

Critical incidents: effective responses and the factors behind them

An investigation into the factors that shape how leaders and teachers in school deal effectively with critical incidents and episodes

SCHOOL LEADERS

Report

Michael Mander

Headteacher, Edge Hill Junior School, Burton on Trent

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Introduction: (Monday morning again!)

'If you can keep your head, when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you....' (Kipling 'If')

'On arrival in the classroom following a breathless appeal by Katie from Year 4, I witnessed Ben crawling on all fours under the table growling and biting anyone who came within range. "I've tried everything but he bit me" Mrs 'T' said, showing me the bite marks on her hand. Ben had recently arrived at the school and we had no idea of his tendency to imitate with great accuracy the hunting prowess of the King of the beasts. I surveyed the scene deciding what to do as Ben continued to crawl around snapping at imaginary wildebeest. Just my luck I thought I haven't prepared my assembly and the inspector's due at 10 o'clock. Why do things always happen together?'

Colleagues in school are not often faced with incidents as challenging as these, although they are not uncommon. In schools however, we are frequently faced with problems, accidents and incidents that have to be contained, managed and resolved. These incidents can place considerable pressure on those involved in dealing with them personally or on those leading others who have to deal with them.

I would like to propose that the investigation of how individuals and organisations deal effectively with these incidents can improve practice and enhance professional judgement.

Incidents happen all the time but it is important to note that these incidents only become 'critical incidents' when the individuals involved attach a particular significance to them.

'Incidents happen but critical incidents are produced by the way we look at a situation: a critical incident is an interpretation of the significance of an event. To take something as a critical incident is a value judgement we make, and the basis of the judgement is the significance we attach to the meaning of the incident.' (Tripp, 1993, p.8)

I would like to suggest that some colleagues appear to be more adept, prepared and willing to deal with such incidents effectively. They seem to have qualities and have developed strategies and support mechanisms that enable them to cope more effectively with these challenging situations.

Rationale for this research

The purpose of this research therefore is to investigate and foster a greater understanding of some of the factors that shape how school leaders deal with critical incidents and critical episodes and suggest why some colleagues are more effective in dealing with these on a professional and personal level. This might help schools develop their capacity to respond appropriately and effectively to critical incidents and critical episodes. The central focus of the research will comprise 3 interconnected research stages:

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- Stage 1. To explore whether there are any relationships between aspects of personality and factors within ones life history that help one to cope effectively with Critical Incidents (CI) and Critical Episodes (CE)¹ in education.
- Stage 2. To explore how leaders have dealt with CI and CE in the past and present and what features seem to be most effective.
- Stage 3. To suggest a portfolio of strategies, procedures and coping mechanisms that might be adopted when dealing with CI.

Research Questions

The main research questions are:

1. What factors/experiences give an individual the capacity and capability to deal effectively with Critical Incidents and Critical Episodes?
2. What specific strategies /support mechanisms do colleagues/organisations use to deal effectively with CIs and CEs?
3. What leadership styles and preferences enable individuals and organisations deal with CIs effectively?

Reviewing the literature

There has only been a limited amount of research completed within the educational sector that focuses on how individuals and organisations cope with CI and CE and what it is that enables them to do so effectively. There has however, been work focusing on how a structured analysis of CI can be used to inform and develop practice (Tripp, 1993). Tripp's work can help us to develop a working definition for critical incidents but does not provide us with help in determining what it is that shapes our ability to deal with CIs and CEs. The critical incident technique has been employed by the NCSL programmes such as National Professional Qualification for Headship [NPQH] and Leadership Programme for Serving Headteachers [LPSH] as a reflective tool to analyse and understand what drives certain behaviour characteristics.

Expanding the search parameters reveals that much of the literature about critical incidents is concerned with the emergency services; with business, military or political crises, and very little if none at all concerned with education. Consequently there is no universal definition of a critical incident but terms like "emergency", "major incident", "accident", "critical incident", and "disaster" (Flin, 1996) are used interchangeably to describe similar events although major incidents and disasters are seen to be on a larger scale (Parker and Handmer, 1992).

Incidents within school very rarely turn into emergencies or develop into a crisis; they are often smaller incidents that can take on a greater significance with those involved. However, coping with the anxiety and stress an incident raises; making well informed and effective decisions and managing others when coping with these incidents places considerable pressure on those involved.

¹ A Critical Episode (CE) is the same as a critical incident but where a (CI) could be a one off incident a CE takes place over a period of time. It could be a series of CI or a sequence of events or conditions that become 'critical' because individuals have attached a particular significance to them. in the

Sarna (1994) as part of a critical incident management course for British and American Police Officers, has developed a three-stage model of critical incidents. He argues that each critical incident whether it is a minor incident or a major disaster can be described in terms of its life cycle and the subsequent response

1. Response phase (threat, evaluation and containment).
2. Resolution phase (contingency management).
3. Recovery phase (restoration of normality).

Sarna goes on to argue that this pattern is common to a wide range of critical incidents. Whilst I would agree with this I would also like to add an identification phase that precedes these phases and is determined by the individual and context.

Flin (1996) investigates a number of major incidents and proposes that there is commonality in the roles of those dealing with CIs despite the variety of incident types and conditions. She argues that from a psychological perspective there is a fundamental consistency among different professions in the three basic skills of dealing with incidents effectively i.e. coping with stress, decision-making and team management (Flin, R. 1996, p37).

What are critical incidents in schools?

This definition of a CI is central to our research questions and an understanding of this will help to provide a framework in which to base the factors that help us cope with CIs effectively.

Critical incidents are often seen as traumatic or life threatening incidents.

'A critical (or traumatic) incident is an event outside the usual realm of human experience that is markedly distressing (e.g. evokes reactions of intense fear, helplessness, horror, etc.). Such critical incidents usually involve the perceived threat to one's physical integrity or the physical integrity of someone else. Most importantly, critical incidents are determined by how they undermine a person's sense of safety, security and competency in the world.' (www.criticalincidentstress.com/critical_incidents)

Whilst there is some value in this definition, in that CIs usually involve a perceived threat to one's sense of efficacy and safety, this definition is too draconian and limiting for the purposes of this paper. Instead a more contextually sensitive approach to considering CI is arguably more appropriate for schools:

'Critical incidents are not 'things' which exist independently of an observer and are awaiting discovery like gold nuggets or desert islands, but like all data, critical incidents are created.... To take something as a critical incident is a value judgement we make, and the basis of the judgement is the significance we attach to the meaning of the incident.' (Tripp, 1993, p.8)

As individuals we therefore define what is and what's not a critical incident. What may be a CI for one person may not be a CI for another, or indeed for the same person on a different day. What is important is if the subject considers an incident to be a CI then it is one and it is assumed that this is in itself defined by life history; experiences and personality.

Therefore if we create a CI by the way we look at an incident and this is influenced by values that we bring, then CI can be seen as fluid and transactional. Fluid in that a CI can be constantly changing and is not fixed. Transactional in that a CI can be part of a process of negotiation and interpretation between those involved with the CI which can be carried out consciously or subconsciously.

The definition of a CI underpinned as it is by the value judgements we make and the significance we attach to an event is problematic. As individuals, we bring a set of values to a situation that shapes our definition of the CI; the significance we attach to it and subsequent action. If the values we bring are not aligned with those involved, then a minor incident can become critical through misunderstandings and misinterpretation.

