

Grief and Bereavement

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One of the consequences of grief when it impacts upon a school is it generates enormous anxiety; anxiety in parents, children and also teachers and school leaders. So one of the important things to consider is how to actually manage and contain that anxiety. We can do that with good preparation, good planning. We can also do it with the way we carry out the work when those experiences take place, so the idea of providing a sense of safety and order and predictability. One of the other consequences of events in schools is that people are hard-wired to make meaning of their experience, to make sense of it. So frequently it's very important to quickly establish what we call a dominant narrative about what took place so that people again can feel reassured. In working with schools, arriving at a school after the death of a child for example, you notice that the hugs and the goodbyes from parents to their children are longer; the hugs are tighter than they were the day before.

I think when we start to think about grief we need to consider our own personal response to loss. How does this experience impact upon us? To what extent are we available to other people in order to provide support? I think first of all it's important for people to be self-aware. How does this experience effect us? Often we also focus very early on how we can support others. I think it's important for teachers and school leaders to acknowledge that they are also part of that grieving community. So how do they acknowledge their own sense of loss? How do they also take care of themselves? I think there's also a sense that experience of loss, grief and anxiety raise big questions for people; big questions of meaning. Why did this happen? Why did it happen now? And often the answers to those questions lie in conversation, in developing a shared meaning and so providing staff with an opportunity to share their own response, to talk about their own experience.

In working in schools, what determines most clearly in terms of how the school will manage is the school leader. The extent to which they model grief behaviours and the extent to which they give permission for staff to acknowledge; not just the practical implications of this experience but also how do we actually acknowledge and give permission for staff to acknowledge their own grief? Every organisation has rules. They also have feeling rules. They have rules about to what extent can we talk about this, or to what extent do we actually move into a very cognitive problem-solving approach? Often these feeling rules don't acknowledge the enormous diversity and the idiosyncratic quality of grief that people respond to grief in a myriad of ways. People can respond to grief publicly, through conversation, through expressing their distress or concern, through their behaviour. But we also have people who express their grief far more privately. It is more important for them to get their head around the experience than their heart. The research would indicate that both those responses or styles of grieving are equally acceptable and equally useful. One of the great challenges for school leaders is to address the question how do I accommodate the diversity in grieving responses and how do I create a safe space for all staff? That might be through information, it might be through private conversations, it might also be through ritual that exists for staff. It's also important to know your staff in terms of their own personal history of loss. I recently went to a school after a suicide in a secondary school setting and was made available to talk to staff in the wake of that experience. All those conversations without exception were not about the suicide but about how this experience had impacted upon their own particular experience of loss.

When we think of loss we're not just thinking here of death. Grief is our response to change and that change may be a favourable one, such as a school reorganisation, or a promotion which changes us; we get more money, we get more responsibility, potentially more job satisfaction, but there's also a shadow of loss to that as well. It changes our relationships with peers, it often puts more pressure and stress on family relationships or even our own ability to care for ourselves. So when we think about knowing someone's loss history it's important for us to have a sense of how that experience might resonate with this particular experience of loss that they're facing at that time.

Another very common thing is the idea that grief and loss has been seen as a threat and an insult to the school and the organisation. I think we really need to reconceptualise this experience of grief. That in a sense these are also teachable moments. We can't not communicate to our staff and to our teachers and to our parents and to children about these experiences. Even when we're not communicating, when we take the view that least-said-soonest-mended, we provide a very strong message about the nature of grief; that there is something unspeakable unmentionable about this experience of loss rather than seeing the experience of grief as part of the broader tapestry of life. And so I think what we need to do is to be much more proactive, to engage in outreach to others. To also focus from the perspective of resiliency; that the overwhelming majority of people manage experiences of even quite complex grief with enormous resilience and capacity, to take a truly non-pathological view of grief, that with the support of friends, family and peers that most people manage this experience of loss well. In fact we know that the thing that predicts good outcomes best is social support; being surrounded by people who love and care for us seems to be the thing that predicts a favourable outcome.

