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John Holland

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How schools can support children who experience loss and death

John Holland*

Hull, UK

Scenes of public grieving such as followed the death of Princess Diana bear little resemblance to the ‘taboo’ status of death and bereavement at an individual level. For schools and the support services with whom they work, responding to pupils’ experiences of loss and death, especially of parents, is challenging. This paper draws on research and curriculum initiatives in one region in England to examine the current situation in schools. It then explores ways in which schools may be both more responsive when a death occurs, and more proactive in creating environments in which both pupils and their teachers are better prepared for the challenges which it poses.

Keywords: death and loss; bereavement; sensitive issues; children and schools

Background

There once was a time when it would not have been unusual for many teachers to see their role purely as ‘teaching children’ and not to perceive that they had any direct role in the well-being of their pupils. The view that ‘we are not social workers’ seemed to be commonly held amongst the teachers I encountered in the Humberside area during my time in the classroom in the late 1980s. Although attempts were made in the 1970s to train teacher–social workers, this failed to gain a foothold.

This is in contrast to today where the responsibility for the welfare of children is deemed to rest not only with the parents and teachers of children, but also with the various professionals that they encounter, such as through the ‘Every Child Matters’ (DfES, 2004) and ‘Common Assessment Framework’ (CWDC, 2006) agendas.

Contemporary society often seems to want to protect children from the emotional aspects of death, possibly because of the belief that death has no real meaning for children and hence they cannot understand it or deal with it emotionally (Schoen, Burgoyne, & Schoen, 2004). Such a perspective does not bode well for bereaved children (and indeed also for bereaved adults). It is an irony that a national event, such as the death of Princess Diana, can evoke an outgoing of public grieving on a grand scale that is probably not matched by many who are uncomfortable with the private grief of an individual. However, death is not a topic that is generally discussed. Writing in 1991, Golding (1991) suggested that it was generally a topic to be avoided in polite conversation, and one around which negative attitudes seem to prevail; in other words it is ‘taboo’, at least in terms of personal experiences in contrast to the more ‘emotionally remote’ death featured in the media.

*Email: john.holland@john-holland-ep.co.uk

In recent years, things seem to have at least marginally changed, with a growing awareness of the impact that loss and bereavement may have on children. Much of this is led by research and a growing level of awareness of the importance of knowing how to respond in both a reactive and proactive manner to children and young people who are bereaved. There is now a far greater awareness of loss and death and far greater provision in terms of courses, resources and interventions. The Child Bereavement Network now coordinates and lobbies on a national level. Organisations such as 'Winston's Wish' offers support to bereaved children and St Christopher's Hospice and the Open University now offer academic courses in the area of death.

This paper draws together some of the research that I have carried out in the Hull and Humberside area over the past 15 years, culminating in the *Lost for Words* project which provides training locally in the Humberside area as well as being a resource that is used internationally. The research in local schools took place from 1993 to 2007. The first study was by questionnaire to the head teachers of all the primary schools in then Humberside local authority. This was repeated in 1995, with the same questionnaire, in all the secondary schools of the Humberside area.

The questionnaire was then sent out to the head teachers in all of the schools, including special schools, in the Hull local authority area, using the same instrument and repeated in 1996, 1998 2001, 2003, 2005 and 2007, in an attempt to track what was happening in schools in the city. In addition I carried out a study through the University of York, *Project Iceberg*, with adults who were bereaved of a parent when they were children. This is referred to later in the paper.

The impact of bereavement

Any death will have an impact on those close to the deceased and a parental death will be very distressing for the child, and will also change their perceptions, impacting on them as individuals (Busch & Kimble, 2001). An apparent 'certainty' of childhood is that your parents will always be there and available, and this is at least partially removed by parental separation. The assumption is totally removed in the case of a parental death where the world may now be seen by children as not as safe a place as had been assumed and additionally, that if one parent dies, then why not the other one too?

School staff need to be aware of the potential impact that death may have on children so that they can understand the impact and respond to the needs of their pupils. The impact of loss is not straightforward or predictable, nor is it always recognised by others. There may well be an economic impact on the family, as the breadwinner may have died and a reduction in income may lead to events such as a move of house or a decline in their material standards. The initial loss potentially leads to further losses such as friends, home, schools, communities, self-esteem, and stability (Holland, 2001). In terms of frequency, it has been estimated that between 4 and 7% of children will experience a parental death before the age of 16 and that the negative impacts of such a death are magnified in the case of vulnerable or disadvantaged children (McCarthy & Jessop, 2005).

