

## Leadership Through a School Tragedy: A Case Study (Part 2 - The Next Two Years)

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### Abstract

*Part Two of the present study continues an investigation of a school principal's leadership through a crisis in a New Zealand school where six Year-12 students and a teacher lost their lives in a river canyoning tragedy; the students were attending an outdoor education camp in the central North Island. There is a long aftermath to a tragedy, and the ongoing demands on the leader require considerable physical, mental and emotional energy. Part 2 covers the principal's leadership concerning the tragedy in the two years following the event. Part 2 covers: support for the school; support for grieving students, staff and families; tributes and memorials; issues of safety; and looking after the leader. Part 2 should be read in association with Part 1 (which covered, essentially, the first week of the tragedy). Background material for Part 2, and an outline of the Method, are contained in Part 1.*

**Keywords:** leadership, school, tragedy, crisis, psychosocial, grief

### Introduction

#### Children in traumatic events

Traumatic events involving a school can occur on-campus or away from the school itself. In both cases, the crisis may involve loss and trauma with the potential to impact on students, their families, and staff alike.

Heath, Nickerson, Annandale, Kemple, and Dean (2009) assert that immediately following a disaster, there is a need for children to be reunited with their families and caregivers. While students can be assisted individually and in groups in a school environment, when death

occurs the family is considered to be their primary social environment and support; this is particularly the case for younger aged children (Rowling & Holland, 2000).

Previous studies have shown that within the family, parents' reactions to a disaster predict their children's behaviours, thoughts and feelings (e.g., Deering, 2000; Huziff & Ronan, 1999). Although children's vulnerability to trauma can be increased in the presence of negative parental responding, children's vulnerability to deleterious psychological effects is reduced where parents or other significant adults convey effective coping strategies to children, combined with warmth, consistency and support for the children (Ronan & Johnston, 2005). Conversely, where there are symptoms of trauma or distress in parents or caregivers, these can be magnified in children in their care (Pine & Cohen, 2002). There may also be instances where parents avoid discussing a traumatic event with their children because of their own distress, or fear that talking about the event may distress their children, believing that such avoidance may protect the children (Dyregrov & Yule, 2006). In such instances, children are denied an opportunity to discuss their feelings, to have their feelings acknowledged and validated, and to receive assistance where required.

Following a traumatic event, "most children are able to negotiate the grieving process without lasting scars" (Cohen & Mannarino, 2011, p. 117). However, where trauma symptoms intrude on the child's grieving process, a condition known as Childhood Traumatic Grief (CTG) may develop. Cohen and Mannarino state that teachers can help grieving students who are not coping by recognising CTG symptoms in children; CTG symptoms can include, for example, re-experiencing, avoidance, hyperarousal, learning-problems, or emotional, behavioural or cognitive difficulties. As some of these symptoms can be observed in children who are not experiencing CTG, it is important that educators refer children about whom they have concerns, to mental health practitioners so the children can be professionally assessed in the first instance.

Children experiencing CTG usually benefit from a trauma-focussed intervention, which assists the children to learn skills that can help them regulate their

feelings, thoughts and behaviours associated with their loss (Cohen & Mannarino, 2011). Children who are receiving professional assistance for traumatic grief can also be supported by educators: Heath et al. (2009) state that teachers can learn ways to support grieving children through the necessary collaboration with the CTG therapists and the parents of children receiving therapy. Such collaboration will assist teachers to provide assistance that coincides with the strategies and messages that the child is receiving in therapy and at home. Other grieving children may also benefit from learning such strategies. For example, all children can learn and practise relaxation exercises, and they can learn and practise skills for affective and cognitive coping.

Traumatised children, whether or not they are engaged in a CTG intervention, are likely to benefit where educators help the children understand that their feelings of shock or loss are normal. Heath et al. (2009) state that children can be encouraged to express their thoughts and feelings, either verbally or in drawing or play. These authors go on to state that adults should also respect a child's silence, and reassure the child that the adult is there to help him or her when and if the child needs or wants assistance.