'A conflict had arisen between two children in school and attempts to resolve the situation had only worked for a short while. Child 'a' hit child 'b' and when questioned by staff, replied that his father had told him to hit the other child if they annoyed him. Discussion with the named parent revealed a distinct disparity between how the school expected the child to behave and how the parent said they could behave.'

In this situation there is a conflict in the values that individuals have brought to the incident that has created a CI. Despite this, the situation needed to be dealt with empathetically. The behaviour of the child was unacceptable and this needed to be made clear without exacerbating the CI. The parent in the example above needed to understand that the reaction of his child was unacceptable and they need to work within the policies and procedures of the school to avoid further CI developing. One also needed to consider that the resolution to a particular problem may not always be the same. There might be different resolutions to the same problem and this could be defined as much by the context as the individuals involved.

A Typology of Critical Incidents

The analysis conducted in this paper indicates that critical incidents can fall into the typology outlined in figures 1 and 2. The specifics of the incident may not always be important; it is the reactions an incident provokes from those directly and indirectly involved that matter most. A CI could be perceived as negative at first but have a positive effect on an individual's subsequent self-efficacy and being the locus of control.

Negative Critical Incidents

Figure 1. Typology of personal critical incidents

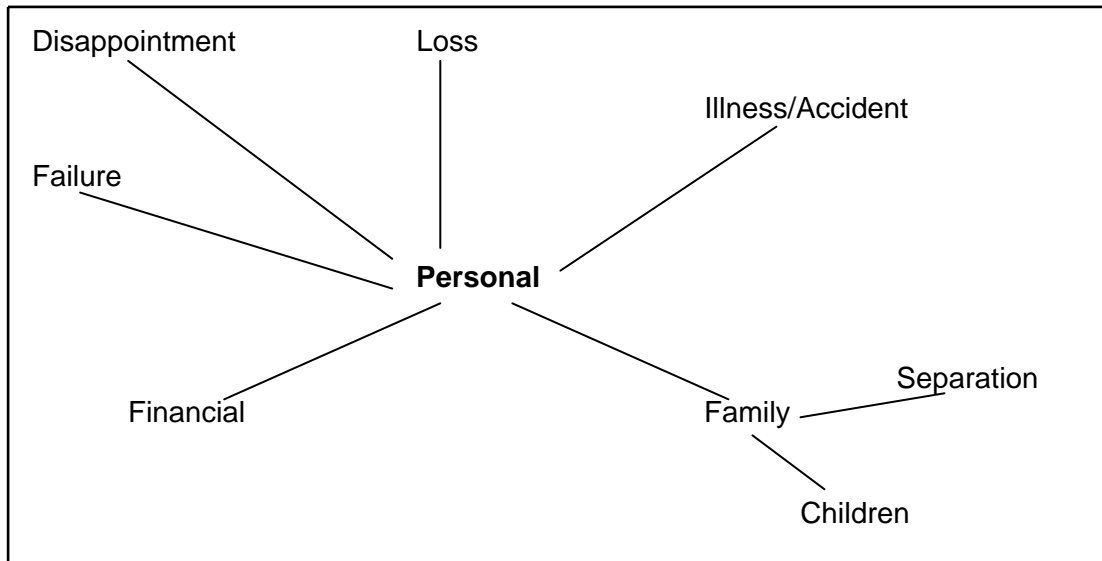
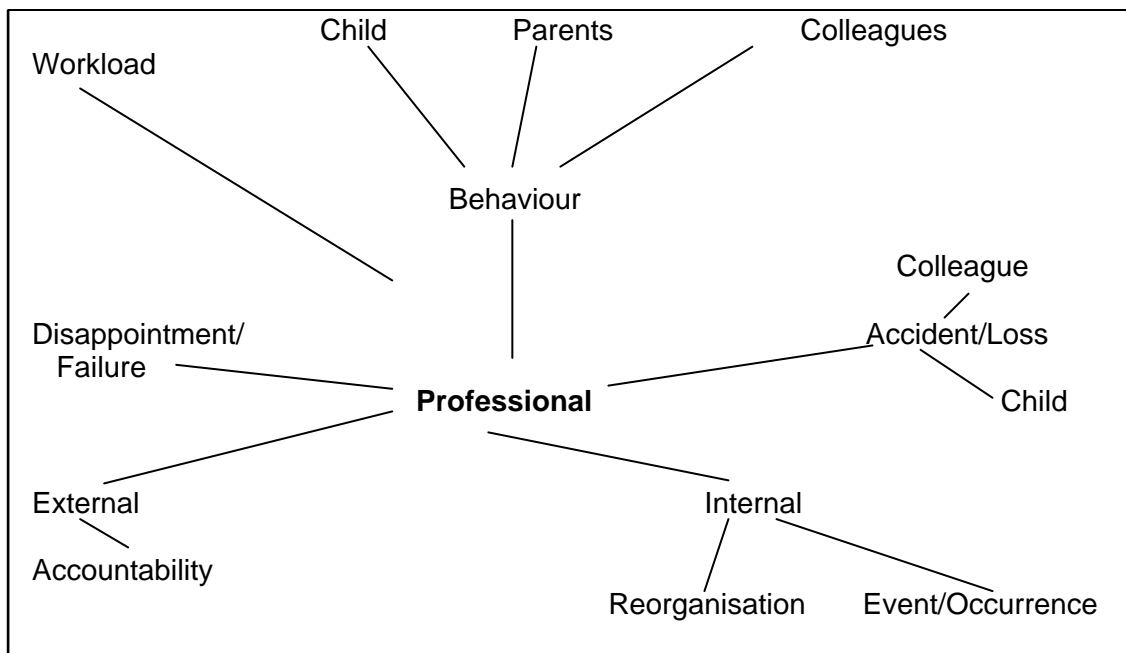


Figure 2. Typology of professional critical incidents



Although presented separately, considerable overlap can exist between personal and professional critical incidents. For instance, after the loss of a child one participant commented:

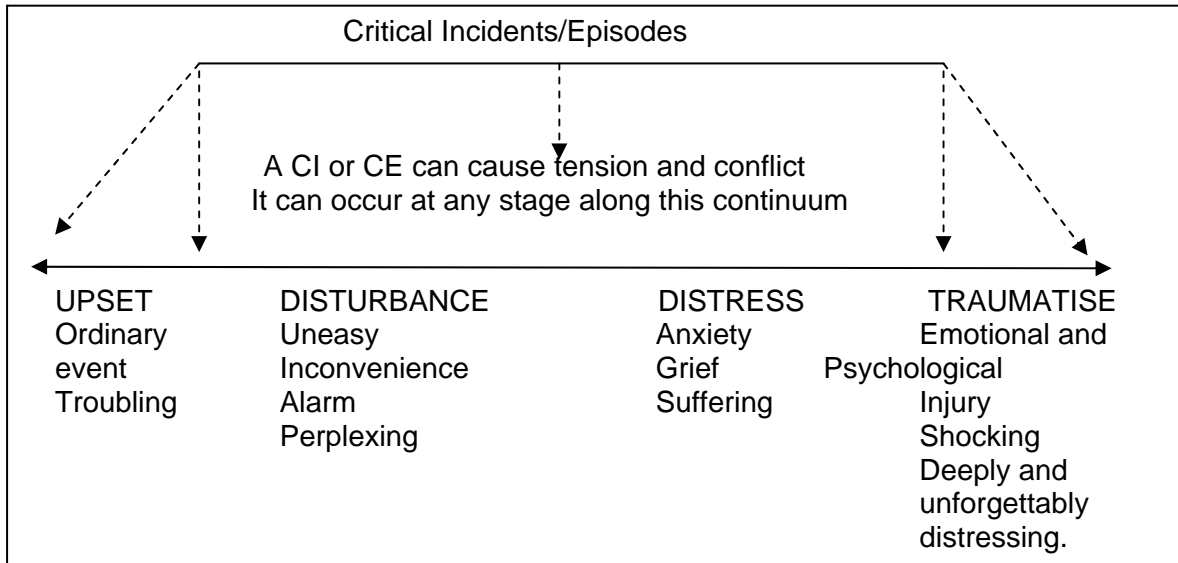
‘That has made me appreciate people...it showed me I could really cope...made me feel the most important thing as a teacher is being there, for some children we are the only stable thing in their lives...at my first school there was a child in my class and his father had been killed in an accident. It