Far more children are affected by parental separation, which once was an uncommon event. A straw poll of any classroom will reveal the scale of this; in some of the schools that I have worked pupils whose parents had separated were the norm. In terms of priorities in schools, parental separation is rated more highly as a priority

than is child bereavement. There are some justifications for this as the effects may be as far ranging in terms of lifestyle and a significant number of children will lose contact with one of their parents. In this case the children may in effect be suffering a bereavement, as they have lost contact with a parent, with potentially the same emotional effects as if the parent had died.

Children will respond in different ways to loss, depending on their age, experience, personality and the context of the loss they have experienced; they may feel isolated and uncertain. Children's academic performance may decline and they may also show regressive behaviour (Schlozman, 2003). Stroebe (2002) contends that individuals who have developed secure attachments will tend to grieve in a healthy way compared to those who are more disorganised.

Willis (2002) suggests that there are several elements of children's understanding death. First, in regard to the finality of death, the notion that death is irreversible and that the dead cannot come back to life, infants and immature children may well hold the belief that things can be fixed or mended if they are broken, so that the 'lost' person has not really 'gone'. A second problem is that children may not also understand causality, and think that things, such as death, are caused by factors over which they the child has control in a 'magical manner'. If they are not helped, children may have feelings of guilt and think that they may have actually caused the death, through having said things in the past such as 'I wish you were dead'. Third, adults, including school staff, may fail to understand that children do need to grieve and they themselves may lack the knowledge and understanding of the impact that loss will have on children, for example, assuming that they are too young to grasp what has happened and therefore too young to mourn (Sattler, 1998). They may also accept the myth that all children are 'resilient' and are well able to recover from loss experiences without any adult help.

The effect of parental bereavement can induce changes in behaviour which indicate that the child may be at risk (Goldman, 2001). These can include behaviours that may not be so apparent, such as the child being withdrawn and being along the continuum towards depression. Conversely, more overt behaviours may appear, such as temper tantrums, 'acting out' or attention seeking, resulting from feelings of an otherwise unexpressed or expressed anger in relation to their perceptions of the unfairness of the parental death. Children may also show regressive behaviour; this behaviour relating to a perceived safer time before the death, with markers such as bedwetting, thumb sucking, or being over 'clingy' to the surviving parent. Children and young people may become disinterested in or even detach themselves from school through internal or external truancy (Van Eerdewegh, Bierii, Parrilla, & Clayton, 1982).

Teenagers may 'cope' with death in quite negative ways such as through becoming involved in substance abuse, promiscuity, or in petty criminal activity (Holland, 2001). This may come about initially by them rejecting school and then the truancy itself leading them to becoming involved with those activities as they socialise with other truants. Retaining pupils at school in these circumstances seems to be crucial in helping them. There will now only be one parent in the parenting team, which means that children may now evade control more easily. The arrival of another partner for the parent may also bring its own difficulties and could mean that they receive even less attention. Children may find that they have additional responsibilities, such as caring for a younger sibling, and they may feel 'robbed' of their childhood. Sharing emotions may be hard for adolescents, made even more difficult as they are going

through the years of seeking independence and breaking away from their parents. School can potentially play a positive role for these young people.

Death as a problematic subject

Despite some changes in attitudes (see below), death still seems to be a taboo subject, which is perhaps remarkable as it is the one sure certainty! People generally seem to find it difficult to know how to respond to the bereaved, and as a result they may do nothing and thereby add to the negative emotional impact on the person.

The surviving parent or guardian may not be emotionally available for the child and they may be unable to facilitate their grieving through discussing the death and their feelings, as well as not answering their questions (Papadatou, Metallinou, Hatzichristou, & Pavlidi, 2002). Children may then become the 'forgotten mourners', being isolated and vulnerable. This seemed to be the case in *Project Iceberg*, a doctorate study that I carried out at the University of York (Holland, 2001) interviewing nearly a hundred subjects either bereaved of a parent when children, or had been a surviving parent. Many of those involved in *Project Iceberg* reported that schools had offered them little help when they returned to school after the death and indeed had done nothing to prepare them for the event.

