How did families and school communities cope with the sadness of losing people they knew?

How did they remember people who did not return? How did they help those who did return?

This investigation explores the impact of the Great War on families and school communities. It examines how they responded to the grief and sadness of losing people they knew. It also provides evidence of how their loss was remembered and commemorated.

Background information

Few records exist on how children coped with the wounding or death of family members and others from their community during the war. Teachers needed to manage students' grief when their family or others in the school community suffered a loss, whilst also managing their own. There is little evidence of any official advice on how this might be achieved. Most school authorities relied on presenting their teachers and students with the great poetry and prose of the ages or biblical passages, and expected them to find comfort in 'reading comprehension'.

Most authorities encouraged schools to create their own memorials to the fallen but many commenced honour boards and books on their own initiative. Honour boards were usually unveiled with solemn ceremonies with speeches in the presence of dignitaries, returned soldiers and nurses. Framed images of fallen students or teachers were hung in school corridors or classrooms, memorial windows were placed in well-lit positions, and plaques were affixed to walls. Some schools created commemorative gates, arches, steps, doorways, libraries, or halls. Houses and form groups were named for significant or fallen men or, sometimes, nurses. Some schools had cenotaphs built and memorial trees planted. Students and teachers made or purchased equipment for hospitals, supplied food or entertainments and performed 'social service' for families with disabled soldiers.

For a generation raised on the ideal of duty to God, King, Queen or country, the belief that any wounding or death was for a 'just cause' may have offered some comfort. To believe otherwise in the face of the enormous losses of the Great War would have made the situation even more distressing. No matter what students or teachers believed about the British Empire or its enemies, or what they did to overcome the problems of resourcing at school, and whatever contribution they made to the war effort, the war still had an enormous effect on their lives.

Learning activities

Tuning in

1. Does your school do special activities to help others in need or crisis? If so, what, when, how and why?
2. Does your school have an honour board or an honour book from the Great War? If so, who are the types of people named on the board or book? Why were these items created by your school? Why does your school still have them?
3. Discuss what the word 'commemoration' means. What do you do to remember the people you love?

Using the sources

1. Activity 1 investigates Edith Dennis and her family story during the Great War. You will look at the Sources 45–52 in order to answer some questions. Fold under the information at the bottom of the page. Investigate each source and discuss the questions. Then unfold the base of the page and read the information to find out more about the members of the Dennis family and the impact of their loss.
2. Activity 2 investigates how school communities coped with loss during the Great War. In groups look at one of the Sources 53–60. Look at the photograph and discuss the questions provided on page 75. Use scissors to cut out the form of remembrance on page 76 and match it to the source. Share what you have learned with other students.
Going further

1. Is there evidence of the Great War in your school or local community? Are there monuments, buildings, streets, parks or special places that remind us of those who served in the Great War?
   a. If so, why do you think your community has such places?
   b. Find some names of people who lived in your region who served in the Great War.
   c. Where possible, bring in family stories and memorabilia from your own family’s involvement in the Great War. Obtain permission from your family members to take the items to school. Set up a secure class display.
   d. Use the questions from Activity 2 to investigate a memorial in your local area.

2. Can you name some plants, shrubs or trees that have become symbols of commemoration? Find out why:
   a. Design a memorial garden for your school. What plants and features would you include?
   b. What existing memorials will inspire and assist you with your design?
   c. Who or what will the garden commemorate?
   d. What will be your messages about war and peace?

3. Find out more about the Dennis family story by looking at the war service records at the National Archives of Australia or the Roll of Honour at the Australian War Memorial.
   Note that Roland’s name is spelt incorrectly on his attestation papers. This was quite common at the time as clerks were writing the names and may have mishandled and misspelled the name. Discuss why this can make the work of historians difficult.
Activity 1
Source 45
Perth State School, Tasmania

Look at the source
- How many students are there?
- How many teachers are there?
- The circles show the four children from one family, the Dennis family. Edith Dennis is the student circled next to the female teacher.
- Edith’s two older brothers are not in this photograph. Why not? Where might they be?
- Can you tell from the photograph if the students are happy?
- Is this photograph similar or different to your school photograph? How is it similar or different?
- What questions would you like to ask about the photograph?

