

A response to the death of a pupil

A school counsellor's perspective



Jo Ebner-Landy BEd MA DipCouns CertFT
School Counsellor, London, UK

With additional comments by a teacher from the school

How does a secondary school react to the sudden, violent death of one of its pupils and what is the role of the school counsellor in this situation? Jo Ebner-Landy offers a personal account of how a school population coped with this traumatic event. She focuses on her difficult and delicate task as school counsellor, and her responses to the reactions of the Headteacher, staff, students, and the external support that was offered. In a following section, a teacher at the school also gives her perspective. The authors' intention is to help other schools explore how they might respond to such a tragedy and consider preparing an action plan.

How does a secondary school react to the sudden, violent death of one of its pupils and what is the role of the school counsellor in this situation? Jo Ebner-Landy offers a personal account of how a school population coped with this traumatic event. She focuses on her difficult and delicate task as school counsellor, and her responses to the reactions of the Headteacher, staff, students, and the external support that was offered. In a following section, a teacher at the school also gives her perspective. The authors' intention is to help other schools explore how they might respond to such a tragedy and consider preparing an action plan.

Laura, aged 14, was killed returning to school after an outing. She and a friend had gone on ahead without permission. On seeing their teacher and the other girls on the opposite side of the road, they turned around and ran back across the road, into the oncoming traffic. Her friend survived but Laura was killed outright. The rest of her year group, 51 students, witnessed Laura's body being tossed through the air. They witnessed the wait for, and arrival of, paramedics, doctors, the police and ambulance.

I had been working as the counsellor in Laura's all-girls' secondary school for several years, running a weekly drop-in clinic. I was not in school that day but received a telephone call at home later in the afternoon telling me of her tragic death.

THE INITIAL RESPONSE

After my first reaction of shock and sadness, I felt, in consultation with my counselling supervisor, who is independent of the school, that a team of counsellors should be brought in from an external organisation, such as the Tavistock Clinic (a nationally known centre for psychotherapy). It was clear more resources were needed than my weekly clinic could offer. I have no specific training in traumatic

bereavement and I believed outsiders, who were not emotionally involved, would be able to help me form an objective action plan. I felt we needed to think about the health of the whole school, as well as offer support to individual students. However, I needed to take my lead from the school.

The school's initial telephone call breaking the news to me, had asked me to wait for instructions from the Headteacher. The school was in a state of shock. That evening I spoke to the Head, who gave me further details about what had happened. I suggested we bring in a team of experts, but at that stage the Head preferred a 'keep it in the family' approach.

Many parents and friends had called the Head offering their services – bereavement counsellors, family therapists, doctors, counsellors in training etc. She was grateful for these offers and had agreed they should come into school to help the students during that first week. She asked me to come in as normal the next day to liaise with the counsellors and to discuss the way forward with her.

THE FOLLOWING DAY

When I arrived in school, five counsellors were there to offer support to any student who wanted it. Some were related to the

students: two were mothers of pupils, and another was a grandmother. They were shown to various rooms around the building while I went to my usual room. Notices were posted throughout the school saying counsellors were available for any girl, and a list of rooms and times was pinned up.

At lunchtime, I was inundated; some students came in small groups, others as individuals. The other counsellors were less busy; one saw two students, another saw one only. The male school doctor received no clients, nor did two other counsellors.

Students may have been embarrassed to ask for help from someone whom they knew in another context, and preferred to use the system with which they were familiar. Also, they probably felt they did not need medical advice from a doctor, not understanding that he might be able to provide emotional support.

This pattern continued throughout the week. Different counsellors came into school, and I was kept reasonably busy,

EDITOR'S NOTE

The horrific death here described could be expected to give rise to two distinct types of reaction. For those attached to the child who died, severe grief was to be expected and the sudden, unexpected nature of the loss made it imperative to provide a prompt offer of bereavement support. Those who witnessed the accident, even if they were not attached to the victim, were likely to be haunted by traumatic memories and other symptoms including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). For them stress counselling and assessment of the need for specialist treatment was needed. Because most teachers will one day face similar situations they should be made aware, in the course of their training, of the importance of setting up prompt and effective assessment and support using the best available resources. Counsellors need to work with the teachers to assess and meet these varied needs.

This paper describes the organisation of a bereavement response. For a more detailed account of helping children after a traumatic bereavement see Martin Newman's paper in *Bereavement Care* 1995; 14 (2): 18-19, and for an account of a training programme to prepare people to work with traumatised children see Brown et al in *Bereavement Care* 1996; 15 (2): 17-19.

but by Friday, I had only one student. It was apparent by now that the voluntary counsellors were no longer needed. They were thanked and offers of further help politely declined.

We were aware that after such a horrific accident, trauma was likely to be a major problem, especially for the 51 students who had witnessed the death. Three children were identified during the sessions in this first week as suffering from flashbacks and other symptoms of PTSD, and were referred on to local child and adolescent units for specialist psychiatric help.

