The Death of a Teacher

The Strategies For Coping With Its Impact on Staff and Students

by: Beth J. Evans

An art teacher in an elementary school dies suddenly in a car accident; a sixth-grade teacher dies in the middle of the school year after a five month battle with cancer and his own child is a student in the school's second grade.

The sudden or anticipated death of a teacher is a traumatic event that calls for the best coping skills of all in order to help both students and staff personnel overcome this tragedy. A school system, confronted with such a loss has the responsibility to work actively to help the school family acknowledge, understand, accept and pull through this crisis, as painful as it may be. There are many strategies that can be implemented to help students and teachers to respond in ways that are psychologically sound and educationally enriching.

A teacher is a very significant person in the lives of children. Therefore, the death of a teacher is a major stressful event for students. Gilbert Kliman says that a teacher's absence is even more meaningful than a child's and it is especially important to discuss the child's fantasies as well as the real reasons why the teacher is not present. "A teacher is so important to each child that it would be peculiar not to acknowledge the fact of his or her absence."

In addition, the death of a teacher is keenly felt among the teachers and other staff members because of the professional and social bonds that develop over time. These intense feelings can interfere with each teacher's ability to be emotionally available to help their students deal with the tragedy. Being aware of these two factors will provide us with the insight needed and serve as a basis for understanding the necessary steps if we are to help the adults as well as the students.

When the death of a teacher is expected, because of terminal illness such as cancer, or a devastating car accident that severely injures a teacher, it provides us with the opportunity to start doing some of the work of anticipatory mourning. A first step is the acknowledgement that someone we care about is going to die and to accept that it is painful, sad, and uncomfortable. When the death is sudden, the luxury of time does not exist, making it even more imperative to meet immediately with the staff so the work of mourning can begin for staff and then students.

The impending death or sudden death of a teacher signifies major changes for the students and can result in disbelief, panic, and disorganization. At the same time, the teaching staff is feeling bereft and at a loss about how to go on. The colleague with whom one team taught, planned school trips, or looked to for creative ideas in planning assembly programs is no longer there.

In order to handle all these thoughts and to understand that all are entitled to their feelings, and to reach a certain level of acceptance of their feelings, I would call the staff together under the guidance of a crisis intervention consultant.

A plan should be made so the staff can quickly convene in an emergency situation. It is probably easiest to use the emergency telephone chain that is in effect for school closings. The meeting should be called before the children arrive at school, which may mean requesting staff to meet in the evening or to report to school an hour earlier. If necessary, the opening of school can be delayed by an hour or two so teachers can meet with psychologists, counselors, and clergy members. A primary goal of this meeting is to form a support group for school personnel. A second goal should be helping teachers acknowledge the reality to offset the denial that is so frequently used as a defense against the painful reality. An important rule that should be established at this meeting is an insistence on telling the truth to all adults and children so distortion is prevented. A third goal is to assist teachers in what and how to tell their students about the death.

At this first meeting, I would share whatever information is available. It is most important for the staff to have accurate information. When truth is shared, trust and sincerity are maintained among colleagues. In addition, if teachers are to help each other and the students, they need to begin to accept the disheartening news. They must have time to deal with their own denial, which is an emotional shock absorber, as well as other feelings that are present. These may include anger, confusion, guilt, anxiety, and sadness. For some teachers, previous losses or unresolved conflicts may resurface making it very important for the staff to have opportunities to ask questions as well as express their rage, cry, reminisce, and support one another. It is crucial that the school community not withdraw emotionally from each other at this time; the strength to cope will come from being available to help and support each other. The work of mourning is more difficult to do in isolation.