Silverman and Worden (1993) reported that the strongest predictor of risk for children who have had a parent die is the level of adjustment and psychological well-being of the surviving parent. It may be that a parent who is coping in a positive way is able to facilitate the grieving of their children through being emotionally available for them.

Hurd (1999) contended that a child's healthy mourning was dependent on a number of factors. These factors included their relationship with the deceased parent, the emotional availability of the surviving parent, and effective communication within the family. In addition, the participation of the child in the funeral, and the quality of the child's support network, including school, friends, and family will be relevant in terms of a child's mourning.

Teachers also need to be comfortable with the topic of death in order to support their pupils (Cullinan, 1990). McGovern and Barry (2000) found that death was a 'taboo' subject for both teachers and parents. Lowton and Higginson (2003) found that many school staff had concerns about doing the 'right thing' suggesting that there was a lack of confidence and training, as to how to help children.

There seems to have been more recognition of the effects of loss on children recently, not only through research but also through change reflected in government policy and legislation. There has been a growing awareness of influences and needs beyond just 'learning'. This is epitomised by *Every child matters: Change for children* (DfES, 2004), with the government commitment to five key areas for children:

1. To be healthy
2. To stay safe
3. To enjoy and achieve
4. To make a positive contribution
5. To achieve economic well-being

Such a commitment to the well-being of the 'whole' child suggests that there are few if any limits to the situations in which schools may be able to help. In this context, the agenda has moved towards the view that schools should be more involved in supporting children who have experienced loss.

But at what level should an intervention take place?

There are a range of potential options, such as providing counsellors in schools to support all children going through a loss. We may think of this as a 'reactive' provision since it is a response to an event which has already happened. In contrast, *proactive* provisions could include skilling staff in terms of loss awareness. Interventions need not necessarily last for a long term; short-term interventions before a death can do much to benefit children. However, there is the danger that good intentions or theoretical provision may not actually deliver what is needed in school and the monitoring and evaluation of school provision is essential.

School as a potential helper

Schools seem to be in a unique position to help grieving children. Although bereavement is a family issue, it will potentially affect children while they are at school (Reid, 2002). Children spend most of their waking term time days in school so that has the potential to be a safe haven and even a secure 'second family' (Lowton & Higginson, 2003). If trust and rapport are established and children provided with accurate information this helps to avoid myths developing about a death that may further complicate grieving for children (Klicker, 2000). A sensitive teacher who is able to acknowledge the needs of the pupil and help them through the mourning process is crucial in helping children to adjust to a loss through death.

Schools may also be able to offer support to the bereaved family, by offering a listening ear or guiding them to a relevant agency for support, which will then indirectly impact on the pupil.

How schools rate the area of loss

My own research has shown that teachers consistently over time rate the area of loss and bereavement relatively highly as an issue in school, but some of them feel that they lack the skills to support bereaved children. This was the case in Hull and Humberside schools where a significant 'training gap' was identified (Holland, 2001). Eighty-four percent of Hull schools in the study rated the area of child bereavement as important or very important and the overall rating was an 82% priority, a figure which has remained more or less constant over 10 years.

However, parental separation was rated as an important, or as very important issues for their school by 95% of Hull schools, some 10% higher than bereavement rating. This suggests that loss through separation is a greater issue in schools than is bereavement, presumably because of the higher frequency of parental separation compared with bereavement. This highlights the need to focus on *loss* as a generic experience, more or less heightened by the nature of the loss, a point to which I return below.

Training for schools

Training has the potential to raise awareness and build confidence and skills.

Although the provision of training in the area of children and bereavement support has increased over the past 20 years (Holland, 2001), providing care and support to bereaved children still seems problematic. In my research, teachers were 'wary of causing an upset' and although they wanted to support bereaved pupils they were unsure as to how to help. Those teachers who are unable to respond to pupils' concerns may well care but they may be unable to help because they have not fully dealt with their own grief reactions and the ways in which loss has altered their perceptions (Reid, 2002).

Developments in initial teacher training could also help. Training may be needed to develop understanding and awareness of loss and bereavement and its wider effects on children (Rowling & Holland, 2000). It is not typically included in initial teacher training and in the preparation of the classroom teacher (Reid & Dixon, 1999). Whilst some awareness of the issues could be included in initial teacher training, perhaps teachers when qualified would benefit from refresher courses in the area of children and loss to best combine theory with the actual practice. Arguably, this is an area that teachers and staff in school need to revisit from time to time.