MY REACTION

For me personally, there were some feelings of marginalisation. I felt I was not given the responsibility I would have expected to deal with the crisis and nobody in the school seemed clear how to react. However, the Head felt that as people had volunteered their services, it would have been churlish to decline; and the insistent nature of some offers made declining even more difficult.

A feeling of competitiveness developed among the volunteer counsellors. Each had different levels of training and experience and came from a different discipline, and each felt he or she was the 'expert'. One counsellor in training wrote to the Head offering to come in on a regular basis to counsel students, overlooking the fact that the school already had its own counsellor. Another telephoned me at home to tell me three students had come to see her outside school and that she had been supporting them because 'they didn't want to see a counsellor in school'. And there was also an issue of boundaries: I felt it was not appropriate for family members of students to counsel other pupils.

It was interesting that on the one hand I was made to feel indispensable, yet on the other I was marginalised. I felt this was a manifestation of the ambivalent position I had often experienced as a school counsellor, which arises from the difficulty of trying to be part of the system while, in many ways, remaining outside it.

As the weeks went on, my role and position in the school was recognised and re-established.

COUNSELLING ACTION PLAN

After the first week, I met the Head to think about how the school should respond further to the situation. It was agreed that I should consult a group of professionals to consider how best to meet the needs of staff, pupils and parents.

I arranged a meeting with a number of respected professionals in the fields of counselling, therapy and bereavement to establish an action plan. Together we considered various courses of action, trying to find the best way forward, and concluded that the following would help:

- a meeting for the staff
- meetings for Laura's year group
- a meeting for parents
- communication with Laura's parents
- a memorial at school.

Staff

The meeting for staff, run by the Candle project of St Christopher's Hospice, London took place during the third week after Laura's death. The Head and I felt this was an urgent need because staff were having to deal with students on a daily basis. The aim was not only to offer ideas on how to deal with the tragedy, but also to create a forum in which staff could discuss how the school reacted and how best to support the students.

It was interesting that on the one hand I was made to feel indispensable, yet on the other I was marginalised

Staff were offered an informative talk and were given leaflets about traumatic bereavement from Dr Dora Black's Traumatic Stress Clinic, London, as well as information on signs of PTSD. They examined models of grief and looked at ways in which people cope by oscillating between confronting grief and avoiding it. There was also an opportunity for them to talk about how they were feeling and to ask questions. About a third of staff attended the meeting, and the feedback was very positive.

Pupils

External professionals were also engaged to run a programme for Laura's year group. Two senior members came in to offer support to the students one day after school, without staff present. But although the meeting was well publicised, not one student turned up.

I was not involved in the organisation but it would have been helpful to have known the date and time of the meeting. In retrospect, greater care should have been taken over how the meeting was presented to the girls. Perhaps they were worried that staff would be present and they would not be able to talk freely. Certainly the meeting should not have been held after school hours. It seemed as

though the girls were supporting one another at this stage and were not even coming to me for help.

During all the years I had run a counselling service in the school, it had usually been full; indeed, it was often difficult to get an appointment. At the same time as the meeting for students was offered, I had been coming into school more than usual – on a twice-weekly basis – to offer lunchtime counselling sessions. Yet, interestingly, two weeks after Laura's death, girls stopped coming to see me.

At first, I felt this was because they were simply too upset and angry and that the grief was raw and unprocessed. Clearly, there was a feeling of helplessness. Possibly, girls who would usually come to discuss problems within their families, or issues about friendships, felt their problems were too trivial in the wake of the tragedy. This situation continued until well into the next term, when a few sixth formers began to make appointments and see me again.

Parents

A meeting was arranged towards the end of the term for parents of all the girls in Laura's year, run by professionals from outside the school. About 20 parents attended, including Laura's mother. It was a successful meeting and parents felt they had received a great deal of support.

Communication with Laura's parents

For a period of time after Laura's death her parents needed students and staff to answer questions (sometimes at home) to assuage their grief. In the event of a tragedy like this, the school has to be conscious of and responsive to the parents' needs, and professional lines may sometimes be blurred. If they want to, parents must be able to continue to have an ongoing relationship with the school.

We encouraged the school to keep up communication with Laura's parents. But we felt it was important and necessary to refer them on to a specialist agency which could provide them with the crucial support they needed, which the school was not equipped to provide. We suggested they contact the Child Death Helpline, based at The Hospital for Sick Children, Great Ormond Street, London.

A memorial at school

Students were keen to have a physical memorial and organised a collection so that a bench could be placed in the playground and dedicated to Laura's memory. Six months after her death, all the pupils from her year group attended a service at which the bench was dedicated.

At the action planning meeting, it was also suggested that a memorial service might be held in school, perhaps towards the end of the academic year. Laura's parents are discussing with the Head the possibility of an endowed prize in memory of her.