In the school environment, Litz, Gray, Bryant, and Adler (2002) assert that social support is critical to positive adjustment, and that children need to be linked to their peers and teachers in structured activities that encourage and strengthen social support connections. Schools can also connect with community groups that work with and support members of their groups that may be represented within the school (Smith-Adcock, Daniels, Lee, Villalba, & Indelicato, 2006). Heath et al. (2009) suggest that encouraging Parent Teacher Associations to become active in the crisis management of the school can serve to unify the school, parents, and the community. Heath et al. go on to suggest that paraprofessionals, students, and volunteers can be invited into the school to help children and families with special needs.

Rowling and Holland (2000) state that peers and adults in the school are important sources of support for students, particularly if a death involves the school community. Rowling and Holland suggest that children can be prepared for managing traumatic incidents through the school having in place curriculum content concerning grief, and a supportive social and cultural environment in the school that acknowledges the

normality of grief experiences as being part of life events. For the majority of children, naturally occurring social support will be sufficient for the children to make positive adjustments following a traumatic experience (Barenbaum, Ruchkin, & Schwab-Stone, 2004). For adolescents in particular, discussion among peers is a normal aspect of their social behaviour. Thus it is likely that this age group would be disposed to discussing issues relating to a traumatic experience; teachers, who are typically not trained in traumatic grief counselling, can assist students through empowering social support systems following a disaster (Litz et al., 2002).

For educators to provide optimal support for children and their families, particularly after a traumatic death, cultural views and practices of the children and families should be understood, particularly values and practices around mourning (Cohen & Mannarino, 2011). By asking families about their cultural values, it is likely that educators can increase further understanding and trust with those families. For continued support, children will benefit from being connected back into the cultural, family, and spiritual practices that supported them before the traumatic event (Barenbaum et al., 2004). A school may benefit from strengthened relationships with faith leaders in the community, who typically know the community's histories and strengths, and the availability of resources (Heath et al., 2009). In the first instance, faith leaders may mobilise physical assistance for the school (e.g., clean-ups or fundraising), and following the immediate crisis faith leaders can become part of crisis management teams in the school, encouraging families from their congregation to participate in services and prayer on or off-campus, and offering other assistance as deemed appropriate by the school (Heath et al.)

### **Schools in traumatic events**

The question arises of how a school might assist children following a disaster. A study following the catastrophic event of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 (Barrett, Ausbrooks, & Martinez-Cosio, 2008) demonstrated the potential for teachers to assist traumatised children. The study of children's adjustment to life following their evacuation from New Orleans found that children turned to staff in their new schools to help them cope with the aftermath of this extraordinary event. Of special interest was the finding that children who coped most effectively with the loss of their homes and social networks, and the subsequent relocation to a previously unknown environment, were the children who had developed a positive relationship with teachers in their new school.

A further study (United States Dept of Education, 2006) highlights some effective strategies for assisting students when a school experiences multiple deaths. Prior to 2006, seven middle school (Grades 6-8) students from the same school were killed in a car accident in the southern USA. Immediately, a crisis team was established at the school to: (1) dispel rumours about the accident; (2) help the school respond to enquiries from families and media; (3) assist teachers and families with tools and resources to help them support the children; (4) provide short-term counselling, and assistance to identify students in need of further counselling; (5) coordinate volunteers; and (6) help teachers restore a normal learning environment. In 2006, the US Department of Education's Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools Technical Assistance (REMS TA) Center reviewed the school's response to the tragedy, and from lessons learnt, suggested that schools: develop a school crisis handbook for future use in emergencies; conduct emergency management training for the trainers (i.e., for selected staff and students); develop memoranda of understanding that include procedural guidelines for communicating with and directing teams of crisis personnel and volunteers; establish procedures for communicating with families, school staff, and the media, and audit these on a yearly basis; organise support for school staff and the crisis team while they are responding to the crisis; and decide on how the school might respond to memorials and anniversaries. Importantly, in relation to managing the crisis, REMS TA suggests that a record of processes, timelines, activities, and student-needs be kept throughout, as such records can be used to improve future procedures and protocols.

