

Handling bereavement in Danish schools – A system at a crossroad?



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Abstract: The bereavement response system used in Danish schools has developed differently from those in other European nations. At its heart lies the bereavement response plan, which 96% of all schools today use on a voluntary basis. Through a timeline interview with one participant and a focus group interview with three participants, this study explores how the Danish system has been influenced by the teachers using it in a particular school context. Interviews identify that in-school revisions of the bereavement response plan seem to occur isolated from advances made within academia. The article concludes that the current system has begun to transform into something different than was originally intended. While it is difficult to conclude whether such a change is for the better or worse, it remains problematic that no organisation seems to be in control of the current direction the system is taking.

Keywords: Bereavement response, Death of a parent, Social support, School responses

Introduction

Most professionals working with bereavement have witnessed the devastating impact it can have on people's lives. In this regard, the severe and life changing effects it can have on children in particular have been highlighted by many researchers (eg. Cullberg, 2006; Dyregrov & Raundalen, 1994; Weller *et al*, 1991). With such findings in mind it is of paramount importance that schools, in which children spend a considerable amount of their time, are able to help them cope with the loss of a family member. However, supporting grieving children is often considered a challenging task by teachers. In an interview undertaken by Rowling (2003, p43) a teacher argued: 'It's very painful for yourself, plus you want to, as a teacher, be there for their kids'. Another explained: 'After this [the bereavement] I have said that because I was able to handle it, I can handle anything' (Lytje, 2011, p3). These quotes testify to the challenging nature of bereavements, which every teacher, statistically, will encounter at least once during their career (Bøge, Personal communication). The issues surrounding childhood bereavement have similarly been recognised in

an editorial, by *The Lancet* (2013). The journal called for more research to look into the long-term well-being of children who have experienced traumatic events.

Sadly, little academic research has been carried out which evaluates the support mechanisms Danish schools utilise to help grieving pupils. However, studies undertaken in British schools (eg. Holland, 1993, 2000; Lowton & Higginson, 2003) have indicated that often little is done to support grieving children. This lack of response is mainly attributed to the fact that most British schools do not have any pre-planned approaches on how to deal with bereavement. Holland (1993) reasons that one of the most effective ways to improve the bereavement response is to introduce formalised approaches outlining how the school should respond. Through experiences based on practice, rather than scientific research, the same conclusion was reached in Denmark. At the beginning of the nineties, Dige and Bøge, two consultants from the Danish Cancer Society, developed the idea of the Danish bereavement response plans¹ (b-plans). In 2011, 96% of all Danish schools

¹ Bereavement response plan is a translation of the Danish word: *Sorgplan*.

reported being in possession of such a plan (OmSorg, 2013).

The major advantage of the Danish b-plans is that they are individually crafted by each school and thereby shaped to the needs of the specific community. In practice, this is done by providing schools with a guide on how to create a b-plan rather than just supplying a finalised plan. As a consequence of this process, some plans are very efficient while others lead to a false sense of security and the introduction of practices that might potentially do harm.

This article aims to introduce the reader to the Danish bereavement response system and show how it has become influenced by the teachers using it. In order to accomplish this, a timeline interview (TI) and a focus group interview (FGI) was undertaken. The article will explore how 'good' and 'poor' grief work is perceived by a group of teachers and discusses how teacher conceptualisations might have influenced the development of the system in a particular school context. It goes on to debate whether this influence could lead to a fragmentation of the system, and isolation from the advances made within death studies in academia.

Background

The development of the Danish bereavement response system

The development of the Danish bereavement response system has not previously been covered in academic literature. Consequently, this part of the article will be based on interviews undertaken with the authors of the system: Jes Dige and Per Bøge. In 1994 they were working with the establishment of bereavement support groups for children. Running this project under the Danish Cancer Society they repeatedly came into contact with distressed teachers who expressed the need for a stronger bereavement response in their schools. In Norway the researcher Dyregrov (1985, 1988) had been responsible for the development of the Norwegian school response, and his approach was used as an initial inspiration.

