How should schools respond to death?

GRIEF IN SCHOOL COMMUNITIES

Louise Rowling

Buckingham, UK: Open University Press, 2003, 196pp. £17.99 pb. ISBN 0 33521 115 1

Wherever you turn at present, writers in the bereavement field are producing information for teachers. Awareness of the needs of bereaved children has extended beyond the limits of the child and family to include the institution where children spend at least six hours every day. Unfortunately much of this literature, particularly that written in the USA, does not transfer well to settings outside the country of origin, but Lousie Rowling's extensive qualitative research, in both the UK and Australia, gives this book a wide relevance for professionals in many countries.

Dr Rowling has a background in education, and her empathy and appreciation for education professionals come through clearly in the many quotes that illustrate her book. I was impressed by the depth and thoroughness of her research, which included interviews with educationalists from all backgrounds and with a variety of teaching experience. She looks at death and loss as experiences within a social context, interpreted through personal interactions, and argues persuasively that death education should form part of a school's social learning curriculum: the supportive environment schools can create should be part of the wider mental health promotion framework.

Starting with theory, the book takes us through all aspects of loss as it impacts on children, teachers, and school communities. The management of critical incidents, special cases such as death by suicide, and the possibility of disenfranchised grief of both pupils and teachers, are all considered. Rowling looks at the role of the head teacher, exploring the particular issues for those who are expected to be in charge, partnerships with other agencies, and ways to place education about grief and loss within the curriculum, with comments from young people. Finally, she discusses the way forward for education and training. Each chapter ends with a few helpful, practical bullet points on implications for practice.

The strength of this book is that it provides both a theoretical underpinning and sensible, practical and workable suggestions for creating supportive school communities. It would be a most welcome addition to the library of anyone working with bereaved young people.

Frances Kraus

St Christopher's Candle Project Leader

WHAT WILL WE DO? Preparing a School Community to Cope with Crisis (2nd edn)

***Robert Stevenson** (ed)*

New York: Baywood Publishing Company, 2002, 242pp. $48.95. ISBN 1 84310 015 0

This book is written for all who are interested in how schools can cope with crises and minimise their effect on the school community. In recent years there has been increased concern about the safety of children in school and a number of traumatic events involving children and staff both on and off the school premises. It is urgent, therefore that every school should consider how it would respond to different kinds of crises.

The book describers pre- and post-intervention programmes in the USA which deal with issues relating to loss, illness, death, grief, war and violence. One chapter describes practical steps that need to be taken by a school to help it prepare for a possible future crisis. Other very useful chapters cover youth suicide, AIDS and HIV infection ('a continuing crisis'), community support groups, encouraging peer support, and creating a 'safe room' in the school nurse's office. Rick Ritter, in chapter 14, describes how critical incident stress debriefing teams give support to schools in the USA and raises very important questions about how schools in the UK can establish reliable networks of professional help and support as part of their crisis planning.

This book is timely and highly recommended reading for all head teachers and others involved in preparing schools for possible future crisis management.

Susan Askew

Course Leader in Health Education

RESPONDING TO PUPIL BEREAVEMENT

Lesley Ratcliffe

Ainsdale, Merseyside PR8 2TD, UK: Positive Behaviour Management, 2001, 32pp. £7.99 pb.

This short, easily-read publication gives clear advice to teachers about how to help children after a bereavement. There is a discussion of 'normal grieving', and of the changes in behaviour that may be seen. The importance of age and developmental level are considered. The characteristics of a good listener are outlined, as are some of the obstacles to good listening and effective communication. The author points out that access to specialised counselling support may not be an immediate

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Dear Editors

As a coroner in a rural area of England which has substantially changed its coroner service recently, I hope I can correct the impression given by Parkes' editorial in the Summer issue (*Bereavement Care* 2003; [2]**22**: 18) that the criticisms of the coroner service outlined there are universal practice. I appreciate that in other areas circumstances may well be different.

Our service is now run by the local authority with all coroner's officers, administrative staff and archive facilities under one roof, centrally placed in the region. Bereaved relatives find this a considerable improvement on the previous *ad hoc* arrangements with local courts and other facilities.

Families are almost invariably consulted by us over post-mortem decisions. Where there is no choice, the reasons are explained. If organs must be retained to establish the cause of death, this is carefully discussed and the family's instructions on what is to happen to the organs subsequently are carried out. If necessary the body is kept until the organs can be reunited with it. We often deal with insurance claims for families and, as a result of our post-mortem or inquest procedures, can sometimes provide essential medical information.

Very rarely are funeral arrangements delayed, usually only where there are possible charges of homicide or disputes amongst family members about funeral arrangements. Police are only involved if there is a reasonable suspicion of an unnatural death. Otherwise any investigation takes place through the coroner's service.

At present, the coroner has a statutory duty, without any discretion, to hold public inquests in certain circumstances, unless issues of national security arise. However, we use documentary evidence instead of witnesses for many of our inquests, and families have access to that evidence and are often invited to come in to review the file and talk to the coroner's officer.

My hope is that in the future coroner's service would be able to provide a full investigative and support service for the bereaved, including facilities for bereavement volunteers. The substantial financial resources this may require would be well spent if it helps support those involved in sudden and unexpected deaths which, as the editorial rightly states, are inevitably going to be traumatic.

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