was parents evening and an aunty came. We were normality. I've been a better teacher since I've had children of my own.' (LHI 1 DHT Org c)

This illustrates vividly the impact home life and experiences can have on the capacity to cope with CIs at school. Experiences like this can help us to keep things in perspective and realise the significant influence we as teachers can have on people's lives

Reactions to critical incidents can be seen to form a continuum, outlined in figure 3 below.

Figure 3. Continuum of reactions to critical incidents



A CI can generate an emotional response at any point along this continuum and subsequent action and consequences (even further CIs) can move this response along the continuum in either direction.

It is also important to note that an incident on its own might not be critical but when combined with other incidents and emotions it can become so. Sometimes these incidents are so critical that they place considerable pressure on those involved with them. At other times they are small, often insignificant but their cumulative effect can be felt to be equally challenging. Providing strategies and support mechanisms to help colleagues in school deal with these would arguably help them to develop increased understanding and control over professional and personal judgements.

'I felt it was a critical incident as there were so many episodes happening very quickly' (Headteacher Org a)

Despite this cumulative effect, one needs to keep a sense of proportion when the definition of a CI can range from loss of a family member to loss of your planning when faced with an inspection.

'It's literally a case of everything builds up and you've got to deal with parents, a supply teacher, then you need to look at planning, talk to the ICT Coordinator and I thought "oh no what am I going to do?" and then I stood still and thought "what does it matter? do the children really know any different?" They don't know and I am still capable of delivering a lesson. It's a case of

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stopping and putting the whole thing in perspective. Because if you don't it's very easy to blow it all out of the water.' (Life History interview 2 DHT org a)

Critical incidents can also be positive. A life affirming experience (success at a job interview or reward for a particularly successful project) can develop confidence, feelings of self-efficacy and professional standing. This could in turn impact on how one initially and subsequently deals with a CI.

Methodology

I have adopted a life history methodology composed of two interconnected elements. The historical element (retrospective life history) informed in the main by semi-structured interviews and personality profiles and a 'current' element (contemporaneous life history) Cohen (2000 p166) informed by journals kept over a period of time by the research participants.

Life History Methodology

A central tenet to my research is that there are certain events/ experiences or occurrences in our lives that may be instrumental in shaping our attitudes and ability to cope with Critical Incidents and Critical Episodes. The Life History methodology helps us to explore this belief because it can focus on the concept of multiple realities. We all have our own perception of what reality is for us. This is informed amongst other things by our experiences, personality, relationships, motivations and interactions. These perceptions are valid to those involved and in attempting to describe and understand these realities help us to better describe and understand our behaviour and the behaviour of others.

Semi-structured Interviews

Interviews were selected as an appropriate tool to collect life history data because they can give the research participant the opportunity to tell 'their story' within the parameters of the interview schedule. Semi-structured interviews enabled participants to explain their own ways of defining the world. They provided flexibility and allowed different issues to be discussed that might not have been included in the pre-devised schedule (Denzin, 1970; Silverman, 1993). Two sets of interviews were held. The first focusing on participants' childhood and early experiences and the second interview focusing on career and recent events (See Appendix 1 for Interview Schedule)

Research Journals/Diaries

The use of journals as a tool to describe and reflect upon experiences and perceptions has been widely used in biographical research (Kridel, 1998. Etherington, 2004). These also enabled the research participant to tell 'their story'. In this way they created their own narrative within the parameters and definitions agreed at the outset of research.

Journals were kept over a period of 6 – 8 weeks and participants were asked to complete a journal entry as soon as possible after they had to deal with a CI or CE.

The CI or CE was defined by the participant as it occurred and it could be professional or personal. (See Appendix 2 for draft journal structure and prompts)

Personality Assessments

In addition to offering their own perceptions of their personalities, participants also undertook two personality assessments. The first was adapted from Carter and Russell [2006] and was used as it provided an easily accessible questionnaire for the participants to complete in isolation without support. This analysis only provided a brief insight into the participant's personalities due to the limited analysis provided by the authors. The Myers Briggs Type Indicator (1985) was therefore used to support, extend and provide further insights into personality.

Sample of schools involved

Eight primary organisations were approached to be involved in the research. These were selected by the researcher, as the headteachers were either recommended by colleagues or known to him on a professional level. Five organisations agreed to be involved in the research. These were made up of three Primary Schools, one Junior School and one Infant School. Two of the primary schools had three research participants; the other had one participant and the junior and infant school had three and two participants respectively.

Four head teachers, four deputy headteachers and four class teachers [two of which had a leadership responsibility] were involved in the study. In four of the schools, the headteacher and deputy headteacher took part in the research and in one school only the head teacher participated.

All research participants were experienced teachers with more than eight years teaching experience. Both male deputy heads were younger than their female counterparts and had been promoted quickly. The key characteristics of each of the schools involved in the study are summarised in appendix 3.

Pilot Research

Following an OfSTED inspection, pilot research was conducted in the researcher's school. Participants were asked through brief discussions to identify what they thought helped them cope with the inspection process. The following strategies, themes and experiences were highlighted:

- A desire not to let others down.
- Conscious dislocation of home and school.
- Routine.
- Being prepared/planning for an incident.
- Hobby/Sport.
- Walk rather than run to the problem.
- Having experienced similar things before.
- A significant other.
- Establish a routine.
- Inner strength/resilience.

- Having dealt effectively with CI or CE in the past both personally and professionally enables one to deal with them more effectively (self-efficacy).
- A significant mentor who shaped thoughts.
- Positive experiences of school.
- Experience of working in other schools/situations.
- Happy, secure childhood.

These themes and examples of experiences were used to structure the interview schedule and inform the data collection instruments. (See appendix 1 for interview schedule)

Findings and discussion

1. **What factors and experiences does the evidence suggest, give an individual the capacity and capability to deal effectively with Critical Incidents and Critical Episodes?**

The following factors and experiences were highlighted as helping individuals develop the capacity to cope effectively with CIs and CEs.

- **Having a significant professional mentor who has shaped ethos, philosophy and modus operandi featured significantly in participant's responses.**

Mentors did not always have to be within the profession. Amongst those specifically mentioned were friends and peers from other walks of life. Often these mentors weren't consciously approached but were significant in developing an individual's philosophy and way of working.

