Examining Postvention Practices in Preservice Teachers

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Abstract

Expanding on Mackesy-Amiti, Fendrich, Libby, Goldenberg, and Grossman's (1996) true or false questionnaire on school personnel's response to a student death by suicide in their school with current suicide postvention procedures (Brock, 2002; Brock, Sandoval, & Hart, 2006; Kalafat & Lazarus, 2002; Lieberman & Davis, 2002), we developed a fictitious vignette for preservice teachers to examine their level of readiness to engage in postvention responses given the particular scenarios. We distributed the vignette to 17 students taking a special education course at a large Midwestern university. There were 16 participants who identified as female and 1 who identified as male. The median age of the participants was 21 with participant ages ranging from 20- 47, with 94% of participants identifying as Caucasian and 6% as other. All participants majored in special education with 53% focusing on elementary education and 35% on K-12.

The researchers analyzed the data using a conventional content analysis approach by having three coders independently generated a list of themes that emerged within the data in order to create a qualitative codebook. The three coders then independently analyzed the participant responses utilizing the codebook to identify which participants provided responses that reflected each theme. To increase content validity, a minimum of two coders needed to identify any given theme within each participant's data (Creswell, 2014; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). We compiled these into a table of participant response categories. The results may indicate the level of experience of the preservice teacher dealing with a student death by suicide in their school, which may have implications for university teacher education programs. Future research may include using these case scenarios to develop problem-based learning modules to help train preservice and active teachers in evidence-based practices in responding to a student death by suicide. In the following section, we included the participant response categories along with highlighted significant quotes found within the participant responses.

Vignette and Preservice Teacher Responses

From the very moment you stepped on school grounds this morning, you knew that something was wrong. The silence in the hallway was almost as overwhelming as the lack of your fellow teachers in the hallway running their usual before class errands. As you enter your classroom, you pull up your email and see that the principal has an urgent meeting for all faculty and staff at 7:15 am. You look on your computer screen noting that the meeting will begin in about 10 minutes.

As the meeting begins, the somber principal announces, "I know a few of you have already heard, but Julia Parker died by suicide last night."

A teacher two rows away starts crying uncontrollably. You remembered how Julia struggled in your class. You remembered the hours you spent working with her and all of those gains that she made that year. You feel guilty as if maybe there was something you could have done.

What do you do (if anything) to cope with the death of the student?
Participant Response Categories
With the support of the other teachers (n= 6)*
Cry and speak with students (n=1)*
Check on mental health themselves (self-reflection) (n=2)*
Receive therapy service (individual counseling, group counseling) (n=3)*
Get family card, flowers, and attend funeral (n=2)*
Focus on their responsibility of being a teacher (n=5)*
Talking with friends (n=1)*

"You receive the same therapy services that you encourage your students to attend. You allow yourself to mourn. You let your students see your sadness, but be professional."

"There are resources available for those who need additional help," the principal continued. "We need to make a decision about how to proceed to inform students of Julia's death."

What would be the best way for the school to inform the students of Julia's death?
Participant Response Categories
Have the teachers and counselor announce the student death by suicide to each class individually (n= 8)*
Send an email and/or letter to students and parents (n= 3)
Announce the student death by suicide in a student assembly (n= 4)
Tell the students in an announcement over the P.A. System (n=1)
Make sure to tell students in a developmentally appropriate manner (n= 1)*
Develop a script so that teachers can provide consistent information to students (n=1)*

"The best way is to have their homeroom teachers and counselor describe why Julia isn't here at age-appropriate and sensitive conditions."

"Each of you will be responsible for informing your students. If you believe you cannot do this, please come forward and talk with the Crisis Response Team. Does anyone have any questions?"

A colleague of yours raises his hand, "Should we discuss canceling school for today?"

Should school be canceled for the day? Why or why not?
Participant Response Categories
Yes: 30% of participants believe that school should be canceled.
School should be canceled because, it gives the students the ability to gather themselves (n=2)
School should be canceled, because students and teachers would not be able to concentrate in school (n=1)
School should be canceled so that they can be with close family and friends (n=1)
No: 70% of participants believe that school should stay in session.
Canceling school would cause too many logistical difficulties such as transportation issues (n=2)
School should not be canceled, but students should be allowed to go home (n=3)
School should not be canceled because it creates a better coping environment with resources (n=5)*
School should not be canceled, because routine is best in this type of circumstance (n=2)*
School should not be canceled, because it helps to prevent suicide contagion (n=1)*
School should not be canceled, because it would intensify the crisis (n=2)*
School should not be canceled, because it ensures everyone gets the same and accurate information (n=2)*

"We would run the risk to send the kids home to an empty house with the news of their peers fresh in their minds."

