



THE MANY FACES OF TRAUMA

In April the Institute took a call from Middle Kinglake Primary School teacher, Catherine James. Catherine's school was destroyed on Black Saturday.

Some of the Middle Kinglake families had been forced to relocate to other parts of the State. Catherine felt that in their schools far away from bushfire affected areas, students still needed the support of their new communities. She suggested that an article on students affected by trauma (bushfire and other trauma) could help teachers address their needs.

We would like to thank Catherine for her suggestion and hope the article prepared for us by Dr Simon Crisp of Monash University will be helpful to teachers.

Dr Simon Crisp writes...

In recent months, the entire community has sadly become aware of the human toll from disasters such as the Black Saturday bushfires. Teachers and school communities have had to face a complex, often daunting task of responding to the initial needs of children and teenagers (and colleagues) who have been directly or indirectly affected. Now, as time goes on, a less obvious but very difficult challenge emerges – being able to understand what the effects might be longer-term, in the months or years ahead.

Initial psychological effects and broader bio-psycho-social impacts

Psychological effects of disaster can be quite individualised, but in the short-term, disruptive biological, psychological and social effects are the norm. Initially, affected children begin to cognitively and emotionally process events and recover from a hyper-aroused, biologically driven survival response.

Sleep problems, nightmares, concentration and memory problems, emotional fluctuations and impulsivity, heightened startle responses and avoidance of reminders of the trauma (such as fire or sirens) are common.

In young children, regressive behaviour and lowered social performance are to be expected. These are normal responses to an abnormal experience and in the majority of cases usually last for just days, weeks or less commonly months following a single event.

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NEWSLETTER

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continued from cover story...

Traumatic grief and loss

Of course, there may be substantial material as well as social loss from a large scale disaster. Shock, grief and prolonged distress can be immense. Such cognitive and emotional turmoil can so overwhelm a child's coping skills that serious on-going conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) develop.

Further complicating the picture, pre-existing psychological or behavioural disorders may also become exacerbated. For instance, a young person may have a relapse in depressive symptoms with accompanying suicidal thoughts, or their abuse of substances may intensify.

Additionally, loss of family members, parents and significant others requires enormous practical and psychological adjustment. Such a profound interruption to normalcy can inhibit or derail normal psychological and social development. So, the child who is learning to be independent suddenly becomes clingy to care-givers, and the teen who was always responsible becomes reckless and abandons hope for the future.

The tricky issue here is that these changes can occur sometime after the disaster, and such behaviour may be misunderstood, and the link to the trauma missed. Serious conditions such as PTSD may go untreated, or even mistreated.

Promoting resilience

Ongoing post-trauma symptoms as well as other psychological symptoms such as depression can have major implications for a child's learning. Cognitive deficits such as concentration and attention difficulties, memory encoding and retrieval problems, emotional instability and disrupted information processing are common.

In general, the most helpful intervention is to return life back to what it was, as much as possible. Reinstating familiar and reassuring routines, rituals and activities helps instil a sense of security and mobilise a child's coping resources. In particular, re-establishing social networks is vital.

Reaffirming relationships, providing natural opportunities for people to express and receive support, and allowing choice can reduce anxiety. In the case where a child's social supports have been lost, encouraging the child to draw on extended family or community will be important for him or her to feel safe enough to begin to grieve and then to start looking forward.

Teachers also play a key role in noticing and reinforcing a child's effective coping, initiative or altruistic behaviour and their ability to master and manage this difficult and often long recovery phase.

Be a safety net

Teachers have a unique opportunity to monitor and detect any possible signs of PTSD or exacerbated psychological disorder in the months or years following a major disaster. To feel prepared, teachers should familiarise themselves with the types of symptoms seen in traumatised children. The Australian Psychological Society or the Australian Child & Adolescent Trauma, Loss & Grief Network are both authoritative sources of much online information relevant for teachers.

While it is often hard to predict who, a minority of children who have experienced a major traumatic event will develop PTSD in the months following. It is not uncommon for serious and debilitating PTSD to go undiagnosed for years. Teachers are often the bridge between undetected problems that may be severely affecting a young person's functioning, and getting professional assistance. Being informed and vigilant is critical. Be confident to raise your concerns with colleagues or parents, or if appropriate with the student themselves.