'My first deputy (was my mentor) when I started teaching. I like his philosophy, strong ethos. He was an early influence without me realising it.' (Headteacher Org c Life History interview 1)

Having said this, there were a number of incidents where a respondent specifically sought the advice and help of a mentor or colleague they had worked with.

'I had an excellent head there (at a previous school) and he was always my sounding board when I was going for jobs....he still phones me now...he's my sounding board really.' (Headteacher Org (b) Life History interview 1)

The evidence suggests that there were other significant mentors who were someone who was respected and trusted.

'My mum...just the way she was so positive with me. She just showed her concern and care and just wanted the best for me.' (Senior Teacher Life History interview 1 Org b)

'My mum...I had so much respect for her and not wanting to let her down was a big thing...I think she was the biggest influence.' (DHT Life History Interview 1 Org a)

- **A positive, happy childhood including positive happy experiences at school.**

A number of participants commented on their positive, happy experiences at school and how this helped to create a sense of well-being and self-efficacy.

- **A close, stable family, partner or significant other who is supportive.**
Having the chance to discuss issues with others was fundamental to this:

'Another major factor (when dealing with CIs) has to be a problem shared is a problem halved.' (HT – Org d LHI2 L 33-37)

'On a personal level I am able to talk through school issues with my wife who helps give me a sense of perspective.' (HT Org c Journal entry)

- **Experience of activities that helped to develop their EQ. That is being self aware, aware of others an understanding of ones personality.**

- **Positive experiences that has helped to develop feelings of self-efficacy.**

- **Experience of dealing with CIs and CEs.**

Evidence indicated that previous experiences of dealing with CIs helped individuals to tackle subsequent events and cope with their aftermath. Interestingly, such experiences did not necessarily have to have been positive. It was also evident that individuals benefited from hearing about others' experiences. This worked best when done systematically, for instance by adopting the Critical Incident Technique [text box 1], not only to provide specific strategies but also to reassure individuals that they were not alone and everyone has to deal with them at one time or another. Feeling isolated and unsupported significantly hampered ones feeling of efficacy and success.

Text Box 1: Critical Incident Technique

Flanagan (1954) first devised and used CIT in a scientific study because they are particular events that very starkly illustrate a particular feature of a behaviour, style or approach. Flanagan defined the critical incident technique as:

'a set of procedures for collecting direct observations of human behaviour in such a way as to facilitate their potential usefulness in solving practical problems and developing broad psychological principles. ... By an incident is meant any specifiable human activity that is sufficiently complete in itself to permit inferences and predictions to be made about the person performing the act. To be critical the incident must occur in a situation where the purpose or intent of the act seems fairly clear to the observer and where the consequences are sufficiently definitive to leave little doubt concerning its effects.' (Flanagan, 1954, p327.)

This list, although quite extensive, is not exhaustive and even though one might not have had these experiences does not mean that one cannot deal with CIs effectively.

In addition to these experiences, an initial investigation into personality traits and characteristics highlighted the following as indicators of having the capacity to deal with CIs and CEs effectively:

- Well balanced and well adjusted.

- Temperate.
- Conscientious.
- Hard working and enthusiastic.
- Compassionate, tolerant and empathetic.
- Ability to see the big picture as the details simultaneously.
- Being self-aware and self-regulating.

Personality type

Personality refers to patterns of thought, feeling and behaviour that are unique to every one of us. These patterns are dynamic and fluid and as such can change depending on mood and in terms of intensity from one moment to another (O'Connell 2001). Despite this, we develop a pattern of personality that is generally recognisable to others. This, coupled with the notion that how we respond to a critical incident is generally consistent, indicates that managers who understand and know their team members well would arguably be in a better position to help them deal with critical incidents. (Flin 1996)

Personality traits are to do with individualism, internalised conscience; the ability to control emotion, sociability and personal achievement. There have been many definitions of personality development but there is some agreement that:

'Personality is the dynamic and organised set of characteristics possessed by a person that uniquely influence his or her cognitions, motivations and behaviours in a various situations. It can also be thought of as a psychological construct – a complex abstraction that encompasses a person's unique genetic background (except in the case of identical twins) and learning history and the ways in which these factors influences his or her responses to various environments or situations.' (Ryckman 2004. p4)

I would like to propose that personality has an impact on one's ability to cope with CIs and to develop a definition of personality to include 3 characteristics; uniqueness, dynamic organisation and consistency where:

'Uniqueness means that no two personalities are exactly alike (not even those of identical twins). Dynamic means that our personalities are not static but fluid and changeable in mood and intensity from one moment to another. Yet, despite this, most of us develop a fairly consistent personality patterning which is recognisable to others.' (O'Connell 2001)

Individual responses to the critical incidents whilst influenced by life history, personal socialisation and other critical incidents must also be considered with relation to individual personality characteristics or traits.

An appreciation and awareness of these experiences and personality traits could be useful in the identification and recruitment of future leaders and so Leaders within schools need to be able to develop a flexible style that enables them to support colleagues in dealing with CIs.

Psychological Resilience

Another area that needs discussion is the concept of psychological resilience and how this intersects with the other factors that influence one's capacity to cope with CIs.

Psychological Resilience is the capacity to withstand and renew oneself in light of life stressors, thrive and make meaning from challenge.

There is a notable relationship between one's psychological resilience and ability to cope with stress. As Flin (1996) above proposes one of the significant factors in coping with crisis and CI is one's ability to cope with stress.

The central process involved in building resilience is the training and development of adaptive coping skills. The basic flow model (called the transactional model) of stress and coping is: A stressor (i.e. a potential source of stress) occurs and cognitive appraisal takes place (deciding whether or not the stressor represents something that can be readily dealt with or is a source of stress because it may be beyond one's coping resources). If a stressor is considered to be a danger, coping responses are triggered. Coping strategies are generally either outwardly focused on the problem (problem-solving), inwardly focused on emotions (emotion-focused) or socially focused, such as emotional support from others. (Neil J, 2006) <http://wilderdom.com/psychology/resilience/PsychologicalResilience.html>

As discussed above resilience is one's ability to cope and strive despite the stressors in everyday life. Individuals who are resilient see problems as learning opportunities. One important point to note is resilience is a dynamic quality (Dewey). Whilst some individuals may be more resilient than others in certain situations, this is not a permanent capacity and can change time to time and from situation to situation. This dynamic quality sits comfortably with our definition of a CI in that it is subject, time and context specific. Despite this, if an individual is more psychologically resilient and can demonstrate dynamic self-renewal then they would arguably be better equipped and willing to cope with CIs. Those less resilient individuals may find themselves worn down by CIs and therefore become less effective at dealing with subsequent CIs.

Further investigation involving the Myers Briggs Type Indicator highlighted a number of personality characteristics that were appeared to be common to participants who dealt effectively with CIs.

The Myers-Briggs type personality inventory uses these to describe how people use their minds to interact with themselves and the outside world placing individuals along a continuum between the two opposites of each type. Further details on this are included in appendix 4.

Table 1 summarises the results of the Myers Briggs personality tests for respondents from this study, and the relative prevalence of this type within the wider population.

