

Episode 158 - Dr. Danilea Werner: Social Workers' Preparedness for School and Community Crisis

[00:00:08] Welcome to in social work. The podcast series of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work at www.insocialwork.org. We're glad you could join us today. The purpose of social work is to engage practitioners and researchers and lifelong learning and to promote research to practice and practice to research. We're so Sure hi and happy new year everybody in downtown Buffalo we are enjoying our new public ice skating venue at canalside. Here's a fun fact. It's four times the size of the ice surface at Rockefeller Center in Manhattan. I'm Peter Sobota in this episode our guest Dr. Daniela Werner argues that social workers especially those who work in schools are on the front lines of response to community and social crises. Dr. Werner discusses her research with school social workers exploring their perceptions of their own and their districts preparedness for crisis events. Bridging research to practice Dr. Werner describes how social workers and schools can increase their perceived preparedness and what can be done to increase their confidence in their districts colleagues ability to respond effectively she concludes with recommendations on the importance of integrating students and parents in preparedness planning for crisis situations in their schools and communities. Daniela Werner Ph.D. LCS w MPH is Assistant Professor of Social Work at Auburn University. Her research interests include mental health disaster preparedness and response specifically focusing on school and community personnel. Dr. Werner has also worked in disaster preparedness public health education and as a clinical therapist. Dr. Werner was interviewed by Lisa Caprio an adjunct professor here at the school of social work as well as a local school social worker.

[00:02:12] They spoke in October of 2014 this is Lisa Caprio. I am an adjunct professor here at the University of Buffalo School of Social Work and today I'm speaking with Dr. Daniela Werner from Auburn in Alabama. Welcome. Dr. Werner. Thank you for your time this morning thank you. Thank you for having me. We can just sort of go right into things here. Can you tell me a little bit about you know your current research the project that you're working on. Sure. My current research is really trying to understand and look at it for how school personnel especially social workers are prepared for training for responding to crises. And that is something that I'm really interested in and wanting to know we continue to see things. Crises happening at the school level at all levels from elementary through to the university level and so how are we as a profession are responding to those and prepared for those. That's really the area that I'm looking at. I think that's wonderful research. I actually am a school social worker and I work in an elementary school. And our safety team has kind of been charged with you know unfortunately talking about situations like active shooters and all kinds of you know lockout and lockdown procedures and how to best not only handle that ourselves but then you know how to best prepare students for that without raising their anxiety level. So I think that's really interesting. Let's sort of got you into that. How did you get interested in that area.

[00:03:49] Well before I came to Auburn University I spent many years as a project coordinator at the Heartland Center for Public Health Preparedness at St. Louis University and what we did there was we worked with public health officials across the Midwest helping them to prepare planned for disasters of all kinds. And what we consistently found was that mental health preparedness at all levels was on the back burner. If it was on the stove at all. And so we thought oh this is a need this is something we need to look at. So I began to work with some colleagues at the Missouri State Department of Health to develop specific trainings and programming to help people all over the realm of public health and social work. Think about how do we respond after any type of crisis and that as I began to look at that I really got interested in schools because it seemed that more and more that was where a hotbed of activity was happening. And so that's how I got into it and have stayed

into disasters and crisis in many areas. I worked with community response after the Gulf oil spill in 2010 and continue to do the work within the schools. That's fabulous. I mean it's such a needed area and you have such experience I mean dealing with such you know major crises. But to be able to sort of put that on a level of you know certainly when you see something like an oil spill you know you think well that doesn't necessarily apply to me or that happened somewhere so far away from me. We're talking about schools like that's everybody that's in your community that's your children it's your neighbors children.