Dige and Bøge had two key goals which they believed the Norwegian system did not handle in a satisfactory manner. 1) The b-plan was to be implemented in a way that would make teachers feel a sense of ownership towards it; 2) The plans needed to be individualised to correspond to the diverse needs of different schools. The authors' philosophy towards reaching these goals was a simple, yet powerful one. Dige and Bøge believed that by prompting schools to create individual b-plans, from a standardised guide, would force them to carefully consider the implications of having to deal with a bereaved pupil. Such considerations would naturally be based on the context in which the teachers were working and would therefore shape the plan to the needs of the specific school. Furthermore, the authors anticipated that teachers would develop a sense of pride, and a feeling of ownership,

towards the product which emerged. Such pride would cause them to encourage each other to remember and use the b-plan. The second goal of individualising the b-plans was considered important because of the complexity which existed when having to adopt grief work to the socio-economic and ethnical dissimilarities of each school. In classrooms with pupils from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds this would have to be reflected in the plan. In such instances the plan would have to be adopted to operate in correspondence with local ways of dealing with grief and bereavement. As such, the developed b-plans had to be matched to the cultural and religious tendencies within the community surrounding the school.

Bereavement response plans

With every b-plan being independently tailored to individual schools, it is difficult to describe the exact nature of the plan, other than as a guide to deal with bereavement in a school setting. Even today there exists no consensus on what the plans should be called². In this article bereavement response plan (b-plan) is used to encompass all the different names currently used to cover the same idea.

Lytje (2011) reviewed 40 randomly sampled b-plans and uncovered a significant difference in how they were constructed. Some plans extended over 35 pages while others spanned no more than four. This difference of up to 31 pages naturally meant that content diverged considerably. Several plans included highly detailed walkthroughs on what to do in the initial weeks after a bereavement, had copies of draft letters ready to be sent to parents and covered excerpts on psychological theories of grief. Shorter plans mainly concentrated on detailing the bereavement response in the initial weeks. Some were imprecise and suffered from issues such as highlighting that the teacher should look for signs of grief turning 'complicated', without specifying what these signs were. One b-plan further detailed a theory of grief which had been misinterpreted by the authors of the plan.

B-plans also tended to mainly focus on the practical aspects of undertaking a bereavement response. They often included practical guides on topics such as: who to notify if a bereavement has taken place, division of responsibilities during the first initial weeks and lists of books and contact persons in case the school needs additional help. Many also included recaps or references to Cullberg's *Four Stage Model of Grief* initially developed in 1975³. The model argues that a grieving person has to go through four stages

² The most common names are listed here and translated into English in the following parentheses: "Sorgplan" (Bereavement Response Plan), "OmSorgsplan" (Grief Care Plan) and "Sorg og Kriseplan" (Grief and Crisis Plan)

³ The model has since then been revised five times. The latest version was published in 2006 (Cullberg, 2006). While the book has been updated the assumptions behind the theory have not changed significantly during the revisions.

of grief: *shock, reaction, processing* and *re-orientation* on the way to recovery, and provides an easy-to-follow description of how the 'average person' passes through grief. It has gained a large following among Danish practitioners during the last two decades. This is somewhat problematic since stage models of grief has been heavily critiqued by authors such as Weiss (2008) and Jacobsen (2008) for being imprecise and empirically unverifiable.

While the plans did differ greatly, the vast majority still used the same framework, in which they considered three different scenarios: 1) When the institution loses a child; 2) When a child loses a caregiver; and 3) When the school loses a teacher. Most plans do not seem to offer any support in cases where other relatives, such as grandparents or friends die. Sources for this model were never cited in any of the reviewed plans, which did not provide references, but it comes close to the framework originally suggested by Bøge, Dige and Grønbeck (1998). Another surprising finding was that, while Bøge and Dige highlight the differences between working with young and older pupils (eg. Bøge & Dige, 1996, 2000), this was never reflected in any of the b-plans. None of them distinguished between approaching very young pupils and those in their final years at school.

This difference in what the b-plans cover and include makes it difficult to evaluate them as one unified entity. In many ways, this variance constitutes the greatest strength, but also weakness, of the Danish system. Some plans are of high quality and updated on the basis of new experiences gained from working with bereavement. Other plans show signs of being hastily made and are of questionable value for teachers having to deal with bereavement. Consequently, the success of the Danish model can, and should, still be debated.

