

Effective Crisis Management

Study of Effective Crisis Management

**What happens when schools
are confronted by student
death?**

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A Study of Effective Crisis Management: What happens when schools are confronted by student death?

Whakatauki

Ahakoā nga ueue

Kia kaha, kia toa, kia manawanui

When you find things are difficult in life,

Stand strong, stand tall and be of great heart.

Acknowledgement

I sincerely thank my Board of Trustees for their ongoing support and enabling me to take up this opportunity. Thank you to our Assistant Principals who admirably led in my absence and to the Staff at Hampstead School, all have supported my leave and enabled me to undertake this sabbatical. Thank you to the principals and staff from other schools who have been so ready to share their own experiences and findings

I also acknowledge the Ministry of Education and N.Z.E.I, for making sabbatical leave available; having the time to read, reflect and pursue an area of interest, as well as having time to revitalise, have personal space and look at life away from the pressures and time constraints of a busy school, is valued, personally and professionally.

Background

In our wider school community we have recently experienced student death. In supporting peer principals I became aware of the stress they were encountering. Principals become the focal point of a school's response, are the spokesperson, the leader of the response and the ones looked to for leadership. Additionally the principal will also cope with the emotional consequence of knowing the student and family. In these circumstances our professional role is complicated by the very personal impacts that we need to contend with.

“By the time children complete high school, most will experience the death of a family member or friend, with 5% of children experiencing the death of a parent by 16 years of age. Nearly 40% will experience a death of a peer, 20% will have witnessed a death.” National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement p 1 Cincinnati USA 2012

In 2015 31,608 deaths were registered in New Zealand (Statistics New Zealand). As Pollard 2015 notes, “Nearly every principal will be faced with the death of a student or faculty member during his or her career. How schools respond to a death can either help or hinder the healing process and the principal sets the tone for the level of assistance that is provided following a death at school.” I would suggest that

regardless of where the death occurs, at school, in the home or elsewhere, the school has a role to play.

Principals are the figure head of a school, we project the values and goals of our community as a subset of the wider principal role. A time of death requires a particular leadership, it can be demanding and emotionally draining but also hugely rewarding in knowing we have tried our best to support our community and in particular the family and memory of a student of our school. There is no training for this role other than the performance of the role. While principals may observe and apply professional experiences, in these circumstances it will also be their unique personality which is sought by communities. The role requires administrative skills but also the humanity of the individual. Communities are looking for the controlled public face of grief that is able to communicate leadership in overwhelming times. A personality that is able to effectively communicate and bring together a community's response will provide a measured yet human response.

Cultural differences in how death is addressed, adds an additional requirement of understanding for New Zealand principals. For example in some cultures when tragedy does occur, adult reluctance to discuss feelings and uncertainty about how best to help can lead to confusion. When faced with a different set of values and understandings mistakes can be made. At a time of grief making errors of culture is uncomfortable for all. A better outcome is made when attempts have been made to communicate and consult so that appropriate responses and actions can be made. New Zealand is a land of increasing cultural diversity, principals embrace diversity in their classes, have resources and plans in place to promote understandings as a means to connect with students; a time of student death is a time for the Principal to live those values and understandings, to walk the talk.

Purpose

In discussions with colleagues over the past year I noted that the response to student death could be a fragmented approach, based on intuition, personal experience and the on-the-spot talents that principals bring to their vocation. It can be seen that principals are resourceful people, they are capable when faced with a wide array of people and situations. It is part of the effective principal composition that they are able to react and cope with difficult situations.

The purpose of my sabbatical study was to investigate how schools react to the event of a student death, how they are currently supported and to propose some ways in which we might improve our response.

Rationale and Background Information

Findings

The reaction of principals to student death tends to be piecemeal- a product of a principal's experiences, personality, those around them and the community they work in. There is no right way to react, rather a number of ways which are more positive, appropriate and affirming. The advice which can be found from the Ministry of Education in terms of paper and personnel is immense. Sifting through that when decisions need to be made could be problematic- prior preparation is preferable.