[00:05:28] Things like that and the schools after the Gulf oil spill really did feel a lot of different responses. A year after the Gulf oil spill the schools were some of the main ones dealing with families moving and kids still having anxiety and families being thrust into poverty because of a loss of a job. So schools are really our front line when it comes to disasters. And I think once it's out of the national news you do sort of tend to there's so much that replaces it. Many other news stories and crises that replace it that you don't sort of always go back and think I wonder how those children are doing. Those families are faring the year two years later five years later. Yes and that's what we found with the Gulf oil spill was that it was one year later that that's when the height the community was getting the most calls. A year after it was over. And so it really showed the longevity. Like you said even after the media has way moved on but the families and the schools were still dealing with it. That's incredible work. That's wonderful. Why do you think that in general social workers should be concerned about this particular area. Well we are the frontline workers one that what research has shown we continue to say is we're the ones out there doing the work. And so we need to be there. We need to know we were in schools. We're in the community we're and all of these areas where disasters are touching that people sometimes forget. And so for us it is what we do. We are trained holistically.

[00:07:06] We are the ones who can understand how all of these systems are impacted by one major or moderate crisis. And so that's what we do. I really feel like that's important for our profession to continue to be actively involved. Is there a current research study going on that you're involved with. Yes. Can you tell me a little bit more about that like who comprised your sample and how you started that where you are now. Sure. But I wanted to look at social work personnel in the school of school social workers across the country. And I wanted to say just in general start to get an idea of did they feel individually prepared for a crisis do they feel that schools are prepared for a crisis kind of what kinds of crisis they have been involved in and what kinds of training they've been involved in those type of things. And so I used an online web survey and looked at with the group the school Social Workers Association of America. It's a professional group that many school social workers are members of and so that they were more and response from across the country around 800 people fully responded and it was wonderful because what we found when I found was that yes many times the social workers do feel individually prepared at least moderately prepared to handle a crisis and that they feel their schools are a little bit less prepared than they are so they don't have as much confidence in their school wide preparedness as they do individually which is what I figured. Usually we can be confident of what we can do but we can't always predict our colleagues preparedness.

[00:08:53] The what was so interesting was that we found that if a school had a crisis team and if that person was part of the team and had helped develop or knew that they had a very well-developed comprehensive response plan and that they exercise that plan at least once a year but preferably twice a year those people not only felt significantly more prepared but they thought that their schools and their colleagues were significantly more prepared to handle a crisis. And so this really said wow that you really need to be doing a few things you need to make sure that you have a team. You need to make sure that you have a very well-developed plan that is exercised regularly. That is probably the biggest point that we got from this information both quantitative and qualitative was that you needed to be exercise and one person wrote on the qualitative part. We

learn a lot when we do it and I thought that's such a key message. Actually you can't have this dusty piece of paper or a binder that says here's what you do. I thought of Chuter comes then or. But if you haven't practiced it in nine months you may forget. If you don't use it you lose it. I also was looking at what kinds of crises the schools had. What did they consider a crisis. What were they working through individually and at least 35 percent of the school's social workers that responded had it's been if at least one crisis at 42 percent had more than that more than one. What types of things did they consider to be a crisis.

[00:10:31] Well looking at their qualitative responses we are divided into five categories and they could respond in multiple categories. But it was having an active shooter or some type of lockdown around a weapon. And around 33 percent of the people responded that that had happened to them. Oh gosh yes. Significantly high. I would guess that that's what I talk to some of this is very disturbing because you're like Wow. Thirty nine percent reported either having a death of a student or faculty. And if you've been in a school you can understand why that that is a crisis that ripple effect. Yes 36 percent had experienced a natural disaster. And this those everything from people saying we had hurricane theory too. We've had earthquakes those type of things so natural disasters do impact your schools and I thought well this is great it shows it right here. So and then 24 percent pulled out the death of a 13 and to suicide either suicide of a faculty or suicide of a student. And there were both of those in that category which I thought was also pretty high. Then there is this other category where things kind of didn't fit and that was everything from chemical fires and the chemistry department type thing. And that was around 18 percent. They had some type of issue in that way and so they kind of ran the gamut. But what I thought was really interesting was how many of them had experienced something like that. Thirty three percent. Tell me again what was that category. Shootings are lockdowns like lockdowns could be related to a weapon brought on school grounds or in the area.

