

A comparative study of the child bereavement response and needs of schools in North Suffolk and Hull, Yorkshire



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Abstract: This study compared the perceptions of bereavement in North Suffolk and Hull schools. Hull is a mature area in terms of training and support, North Suffolk is a developing area. The majority of schools in both areas rated bereavement as a high priority. Hull schools had more trained staff and were more self-sufficient after bereavement, having clearer referral routes and more policies in place. Training needs were identified in both areas, although the 'training gap' was less in Hull schools. The areas had different approaches to pupil bereavement; North Suffolk schools had access to a 'bereavement box'. Schools in Hull had access to the Lost for Words training project that was developed in the city with Dove House the local hospice. Recommendations are made for local authorities and schools.

Key words: loss, school, bereavement, teachers, children

Introduction

Parental bereavement is experienced by around two to six percent of children under eighteen years old (Harrison & Harrington, 2001). Bereavement has a potentially negative effect on individuals (Stroebe *et al* 2007), and parental death bereavement may impact adversely on children and young people over the medium and long term – the initial response of schools may be crucial to help to minimise these potential adverse effects (Holland, 2001).

Ribbens McCarthy and Jessop (2005) found that bereavement in childhood can affect educational and employment achievements, and result in children leaving home early, experiencing early sexual and partnering activities. These young people were more likely to take part in criminal or disruptive behaviours, be affected by depression and lower self-esteem. They highlighted the significance of bereavement in young people's lives, and the increasing risk of vulnerability and

social isolation after the death of a parent, with young people lacking the opportunity to talk about the death.

Silverman and Worden (1992) found evidence of problems in the short and longer terms for bereaved children. Cross (2002) found that bereaved children are at greater risk of abuse, and Draper *et al* (2011) found that parentally bereaved children are significantly more vulnerable to becoming involved in delinquent behaviour. Brent *et al* (2012) found that adolescents bereaved of a parent had lower educational aspirations, lower competence at work and poorer peer relations compared to a control group.

It can therefore be seen that bereavement may well have a negative impact on some children and young people.

Bereavement in schools

Bronfenbrenner's model (1979, 1997) is useful in framing the ecological system and context after a bereavement, highlighting schools as being able to offer potential support for their pupils.

In the model, the child is seen as being in a centre of a series of concentric circles. There are bi-directional effects as a child's grief may both affect and be affected by others' actions.

The family is within the inner circle, with school, church and the neighbourhood in outer circles, but still relevant, as are the services of both local and central government and the cultural context. The 'chrono system' includes the dimension of time.

This theoretical position supports the notion of schools being potentially significant in supporting their pupils after the death of a parent. Whether schools recognise this potential and perceive themselves in this role, such as through their level of understanding, awareness and training in the area is a core part of the study outlined in this article.

Pupils spend a significant time at school which could offer them tranquillity, in contrast to a grieving home, where the surviving parent may not be able to facilitate their children's grief. However, 'Project Iceberg' at the University of York (Holland, 1999), showed that for many young people the response of their school was not ideal; many of them felt isolated and unable to approach staff at school.

Dyregrov (1991) suggested that as schools tend to have an in-depth knowledge of children and their families, they are well placed to offer bereavement support. In Tracey's (2006) study of early bereaved daughters, the role of teachers who helped pupils was regarded as being positive.

A 'training gap' was identified in Humberside schools by Holland (1993). The majority of schools considered the area of child bereavement important, but lacked the skills and training to be able to effectively respond. Lowton and Higginson (2003) found that staff in schools had concerns about doing the 'right thing', suggesting that they lacked confidence and training. This was echoed in Holland's (2001) finding that teachers were 'wary of causing an upset' and although they wanted to support bereaved pupils, were unsure as to how to help.

There seemed to be a will, but without a way, and this led to the development of the 'Lost for Words' Project with Dove House, the Hull-based hospice and educational psychologists (Holland *et al* 2005). As part of an earlier national initiative, after a series of national disasters the publication *Wise before the event: coping with crises in schools* (Yule & Gold, 1993) was mailed to all schools in the UK.

