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School Memorials: Should We? How Should We?

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Abstract: *The National Institute for Trauma and Loss in Children regularly receives calls from school personnel asking about in-school memorials, memorial services, and memorial practices in schools. Consensus indicates that these memorials are not appropriate when associated with suicide. Beyond this one area of agreement, there are a variety of opinions on memorials for those who have died. Practices are varied and do not always consider the long-term difficulties “in school” memorials can create for students as well as for administrators. This commentary discusses these possible long-term problems, examines the potential traumatic aspects of the ongoing reminders that school memorials can represent for some, and follows with recommendations regarding permanent memorials and memorial services practices.*

Several students die in an “active shooter” situation or as the result of a major car accident. The school erects a permanent memorial for these students. Months later, another student dies. Should this student be included in the permanent memorial or should another memorial be created? Within the next two years fourteen more students die. Some die by violent means, others by non-violent means. Some are well liked; others are not at all liked. What should you do regarding their inclusion in the memorial?

Many administrators at schools where permanent memorials have existed for a few years are now realizing that the immediate and long-term issues they present can be larger than administrative parameters, responsibilities, and resources of their schools. Just a few of the difficult challenges include, but are not limited to the following: student and staff deaths, the causes and circumstances of their deaths, variations in their status, variations in cultural views and customs, size and location of the memorial, politically and economically influential parents who want something different for their child, and resources needed to maintain these memorials.

The only nationwide consensus regarding establishing memorials and memorial services in schools following student suicides is that memorials are not appropriate. Most accept and understand that memorializing a student who takes his/her own life communicates to those predisposed to suicide, “If you want to get noticed, kill yourself” (www.suicidology.org - Media Guidelines for Reporting on Suicide).

Beyond suicide there is no consensus about memorials. In fact, there are a wide variety of opinions and practices. These range from creating garden memorials on school property to restricting memorials to a specific time frame, size of lettering on memorial plaques to varied yearbook practices. Some policies basically say that each situation will be studied at the time and decisions made by a cross section of school representatives.”

Healing garden memorials themselves are quite varied. At Rancho Cucamonga High in California (Torrejon, 2004), rose bushes and plaques identify deceased students. Santana High School in San Diego, California (Torrejon, 2004) created a healing garden to remember what happened and “the sanctity of human life.” Some gardens honor staff. The Ashland High School (Torrejon, 2004) garden has only one plaque to honor all the students. The school did not want to start listing names fearing it would leave students wondering who would be next. Another variation is the “remembrance garden” at Lewiston High School in Maine (Torrejon, 2004) which uses bricks to identify retired staff and others who wished to be remembered for various reasons.

Memorial web sites, often designed by students, are on the rise. More often student memorials are quickly created at student lockers, parking spaces, and other areas on school property. Some districts allow memorial plaques but determine the size of the plaque as well as the size of lettering on it. There are different practices related to yearbooks; some allow poems, student letters and photos while others have a memorial page listing no more than the names of those who died. Still other schools identify the foundations that can receive

memorial donations or those materials that can be purchased with donations in memory of the deceased. Recently, students are coming to school wearing T-shirts with their peer's picture and often a message on the back.

There is a general consensus that memorials provide an avenue for healing, a place to visit (National Association for School Counseling, 2004, www.naspoline.org/neatmemorials). People can come together to support one another as well express their feelings in a supportive environment. Given the acceptance that memorials serve a beneficial purpose for most, the question still remains, "Do memorials belong in schools?"

Are School Memorials Appropriate?

Should memorials, other than for suicide, be created within schools? And if so, what guidelines should be considered? To partially answer these questions it is necessary to understand the nature of trauma and, specifically, issues of exposure, as both influence guidelines for memorials.

Any situation that results in a desire to create a memorial is likely to be traumatizing for some students as well as staff (Steele & Raider, 2001). Abundant research describes the many child and adolescent manifestations of trauma (Pynoos, 1988, van der Kolk, 1996). The area of concern associated with memorials is that which deals with exposure and arousal, also referred to as "activation."

Trauma is a state of terror in which victims feel unsafe and powerless to do anything about their situation (Steele & Raider, 2001). Trauma is also accompanied by worry; often worry about "it" happening again and "will I be next?" Arousal is a psycho-physiological and neurological state of readiness for the "next time." Physical proximity to the actual location of the tragedy and or to visual reminders activate the arousal response (van der kolk, 1996; Rothchild, 2000). Memorials, although beneficial for many, are also activating for many, especially those already vulnerable due to their own personal trauma experiences. This constitutes a significant number of students in any facility.

Memorials can be activating because of the simple fact that they provide an ongoing visual reminder of what happened. Arousal can also lead to a decrease in cognitive function, the ability to attend, focus, retain and recall, and the ability to process information-- primary learning functions. Furthermore, prolonged arousal also leads to aggressive, assaultive behaviors. From this perspective memorials in the school or on school property do pose a risk for many simply because in this "closed" environment it becomes almost impossible for students to avoid the physical reminders. There is no choice. Memorials need to be an opportunity of choice, as we all grieve differently. For some, it is healthier not to be reminded.