Towards a pattern of support: the Hull experience

The potential for a wide range of help for young people is considerable, from providing counselling support within schools to skilling staff as to how to respond to children after a loss and how to use the curriculum in a proactive way to prepare children for future loss. It is perhaps not surprising that with much competition for scarce resources, the provision of support for children generally remains both patchy and uncoordinated (Rolls & Payne, 2003).

It can be contended that any death is a traumatic event for the bereaved, but this is particularly so when young people are involved in life-threatening experiences or witness life-threatening events. In these cases, procedures such as Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD) may be appropriate (Kinchin, 2007). There were a series of high profile disasters in the 1980s, such as the deaths at the Hillsborough football ground, and the book *Wise before the event* (Yule & Gold, 1993) was widely distributed to schools as a response. My most recent research (Holland, 2007) shows that 23% of Hull schools had a copy of the book when recently asked. This figure has remained constant over the years after the initial 'washout' effect, although there is still uncertainty as to whether it is an active document that is used in a proactive way.

In Hull, responses where a child has witnessed a death or traumatic incident, were led by the local authority, the City Psychological Service providing a Critical Incident Debriefing Team, to support schools in these circumstances. In contrast, where there have been losses such as a parental death or parental separation, it was expected that the school took the lead, although support and advice were also available from educational agencies. Some projects, such as *Lost for Words* (Holland, Dance, MacManus, & Stitt, 2005), are available to staff who work with children and are intended as proactive programmes, to help schools to support children before a death actually happens through having a prepared response.

Lost for Words was a joint project between Dove House (the local hospice in Hull) and the City Psychological Service and involved educational trainers, social workers,

nurses, and psychologists. There are 19 topic areas in the training pack, including both a theoretical examination of models of loss and a large element of experiential interaction on the day-long course. This replaced the previous twilight ad-hoc courses which staff seemed to find tiring after a day at school. Nearly a quarter of Hull schools now look at their own internal support networks before seeking outside help. Hopefully there is a connection with the *Lost for Words* training as the early research in Humberside (Holland, 1993) showed that schools would quickly refer to outside agencies after a child had been bereaved.

The City Psychological Service was proactive in developing and delivering *Lost for Words* training and providing other interventions such as circulating 'help sheets' to schools, having a reference library, providing 'drop-ins' for teachers and also organising three international conferences on the theme 'Loss in schools: Time to listen'. A fourth conference is planned for 2008. *Lost for Words* training courses and conference papers were also delivered throughout the country as well as abroad in Europe, North America and the Middle East.

In the USA, *Operation HEART* (Dunn, 2006) was developed using elements of the *Lost for Words* project but taking place over a longer period. The objectives were to raise the awareness of staff in schools about childhood bereavement and the implications of their classrooms and schools. It also had the aim of increasing staff's awareness of their own reactions to grief and experiences with death, to help them facilitating their pupils' grieving as well as to enable staff to engage in the area of death with their non-grieving pupils, and bring death education into the school curriculum, in particular in the form of a loss awareness module.

Children's understanding of death and possible changes in learning and behaviour are included in the training, as is the use of 'loss' in the curriculum, policies, cross-cultural aspects and responding to a death in the school community. In the course, schools are actively encouraged to make contact with the family after bereavement. The project has been used to raise the profile of the experience of loss in schools in Hull, with a focus on encouraging them to develop policies and procedures as well as to gaining an insight into the experience of bereavement. Evaluation questionnaires are sent to schools on a regular basis, both to gain the current views of schools in the area of loss and bereavement and to assess the impact of *Lost for Words*.

It is difficult to isolate the effects of projects such as *Lost for Words* since there are many other variables at work, such as general changes in social attitudes; however 28% of Hull schools now have a planned response to child bereavement. Fifty-two percent of schools also now have an individual responsible for the area and a third of all schools have a policy or procedure in place to respond to loss or bereavement, whereas the initial Hull survey found that all of the responding schools had an 'ad-hoc' approach and none had a policy or procedure (Holland, 1993). *Lost for Words* encourages schools to have a formal approach to responding to loss, giving 'whole staff' thought as to responses. Some schools contend that each bereavement is different and that an 'ad-hoc' approach is necessary; however, despite the uniqueness of each event, there are also many things in common after a death including rites, mourning and an emotional impact. Hopefully an increased awareness of the issues of loss and bereavement and of parental separation will enable staff in schools to be more sensitive to and aware of what is happening in terms of their pupil's behaviour, whether it is more withdrawn and sad or conversely outgoing such as expressions of anger.

