

**Responding to Loss and Bereavement in Schools. A training resource to access, evaluate and improve the school response**, by John Holland, London, Jessica Kingsley, 2016, 150 pp., £22.99 (paperback), ISBN: 978 1 84905 692 2

When I arrived at a secondary school to do some research some 25 years ago, I knew there was something wrong from the start: there was no laughter, no bubbly conversation, no macho challenges amongst the boys, just knots of youngsters in hushed and tearful conversation or standing silently with shocked expressions. News had just come in that a Year 10 pupil had died suddenly of meningitis. The whole school seemed to be traumatised. My data-collection had to be shelved for the time-being, but as my research was on 'teachers as active carers', it was appropriate that I ask about the event when I interviewed the deputy head a few weeks later. He gave me a blow-by-blow description of how the school had been taken entirely by surprise by the tragedy, and how, in the weeks that followed, they had negotiated their way through the trauma and provided the support the children (and staff) needed. For this to happen, a great many questions had to be answered. How do we check that the news is true? How do the parents wish us to respond? Which pupils (if any) should we allow to attend the funeral? Should there be a special assembly? Should there be some permanent memorial (a tree? a plaque?). And many more.

The purpose of *Responding to Loss and Bereavement* is to help schools *not* to be caught unprepared when someone dies. And why should they be? After all, we are all touched by death at some point in our lives, so why would we not, as part of our pastoral planning, ensure that our schools already have policies and procedures in place, and do not have to 'start from scratch' to find answers to all those questions? A powerful reason is that, at least for the last century or so, death has been a taboo subject: something best not contemplated and certainly not something with which we should burden our children.

This is not a book in the conventional sense; rather, as the sub-title indicates, it is a resource for schools wishing to appraise and improve their policies and procedures and the capacity of their staff to provide better support when someone dies. The underlying model of school improvement is that of Survey ---> Analyse ---> Plan, so the starting-point is an audit of the school's current provision and questionnaires to probe staff capability in order to shape staff-training and policy development.

The bulk of what follows is a set of activities and exercises for staff to undertake in order to raise their awareness of the issue, consider their own experiences and potential to provide support, and contribute towards school policy and procedure. Most of the activities require individual reflection, discussion with a peer or in a small group and plenary review, but some involve role-play. They are grouped in a structured training plan as follows: General loss-awareness exercises; Initial responses to a death; Medium and longer-term responses to a death, with sub-groupings such as 'Children's understandings of death', 'Responding to the family', 'Death as a taboo subject' and 'Communications in school'. Examples of activities include: what teachers think children understand by death; the language used when talking with children; how the school should respond to the news of the death of a parent; writing a letter of condolence; how to inform the school community; and barriers to interacting with bereaved children. The culminating exercise is directed at the generation of policy which, correctly, should be the outcome of all that precedes it. Each activity has a sheet which may be photocopied, is prefaced with a rationale and instructions to the facilitator, and is followed by a list of 'reflections' which can be used to illuminate and extend the ideas generated by the group.

John Holland is an educational psychologist of many years experience, whose doctoral research (the 'Iceberg Project') is the foundation stone for this volume. His many years of researching, writing and providing in-service training relating to bereavement support and death education are evident throughout the exercises and reflections upon them, but also in the Introduction where he outlines

the nature of family loss, theories of grieving, what is known about children's understanding of death, and religious and cultural issues raised by responding to death, and in Chapter 1, which addresses the role of the school and provides the context for the training plan that follows. Importantly, Holland identifies four 'Golden moments' which are 'crucial times where responses are needed to help to provide support and minimise the chance of pupils being alienated from school' (p.25). These are: when news of the death arrives in school; the period before the funeral; the pupil's return to school; and when the pupil changes school.

Another important point made in Chapter 1 is that staff in different roles can provide different kinds or degrees of support, and Holland offers roles of 'champion', 'strategist', 'interventionist' and 'interactionist' as potentially useful in identifying who should do what in responding to death. However, although reflection on roles figures in a number of activities, an exercise for senior- and middle-managers which explicitly appraised the school's pastoral care *structure* (as opposed to policy and procedure) would have been welcome.

Useful as this introduction and contextualisation is, it is by no means an exhaustive account of what is known and thought about this topic, and this might disappoint some readers. Anyone wishing for such depth should consult the helpful guide to further reading provided towards the end, which includes earlier books and journal articles (three published in *Pastoral Care in Education*) by John Holland, and a number of books by other authors. Readers will find here also a small number of books aimed at children.

While less than a full-blooded action-research project, Holland's approach has great potential for any school wishing to review and improve its pastoral provision. Whether the exercises are as readily adaptable to deal with other kinds of loss as he suggests (p.11), I am not sure. In any case, in the hands of a good facilitator, this resource would do much to help support pupils, families *and* school staff avoid the kind of trauma I witnessed as a researcher all those years ago. I warmly recommend it to schools everywhere.

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