Reactions of schools in the Bath area to bereavement

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It has been said that British schools have traditionally expressed a concern for the 'whole child', which encompasses not only curricular issues, but also some responsibility for pupil welfare[1,2]. Since children spend a large part of their day there, schools could play a valuable role in supporting their bereaved pupils.

This study, undertaken in 1996, investigated schools' perceived role in bereavement affecting their pupils and their possible needs for support in that role. It formed the major part of research work to inform a Cruse Bereavement Care working party, which was investigating what resources would be needed to provide a specific service in the Bath area to support bereaved children, and the form that such support could take.

Research method

Postal questionnaires were sent to the head teachers of 80 schools, identified from the telephone directory, in the geographic area covered by the two education authorities of Wiltshire, and Bath and NE Somerset . The questionnaires were sent to all 20 schools listed as secondary schools, and to a random sample of 60 other schools. Questionnaires were returned by 54 schools, 21 secondary schools and 33 primary schools (3 of random sample were, in fact, private secondary schools). This was a good response rate, particularly from secondary schools, possibly because the questionnaire was sent soon after the Dunblane tragedy.

The questionnaire comprised four sections covering:

- general issues concerning the role and training of schools in bereavement affecting pupils;
- bereavement affecting the whole school (ie the death of a pupil or a member of staff);
- pupils' private bereavements;
- the role and practice of schools in teaching about death and loss in the curriculum.

The questions included fixed-choice responses and open-ended questions. Follow-up face-to-face interviews were also included in a small sub-sample of five of the secondary schools and four of the primary schools. Although this sub-sample was small, and therefore not representative, it was felt that these methods would allow the expression of some of the reasons and feelings behind the answers which is not always possible in pure questionnaire research.

The school's role

The overwhelming majority of respondents (92.6%) felt that it was part of the school's role to offer support to bereaved pupils. Of the three who said that it was not their role, two qualified this by saying that they would offer support to individual pupils if needed. However, only 29.6% (38% of secondary schools and 24.2% of primary schools) said that they had received any specific training in bereavement and some indicated that this had been brief. This highlights the gap between the expressed role of the school and training, also found in studies by John Holland[3,4].

In follow-up interviews, respondents did feel that there was a need for more training but the view was expressed that there are many areas in which training could be useful and that usually priority would be given to compulsory, National Curriculum topics. In an interview preliminary to this research, an educational psychologist who runs occasional courses on bereavement issues said that these were poorly attended, which accords with research by Elizabeth Capewell[5]. Given the general reluctance to address the subject of bereavement, this is, perhaps, not surprising. The pressure on schools to be knowledgeable in many areas should also not be forgotten. As one respondent said, with a sigh, 'There is a need for training in everything'.

Bereavement affecting the whole school

Both education authorities in the area surveyed were at that time drawing up guidelines for school responses to major incidents. An officer of the Wiltshire authority did say that copies of the book *Wise Before the Event*[6], which describes ways in which disasters and crises affect schools and argues the importance of contingency planning, had been sent to all schools. However, only one school had a written policy for bereavements affecting the whole school. None had such a policy for pupils' private bereavements. In interviews, the view was expressed that a formal policy could not adapt to individual needs. It also appeared that there is a pressure on schools to draw up formal policies in many areas, but the usefulness of this was doubted if, as one respondent said, the document is then, 'put on the shelf and forgotten'.

This is not to say that schools cannot react well when the occasion demands. One primary school in which an interview was conducted had experienced the death of a pupil. The school worked with the child's parents, and with pupils at the school of whom around 40 attended the funeral. The dead child's parents had clearly found this a great comfort and had written to thank the head teacher. However, the head described the school's response as 'knee jerk', with the school having to seek sources of assistance in a time of crisis, without any known avenues of support.

Supporting bereaved pupils

In interviews respondents were asked whether the school would offer support to a bereaved pupil, how such support would be offered, and who would offer it. Although only a small sub-sample took part in the interviews, three categories of responses emerged. Either a teacher responsible for the pupil and, in one case, a non-teaching staff member, would offer sympathy and support, as a matter of course; or staff members would offer sympathy and support, at their own discretion; or bereaved pupils would be expected to seek support from staff who they feel would be sympathetic. One teacher commented, 'We put a lot of responsibility on the child to come and ask'.

It was difficult in the face-to-face interviews to obtain information as to whether schools would contact parents and offer them the opportunity to discuss the child's needs with someone at the school. Three respondents said that they would do this. Others, however, seemed reluctant to address this issue directly. Some felt that this might draw them into family matters with which it would not be appropriate for the school to become involved – 'Teachers are not social workers' – although they might contact the family if the child's behaviour was giving cause for concern.

Tim Gisborne[7] and Peta Hemmings[8] believe that teachers can and will, willingly, support bereaved children if they are given advice, and encouragement to do so. Hemmings proposes that counsellors working with bereaved families should encourage communication between parents and their child's teacher about the child's needs so that the primary relationship is between the teacher and the parent, with the counsellor taking an advisory and facilitating role.