Methodology

Participants

This study aimed to undertake a qualitative examination of how a Danish bereavement response was conceptualised and perceived in a particular school context. The first school which was approached agreed to participate. Since full anonymity was offered, the name of the school will not be mentioned in this study. However, it was located in a city with approximately 6000 inhabitants and provided education during years 0-10⁴ for approximately 700 pupils. These came from the city itself as well as adjoining hamlets. The first request was sent directly to the headmaster who forwarded it to a teacher designated as responsible for maintaining the school b-plan. After an email correspondence and a phone call, this teacher

agreed to participate in the Timeline interview. While the study has been anonymised her designated name during this article is Ida. This interview was conducted in 2010. A year later the opportunity was given to return to the school and undertake a focus group interview with three teachers present including Ida, one of the original four participants having cancelled. Data on all participants can be seen in Table 1.1 The small sample size in this study is explained by the focus group interview being part of a larger mixed method study which also included a national survey (Lytje, 2012). Since utilising all available data would make for a very large article, the choice has been made to divide it into two articles, of which this is the first.

Both interviews followed the ethical guidelines set down by British Psychological Society (2009). This framework is built around the four principles of: respect, competence, integrity and responsibility. It covers points such as: the right for participants to withdraw at any time, being honest and to present participant views as accurately as possible. Participants were introduced to the topic of the study beforehand, and were allowed to comment at the end of the interview on any part of the meeting they might have felt uncomfortable about.

Table 1.1: Participants

Name:	Teacher	Years of Teaching Experience:	Teaching Years:	Experiences with Bereaved Pupils:
Lis	60	15 +	All	Yes
Ida	33	5	Grades 6-10	Yes
Tom	57	14	All	No

Data collection and analysis

The data used for this study has been based on two different types of empirical data: a timeline interview (TI) and a focus group interview (FGI). Adriansen (2012) elucidates that the TI aims at in-depth exploration of participant views through the real-time creation of a timeline. Ideally, this helps to create a coherent story and functions as an anchor for the conversation. The timeline can further be used as a map of the interview, allowing the participant to navigate back and forth from important events without losing focus. While not providing as high a level of detail, The FGI is an effective method, which can help the researcher to improve his or her understanding of how participants relate to an issue or a topic. Krueger (2009) argues that the FGI is an effective tool when wishing to explore opinions. He defines the FGI as: '...a carefully planned series of discussions designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, nonthreatening environment' (Krueger, 2009, p2). Vaughn, Schumm & Sinagub (1996) further argue that FGI's are

4 In Denmark both primary and secondary education are provided by the folkeskole. Year's 1-9 are compulsory with an optional year 0 and year 10. Children usually start at the age of 6-7 and leave at the age of 16.

best used when conducting exploratory research. With the technique focussing on generating opinions this makes it ideally suited for exploring teacher conceptualisations of grief work. While one-to-one interviews were initially the recommended technique when investigating research on sensitive matters, several authors have challenged the conception that FGI's are unsuitable for research on sensitive matters (eg. Farquhar & Das, 1999; Kitzinger, 2006). It has here been a central argument that a common loss or issue shared by the group can present as strong a bonding factor as a homogenous group. For participants it can also be a relief to have the opportunity to discuss a sensitive issue with people who are in a similar situation as themselves (Finch & Lewis, 2003).

With the TI focusing on elucidating the story as the interviewee perceived it, it did not utilise any interview questions. Instead the participant was asked to give an account of her experiences with taking care of a bereaved pupil. The interview explored the efforts she made to help the pupil and her class to recover from the bereavement, from the day it befell and in the year which followed. The FGI aspired to have the participants moderate their own discussion. However, thematic questions were created based on insights gained during previous studies, and used in order to ensure that that the interview covered different parts of the grief work process. Participants were asked to discuss: 1) 'Good' and 'poor' ways of dealing with grief in a school setting 2) Needs of a mourning child and 3) Whether grief should be approached differently depending on the age of the pupils.