The response of many schools often is to seek lots of additional input from other services and agencies and I think there's also been a change in the research which suggests that schools in a sense are in the best position to manage their own experiences. Certainly with outside agencies providing support and consultancy or assistance, but really these experiences are best supported within the context of relationships that already have existed and to support staff in their own ability to have difficult conversations with students about change.

One of the real issues in terms of events now is managing the well-meaning but sometimes misdirected good intentions of outside services. Often services where we don't have well-developed pre-existing relationships and the danger is a lot of those external inputs can undermine those networks of support and care that exist. When we think about grief we're often thinking of grief in reactive terms; that if somebody experiences loss then they need counselling. Again the research wouldn't support that, in fact that a very small proportion of people would (a) need counselling and (b) would benefit from it. And so we need to think in terms of building the connectedness and the support within the school without necessarily over-intervening or intervening too early. Very often what we would focus on is providing psychological first-aid, information, care, support, some emotional containment, a sense of continuity and also a sense of optimism in an individual's ability to manage these experiences.

The experience of grief is not just one of loss; it can also be one of gain. And so we can often see within school communities how they've been changed by experiences of loss, and changed for the better. It might be that people are aware of a sense of connectedness that maybe they didn't appreciate or even that the capacity to survive these experiences. So it's also important that we are watchful for these signs of what we call post-traumatic growth, both at the individual level and also at the school as well. Often this does bring people together closely and intimately. What we often see over time is that connection isn't sustained and often we can see tension that develops because in part people's style of grieving is very different. We have some people in the school community who will say "enough is enough, you know we've dealt with this, let's put it in the past." Whereas there'll be other people in the school community still acutely effected and impacted upon. And so I think a good school leader needs to be attuned to those very different approaches to loss and finding ways of managing them both effectively.

I think many adults have a strong desire to spare children from pain and distress. And I think the experience of death or grief in a context of children is one that challenges adults in a fundamental way. It would be nice if children didn't grieve, if we didn't have to have difficult conversations with children about experiences of loss. But fundamentally grief is a price we pay for love and if a child has formed a bond or an attachment then grief will ensue when that relationship is ruptured.

It's important for us to realise that children grieve in a very different way from adults and for us not to expect that a child will grieve in an adult-like way. A child, for example, won't have access to the same kind of textured

emotional language than an adult will; that a child is much more likely to display their grief through their behaviour or through their play than through conversation. That a child is more likely to express their grief through a drawing perhaps than through a detailed analysis of their experience. So first of all it's important to acknowledge that grief is a natural response to loss. That secondly we don't take a pathological view to grief, that every grieving person needs necessarily intensive intervention. And thirdly the importance of a supportive stable adult across time is really critical. That we also acknowledge the children will grieve in a variety of ways. What children will often do is put their grief on hold until the adults or parents around them are OK. And so what we often see with children is that they re-grieve over time. A child at four might see mum as a star in heaven, but that won't sustain a child at fourteen, and so a child will continually rediscover and search continually for this sense of new meaning. Certainly it's important that we acknowledge that grief is very much a physical experience as well; it depresses the immune system. We often find in schools that children will report to the sick bay more than usual or the child who may fall and skin their knee and keep on running may, for example, need the support and care and nurturance of adults. It's important that we also give children choice in terms of their level of involvement in terms of these experiences. We might, for example, give children choices in terms of drawing, art, discussion. We may use some of the vast array of children's literature that deals with the experiences of loss and grief. So in a sense we help children both find language for the experience and also a sense of connectedness in this is an experience that we all experience but we may also deal with it in very different ways. We'll often find that grieving children regress both behaviourally and cognitively; that is difficult for children to process information to make decisions, that they're more inattentive, that a very young child, for example, who may have been dry at night may recommence bed-wetting. So being attentive to those sorts of changes at a physical level is important. But I think what's key is what kinds of messages to adults provide.

