Going down: crisis and a school community

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Keywords
Airlines, Cargo, Disasters, Crisis, Schools

Abstract
Aeroplanes fly routinely over residential areas. As we watch them fly over our cities, and our houses, it is difficult to think of a plane crashing amongst us. But that is what happened one evening in October 1992 in Amsterdam when a large cargo plane crashed into an apartment block. The following day a number of pupils did not show up at an elementary school in the vicinity. The majority turned up but four remained missing: they had been casualties of the plane crash. How did this school community manage the situation?

Introduction
In the early hours of the evening of Sunday 4 October 1992, a 747 cargo-jet, belonging to the Israeli airline El-Al, went out of control and crashed at high speed into a ten-storey apartment block in Amsterdam. The flight had taken only 14 minutes. It was early Sunday evening and in Holland the winter darkness had already fallen. Outside the cold was enough to keep most people indoors, with many watching TV to get the latest sports commentary. Then suddenly there was an enormous explosion followed by a huge ball of fire. It looked like hell on earth. The jumbo had crashed through ten storeys and razed a section of the apartment block to the ground, leaving a gaping, smoking hole. The plane was carrying a shipment of cargo from Amsterdam Airport to Tel Aviv, but shortly after take-off it lost two of its engines owing to a technical defect. The pilot put out a "Mayday" signal and decided to return to the airport via a route which would take him over a residential area. After he had lost control his last words to the control tower were: "Going down, going down". The jumbo, which still had its full load of kerosene, transformed 80 apartments into a ball of fire, with a temperature of up to 3,000 °C.

Some of the inhabitants in an effort to escape came rushing screaming out of their apartments, while others leapt to the ground. The rescue services were rapidly on the scene and cordoned off the area. The various sections of the Disaster Team (the official network of organisations mobilised to implement the various rescue services, over which the Fire Brigade has overall control), were able to assemble with little delay. A tremendous effort went into the operation and the inferno was rapidly brought under control (Rosenthal, 1980). Vulnerable inhabitants were rescued, ambulances ran back and forth to the hospitals, and a reception centre was set up. By dawn on Monday morning all that was left to be seen of the fire was a smoking mass of rubble.

Early on that Monday morning a teacher reported to the police, who were doing their first search through the area. His school was close to the block of apartments affected. Apparently several of the school children lived in the part of the block destroyed. He was worried if the children were actually there at the time or if they were staying over someplace else? There was considerable confusion about who had been in the flats and who had been a casualty.

The teachers started to arrive, one by one, looking somewhat depressed, and the first day did not change this rather gloomy atmosphere as many questions remained unanswered. The school children started to relate what they had experienced, what they had seen and heard and some of them were then unable to stop talking. For one of the teachers it became too much and another spontaneously automatically took over his class. Another one had to take care of a desperate mother who approached the school. Many telephone calls were made to the various rescue services seeking information.

Just how awful the accident had been, became more and more apparent as the reality sank in. However, each empty desk in the classroom remained a question mark for the time being. Where were the children? The rest started drawing and writing accounts of what had happened. The school sent the parents an initial letter, carefully considering each word used. As long as the school did not have the full story the press was denied access and the television camera crews were kept at bay. The teachers kept what they knew to themselves. Reports of children being found were promptly noted and some of the question marks removed.
Slowly the list of missing children became shorter.

Two teachers found three of the children in the sports hall, which doubled as the main relief centre during the crisis. Slowly people began to realise what far-reaching effects the accident would have, and the question remained what the effects on the children would be after all they had seen and heard.

After a few days the police came with a plastic bag, with a label saying “an object found at the scene” and containing a class photo from 1989 which had been singed by the fire. Gilbert could be seen in the photo. At that point Gilbert was thought to have perished in the accident alongside four other school children. A fifth pupil, a girl, a mere toddler, was injured so badly she almost died. She would have to receive treatment for burns for years to come.

