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A comparative examination of schools` responses to bereavement and the associated needs of the school community in Galway, West of Ireland and Derry, Northern Ireland

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Abstract

The aim and objective of this study is to examine and compare how schools in Galway, Republic of Ireland and Derry in the North of Ireland, [Cities located within two independent jurisdictions in Ireland], manage and respond to bereavement. The ‘Loss in Schools’ questionnaire (Holland, 2001) previously been administered in studies in Hull, contains ten questions designed to unearth pertinent issues including the needs and concerns of schools. Sixty questionnaires were administered in both Galway and Derry with a return of thirty-eight and thirty-five respectively. This study illuminates important aspects of the topic. The schools in both Galway and Derry rate bereavement (and parental separation) as highly important in terms of priorities. In terms of policy, some respondents in both study sites report that loss is included in their school’s policy documents but not formally included in the curriculum. A designated staff member [for bereavement issues] is evident in thirty-seven percent of Derry schools and twenty-three percent of Galway schools. Some members of staff in both study sites have attended training in bereavement. Schools request assistance from other agencies outside the formal schools arena in times of need. In Galway, the psychology services are most commonly consulted; in Derry,

the Western Education and Library Board (WELB) Bereavement Counselling teams and Cruse Bereavement Care are identified as additional resources from which help is sought. This paper outlines recommendations on schools' training needs in the area of child bereavement and the request for support to help further develop and formalise school policies.

Introduction

Death touches the lives of school-going children in the North and Republic of Ireland (see Donnelly and Connon, 2003; McGovern and Barry, 2000; Smyth, Fay, Brough and Hamilton, 2004; Tracey, 2006) and in many other areas throughout the world. For example, bereaved children have been considered in the literature in England (see Holland, 1993; Shipman, Kraus and Monroe; Stokes, 2004); the United States (eg. Servaty-Seib, Peterson and Spang, 2003); South Africa (eg. Cluver and Gardner, 2006); Finland (eg. Rask, Kaunonen and Paunonen-Ilmonen, 2002) and Australia (eg. Wooding and Raphael, 2004). While our knowledge and understanding of bereavement in children has increased, the way in which schools respond to and manage death is less illuminated in the literature. This paper draws on the definitions of Stroebe, Stroebe and Hansson (1993a) to outline the key concepts: bereavement is the loss of someone significant. This paper is concerned with bereavement through loss that occurs as a result of death or parental separation. Grief, 'incorporates diverse psychological (cognitive, social-emotional) and physical (physiological-somatic) manifestations' (Hansson, Stroebe, and Schut, 2002, p6).

The need for awareness: childrens' responses to death

The insights gleaned from studies about children demonstrate that death (particularly the death of a parent) has a significant impact on the health and well-being of the young (see Elizur and Kaffman, 1982; Van Eerdewegh, Bieri, Paarilla and Clayton, 1982; Van Eerdewegh, Clayton, and Van Eerdewegh, 1985; Weller, Weller, Fristad and Bowes, 1991; Worden, 1996). However, the way in which children respond to death will vary (Speece and Brent, 1996). A number of factors will help to determine how a child responds to loss. These include the age and developmental level of the child (Baker and Sedney, 1996; Speece and Brent, 1996), the background of the family (Berlinsky and Biller, 1982; Kranzler, Shaffer, Wasserman and Davies, 1989) and the quality of the relationship with the person who has died (Webb, 1993). It has been found that if death is not talked about within the family, if it is not an integral part of life, it may be difficult to deal with when it occurs (O'Brien, Goodenow, Espin, 1991). Conversely, a child with strong emotional support within the family will be more likely to grieve in a healthier way (eg. Hurd, 1999).

Bereavement and Grief

The psychological process of adjusting to bereavement (in children and adults), known as grief or grieving is said to include the stages of shock-numbness, yearning-searching, disorganisation-despair and reorganisation (see Bowlby, 1980; Parkes and Weiss, 1983). Bowlby (1980) defined grief as a response to the loss of, or separation from, the attachment figure. It is important to note that in the same way as bereaved children suffer emotionally, children will suffer similar emotional effects [ie. grief] as a consequence of parental separation, divorce or family break-up (Fawcett, 2000).