The current study

The research compared the child bereavement responses and needs of schools in rural North Suffolk, with urban Hull in Yorkshire, both situated on the east coast of England. Hull has 100 schools and Northern Suffolk 110.

Hull and North Suffolk have high levels of unemployment, below national average wage levels, and low educational attainment and other indices of social deprivation such as poor health and significant health inequalities. Life expectancy in North Suffolk is 81.6 years for women and 77.5 years for men (Waveney District Council, 2011), and 80.0 for women and 75.2 years for men and 80.0 for women in Hull (Hull City Council, 2014).

Hull is a mature area in relation to schools and bereavement, and has addressed loss in schools over the past fifteen years. The 'Lost for Words', a training programme based on research in schools was developed in Hull and conferences have been held on a regular cycle, some with international speakers.

In North Suffolk, the importance of pupil bereavement has been recognised and work is in progress to develop the area. North Suffolk has no specific bereavement support services, although in 2010 a joint initiative between the educational psychological service and TAMHS (targeting mental health in schools) was launched named the LISS: TEN programme (Loss In Suffolk Schools: Time, Effective listening and Nurturing).

Research questions

These are outlined below.

- Hull is a mature area in terms of developing responses to bereaved pupils, what are the differences and similarities compared with North Suffolk, an area more recently developing strategies?
- What priority do schools in the two areas give to the area of child bereavement?
- Is there a difference between the two areas in responding to bereaved pupils?
- From where do schools in the two areas receive support for pupil bereavement?
- Do schools in both areas have staff trained in loss and bereavement and are there any training needs?
- Do schools have resources in place, including *Wise before the event* (Yule & Gold 1993)?

Methodology

The research used the 'Loss in Schools' questionnaire developed by Holland (1993) to investigate the provision for bereaved pupils within North Suffolk schools, and compared it to the recent findings in Hull, Yorkshire. The questionnaire is shown in the appendix and was designed in an action research project in Humberside and is used every two years to monitor the area of bereavement and schools in Hull as well as to raise awareness. The questionnaire has been used in other areas, including Northern Ireland and Eire, (Holland, 1993, Tracey and Holland, 2008, McGovern and Tracey, 2010).

Minor revisions were made in the North Suffolk version, where an open ended question relating to resources was included, replacing one relating to the publication *Wise before the event* (Yule & Gold, 1993). Unlike in Hull, there was no local awareness or knowledge of the publication and it was decided to exclude it from the questionnaire.

The questionnaires were distributed to all primary, secondary and special schools, by post in Hull and through the courier system in North Suffolk, with a follow up reminder letter two weeks later.

The questionnaires in Hull were completed by head teachers, Special Educational Needs Coordinators, heads of pastoral care,

and teachers, and in Suffolk by the head teacher and Special Educational Needs Coordinators. The return rate was 34% in Hull and 36% in North Suffolk which was considered a reasonable return in the authors' experiences of responses to questionnaires.

Results and discussion

The results of the survey are shown in Table 1. The scores relating to priorities in schools were converted to percentage figures. In North Suffolk schools, without a history of bereavement support, 90% rated bereavement as an important or very important priority for the school, similar to Hull (83%), an area with a strong history of activity in pupil bereavement.

Parental separation was included as a yardstick against which to compare parental bereavement. Interestingly 90% of North Suffolk schools rated this as either important or very important, the same as they rated parental bereavement. Ninety four percent of Hull schools rated schools rated parental separation as being either important or very important, higher than for parental bereavement. Parental separation occurs at a higher frequency than parental bereavement and can be an active issue in many schools.

Twenty three percent of North Suffolk schools had a formal bereavement policy, less than the 39% of schools in Hull. There has been a continued focus in Hull on encouraging schools to be proactive and to have a formal policy. Having a policy or procedure in place is a marker of a proactive response, showing

that the school has thought things through before a death. The higher figure in Hull may relate to the training that has been delivered over a number of years.

