Chapter 11
Death Reminders:
Teaching About School Shootings in Social Studies

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ABSTRACT

Discussing school shootings as current or historical events in social studies classrooms can be a difficult endeavour, as it requires confronting death and making sense of violent human behaviour. This chapter asserts that existential anxiety plays a role in helping us better understand these tragedies. Terror management theory (TMT) accounts for existential anxiety as a driver of human behaviour and can be a powerful conceptual tool to help students and teachers unpack the difficult subject matter of school shootings, as well as provide insight for behavioural responses that may emerge in the classroom in response to these discussions. As a result, TMT contributes a classroom of care that fosters a sense of student agency for which to imagine a preferable future.

INTRODUCTION

"We are going to be the kids you read about in textbooks," insisted 17-year-old student activist Emma Gonzalez during a student-led rally in the wake of the school shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland County, Florida (CNN, 2018). What became known as the "Parkland" school shooting was just one of many in 2018, marking the year as the "worst year for US school shootings" (Coughlan, 2018). In the midst of trauma, grief, anger, and fear, Gonzalez, along with a number of her peers, organized #MarchForOurLives, a national campaign with the goal of not only raising awareness of the number and extent of school shootings, but as a rallying cry for government policy changes to gun legislation in the United States that would, perhaps, eliminate school shootings altogether.

Gonzalez's prophetic claim highlights the ways in which schools and curricula especially are arenas in which students encounter and implicate themselves in the devastation of human suffering in hopes that by learning about (and learning from) human tragedy, they may be compelled to move to a more hopeful future. School shootings are complex tragedies and attempts to understand them require drawing on both multiple perspectives and multiple disciplines (e.g., sociology, psychology, history, anthropology, etc.). By its nature, social studies draws from these various disciplines to explore both historical and contemporary political and social issues, some of which involve human tragedy. Social studies teachers help students to understand the increasingly precarious and uncertain world around them (Garrett, 2017). While social studies education asks students to grapple with aspects of this world, including devastating events and atrocities such as school shootings, research has demonstrated that engaging students in discussing social and political issues is a complex endeavor that can evoke affective responses (Garrett, 2020; Garrett & Alvery, 2021), and may implicate teachers in their beliefs and worldviews (Geller, 2020). Teaching about the individual and collective actions behind tragedies like school shootings may help students make some sense of and learn from events that appear to be entirely senseless and cruel. Social studies can examine the motives and actions of the killers responsible for planning and executing mass school shootings, and explore the aftermath of collective social and cultural responses.

In addition, studying school shootings as a curricular exercise can provide a meaningful basis for students to engage in political dialogue of open issues (Hess & McAvoy, 2014, McAnulty & Garrett, 2021), by weighing the merits of topics such as gun rights policies and school security measures. It can also give students an opportunity to examine ethical concerns around the ways in which the public responds to grief and large-scale tragedy through news coverage, memorialization, and commemoration (Simon & Rosenberg, 2005; Perloff, 2016), and around how these kinds of public responses can either affirm or deny the desires of the perpetrators

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