Support for schools

The questionnaire asked whether, in the previous two years, schools had sought any outside assistance for children's bereavement issues, from where such assistance was sought and what form it took. It also asked whether there are any types of assistance or resources which would be useful to the school, which are

not currently available.

Of eight schools which had experienced a bereavement affecting the whole school, four had sought external assistance; in the case of pupils' private bereavements, 13 schools had sought such assistance. A variety of sources of support had been used, including: Cruse volunteers; education welfare officers; educational psychologists; the local hospice; counsellors and general medical practitioners. It is interesting, perhaps, to compare this with John Holland's[3,4] research in primary schools, in which head teachers were asked what supports they would use (rather than actually had used) and social services were given the top ranking. None of the schools here had sought help from social services. Support had been sought both to help school staff in dealing with pupils' bereavement issues and directly for pupils and/or their families. What emerged from this study is that there is no one avenue of support to which schools usually turn when they need such assistance.

Of those schools which commented on supports which they would like to be available, the majority wanted information and training to enable staff to support pupils. Only four said that they would like access to direct counselling for bereavements affecting the whole school, and only two for private bereavements. Other needs expressed included: policy advice; staff training; contacts for support and advice in the event of need; and some simply wanted to know what is available. This, again, highlights the difficulty which may be faced by schools, in the absence of policy or guidelines, of where to turn when bereavement support is felt to be necessary.

Bereavement and loss in the curriculum

The great majority, 46 (85.2%), of the respondents felt that it was part of the school's role to teach children about death and dying, and seven (12.9%) were not sure. The most striking thing here was that none of them felt that this was *not* part of the school's role. However the topic was included in the curriculum of only 28 (51.9%) of these schools. It was more likely to be approached in secondary than in primary schools, usually as part of personal and social education or religious education. In face-to-face interviews respondents indicated three main difficulties in including this topic: time in a crowded curriculum; the sensibilities of teachers, who may be unwilling to approach the subject; the possibility of upsetting pupils who had experienced a bereavement.

This, again, is an area in which those trained in bereavement issues and in supporting the bereaved, might be able to assist schools, as they could deal with the subject openly and sensitively.

Recommendations

There were two main recommendations arising from this research.

1. Information should be made available to all schools, and to the education authorities, about the ways in which Cruse and other bereavement organisations could assist them, including:
   - assistance to schools and teachers to enable them to support bereaved pupils themselves
   - direct counselling
   - group counselling
   - in-service training
   - talks to school classes about death and loss and the issues surrounding them.

It might be useful if such information could include the possibility of named contacts.

2. Where a bereavement counsellor becomes directly involved in a child or family bereavement, communication between the family and the school should be encouraged and supported by the counsellor.

These strategies are aimed at raising the awareness of local bereavement services in schools so that they would become a natural point of reference in pupil bereavement. BC

References

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REVIEW

GRIEF AND BEREAVEMENT

Studies of grief in adult life (3rd edition)
Colin Murray Parkes.
London, UK: Routledge, 1996. £27.50 hb

In 1972, I was asked by my late professor, T Frey, to review a recently published book by an author whose name at that time was unknown to me. When I first opened this book, *Bereavement*, by Colin Murray Parkes, I gradually realised as I read how important it was for a young psychiatrist to know more about the relationship between grief, bereavement and depression. Dr Parkes postulated:

> 'I know of only one functional psychiatric disorder whose cause is know, whose features are distinctive, and whose course is usually predictable, and that is grief, the reaction to loss. Yet this condition has been so neglected by psychiatrists that it is not even mentioned in the indexes of most of the best-known general textbooks of psychiatry.'

At that time, the interest in grief, as a scientific field, was not very great in my country, Sweden. I had been given the opportunity to work in a psychiatric emergency ward and I found Dr Parkes' book, and the crisis theories of the 1970s, very helpful for understanding my patients. This book was also the starting point for my own research work in the field of traumatic bereavement.

Against this background, it was with great pleasure and interest that I agreed to review the third edition. Much has changed in nearly 30 years and the body of knowledge has greatly increased: the list of references is almost three times as long as it was in the first edition.

One of the more prominent differences – and improvements – in the book is the distinction between pathological/problematic grief and post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Today it is well known that the determinants to consider in relation to a possible problematic grief reaction are whether or not the loss has been sudden, unexpected, untimely, and traumatic: a traumatic stress reaction is more a result of traumatic circumstances than of the loss itself.

The contents of the new edition have been organised in the same way as the first with the following main themes – the cost of commitment, the broken heart, alarm; searching, mitigation, anger and guilt, gaining a new identity, atypical grief, determinants of grief, helping the bereaved, and reactions to other types of loss.

The whole text has been accurately updated with references to all the important research contributors of today, making the new edition the most authorative work of its kind. I can strongly recommend it, both for beginners in this field and for experienced veterans.

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