This psychological first response with the student doesn't have to be executed perfectly but is better attempted than not. Fortunately, treatments for PTSD are well developed and generally effective. However, getting the student the professional help they might need can depend on how well teachers can engage the young person or their parents around their concerns. Being knowledgeable about PTSD symptoms and what professional options there are may make all the difference.

References Australian Psychological Society <www.psychology.org.au/bushfires>
Australian Child & Adolescent Trauma, Loss & Grief Network <www.earlytraumagrief.anu.edu.au>

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Spotlight on Institute disciplinary hearings

There are more than 108,000 teachers actively registered in Victoria. Since 2004, the Institute has held just over 80 disciplinary hearings to inquire into allegations against teachers of serious misconduct, serious incompetence or lack of fitness to teach.

As a result, 36 teachers had their registration cancelled, 13 had their registration suspended and 23 remained registered. Seven teachers had conditions imposed on their registration.

Clearly the number of teachers appearing before an Institute disciplinary hearing is a tiny proportion of the profession.

It is regrettable that in their reporting of these cases, some media commentators magnify the incidence of misconduct.

Unless the Hearing Panel closes a hearing because of the intimate, personal or financial nature of the evidence, members of the public and the media may attend.

The Institute's disciplinary powers are activated when an employer notifies the Institute that disciplinary action has been taken against a teacher at their school, or if the Institute receives a complaint about a teacher. An inquiry will also be initiated when a criminal record check discloses an indictable offence (other than a sexual offence) in a teacher's history. A conviction or finding of guilt for a sexual offence results in the automatic cancellation of a teacher's registration without inquiry.

For any of these matters to proceed to a formal hearing the Institute must find *prima facie* evidence of a teacher's serious misconduct, serious incompetence or lack of fitness to teach. In many situations the evidence is not sufficient to warrant the Institute proceeding further.

The proceedings of a formal hearing are similar to civil court proceedings. Panel members include registered teachers and the Chair of the Panel must be a member of the Institute Council.

Panel members must apply the principles of natural justice. They draw on precedent from other jurisdictions that set the benchmark for serious misconduct or serious incompetence.

In reaching their decision, Panel members assess the evidence given by witnesses and the degree of insight, remorse and remedial action demonstrated by the teacher. The purposes of disciplinary proceedings are to protect the public, to maintain proper standards of conduct for the profession, and to protect the reputation of the profession. The proceedings are not designed to punish the teacher.

A number of outcomes are possible from the formal hearing.

The Panel may determine that the teacher may remain registered. In some circumstances the teacher will remain registered but have conditions imposed on their registration.

The Panel may suspend the teacher's registration for a period of time subject to the teacher meeting certain conditions.

Or the Panel may cancel the teacher's registration. A teacher whose registration is cancelled or suspended can't teach in any Victorian school. Effectively, the teacher also can't be employed as a teacher in any other Australian State or Territory.

The full decision of an Institute Hearing Panel is published online.

Below are case summaries of two decisions. The first involves allegations of serious incompetence, the second, an allegation of serious misconduct. Both provide insight into the gravity and complexity of the decision making process. Readers are encouraged to visit the Institute website at <www.vit.vic.edu.au> and follow the links from 'Professional Conduct' to view the full decision of any Panel Hearing.

TEACHER A

Panel concluded teacher was seriously incompetent and unfit to teach and suspended her registration for twelve months

It was alleged the teacher failed to teach effectively and engage students in active learning, failed to assess student work or provide feedback, and that her students were disruptive to other classes and allowed to wander the school unsupervised. A further allegation was that the teacher sat at the front of the classroom and did not move from her desk while students lined up tables as a bowling alley and 'bowled' a student seated in a computer chair, the length of the classroom.

The Panel noted 'serious incompetence need not result from criminal conduct, but that the incompetence must be of such a degree or so frequent that it reflects on the teacher's fitness to teach, and that whether conduct amounts to serious incompetence will depend on the facts of the case'.

The Panel suspended the teacher's registration for 12 months, noting 'the public interest and the teacher would be well served, if and when she planned to return to teaching, she initiate a series of professional development activities targeted at the areas of concern detailed in the substantiated allegations'.

TEACHER B

Panel determined teacher was guilty of serious misconduct and deemed unfit to teach, cancelling his registration

It was alleged the teacher failed to maintain a professional relationship with students in conversation, and in personal and inappropriate emails.

The decision noted the teacher abused his authority, betrayed the trust implicit in the student-teacher relationship, and harassed, intimidated and exploited vulnerable young people with potentially serious effects for their emotional and psychological development.