In terms of the leader and crisis teams being supported in various stages of the crisis, leaders take control of the situation from the beginning, and continue their role through the long aftermath that follows a major event. Thus, during the crisis, constant demands on, and constant availability, of a leader of an organisation can come at a cost of harming the leader (Fein & Isaacson, 2009). In this respect, Fein and Isaacson suggest that leaders dealing with a crisis could, themselves, benefit from support in the days immediately following a crisis: support may be in the form of, for example, working with a crisis mentor, or through meeting regularly with a counsellor experienced in crisis impact, or by taking a certain amount of time away from the site on a regular basis. In the long aftermath of a crisis event, similar ongoing support can be required for the leader as he

or she attends to requirements arising from the event in the following months, or years, to come (e.g., attending to legal and government enquiries; liaising with affected people who are linked to the organisation); attending to demands arising from the crisis are likely to continue for the leader while, generally, he or she conducts other leadership responsibilities concomitant with their position. Consistent with the need for a leader to be supported when handling a crisis, members of support teams are also likely to require similar types of support, especially in the initial stages when there are frequently constant demands on this group for information, action, reaction, decisions, and energy. Further, in crisis situations, there may be a particular need for support where the leader or members of the support team are personally affected by the crisis because of their own personal circumstances or losses (Cacciatore, Carlson, Michaelis, Klimek, & Steffan 2011).

Where there is loss of life among students or teachers, how can schools respect and celebrate the lives of those people? Jimerson and Miller (2008) suggest that writing-activities or compiling scrapbooks can assist students to "concretize" memories and experiences that are personal or shared. Permanent memorials can also assist the children and staff in their coping with loss. For example, Jimerson and Miller suggest that the choice of the particular type of memorial (e.g. planting trees as a living memorial) can be a permanent tribute to the deceased person(s), as a reminder of the deceased's value and legacy to the school, to their families, and to the community.

Part 2 of the present study covers: support for the school; support for grieving students and families, tributes and memorials; issues of safety; and looking after the leader.

## Results and Discussion

### Support for the school

Essential professional and social support from a range of sources has been available to the students and staff, the principal, and his support team for the two years from the night of the tragedy.

*I think initially we would not have coped in the first three [or] four days til the end of term if we hadn't have had the unsolicited support. Guidance counsellors from other schools - they just came - they just downed tools and came. They were here. We would not have survived if schools had not released teachers at their expense*

*to come over and take classes for us. We would not have survived if the church hadn't been free to help us whichever way possible.*

*And it was never just about the Elim community. It was far wider than that. Victim Support came; the Ministry's [Ministry of Education] team [came]. (Victim Support is a New Zealand independent charitable trust and community organisation that works with the police to support people distressed by trauma or crime: Victim Support, Manaaki Tangata, 2010.)*

*So I think that we saw the best of our society coming together to help – offers of help from all over the place. The gifts that came from little people, older people, wealthy people - it didn't really matter - I think you've got to be all-embracing.*

### **Supporting the grieving families**

It is important to know when and how to intervene following a traumatic event in a community, rather than making an assumption that everyone will require assistance; where required, appropriately trained persons can be engaged to assist (Yule, 2006). In the case of the present study, teachers and counselling staff at ECC provided initial grief-support for the students and other staff at school, and the principal arranged the availability of professional off-campus grief-support services for the school and families who sought professional assistance.

For the two years since the tragedy, the school has provided ongoing assistance, care and social support for the families who have lost loved ones.

*First, [there were] seven funerals, and we just committed ourselves to supporting the families in whichever way they needed it.*

*I just realised what it meant to people when other people came to pay respects. I saw that in those funerals, day after day. I think it's that collective ... putting of the arms around people isn't it - sort of like we are all in this together.*

From the start, families have known they could go and talk to MB or others from the school's Board of Trustees [i.e., the school's governance body]. This social support is still offered to families two years after the tragedy.