The concept of "exposure" or physical proximity to reminders is supported by many years of research, The memorials need to be moved out of the school environment into the community where they can either be easily accessed by those who need their comfort and benefits or easily avoided by those who are activated by the "reminders." Community memorials provide the same benefits as school memorials while avoiding the many conflicts and challenges created when erected in closed environments such as schools.

Long-Term Complications

Where will the resources come from to maintain the memorial, especially the larger memorials, like gardens? How large will the memorials be allowed to grow? In reality, many deaths can occur within a few years. From 1996 through 2003, Slippery Rock High School in the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania area experienced 23 tragic student deaths (Clark & Woodall, 2004). The numbers can grow quite rapidly. Do you really want students to be reminded daily of how many have died? What if the memorial or parts of that memorial are destroyed? Not all students will react favorably to memorials created for an individual student and vandalism can occur. Once the practice of creating a permanent memorial begins, how will the school respond to the politically and economically influential parents in the community who insist that their child be given a separate memorial? Are schools prepared to respond to the friends and families of students with much less status or those who have been disruptive students? Sometimes people will question the value of including a "less desirable" student to the memorial. Who is going to make the value judgment as to who is included and who is excluded? Should exceptions be made for different students or different situations? School boards do fluctuate and make exceptions to the rules. (see www.splc.org/report , Student Press Law Center.)

Recommendations

If memorials can be a beneficial healing experience for some, while an activating experience for others, what is recommended? Many students do need that opportunity to express themselves, feel connected to others, and to let others know the value their friend brought to their lives. However, others need not be reminded. We each need to grieve in our own way, to do what is most helpful for us individually.

Based upon the knowledge of traumatic exposure as well as the complexity of school systems and school populations, it is recommended that schools do not create permanent memorials of any kind, but do in fact, look to the larger community to make the memorial a community memorial. Community memorials, such as healing gardens, mosaic tile walkways and walls, sculptured works created to represent the spirit of the deceased or the value of life, certainly are beneficial for many. Being in the community, however, the choice to visit or avoid is retained. Community memorials allow for not just students to be remembered, but staff, families and all members of that community who suffered a tragic or untimely death, as well as those who made noteworthy contributions.

Guidelines

Following are several guidelines based upon what is known about exposure to reminders. These practices can help those who are grieving and fulfill their need to “do something” to express themselves to others.

• Memorials Can Be Temporary

A temporary memorial is one that can provide students the opportunity to express themselves and to give testimony to their peers, as well as learn how to also direct their generosity to surviving family members. The opportunity to participate in temporary activities and projects can help them come to accept the finality of their loss. Temporary memorials are very important to healing and do not create the significant problems and challenges of permanent memorials in schools. An initial memorial site where students and staff can place flowers, poems, pictures, and teddy bears, can be located in an area where those who wish not to be reminded can easily avoid that location, while others have easy access. However, it is to be temporary. A natural time to remove the materials is often following the funeral, but do so in a formal way that leads to the presentation of all these symbols of caring to the family. This provides students the opportunity to experience the tremendous help they can be to grieving family members. This is a wonderful “teachable moment” and completes the need most of us have to feel as if we have done something helpful and meaningful.

• T-Shirts Picturing the Deceased

T-Shirts with a picture of the deceased student or students is a memorial itself, but one that also needs to be time limited. T-shirts are another way for students to express themselves, but because they are visible to many, some may become activated by this visual. Students wearing memorial T-shirts will need help in channeling their need to be visible and publicly associated with the deceased student. Involving these students in activities that fulfill this need, helps to diminishing the need to wear the T-shirt. Students can write notes and cards to family members for formal presentation or, better yet, be given the opportunity to meet with the family to directly communicate their thoughts and feelings to the family. They can help establish a drive to raise monies for the school foundation in memory of their friend. Depending upon the nature of the death they could organize efforts to develop recommendations related to prevention of such deaths. They could be invited by the crisis team of that school district to contribute their suggestions as to what was or would be more helpful should such a situation happen in the future. However, at some point the wearing of t-shirts, which is not part of the dress code for many schools, must end. It will be much easier if students have been involved in other related activities as well as educated to be sensitive to the way their tribute can be difficult for others. This too is a teachable moment regarding consideration for others.

• The Need to Do Something

In the numerous articles about memorials posted on the Internet, not one discusses the conflict between staff and students that can be created in the first few weeks after a death, especially when administrators face the difficult challenge of saying “no” to specific behaviors and desires of students. Problems most frequently emerge when the student’s need to do something is not channeled into activities that become meaningful for family survivors, when students are not participants in determining how best to show support during memorial services. Students who continue to challenge school policy regarding memorials often have other personal issues triggered by the death of their friend. Some may need further intervention. Maintaining a dialogue and attempts to reach agreeable solutions becomes another “teachable opportunity” to develop supportive relationships with these students. Providing a range of activities for students retains their need for choice provides experiences they may not otherwise have been able to provide themselves, and communicates

administrative/system support of their need to grieve and to somehow find a way to manage the wide range of emotions they experience.