In terms of the concept of stage models (such as Bowlby's), others have cautioned that this approach to understanding the grief process should not be taken too literally as the individual, personal and unique experience of loss is not fully understood or explained by stage/phase models (eg. Scrutton, 1995). As Baker, Sedney and Gross (1992) noted, "grieving can never be an orderly or efficient process" (p116). For example, the circumstances of the death is a factor that needs to be taken into consideration as it may influence on the course of the grief trajectory (Maciejewski, Zhang, Block and Prigerson, 2007). In his study of young men and women bereaved of a parent in childhood, Holland (2001) reported that those who anticipated the death had better outcomes than in cases where the death was sudden and unexpected. The rationale was that "children may have had time to say goodbye to their parent, and also to come to terms with death before it actually happened" (Holland, 2001, p185).

Worden (2002) highlighted that bereaved children and young people will react with sadness, crying, panic, lowered self-esteem, guilt and anxiety. Feelings of grief in the young can also be expressed through acting-out behaviour (Black, 1978; Goldman, 2001) and somatic symptoms (Van Eerdewegh et al., 1985). However, in some cases, it may be up to two years before grief symptoms emerge in children following the death of a parent (Silverman and Worden, 1996).

Bereaved children - experiences in school

After a death, children need support, nurturance and continuity (Worden, 1996).

Given the significant amount of time children spend in school – up to six hours a day in the classroom - it is possible that children and young people will welcome

additional help and support from teachers following the death of a parent (Tracey, 2006).

In the Harvard Child Bereavement Study, Silverman and Worden (1996) found that the death of someone close is something that children do not always wish to talk about. In school, children may be teased about the death of a parent (Worden, 1996) and such lack of understanding from peers can be stressful for them (Silverman, 2000). To avoid other children's hurtful remarks children may choose to remain silent (about the death). From the child's perspective, it is important not to be regarded as 'different' or 'abnormal in any way' (Baker and Sedney, 1996), and to avoid showing emotion to peers (Silverman and Worden, 1996).

Bereavement – the need for acknowledgement in schools

Given what is known and understood about the impact of loss on children's mental and psychological health, death in children's lives (or emotional disturbance due to parental separation), is something schools cannot ignore. As Servaty-Seib et al. (2003) pointed out, "...death cannot be kept outside the walls of our primary and secondary school institutions. Death is a fact of life; a fact that school personnel and school systems cannot afford to deny" (p170). While this claim is acceptable, it has to be said that in order to help bereaved children, teachers need to feel comfortable in dealing with the topic of death (Cullinan, 1990). So the related questions are – how comfortable do educators feel in dealing with death? If a general discomfort exists, what should occur in schools to create and maintain a positive, supportive environment for student bereavement?

Bereavement in the Curriculum

The need to incorporate death education (including grief) into the curriculum in schools in Ireland has been identified (McGovern and Barry, 2000). If this were to happen in schools, it could have a beneficial effect in the short-term and longer-term. That is, if children have not experienced the loss of a loved one, they may not fully understand the impact of death on their peers, and as Worden (1996) found, the bereaved child can be taunted and teased. In Tracey's (2006) study, one of the most difficult aspects of school life for bereaved daughters was the unwelcome remarks made by other children who had no idea of the hurt and distress they caused. Perhaps death education in the curriculum would create a greater awareness of the impact of teasing, and 'prepare' children for possible losses in the future.

While McGovern and Barry (2000) found support for the inclusion of death education in the school curriculum in Ireland, two areas of caution were highlighted. Firstly, teachers were concerned that providing death education in school might reduce parental responsibility around such matters. Secondly, if teachers were to deliver death education programmes, further training and ongoing support for teachers would be a necessary part of the preparation phase (McGovern and Barry, 2000).

Services available to bereaved children

Childrens' needs, health and well-being have been a central part of Government strategies in both domains in recent years. The Children's (Northern Ireland) Order of 1995 provided a statutory framework that ensured a 'whole child' strategy was firmly in place. More recently in Northern Ireland, a ten year strategy – 2006-2016 - issued by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister [2006], pledged to

sustain a child-centred, rights based approach to the health and well-being of children and young people. Similarly, in 2000 the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs in the Republic issued the National Children's Strategy, Our Children - Their Lives 2000 – 2010. Therein, it was stated that the aim of the strategy was to create 'An Ireland where children are respected as young citizens with a valued contribution to make and a voice of their own; where all children are cherished and supported by family and the wider society; where they enjoy a fulfilling childhood and realise their potential' (p 1).