*We have walked the journey now with those seven families for nearly two years - the best thing you can do for people is simply to be there for them. Even now, if XY [a mother who had lost her son] walked in here, I*

*would drop everything and chat and listen to [her] - and that's just all we have really done. We haven't given them any clues of how to deal with this - we've simply answered the same questions [many times] - talked about the same things.*

*The Board's had them for dinner - have been places together - they just need to talk. They just need to get things off their chest. They need to ask questions - and we need to ask them too - everything we've done - how does this sit with you? Is this helping you move along your journey. We don't ever talk about getting over things - I don't think you ever get over things - I think you move through things.*

There have been occasions when one or two of the bereaved families have had concerns regarding their surviving children being exposed to particular situations at school. MB has talked with the parents and acknowledged their concerns, providing parents with assurances that he was keeping a close eye on the needs of the grieving siblings.

*Work with me and I'll filter it - I'll let you know if it's appropriate [he told the parents]. I think you've got to protect at the same time, and I put a little net around the families myself, and said what people should come near [those children] and who shouldn't.*

*Emotional intelligence [is important], the ability to be empathetic - to put yourself in another person's shoes.*

By listening to and reassuring parents, MB was able to connect with the parents regarding the concerns they were expressing about their children. The principal has provided care and ongoing communication with the families over the two years since the tragedy. Greenockle (2010) asserts that effective communication is the key to relationships, and that empathetic communication can arise from careful listening. Empathetic communication is described by Greenockle as part of emotional intelligence, Mayer and Salovey (1997) asserting that emotional intelligence is central to effective leadership; Mayer and Salovey define emotional intelligence as a set of four distinct, though related, abilities that concern how emotions are: perceived; used; understood; and managed, these abilities guiding the individual's thinking and behaviour.

Other coping strategies that became part of the school's approach to dealing with the tragedy included acknowledgment and acceptance of normal grief reactions, and getting the school back into a normal

routine as soon as reasonably possible. These strategies are supported by Yule (2006) who also advises that children be given opportunities to express their reactions and experience of the event. The group-setting of a classroom is a suitable environment where children can choose to discuss their reactions to trauma. Talking in such a group-setting can help to reduce any feelings of isolation in the children, and to increase their feelings of connectedness to others (Openshaw, 2011).

### **Seasons grief course**

The siblings and parents of the grieving families were all invited to participate in a *Seasons* grief course. The *Seasons* grief course is a support programme, usually for young people (5-18 years) who have experienced loss or grief. The course is facilitated by trained professionals experienced in grief and loss counselling. The course runs over several weeks (usually 10), and in Auckland is offered through the Anglican Social Services.

*They all went, and it was done very, very well - adults and children.*

*[After the Seasons session, held over a period of about two hours], they all went to [a local coffee shop] and talked for hours. It was a nine-week course, so there were a minimum nine opportunities of a couple of hours each to be bound together, and for a long time.*

*I would recommend grief courses like Seasons, and particularly for the siblings. We've [the school] produced a book ... that the siblings wrote [while taking part in the Seasons grief course]. It's profound in its simplicity, and I think it was an incredible help to the siblings to work through their own grief process, and the parents too.*

Through their work and writing in the course, grieving siblings have published a short book that may assist other children who have lost a brother or sister. This book, called *Never be the same*, was reviewed in the New Zealand Education Gazette (a professional publication for schools), and is available directly through ECC and via the online bookshop, *NZBookShop*.

### **Individual differences in responses to grief**

MB observed shifts in the families' responses to grief over a period of months as the families dealt with their grief in different ways and at a different rate.

*[Early on] DV, my chairman [of the Board of Trustees] and I found it very easy to speak on behalf of the group as a whole. We knew exactly where they were*

*at - I've learned that probably for three or four or five months they were together - thinking about it the same, responding the same, and it wasn't until about the six-month period, approximately, that you started to see the shift.*

Some families were appearing to go forward in their thinking and coping efforts, while others were having more difficulty moving ahead from their earlier thoughts about the tragedy.