The above questions were derived from insights gained during the TI and other unpublished interviews with teachers. In this regard the purpose of the FGI was not to uncover new themes but to gain a deeper understanding of those already discovered. The FGI further allowed the study to explore whether the teachers shared the same conceptualisations of grief work or had individual ones. Undertaking the TI and thereafter the FGI had the advantage that the TI gathered the initial thoughts of the teacher. Had the interviews occurred the other way around, the answers received from the TI could have been altered by the consensus reached during the FGI. Both interviews were recorded on audio, and thereafter transcribed onto paper.

The TI was analysed by cutting out every sentence on a piece of paper and then sorting them into different and naturally occurring themes. The FGI was analysed through the same process, but with the difference that the findings were sorted into the four pre-established categories: 'good' grief work, 'poor' grief work, needs of the bereaved children and difference in grief based on age. The findings uncovered during the interviews will be presented and discussed in the following sections. This will be followed up by a discussion on how the Danish Bereavement Response

system might have been shaped by the teachers using it, and what challenges this leads to.

Findings

Teacher conceptualisations of 'good' grief work

During the TI, Ida describes how she was made responsible for handling a case of bereavement in a class she taught. In Denmark, the full responsibility for initiating and maintaining the bereavement response is given to the class teacher. Ida stated:

It's the system we have in Denmark, when situations like this happen it is the primary class teacher's responsibility to deal with... I would preferably do it all myself... There have to be as few people in contact with the family as possible so they only have to deal with one representative of the school.

After having been notified about the parental bereavement, Ida contacts the remaining caregiver in order to make her condolences and to inform them about the areas of support the school can provide. This includes support such as: notifying classmates and booking counselling for the grieving pupil. She also asks permission for the school to be allowed to participate in the funeral. Having gained permission to do so, a group of teachers and the headmaster attends the funeral. Furthermore, Ida is put in charge of notifying classmates of what had transpired. Throughout the whole interview Ida emphasises the importance of structure and the need to possess the courage to engage a bereaved pupil. She highlights how much effort was put into discussing the topic of death in the class after the bereaved pupil had returned. As an example, a local priest was invited to talk about death from a Christian perspective and the reason for the rituals surrounding the burial ceremony. Ida further emphasises that throughout the whole process the b-plan was a great tool in helping to provide structural support. Based on the TI it is clear that Ida saw it as her primary responsibility to provide her pupil with a structured – and actively engaging support.

Being proactive is also explicitly highlighted as a strength in the FGI. Here, the Focus Group summarise their perspective on what constitutes good grief work in the following way:

Lis: I still think courage is a significant headline because it is also the courage to recognise what is my strength compared to my own limitations when contacting people in severe grief... I think especially it is about professional courage to see...

Ida: It is also presence both towards the family and the child... Our duty is to take care of these children... I

Table 1.2: Principles of belief

Principles of belief:	Description
Structure:	Is important in the initial days in order to assure that the school responds in an appropriate way and that no steps are forgotten such as notifying the class or members of staff. Long term structure is seen as necessary in order to ensure a plan is created and followed on how to help the bereaved pupil, and the class in general.
Courage:	Is needed when having to approach the bereaved child. Is also perceived as being able to ask for help if a teacher realises he or she can needs a break away from dealing with the bereavement.
Personal Insight:	Is important in being able to distinguish between what one does in order to help oneself and what is done to help the bereaved pupil.
Collaboration:	Is seen as important when having to coordinate the bereavement response between family, school and external helping sources.

think it is comforting to have a check list [b-plan]... To see if you have done the official stuff and the rest comes afterwards... Because that [the individual child] it [the b-plan] cannot describe no matter how good we make it.

Interviewer: So now we have talked about: organisation, courage and safety...Do you agree in these three headlines...Does anyone agree or disagree?

Lis: I think safety should be changed to empathy and presence.

Ida: Yes, presence is more important.

Tom: Because safety is so far away in this situation that we cannot reach it, but only work toward it. This we can do through empathy and presence and perhaps by using more of our time than we are given to handle it [the bereaved child].

Lis: I completely agree

Ida: Yes!