At present, children in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland have routes towards support following bereavement or parental break-up. In Derry, depending on their level of need, young people can be referred to their general practitioner, social worker or educational psychologist. In Northern Ireland, as in the Republic, child clinical psychologists are usually linked to a Health Board [Northern Ireland] or the Health Service Executive [HSE] in the Republic. In the Derry locality, the Western Health and Social Services Trust offer clinical services such as individual counselling and family therapy through the Child and Family Team.

The existence of Cruse Bereavement Care in the North [it is a UK wide service] means that young bereaved people in Derry can be referred. Cruse has volunteers trained to work with children, usually with social work or counselling related backgrounds. Other existing agencies that can be accessed in times of need are Relate Teen set up in 1991 by the marriage and counselling agency, RELATE [a professional relationship counselling organisation]. Relate Teen is a counselling service for young people who are affected by the break-up of their parent's marriage.

In the Republic of Ireland the route towards seeking help for bereaved children is similar to the North. Barnardos, the Children Charity, is estimated to be one the largest providers of help, counselling, training and resources for work with children and in particular on bereavement issues. Galway schools have access to the Rainbows Ireland Project that was set up in Ireland in 1988. The Project offers help to children and teenagers in relation to loss through death, separation and divorce or other difficult transitions that children may go through within their family. The format is small groups that meet weekly for six weeks, run by trained facilitators. Table 1 outlines the structure of the interventions [including crisis intervention] offered to different school sectors, young adults and parents:

The Rainbows Ireland Project

Sunbeams - Primary School (Junior/Senior Infants)

Rainbows (Levels 1 / 2 / 3) - Primary School (1st - 6th Class)

Spectrum (Levels 1 / 2 / 3) - Secondary School

Kaleidoscope - Young Adult

Prism - Parents

Silver Linings - Crisis Intervention

Table 1

‘Childline’ is available to children in the North and Republic and many schools use poster advertisements to alert children to the service.

Bereavement in the Irish context

In relation to Ireland in particular, the cultural change of attitude to death and mourning and the steady decline of traditional rituals means that schools are playing

an increasingly important role in dealing with loss in young peoples` lives (McGovern and Barry, 2000). If funeral parlours become the norm and the traditional wake is eroded, the young may lose their resource for understanding and learning about death and loss and, in particular, dealing with their own grief. According to McGovern and Barry (2000), "Traditional wakes in the family home offered an important opportunity for sharing with children and understanding the passage between life and death" (p 325). In their study of children in London schools, Lowton and Higginson (2003), suggested that in terms of responding to death and loss, young people are influenced by culture of the wider society they live in. In other words, if death is surrounded by a 'veil of silence', it is likely that this will influence how the young react or repond to death. Their findings confirmed that, indeed, the 'veil of silence' was transferred to the classroom situation (Lowton and Higginson, 2003).

When they examined parents and teachers understanding of children`s grief and attitudes to death, McGovern and Barry (2000) revealed a number of important findings. For example, while teachers (35%) and parents (72%) reported that they had dealt with death issues, both groupings described themselves as uncomfortable in talking about death with children. In dealing with death in the school setting, teachers worry about doing the 'right thing' (Lowton and Higginson, 2003) or may be 'wary of causing an upset' (Holland, 2001). The need for training and support for teachers in dealing with death issues in schools is echoed in other studies (eg. Holland, 2001; Lowton and Higginson, 2003; Tracey, 2006; Tracey and Holland, 2008). However, this raises the issue of how the school community feel about the role of supporting and managing death in the classroom.

The Present Study

The present study was designed to compare responses to bereavement and the needs of schools in the cities of Galway, Ireland and Derry, Northern Ireland. The study sites are within two individual jurisdictions as the Country was partitioned in 1921. Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom and the remainder of the Country, known as the Republic of Ireland [sometimes referred to as the Irish Free State or Eire], is ruled by its own government in Dublin. The population of Ireland as a whole is estimated at just over 6 million people, with 1.8 residing in the North and approximately 4.5 in the Republic.

The two regions – Galway and Derry - are located on the Western side of the Country; each with their own airports, universities and colleges of further education. Both are places of historical and cultural interest.