*[By Christmas time, eight months after the tragedy], I couldn't really speak on behalf of the families as a group any more.*

To support people who are grieving, it is helpful to have an understanding of how the grief process works, to recognise that there are stages in the grief process, and that there are individual differences in how people respond to grief.

*We do need knowledge of how the grief process works, and we do need to be aware that the goal posts will change, and that we can't just presume to speak on behalf of these parents. They were finding their feet in the whole thing.*

### **Grief-support across the school**

As well as assisting families who lost loved ones, the school has provided support, or arranged support, for all students and staff from the night of the tragedy. Children from a broad range of cultures attend the school, and in respect of the cultural mix of the school, MB acknowledged there were some cultural differences and gaps in dealing with grief, and in coping with legal processes.

*Most of our students are European. ... We've got multi-cultures from around the world, but we've only got about eight Māori children [Māori are the indigenous minority of New Zealand.] ... We didn't embrace the Māori dimension as well as we could have, in terms of help, because they have a real affinity with grief. But that's one of the learning curves for us.*

*We had the added situation that one of our students (TS) who passed away was an international student, so we were dealing with Taiwanese matters as well, and their whole cultural breakdown - TS's parents still can't handle the fact that our legal processes take so long. Back in Taiwan [it would have been] dealt with and ... they would have moved on. Our culture's not like that, our legal system's not like that, and they just*

*can't understand that. They went back [to Taiwan]... a few weeks after the tragedy. [The grandfather, back in Taiwan] perceives New Zealand [as] an unsafe country now.*

### **Tributes to the school and families**

Such was the impact of the tragedy on the country, that the school received a large number of private messages of condolence from across New Zealand and beyond. MB recognised the genuine public response to his school's grief, and extended personal thanks to the individuals for their support.

*I employed a team of people to actually help me to reply by card or by email - it was thousands that went out. I signed every one personally with a little message if I could. And we were still getting them a year later, ... and [we] try and thank them for their gifts ... and try and reflect some of the grief they were feeling too.*

MB took responsibility for ensuring that messages of condolence reached the families, while at the same time protecting families from messages that may not have been helpful to them.

*But I think once again, it's got to come through a gate-keeper, and I'm the gate - I'm one of the gate-keepers and so are my office staff - it's just because some people mean well, but it comes out wrong. Basically, it's bringing in the help and evaluating it, passing it on to where it's most needed, and you continue to do that.*

This tragedy connected the school with an empathetic public of New Zealand and with concerned people from outside the country.

*We had gifts from overseas - a British school in Egypt sent us some ceramics. Incredible really. We've got scrap books and things like that - our living reminder of the whole.*

*I think we've got to realise we are not isolated - that life is all about a connection with others, and this story, this tragedy has affected New Zealand immensely, because everyone puts themselves in that situation, whether they be a parent or ... an adult who has been through it - and that took me by surprise too.*

### **Memorials**

MB commented on the value of sharing ECC's experience with other schools that had been through traumatic situations involving loss of life. Exchanges with other schools were helpful in EEC's decision to build an active memorial that would capture the spirit

and memory of the students and teacher who lost their lives, a memorial that could also benefit future students at the school. Their memorial is in the form of a climbing wall. The wall has seven sections representing the six students and one teacher who lost their lives. Each of the seven sections is coloured differently and has an individually named memorial plaque attached.

*A memorial is our climbing wall.... We've heard from other schools who have been through trauma, and how they continue to commemorate and remember, and so it's been quite useful as we go along as to what we do and how we do that sort of thing - what's meaningful and what's not - the messages from generation to generation.*

MB also sees a value in creating a documented record of the tragedy for families to have in years to come.