After having presented individual and diverging opinions the group has managed to reach a consensus on what constitutes good grief work. They agree that the most important pre-requirement is for the teacher to have the courage to engage the pupil. According to the group it is, furthermore, important to retain an ability to realise when one has reached one's own personal and professional limitations. Good grief work comprises of the teacher being empathic and present in the meeting with a mourning pupil. It is also agreed that establishing collaboration between the home and the school should be of high priority. If no such collaboration exists, it can be very difficult to coordinate information between the home and the school. During

this negotiation the members of the group have progressed from individual understandings of the topic to sharing a unified one. The unified understanding is based on all their individual experiences and is likely of a more complex nature than their old individual representations. For an overview of these principles of belief which occurred during this section see Table 1.2.

Teacher conceptualisations of 'poor' grief work

During the TI it is clear that Ida perceives doing too little and ignoring the needs of the child as some of the worst thing a teacher can do. She does, however, also possess ambivalent feelings towards using the b-plan. Ida states: 'In some ways I think it might be dangerous to trust it that much...But it helped get me through handling the bereavement and I have not become any smarter since I just used the plan again.' While not discussing the dangers of the b-plan, the focus group shares some of Ida's other worries. This happens during the concluding part of the discussion.

Lis: It is the act of saying we will not have time to do this [help the bereaved]...It is not in our contract.

Tom: It can also be too much...It can be the person who keeps...

Ida and Lis: Yes!

Lis: I completely agree...Where the teacher has some needs which have to be met...That is the worst case scenario...But I still believe the worst grief work...Is grief work on the basis of passivity and silence.

Tom and Ida: Yes!

Lis: It is better to say too much rather than too little. And yes it can be very disgusting [teacher

overindulgence]... But in the longer perspective I believe it is less damaging than if the teacher signals: 'Now we are not going to talk anymore about that'... But poor grief work to me, I would like to point out, is silence and neglect.

The group here agree that the worst kind of grief work is when a teacher remains passive and refrains from helping the bereaved pupil. At the same time, they also find it problematic if the teacher wants to do too much and becomes overindulgent basing helping efforts on their own needs rather than those of the pupil. The group, nevertheless, maintains that in most scenarios it is still better to risk doing too much rather than too little.

Discussion

Origins of knowledge

It was initially hypothesised that a majority of Danish teachers would subscribe to a stage theory based view on grief (eg. Cullberg, 1980). No such evidence was explicitly found during the FGI. Only at one single point in the conversation is this hinted. This occurs when Lis explains: 'Every day constitutes of 24 hours and time will feel infinitely long the next many months...So there is plenty of time, in the first shocking time where everything is chaos'. Her argument might be considered as an indirect reference to *the shock stage*, covered in the model created by Cullberg (1980). Nevertheless, the concept of shock is only mentioned a single time and cannot be refuted as simply having been a commonsensical argument. However, during the TI Ida was asked about whether their school b-plan had any guidance on the nature of grief. Here she acknowledged that the plan covered a description of the four stages of grief⁵ and that such an understanding could be beneficial. However, while recognising the existence and benefit of a theoretical model, in the remaining part of the interview it was never mentioned again. This could indicate that while at least some teachers do possess an understanding of grief, they do not seem to actively apply it during their practical work with bereaved pupils. The data sample available here is, however, too small to conclude anything and more research is needed on this topic.

Knowing that at least one participant in the FGI possessed a theoretical understanding of grief, it is surprising that no hints or references of such theories were included in the discussion. Instead the teachers seemed to draw their arguments from other sources of knowledge. Through the discussion, sentiments such as: 'I feel', 'I think' and 'I sense' kept reoccurring. Teachers who had previous experience with bereaved pupils further drew ideas from personal experiences. In this way, it seemed

evident that participants mainly drew their ideas from emotional and intuitive, common sense knowledge and experience based ways of thought. This discovery becomes even more surprising when consulting the findings of a survey conducted by Lytje (2012). Here, 77% of a sample consisting of 967 Danish teachers reported subscribing to the idea of grief as being stage-based. Only 7% disagreed.

