INVESTIGATION 6

How did members of school communities during the Great War respond to the death and wounding of people they knew?

Advice to teachers

This investigation explores how members of school communities responded to the deaths and woundings of people they knew.

1. You are encouraged to read the Background information as context before you commence work with students.

2. Provide your students with sources 6.1–6.12.

3. You may distribute the Source Analysis Worksheet on page 18 and ask students to make notes, or ask them to complete the Tuning in activities.

4. Discuss with students what they have learned from the sources and Tuning in activities along with their answers to the overall investigation question.

5. To help them answer the questions, you may choose to provide sources from other investigations in this resource or from the CD-ROM. You may also choose to provide the Background information, but this should be done only after students have formed conclusions based on analysis of the sources.

6. Students may undertake further research or explore personal values and attitudes through the questions and activities in Going further.

7. Inconsistancy in spellings, such as ‘honor’ or ‘honour’ were common in documents and artefacts of the time. All quotations and citations are presented in original form.
Background information

Little has been recorded about how children coped with the wounding and death of family members and others from their local communities during the Great War, including the death of the often most significant adult males beyond their families – their teachers. Yet children’s anxiety and grief was almost certainly intensified through attending their school and learning about the painful experiences of its members. Teachers needed to manage that grief while managing their own, yet there is scarcely a record of any authorities’ ‘advice to teachers’ on how to set about the task. This was uncommon, given the prescription of so much else in a teacher’s day. Rendered mute themselves by horror, helplessness or guilt at the outcomes of a war that they, amongst many, had initially accepted, even welcomed, most school authorities resorted in the first instances to presenting their teachers and students with the great poetry and prose of the ages or Biblical passages and expected readers to glean comfort through ‘reading comprehension’.

In the next phase, most authorities set about encouraging schools to create their own memorials to the fallen, although numerous schools did not require this direction, having commenced honour boards and books with the war in progress. Most boards, however, were created in the years immediately after it. Boards were usually unveiled with solemn speeches, songs, poems and the presence of dignitaries, returned soldiers and nurses or stoic bereaved. The creativity that had accompanied schools’ patriotic activities emerged again as schools assumed responsibility for their own commemorative means, despite the best efforts of some education departments to impose a uniformity of style. Thus, framed photographs usually of honoured fallen students and teachers were hung in school corridors and classrooms. Memorial windows were placed in highly visual positions and plaques affixed to interior and exterior walls. Some schools created commemorative gates, arches, steps, doorways, libraries, halls or shelter sheds. Less commonly, there were clocks, individual or blocks of drinking taps, or school bells. Houses and form groups were assigned the names of significant or fallen men. In some school grounds, cenotaphs were created and single or multiple memorial trees planted. And if schools did not possess significant monuments or spaces for commemorative assemblies, teachers were advised to take students to local memorials, especially on the main day of commemoration that schools played a significant role in institutionalising as an annual reference point, Anzac Day.

Many school communities, even if they opposed the war and Australia’s part in it, assumed responsibilities for supporting the wounded overseas or invalided home. Students, as well as teachers, made or purchased equipment for overseas or local hospitals, supplied food and entertainments to hospitals and engaged in ‘social service’ through chores for families where a disabled soldier could no longer contribute around the home.

For many of the generations before or during the Great War, raised by their families and schooled on one or more ideals of duty to God, Queen, King or country, the belief that any wounding or death was for a ‘just’ cause may have offered some comfort. There was little alternative. To believe that any sacrifice was not worthwhile would have made the situation even more distressing. No matter what students or teachers believed about the Empire and its enemies at war, what positive values they attempted to uphold, what problems of resourcing they overcame at school, and what patriotic or social service activities they performed during or after it, the war had an enormous impact on their lives.
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Learning activities

**Tuning in**

1. a) List the activities undertaken by members of school communities in response to the deaths of people they knew.
   b) What reasons are given by the sources for such activities?
   c) Can you think of other reasons why school communities acted in such ways? Explain.

2. An honour book usually contained a brief account of every former student or current teacher of a school who had served and sometimes died in the war. What is the evidence that an honour book was a special book?

3. Look at the appearance and position in schools of the honour boards which listed the names of former students or teachers who had served. What is the evidence that such boards were meant to be respected?

4. Why do you think trees were chosen as a form of memorial?
1. Provisional honour rolls, boards or books were created while the war was in progress.
   a) Why may such items have been created while the war was in progress?
   b) Why do you think gateways were turned into permanent memorials after the war?
   c) List the possible feelings of teachers and students in viewing such memorials after the war.

2. Look again at Source Intro.3 of Perth State School. Not only the Dennis family members, but many of the children pictured as well as the two teachers would have had family members, friends or people known to them from their community killed or wounded in the war.
   a) What reactions to this loss may there have been in classrooms, staffrooms or school grounds for students or teachers?
   b) How may have individuals who had family members go to war and suffer or die, respond to those who had not experienced the same?

3. Imagine you are any one of the students pictured in Source 6.3.
   a) Tell your story of how you have come to be at the Caulfield Military Hospital on the day the photograph has been taken.
   b) What are you thinking as the photograph is taken? Why?