*We'd like to see a definitive account of what happened ... not for any sensational reason - that's abhorrent to us - but simply to record what is a momentous, extraordinary event in the life of New Zealand. It's hard to know what emphasis you would give it. ... I'd love it to be done. There'd be learnings in there for everyone, and hopefully inspiration as well.*

At present, not all parents have agreed as to whether this record might be created and, if so, how it might be done.

*Timing is critical. In all of these things, timing is critical.*

Over the last two years, *Victim Support* has provided the school with ongoing support, including how to manage anniversaries and significant events.

*It's a brilliant organisation. We're very thankful for that. [They have been with us all along], but not intrusive. They're just there when the more momentous things happen. They realise that the media is going to be around, or we've got to go to court. ... Initially, they were with us for quite some time. They gave us good advice on ... what to do with anniversaries and events like that.*

### **Issues of preparation, safety, and consent**

Occasionally, schools do experience negative events when providing students with access to outdoor education programmes, and the Ministry of Education reviews and updates their Education Outside The Classroom (EOTC) guidelines according to lessons learnt from these events. MB reflects on the balance between preparation and planning to maintain a safe off-campus environment, against the possibility of negative outcomes that could occur nevertheless.

*I don't know whether all the guidelines in the world can prevent it from happening ... so what do you do to ensure that a generation of New Zealanders still enjoys the incredible outdoors we have ... without the whole thing falling apart and imploding on us.*

Schools request parental consent for children to be allowed to attend educational experiences outside the school. However, it is likely there are instances in which parents are not giving *informed* consent. MB reflects on this issue:

*When the school sends home another form and says please consent to sending [your child] on this leadership training [course] at [the outdoor education centre], what are we asking the parents to do? What are we asking ourselves to do? Where does our sense of responsibility start and stop? It certainly does not confine it just to the RAMS form, that's for sure [RAMS: Risk Analysis and Management system form the Ministry of Education requires schools to complete before students are taken off-site]. Everything was signed, every piece of paper was done correctly, all the activities had been assessed, and we had done our part in getting us from here to [the outdoor education centre]. I [as principal] still have duty of care while they are at the centre - just because the centre then applies their own risk management to what they're doing, doesn't absolve me of responsibility.*

Generally, New Zealand parents favour their children gaining outdoor experience in a controlled environment. However, despite parents' consent and expectations that their children will be safe, situations occur from time to time where children may come to harm.

### **Looking after the leader**

Such was the intensity of leading and managing the situation over the first few days of the tragedy that at this point the Chair of the School Board of Trustees recognised that MB could benefit from putting down his mobile phone and taking a little time out for himself. Two members of the Board took MB away from school to share a quiet lunch.

*You need people who look after you in that situation. How do you get that? I think ... by being a real authentic person, building trust .... This sounds a little bit airy fairy ... warm and fuzzy, but it really does count on the day.*

*The effects on me - people ask me that a lot. I think that it's been therapeutic in the sense that I have been with it all the time. I walk past the photos [of those who died, in the school foyer] every day, I read lots of what is*

*written, and I talk about it lots, and I think that's been part of my therapy. I'm sure I've been stressed. But, I think the fact of just having that time to reflect on it and think about it, and talk about it has been quite therapeutic.*

From the night of the tragedy, there were constant demands on MB's time, particularly in the earlier stages as he attended to a wide range of practical and interpersonal issues. Much of the work required him to prioritise or balance tasks, work with a diverse group of people, and learn about processes and procedures in situations previously unknown to him.

*I think you do end up with new perspectives and different perspectives. I lost interest in purely educational - curriculum - matters, because I was just having to deal with so many other people - matters - organisational matters.*

The constant load on the principal is illustrated in his comment directly above, and in the following section as well, indicating the relentless demands on his time and energy.

### **The aftermath of the tragedy**

Among principals in New Zealand, MB's experience is unique regarding a school tragedy of this magnitude. For the two years since the tragedy, alongside running the school, MB has continued with the multi-dimensional task he began on the night of the tragedy. Over this period, MB has gained new insights and perspectives as a leader, and at times is asked to speak to educational and business groups to pass on his learning.