• **School Newspapers**

School newspapers can be considered a temporary memorial. Students will expect to read about that student(s), what happened and what others have to say about the student and, in some cases, the circumstances of the death. We recommend that the guidelines established by the American Association of Suicidology regarding the reporting of a suicide be followed (www.suicidology.org). These guidelines are based upon well-documented research related to contagion and the modeling of that suicide act in order to be also publicly acknowledged. This is a difficult task for editors who must find a balance between what is helpful and what becomes a glorification. Highlighting the values the student communicated or lived by, their favorite activities and songs, but most importantly why they will be missed, constitute responsible, helpful information for those who are closest to the student. After articles in the student newspaper have been published, bring students together to discuss their thoughts, their responses, what they liked or did not like about what they read. Again, involving the students helps to defuse otherwise intense reactions. Students certainly could be asked to submit their thoughts in writing to the newspaper staff before and after, as students often identify life issues that are important, do have merit and deserve consideration.

• **School Foundations**

We recommend schools establish a school-based foundation that families and students can contribute to for the purpose of funding specialized programs, services, in-service trainings, materials, and equipment. Attention therefore, is not on any one single family, student, or staff person. Foundation contributors can be listed in the yearbook and school newsletters. Materials, services, programs, etc. that are made possible through this funding can be acknowledged with, "This equipment was made possible from the families, businesses, and benefactors in our community."

Memorial Services

Again, it is important to involve students in the planning of memorial services when such services allow for student participation. Some students will not want to attend services. They need to be provided alternative activities. Use symbols of life that deliver positive messages and hope. Music, balloons, and candles can all be effective in focusing on our ability and strength to survive painful experiences. It is recommended that memorial services are not conducted in the school but again, at a community facility such as a church. In some communities the school gym or auditorium is the only facility large enough to hold a large group. Should the decision be made to use the school, schools should not allow media coverage. Administrators have no control over what reporters decide to communicate. Most administrators who have allowed the media to attend have regretted it. Speeches, testimonials, music, poems, and other performances, need to be previewed and approved. This necessitates that several staff and crisis team members work with the students as they prepare. Conflict can arise regarding the appropriateness of some of their material, and what they wish to do. It must be brought to their attention that their message could have an impact on the larger student population.

Following any memorial service students need to have the opportunity to talk about their thoughts and reactions one more time. This is also a time for crisis team members to normalize their reactions and talk a bit about what life will be like without their best friend. Let them know healing will take time and, should they need to just sit and talk in the future, team members will be available. Above all, those students closest to the deceased will need permission to laugh and enjoy themselves in the weeks and months to come without guilt, acknowledging that real friends want the best for one another.

Conclusion

There are a number of articles written about the benefits of a community memorial. The Oklahoma Memorial is somber yet a beautiful testimony to those who were killed in the bombing of the Federal Building. It certainly helps families to give some meaning to the senseless death of their loved ones. Memorials in the community simply do not present the problems such memorials in closed environments, like schools, present. When a student is allowed to speak to other students or at a school assembly problems can arise because of the diverse yet closed assembly. When that same student presents the same message in a community setting open to others to attend, the message will be heard and reacted to quite differently.

Unfortunately, there is no long-term research on the impact permanent school memorials have on its

population, on its constantly changing population. However, the anecdotal information from those who have dealt with problems they never anticipated when that permanent memorial was approved does, and should, cause concern. We know that because of the disturbing effects of exposure to ongoing reminders that rethinking permanent memorials in schools is necessary.

Memorials can be very beneficial, but for some they can be very activating. Anyone who needs to, should be allowed to easily avoid the unwanted memories and fears memorials can trigger. Most school memorials today are impossible to easily avoid. In contrast, community memorials are much easier to avoid. Temporary memorials are helpful and appropriate but must be time-limited and removed from the school. Students must be involved in the planning of memorial services and activities and ultimately these students and their activities need to be directed at supporting the family of the deceased student. The nature of the death can be the beginning of efforts and campaigns to prevent similar deaths. Moments of silence are appropriate and, when death impacts a large part of the student body, a brief reminder and moment of silence on the anniversary of that death is appropriate.

Editor's note: Should you have specific questions suggestions, guidelines that work for you, please call, email, or write the National Institute for Trauma and Loss in Children. Since 1990, the National Institute has trained well over 60,000 educators and members of crisis teams in schools across the country and have received feedback of hundreds of schools and thousands of school personnel who have struggled with the challenges that permanent memorials can create. Obviously, in an increasingly diverse world guidelines must remain flexible, yet preventative of further traumatization. Thoughts, information you pass on to the National Institute will be passed on to others by regularly updating this article. TLC can be contacted toll-free at 877-306-5256 or by email at steele@tlcinst.org

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