As noted above, the initial research in Hull revealed a ‘training gap’; loss and bereavement was rated highly but schools lacked skills to support their pupils and 58% of schools still report that more training is needed in the area of bereavement (Holland, 2007). The percentage of schools with trained staff has gradually increased; initially just 10% of local primary schools had just one staff member with training and none was educational training as such, but from other sources, such as through a previous health career. Training has since been delivered directly or indirectly to the whole staff of some local schools and support services. Sixty-one percent of local schools now have someone on the staff who has received training and 73% of those trained have been on a *Lost for Words* course and 19% of Hull schools were represented at a *Lost for Words* training day held before the international conference in 2005.

On the basis of the Hull experience, the next section identifies some common issues which schools need to address, and offers some suggestions for good practice.

Practical responses

Short-term responses

In terms of helping children after bereavement through death or other loss, one issue may be that the school is not aware that the death has occurred; this could be the case where the school is not a neighbourhood school and where the news of the death has not crossed from the community to the school. There is little that the school can do if the family choose not to inform them; perhaps the family perceive the school as a place of learning and do not see the relevance of informing the school, or they may be in a state of shock and not able to take the step of making a formal declaration.

The school can help to minimise the potential of this happening through being open and welcoming and encouraging parents to let them know of any significant changes. The news may reach the staff through indirect means, such as through discussions with pupils or a significant change of behaviour that is noticed by the staff and leads to an investigation through contacting the family.

Even if the news has reached the school, it may not have been communicated to relevant staff within the school. All staff at school need to be aware when children are bereaved so that they can respond appropriately and efficient communication systems and policies within schools would help (Holland, 2001). If school staff are not aware of the bereavement then there is the potential for difficulties for those who work with the pupil and being sensitive in interactions or misunderstanding their behaviours. Training helps to raise awareness of such issues, such as children’s reluctance to talk with their friends about a parental death. Findings of research by others also show children’s emotions to be problematic (Silverman & Worden, 1993) and that many children do not have anybody who they can talk to in any depth about the death (Holland, 2001). Children may even feel that they could be teased for being ‘different’ (Worden, 1996). Teachers need to be aware of these issues and they are all included in the *Lost for Words* training.

Returning to school

The return to school after a death may be problematic for children. In my own research, children reported feeling ignored, isolated, embarrassed, uncertain, and

different (Holland, 2001) and these issues are addressed in the *Lost for Words* training. Teachers may be unsure about how to broach the topic of loss, this leading perhaps to them ignoring the child and acting as though the death never occurred. The effects of bereavement on children may be overlooked or underestimated and adults may not always make a connection between changes in behaviour or learning of a youngster and a loss event (Holland, 2003). In terms of a response, for many children in the *Project Iceberg* study, an acknowledgment and kind word would have gone a long way in helping them; there would have been no need for a 'heavier' intervention.

Close liaison with the family is important in order to find out how the child is coping and what would help them on their return. This liaison should be continued into the medium term in order to gain an early warning of any problems either at school or at home.

It would be helpful to prepare classmates for the pupil's return and help them to respond appropriately to the returning child, hopefully thereby minimising their isolation. Children may well need guidance on how to help others and this experience will also provide these pupils with an important lesson about life (Naierman, 1997).

The longer haul

In the short to medium term, children may have difficulty expressing themselves verbally and may find that the creative media such as dance, drama, puppets, drawing or painting help children to express their emotions. Children could also create a mural, memory book, memory box, or a collage about the life of the person who died (Goldman, 2004). Writing a pretend letter to the deceased can help children and listening to music may help with contemplation.