*A tragedy like this does not go away for a very, very long time. The aftermath of it has a complete life of its own, and any research or documentation has to state that. We are nearly two years down the track now, and wherever I go I get asked about it. I'm still doing talks occasionally, we are still working through legal processes, endless conversations and decisions about memorials. It never stops - the administration ... is quite incredible. Those sorts of things colour your world for a long time.*

### **A final word from the principal**

*We never think it will happen to us, so therefore we never properly prepare for it as we should. Probably, if anything I could have done differently [it would be] to perhaps have with real commitment and intent, gone and taken a course of a professional development experience in crisis management. I probably still need to. The difficulty I find with even saying that, is that it's in*

*isolation - it's all a bit unreal - you're kind of connected, but you're not.*

*Apart from that, I don't think I would have changed anything really.*

*I think there's been a lot of reflection on the whole thing, and certainly you read the leadership books with new eyes too, and you upskill yourself at the same time. It's ... translating it from a purely academic exercise to the fact that this is a reality that you should prepare for.*

MB, the principal of ECC, has led his school through a tragedy from the night it unfolded on 15 April 2008 and through the two years since. The present investigation advances understanding of school leadership in a human crisis, and suggests the following lessons and implications:

## Lessons Learnt

### • **Accept offers of support where appropriate to the school**

As help is offered from outside the school, it is important that the principal, and delegated others, act as gatekeepers to ensure that offers of support are empirically validated to be effective and appropriate to the school's and families' needs.

After the crisis, people who have helped the school should, where possible, be thanked personally for their contribution and, where appropriate, those who have helped should have their own concerns or grief acknowledged.

### • **Grieving families may require support from the school**

Schools are advised to seek support-opportunities and resources for grieving or traumatised families, and advise the families of these. If required, families could be directed to specialised support from mental health professionals with recognised training in trauma-focussed therapy methods. Assistance from the school to locate such assistance is particularly important for families who may have limited ability to locate and utilise such resources themselves. Where there are several grieving parents, the school may also be able to assist those parents to set up opportunities where they can meet among themselves for social support.

Where appropriate, support for parents who have lost children could be provided through the principal

or a senior staff member being available to talk with parents, at times individually or collectively, and likely on repeated occasions.

Where there are grieving siblings at the school, the school is advised to allocate an appropriately trained staff member, or the principal him/herself may take responsibility, to keep a close eye on the siblings to ensure that the school is aware of any special needs of the siblings, and that those needs are met where possible.

### • **There will be individual differences in responses to grief**

It is important for the principal and staff to have a knowledge of the grief process, and to understand that responding to, and expressing grief, will vary across time and according to the particular individuals.

### • **Acknowledge cultural differences**

Schools are advised to consider cultural differences and needs among the students and staff, and in particular those individuals from minority cultures who may be impacted by a crisis event. The school could consult with such groups on how to best help them meet their needs and assist them in a crisis event.

Schools are advised to learn how best to assist Māori students and staff in their Māori grief traditions, and to learn how Māori grief traditions might be helpful in addressing their own wider school circumstances.

### • **Talking and timing are important in tributes and memorials**

Talking with other schools who have experienced a traumatic event can be helpful to provide a range of ideas and approaches regarding remembrance of those who have lost their lives, and of how to approach establishing permanent memorials at the school in the longer term. Such memorials would be aligned with the spirit and memory of the particular individuals who had lost their lives. It is important to consider appropriate timing for families where the school requests their input into decisions regarding memorials.

### • **Attend to detail in safeguarding the school as much as possible**

In seeking parental consent for children to participate in off-site school-related activities, it is advisable that the school provide as much information as is reasonably possible, so that parents are able to



make an informed decision. Even then, it may not be possible to eliminate all potential harm.

- **Look after the leader**

It is important that members of the support team recognise the efforts of, and energy expended by, the leader in potentially mentally, emotionally, and physically demanding situations. In this respect, it is advisable for the leader to take time out from the site on regular occasions, or to be unavailable to deal with crisis-related matters (e.g., on specified days or half-days every week) in order to refresh and be relieved of the constant demands that will inevitably occur in a crisis situation. Likewise, it is important to “look after” other staff and the team who supports the leader.