Derry, also known as Londonderry, on the River Foyle, is inhabited by approximately 110,000 people. It is located in the North West of Northern Ireland (close to the border with Co Donegal). Galway is situated on the mid-West coast of the Republic of Ireland with a population of around 72,500 that is ever-growing. It is anticipated that by 2020, it will have 100,000 people living in the City and surrounding areas. Galway has 27 primary schools and eleven post-primary schools whereas Derry (and its surrounding districts) has more than double that amount with a present total of sixty including primary, post-primary and special.

Tracey and Holland's (2008) recent comparative study of schools in Hull, Yorkshire and Derry/Londonderry revealed that schools rated death and loss as significant but

were asking for help and support to develop policies and training to enable staff to respond consistently and confidently to a child who has experienced loss. However, to our knowledge a comparative study of schools in the North and Republic of Ireland in relation to responses to bereavement and the needs of schools could not be found. The type of provision available to children and young people and schools' responses [eg. to the management of death and bereavement when it occurs, existing policy or inclusion of death education in the curriculum] were unknown. Therefore, the present study set out to address the existing gap *and* to begin the process of developing an understanding of schools' responses to bereavement in the Republic of Ireland and the North of Ireland. The selection of the two geographical areas was determined by the long-standing, deep interest of the researchers in the topic, the availability of school sites and the home based Universities of the researchers at University of Ulster, Magee and NUI, [New University of Ireland], Galway.

The 'Loss in Schools' Questionnaire

In order to address the objective of surveying how the school forum in Ireland – North and Republic - manage bereavement and respond to children, the 'Loss in Schools' questionnaire (Holland, 1993) was considered appropriate for the task. The questionnaire, devised by Dr John Holland, an educational psychologist, was administered on a regular basis over a number of years in schools surveyed in Hull. In a 1993 survey, amongst other findings, Holland's questionnaire revealed that schools in the area lacked the skills and training required, even though bereavement was identified as a high priority. Over the years, the questionnaire has successfully highlighted the needs of schools and the longer-term, sustained effort by Holland and others in Hull in leading the cause for the management of and response to bereavement

in children has to be commended. For example, the ‘Lost for Words’ training pack (Holland, Dance, MacManus and Stitt, 2005) has been widely used in training as well as helping schools develop policies and procedures. This endeavour along with others that include ‘drop-ins’ for teachers at Dove House Hospice in Hull, international conferences and a library of resources, ensures that Hull exemplifies best practice in terms of keeping death in childrens’ lives on the agenda.

‘Loss in Schools’ has been long-established, utilised in comparative studies with other Countries and requested by researchers in other cultures. While it has been robust in identifying the needs of schools [eg. Holland, 1993; Holland, 2005; Rowling and Holland, 2000; Tracey and Holland, 2008], information relating to the reliability and validity of the questionnaire was not available at the time of writing.

The Loss in Schools Questionnaire contains eleven questions that are classified into two groups – closed and open-ended. Most questions, for example, offered the respondents a Likert -type choice [ranging from not important to very important] with the option to specify details. The use of an open-ended response format is less restrictive and provides those participating with the freedom to respond in their own way (Pallant, 2001). The questions cover the following themes:

- the priority given to bereavement and parental separation in school
- how loss is approached and who is responsible
- the area of training / where would schools seek help if it was required
- whether loss address in the curriculum or included in policy documents
- if further help is required?

Three other components are included:

- A 'Help Form' is included at the end in which respondents can indicate the name and address of the school and highlight the areas of further help that they may be interested in - training courses, training packs or other.
- Schools are asked to indicate their sector [primary, post-primary, special]
- Schools are asked to identify whether or not they have received a copy of 'Wise Before the Event' (Yule and Gold, 1993).

[NB. A free copy of 'Wise Before the Event': Coping with Crises in Schools (2003), was said to be posted to every school in the U.K. with the aim of helping schools respond to bereavement and loss experienced by a school going child. Therefore, when the questionnaire was designed, this question was included to assess how many schools actually had a copy of the book].

Procedures

Galway

Galway Education Centre co-operated fully in preparations for the study, identifying the school base in the region. The cost of administration [including the stamped addressed envelopes for return of questionnaires] was covered. The 'Loss in Schools' questionnaire was administered to 60 schools that included primary, post-primary and special schools [see Table 1]. All schools were of Catholic ethos, of mixed gender and social class in Galway city and surrounding areas.

Derry

The Western Education and Library Board (WELB) provided a list of 60 schools that constituted the Derry catchment area. The 'Loss in Schools' questionnaire was

administered through email and postal networks to the primary, secondary (grammar, high and colleges) and special schools [see Table 1].