A high priority is to identify students who can be considered to be at high risk. These may include youngsters who had a very close identification or relationship with the deceased teacher, bereaved children who have recently lost a significant person in their life, children who themselves are terminally or seriously ill, or students who have been identified to have serious emotional problems. It is necessary to note the vulnerability of those students who did not get along with or had an actual dislike for the deceased teacher. Those classes that have been identified as having designated high risk students should have a support personnel person present in the class, or at least available, for the first few days following the death. If necessary, additional support personnel should be temporarily deployed from other schools in the district to enable the school to provide additional emotional support to teachers and students.

The students in the teacher's present class need very careful attention. Frequently the students of the teacher's previous classes are forgotten. It is crucial to notify them, identify those who may be at high risk, and to give all the past students an opportunity to become involved in some mourning activities. It is equally important to be tuned into those teachers who were extremely close to the deceased teacher, and who can benefit from some additional support in dealing with their feelings and to help them do the grief work with their own classes.

The school staff (as major caregivers) falls into the category of what Ann Kliman calls the "hidden victims." This can put teachers at a special disadvantage because they rarely are aware they are being victimized and therefore expect themselves to remain professional and competent at all times for it is deemed unprofessional to be angry or show one's innermost feelings. Furthermore, it needs to be pointed out that when a colleague dies the staff are double victims, for they are also indirect victims as are their students. Indirect victims are those associates and students of the deceased and are subject to the "guilt of the survivor" which manifests itself in new physical and psychosomatic illnesses and in accidents at home and at school. The staff must be made aware of these vulnerabilities and know that as hidden and indirect victims they are also victimized by this death. Knowing this will prevent burnout and improve their ability to help their students. The staff needs guidance to ensure they do not fall into the trap of doing for the victims but rather facilitate the victims' abilities to do for themselves.

It is important to note there will be teachers as well as children who will be out-of-phase with one another. For a variety of reasons some teachers will be more ready to deal with the crisis, while others will feel uncomfortable or unprepared. It is much more beneficial to be respectful and nonjudgmental in accepting these differences among staff members and have another person, a teacher or staff psychologist, step in and work with the class.

The meeting can be used to provide some practical teaching suggestions for helping the students cope with this disorganized event. Because everyone feels so out of control after a teacher's death, it becomes that much more important to cope by taking some positive, constructive action. It is important to tell the students as soon as possible about the death. Not doing so only provides fertile time for rumors and frightening fantasies to take over.

It should be explained to the teachers there are four basic tasks that need to be accomplished in order for children to do the work of mourning. Those tasks are understanding, grieving, commemorating, and then having permission to go on living. On the day the death is first known, it is sufficient to inform the children about the teacher's death and help them understand what death means, so they can begin to grieve. A simple, honest explanation in language that children understand is best. Not knowing but sensing that something is amiss, only heightens the children's anxiety.

Little children see death as an abandonment. They perceive death as a rejection and need help in understanding that death was not meant as a willful desertion on the part of the dying person. They need to know there are other adults that are here to help take care of them, love them, and teach them. For kindergarten and first grade children,

death is also seen as being reversible. Therefore the teaching staff needs to expect that these students will accept the death of a teacher on Monday and yet still expect the teacher to return in time for their Christmas party. It takes patience to reiterate many times that the teacher is dead and will unfortunately not be here any more.

Children up to the age of nine believe that death is a punishment for all the bad things they said, thought, wished, or did. This concept of "magical thinking" leaves them vulnerable to feeling guilty and responsible for a death.

It is an area in which educators must acknowledge and be prepared to help. It is very possible there will be students who feel guilty for their teacher's death. In talking with the class a teacher must be alert for signs of guilt and figure out what their perceived reasons are so students may be helped to understand that no child is powerful enough to cause another person's death by wish, dream, or thought. Very frequently a child will feel responsible for his teacher's death because he disobeyed the teacher, argued with him, or disappointed him by not doing well on a test. It is also age-appropriate for these children to be very interested in the physical aspects of death and therefore teachers can expect many questions on this topic.