Source 46
Archibald George Dennis
Archibald Dennis aged 23 years, March 1916.
Born in October 1893.
Enlisted on 7 March 1916.
Died on 25 June 1916.

Source 47
Archibald Dennis’s grave
Archibald’s grave at Cornelian Bay Cemetery, Hobart.
His mother stands beside the gravestone.
The photograph was taken in 1921.

Look at the sources
- What age was Archibald when he joined the Australian Imperial Force (AIF)?
- When might the photograph of Archibald (Source 46) have been taken?
- Why is he not wearing a uniform?
- How do you think he feels about enlisting?
- How may Edith and her sisters and brother have felt about him enlisting?
- How do you think he died?
- How do you think the members of Archibald’s family felt about his death?
- What question would you ask Archibald if you could?

Archibald was a labourer on a farm in the local district. His younger brother, Roland, had already joined the AIF two years earlier and was serving overseas.

Archibald was 23 years old when he enlisted in March 1916. He joined the 40th Battalion AIF. He went to the AIF training camp in Hobart, fell ill and died of meningitis in the Hobart Hospital. He never left Australia to go to the war, and was buried in Hobart. He never joined his brother in France.

When the Perth State School photograph was taken (Source 45) the four siblings of Archibald Dennis may have known that he had died in Hobart. Archibald would have been at the school as a student only five years before, and would have been known by the other families in the area.
Roland had been a student at Perth State School only a few years before war broke out. He had been a farm labourer in the local area, possibly with his older brother. War was declared on 4 August 1914 and he enlisted in the AIF sixteen days later. He was just 19 years old and most likely keen to serve the British Empire as well as experience adventure. He had also been a senior cadet at school. He left Australia in March 1915. He landed at Gallipoli on 25 April 1915 and served there in the 12th Battalion AIF. After the evacuation from Gallipoli, his battalion went to France in 1916. In France he was sick and seriously wounded, even suffering from mumps, and went on three months leave in Paris. He was transferred to the 52nd Battalion and served until he was killed on 25 April 1918.

It is not known if Roland knew that his brother Archibald had died in June 1916. It is likely that Roland wrote letters home and letters from his mother or father informed him that his brother had died. Edith may also have written to him and told him the sad news.

This is a photograph of Edith Dennis. She is about 17 years old. She is wearing an amethyst thistle brooch that her brother Roland bought for her in Scotland when he was on leave. He also sent her postcards while he was away, proving how much he thought about and loved her. He served with the 52nd Battalion AIF in Velines-Bretonneux, France, and was killed on 25 April 1918. Edith and her brother and sisters were still at Perth State School at this time. When the photograph (Source 50) was taken in 1919, Edith would have known that her two older brothers were dead. The Great War had ended. Edith lived to be almost 100, was always sad for the loss of her two brothers and actively worked for the Red Cross for over eighty years.

Look at the source

- How eager do you think Roland was to join up? Explain your thinking.
- What age was Roland when he enlisted?
- How might Roland’s brothers and sisters have felt about him choosing to go to war?
- What does R.I.P. stand for?
- On what date did Roland die? Is there any significance to this date?
- The war ended in November 1918. Knowing this, do you think this made the family’s grief worse? Explain your thinking.
- What question would you ask Roland if you could?
- Do you think Archibald (Source 46) may have joined the AIF because of his brother?

Look at the source

- Edith is 14 in the school photograph (Source 45). How do you think she was feeling and why? How many years later is this photograph taken?
- Do you think Edith has left school? Explain your thinking.
- What age is she?
- Describe what Edith is wearing. Is she wearing any jewellery?
- Who may have given her the brooch? Who may have given her the necklace?
- What would she know about her two older brothers at this time?
- As the eldest girl in the family, how may the Great War have affected her life at home?
- How do you think Edith’s parents felt about what happened to their two older boys?
- What question would you ask Edith if you could?
It is likely that this honour board was created and displayed at Perth State School during and after the Great War. It includes the names of the students that served in the Great War. It may have included teachers, but this is not clear without further research. There are thirty-four names on the roll, which shows how deeply the war affected this school and local community. This honour board highlights that the Great War affected nineteen families whose children had attended the school. The honour roll provides an asterisk beside the names of those who died. There are eight Dennis family names on the Honour Roll. As Archibald and Roland were part of Edith’s immediate family it is clear that six other members of the Dennis family – cousins of Edith – also attended the school and served during the war. Four Dennis members returned from the war and two cousins also died. It is unclear if all the names are for males, but it is more likely that the lives lost were of men rather than women. During the Great War, females could serve as nurses, and some lost their lives.