Analysis

The small sample size in both study sites determined that complex analytic procedures were not considered appropriate. First of all, the frequencies of responses for each question [Likert-type] were calculated as a percentage of the data set. A content analysis of the textual data [Weber, 1990] was applied to specific written information that accompanied the questions. Each researcher took responsibility for analysing and writing up the results of the questionnaires returned within their own study sites. When this process was completed, a comparison of the percentages emerging from the results of the Derry and Galway schools was drawn up.

Results and discussion

The purpose of this study was to compare how schools in the North of Ireland (Derry) and in the Republic of Ireland (Galway) manage and respond to bereavement. To ensure that the results of the study are clearly outlined, the results will be presented as follows: Each question in the survey will be addressed separately, comparisons noted and issues arising highlighted. First, an overview of the response rates in each study site by sector is presented.

Overall response Rate to Questionnaire

The returns on the questionnaires were 35 out of 60 in Derry (ie. 58%) and 38 out of 60 in Galway (ie. 63%) [see Table 2].

School Location	Posted Out	Returned	%Response
Primary Derry	43	25	59%
Galway	48	29	60%
Post-primary Derry	14	8	57%
Galway	10	7	70%
Special Schools Derry	3	2	67%
Galway	2	2	100%

Table 1: The response rate to the questionnaire by study site and sector

Question 1: Do you have a copy of ‘Wise before the Event’ at school?

This first question could have been considered more relevant to the North of Ireland sample, given that ‘Wise before the Event’ (a guided bereavement book for schools) by Yule and Gold (1993) was said to be posted out to every school in Britain and Northern Ireland. There was no understanding that the same action had been taken in the Republic of Ireland. However, the responses showed that one school in Galway had the book but none of the schools in Derry reported that they had received a copy!

Therefore, the first comparison of note was that all but one school in both study sites were devoid of a useful reference book that could guide their response to bereavement.

Question 2: On a scale of 1 to 4, how do you rate the area of child bereavement in terms of priorities in school?

In the Derry study site, 86% of schools rated child bereavement as important or very important in terms of priority, with a similar response in Galway [84%]. Looking within the sectors the similarities remained. For example, the primary sector response in Derry was 80% and the post-primary 75%. In Galway, the corresponding results were primary 96% and post-primary 75%. Both sets of special schools [two respondents in each study site as noted above] were in agreement that child bereavement was high priority in their sector. The high percentage of responses in the important/very important categories suggested that schools gave precedence and recognition to bereavement, an issue of significance and importance in the life of the school and its pupils.

Question 3: On a scale of 1 to 4, how do you rate the area of parental separation in terms of priorities in school?

Interestingly, parental separation received a slightly higher rating [than bereavement] in Derry (89%) and Galway (87%). Perhaps parental separation had the edge because schools were aware that in the current climate separation may be more likely in childrens' lives. For example, Fawcett (2000), reporting on the United Kingdom, noted that relationship breakdown, divorce and separation are on the increase. A similar development in the Republic of Ireland is confirmed in statistics issued by the Central Statistics Office [CSO, 2007]. In 2007 alone, it is estimated that 4,877 families were subject to divorce, separation or annulment. Comparative figures in the Population Marital Status [CSO, Cork] suggested that in 2002 the statistics were 98,779 separated

and 35,059 divorced while 2006 showed an increase in both of these national statistics, ie. 107,263 separated and 59,534 divorced. Notably, a programme available throughout the Republic, the 'Rainbow Projects' (a group based intervention programme for separated and bereaved children), has been running in the Galway area for a number of years [see above].

Schools in the study indicated that teachers need to know about the changing circumstances in a child's life so that they can respond appropriately. Immediately, one thinks of the value of policies and procedures that could help to ensure that teachers are informed, kept up to date and made aware of events in childrens' lives. The need for such awareness is poignantly illustrated by an example from Tracey's (2006) study of early maternal loss. A former teacher met an early bereaved daughter in later years and said, '...I didn't even know your mammy was dead; I went through the entire time of knowing you, not realising' (p141).

Question 4: What best describes your school's approach to responding to a bereaved child, either formal or ad hoc?