Many schools, as in Tracey and Holland's (2008) study, reported that, as each loss was different, they always respond in an 'ad-hoc' way. Although each death is different, there are patterns of response that can be helpful in all deaths, such as liaising with the family and consideration of the funeral. The differences in proactive procedures between Hull and North Suffolk may be partly explained by the lack of known external support for schools in North Suffolk. It seems that in Hull, where the training has been in place for some time, there is more systemic and planned support than in Suffolk. This was also reflected by half of North Suffolk schools describing their initial intervention as 'ad-hoc' compared to 39% of Hull schools.

Having a structured response, through a policy or procedure, should help to ensure that nothing is omitted at the difficult time after a death.

Marginally more schools in North Suffolk (45%) had an individual responsible for the area of bereavement than in Hull (41%). In North Suffolk these included head teachers, Special Educational Needs Coordinators, Pastoral and inclusion coordinators, Senior Learning Support Assistants, Learning Mentors, and Personal, Social and Health Education Coordinators.

In Hull the roles of those having responsibility for bereavement included head teachers, Special Educational Needs

Table 1: Summary of the results

	Hull	North Suffolk
The number of schools	100	110
The number of schools returning questionnaires	34	40
Percentage return rate	34%	36%
Schools rating bereavement as an important or very important priority	83%	90%
Schools rating parental separation as an important or very important priority	94%	90%
School with a formal policy in the area of bereavement	39%	23%
Schools having an ad-hoc response after a death	39%	50%
Schools with an individual responsible for the area	41%	45%
Schools having a copy of 'Wise before the Event'	0%	NA
Schools having resources relating to loss and bereavement	NA	80%
Schools addressing loss in the curriculum	48%	58%
Schools with a section on loss in their library	48%	48%
Schools with staff training in the area of loss and bereavement	57%	35%
Schools needing more training in the area of loss and bereavement	43%	68%
The number of different support routes mentioned	4	18

Coordinators, auxiliaries and mentors. Some Hull schools reported that 'all staff' supported each other.

It can be debated as to whether one person should have sole responsibility for bereavement. If just one person develops their skills, there could be issues if they are absent when bereavement occurs, or if they have left the school. Perhaps a group of staff could share responsibility, providing 'cover' for absent staff or those that have moved on, but also providing a focus for discussions after an incident as well as being self-supporting. Ideally all staff need at least a basic awareness of the issues.

Research by Holland (2001) showed that pupils did not think that their schools prepared them for bereavement. If the area of loss is addressed at school, relating to both the emotional response and the appropriate level of information for the age of the child, then this could also help them to be more resilient after bereavement. The Iceberg research suggested that pupils did not generally feel positive about their school's response after bereavement; a small minority felt that it not being raised at school was helpful.

In North Suffolk schools were asked about resources and whilst 80% of schools did have these available, the number of resources mentioned ranged from zero to five, indicating an inequality of provision. The most frequent resource mentioned, by 53% of North Suffolk schools was library books. Three schools reported having the 'Bereavement Box', a local authority resource available from school health or the educational psychology team, and containing books, leaflets and DVD resources. Another three schools reported having a resource pack from local funeral directors and three more cited their school counsellor.

In the Hull research the equivalent question was asked as to whether the school had a copy of *Wise before the event: coping with crises in schools*, (Yule & Gold, 1993) and none reported having a copy. This indicated a 'wash-out' of the government intervention that took place after a number of high profile disasters, and reinforces the need to keep the issue of pupil bereavement active in schools.

North Suffolk schools had a higher rate of addressing loss in the curriculum than in Hull, 58% compared to 48%. Schools in North Suffolk addressed loss through:

- Cross-curricular assemblies;
- Religious Education;
- Story time;
- Circle Time;
- Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) programme;
- Within Health Care modules.

Hull schools addressed loss in the curriculum through Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE).

The percentage of schools having a loss section in their library was identical for North Suffolk and Hull at 48%. Having a section relating to loss and bereavement is a marker of the school having a level of loss education that is resourced and nearly half of schools in both areas had such a section.