Table 1. Myers Briggs personality types of respondents

Personality Type	No in sample	%	% from general population *
ESFJ (Feeling sensing people)	5/11	45	12.3
INFJ (Intuition feeling people)	1/11	9	1.5
ISFJ (Sensing feeling people)	1/11	9	13.8
ENFJ (Feeling intuition people)	2/11	18	2.5
ESFP (Sensing feeling people)	1/11	9	8.5
ENFP (Intuition feeling people)	1/11	9	8.1

* Source Quenk 2000 p74

While one must consider this data and its limitations in light of the small sample size, this research does however raise some interesting issues. Foremost in this is the suggestion that these individuals display a greater bias towards 'sensing feeling' characteristics than the population more broadly. There is also a stronger representation of 'feeling intuition' type personalities than would be expected. This suggests that this sample of individuals may be more likely to make decisions based on emotion in instances where there is a concern for the consequences of their decisions on groups and others. This 'judging' characteristic may help these individuals to organize their life events and act according to their plans and wants to arrive at a conclusion quickly. These are qualities that it could be argued help one deal with CI in different contexts which the evidence from the research suggest are often concerned with interaction between individuals.

In broad terms, CIs in school can be viewed as either extrinsic or intrinsic to the individual. Examples of extrinsic CIs include aspects which are related to things such as bomb scares, school moves and closures. Intrinsic aspects are more personal in nature and can be sub-classified into three broad areas:

- Family related
- Colleague and work related
- Parent and children related.

It can be argued that this emphasis on feeling type personalities may help managers to deal with intrinsic CI, through their well developed interpersonal skills, and their reliance on feelings, values and beliefs to interpret and interact with the world. Furthermore, if we consider these 'feeling sensors' are likely to be effective in dealing with CIs then early identification of these types of personality within teaching and appropriate support might help in developing future leaders.

Similarly, significant proportions of respondents exhibited Extravert Sensing traits. Extravert Sensors think most effectively when interacting and talking to others, often only making sense of their experiences through verbalising. A number of

participants described themselves in terms of this behaviour when identifying solutions to dealing with CIs.

'We spent a number of after school sessions talking about different scenarios to deal with her problems and whether her perception of things was accurate and to try to see things from the point of view of others involved. I encouraged her to think things through and not to make any hasty decisions, any career moves needed to be ones that would be a benefit. We also talked about where she would like to see her future here at school. I then talked to the Head, with her permission and alerted him to the depth of her unhappiness. And discussed with him the way forward.' (DHT Journal Org c)

This example demonstrates the importance of discussing and verbalising the problem through which a solution can be developed and implemented.

Having discussed some of the specific factors and experiences that the evidence suggests influences how we deal with CIs and subsequent implications for leadership and management, we can now turn to our second research question.

2. What strategies and support mechanisms do colleagues and organisations use or have used in the past to deal with CIs and CEs?

I would like to approach the main research question from two interrelated perspectives:

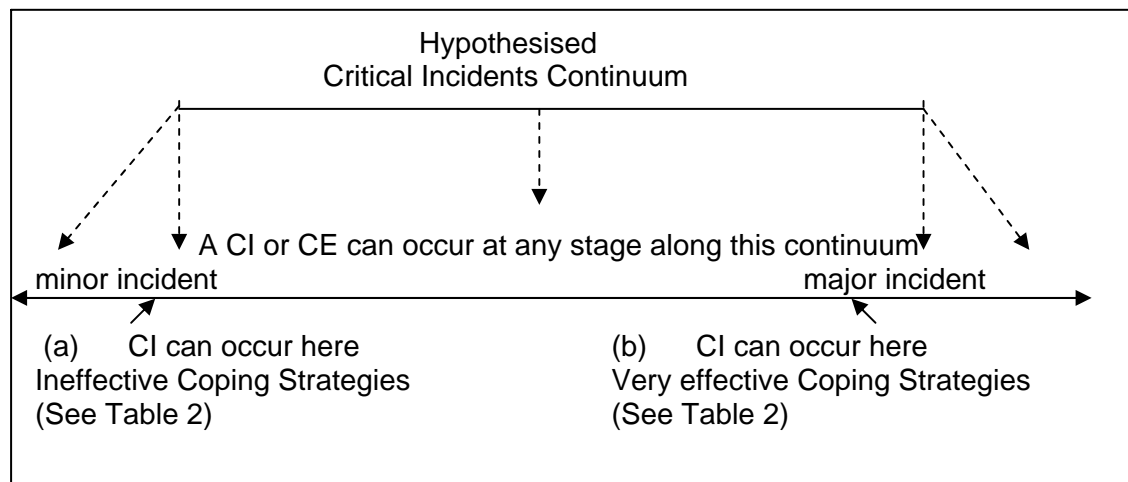
- How do individuals deal with critical incidents and critical episodes and within this, draw the distinction between specific strategies and support mechanisms and networks?
- How do leaders manage and support themselves and others who have to deal with critical incidents and critical episodes?

Table 2 below illustrates how the evidence suggests colleagues cope with CIs. These strategies have been classified into conscious and sub-conscious strategies that I would argue are underpinned by emotional intelligence (EQ).

Table 2. Strategies for dealing with CIs and CEs

Category 1. Consciously Adopted Strategies		Category 2. Subconsciously Adopted Strategies
<p>Strand 1 Strategies used to respond to a specific CI</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Discussing problems and issues with colleagues and family or a significant mentor. ✓ Calming a situation down by sitting, taking notes, listening and giving those involved the opportunity to have their say. ✓ Rationalisation of the incident and/or process to deal with it. ✓ Working collaboratively (linked to discussing the problem). 	<p>Strand 2 Strategies /networks of support used regularly as a means of coping with daily CIs or CEs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Regular discussions and a reflective approach to professional and personal experiences. ✓ Working collaboratively. ✓ Regular exercises/hobby. ✓ Separating home from school as far as possible. ✓ Being organised/prepared. ✓ Having a stable, happy and secure life outside school (family). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Using knowledge and skills learnt from previous responses to critical incidents was used as a coping strategy although not consciously. ✓ Spontaneous responses to incidents that are defined by personality and emotional intelligence.
<p>Category 3: Strategies influenced by EQ emotional intelligence (These underpin both conscious and subconscious strategies)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Understanding of your personality and self. ✓ Helping others. Setting an example and not wanting to let others down. ✓ Rationalising the process – cause and effect. Keeping things in perspective. ✓ A sense of professionalism/ pride based on a set of values. 		

The effectiveness of these strategies could be a factor in informing one's personal CI threshold. That is when an incident becomes critical in the eyes of the individual. If these strategies are very effective one would move further along the continuum before an incident became critical. In the table below, if your coping strategies were not very effective, a CI could occur at point (a) and might not be seen by others as too serious. However if one's coping strategies are effective then a CI might occur at point (b), which could be considered very serious. An incident occurring at point (a) for these individuals would not be a CI.



Initial responses to CIs by individuals and organisations are vital because they can either improve or make an incident worse which can have implications for subsequent action and resolution.