A difference in responses to the question regarding schools' approach to bereavement emerged in the results. In the Derry study a combined total of 37% of primary and post-primary schools reported that they had a formal procedure in place compared with a combined total of 23% of Galway primary and post-primary respondents. Informal or ad-hoc arrangements amounted to 77% in the Galway study and 63% in Derry schools. However, Derry and Galway also indicated that revised responses to bereavement including policies and procedures *are* being formulated, a finding that corresponds with the level of priority given to bereavement. Schools in the Derry locality have access to

help and support from the Western Education and Library Board (WELB) when setting up or revising policies. In Galway, schools will consult with the Educational Psychology services.

Question 5. Does one person in school have responsibility for responding to a bereaved child?

Table 3 below charts the responses to the question ‘Does one person in the school have the responsibility for responding to a bereaved child?’

School	Location	Yes	No
Primary	Derry	48%	52%
	Galway	17%	83%
Post-primary	Derry	50%	50%
	Galway	71%	29%
Special schools	Derry	100%	
	Galway	50%	50%

Table 2

In 71% of Galway post-primary schools, the most frequently mentioned person with designated responsibility for responding to a bereaved student was the school principal. The pastoral care team or the school chaplain were second and third on the list. In Derry’s post-primary sample, 50% said they had a designated person in place that included principals, vice-principals, year heads, ‘SENCOs’ [special educational needs co-ordinators] class teachers, counsellors and child protection officers.

In the primary schools [Derry], the principal and the child protection officer, [SENCO] were mentioned. The percentage of primary schools in Galway reporting that no one person had responsibility was high [83%] with regard to overall primary schools. As noted earlier, help for children can be sought through alternative means in Galway, including two 'Rainbow Projects' (a groupwork intervention programme for separated and bereaved children) currently running in the area.

Question 6: Has anybody in your school received training in the area of childhood bereavement or loss?

In relation to appropriately trained staff, across the entire sample of primary and post-primary schools – North and Republic - only 18% had some training in this area. Alarming, of the primary schools surveyed in the Galway region, only 3% reported having the opportunity to attend or be represented at a conference or training day in the area of bereavement. The two special schools had staff who attended relevant training and one had a highly trained teacher who had attended a number of courses in childhood grief. In terms of post-primary in Galway, 43% of teachers had either attended a training course, conference or both.

In Derry, one special school relied on all of the teachers taking responsibility for managing bereavement and one had a pastoral care co-ordinator. A post-primary school in Derry had drawn up a bereavement and loss policy and had training in dealing with 'critical incidents' [usually facilitated by the Western Education and Library Board, WELB, bereavement team]. Another Derry school suggested that there was a need to build on any training that had already been undertaken [eg. 'critical incident' training] to put policies and procedures in place. Notably, Galway and Derry responded differently to critical incidents with Derry seeking support from the WELB and Galway

responded that [in their post primary schools] designated individuals responsible for critical incident management ranged from the principal to the pastoral care team. Two schools consulted the school chaplain.

Forty-one per cent of the Derry schools had attended training days, while one member from a primary school and a special school had attended a one day conference. Those who had attended training included principals, year heads, pastoral care co-ordinators and special needs co-ordinators.

When considering both study sites together and reflecting on what is needed in the future, it is clear that the majority of all primary and post-primary and the four special schools who responded recognised their need for training and support in this area. Both sets of data called for further help. Schools in other areas of the UK, such as Hull, have the benefit of on-going training courses on their door-step. For example, 'Lost for Words' (Holland et al., 2005) aims to help and support schools and teachers to gain knowledge of bereavement, and get a better understanding of how to develop bereavement policies and procedures. In Derry, the needs of schools are complemented by the WELB Bereavement Team and Galway by the Educational Psychology services. The study revealed that more needs to be done to assist schools with training needs in bereavement and setting up policies and procedures.

Question 7: From where would you normally initially seek help if a child is bereaved at your school?

Schools in both Derry and Galway reported that they sought out the services of external agencies if they faced situations around bereavement that they felt unable to deal with.

The top two outside referral agencies for Galway were Educational Psychologist (24%) and Local Priest (13%) with the counselling services and local doctor also identified. However, twenty per cent of the primary sample clearly indicated a sense of uncertainty and unpreparedness for bereavement, as noted in the written responses provided, for example, these included: 'Don't know/I'll wait till it happens/Hasn't happened yet/I'd feel at a loose end'.