I think often the sins we commit are sins of omission rather than sins of commission; that we really need to be far more proactive in reaching out and providing support. And very often the grieving person will set the limits around that in terms of the nature of the support they want. That the people in the best position to provide support are people who knew the individual prior to this event taking place. These are experiences that create enormous anxiety, enormous distress, and I think it's really important for school leaders to find people outside the school that they can also receive support from. My experience has been that many principals, for example, find it very useful to speak with other principals who've gone through other experiences of loss; that it's an enormous burden to bear and for many principals these sorts of events can really be watershed experiences in their career because it really does amplify the important role of leadership, not just in terms of leadership from a procedural or managerial point of view but also on emotional leadership. To what extent do we give permission for people within a school community, to what extent do we use this experience as a platform, as a springboard for teaching about the nature of life and loss and that grief is the price we pay for love? And if we have school communities that are based on those principles of love and connectedness then we also need to develop school communities that respond to the rupturing and the breaking of those emotional connections.

Fundamentally it's about school leaders being aware of their staff, their particular styles, particular experiences of loss or change that they may be dealing with or have dealt with in the past and also acknowledging that people have different safe places. For some people that safe place may be with others in conversation. For others it may be much more focussed on activity or procedural sorts of approaches. It's also important for school leaders to know what their own particular grieving style is. We often, I think, as a culture see feelings or emotions as the gold standard and that people need to express and talk through and communicate their experiences to others. And I think that can be fundamentally challenging because we know that for many people that's not the case; that it's far more important for them to get their head around the experience than their heart. We also need to reconsider the time frame that we traditionally would assume in respect to loss; that these are experiences that don't take days and weeks to deal with, but these are experiences that frequently can take months and years for people to deal with. It's very seductive to have the idea that we reach a point of acceptance or the grief stops in some way, like grief is the common cold. But we know that in a sense our relationship to that which is lost changes as we change

over time. So for many people this will be a continual reworking; that we also acknowledge anniversaries and other experiences that people know that they aren't alone. In the case of a death we acknowledge that death ends a life, but it doesn't end a relationship. So how do we keep that relationship alive? And that relationship will often provide people with enormous comfort.

A school that has a bedrock of good social support and good sound student welfare and good staff self-care is really in the best position to deal with adverse events. On that foundation of strong relationships, of good conflict management, of good clear communication; these are experiences that can strengthen schools rather than leave them debilitated.

The difficulty is in dealing with and accommodating the enormous diversity within schools, in terms of differences in cultural practices, differences in personalities, differences in terms of what the needs of school communities are. But I think schools can be incredibly proactive too in terms of these experiences. For example we can reverse how we may as a school community, and as a leadership team, deal with a range of experiences; too look at events as they are reported in the newspaper and ask the question "how would we have gone? What would we have done? Who would have taken charge? What would have been our response?" That in a sense to take that difficult step of putting ourselves in the shoes of others and asking those questions, then we can develop some sense of control and management. We know that when schools are in crisis one of the protective factors is having a role that defines what we're expected to do and so having in place policies that clarify what those roles are and allow people an opportunity to rehearse those roles can be important.

When we talk about grief and loss within school communities we often focus on the negative life events; the death of a teacher or a student. We also need to think what are the sorts of messages that we provide students with about the nature of loss and grief and change. To what extent is it reflected in the community? To what extent do we actually use a grief and loss framework for dealing with a range of experiences? And in a sense these can provide opportunities for us to provide skills to students. These are also teachable moments about the nature of human relationships, and that loss is the shadow of all possessions whether they're material in terms of people and relationships or whether they're immaterial, such as a sense of order and predictability. That these are experiences that can really shatter the assumptions we have about the way the world works; that bad things don't happen to good people, that children grow up as adults, and these experiences can cut across a number of those assumptions we have that buffer our anxiety and give us that sense of safety and predictability.