At a first glance, it could seem like the data from the survey and the FGI contradict one another. In the FGI, the evidence of a stage theory belief is speculative at best, whereas in the survey it is exceedingly clear. However, when inspecting the way in which the three studies tested the hypothesis, some methodological differentiations might explain the contrast. The participants in the qualitative studies were subtly guided towards topics where the inclusion of bereavement theories would be relevant. In the quantitative study teachers were specifically asked if they believed children's grief passes through a series of predetermined stages. Consequently, when asked directly, the majority of teachers do subscribe to a stage theory belief. However, this does not appear to be knowledge they use for argumentation purposes during discussions.

When contemplating why theoretical conceptualisations did not surface more clearly during the interviews, it could be speculated that in everyday life teachers choose to draw their conclusions based around other kinds of knowledge. Similar tendencies have been highlighted by Lunenberg and Korthagen (2009) who argue that many studies show that teachers utilise little theory in their everyday practice. This is ascribed to what they term 'the complexity of teaching'. Teachers' practices are constantly challenged by their surroundings, such as changes in curriculum and the kind of pupils they teach. It is too simple to think that any problem can be solved by applying the 'right' theory. Lunenberg and Korthagen (2009) conclude that since most theories often fail to take such deviations into account, it can be very hard for any teacher to utilise a 'standardised' theory. If this holds true it could indicate that teachers do not generally use theoretical based approaches in their dealings with bereaved pupils. Furthermore, since b-plans are made by the teachers themselves the above explanation would highlight why the plans are mainly focused around organisational and practical helping mechanisms, while being less concerned with theoretical perspectives on how to approach bereaved pupils.

The above evidence could indicate that some Danish teachers use a ritualised stage model of grief (eg. Jacobsen, 2008; Weiss, 2001) when approaching bereaved pupils. It could however also point toward them not utilising any theories at all, but simply engaging pupils based on common sense and experience. While applying a theoretical approach does not automatically improve the quality of the bereavement support in schools, it can help teachers understand the emotions and grief pupils experience after

⁵ While the teacher did not remember if this model was by Cullberg (1980), the model seems to fit her description.

bereavement. Not possessing such knowledge can lead to misunderstandings on how to approach grieving children and erroneous assumptions on how to help them. One example of such issues can be taken from the response which existed in Denmark before the b-plan was introduced. Bereaved pupils of this time have reported how their grief was often treated with silence in the school (Skov, 1999). This led to feelings of isolation and alienation from their class.

A system fragmenting?

This study has shown how the interviewed teachers displayed a strong will towards supporting bereaved pupils. They emphasised that help had to be individually tailored to the needs of the specific pupil and as far as possible happen in collaboration with the family. Poor grief work was seen as silence or overindulgence from the teacher based on their own needs rather than those of the child. The TI seemed to confirm these conceptualisations also shining through in the realised interventions when helping a bereaved pupil. Here much was done to support the family and integrate the bereaved pupil back into school. Nevertheless, it appears that both the b-plan and helping efforts are often based around outdated theories and personal experiences. This has the consequence that the Danish bereavement response system has been developed in isolation of the breakthroughs which have emerged within modern bereavement research. It might be beneficial to exchange the very popular but also aged model of grief understanding by Cullberg (1980) with a more contemporary understanding. Here models such as: *The Dual Process Model of Coping With Bereavement* by Stroebe and Schut (1999) or *The Model of Meaning Reconstruction* by Gillies and Neimeyer (2006) might help bring forth new perspectives on how grief can be approached by a grieving individual. However, such models are not as easy to use as the framework by Cullberg (1980) and their adaption could create new problems on their own. Alternatively, the Danish system could look towards Australia, which has created as popular a system as its Danish counterpart. Authors (eg. Roberts, 2011; Rowling, 2003, 2011) have here created an alternative approach to many of the issues both countries face.

For now it is clear that the reliance on own experiences might be dangerous and potentially harmful. This can be seen in the following example where the participants were asked to discuss whether or not the age of a bereaved pupil should influence the bereavement response provided. Here Ida stated:

... Of course, there is a little difference between dealing with a year 1 pupil and a year 9 or 10 pupil in accordance to how they can express their feelings, thoughts and wellbeing...And yes, there is a little difference but I would have to say that in a larger perspective then I don't think there is.