Teachers should be aware of the following universal concerns children have following a death: 1) Did I do anything to cause the death? 2) Can I die of the same thing? 3) Who is going to be my teacher and will I like this teacher? Appropriate answers for each grade level should be discussed at this meeting.

There are two ways to break the news to a class. One is to elicit from the children what has happened since class last met. The other is for the teacher to gather the children around and start off by giving some basic facts such as: "I have some very sad news to share with you. You all know that Mr. Smith was very ill with cancer. The doctors tried everything to make him better, but unfortunately they were unable to save him. Last night Mr. Smith died at home. I'm very sad, angry, and upset. It's hard for me to believe that he will never be here again to teach fifth-graders." Then it's time to listen to what the children have to say and the questions they want answered. Let the students talk about this teacher and share other personal experiences the children may have had with death. I urge teachers to help their students express their sadness, ask questions, and confront their feelings, instead of concealing any confusion or anxiety. Let them know it's OK if they feel scared or sad. This is just the beginning of the discussion, the children will need other changes to talk about death. Remembering and talking may be painful and difficult but this is also healing.

To achieve the goal of successful mourning, the staff must help children accept the reality of the loss and experience the pain of grief. They must adjust to the class and school environment in which the person has died and is missing, and withdraw the emotional energy connected to the deceased teacher, and reinvest it in another relationship.

One way to begin the task of mourning is to help the children move from a passive, helpless position to one of active coping. This means using techniques that involve the students in positive and constructive activities of mourning. One such activity is gathering

the students in a circle and letting each student share one thought about the teacher as it is written on the blackboard. Each child, because this is a sensitive and personal topic, has the right to pass. These thoughts may then be typed up on the computer, published in the school newspaper, or used as a basis for a bulletin board. Young children can draw pictures that express their feelings, or together make an experience chart about the teacher. Older children can learn how to write a sympathy note to the family. A very meaningful activity and one that will be cherished by the bereaved class is to have other classes write sympathy notes or send them a collection of drawings. It is important, at least at the beginning, to include activities that involve the whole class, so that a feeling of togetherness and cohesiveness is maintained. This will prevent the hysteria that sometimes starts when youngsters are allowed to leave the room, roam the halls, and go in small groups to cry in the restroom.

Teachers should be encouraged by administrators to forgo the regular lesson plans. Instead, teaching for the week should be adapted to meet the needs presented by the disorganizing problem by organizing it into the curriculum. For example, science for the week may focus on the life cycle of living things, math may include lessons on life expectancy rates of Americans in the 1980's with children making different types of graphs to illustrate this. These types of lessons will have a dual purpose: they will enable children to keep learning in a positive manner while reassuring them that most children will live well into adulthood. Reading lessons can be centered on books about death, both fiction and non-fiction.

Vocabulary can include such works as casket and obituary. Another constructive activity is making a batch of cookies that can be sent to the bereaved family. These types of activities teach our students how to cope in a caring way that will serve as appropriate models throughout their lives.

I would arrange to have the staff meet informally during the lunch periods to see how everyone is doing. You can expect everyone to be emotionally and physically drained by the end of the day. However, it may be helpful to meet with the staff again to exchange ideas, get suggestions on how to proceed, and share new information concerning funeral arrangements.

One major concern that needs to be addressed by the staff is attending the funeral. A funeral is an opportunity for everyone, including children, to say good-bye and to accept the finality of death. Attending a funeral, wake, or shiva helps to confirm that which is hard to believe, a teacher is dead. However, in order for children to attend any of the funeral rites, they must be prepared in advance and told exactly what will happen and what they will see. Teachers can do this in the classroom. Children should neither be forced to attend nor prevented from attending the funeral. Even if the bereaved class decides to attend as a group, I would recommend that children have parental permission and an adult to accompany them. Time should be allowed afterwards for the students to talk about what happened at the funeral. This will be beneficial for the students who did attend as well as those who did not have the opportunity to participate in the funeral rites. If the funeral is during the school day, staff and administrators should decide which teachers will attend so that coverage is adequate for those students remaining in school.