LOOKING FORWARD

Since Laura's death, two terms ago, we have learned a great deal about how to respond in the wake of a tragedy. First, it would be useful for schools to have a list of experts to call on, with contact telephone numbers. Ideally this should be organised on an area basis by the local education

authority, with schools being encouraged to make their own contacts as well.

It is important to think about the needs of three groups: pupils, staff and parents. If there is no clear response, then the whole school will be affected and the health of the school suffers. In our case, I believe the needs of parents and staff were well met, but the pupils' needs were not fully recognised. There is a feeling that the girls have supported one another and are now preoccupied with preparing for Standardised Attainment Tests. Some have sought help outside school on an individual basis, for example, the student

who was with Laura at the time of her death is receiving on-going counselling.

Postscript

It is now two years since Laura's death and the girls still talk about the tragedy, but in a much calmer way. Laura's friends remember her with affection and good humour. For nearly a year, I felt that I was made to represent for the school something about the untouchability of death and the raw pain of grief. That time has now passed, the school has been able to move on and, significantly, the counselling service is very busy again.

A teacher's perspective

In the previous academic year, the school had drawn up a disaster recovery plan, a cumbersome title perhaps, but the document was designed to be a clear and immediate reference for any of the Senior Management Team in the event of a crisis. I said in a staff meeting that the document had been compiled in the hope that we would never need to put it to the test. In the event, it served us well. Diagrammatic sequences, lists of vigorous logic and practical guidance enabled the school to meet the need for an immediate response, even while full details of the tragedy were still unclear.

The initial school response

The death occurred in the middle of a school day. No document can help any teacher – even a Headteacher of many years' experience – tell a school of such a tragedy. Form teachers, Section Heads, and all members of the pastoral team were outstanding in helping pupils to cope in the immediate aftermath of the news.

I shall never forget seeing a group of 11-year-olds, chattering and laughing outside the school two hours after they had been told of the tragedy. In their hands they were holding the letter that we had written to parents. There was something faintly comforting in such apparent normality.

The next day

Assembly the following day was the first time the whole school had gathered since the tragedy. There is an emphatic quality to the silence voluntarily sustained by 800 people. The balance between grief and continuity, which characterised those early weeks, began in the Headteacher's assembly that day.

Staff were asked to continue with classes as normal, but no girl from Laura's year group was expected to be in lessons during the first week. In fact, a surprisingly large number chose to attend. Although younger pupils

continued to respond more or less as normal, those pupils most closely involved were often muted and detached in class. It was difficult to teach girls who were so unlike themselves.

A group of Laura's closest friends planted a tree on common land a couple of miles from the school that morning. They needed somewhere private to go to remember her. A phone call was made to the school to ask whether several girls who were in lessons might be told about the tree-planting and allowed to attend. One of the most important aspects of the first week was the sensitivity with which school rules were broken by staff.

In accordance with our disaster recovery plan, a press statement had been issued at the end of school on the day of the accident. The following day, press inquiries were put through directly to the Head; all other phone calls relating to the accident were answered by the Deputy Head. The school was inundated with offers of help, and some parents telephoned to ask advice from the school.

The staff

Six weeks after the tragedy, we offered a voluntary bereavement counselling session for staff, led by professional counsellors. The session was well attended. Staff were told about the 'normal' cycle of bereavement and given advice about how to respond to pupils who needed to talk about the tragedy. It was a valuable opportunity to ask questions and share uncertainties. Ironically, none of the staff most closely involved in the tragedy has sought counselling, but it would be easy to underestimate the value of a cohesive and supportive staff room.

Pupils

The Section Head and form teachers of Laura's year group have experienced at first-hand the fluctuations in the girls' response. The initial need to talk to

adults was later replaced by a silence that seemed obdurate and excluding. This was confirmed by their absence at a well-advertised confidential counselling session in school.

Girls felt this was 'their' private grief and did not want to discuss it with any adult. No-one was in any doubt that the tragedy was dominant in the minds of all the year group, despite the reassertion of school routine. Almost all those pupils most directly involved in the tragedy have chosen to have private counselling, out of school.

Several of Laura's closest friends have composed music and songs in her memory and have chosen to perform them in school concerts. A bench has been bought in her memory. This was the girls' decision and the whole school contributed to the cost. Laura's year group decided on the design of the bench and discussed with the Head where it should be placed. The dedication ceremony, attended by Laura's parents and all staff and girls who wanted to be present, was highly regarded by her friends. Girls found the Section Head's reading about friendship particularly apposite.

There are several pupils who had considered other schools for the sixth form, who no longer have any inclination to leave our school because of the collective response prompted by the tragedy.

Looking forward

Everyone recognises that there can be no absolute conclusion to such an event and that the function of any school is to guide its pupils towards the future. Intelligence, good judgment and compassion will continue to be essential in our response to all pupils, not least those who knew Laura.' BC

This article is adapted, with kind permission of the authors and editor, from the original, first published in Young Minds Magazine 1999; 41: 21-23.