'I believe that the skill of dealing with a crisis is something that exists within individuals. It cannot be easily taught, nor learned by everybody, as no amount of learning can fully equip some people with difficult situations. People who are better at dealing with crisis situations seem to possess the 'it' factor that seems to enable them to cope. People who are less able to cope with difficulties often become the reason why situations escalate to crisis level...the most difficult part of my job is to support a member of staff in a public situation when I know it is the member of staff, not the pupil who has taken the problem to crisis proportion.' (BESD HT NPQH Hotseat May 2007)

The 'it' factor is a very interesting notion. I would agree that some people seem to have 'it'; something about them that helps them to cope effectively. This doesn't really help us in a practical way. Evidence from my research suggests that 'it' might be to do with EQ, one's personality; the experiences that one has had to build up resilience, perspective, skills and knowledge. The notion of psychological resilience (see above), which is an individual's capacity to withstand stressors and the ability to maintain and renew oneself, which is built up through the development of adaptive coping skills, may help here. Using these situations as learning opportunities might help to support those individuals who sometimes 'make a mountain out of a mole hill' because of their initial response.

Having focused on how individuals cope with CIs, the following activities are suggested to leaders in school as a means to support and enable staff to deal more effectively with CIs and CEs.

- Ensuring school has policies and procedures for dealing with CIs using the response, recovery and resolution cycle suggested above. Provide time to discuss CIs and how they were resolved.
- Sharing CIs that are experienced at different levels of the hierarchy might be a useful strategy in developing an organisation's capacity. By creating a portfolio of CIs and what has been learnt from dealing with them.
- Enabling and supporting staff through professional development, to develop an understanding of their personalities and how they work.
- Adopting some of the work-life balance activities currently advocated by some LA's might also be useful.
- Developing a scheme to identify a professional mentor either within one's own school or one who stays with an individual throughout their career. This would be problematic to establish but not impossible
- Taking time to carry out a review of a CI each term and identifying what was learnt from it. Experiencing and coping with a CI or CE effectively builds up one's immunity/resilience to their effect (like an illness) and helps to develop ones capacity to cope initially and afterwards. Therefore protecting individuals from CI might not always be beneficial to the individual or organisation
- A sense of self-efficacy can be encouraged through a supportive professional development programme, where staff have the skills, knowledge and opportunities to work effectively.
- Reading and hearing about other people's CIs and CEs and how they dealt with them either positively or negatively can be helpful in a number of ways:

Adopting some of the distinct elements of distributed leadership; working constructively in teams; negotiating boundaries of leadership; enabling personal growth and self-efficacy, as well as developing an ethos and culture that supports distributed leadership, could help leaders in school facilitate the strategies suggested above for dealing with CIs (see below for further discussion of this).

As discussed above, I have assumed that there is a relationship between the ability of individuals to deal with CIs effectively and the organisation's capacity to deal with CIs. Therefore, an organisation needs to be viewed in terms of the individuals that work together to create that organisation. If individuals have a sense of ownership; feeling of self-efficacy and value within an organisation, then they will work together to develop an ethos that is both supportive and flexible; that has systems and support mechanisms for individuals and the organisation to cope effectively with CIs.

A number of participants commented on the importance of the support and organisation within the school. For instance:

'The teamwork is a very strong feature, mutual respect and mutual support. One of the other things is I don't ask or expect things of them that I wouldn't do myself.' (Headteacher Org a Life History interview 1)

If we are to begin to understand the relationship between factors which enable individuals to cope with CIs and those which shape an organisation's capacity to deal with CIs, we need to further consider the effectiveness of the leadership within that organisation and the culture and context in which it operates.

The personal dimension of headship

The personal dimension of headship (Southworth, 1995), is a vital factor in the formulation and personal perception of one's own leadership styles. One's conception of headship is informed by a strong sense of one's own identity and what you believe a headteacher to be. This will influence your preferred style and approach. Southworth completed a case study focusing on the leadership style and personal characteristics of a successful head. This research base, although limited due to the small sample, does offer some plausible insights focusing on the impact of life history, experiences, etc.

Our perceptions of self and personality will influence our preferred styles and approaches. So our self-esteem and resilience has to be self generated and we need to develop a strong belief in our convictions and values. Headship therefore becomes personal and individualistic. One needs to be personally convinced of the rightness of what one is trying to achieve. Only in this way can leadership be truly genuine. Often when faced with a serious CI where there is conflict, it is one's values and belief that what is being done is right, that helps to achieve a successful resolution.

'If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs and blaming on you. If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you' (If. R Kipling)

Gronn supports the view that one's sense of self influences preferred leadership styles and subsequent ability to adopt others accordingly. Sense of self-identity can be summarised into three headings Gronn (1999):

- Subjective: Knowing yourself, which is influenced by personality type and life histories.
- Public façade: That is your professional self.
- Social self: That is your personal self.

Gronn asserts that your self-identity is the sum of these. The evidence suggests that these three elements combine to shape how individuals deal with CIs. If you think you are an effective person who has the skills and knowledge to deal with CIs, then you will be better equipped to do so.

3. What leadership styles and preferences most enable individuals and organisations to deal with CIs effectively?

There is a large body of research (Hopkins D, et al. 2001, Harris A, 2001. Day, Harris & Hadfield 2001, Chapman C. 2002) concerned with identifying and quantifying the most effective leadership styles and what leadership traits are common to successful leaders. There is still much to debate but there are a number of common strands emerging.

Hay (2002) has identified the following adjectival perspectives to describe different approaches:

- Coercive: Do it now and in this way.
- Authoritative: This is where we are going as a school.
- Affiliative: The most important thing is that we all get along.
- Democratic: We will make decisions together
- Pacesetting: Watch me do it and learn
- Coaching: Let's explore what happened and identify what we can do better next time

I would like to argue that there is no blueprint for a leadership style that is effective in all cases and situations. Arguably, an effective leader needs to be able to adopt styles that are most appropriate to the needs of the situation within which they are faced.

Harris (2002) in her research, corroborates this in proposing that no single leadership approach worked in every situation and different styles are necessary for different purposes. This assertion is based on evidence collected from 10 schools.

'The evidence collected within the study suggests that headteachers adopt leadership approaches that match the particular stage of a school's development. For example, while the heads acknowledged that they had all adopted more autocratic leadership approaches at critical times, they also agreed that this was the least likely to lead to sustained school improvement. The headteachers in the study had deliberately chosen a form of leadership to move the school forward that empowered others to lead and distributed leadership activity throughout the school.' (Harris, 2002: p17)

When dealing with CIs and the way in which these are resolved, leaders at all levels in school need to model practice and be tuned into the needs, motives and context of the individual and the organisation and thus adopt an appropriate style that would be effective.

'Successful leaders not only set direction, organise and monitor, build relationships with the school community, and are people centred; but they also model values and practices that are consistent with those of the school.' (Day, 2003: p3)

The qualities and characteristics of a successful headteacher are much more than the sum of the parts. There is almost a sixth-sense, a quality that is intangible and internal (West Burnham 2001). These qualities and characteristics all feed into preferred leadership styles. Leadership is personal and how you interact with the environment, your goals, aspirations, motivation and flexibility are all influenced by your life history (Parker 2002), sense of self (Gronn 1999, Southworth 1995), personality (Gronn 1999, Dressler 2002) and training. These will influence your preferred leadership style and ability to adopt others as appropriate. This list, although not exhaustive, bears an interesting similarity to the factors that I consider to be influential in our capacity and ability to deal with CI.

There is now growing agreement that the basics of successful leadership can be addressed through a core set of leadership practices (Leithwood et al. 2006, PwC 2007).

