



## Science Educators and Grief Counselling: Management of Bereavement in the School Environment

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### Abstract

*In our study, we examine counselling processes of mourning and grief in children and adolescents in the school environment. Specifically we discuss the role and skills of the science teacher as a grief counselor. Educators “become” grief counselors when they must support their students while they deal with loss, either in their school or in their family environment. We explore the terms grief, mourning, loss and refer to their manifestations in children and adolescents. Knowledge of the psychological stages of grief and mourning, of the feelings that surface during the process of mourning, and of grief counseling techniques enables the teacher in this task. Research conducted with a sample of 135 science teachers in Greece indicates their lack of confidence as well as their strong desire for additional training in grief counselling skills. In the absence of formal education science teachers prefer to support their grieving students through group sessions and preventive counselling in order to offer a better support system for their students.*

**Keywords:** *Death, Stages of Grief/Mourning, Teacher, Science teachers, Grief Counseling*

### 1. Introduction

According to Humphrey & Zimpfer [10], any event that encompasses change is considered a loss necessitating the process of grief and transition. In this respect the process of mourning appears as an integral part of life. Increasingly, it is being recognized that if the child has a consistent adult who reliably satisfies reality needs and encourages the expression of feelings about the loss, healthy adjustment can occur (Bowlby [1]).

The management of grief in the school environment appears to be difficult, given the fact, that most teachers lack formal education and training in the skills necessary to support children/ adolescents in bereavement. Educators “become” grief counselors in order to help their student(s) cope with loss either in the school or in their family environment. Research acknowledges how teachers play a vital role in recognising a young person’s grief as well as aiding the psycho-social well-being of those in their care [6].

The term “mourning” indicates the painful internal process of bereavement and grief in a human being over the loss of a loved one. The Victorian belief that grief was a sign of a “broken heart” resulting from the loss of a love was replaced by Freud’s psychodynamic view that grief was painful because it involved letting go of attachment to the deceased [8]. This “letting go” was viewed as essential for “moving on” with one’s life, eventual recovery from depression, and a return to “normal” [14].

#### 1.1. Manifestations of grief and loss in children and adolescents

People who interact with recently bereaved youth find them sad, angry, and fearful. Their behavior includes appetite and sleep disturbances, withdrawal, concentration difficulties, dependency, regression, restlessness, and learning difficulties. They also note that initial symptom patterns depend largely on the age at which the child is bereaved. School-age children may become phobic or hypochondriacal, withdrawn, or excessively care-giving [12]. Adolescents may also be reluctant about expressing their emotions because of fear that they will appear different or abnormal.

Bowlby [1] views mourning as including a variety of psychological processes, set into motion by the loss of a loved one. He cites four general phases, namely numbing, yearning and searching, disorganization and despair and reorganization. The child/adolescent grieves for the loss while he/she feels anger that this should happen. Guilt and self-blame for the things the child considers he should have done, anxiety and fear for the future are feelings that the child/adolescent experiences after the loss of a loved one. Because these emotions may be expressed as angry outbursts or misbehavior, rather than as sadness, they may not be recognized as grief-related. [10].

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Common reactions to bereavement, which may subsequently affect a bereaved pupil in the classroom environment, include: acting rebellious, substance abuse, psychosomatic complaints, changes in behavior, performance decline, eating problems, specific fears triggered by reminders of the trauma, overwhelming emotions, and a foreshortened future [2]. These negative outcomes call for appropriate care, training, and support from both the school and its staff.

### **1.2. Grief counseling by teachers**

As young people spend one-third of their lives in school, the reactions of teachers and peers are significant, as is the role of the school itself to establish that the needs of bereaved students are recognized and responded to in an appropriate manner [5].

Research recognises how teachers play a vital role in recognising a young person's grief as well as aiding the psycho-social well-being of those in their care [6]. *"While the psychological pain and processes of grief are mostly unavoidable, it is clear that the behaviour of those adults relating to young people on a daily basis is a major contributory factor towards what is often referred to as a healthy progress through grief."*(p.31)[3].