I found that principal-to-principal support was seen as particularly valued. I saw a principal relating their experiences and resources they found useful at a Principals Association meeting, to be particularly appreciated by their colleagues. This could be seen as a version of professional training, a type of real life incidental learning that is as valuable as any checklist. The meeting had reciprocal value as the speaking principal was affirmed in their actions and thanked for their sharing of what was a demanding time. The role of the principal can be a lonely one and the support of colleagues can assist in easing the way.

Venturing forth on an internet search reveals too much information. Having a simple flow diagram and brief but salient points is a more useful resource for the Principal looking for assistance. These resources can be found with the Ministry.

I considered what resources are in place that would assist us. The Ministry has a web link, (<http://www.minedu.govt.nz/theMinistry/EmergencyManagement.aspx>), that provides an effective start; it notes the availability of traumatic incident specialists, contact number and the advice for schools to have in place plans and policies to address responses including to student suicide. Further the Ministry staff will assist with such planning. It may be that the Ministry approaches you before you contact them.

The Emergency Management Team from local Ministry offices are readily contactable. Their expertise, willingness to support and contacts with other agencies make them invaluable as a resource. Principals talked of the Team as useful in the role of a sounding board, able to attend to administrative details, supportive of other Staff and having the benefit of experience. The Ministry Staff will:

- Assist schools to respond to an incident and help maintain daily operations
- Assist staff to communicate appropriately with children, young people and the community
- Make people aware of basic coping and self-hel strategies and how to communicate about the event
- Provide advice about typical traumatic incident responses
- Ensure the safety of children and staff by developing processes and systems with the school
- Link to Maori networks and other culturally appropriate services

(Responding in an Emergency or Traumatic Incident p 1 Ministry of Education web site 2016.)

Culturally the Ministry is reflective of communities and there are more often people who can assist in negotiating cultural mores. Equally there may be community members who can provide this resource additionally local ministers, kaumatua, people of standing may provide advice.

The resource, *Managing Emergencies and Traumatic Incidents*, provides a Nine-Step Checklist for those looking for guidance to an incident. It is also useful for highlighting the areas in which demands will emerge. Among those points are the following:

1. The need to gather the facts- recorded
2. The immediate actions required- contact with the Board Chair
3. The need to inform the Community- Staff, Students, School Community
4. Suitable responses to those injured
5. Media response
6. And Review of the process

Traumatic Incidents: Managing Student and Staff Wellbeing Guide for School Incident Management Team, March 2016 provides a comprehensive response to trauma. It is worth reading it, before needing it.

Implications

Grief will be shown in different ways. The unique facets of family, cultural and faith support systems will interweave with past experiences of loss and trauma. There are stages of grief that a family may work through; shock, disbelief, anger, numbness and acceptance. It may be that the principal also moves through these stages. It is normal to have such feelings which can however be tempered by the knowledge that grief will pass and will be replaced by acceptance of death and appropriate memorial of those lost. The principal is not immune to the loss and may experience deep grief but our position requires a controlled response in order to maintain stability of the school. If the grief is overwhelming for the principal then there is sense in seeking assistance that bolsters capacity.

Within the school setting the principal can foster an environment in which student questions are welcomed, accepted and responded to openly and without judgement. Students are confrontational, they will ask the questions that challenge. How someone grieves when someone they are close to has died will depend on things such as their, developmental stage and personality. While there is no constant reaction, there are commonalities such as shock and anger. Principals can be aware that not every child in a certain age group understands death in the same way or with the same feelings. All students' attitudes vary, just as their view of the world varies. We work in diverse communities, not just in terms of culture but also in terms of how people respond to traumatic situations. The role of the principal is to provide a point of reference; to steer a path forward when times are difficult. Children need to feel safe after something tragic occurs. Their world has been shaken; routine can assist in confirming that a whole child's world has not changed.

There may be students who require additional support. Being actively aware and having a plan to assist those students is useful. Informing the student's family of the support and actions taken is essential.

The principal has a role to ensure Staff are informed and able to present an appropriate response to students. Staff are the first point of contact with students and have a role

to provide a consistent message that acknowledges the death of a student and provides coping mechanisms. That consistent message can be constructed at the School Response Team level and disseminated through the school.