This statement seems to highlight a deeper belief that grief is of a constant form which is a dangerous assumption. It goes against most research which has highlighted that children understand grief differently based on both age and circumstances of death (eg. Hunter & Smith, 2008; Mahon, Goldberg, & Washington, 1999; Speece & Brent, 1992). No evidence exists to suggest that grief can be considered the same in every child. Consequently, the above statement does not derive from any theoretical or empirical source. Before going further into this issue it should be pointed out that the FGI question was introduced nearly 1 hour and 30 minutes into the interview. At this point, participants might simply have been too tired to carefully consider the question. However, the finding does not seem limited to this study. McGovern and Barry (2000) interviewed 142 Irish teachers and found that 58% of the sample agreed that children's age should not dictate the bereavement response. Whereas at least in the beginning the plans were built on guidelines provided by experts on the field, the Danish b-plans today seem to become more the product of individual experiences gained in different schools. This change poses several challenges for the system.

Recommendations

The Danish bereavement response system has developed into a strong and successful supporting system for Danish teachers. In the survey by Lytje (2012) 56% of the sampled teachers reported the system to be so effective that they did not feel the need for any further support on the topic. This is a significant finding that highlights the efficiency of the Danish b-plans, especially when taking into consideration that grief work is not covered in the Danish teacher training curriculum (eg. VIA, 2012). Consequently, the b-plan might well be one of the only forms of support available to teachers dealing with bereavement for the first time. That Danish teachers do not feel they need more support is further surprising since many international studies (eg. Holland, 2008; Lowton & Higginson, 2003) have reported the majority of their samples as highlighting the need for further training. At the same time the interviews highlighted that the teachers' conceptualisation of a good bereavement response came close to the recommendations given by experts on the topic, such as Holland (2001), Rowling (2003) and Dyregrov and Yule (2008).

Nevertheless, some of the evidence presented in this article points towards the Danish bereavement response system being at a crossroad. Current b-plans seem to mainly be based on outdated theories and individual teacher experiences. During the interview the teachers never brought up any advances made within death studies during the last decade. The teachers did not seem to be aware of any of these. Consequently, it seems like the Danish b-plans have taken on a life of their own and that current incarnations are developed isolated from advances made within academia.

While, the experiences gained from the teachers' practice has as much validity as academic contributions, it could be argued that a system which took advantage of experiences gained from both fields would be a stronger system.

However, both the non-governmental organisation who originally published the guidelines on how to create b-plans, and the teachers, currently seem to be unaware of the danger this fragmentation could present. The current generation of b-plans are still of generally good quality and aligned with academic ideas of bereavement care. However, will this still be so after another 5 or 10 revisions? With no guidelines available on how to revise the current plans it is understandable that teachers simply utilise their common sense and revise the b-plans based on their own ideas. However, revisions only based on individual experiences will lead to a highly contextualised system which might end up taking a completely different form than what was intended. What is more, there will be no way to predict how these changes will transform the plans. They could lead to stronger plans but also harmful ones. With 96% of all Danish schools utilising b-plans the development of the system seems too important to leave to chance. It is the view of this author that someone needs to take responsibility for ensuring that the development of the Danish bereavement response system moves in a positive direction. The question is who in Denmark is willing to do so?

Future research

As recognised in the Lancet (2013) much research still needs to be undertaken on how children recover from traumatic events. While several authors (eg. Lowton & Higginson, 2003; McGovern & Tracey, 2010) have focussed on childhood grief and school responses, relatively little is known about whether pupils and parents feel they benefit from such systems. Similarly, few studies have focussed on exploring what kind of help parents' and pupils' would find potentially beneficially and enticing. It is further interesting that both the countries of Australia and Denmark, independently from each other, have developed bereavement response initiatives used in more than 90% of their schools (Rowling, 2003). Each country could benefit from exploring the different solutions the approaches have taken to deal with the same series of problems. Finally, the area covered during this article could benefit from being examined in a larger scale study and such an endeavour might help establish whether the findings of this study can be considered generalisable. ■

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