**The crucial question**

There have already been many articles published on crisis management and on how people contend with catastrophes. For those qualified in social sciences and public administration the police, the fire and the health services are especially interesting. In this contribution, however, the central theme is one of a team of elementary school teachers in Amsterdam who are confronted with the consequences (the victims and emotions) of the disaster mentioned above. The school where the research was done is right next to the disaster area. The question here is: how has this team of elementary school teachers led the way for this school to face the consequences of the disaster? The main issue in this article is not therefore a crisis situation for the school as such but how the schoolteachers managed to cope after a plane accident wrecked their daily routine.

**School surroundings**

The Netherlands in general, and Amsterdam in particular, were shocked by the plane crash. The event was the subject of discussion for days on end in both the national and regional press. Each day hours and hours were devoted by the media to the accident. The newspapers were full of it and the television stations, CNN included, repeated several dramatic scenes time and time again. Why all the attention?

First, the effects of the disaster were of added emotional significance for many people because of the location of the crash, in the south-eastern suburb of the “Bijlmermeer” in Amsterdam. This district, made up of groups of people from totally diverse nationalities, is known as one of the areas in Holland where today’s social problems are very apparent. This district is synonymous for many people in Holland with a dangerous neighbourhood, criminality, neglect, unoccupied houses and social deprivation; and the media upheld this image in their reports. It was also full of illegal immigrants who were not registered officially and this accentuated the confusion on casualties. The plane had crashed on one of the most socially deprived, and multicultural, areas in the country. In some respects this added to the emotional impact.

Second, plane crashes with many victims are not frequent occurrences in Holland. Holland is not at all used to this situation. In 1977 the worst air accident in the history of civil aviation happened off the West Coast of Africa in Tenerife. A KLM jumbo jet collided with a PAN-AM jumbo and 583 people were killed. This accident, however, happened far away from The Netherlands. A few years later in 1981 a whirlwind broke off the right wing of a NLM F-28 while it was flying over South Holland. All 17 people on this passenger plane, belonging to a sister-company of KLM, were killed. The biggest plane crash ever on Dutch soil happened shortly after the end of the Second World War, when a Dakota crashed near Amsterdam Airport killing 26 people.

However The Netherlands is prepared for other disasters, particularly natural ones: the threat from the sea, which through the centuries has, along with river flooding, cost the life of many Dutch people. The last big flood was in 1953: 1,833 casualties. The El-Al crash, described above, with its 43 victims dented the psychological resistance of the Dutch, and especially those living in Amsterdam, because nothing of that sort had happened before, and certainly not in a built-up area.

**The approach chosen**

The week after the crash I contacted the school by telephone. After expressing my condolences, I soon noticed a reticence during the conversation, which later during an interview with the school management was expressed in the following way:

In the first week you would not have been allowed to conduct research here … You would not have been allowed in …

This comment typifies, on the one hand, the situation in which the teachers of the school found themselves at that moment, and on the
other hand the relatively closed ranks of the school staff. This is not surprising given the nature of work in a school. This reticence, culturally and structurally imposed on the school staff, resulted in a certain introspection and created an atmosphere of internal solidarity while at the same time arousing suspicion of all those from outside. It is not easy to break through this (Goffman, 1961). This relative isolation was exacerbated in the first week. A researcher must find ways around these barriers. The way in which resistance is expressed and the minefield laid down for outsiders, is, I am convinced, an integral part of the research process and bargaining for access.

If I had gone there in the first week, for example to help, my research report would have given away my real intentions. From the point of view of respect for the teachers as well as the ethical side of fieldwork (Punch, 1985), I considered this approach unacceptable. Finally there was the real danger that I would have been unable to function as a researcher because of the intense emotions which were part of this case. Although during participant observation researchers are, to a large extent, their own research instruments (Clarke, 1975; Burggraaf, 1988), I tried to keep sufficient distance in this particular case.

In 1993 I was allowed by the school board to carry out the first interviews and observations; in autumn 1994 I continued and in autumn 1999 after five years the teaching staff was able to take some distance from the case — after a Round Table Session, I concluded my observations.

Interviews were carried out with schoolteachers and I was able to make observations on the fortunes and misfortunes of the school. The approach used was a process of searching in which I did not consider, at every juncture, the question of what might come next, but rather observed what I encountered (Agar, 1986). The case in question therefore does not have a linear process and bargaining for access.