The conversation at the heart of one of the allegations involved the sexual propositioning and harassment of a child under the teacher's care, compounded by an attempt to swear that child to secrecy about such action.

The Panel found no evidence of remorse from the teacher and noted 'Until such insight and remorse are evident and demonstrably acted upon he remains unfit to teach'.

Author Wendy Bradly, Group Manager,
Communications & Research Branch
Victorian Institute of Teaching

Supporting new teachers on their journey

Teaching is complex work. Successful teaching relies on high level professional knowledge being translated into teaching practice that engages students in learning. Experienced teachers know the challenges they are likely to face in the classroom and strategies they can use to ensure all students achieve their best.

But what about teachers who are new to the profession? How can they best be supported to develop their professional practice?

Each year, the Institute invites all new teachers to a supporting provisionally registered teachers seminar. This provides an occasion to welcome teachers to the profession and explain the process for achieving full registration. A key benefit is the opportunity to network with other new teachers and to debrief.

Once they gain employment in a school, new teachers are supported by a mentor and a targeted induction program. Mentors are offered two days training, which is provided by the Institute in collaboration with the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and with the support of the Diocesan Catholic Education Offices and the independent school sector. This course is offered in up to 28 metropolitan and regional locations around Victoria and details can be found at <<http://pdi.vic.edu.au/>>.

A key benefit is the opportunity to network with other new teachers and to debrief.

The Institute provides other mechanisms for supporting new teachers. A CD-ROM and manual outlining the process for teachers to gain full registration guides them through the steps and provides samples of evidence. These materials are made available to principals and mentors to ensure school processes are consistent with Institute requirements. They offer opportunities for collegial and reflective practice.

As teachers develop their professional knowledge and practice, they can use Pdi, the professional development activities search engine. This online facility will help them find the programs and courses of most professional benefit. A professional reading portal on Pdi provides interesting and relevant articles on teaching and learning. Teachers can share their reading with others through a reading group blog.

The first months of work can be overwhelming for new teachers. The Institute seeks to ensure this time is a positive one for teachers as they develop confidence in their practice.

Author Fran Cosgrove, Group Manager,
Standards & Professional Learning Branch
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CRT connect

Are you a casual relief teacher (CRT) looking for an avenue to meet regularly with other CRTs and share valuable knowledge?

Are you seeking a way to meet your professional development (PD) needs in a supportive group environment?

Or are you feeling a little alone and yearning for a sense of belonging to a like-minded community?

If you answered 'yes' to any of these questions, the solution may be to join a CRT network.

With assistance from the Institute, networks are being established across Victoria in areas where there is interest from CRTs. Institute support is provided until the network is able to operate independently.

CRT networks generally meet once a term, for about two and a half hours at the end of the school day. Where possible, networks build a relationship with a conveniently located school which can provide a meeting place and various resources. Appropriate presenters are sourced from local schools, principals and education experts.

Attendance counts towards PD requirements for renewal of registration and a certificate is provided to each person at the end of the session. Your PD via a CRT network is local, readily accessible and either free or low-cost.

Currently, CRT networks are operating in a range of locations. If you'd like further details, please visit the Institute website at www.vit.vic.edu.au. Click on 'Registered Teachers', then 'I am a Casual Relief Teacher' and scroll down to the section headed 'Networks'.

If you're keen to set up a network in your own area and require assistance, please email dawn.colcott@vit.vic.edu.au.

Planning on driving a school bus?

Did you know that as a registered teacher you need to undergo a bus driver accreditation check before you are legally able to drive a school bus?

Teachers who wish to drive buses (a passenger vehicle of 12 seats or more including the driver) must obtain accreditation in the same way as any other prospective bus driver, with road safety being the paramount consideration.

When assessing an application for bus driver accreditation, the Victorian Taxi Directorate (VTD) considers an applicant's criminal record check from Victoria Police and their driving/traffic records from VicRoads.

There is a list of 'disqualifying' or prior offences, which depending on their seriousness can disqualify an applicant from being accredited.

You can obtain a driver accreditation application form by contacting the VTD on (03) 9320 4300 or downloading the form from the VTD website at www.taxi.vic.gov.au.



Minister acts on certifying documents

We have been aware for some time of concerns in the non-government school sector about the Institute's policy of authorising only government school principals to witness statutory declarations and to certify copies of documents.