4. Imagine you are the teacher unveiling the honour board in Source 6.9. Write a five minute speech including the experiences of members of your community. Refer to what has happened on the battle front as well as on the home front.

5. Look at the photograph of Edith Dennis in Source 6.12.
   a) Even though the custom was not to smile when sitting for a professional photograph, what are the indications that she was still grieving when the photograph was taken?
   b) What other evidence is there in this resource to suggest that she ‘grieved all her life’?
   c) What might she have been thinking as the photograph was taken, and why?

6. Research how Australians tried to cope with the scale of war-related death and its effects on themselves and others. Where possible, use local or school histories as well as resources recommended in Investigation 7.
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Source 6.1

‘An appeal to the past and present students of the [Fort Street] School [New South Wales] was launched for the erection of a war memorial befitting such an institution as Fort Street to perpetuate the memory of those who had “Poured out the red, sweet wine of youth”.

Do not imagine these men as a race apart from ourselves. Future ages may elevate them to the divine as did the ancients of the classics with their heroes, but remember you who now occupy their benches, they were once just such as you are today. They had their ambitions, joys and trials such as you. Away in the future they had built their castles of air, and at the trumpet note they cast them aside. Now in some far-off land a simple cross stands.’


Source 6.2

‘Exterior view of the wards at No. 11 Australian General Hospital Caulfield, Victoria, purchased, complete with beds for 14 wards of 300 patients, from funds raised by the Victorian Education Department’s Patriotic League.’

Source 6.3

‘Entertaining the Soldiers at the Caulfield Military Hospital.’

Education Department, Victoria, The Education Department’s Record of War Service, 1914-1919, Albert J. Mullett, Melbourne, Victoria, 1921, p. 235.

Source 6.4

‘When the request of the Old Scholars for permission to erect the [Honour] Board came before the Committee there was much troubling of the spirit amongst members ... for they recognized both the legitimate wish of the Old Scholars to mark the service of those who had done their duty as they saw it by joining the armed services, and also the conscientious objection which Friends [Quakers] had held since 1660 against war and preparation for war and commemoration of war. Out of this came the decision of the Committee that permission should be granted on condition that names should be recorded without designation of military rank, without special marking of the names of those who had been killed, and without distinction being made between those who fought and those who helped as non-combatants ...

[J.H. Gould later wrote:]

So we have the infantryman side by side with the nurse, the stretcher-bearer, the gunner, the naval officer, the members of the Friends’ Ambulance or Reconstruction Camp, the troopers, the munition worker – their only qualification being that they served abroad in some capacity during the war.’

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Source 6.5

‘In London: One of Our Omnibuses “Presented by the Victorian State Schools Patriotic League”.’
The vehicle was used to transport soldiers recovering from their wounds.

Education Department, Victoria, The Education Department’s Record of War Service, 1914–1919, Albert J. Mullett, Melbourne, Victoria, 1921, p. 212.

Source 6.6

‘Case Fastened to the Wall of the Schoolhouse and Containing the Honor Book.’

Education Department, Victoria, Tasmania and Western Australia, ‘The School’s Memorial’, School Paper, Grades VII–VIII, May 1919, p. 44.

Source 6.7

‘Violet Day, 26 June, was recognised each year:

Everyone will, if practicable, wear a spray of these fragrant flowers in memory of the noble men who have given their lives for us on distant battlefields. There they lie in the silent graves – the young, the strong and the brave, and we, living in comfort, should on that day at least give to their memory some of our thoughts. If there is a Roll of Honour in the school perhaps the girls might decorate it with violets.’

‘The principal of Christian Brothers’ College in Adelaide announced to those attending the unveiling of this provisional honor roll (note the incomplete date on the right of the shield) in 1916 that already there “were nearly enough names to fill another roll, which, when completed, would match that before them”.

State Library of South Australia and *Adelaide Register*, 29 November 1916, p. 6.

‘Head Teacher and Committee [of an unnamed school] at the unveiling of an Honor Board.’

*Education Department, Victoria, Education Gazette and Teachers’ Aid*, May 1919, p. 83.
Source 6.10

‘Trees ... are looked upon as fitting memorials of worthy men and important events. Let us, at this time, plant what will become beautiful living monuments to the memory of our brave soldiers when the war in which they fell facing the foe is a hideous thing of the past.’


Source 6.11

Memorial Gates, ‘Townsville West State School, Queensland.

‘The school honoured students and teachers who served, and in some cases died, during the Great War by erecting both honour boards in the entrance foyer and memorial gates. Because both memorials contain the same number of names it is thought that the honour boards were installed soon after the war. Two hundred names inscribed on marble tablets are attached to the arched gateway.’

Monument Australia

www.monumentaustralia.org.au

Images courtesy of Kathy MacDonald
Source 6.12

Edith Dennis was 17 when this photograph of her was taken in 1919. (See the Introductory Investigation.) Edith chose deliberately to wear the delicate silver and amethyst thistle brooch that her brother, Roland, had bought in Scotland when on leave from the battle front. Not long after he posted the brooch, he was killed in action in France on 25 April 1918. This was three years to the day of his landing at Gallipoli, on 25 April 1915. Edith, and her sisters and brother who were still at school when he died, grieved the rest of their lives for two brothers taken by war.