[00:12:11] So so anything other than a drill like an actual lockdown and actual wow. Yeah. Which right. I mean it really did send me into this. OK. This is something that we need to really begin to focus on especially in our training. And I think that's another piece of why it's so important. And what I'd like when I do that my research when I'm looking at is how can we practically apply these things and the exercising understanding what schools are going through and then really making or training collaborative with those of you in the schools who are going through this every day and meeting your needs to make you safer and the kids safer and the families safer. So what what is it that you need and what are you experiencing. And that that's really the goal of this research. So as a school social worker as you're talking I'm thinking certainly about my building and our administration and our teachers and already how much information I can share with them. Like I said we do have an active safety team but we have yet to sort of that drill. We're talking about when we're going to do that a lockdown or possibly an evacuation. Recently we had a meeting with whole faculty and one of our local law enforcement officers came in and we had a very sobering experience of listening to some of the names. One calls from Sandy Hook just in an effort to help us understand from listening to that. Like what can we learn from that.

[00:13:41] What could have been done and certainly cautious to even bring this up because certainly not in a blaming kind of way or you know not at all what should they have done. But there were a couple of interesting things that came out of that. Some simple procedures like making sure doors are locked so that we are not sort of fumbling with keys or trying to just some simple things that we are held accountable for on a daily basis. So in the event of anything happening like that that's one less thing that we have to think about. Right. And that is the key to crisis preparedness at all levels whether you're preparing at your school or at home is not to look at oh they should have done but what can we do. Because we do we learn from every time something happens. We should look at it from the from the perspective of OK what can I take away from this as well. So little things we often forget the simple thing of locking the door or locking window. Wow that sounds

simple but you forget it. And I think it's wonderful that you're having the law enforcement come in and talk to you because one of the other things we found in my previous life with the Heartland center was that many times our first responders and I put social workers in that and our school personnel we are first responders. They don't often talk to each other on a regular basis. And so that's really important. And so when you do your exercises to evolve those first responders who would be coming and responding or at least talking to them about it. Because what if they don't know that they are role in your plan. Yeah exactly exactly.

[00:15:21] Afterwards we did sort of receive our safety plan like certainly it's a you know confidential document. But at the same time it's like we need to be clued into that document. We need to know. OK. You know what do we do in this situation what we do in that situation. And it is really a work in progress and it should be one of the things that the research found too was that the more often you exercised your plan the more confident the social workers became in their colleague. And so knowing the plan was so important to individual preparedness and so was practice practice also significantly enhanced your perception and belief of that everyone else around you was ready to respond. And that really important because when you're meeting a crisis you need to have that confidence in each other. Absolutely. So as I said as we're talking I'm thinking about you know what I can do and the information that I can share in my building and a more broader scale. What do you think that social workers can offer in this area in order to meet those challenges. How do we take your research and then sort of make it applicable to you know not just my school district but either in other practice or do you look towards some kind of a policy change. I would love to see some policy that required all schools to have a crisis response plan because right now they don't. Now over 90 percent do. But they unfortunately right now it's not a requirement and it could be state by state. And it could be community by community.

[00:16:54] I'd also like to see some type of components that would be out of that. What should you have a response plan. I would love to see training that was changed one of the things that we wanted to look at with this research was what types of training had people experienced. And most often the types of training were really around one are less than one day type in-service training. And so I think that we have to start thinking about how do we train at a broader level on all areas. I'd love to see this topic be integrated more in our undergraduate and graduate programs for social work. But I think that what we see is that no matter what area of social work you go into you have the potential to work with people who are experiencing these large scale crises as we saw in the Gulf oil spill. We had people the community response was vast and you had people from all different cultures who were victims of this disaster and needed help from social workers. And so it was just really broad and I think that that's what I would love to say one that we start requiring a policy where schools have some type of plan just because we know that having a plan and having a team makes such a difference and then to go further into how can we get this training out there for all social workers. How do we make it broad. I'd love to see mental health and in our response and planning and recovery be in not just school preparedness and planning but what about the community. You know what if a disaster happens in your community what is the school's role.