Recent definitions of mourning suggest that mourners do not just move on and relinquish the relationship to the lost person, but continue to have a relationship with the lost person or object throughout their lives [20]. According to Fiorini & Mullen [7] this approach is a much more hopeful and satisfying one for counselors who work with bereaved children and adolescents. Instead of insisting that their students work through and "get over" their feelings of grief, counselors are able to help them redefine their relationship with their lost loved one and hold on to meaningful memories.

The science educator may potentially have a deeper involvement in grief management in school, as she can define the terms of loss, of death and consequently of grief and mourning by their biological point of view. Using paradigms of the natural biological course of living beings the science educator may inspire students with hope and optimism for life and through reality testing may revive the student's interest for the external world.

## **2. Research**

The participants in our study were 135 science educators serving in secondary education in the area of Athens/Greece, during the school year 2015-2016. The sample was selected randomly. The teachers, responded to a questionnaire, especially designed for the purpose of this study. Questions explored attitudes, beliefs and observations in a 5-point Likert scale allowing educators to express degree of agreement or disagreement with the statements.

Responses by our participants indicate that the majority (87,5%) observed in the order below the following reactions by their students: shock and numbness, yearning and searching, disorganization and reorganization in their grieving students.

At the same the majority of our participants (76%) indicate their lack of appropriate training in grief counseling.No significant differences were noted regarding gender, age or years of professional experience.

Science educators of our sample report using more frequently group and prevention counseling. They believe that they cannot engage in a personal counseling session with their grieving student as they lack the knowledge and the counselling skills necessary to manage grief. According to our participants group counseling sessions with their students improve communication between themselves, the students and their parents. They also encourage pupils to talk about their loss, which they appeared hesitant to discuss with peers in the past.

Suggestions and recommendations of the participating science educators seem to be in accordance with those of Stevenson & Stevenson [20].They stress the need for collaboration with the student's family environment as well as the need to strengthen ties with the school community. Furthermore, they believe that as educators they can act as grief counselors in accordance with Parkes [16] definition of an independent support group.

## **3. Discussion**

Participants observed in their students identical processes of grief management as those described in the bibliography by Bowlby [1] Parkes [16], Worben [22] and Kubler-Ross & Kessler [11]. Our results regarding the lack of training and confidence of teachers in grief management are in concurrence to international research indicating that a lack of training and confidence is prevalent throughout many countries. Reid and Dixon [17] indicated that only half of teachers in the US felt that their academic training prepared them to minimally handle death-related issues in the classroom. Shipman, Kraus, and Monroe [19] found that 56% of teachers in the UK feel inadequate in working with young people



who have been bereaved. Similarly, Holland [9], found a “training gap” in the area of loss and bereavement.

Contrary to these findings, teachers surveyed by Lytje [14] in Denmark reported the system to be so effective that they did not feel the need for any further support on the topic. The bereavement response system that has developed there is different from those in other European nations with the development of the bereavement response plan (“b-plan”).

Let it be noted that the majority of the science teachers in our study, believe that they do have the necessary skills to act as teacher-counselors but only in a preventive framework as described by Worden [22] and Kubler-Ross [12].

#### 4. Conclusion

According to Webb [21] mourners do not just move on and relinquish the relationship to the lost person, but continue to have a relationship with the lost person or object throughout their lives. This approach is more hopeful and satisfying for teachers / counselors who work with pupils who have experienced loss. Instead of insisting that students work through and “get over” their feelings of grief, counselors are able to help them redefine their relationship with their lost loved one and hold on to meaningful memories. Stevenson [20] claims that teachers use sympathy, honesty and empathy effectively as techniques of support and guidance to grieving pupils that seem to help the management of grief in the school. At the same time Worden [22] believes that a positive worldview and optimistic attitude towards life can become an example to their students and facilitate in the better understanding of life itself.

Science teachers can interpret and present death and loss as a part of the biological cycle of life. As grief counselors, despite their lack of education and training in this area, they can help students better understand and ultimately accept the loss of a loved one.

When responding to loss of a loved one it is incumbent upon all in the educational community to ensure that resources, supports, and training programmes are robust and certified, and not just the result of good intentions.

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