Children may need the opportunity to talk, if they would find it of benefit, and be given time so to do if necessary. It is important that the rest of their school life is kept as constant as possible; they still need to comply with the rules and behaviour of the school, but of course a measure of understanding and empathy is also important. Arrangements could be made with pupils whereby they are allowed to leave the class without explanation if they feel emotionally overwhelmed during lessons. Schools could allocate or allow a bereaved pupil to choose a 'special person' if they need someone to talk with and some schools also allocate a 'quiet area' where children may go to feel safe. Sometimes it may not be possible to talk immediately with a pupil, but the promise of arranging a time as soon as possible will help. It may be possible to allow the pupil to telephone home if needed; some children may become anxious and concerned that their remaining parent may also die. Pupils may need monitoring to ensure that they are making progress and any necessary adjustments made to their work, at least in the short term. In the longer term care needs to be taken at times such as when Mothers' Day cards are being made.

It may also be that the family need advice in terms of whether the children should attend the funeral and whether or not peers at school should be told. These issues are best discussed as soon as possible. Staff should answer questions as honestly as they can and good rapport with home will help to ensure that there are no difficulties. One potential problem is what the surviving parent or relations have told the child about

the death. For example, well-meaning parents may tell the child that the dead person is a 'star in the sky' which can cause difficulties later in terms of explaining the grave.

A 'weather eye' needs to be kept on bereaved pupils for some time, and records need to be passed between classes and schools to ensure that the bereavement is recognised and that the pupil is provided with support if needed. Anniversaries of the death may be a particular problem for children, especially the first anniversary as the context around them will be similar to that which existed at the time of the death. Birthdays and other special days or times such as Christmas may also be problematic for children, as with bereaved adults, as they are presented with the appearance, on the media, that everybody is having a happy and wonderful time, whereas they may well be finding things difficult.

Loss education

The area of 'death education' in the curriculum, as with 'sex education' is potentially problematic, but the introduction of 'loss education' can help pupils to understand the effects and implications of loss and thereby hopefully to be better prepared when they encounter loss in their lives. Sixty-seven percent of Hull schools currently already address loss education in the curriculum.

Many primary schools in the area use PSHE and take advantage of opportunities as they arise, for example, something that affects the community locally or nationally, or is perhaps raised by children. This does have the potential danger for parental concerns, especially if pupils report back to their parents in a distorted way. Here much depends on the ethos of the school and the relationship between staff and parents; ideally it would help if parents are kept informed of planned events. Others include 'loss education' more formally within RE and science or within 'feelings', circle time or citizenship. There is also the opportunity to include the subject in literature and 'story-time' as well as in cross-cultural studies where there is the opportunity to compare different funeral rites and customs of religious groups, such as the period and the etiquette of mourning and the disposal of the body, for example, burial in the ground or at sea, cremation, or sky burial. For those children who feel too inhibited to ask questions, a question jar or box could be used, this being where written questions are submitted and then later responded to by the teacher.

Busch and Kimble (2001) contend that educating children about death should be done before a crisis and that children who have been told about a foreseen death and who are encouraged to question and allowed to show their feelings, as well as being included in the care giving tasks, cope better than those without that experience. By promoting loss education at school, children will gain the notion that death is a natural part of life. Many activities can help, such as remembering anniversaries of deaths and creating memorials such as planting a tree to commemorate a death if relevant to the school community. Observation of the seasons and seeing the move through the year from leaves in bud, through to leaves growing and then falling in autumn, reinforces the notion of change and the cycle of life. The life cycles of such as butterflies or frogs will also help children to gain these concepts. Stories such as *Charlotte's Web* can also provide the classroom opportunity for children to gain the notion of change, loss and death in a safe way.

National and international disasters could also be discussed and could be thought provoking, especially for older children, although this needs to be handled with

sensitivity to avoid causing alarm and concern to children, who may fear that they could be affected by terrorist events such as 9/11.

Outside agencies

Schools may feel that they are able to support bereaved children themselves, but may feel the need to refer to outside agencies. There are educational agencies such as educational psychologists or educational welfare services, as well as the medical services. An interesting development in Hull in the most recent survey (Holland, 2007) was that a significant number of schools were now seeking help within their own resources initially before referring to outside agencies.

It is perhaps not surprising that the educational psychology service was named by nearly a third of schools as being the agency that they approached first, as the service took a lead role in developing *Lost for Words* (Holland *et al.*, 2005), but they seek help from a variety of agencies, including WYNGS (Working with Young people Needing Grief Support) which provides advice and group support for bereaved young people, from the local 'Behavioural Emotional Support Teams' and also from the clergy. There should be a continuum of support available for the continuum of pupils' needs and if the grief of a child is prolonged then it may be that a more powerful intervention such as CAMHS is needed, although hopefully a speedy lower level intervention will help to avoid this situation arising.

Complicated bereavement is where there is such an intense and prolonged bereavement that the individual's life is affected over a longer term and to a greater degree than would be expected. This might include depressive disorders, anxiety disorders and declining physical health (Aranda & Milne, 2000). Bowlby (1963) also thought that grieving was pathological when the bereaved had difficulties in the areas of denial, anger, the compulsive caring for other bereaved persons, and depression or anxiety. In these cases it is likely that school resources will be insufficient to cope and that outside specialist agencies will need to become involved.

In conclusion

What can be drawn from the evidence presented in this paper? In some ways we seem apparently to cope well with death: witness the responses to the death of Princess Diana or the response to tragedy, with public mourning, the laying of flowers and so on. But this response is perhaps more about how we cope with feelings aroused in ourselves than about the help that we actually give to the bereaved; the latter may be little more than a short-term demonstration of solidarity. Perhaps it is indicative of the British 'stiff upper lip' combined with the sense of ceremony that is something of a national stereotype.

Research on the more 'micro' level shows that there is often a lack in terms of helping and responding to the needs of children and young people after the death of a close relative. Grand gestures need to be translated into actual help for the bereaved, perhaps through the provision in schools of counsellors and mentors who are willing and able to listen and respond. Care is needed however. Death within families is above all a family matter; will interventions by schools be seen by parents as education encroaching too far into the realms of 'family'?

Will the 'Every Child Matters' agenda be the vehicle to provide help and support for children and young people who suffer bereavement? The agenda has certainly

raised awareness of issues beyond just ‘academic learning’, but the effect in operational terms is yet to be proven. It may well depend on the enthusiasm of head teachers and the individual teachers and auxiliaries in schools in how they interpret and use the guidance. A more systemic approach is probably needed. Although there are now more resources available (such as the *Lost for Words* and *HEART* projects discussed in this paper) which adopt a proactive approach, encouraging schools to develop policies and procedures before a bereavement occurs, provision remains patchy, uncoordinated and too dependent on the initiative of individuals. As we have seen, surveys in schools in the Hull area show that there is still a high demand for training; the ‘training gap’ identified in the initial surveys still exists and I am dubious as to whether parents and wider society are convinced that ‘death and loss’ are suitable topics for children. One prevailing view seems to be that children need protecting, whether in terms of being taken by car to school or limitations on the roaming of their environment by children and the short-term apparent ‘protection’ of children seems to fit this pattern.

Loss is included in the curriculum in some schools, although (as with activities such as Circle Time) these may be used more or less well by teachers. Some may use them sensitively and systematically, with careful planning and preparation, but others may not be convinced of the value and appropriateness of such approaches and, if they use them at all, may do so in a desultory and uninspired way. The quality of provision will depend very much on the enthusiasm of individual teachers.

Greater access to counselling and other psychological support both inside and outside school has much to commend it. However, the paradox is that the provision of counsellors in schools or outside agencies offering such services does to a degree de-skill others in schools: why should teachers prepare themselves for a positive and caring response when they now have somebody else to who they can dispatch those ‘touched by death’?

Provision for children who have experienced loss, in terms of both preparation through ‘loss education’ and responses after an event, seems sporadic, both locally and nationally. Whether or not children and young people are well prepared for loss and receive a ‘good-enough’ response after an event may well depend on the enthusiasm and pastoral awareness of individual staff in school, rather than on institutionalised and systematic care. Someone well informed and sensitively aware of the issues of death and loss who is well placed to influence school policy and coordinate the area could make all the difference in a particular school. Clearly this is not enough on its own, but change on the wider scale will be limited unless and until there is a change in curriculum ethos or the area becomes ‘targetable’ and schools then have no choice but to address it in a more consistent way.

Notes on contributor

John Holland is an educational psychologist who has researched the area of childhood bereavement since the early nineties. He has published many articles in this area as well as books, including *Understanding children's experiences of parental bereavement* and *Coping with bereavement: A handbook for teachers*. John led the ‘Lost for Words’ project in Hull, a loss awareness-raising training project with Dove House, the Hull based hospice and has presented the findings of the project across at conferences in the UK and abroad. John currently works in the East Riding and North Yorkshire area with both his private practice and local government work.

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