[00:18:39] I'd love to see more people interacting together which makes sense because the school is such an integral part of a community. Yes integrated response integrated planning integrated recovery and so that really helps make the community resilient at all levels. When we do those things I can't help but think about the response like then how do we sort of translate the message to children without raising the anxiety but helping them be prepared. And I think about fire drills when we are responsible for doing a specific number each fall each spring. Our children know what to do. There's no alarm to maybe when they first hear it maybe the kindergartners. Certainly it's noisy but it's just part of our day as part of what we do. Be ready for it. And I think that this is just a shift in that it doesn't need to be. You know I think about when I was in grade school on how we do air raid drills and hide under the desk and piercing alarm. But what was interesting about that is it wasn't

stressful it was just part of one of the drills we did. And so I guess sort of being able to you know what I would be maybe looking for is OK so how are we then letting our children know OK this is a new type of drill we're going to do and this is the reason why we need to do it right. And I think that that's really I love that thinking. I think that first that will be tough because anytime we make change and anytime we introduce something new we especially as adults get a little concerned about it.

[00:20:15] Children are so resilient. And one of the things that we can do is start to practice these things and we need to come up with a name for them. Some people I know within schools have started doing active shooter training. I don't know if that's the best name for it. I don't know that I have a great name for it. I'm not that creative but come out with some wonderful name. But I do think that you're exactly right. If we can create something that's non-threatening but is just integrated into the fabric of the school day you know. OK it's October 10th let's do this. I think that is really important and I do think that the kids what we know from all types of disasters is the more you practice. And then what happens is your response and your recovery just is so much quicker because OK you got this. You knew what to do. And that really makes a difference in long term recovery especially emotional recovery is when something happens and we get knocked off of our like oh I had no idea what to do here. That's when their emotional recovery takes even longer. So the argument for integrating this into our regular real sessions is very strong. I'm with you. That's a good policy change through that exactly. I think a piece of a challenge when there is a crisis. I think some parents certainly on the elementary school level some parents want to protect their children from it and other ones expect that the school will be an integral part of helping ease you know whatever that trauma is.

[00:21:57] So I think that continues to be a challenge. Whose responsibility is it. Well we would certainly take it on as a school. And some parents would much rather they handle it within their homes like it's a little tricky at times. Yes. And that I do think that's something that's somewhat unique to schools. You know when you're talking about community it's very clearly. Here's what the communities are responsible for. And so I think with schools that that is something that and especially in each different school district you have to get the feel of your own school and your own parents and your community. That I think there again there is a way to come at this that is very friendly to parents offering trainings and chances for them to get involved and maybe giving them talking points. One of the things that the survey showed was that one of the most helpful pieces of training of course they were saying doing it children's reactions all of those kind of things but they also said communicating with families and that was one of the most helpful things in trainings that are social workers in the schools. That was important and so that taught me we need to do more of that. We need to have. OK how do we communicate with families and then how do they communicate and understand what is inappropriate reaction for their child at that age. I think that's really important. Think it'll have its own challenges of how do we integrate parents and families and communities into this.