1. Building vision and setting directions – including creating a shared vision, acknowledging group goals, communicating and monitoring performance.

2. Understanding and developing people – through support and challenge, agree goals and reward achievement. Distribute leadership and responsibility.
3. Redesign the organisation – building collaborative cultures, and sustain positive relations with all stakeholders.
4. Manage the teaching and learning programme – through productive working conditions, stability and learning centred leadership.

It has been argued (Leithwood et al 2006) that these core practices rest on a handful of personal traits.

‘The most successful school leaders are open-minded and ready to learn from others. They are also flexible rather than dogmatic in their thinking within a system of core values, persistent (e.g. in their pursuit of high expectations of staff motivation, commitment, learning and achievement for all), resilient and optimistic’ (Leithwood et al 2006 p14)

Further to this, NCSL research has identified a number of factors that were indicative of effective urban leaders, although this could be extended to all leaders.

These characteristics include: courage and conviction; enduring resilience; community engagement; focused vision and simplicity; open and connected leadership; accountability and consistency; leading learning innovation; purposeful and responsive influencing and filtering, judging and acting. These characteristics could be seen as valuable in being able to deal with CIs and CEs personally and in supporting others when dealing with them.

Successful leaders need to be contextual literate, be optimistic and have a strong moral compass based on a core set of values (Fullen 2003).

West – Burnham (2003) proposes three elements that are necessary for developing personal capital, which I would argue, enables one to more effectively deal with CIs and CEs. These are emotional capability, knowledge, and spiritual and moral dimensions. All of these are underpinned by one’s understanding of the one-self, which informs personal and social action. There has also been limited research into support staff and teachers’ expectations of effective leaders (PwC, 2007), which could contribute to effectively dealing with CIs.

Table 3 Expectations of Effective leaders

(Source: PwC School Leadership Focus Groups 2007 p 52)

For support staff and leaders...	For teachers effective leaders are....
Recognise and value the work of others	Visible and approachable
Communicate fully and effectively with all staff	Have an in-depth knowledge of the school and the wider community
Define roles and responsibilities	Are supportive
Provide development opportunities	Are interested in wider issues rather than just results
Adopt an open consultative approach	Understand classroom practice
Are visible	Are non-hierarchical and consultative
Have a constructive approach to PM	Distribute leadership effectively
Act and feedback on concerns	Act and feedback on concerns raised

(Leithwood et al 2006) propose the following seven strong claims about school leadership:

1. *'School Leadership is second only to classroom teaching as an influence on pupil learning.*
 2. *Almost all successful leaders draw on the same repertoire of basic leadership practices.*
 3. *The ways in which leaders apply these basic practises – not the practices themselves – demonstrate responsiveness to, rather than dictation by, the contexts in which they work.*
 4. *School leaders improve teaching and learning indirectly and most powerfully through their influence on staff motivation, commitment and working conditions.*
 5. *School leadership has a greater influence on schools and students when it is widely distributed.*
 6. *Some patterns of distribution are more effective than others.*
 7. *A small handful of personal traits explains a high proportion of the variation in leadership effectiveness.'*
- (Leithwood et al 2006)

Having considered these elements I would like to focus on aspects of distributed leadership that I would argue, demonstrate many elements of the characteristics of effective leadership discussed above. Distributed leadership can embody an ethos and systems that enable and put more influence and responsibility in the hands of those individuals with expertise (Leithwood et al 2006, Gronn 2002, Harris and Chapman 2002,).

Bennett et al. (NCSL 2003) despite acknowledging that there were few clear definitions of distributed leadership, proposed three distinct elements of the concept of distributed leadership.

Firstly, distributed leadership emphasises leadership as an emergent property of a group or network of interacting individuals. This is in contrast to leadership as a phenomenon that arises from the individual.

'What is most distinctive about the notion of distributed leadership is summed up in the second of the meanings identified by Gronn, namely concertive action. Contrasted with numerical or additive action (which is the aggregated effect of the contribution of a number of individuals contributing their initiative and expertise in different ways to group organisation), concertive action is about the additional dynamic which is the product of conjoint activity. Where people work together in such a way that they pool their initiative and expertise, the output is a product of energy which is greater than the sum of their individual actions.' (Bennett, et al. 2003 p7)

Secondly, distributed leadership suggests an openness and flexibility of the boundaries of leadership. There are no limits built into the concept and there are leaders throughout the school. By putting more influence and responsibility in the hands of those individuals with expertise (Leithwood et al 2006), one empowers individuals and fosters feelings of self-efficacy which in turn can help individuals as well as organisations cope with and learn from dealing with CIs.

When participants were asked how they felt the ethos and organisation helped the school deal with CIs, there was an agreement that an open learning culture, where

teams felt empowered with leadership at all levels was important and that if you dealt with an issue you would be supported.

'I think that because we are all aware of the children you never feel you have to deal with things yourself. Or that anyone is going to criticise you for the way that you deal with things.' (Class teacher Life History interview 2 org d)

'My teachers feel that if they have got a concern they can come to see me...I've teams that are well led and I've got a system in place.' (HT Life History Interview 2 Org c)

Thirdly, distributed leadership entails and values the view that there is a variety of expertise which is distributed across all members of the school.

'I strongly believe in a collegiate, distributive management system...much of my support (in dealing with CI) would come from my SMT, Chair of Governors' (HT Org C Journal entry)

'my best ideas generally come from other people from me throwing out something and listening to feedback and getting something....It's the spark' (HT Life History Interview 2 Org c)

'I was able to cope with this (CI) by discussing this with a close and valued colleague whom I know is entirely professional and who is a sounding board. Interestingly this is not my deputy but a colleague and friend who works as my personal assistant. I feel this enables me to deal with minor anxieties effectively' (HT Org a Journal entry)

Effective teams have ways of facing and resolving conflict and I would propose that the characteristics described above would enable one to deal more effectively with CIs.

In addition to this, leaders in school who are responsible for managing teams can advise/give suggestions for coping with critical incidents as appropriate by:

1. Building up one's sense of self-efficacy by reinforcing/endorsing action you might have taken.
2. Contributing to one's sense of 'not being alone'. There are many people who deal with CIs and CEs regularly and successfully.
3. Being sensitive and aware of the possible effects of dealing with a CI and having procedures in place to support colleagues appropriately.

The reciprocal relationship between an individual's and an organisation's capacity to cope effectively with CIs is marked and the leadership style adopted has a significant impact on this capacity.

Table 4 (over) summarises the main themes that have emerged and suggest how organisations might provide opportunities for colleagues to have experience of these activities, etc.

Table 4. Developing the capacity to cope with CIs.