Subsequent meetings should follow. These may be formal or informal and should include suggestions for additional ideas on teaching about death, sharing and successful strategies that were effective with their classes, and techniques for reminiscing about the deceased teachers. Remembering the good and the bad of the deceased teacher is healthy and allows for positive growth.

A special follow-up meeting should be held for those teachers with students who have been identified as high risk to see how they are functioning and to evaluate if additional professional intervention is needed.

Suggestions for commemorating the teacher's life should be discussed with the staff and with the individual classes. These may include activities for the entire school as well as activities for each class. Appropriate and meaningful ways of commemoration include establishing a library collection in memory of the teacher with funds raised from cake sales or a school raffle, dedicating the winter concert to the teacher, or holding a school assembly with poems, musical selections and short speeches offered by students, staff and administration. It is of utmost importance that any memorial include the input and participation of the students. Too often these memorials include everyone except the population to whom the teacher had the most influence--the students.

It is also important to acknowledge the significant of the first anniversary date of the teacher's death. This is an emotionally difficult time. Children and staff may find it difficult to concentrate and function on this day. However this day also affords the school community a chance to reminisce again as well as have some structured activity. This may be an opportune time to hold an assembly program in which an award is presented to a student who best represents a quality of the deceased teacher.

Acknowledging the death of a teacher is extremely difficult for a staff to do with its students. It involves the commitment of staff and administration to know the importance of confronting and accepting the death as well as a willingness to teach about death. As facilitators of the mourning process, we can provide opportunities for our students to make choices and responses, when confronted with a situational crisis, that are psychologically healthy and that will strengthen them emotionally, socially, and intellectually.

To summarize, the following steps for helping staff deal with the death of a teacher are:

* Bring the entire school staff together before the start of the school day to inform the staff and to discuss strategies to use with the students in dealing with the crisis.

* Tell the students as soon as possible so teachers can help children do the work of mourning.

* Acknowledge that the students are entitled to all of their feelings.

* Provide opportunities for staff to model appropriate reactions so students will feel comfortable talking about their feelings.

* Use the correct words for death, not euphemisms that confuse or scare them.

* Expect behavioral changes in students.

* Help children move from a passive, helpless position to one of active coping.

* Structure the disorganizing event by incorporating it into the curriculum with meaningful activities.

* Identify high risk children and have a plan to offer additional support services to these children.

* Have students and staff plan a memorial activity.

Suggested Books

ADULTS:

Evans, Beth J., "The Death of a Classmate: A Teacher's Experience Dealing with Tragedy in the Classroom," Journal of School Health, (52) 1982.

Fox, Sandra S., Good Grief: Helping Groups of Children When a Friend Dies. Boston: The New England Association for the Education of Young Children, 1985.

Gaffney, Donna A., The Seasons of Grief Helping Your Children Grow Through Loss. New York: New American Library, 1988.

Kliman, Ann S., Crisis: Psychological First Aid for Growth and Recovery. New York: Jason Aronson, 1986.

Kliman, Gilbert., Psychological Emergencies in Childhood. New York: Grune & Stratton, 1968.

Schaefer, Dan and C. Lyons., How Do We Tell the Children? New York: Newmarket Press, 1986.

CHILDREN:

Clifton, Lucille., Everett Anderson's Goodbye. New York: Henry Hold, 1983.

Gould, Deborah., Grandpa's Slide Show. New York: Lothrop, Lee and Shephard, 1987.

Krementz, Jill., How It Feels When A Parent Dies. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983.

LeShan, Eda., Learning to Say Good-Bye. New York: MacMillan, 1976.

Simon, Nora., The Saddest Time. Niles, Illinois: Albert Whitman & Company, 1986.

Stein, Sara B., About Dying. New York: Walker and Company, 1974

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P. O. Box 1997/MS# 603
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