Parents of other students need to be informed of what information is being shared with their children. A letter home that includes brief facts, how the news of the death was shared with students, behaviours that might be expected from their children and ways they can support their child will be useful. It may be that a meeting is held for parents where counsellors can talk further about coping with grief.

The Media may be invasive. Preparation to ensure that the intended response is conveyed, is recommended. Being factual, acknowledging death but avoiding a causation (that is the role for the coroner) is a measured response. Having a spokesperson, being proactive and using the media to relay school and community supports is effective practice. There will be a swirl of contacts: Victim Support, Police, Ministry of Education and possibly input from funeral director that may require attention. Maintaining a record of such contacts, who was spoken to, the time and what was covered can be a useful reference.

Social media will be active and need to be addressed. After consultation with family it may be that a team member, assigned media response, will be able to release an appropriate message. There may be photos of the student on the School's social media, consideration that other media may lift these for their own use should be understood.

Students own postings, both private and public, are likely to create a frenzy of debate. If at all possible it would be a consideration to talk with the student community and reinforce the importance of facts, of respect for the student and their family and remind all, that what is posted on social media, whether seemingly "private" or not, could become unhelpful to the family.

The principal is a figure head. There is a requirement to be visible, to coordinate and be responsive to the situation. Careful thought is needed to construct an appropriate response that both honours the memory of the student and provides a framework for moving forward. It is also vital that the principal have support- from a team, peer or Ministry liaison. It is important for the principal to monitor their own coping skills and seek help as required. The principal can talk with someone independent; who can listen, reflect and understand, that someone may be a peer supervisor or peer principal.

Culture is a major influence on how people response to death. Responses are part of the fabric of who we are; the surroundings we were brought up in, the people of influence in our environment and the ideas, customs, and social behaviour of a particular society.

There is a need to be culturally appropriate. Where we are unsure advice can be sought from those that may know, this may be local representative, family or Ministry resource. It cannot be presumed that because a family is outwardly associated with a Maori, Pakeha or Pasifika culture that they will follow what might be felt to be the perceived ways of response. Each family is different, therefore a compassionate

response requires communication. If in doubt we would be wise to simply ask a representative of the family for advice.

Those with Māori heritage may cope with death through a process of tangihanga (Māori death ritual.) Tangihanga is a process in which whanau (the family) and community come together to grieve for the death of a loved one. It can be expected that a school will contribute as a member of the community. Representation by school members to visit the family and to go on to a marae may be appropriate. The school may be asked to be part of a tangi service. Knowing what to do on the marae is useful. Seeking a guide to behaviour on the marae, a kaumatua to advise is wise: having a speaker of Maori, knowing the protocols of being called onto the marae, having speakers and waiata ready, and knowing that you may be invited to attend an open coffin and speak with the deceased are components of some Maori funerals. Being flexible and adjusting to the local etiquette will assist.

Providing ongoing support and monitoring those close to the deceased is advised. Grieving is not an event, rather it is a process through which people move. Trauma teams from the Ministry, internal counsellors or local support agencies may provide additional capacity for the school response. Being alert to students' needs means maintaining communication to provide a response where it might be needed. Principals have many networks both formal and informal, using these to maintain a watch for other students' wellbeing is useful.

A death may give rise to consideration of a memorial of a longer lasting nature. Consideration of a memorial such as raising funds for a rescue service or research project provides a focus on activity that moves to a positive response, something which provides a focus for energy and which affirms the way forward. Other memorials include a scholarship fund, travel support or a plaque placed in the school grounds. Determining the type of memorial can occur in consultation with the family and as seen appropriate by the school community.

It may be that involvement of the school starts before the student is deceased as in the case of a terminal diagnosis. The School can act in accordance with the family's wishes in acknowledging and discussing imminent death. Underlying this action is the vital communication with the family- it may be with a family spokesperson. Speaking in unison with the family ensures a similar message is provided based on facts. A little said honestly, is better than too much, said in haste.

