparedness in schools	58	34.9
Government to finance schools to acquire current communication in schools	30	18.1
Guidance and counselling	18	10.8
Embracing the latest technological communication devices and applications like websites for communication	18	10.8
Developing a crisis communication preparedness plan	13	7.8
Government to work with telecoms to ensure network masts/boosters are set up	9	5.4
Enhance training of the school community	8	4.8
To have vertical/horizontal/diagonal communication	5	3.0
To be introduced as a subject unit in school	3	1.8
Positioning of alarms at different areas of the school	3	1.8
Government to assist schools in putting in place immediate communication and emergency response team	1	0.6
Total	166	100.0

Table 4 shows various recommendations put forward by teachers as a measure of addressing crisis communication preparedness in schools. Further, 58 (34.9%) of teachers said that there is a need for the school management to raise awareness among all stakeholders concerning crisis communication in schools. Findings also showed that 18.1% said that the government needs to provide finances to schools to enable them to purchase modern communication appliances to improve the way schools communicate before, during and after crises. Guidance and counselling were mentioned by 10.8% as another method of improving crisis preparedness in schools. The boards of management are also recommended to ensure that their schools adopt the latest technological communication equipment and platforms to improve crisis communication efficiency. Further, 7.8% said that schools need to develop a crisis communication preparedness plan to guide all before, during and after crisis in public secondary schools in Kapenguria Sub-County, Kenya. Further, training in communication was also recommended from the study findings.

DISCUSSIONS

The study found that the usage of new communication media for crisis preparedness was moderately and lowly used in public secondary

schools. For example, the use of Facebook, emails, Twitter, and even running classified information on TV and radio to inform stakeholders of crises in schools did not feature in many schools due to the issue of cost, network, and accessibility to the services. The study differs from Mbui (2016), who discovered that press statements are very important in passing on information and reacting to crisis situations. This meant that communication had a moderate effect ($M=3.0$, $SD=1.25$) on crisis preparedness in public secondary schools in Kapenguria Sub-County. Nevertheless, 65.1% of teachers were sure that communication played a pivotal role in crisis preparedness in secondary schools once it happened. This means that communication has a positive impact on crisis preparedness, response and management in public secondary schools because it prevents crises from happening and escalating, makes every stakeholder aware and also helps schools to prepare for imminent disaster from happening. This concurs with Mbui (2016), who discovered that when there is a crisis communication plan, people cannot wait until things get out of hand and then begin to run around looking for solutions; at that time, it will not be possible to address anyone.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Communication practices in schools are still top-bottom, and therefore, information is disseminated from the principal down to the student with little coming from the student going upward. The communication practice that was common in public secondary schools in crisis preparedness was the guidance and counselling department. Teachers reported that it was one of the communications practices used to prevent, address, and manage various crises that could happen in schools. Nevertheless, the majority of respondents indicated that there was a positive influence of communication practices on crisis preparedness in public secondary schools in Kapenguria Sub-County. To address the effect of communication practices on crisis preparedness, the study suggests that secondary schools' management should set up crisis/emergency response teams with clear roles in schools. There is also a need for schools to adopt cloud-based solutions in the storage of contacts of all stakeholders in schools, which will enable easy retrieval in case physical contact details cannot be tracked.

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