The school

Elementary schools in The Netherlands are for 4-12 year olds. The hallmark of this type of learning environment is an eight-year long routine, which is meant to consist of regularity, peace and quiet, and stability.

The school observed was built as a nine-class school, which through time was expanded to house 17 classes, including a separate annex. In 1992 the school had 365 pupils of 20 different nationalities. The classrooms in the main building are grouped around the central hall, in which the meetings, festivities and parent-teacher evenings are held. Owing to the socio-economic and community problems in the district this school has required support over and above the normal quota of teachers; it also has a headmaster without the burden of teaching duties, a deputy-head, and six remedial teachers. The ratio of men to women is one man to every five women.

The school is horizontally divided, namely into the lower, middle and top buildings, each with the pupils of four to six, seven to nine and ten to 12 years respectively. The vertical divide is in the form of a co-ordinator for each building or department. This “building” co-ordinator is one of the teaching staff, who beside their daily tasks also acts as a functional linking-pin who attends weekly discussion sessions with the headmaster.

Teaching staff

The first day after the disaster the teaching staff turned up early, of their own accord. The files with the children’s personal data and addresses were consulted. The television in the central hall was kept on the whole time so as not to miss the latest news reports.

The interviewees:

We didn’t teach the first day. We stood together with the upper-school teachers in the corridor as each hour another child arrived. Thank goodness . . . we’ve got another one . . . In the first hours there were many children missing, and several of them had of course gone off to have a look at the scene of the disaster before coming to school. That’s why they were so late.

I did not do any lessons on the first day either . . . I had nine children from that apartment block and all the children had to get off their chests what they had seen and heard . . . .

The corridor was our internal communications route, one eye on the corridor and one eye on the class. We were constantly in contact with colleagues from other classes and then with our own schoolchildren . . . simply waiting in the doorway, that’s what happened without anybody expressly arranging it that way.

After the first day I only had half the children back in my class, because of kids playing
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At school there was a predominant atmosphere of unrest, with all sorts of things going on which were not usual for the school community and which did not belong to their daily diet of predictability and routine which was partly dictated by the lesson plan. All this resulted in the complete disruption of daily life. There were many telephone calls from distraught parents and the first day people were pushed to the limit. Children who had always been quiet became active and those who had always been noisy became silent. Some over-active classes exploded and in others it was like an oasis of tranquillity.

In another tempers frayed and there were arguments and fights. The first day was marked by its ad hoc character where the teaching staff did things which were unanticipated and exceptional.

There were also those teachers who did not seek the support of others but who locked themselves away from outside events with their classes. A teacher:

I am like a brooding hen and very introspective. The class is mine and in this class my approach and my norms and standards which count here . . . I closed the classroom door and we formed a discussion circle where we talked a lot with each other. Then we started a class “disaster book” and wrote down our stories . . . what was surprising was that children who rarely put pen to paper suddenly started writing and those kids who never drew, started drawing. In actual fact I did not really know what I should do with my group . . . there were still some children missing from my group . . . we decided amongst ourselves that we should calmly wait and see what would happen . . . you have to be honest with your class . . . gain their confidence and keep it!

There are also groups of teachers who keep social contact with each other outside school. In the first week these groups of teachers broke up because there did not appear any need to meet a colleague after school hours. However, in the weeks after that some teachers seemed to come together more strongly and the bonds between them tightened. Others, which had drifted apart, ceased to exist at all.

Remedial teachers

The remedial teachers stayed apart from the rest of the staff in the first day. The children remained in class with their regular teacher and the day was filled up with discussion circles and subjects where they could air their feelings. The remedial staff were, therefore, called off:

. . . We didn’t have any special classes any more, so we looked on and watched through the glass windows what was happening in the classes and where we saw we were needed we lent a helping hand . . .

. . . On that occasion the classes were the most important thing and we acted, as much as possible, as support staff . . . finding out all sorts of things . . . receiving children . . . being present during discussion circles . . .

. . . Although you might have expected otherwise nobody asked specifically for our specialist help . . .