- **Preparation in self-care is part of crisis leadership training**

It is important that the leader and his/her support team are prepared in self-care, as this group is likely to experience considerable stress at times during the crisis.

- **Build a strong team to support the leader**

As responding to a crisis generally involves a team effort under the leader's guidance, it may be beneficial for the team to engage in activities that build team-strength and understanding in preparation for an emergency. Such team-building may also be beneficial post-emergency.

- **The crisis will have an aftermath of its own**

A crisis will not go away, and it is important that once the immediate crisis has been managed, that in the months or years following, the principal himself/herself is supported as he/she attends to matters such as government or police enquiries, court hearings, inquests, and decisions about memorials, all of which take place some months or years after the event and while the private journey of adjustment and remembrance for the school and families continues. Ideally, the principal will have mentor-support throughout.

Elim Christian College operates on a foundation of Christian beliefs and values which guided the school through the tragedy, in the same way that the Christian faith provides the school's foundation at other times. A further study is required to investigate the role of faith in the adversity faced by Elim Christian College in this canyoning tragedy. The issue of parental consent for off-site activities remains a further area for exploration.

## Limitations

The purpose of the present study (Parts 1 and 2) was to investigate the school principal's perspective of leading his school through the tragedy. Thus it was beyond the scope of the present study to investigate his leadership from the perspective of his support team, the children and parents, or the staff of the school. This means there was no direct input from any of these individuals, including the bereaved families at the centre of the tragedy. The study reports that the school counselling service was active in providing assistance for students and staff at the school, and the school ensured that access to counselling and grief-support was available for families. However, as the study investigated leadership of the school, it was beyond the scope of the study to investigate the mental health of any persons impacted by the tragedy. It is acknowledged that following traumatic events, some children and adults will require greater assistance than the social support and help provided by the school; in these cases, there will be a need for professional psychological assistance.

## Finally, a View from Outside the School

In the absence of leadership perspectives from anyone other than the school principal himself, the following public endorsements of MB's leadership are of particular interest:

In August 2008 Murray Burton received the New Zealand Principal's Federation Service with Distinction award “in recognition for his truly inspirational leadership through the Elim crisis” (Auckland Primary Principal's Association, 2008).

In 2009, the year following the tragedy, *North and South* magazine, a pre-eminent New Zealand current affairs magazine, named MB as New Zealander of the year. In the *North and South* account of MB's leadership and management of the tragedy, Wade (2009) quotes the Chair of the school's Board of Trustees, (DV) who describes MB as the “right man in the worst of times” (p. 42). Wade also quotes the city mayor (LB) who described MB as “a sort of guiding star everyone looked to” (p. 41). In the same *North and South* article, a bereaved parent (JF) said of MB: “Whatever could be done, he did, and he would do: he just couldn't bring our boy back. That's all that man could not do” (p. 43).

In April 2011, Murray Burton was awarded The New Zealand Order of Merit (MNZM) for services to the

community. The award recognises Mr Burton's management of his school and the local community following the tragedy. This honour, instituted by Royal Warrant in 1996, is awarded to people who have "rendered meritorious service to the Crown and the nation or who have become distinguished by their eminence, talents, contributions, or other merits" (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2011).

In the media, depiction of the school and its principal was an exemplar in school crisis response, management, and leadership. In the year following the tragedy, the school was "inundated" with enrolment applications to such an extent that a part-time enrolment officer had to be employed to handle the large volume of applications. Murray Burton has been invited, and continues to be invited, to speak to a number of education and business groups about his experience of leadership in a crisis.

Over two years after the tragedy, there is only infrequent media reference to the event. However, the school and seven families continue their private journey of adjustment and remembrance for the loved students and teacher who lost their lives while on an outdoor education experience on April 15, 2008.

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