A higher percentage of schools in North Suffolk schools (68%) reported that they needed further help in the area of training. The help needed including having visiting professionals to talk to pupils in PSHE lessons, training opportunities and resources including the 'Bereavement Box'. However, just 6% of schools had accessed the Suffolk 'Bereavement Box' resource.

Forty three percent of Hull schools reported the need for more training, despite the input provided by 'Lost for Words' over recent years. This finding is consistent with Tracey and Holland's finding (2008) that despite the level of previous input, staff appeared to want ongoing training. It also fits with Lowton and Higginson's (2003) findings that teachers are concerned about doing the 'right thing' in response to children's distress. Perhaps training increases the awareness of the impact of loss can have on children, resulting in the perceived need for more in-depth training. This highlights the need for continued professional development in this area and the importance of evaluative work to ensure that any training is meeting the needs of the participants.

When schools were asked from where they would initially seek support after bereavement there were interesting differences. In North Suffolk there was a wide range of responses, from 'we didn't know that there was help available' to listing sources of help, eighteen different sources were mentioned. With no formal guidelines, North Suffolk schools contacted a variety of individuals and agencies for support (see Table 2). The school nurse was mentioned by 20% of schools; the advisory team by 14% and the educational psychology and parental support workers by 10%. Cruse Bereavement Care and Winston's Wish were mentioned by 2% of schools.

In contrast, Hull schools mentioned just four routes for support. Fifty eight percent of schools said that they would seek support from within their schools, not from outside agencies. Eleven percent of Hull schools sought support from the school nurse, 8% from 'websites' and 3% from WYNGS (working with young people needing grief support). WYNGS supported children and their parents or carers in small groups, at least six months after the death.

The 'Lost for Words' training project, which John Holland delivers with Dove House, the Hull-based Hospice, has a focus on encouraging schools to be proactive in supporting their pupils and responding after a loss. That nearly two thirds of school in Hull look to their own internal support networks after a loss may be related to confidence gained on courses such as 'Lost for Words' held for over the years to help to enable staff to provide a school-based response that fits their context.

Without internal expertise and interest, schools may either be unaware of potential issues or else may engage outside support at an early stage after a death. Outside agencies cannot know the school culture and pupils as well as the staff and are probably not as well placed to tailor make a school-based response.

Training in North Suffolk had been received from a variety of sources including social services, Cruse Bereavement Care, and health professionals. In Hull, the only training source mentioned

Table 2: Where schools sought support after bereavement

Where would you obtain support after bereavement?	North Suffolk	Hull
From within the school	2%	58%
School Nurse	20%	11%
SEN and Advisory team	14%	
Parent Support Worker	10%	
Educational Psychologist	10%	
Websites		8%
Counsellor	6%	
Working with Young People Needing Grief Support		3%
Head Teacher	4%	
SENCO	4%	
Pastoral Head	4%	
MacMillan Nurses	2%	
Social Care	2%	
PRU	2%	
Funeral Directors	2%	
Children's Centre	2%	
CAMHS	2%	
Didn't know there was help available	2%	
Cruse	2%	
Winston's Wish	2%	
Inter-agency Link Team		3%
Local Education Authority		3%
Rainbow		3%

was 'Lost for Words' available in the city since 2001 and published in 2005 (Holland *et al*, 2005).

Hull has seen a number of awareness-raising projects, often in conjunction with the Dove House Hospice, including 'Lost for Words' training courses, regular surveys in schools, conferences, and links with local media and articles in the press.

Conclusions and implications for practice

The study provided an overview of the current bereavement support for schools in North Suffolk and compared it to Hull, a mature area in terms of training. There are interesting similarities and differences in the results between the two areas.

Pupils are potentially at risk after bereavement and this is an important area to be addressed by schools, who seem well placed to respond. The research supports the notion that

schools, part of the community, are well placed to support their pupils after parental bereavement, as the schools in the study recognised the importance of parental bereavement.