School management

The two-man headmaster’s office acted as the information command centre for the staff as well as the informal corridor information network. The management of the school co-ordinated all information from outside and kept the press at bay. As missing children, who had fled to relatives, started calling in, the headmaster’s office would then inform the member of staff concerned. The headmaster’s office embodied the contact with the authorities and the various aid agencies.

During the first morning the school team was informed in the school hall that: “Class teachers will take care of their classes and only the headmaster’s office will have direct contact with the outside world.” The information coming in from outside was centralised; through the management only.

The policy for the time being was laid down. All internal discussion sessions, which would normally have taken place once a week, were postponed. The permanent organisational structure which took the form of the daily routine in the school was “temporarily” abandoned and replaced by a new style of organisation in which experts, in this case social workers, who had been brought in by the school board to help the school team, took up an important position. The school had to face a temporary organisation and now had to work with a new set of diversely skilled people working together on a complex task over a limited period of time (Miles, 1964; Goodman and Goodman, 1976; Bryman, 1987; Weick, 1990). What is interesting here, and a conclusion
Children

Children who never drew before suddenly started to draw. Those who usually shouted the most and the toughest kids in the class, were now to be found sitting in the teacher’s lap crying and crying. Then one of the children would just get up and go to the rest room, without being asked to do so, in order to get a roll of toilet paper and use it to make tissues to dry the tearful eyes. Some others had found a broken-off piece of the aircraft on their balcony and brought it into the school to let the class see it.

Groups which had lost classmates went, class by class, to visit the site of the accident, to take something along. One class decided to buy flowers and take them for their deceased classmate, another took all the class-work of one of the dead children to the disaster area. (After all it was his wasn’t it?). Others made big pink flowers made from paper (the dead girl was very fond of pink) and took them there. One of her photos was found and pinned up in the classroom. After that the children all ate sandwiches with chocolate-spread (her favourite snack).

In the upper building during a gym lesson in the first week the children decided to take part in a game which had not been organised for them, and this involved nearly all of them (three had gone off to play football); namely building an apartment block made of gymnats and a bridge of parallel bars. Once it was ready they let “the house” collapse and then built it up again so they could once again let it fall down. This game lasted more than half an hour and the teacher looked on.

The district and its particular dilemmas arising from the social problems necessitate a specific educational approach. Against a background of the situation at home and the behaviour of the children at school, the school population was split into two categories:
1. problem children; and
2. non-problem children.

In the case of the latter the children finished the curriculum on time, without any notable extra help with problems in learning and/or upbringing. The problem children on the other hand were treated as a separate category and received specially designed learning programs and extra coaching from remedial teachers, in separate classes.

However a new category of problem children was suddenly brought about through the traumatic experience with the air crash: children who did not dare to go to sleep at night (for fear of another plane crash), children who woke up screaming or who just burst into tears at the slightest of excuses. The pupils who already came under the category of problem children through their previous experience and who had to deal with a new traumatic experience were again categorised as children-at-risk, frequently traumatised twice over. The Regional Institute for Mental Health (mobile division) was called in to deal with such cases. A recently qualified teacher from this school was employed through public funds to work together here with the Mental Health authorities; she used such methods as expressing emotions through using clay, drawing, acting and playing games.

Team of victims

Because of what was happening in the classroom, and the charged emotional state of the teaching staff who were very affected by everything that was going on, the teachers and management had an increased sensitivity for anything at all to do with the crash.

The national and international press showing TV pictures of the victims near the scene of the crash and the stories of the children and their parents, and one being approached by the various organisations offering help, added credence to the statement made above; the school and the school team in particular altered their attitudes accordingly. The school community then started to look on itself as a victim of the disaster as well and eventually began to act like it.

It was no surprise therefore that after a few days internal memos in the school started with “nice” opening words such as “Dearest colleagues”, a form of address which had never previously been used. The relationship was at its most intense when the school management sent some of the team leaders themselves and without first asking their approval, in accordance with their approach to the “problem children”, to get psychological help from the various mental health organisations. And this was not all. Six weeks later the entire team was referred to as a “Team of victims”. On 7 December 1992 the management organised, supported by external advisors, against a background of protests from a minority of the school teachers, a day of “team thought”. Under the motto “evaluation” the school teachers had to
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The role of the victim in which we found ourselves, suited the management...they did not give direction...they mollycoddled us!...

Could this have been avoided? After all the outside world had classified the school as a school of victims. In a case where the media focused its attention on this repeatedly, experts were sent to the school, the Education Minister promised support and categorised the school as the one most affected by the crash, then in such a case you must be very sure of yourself to declare yourself fit to manage without outside help.

Trust

On the evening of the crash the co-ordinator of the Middle Building had rung up the head and discussed how they would deal with the following day’s business. Both of them live in the same satellite town of Almere and have a carpool together to get to work in Amsterdam each day. While they were talking on the telephone they were making arrangements for the following day, such as for example what time they would set out for work, the addresses of the children that would have to be found, and bearing in mind they had to know which children were living in that block of apartments, how would they go about things in general? This phone call not only set in motion an initial response to the tragedy, but also gave the two people concerned a head-start over the deputy-head and the middle management of the school: the “buildings” co-ordinators. It also appeared that the deputy-head was not approached by the headmaster to prepare a plan of action in advance. The contact with the co-ordinator of the middle building was deemed sufficient.

The relationship between the headmaster and the middle-building co-ordinator played an important role in defusing the crisis situation.

In crisis situations believing in each other is of prime importance. It is not for nothing that organisations such as the army, fire brigade and police who are regularly faced with crisis situations consider loyalty paramount. Some of them have even gone as far as setting up their own (company-) training courses in internal relations. The car-pooling co-ordinator of the middle building had already gained the trust of the headmaster and this put her in a more advantageous position compared to the other members of the organisation vis-à-vis discussing the situation and generating ideas. This was further enhanced by the spread-out area of the school and the fact that the middle building was situated in the annex, which was, geographically seen, virtually an independent position.

The co-ordinator (middle-building): I can manage beautifully in my own territory in the annex. Communication problems? No. I discuss everything with the director...and find that everything is just fine over here.

Tension

In this particular case there was behind the scenes dissatisfaction at how things were being done, especially over how the pupils were receiving help and over the decisions of the school management. The schoolteachers appeared to the outside world to be just that, a team, but in actual fact the staff was divided in opinion because of diverse cultural views on things. Briefings took place every day in the hall when all the teaching staff met together, but that was all:

We sat down together because they expected us to and out of respect, and considering the circumstances kept our own counsel...Various formal and informal structures are put to the test in times of crises. Diverging views on how best to handle the crisis can lead to bitter arguments between, and within, organisations (Burggraaf, 1991). Especially when the situation is very turbulent, you get tempers rising and the resulting tension may seriously hamper the decision-making process. After a while, conflicts were a real problem, with different views on how to handle the situation, which were suppressed out of decency.

An organisation, so also a school, has an idea of how the various people within the organisation should treat each other, of how the majority should treat the minority and vice versa, and these ideas must be adhered to, to a great extent. The subsequent relationships become anchored in the organisation during the course of time and then come to belong to the organisation. For the members of the organisation concerned they are characteristic and logical.

In most organisations at any given time, there are several sub-cultures present, which differ greatly from one another. In general there is a certain balance here but certainly in situations of change or crisis such as a plane crash, these sub-cultural differences come to the surface. After all what disturbs the status quo of organisational logic more than insecurity and unpredictability?
And:

...We managed well and went about things in a professional way. People in other schools phoned in sick because of the crash, but how can you leave the children alone at moments like that and put an extra burden on your colleagues over and above?

The question again

In short if the question is again raised of how this school managed with the disruption of daily routine (because of a plane crash) then it can be stated that the school board tried as soon as possible to re-establish the teaching programme, the everyday routine tasks of the school. As a result the most apparent factors of disturbance were solved by staff adjusting to the occasion or by bringing in professional help and advice from outside. Lastly it can also be deduced that in this school crisis management was also a struggle for control to shape a specific school-culture, to maintain specific coalitions, to re-establish the everyday routine.

References