[00:23:24] But I think that the end result is so beneficial that once we get there it will be like why did we do this you know years ago. I'm thinking back to last Gool year our department the social work department did have a community presentation on social media and it was received so well. And I see this you know I could see how this could fit in doing a community presentation just sort of on this disaster preparedness. I think what the social media so many of the parents were for lack of a better word just kind of you know overwhelmed or blown away with like oh my gosh I didn't even realize that this was out there that this was. I mean there are some certainly some scary things for parents out there. And when it comes to some of the things that their children can be exposed to. But I think it also brings a sense of comfort like OK now I know what this is. And I know within my own family how going to manage this. I think the same thing can be said for I think it's an excellent point for parent training. There must be so much and varying levels. But within families

parents I'm sure have concerns about what happened to my child. School is my child's school preparing for this and all of that anxiety can certainly be brought down if that's like a whole support system there that I hadn't previously thought about. But why aren't we bringing the parents in and saying this is what we're doing to prepare your children. Right. Especially when the kids go home and say we did this today or you know. All right. We do evacuate to another building in the community.

[00:24:58] It's very bright and one of the things that would be beautiful I think is that when we're talking about training and preparing at schools if they help families figure out what are some steps they can prepare at home. Because what we know is that oftentimes these situations permeate the entire community and so they may have some anxiety around. What do I do if there's an earthquake. What do I do if there's a flood. So that's another way that helps the wee school social worker serve as a resource for kids families at a larger level. Certainly Dr. Werner were there particular theories or theoretical frameworks that sort of shaped your area of inquiry. Yes. So I really looked at crisis intervention and the crisis theory work from Kaplin and then move that into looking at the self efficacy theory from Bandura that was born out of social cognitive theory because the idea really is that you have this field that you can do it and that was if you don't feel that you have enough efficacy to individually respond or that your school doesn't then you're going to really be hindered in your ability to provide care for anyone including yourself and your colleagues. And of course the children. So those two theories really lead and focused me on the what do we want to look at in terms of training and response and recovery and prepare them when I think is so valuable in just our discussion today is that you know we're talking about Sterry and research.

[00:26:37] And yet I'm walking away from this conversation having very concrete things that I can do tomorrow in school which is amazing you know I mean sometimes there's that disconnect between university work and research. And then the practical implications but thankfully you know for me you've already done all that piece of it. And so I can just kind of go right in tomorrow and talk with my administrator and then be able to move that on to the crisis team like hey this is what we talked about this is what will be really helpful that we're missing. It's exciting. Good because as always when I do research that is always what I like and I am focused on is what is applicable what can we do. I just think it's really important a piece of the three soldiers should be published this year or early next year and children and schools. And so we're really looking forward to that because hopefully it is going to get out there and we can continue to put this very concrete things into practice. So I prefer to thank you for saying that. Thank you. So what's next for you. Well I want to continue I want to continue to look at this area but specifically I want to look at communities. It might be how all of this is integrated so stop compartmentalizing and AGIS schools and looking at how are schools.

[00:27:57] One piece of the puzzle we look at community response such as what happened to the Gulf oil spill is that when we were talking to people from the Department of Human Resources and we're talking to people from the schools and we're talking to people from all areas the food banks and how they together we're having to work to respond and provide the safety net and things that the community needed and it was like a light bulb moment of OK this is really what we need to continue to look at. So that's next. Well you certainly have your work cut out for you. So certainly being a school social worker this is you know just a very interesting topic for me and Dr. Werner I can't thank you enough for your time this morning. Is there anything else that maybe you want to share with us that we haven't already talked about. I would just say to make sure all of you and anyone personally that you know is also getting personally prepared for these type of things. Whether it's a natural disaster or something that's more manmade. And so at the individual level we are better helpers when we have prepared ourselves. So and I want to say thank you it's so wonderful to talk to people who are on the front line and doing this every day. So thank you. Well thank you again Dr. Werner. And like I said this is just it's exciting research. It has such practical

implications things we can put into practice sooner than later and I can't thank you enough for your time. Thank you so much for your time. You've been listening to Danilea Werner discuss school social workers preparedness for crisis situations in social work Hi I'm Nancy Smyth professor and dean of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. We look forward to your continued support of the series.

[00:30:02] For more information about who we are as a school our history our programs and what we do we invite you to visit our Web site at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu.