

The Role of Teachers in Grief Management of Secondary Education Students

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Abstract: Grief is a reaction to the loss of a loved one. It is a normal, though not easily tolerated, feeling that causes it to be found in the environment and is an expected reaction to loss. Social perceptions portrayed children and adolescents as individuals who did not understand or care much about grief. The reality is different since the most dangerous ages for the possible development of psychopathology in people who have experienced a loss of a parent are 3–5 years of age and adolescence. Today, grieving processes at all ages are now recognized and studied, and school is of great importance. Therefore, it is suggested to incorporate the teaching of the whole human life cycle into school lessons, the relevant education of teachers who often do not know how to behave in the case of their students' grief, and the organization of school events and rituals within the school. It is considered important not to stop going to school, as this is a link to his own reality. However, there should be flexibility in terms of behavior and performance.

Key words: grief, loss, student, teacher, death

1. Introduction

Loss has been defined as the deprivation of a loved one by death (Rowling & Holland, 2000). Various definitions of bereavement have been given. Stroebe et al. (2008) described it as the objective situation one finds when losing someone (p. 6). Grief is the mental process where one accepts death and one's own place in this state, integrating pain and absence into investing in new objects without forgetting the person who died (Chatzinikolaou, 2009).

Grief represents the emotional dimension of lament and mourning, represents the ritual dimension of lament. Lament, in the sense of grief, is the set of feelings of pain and sadness that a person experiences in response to loss. It is a subjective state, a series of emotions that arise spontaneously after a death. It is the primary emotional response to loss, a reaction that manifests itself in various psychological and physical symptoms (Chatzinikolaou, 2009).

Any type of loss, whether a job loss, loss of a pet, loss of family member or friend, will result in reactions, and feelings that are all part of the grieving process (Kaplan et al., 1996). Mourning involves a set of rituals or

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behaviors envisaged by the tradition of culture. It includes rituals such as memorial service, funeral, black clothes that represent mourning. Grief represents the internalized emotional dimension of lament, while mourning is the externalized ritual form of lament (Chatzinikolaou, 2009).

2. The Grief Management of Children and Adolescents

Death is one of the most stressful events. Although it is the only certainty in human life, it is regarded as unnatural, unpredictable and incomprehensible fact. In all cases, it is experienced as an end, a definitive loss and abandonment. The fear and pain associated with death make adults avoid any reference to it in front of children especially and hide the reality. They feel that this protects them from painful emotions while trying to cover up their own feelings of anxiety and distress. After all, childhood symbolizing the principle of life and hope for the future is considered incompatible with the idea of death. Thus, any discussion with children is considered a taboo subject. One in twenty children experiences the death of a parent before reaching eighteen years old. More often than not, children lose one of their grandparents or other relatives, and sometimes one of the siblings or a peer dies (Kontopoulou, 2007).

The reactions that occur to the person after the loss of their loved one are defined as grief. These reactions can be either physical or emotional. Grief is socially determined, as it refers to the period after death and also is a series of personal emotions (Antonatou, 2015). Leontari (2015) argues that grief is a situation in which one experiences the death of a loved one and distinguishes three types of grief: normal, pathological, and psychiatric. Normal grief refers to the awareness and acceptance of loss and its manifestation in all of them areas of one's life. Pathological grief is related to the refusal to adapt to the new situation and the unwillingness to integrate the painful experience into one's life. Psychiatric grief relates to specific symptoms that can manifest, such as coercion, aggression towards depleted or depressive symptoms.

According to Kontopoulou (2007) pathological grief reactions are considered prolonged eating or sleeping disorder, prolonged physical discomfort, significant performance or behavioral problems, prolonged absence of any manifestation of mourning, refusal to participate, self-reported activity, complete identification with the deceased person, enduring anxiety or apathy and premature and excessive maturity. Thomson (2012) further argues that grief may not be merely an emotional and cognitive response expressed by the individual and provides a holistic definition describing grief as the organism's biological and spiritual response. The process of emotions helps the child to realize the loss and to try to adapt to it. The reactions that follow are different for each child, and sometimes they may not be understood, meaning there is no "right" or "wrong" way to express grief (Thomson, 2012).

Freud (1957) argued that in the event of death, the person should gradually withdraw the energy he had invested in the deceased. This disconnection from the missing person contradicts the newer psychoanalytic views that the individual must maintain his/her relationship with the deceased (Leontari, 2015). The process of grief is a multilevel process, which refers both to the emotional reactions of the person experiencing the loss of a loved one, to his efforts to signify death and change his behavior so that he can adapt to the new reality, as much as and adapting the family and close social environment to loss by redefining roles. The person experiencing the loss must accept it and experience the suffering it causes, adapt to a world where the dead are absent, signify the unthinkable death, redefine the relationship with the deceased, and continue his life (Attig, 2004).

Papadatou and Kamberi (2013) argue that the concept of grief refers to the total personal reaction of a child

to an event which is perceived as loss, while the concept of mourning is linked to cultural and social rules and ceremonies that accompanying the event of death. Grief is a perfectly normal and healthy process, which helps the child to accept and adapt to reality. There is not a proper way to express grief, as each child has his or her own way of experiencing and expressing grief. They add that children “come and go” out of their grief because they cannot withstand the painful emotions for a long time. At one point they may be sad, and the next time they may play or laugh. Grief is a long process. Every child grows up with their loss. It does not forget nor transcend it. Instead, it learns to live with her. When grieving concerns an important person for the child, it has no fixed time and resurrects at every stage of its development (Papadatos & Kamberis, 2013).

Concerning children's reactions to loss, they are influenced by the age, developmental stage, gender, and type of relationship of the child or adolescent with the deceased (Leontari, 2015). Papadatou and Kamberi (2013) note that how children grieve has to do with the following factors:

- 1) The bond the child had with the person who died.
- 2) The manner and conditions of death.
- 3) The meaning that the child attributes to the death of their own person.
- 4) The previous experiences of loss.
- 5) The family's reactions.
- 6) The availability of support from the child's wider environment.
- 7) The maintaining routine and stability in their lives.
- 8) The cultural influences and religious beliefs of the family.

Preschoolers or schoolchildren very rarely reveal their needs immediately, while adolescents avoid turning to their peers for support because they do not want to be differentiated (Papadatou & Kamperi, 2013). Becvar (2001) argues that psychological reactions of children and adolescents to loss include guilt, anger, fear, sadness, lack of hope for the future, self-doubt, feelings of inferiority, anxiety, feelings of isolation and deprivation, a desire to get in touch with other people, a panic attack and a feeling of emptiness. Adolescents experience guilt and a highly depressed mood (Dowdney, 2000). Some adolescents also report suicidal thoughts, decreased self-esteem and fear that they will not be liked by their peers. Many children and adolescents, after the death of a parent or brother/sister, find it difficult to concentrate on the work being done and are easily distracted (Leontari, 2015).

3. The Role of Teachers

Most teachers choose their profession because they want to contribute to both learning and the development of children and adolescents who face evolving changes and challenges in their lives. However, they are rarely trained in how to manage the death and grief of children and adolescents, and often feel embarrassed about what to say and how to support their students. School is often the only context where students can freely express what they are experiencing after a loss, giving them the feeling that life goes on naturally at a time when everything — in and around them — is radically changing. They find refuge in it, and often turn to teachers seeking their support and guidance. In these cases, the teacher is called upon to act supportively, to recognize the physiological or disturbing reactions of his students, to facilitate their grief and to incorporate any loss into their life story (Papadatou & Kamberi, 2013).

The role of the teacher is crucial in supporting the grieving child and adolescent. It is important to recognize the problems associated with the experience of grief. Poor performance, hyperactivity, impulsivity, and distraction

are normal reactions that should not be misinterpreted and evaluated as pathological symptoms. The teacher should show understanding of the reflection, sadness, and need for different relief that each child and adolescent feels (Kontopoulou, 2007).

As for the grieving child, the teacher has to support him in this difficult moment of his life. He should first be able to recognize the problems associated with the experience of loss and grief. Low performance, hyperactivity, impulsivity, and distraction are normal reactions that should not be confused and evaluated as pathological or dysfunctional symptoms (Cohen & Mannarino, 2011). Even the teacher needs to know that the experience and reactions to the loss vary with each child. It should show understanding in the reflection, the sadness and the need to differentiate each child's feeling but at the same time maintain a consistent behavior and expectations so that it does not differentiate it from the other children (Herbert, 2008).

The teacher should not be silent towards the grieving child. Silence can bring greater stress on the grieving child and cause him to feel that he is not worthy of interest and compassion. Expressing emotions on the part of the teacher can help children discover that the grief is painful and that emotions must be expressed. Tears relieve pain and the teacher must pass this on to children (Haggard, 2005). Also, it is important for teachers to listen, without feeling the need to solve the problems of the crying child but not to present normal situations without problems. They should show respect for the student's emotions without underestimating them and asking him to be brave (Haggard, 2005).

Often, the teacher may face the death of a student in the school community. When such a disgusting event occurs, it is only natural that the whole school community be negatively affected. It is important, therefore, that the school and especially every teacher be ready to provide immediate emotional support, either in groups or individually, to other children for as long as necessary (Stevenson, 1986).

The teacher's contribution should therefore aim, at two levels, in terms of death and loss (Papadatou et al., 2002):

a) Direct and appropriate support for the student and his or her family and/or the whole classroom when death interferes with their life. Initially, the teacher should provide a supportive framework where the child will be able to recognize the loss, grief, make sense of it and integrate it into their lives (Papadatou, 2006). The teacher, like any other important adult for the child, should be able to provide clear answers to the grieving child's questions, reassure him that it is normal to feel confused, angry, and frustrated, and although he may feel weak, he goes beyond having people who love him by his side. The teacher still needs to support the parent in their efforts to help the child and refer them to mental health professionals when they feel it is necessary.

b) In the general education of children on issues related to death and grief. Loss and death exist in the lives of all children; school can include education about death in the curriculum. Through intersectionality the concept of death can be approached in the various courses but also with a specific lesson about death. Familiarity with the fact of death before it is even tackled should be part of the education of all children. The discussion, of course, should be tailored to the children's understanding of their cognitive level and the teacher's ability to handle the subject. Those teachers who choose to shoulder the heavy burden of death education should first receive specialized training and at the same time have reached a satisfactory level of self-knowledge, ie in-depth knowledge of their own behavioral and attitudinal peculiarities toward death. In particular they need to be educated on the specific needs of children, their developmental stages and how to express their emotions. As for their self-awareness, they need to realize their own taboos, emotions, and fears about death so that they can help children later (Atkinson, 2007).

According to surveys, the majority of teachers recognize that children have concerns and questions about death (Leontari, 2015). In these cases, the teacher should not avoid the discussion and change the subject, but offer the student space and time for a productive dialogue. Teachers should not be anxious about answering students' questions about death, but to focus on how they will make it easier for students to express themselves. They should avoid absolute placements and help children understand that there are many different views about death, without having a right one. Even when adults share their personal philosophical or religious views, it is important to present them as beliefs and not as knowledge or absolute truths (Papadatou & Kamberi, 2013).

Leontari (2015) identified three functions that teachers can have:

- 1) helping children feel safe and recognizing the reality of death;
- 2) creating an appropriate environment that will make it easier for children to talk about their emotions;
- 3) educate children about death by developing appropriate learning opportunities.

Leontari (2015) emphasizes that teachers should be able to discern early changes in the behavior of grieving children. Some characteristic behaviors are mood swings, vulnerability, depression and lack of concentration. Many children are also reluctant to return to school. Teachers need to establish communication bridges with the family of the grieving child so that they can better help the child. Papadatou and Kamberi (2013) advise teachers who are confronted with a student who grieve to act as follows:

- a. Facilitate the return of the student to the classroom after the person's close death and the communication with the student on the course of the situation.
- b. To hear more and to speak less.
- c. Encourage the expression of emotions, whatever they are, without judging them.
- d. Recognize the uniqueness of each student's reactions and maintain routine and school safety.
- g. Adhere to boundaries and rules among students.
- h. Adjust performance goals according to their abilities in the given period, in consultation with the child.
- i. Pay particular attention to what children express and do.
- j. Stay on the side of the student that crying and provide support over time.
- k. Foster peer support.

Papadatou and Kamberi (2013) also point out that school communication and cooperation with family is important for two main reasons: to understand exactly what teacher is experiencing and to provide parents with appropriate information and guidance to facilitate the child's grief and adaptation to loss. Therefore, the more prepared and appropriately trained teachers are in managing traumatic and disastrous events, the more they reduce the likelihood of chronic psychosocial problems occurring in students and contribute to the collective development and maturation of the school unit.

4. Conclusions

The death of a loved one may be the most difficult and painful event a child and an adolescent has ever faced. It has a profound effect on the way he views the world after this traumatic event. A child or an adolescent experiencing a loss loses the naive confidence that they are living in a safe and happy world. Students who have the opportunity to understand death and grief in a normal way will come out of this experience with new powers. They will learn to be more sensitive to the pain of others, they will acquire life skills. That's why for a healthy solution to the grief, student need adult support. Education about death and loss should be included in the school

curriculum, as it helps students prepare for significant losses and impending difficulties in their lives.

The teachers must be aware of the effects that grief can have on students and be able to recognize that problematic behavior that results from the experience of loss and grieving, so that they can help students transition from this situation and adapt to the new treaty. In addition, teachers should be aware of available services in the area, which provide support programs in case of loss. It is important to identify people in the community who are able to help when a death occurs and to clarify the role they could play in such a case.

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