In general, the perceived resources of the Galway post-primary schools were more likely to be internal, within school. The respondents suggested that the principal, class teacher, chaplain, Rainbow Programme or home school liaison officer would be consulted. While within school resources were also utilised in Derry, it was reported that the agencies most frequently consulted in times of perceived need included the WELB Bereavement Team, Cruse Bereavement Care, clergy, the family, Education Welfare Office, NSPCC, Young Peoples' Beginning Experience.

Question 8: Do you address the area of loss in your school curriculum?

On average, half [ie. 17] of the total number of primary schools in the entire survey had no inclusion of loss within their curriculum. In Derry, 51% of all schools in the survey indicated that loss is addressed in the curriculum, particularly in religious education, citizenship work, 'circle time' and health education. Sometimes the topic is raised by the children themselves in the course of the school day, or it may arise through fictional stories that are being read in school. In Galway, 42% of post-primary schools included loss in the curriculum.

The need for additional support within the curriculum was addressed in England with the introduction of the SEAL [Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning] Programme

(Department of Education, 2007). It provides teachers with a resource that can help them address the needs of children with emotional difficulties.

Question 9: Is loss addressed in any policy documents at your school?

In both sets of returns, inclusion of childhood loss within post-primary school policy documents was evident in Derry (63%) and Galway (86%). Of further interest is the high rate of Galway primary schools, 83%, that had not included loss in policy documents. This figure contrasted with the thirty-two per cent of the primary sector in Derry (whose policies included loss). Taking the entire Derry sample as a whole, 43% had of all schools responded positively to this question. In addition, both special schools in Derry addressed death and loss in a policy document.

The indications are that schools are endeavouring to have a policy around bereavement and loss. Perhaps those without such documents require further help and support to formalise procedures and practices - ie. to create a shift from ad hoc to a structured approach. Schools have identified bereavement as high priority therefore those who have not yet taken the step of creating relevant procedures and policies are indicating that they need additional help and support to do so.

Question 10: Do you consider that your school needs further help in this area?

Sixty per cent of the Derry primary schools in the survey requested training packs and 48% of Derry post-primary schools were seeking bereavement and loss training courses. However, one post-primary school in Derry noted that help was not required as the school was self-sufficient in terms of dealing with bereavement. In Galway, 55%

of the primary sectors requested both training packs and courses, with 71% of post-primary schools making the same request.

In filling out their questionnaires, Galway schools went further and made suggestions as to the type of support they felt was needed. This included, loss, grief and bereavement text books; children's books on loss; training courses for staff; resources available for teachers; structured school guidelines on bereavement policies and better access to psychological services. The Derry schools interestingly explained their needs as being both internal and external with regard to the topic of loss in schools. They targeted the need for designated teacher training in loss issues and the possible availability of outside referral telephone numbers in case of emergencies.

A wish to formalise procedures was evident throughout the returned responses in both sites. The question asked by a respondent from pastoral care, 'Do some children still slip through the net and how can we become more aware?' was an indication of the concerns that existed within schools. Clearly there is a need for action at all levels to ensure that requests are addressed and that help is forthcoming. While the findings from Derry indicated that schools have access to training in bereavement, the courses are relatively short-term.

Discussion and Conclusion

This survey was designed to compare schools in two separate jurisdictions within Ireland – the North and Republic of Ireland - to determine how schools presently respond to, and deal with bereavement; and to identify the needs of schools in the process. Schools made a concerted effort to respond to the 'Loss in Schools'

questionnaire (Holland, 1993), to contribute to the study and indicate their present position in relation to bereavement.

Clearly, death and parental separation are regarded as high priority in schools, as indicated in the responses to questions 2 and 3. The textual data included evidence that some schools on one hand were not dealing with the issue, preferring to 'wait and see' when it happens, while others were concerned that youngsters might 'slip through the net'.

Two critical issues relating to children and grief in Ireland have been highlighted in the literature. That is, the changing pace of Irish society has impacted on our traditions surrounding death [eg. the demise of wakes and funerals as we know them] and in school, teachers struggle to raise the topic of death with children (McGovern and Barry, 2000). So, what kind of challenge do these issues raise for educators?

Given that schools have an integral part to play in the development of the life of the child, and that children spend up to six hours a day in the classroom, it is essential that schools feel equipped and able to deal with significant life events such as bereavement. However, to begin the process of putting mechanisms in place to help children through bereavement some central developments must happen: teachers and others in the school setting [who are clearly requesting interventions] need help and support through training and skill development to ensure that they feel confident in making a response to bereaved children. Schools also need support at all levels to prepare and implement bereavement policies and procedures. As a matter of urgency these issues require attention.