Source 52
Perth State School honour board, Tasmania
Photograph taken in 1992. Image courtesy: Bob Lewis

Look at the source
• What is the object? Describe what you see.
• How many names are on the honour board?
• Where would the board have been displayed?
• How many Dennis family names are on the board?
• Find Dennis RH – This is Roland Dennis
• Find Dennis AG – This is Archibald Dennis
• What does the * mean?
• What relations might the other Dennis names be to Edith? How many of these men came home, and how many died?
• Why do you think the names are not in alphabetical order?
• Were other families and students at Perth State School going through similar experiences of loss as the Dennis Family? Explain your thinking.
• How do you think the community was feeling when the school photograph (source 45) was taken in 1916? How you think the community felt by 1919?
• What question would you like to ask about the honour board?

INVESTIGATION 6
Activity 2
How did school communities cope with the sadness of losing someone they knew?
How did they remember people who did not return?
How did they help those who did return?

Look at some of the Sources 53–60
• What does the photograph show? Describe what you see.
• Who is remembered?
• How did this school or community group remember?
• Who were they sad for?
• What form did their remembering take?
• Was this done at the school or in the community?
• How did they help those who did return?
• What other questions would you like to ask about this photograph?

Portrait of Lieutenant George Vaughan MC and Bar, previously a science teacher from Leichhardt, New South Wales, April 1918, aged 28. AWM H06524

Note: the two different spellings of ‘honour’ and ‘honor’ were both correct at the time.
INVESTIGATION 6

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These are some of the forms that remembrance took in school communities during the Great War.
Cut them out and match them to the sources on the following pages.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Raise money to buy equipment to help injured soldiers</td>
<td>Christian Brothers’ College, Adelaide, 1916. In 1916, the principal of Christian Brothers’ College in Adelaide unveiled this honor roll. The school had lost so many former students that names filled the board. There is an incomplete date on the right of the shield. The school would make another honor roll with new names of former students killed after 1916. State Library of South Australia, and Adelaide Register, 29 November 1916, p. 6. Image PRG 280/1/9/354</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make an honour board with the names of those who served or died</td>
<td>Source 53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grow or donate food for recovering soldiers</td>
<td>Stand Tall: The Story of the Anzac Spirit, Australia’s Role in World War 1, p. 27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Build a memorial</td>
<td>Stand Tall: The Story of the Anzac Spirit, Australia’s Role in World War 1, p. 27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plant a tree</td>
<td>Stand Tall: The Story of the Anzac Spirit, Australia’s Role in World War 1, p. 27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visit or entertain wounded returned soldiers in Australia</td>
<td>Stand Tall: The Story of the Anzac Spirit, Australia’s Role in World War 1, p. 27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Source 54

Caulfield Military Hospital
Students entertain injured soldiers at the Caulfield Military Hospital, Victoria, during the war.


Source 55

An ambulance overseas
Many students of Victorian State Schools joined the Patriotic League to raise money to purchase this ambulance, which was used to transport injured soldiers whilst they were recovering in London. The efforts of students who had lost family members or knew of people who had died helped them cope with their sadness, in the knowledge they were helping in some small way.

Christmas gifts
These children in Warrnambool, Victoria, are holding onto their Christmas gifts for the sick and wounded soldiers. By December 1917 there had been three years of war and the impacts were strong on schools and families. The students of this state school provided the chickens as a way to help feed the soldiers in the Caulfield Military Hospital in December 1917.

Australian War Memorial H18791

Peace Tree
This is the remains of the peace tree planted at Hall School in the Australian Capital Territory during the Great War. The honour board lists the name of the students who served.

Source 58
‘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 59
Hall Honour Board, Australian Capital Territory
This is the Hall District Roll of Honour with the names of students who served in the Great War. It is located in the school museum.
Source 60

Townsville West State School memorial gates

This Queensland school built these memorial gates to remember students and teachers who served during the Great War. There are two hundred names written on marble tablets attached to the arched gateway.

Images courtesy of Kathy MacDonald.