Strategy theme or experience	Proposed Activity
Having a significant professional mentor who has shaped ethos, philosophy and modus operandi featured significantly in participants' responses.	Develop a scheme to identify a professional mentor either within one's own school or one who stays with an individual throughout their career. This would be problematic to establish but not impossible.
Having a positive, happy childhood including positive happy experiences at school seems to be common to effective practitioners. However this is not essential. Having a close, stable family, a partner or 'significant other' that issues can be discussed with appears to be important.	Of course one cannot have an influence over these areas.
Having experienced a CI that has had a positive effect/impact on thinking and has shaped subsequent actions. (CIs can be negative or positive and can have negative or positive effects. Many participants had experienced CIs that have helped them although there is some debate. On one hand having successfully experienced and dealt with a CI means that you can cope with them better later. Although one could argue that you don't need to have experienced a CI to be able to cope with it. However, in the interviews, it was clear that many participants considered having dealt with CIs effectively in the past had helped to prepare them to deal with them in the present.	Take time to carry out a review of CIs each term and identify what was learnt from them. N.B. Experiencing and coping with a CI or CE effectively builds up one's immunity/resilience to their effect (like an illness) and helps to develop one's capacity to cope initially and afterwards. Therefore protecting individuals from CIs might not always be beneficial to the individual or organisation.
Having a feeling of self-efficacy and having coped with CIs well in the past. Having a strong sense of self-efficacy and capacity to cope when things go wrong.	A sense of self-efficacy can be encouraged through a supportive professional development programme where staff have the skills, knowledge and opportunities to work effectively.

Final Thoughts

This report has set out to show that there could be links between life experiences, personality and how one deals with critical incidents and critical episodes.

The participants involved in the research were perceived as effective practitioners who deal with CIs effectively as they occurred.

The suggestions and arguments forwarded within this report need to be considered in light of their representativeness. Despite the richness of the data generated, the research base was limited and scope for personality assessments and their link to effectiveness in dealing with CIs needs further investigation. This, along with a study of individuals who adopt the different strategies suggested above and whether

certain strategies might be more effective with different types of CIs, might also be the basis of further investigation.

Distributed Leadership has been suggested as an effective way of enabling individuals and organisations to deal with CIs more effectively. However, this suggestion is made tentatively, as there needs to be further investigation into the implications of distributed leadership and CI resolution.

Furthermore, one could surmise that those who have dealt effectively with a CI in the past could arguably cope more effectively with them in the present, although this may not always be the case if we consider our definition of a CI; which is time, context and subject specific. Indeed having to deal with too many CIs can lead to overload.

Finally, the suggestions and strategies are offered in the spirit of the research method and schedule; that is to be of help and benefit to those involved in the research; to those colleagues who are routinely faced with CIs and CEs. In this way the incident remains a mole-hill and does not become a mountain.

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Appendix 1 – Interview Schedule

First Interview

Personal

- Family (Early, Current)
 - Relationships (Home – Work)
 - Partner/Significant other/Friend
1. I would like you to talk about your earliest memory?
 2. Who do you remember as your earliest influence? How and why do you remember them?
 3. Talk about your close family. Number of siblings, influences?
 4. What do you remember most about growing up? Happiest memory. Saddest memory? How do you think these influenced you? (personality, education/career choices.
 5. Can you talk about your earliest recollections of schools/teachers
 6. Who and/or what were your most significant moments/influences?

Education

- Early – Later
1. What type of school did you go to?
 2. Who were the most significant teachers?
 3. Can you talk about defining moments at school
 4. When did you first consider teaching as a career? What were your reasons for going into teaching?

Career

- Early career – recent
1. Did you consider other occupations? If so what were they and why?
 2. Talk about your career path? Where did you work and why?
 3. What defining moments helped to shape your career?
 4. What were the reasons for moving/promotion?
 5. What were the drivers/motivating factors?
 6. What significant achievements/failures have you had. What have you learnt from these?
 7. Who were your most significant mentors/coaches?
 8. How and what helped you to develop your ideas/philosophy?
 9. How has training influenced your development?

Second Life History Interview

1. Talk about your current personal life
2. What role do you have as a spouse/partner?
3. How does this impact on your career?
4. How do your relationships impact on how you deal with CI's and CE's?
5. Describe your lifestyle/routines?
6. There is a lot of discussion about work/life balance. What do you do/strategies do you to help you cope with working in education and coping with CI's and CE's?
7. What CI's/CE's/life changing events helped to shape your personality/How you deal with CI's and CE's
8. Discuss the important influences in developing your philosophy?

Current Trends

1. Talk about your attitudes/approaches to work? What are your most strongly held convictions?
2. How would you describe your teaching style?
3. How would you describe your leadership style/characteristics?
4. How does the ethos and organisation of the school help you to cope/deal with CI's and CE's?
5. Talk about a recent CI or CE that you and/or your school have had to face. This can be personal or professional but is something that challenged your beliefs on a personal and/or professional level.

Appendix 2 – Critical Incident research journal

Complete a journal entry as soon as possible after you have had to deal with a CI or CE. If it is related to a previous entry please note connections. Remember, the definition of a CI or CE is defined by you. The diagram below might help you.

Critical incidents are time, subject and context specific. What might be a CI for you one day might not be on another day or for someone else. Recent events, feelings, etc will all influence how effectively you deal with a CI.

Your CI can be a personal or professional one. How do you deal with the challenges of working in school on a day-to-day basis? When writing about your CI or CE please complete the following table.

Date
Description of the Critical Incident/episode. What happened before or led up to the CI?
Why do you think it was a critical incident?
Initial Reaction: What do you think influenced this initial reaction? How did you feel? Had anything happened prior to this that positively or adversely affected your initial response. What was it?
How did you deal with it? What strategies used? Who did you talk to/ask for help What do you think if anything helped you deal with this? (Relate to your coping strategy, life history influences/personality, previous CIs or CEs dealt with, personality traits)
Were there any repercussions as a result of this incident? What were they? Did you learn anything from this?
Do you feel that by reflecting upon the CI through the journal entry that it helped you cope with it or would help you cope with a similar CI in the future? Do you think this will help you deal with another similar situation? If so how?
Any other comments

Appendix 3 – Key characteristics of the schools in the study

Organisation (a)

A semi-rural primary school with approximately 120 on roll. The pupils' socio-economic backgrounds are broadly average as is attainment on entry to the school and there is a small number of pupils from ethnic minorities. Achievement is judged to be satisfactory and the children's personal development and well-being good by inspectors. The school serves the local community well. (OfSTED Report – Sept 2006). Three colleagues participated in the research; the headteacher, the deputy head and nursery coordinator

Organisation (b)

Primary school with approximately 250 on roll, with a nursery attached serving a mixed catchment area in large county town. Pupils come from a variety of social backgrounds and an above average number of pupils (7%) come from ethnic minority backgrounds. Overall pupils' ability is below that expected of their age according to inspectors and standards at the end of KS2 are above average. (OfSTED report 2002). Three participants involved in the research; the head, deputy and KS1 coordinator.

Organisation (c)

A two form entry junior school, with 280 children on roll serving a mixed community within a large county town. According to OfSTED, inspection achievement in the school is good and it has a good reputation for serving the community. Three colleagues participated in the research; the headteacher, the deputy head and class teacher.

Organisation (d)

A small infant school with nursery with approximately 200 on roll serving a deprived catchment area with some challenging social issues located in the suburbs of a large county town. Pupils' attainment on entry in reception is low – below the national average. Standards at the end of KS1 are good and the attitudes and behaviour of pupils are very good (OfSTED report 2002). Two colleagues took part in the research; the deputy head and class teacher. Achievement is below the national average but in line with expectations.

Organisation (e)

A large successful primary school with approximately 400 on roll serving a mixed catchment area in a large market town. Attainment on entry is below the national average and the number of children with SEN and from ethnic minority backgrounds is broadly in line with the national average. Achievement is above national expectations and the school has high standing within the LEA. The headteacher participated in the research.