"That is not an option for today," the principal continued. "If you believe you need additional help, you can meet with one of the counselors that we are making available. Another hand went up. "Would it be okay if we had a candlelight vigil for the student in a couple of days?"

Do you believe the school should host a candlelight vigil for Julia? Why or why not?
Participant Response Categories
Yes: 82% of participants believe the school should host a candlelight vigil for Julia
The school should host a candlelight vigil for Julia, because it helps students mourn together. (n=3)
The school should host a candlelight vigil for Julia, because the school would show their support by doing this. (n=2)
The school should host a candlelight vigil for Julia, because it provides closure for the students. (n= 5)
The school should host a candlelight vigil, because it is a respectful and peaceful way to memorialize Julia. (n=4)
No: 18% of participants believe the school should **not** hold a candle light vigil for Julia
The school should not hold a candlelight vigil because of the separation of church and state (n=2)
The school should not hold a candlelight vigil, because making the children participate in it would not be beneficial (n=1)
The school should not hold a candlelight vigil because it interrupts routine (n=1)*
The school should not hold a candlelight vigil, because the additional attention may increase the chance of suicide contagion. (n=1)*
The school should not hold a candlelight vigil, because it should be done by the community or family. (n=3)

"Studies show that you should not pay excessive attention to suicide, post a suicide in the school, because it can actually increase the likelihood of another suicide."

"We can discuss this at a later time. Right now we need to focus on getting through this first twenty-four hours. I'm going to go ahead and dismiss you from this meeting so that you have time to collect yourself before your students get here."

You walk back to your classroom and sit for about 30 minutes before your students arrive. The students look at you as if they know something is wrong, but they don't mention anything. The bell rings and you explain to your class, "I have something that I need to tell you all and I am not sure exactly how to say it. Last night Julia Parker died by suicide." Some students immediately started crying, while others showed less of a reaction.

What should the school do with students who are visibly upset?
Participant Response Categories
Teachers should comfort students who are visibly upset (n=3)
Let students who are visibly upset call their parents on their cell phones (n=1)
Let visibly upset students be upset (n=1)
Let visibly upset students have breaks throughout the day (n=1)
Allow visibly upset students go to the crisis team for additional help (n=9)
Send visibly upset students home (n=1)
Address the entire class in order to talk about it (n=1)
Contact parents of visibly upset students to let them know/ email parents (n=2)

"Comfort them! This can be the first experience students have with death."

"I know that many of you knew Julia and there are resources available for you if you need them. They have individuals you can speak with if you need to."

What do you do for the rest of the class?
Participant Response Categories
Start class as normal (n=7)
Discuss the situation as a class (n=3)
Conduct a remembrance activity (n=2)
Do what students want to do (student-centered) (n=3)
Talk to students about resources (n=2)
Give the class time to calm down (n=3)
Be on the lookout for students who cannot express it (n=1)

"Have an open journal time so they can express themselves."

A student raises their hand.
"Yes, Marshall?" you ask.
"How did she do it?" he asked while the class looks at you for answers.

How do you respond?
Participant Response Categories
Tell the truth (n=2)
Refrain from discussing details (n=7)
Refer to the counselor (n=5)
Make sure the students know that this is not the only way of coping (n=1)
Do not say anything (n=1)
By keeping things positive (n=2)

"Let's remember her for who she was, not how it ended."

After about 30 minutes, a group of students approach you. "Do you think we could collect some money to make t-shirts for Julia?"

How do you respond?
Participant Response Categories
Yes: 82% of participants agree to the idea of making shirts for Julia
Check with administration (n=6)
Offer my help (n=3)
Julia would want to be remembered (n=2)
Let leaders come out of it by letting students be in charge (n=1)
Donate the money to an organization in her honor (n=1)
No: 12% of participants disagree to the idea of making shirts for Julia
Not a good way to remember someone (n=2)
Not appropriate for school hours, something that needs to be done after school (n=2)
Unsure: 5% of participants were unsure about the idea of making shirts for Julia
Discuss at a later time (n=1)

"…Let them know that it's good to remember, but they don't need a tshirt to do so."

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