Importantly, schools *are* attending to the needs of children and much fruitful work is being done on the ground with the help and support of internal resources and external agencies. In Derry, the Bereavement Team at the WELB and Cruse Bereavement Care are consulted in times of need. In Galway, the help of the educational psychologist and local priest were sought most often.

Schools are cognisant and aware of their responsibilities but there may be ways of inducing further discussion and opening up the topic. Perhaps the way forward might include creating a platform on which to encourage educators to meet together to discuss - aspects of coping with bereavement in the classroom; providing courses in bereavement that are designed to raise awareness of children's bereavement behaviours normal and abnormal; children's perceptions of death; and personal attitudes towards death [one such example that covers this content is 'Helping Children Cope with Loss' available in the Republic].

Given McGovern and Barry's (2000) finding that teachers do not feel comfortable approaching children, perhaps training courses such as these would help address two central needs for school staff: that is, a deeper knowledge and understanding of children's bereavement *and* an opportunity to reflect on personal attitudes to death. To complement the training, the use of follow up training packs, leaflets and information may help staff meet the needs of the young bereaved on an on-going basis in school.

Finally, in relation to the present study, it is important to state that schools do recognise the significance of childhood bereavement and other losses that young

people might experience over the course of their school years. While the indications were that schools do seek help from other agencies in times of need, a plan of action for all sectors needs to be addressed - in essence, this is what the schools in Derry and Galway who very kindly participated in the survey are clearly requesting.

Schools have indicated that bereavement and parental separation are of high priority but to put the necessary foundation in place [ie. training in knowledge and skills; bereavement policies and procedures] urgent attention needs to be given to schools requests for help. Based on the outcome of the survey and expressed needs therein, the following recommendations seem critical for the future:

Recommendations:

It is of interest to include within this piece of research a number of recommendations. One of the main reasons for this is the lack of previous research available on how Irish schools recognise and support children who have had a significant bereavement in their lives. Furthermore, the findings showed the high priority schools in Derry and Galway placed on the awareness of children coming into the school environment who had recently experienced the death of a family member or significant other. The recognition is evident in the schools questionnaire returns that overall there is a high degree of informal contact between school authorities and children who have experienced bereavement. The time may now be opportune to harness the informality and include Bereavement Policies and Procedures in all educational establishments, especially in the Primary sector.

The following are recommendations from the research:

1. It is important to state that schools recognise the significance of childhood bereavement and other losses that young people might experience over the course of their school years. The recommendations are that:

- Schools need help to develop a bereavement policy either within their policy document or their critical incidents policy. Knowing that there are standards and procedures in place would help all staff to be more confident in approaching pupils.
- For their part, pupils in both primary and secondary schools, if aware that their school had a bereavement policy would know how to access and use the support available.

2. The research indications are that schools seek help from other agencies in times of need. To increase knowledge and confidence so that schools and teachers may respond appropriately, training and resource issues need to be addressed. The need to develop specific training in the area of childhood bereavement and grief responses was highly indicated in the research. The ability of teachers to make an appropriate response to children and adolescents is of paramount importance. The recommendations are that:

- Government departments involved in educational policy, curriculum planning and management of resources make allocations by way of finances for training and support of teachers in recognition of the importance of this area.

- Training to be sourced locally or on a cross border basis.
- Experiences and knowledge shared and International best practice adopted.
- Possible exploration of contemporary social issues in Ireland around multi-culturalism and cultural experiences in the schools' system could be addressed in training.

3. The final research questionnaire section asked what help teachers could identify. Nearly half of the Derry and almost three-quarters of the Galway post Primary schools prescribed what they thought would be of use. This included loss, grief and bereavement text books for staff; children's books on loss; training courses for staff; structured school guidelines on bereavement policies and better access to psychological services.

The recommendations are that:

- The range of needs of schools given priority
- Increasing awareness through multi-disciplinary engagement between schools, education authorities, bereavement and psychological services

This research aims to reflect schools responses to bereaved children and the follow on needs of the educational sector. Children are by law required to be serviced by education. It is suggested that the service would be more holistic if we could recognise and help children and adolescents with their emotional needs as well as their educational necessities.

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