Involvement of the school in a service needs careful consideration. If students attend they are best supported by their parents. Parental support provides immediate and solid assistance by someone the student knows. With consideration to appropriate ages, it may be that students are asked by the family for involvement in a service. This is a recognition of the importance of schooling in the life of a student. Students undertaking readings, waiata or simply being in uniform may contribute to a service. Proactive support of those students involved is required. They can be gathered together and assisted with rehearsal as well as talked through the feelings they may experience and appropriate ways in which they can be supported; rather than one student undertaking a reading alone, they may be supported by a peer. It may be that after the service there is a short debrief other than what might occur as part of the

service, a gathering for kai that provides an opportunity for reflection. This could be for example a meeting with the principal who expresses thanks for their involvement. Part of a principal's role is setting the scene, preparing for events, planning, gathering resources and afterwards ensuring key personnel are supported and that discussions take place that reflect on how we can develop from the experience.

There are a number of response plans available on-line. "Managing emergencies and traumatic incidents- Nine-step checklist" available on-line is a useful Ministry of Education resource. Adopt the response which suits your need and community. A further example is also provided in Appendix 1.

Conclusions

As Pollard and Pollard (2004) note p8, planning and preparation before an event allows a clearer response to be made. Student death is not something we wish to encounter but talking with one principal he noted four occurrences in his career. Background reading and a filing of resources will make a response easier.

Verifying the facts so that accurate information is available, ensures a more accurate response. Be sure before you speak. Ensure that the information you have is accurate. Saying less is better than promoting inaccuracy.

Gathering a team shares ideas, assists in ensuring others and ensures you are supported. The principal acts as a spokesperson, a leader and a figurehead. Our team provides the base for our projection.

Be aware of legal aspects- it is not the role of schools to determine the reason for death (as with suicide) but rather to refer to the appropriate authorities and instead manage the response.

Death will bring out differing reactions. Be aware of the impact of grief and be proactive in acquiring professional response to intense reactions. We are firstly educators and have taken on roles of leadership. Our contact with many differing personalities is useful in giving us experience in dealing with their varying reactions. Being flexible is required.

Culture is important. Sensitivity of others and their beliefs will be integral to a sensitive lead. Take on the experience and wisdom of others. Simply being a presence, listening and contributing to the memories of the deceased may be all that is required. Families need to know that their child was known, valued and will be remembered.

Routine activities will assist in connecting people. The principal can lead that return to routine- acknowledging that the feelings of grief will continue alongside of moving life on.

The principal's modelling of appropriate grief responses and leadership will give a lead to others. Combining a principal's life experiences and experience of working with people will best equip principals when dealing with student death. Remembering that principals are part of a team; being supportive and being supported is integral to the team entity.

Findings

This sabbatical provided an opportunity for me to look into the ways in which schools and particularly principals can prepare and appropriately react when dealing with student death.

From my discussions, review of readings and questioning of colleagues, it is evident that principals need to be prepared- this is an eventuality that most of us will have to deal with. Being the professional while dealing with our own emotional state is a facet of the principal role. The principal has a major role in scaffolding the level and tone of response in a time of stress, being prepared will lead to a more effective response ensuring those involved are supported.

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Appendix 1

The Start of a Plan

Assemble team to respond- prepare communication

Ensure there is a current updated phone tree available

Access resources, Ministry – Trauma Incident Team 08008480326

Is there a need to contact Work Safe NZ- in the event of a death caused by work?

Contact with the school insurance company

Communicate as honestly as possible. Stick to the facts.

Inform: staff, board, students as required- is an up-to-date phone list kept?

Understand the responses that children will have

Liaise with family

Be visible

Update staff in an ongoing manner- talk about possible student responses and what behaviours might be expected. Allow staff the opportunity to talk about their own feelings. Discuss students of concern. Share resources.

Consider representation at the funeral

Memorial if appropriate

Ensure routine of school is maintained

Have:

Sample letters to parents

Ideas for helping a grieving child

Consider Staff Roles:

Use simple, clear words when talking about death

Listen and comfort

Put emotions into words

Talk about funerals and rituals- cultural appropriate

Help children to remember the person

Give time to heal

Provide accurate information to students

Facilitate classroom discussions that focus on assisting students to cope with loss

Dispel rumours

Answer questions without providing unnecessary details

Recognise differing religious or cultural beliefs and model an appropriate response

Identify students who may need counselling and refer to support personnel

Provide activities to reduce trauma; artwork, music and writing