The Institute policy has been shaped by section 107A of the *Evidence Act 1958* (the Act) which identifies 'a principal in the [State] teaching service' as a person who can witness statutory declarations. The list of authorised persons in section 107A does not include the principal of a Catholic or independent school. The Department of Justice advises that a person authorised to witness statutory declarations should be accepted as a person who can certify true copies of original documents.

Non-government sector stakeholder organisations argue principals of Catholic and independent schools should also be recognised for these purposes.

The Institute agrees section 107A of the Act should be amended to include non-government school principals and has brought this matter to the attention of the Minister for Education, the Hon Bronwyn Pike, MP.

The Act, which is administered by the Attorney-General, the Hon Rob Hulls MP, is currently being reviewed.

Minister Pike has now written to the Attorney-General requesting his consideration of the issue, particularly in light of work by the Standing Committee of Attorneys-General to identify a proposed list of professionals for national uniform legislation.

If section 107A of the Act were to be amended to include principals of non-government schools, the Institute policy would reflect this amendment.

LATEST UPDATES

More field officers

Following very positive teacher feedback on school visits by Field Officer, Mary Walker, the Institute has employed six sessional field officers. All former Victorian school teachers or principals, these field officers possess a wealth of experience and expertise.

Schools are invited to contact Mary at the Institute on (03) 8601 5845 or email <mary.walker@vit.vic.edu.au> to organise a date and time for a field officer visit.

Field officer talks cover topics requested by schools such as registration renewal requirements, and are usually presented at a staff meeting. They take about 30 to 60 minutes, depending on discussion and questions.

Career expos

Our stand 'What about teaching?' attracted a huge following at the *Age VCE Careers Expo* held at Caulfield Racecourse from 24–26 April. A seminar presented by teachers Damien Toussaint and Sally Wilkinson was also very popular with visitors to the expo.

Twilight Seminar

What are the implications for teachers of the new national curriculum? This was the question posed of our guest speakers at the second in the 2009 series of Twilight Seminars held at the Institute on 28 May. Responding were the National Curriculum Board's Deputy Chair Tony Mackay and General Manager Robert Randall.

Dates for this year's remaining seminars are 27 August and 26 November. If you would like to be included on the invitation list, please contact Valmai Lee at the Institute on (03) 8601 5849 or email <valmai.lee@vit.vic.edu.au>.

Review update

It is expected that legislation to implement recommendations of the Ministerial Review of the Institute will be introduced to the spring session of Parliament.

VCAL award winners

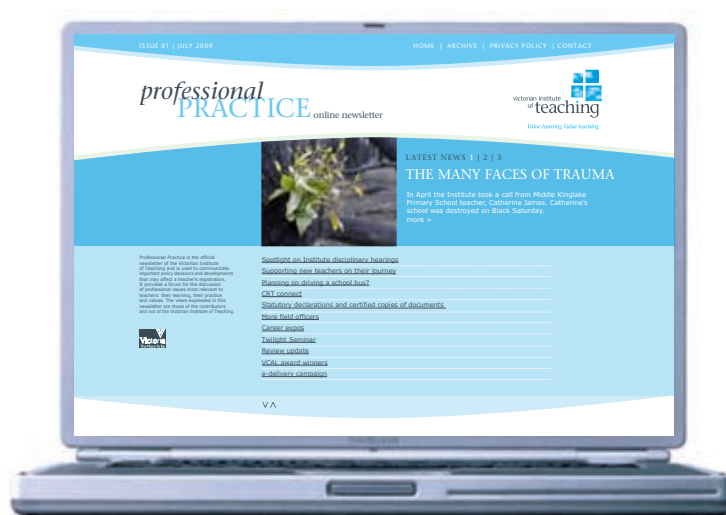
Congratulations to all those teachers who recently won awards for their contribution to the development and delivery of innovative Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) programs.

The Institute was on the judging panel for the 2008 VCAL Teacher Achievement Awards presented in May 2009. For the winners of these and other awards please see *Professional Practice Online* on the Institute website under 'Publications'.

e-delivery campaign

We recently invited registered teachers to let us know if they would like to receive future news bulletins as a website link via email and around 24,000 have said 'yes'.

This offer remains open. If you would like to advise us of your preference to receive *Professional Practice* electronically, please call 1300 888 067 or email <vit@vit.vic.edu.au>.



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