The study adds to the body of evidence suggesting that schools tend to act in a reactive rather than proactive manner – support seems to be patchy with some lack of clarity in relation to the pathways for support and resources that are available for schools. Ideally schools should have policies and procedures in place and clear pathways for support.

The study also reinforces the notion that awareness training and the development of policies and procedures seems to have a positive impact. In Hull more schools had policies in place and less had an 'ad hoc' approach. Two thirds of Hull schools looked to their own internal resources after a bereavement, and just three other sources were named. This probably reflects a greater confidence and maturity of support in Hull. In North Suffolk

eighteen sources were named and there were no clear pathways.

Training needs were identified in both areas, and the 'training gap' identified by Holland (1993) still exists, highlighting the need for further training in schools generally, both initial awareness training, refresher courses and training for new staff.

The study did not address loss in the curriculum but did find that nearly half of schools seem to be addressing loss through their libraries, and support materials such as the 'bereavement box'.

Local authorities in other areas could consider replicating the questionnaire with schools to help to identify the level of need and provision and look to develop proactive strategies at a school level.

Where gaps in provision are identified then these can be addressed; schools can improve their resources using sources such as those shown in *Resources* below or consider the use of external agencies or training.

The study is limited in that it relates to a sample of schools in two particular areas and the conclusions may not necessarily be extrapolated outside these areas. Nonetheless, the results provide guidance and food for thought for other schools and appear to show that there are benefits for schools and hence hopefully pupils in developing training and procedures.

Educational psychologists have several potential roles in this area including developing and delivering training, as well as being able to offer psychological support to schools after bereavement, and to research and monitor the needs of schools.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank all school staff who participated and completed the questionnaires, as well as Suffolk County Council for allowing the research to be conducted, and the Dove House Hospice in Hull for their invaluable support. ■

Resources

- 'Iceberg' was a doctoral study at the University of York relating to children's experiences of parental bereavement. The findings are summarised in John Holland's book *Understanding children's experiences of parental bereavement* (Holland, 2001).
- 'Lost for Words' is a generic loss awareness training programme and 'Chaos to Calm' is a programme aimed at helping schools to develop their responses. Contact John Holland for details: www.john-holland-ep.co.uk
- John Holland's book *Responding to loss and bereavement in schools* will be published shortly by Jessica Kingsley
- The following national organisations can offer support to schools in terms of providing information, resources and ideas to help teachers support their pupils.
 - Child Bereavement UK www.childbereavementuk.org
 - Cruse Bereavement Care www.cruse.org.uk/schools
 - Childhood Bereavement Network www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk
 - Winston's Wish www.winstonswish.org.uk
- Locally schools may be able to obtain support and advice from nearby agencies, such as their Educational Psychology Service and other services provided by their local authority.

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Appendix 1

Generic Loss in Schools questionnaire

Please tick or place a score in the appropriate box:

Phase of School:

Special Primary Secondary

1. Do you have you a copy of 'Wise before the Event' at school?

Yes No

2. On a scale of 1 to 4, how do you rate the area of child bereavement in terms of priorities in school?

(1 = not important 2 = of some importance 3 = important 4 = very important)

Score

3. On a scale of 1 to 4, how do you rate the area of parental separation in terms of priorities in school?

(1 = not important 2 = of some importance 3 = important 4 = very important)

Score

4. What best describes your school's approach to responding to a bereaved child:

A formal procedure An 'ad-hoc' approach

5. Does one person in the school have responsibility for this area?

Yes No

If yes, please specify _____

6. Has anybody in your school received training in the area of childhood bereavement or loss?

Yes No

If yes, please specify _____

7. From where would you normally initially seek help if a child is bereaved at your school?

Please specify _____

8. Do you address the area of loss in your school curriculum?

Yes No

If yes, please specify the curriculum area, year group and method.

9. Do you have a section in your library covering the area of loss and bereavement?

Yes No

10. Is loss addressed in any policy documents at your school

Yes No

If yes, please specify _____

11. Do you consider that your school needs further help in this area?

Yes No

If yes, please state what help or support is needed.