

## Managing bereavement in the classroom: a conspiracy of silence?

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## **Managing bereavement in the classroom: A conspiracy of silence?**

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## **Managing bereavement in the classroom: A conspiracy of silence?**

### ***Abstract***

The ways in which teachers in British schools manage bereaved children are underreported.

This article reports the impact of students' bereavement and their subsequent management in primary and secondary school classrooms in Southeast London. Thirteen school staff working in inner-city schools took part in in-depth interviews that focused on the impact of bereaved children on the school and how teachers responded to these children.

All respondents had previously had contact with a local child bereavement service that aims to provide support, advice, and consultancy to children, their parents, and teachers.

Interviews were audiotaped, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using ATLAS-ti. Three main themes were identified from analysis of interview data. Firstly, British society, culture, local communities, and the family were significant influences in these teachers' involvement with bereaved students. Secondly, school staff managed bereaved students through contact with other adults and using practical classroom measures such as "time out" cards and contact books. Lastly, teachers felt they had to be strong, even when they were distressed. Surprise was expressed at the mature reaction of secondary school students to deaths of others. The article recommends that future research needs to concentrate on finding the most effective way of supporting routinely bereaved children, their families, and teachers.

## ***Introduction***

And suddenly he [Rebecca's father] had a heart attack one weekend. And we got back on a Monday; [Rebecca's] dad was dead. And [pauses] I just didn't know what to do, you know. I didn't know what to do. Nobody knew what to do. We didn't know whether it was something to discuss in the class, as a class or as a whole school, we didn't know what to do. [Class teacher, Highroad Primary]

Wells (1988) estimates that 40 children per day are bereaved through the death of a parent in the UK. Many more children will experience the death of a grandparent, and more rarely, a sibling, classmate or teacher during their school years. Experiences of bereaved children have been well documented using standardised questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with children and their surviving parent, although problems do exist in measuring both short- and long-term outcomes of a young person's bereavement (Kranzler, Shaffer, Wasserman & Davies, 1990; Jones & Tannock, 2000). In the UK, Dowdney, Wilson, Maughan, Allerton, Schofield & Skuse (1999) reported teacher's assessments of bereaved student's behaviour as being significantly more depressed, aggressive, and delinquent than age- and sex-matched controls. However, despite studies identifying problems experienced at school (Worden & Silverman, 1996), one focus of much research in this area is on the effects of bereavement on *individual* children rather than the consequences for a wider social group such as a student's class and teachers (Silverman & Worden 1992). Another focal point of previous British research has been on teachers' *attitudes* to dealing with grief and bereavement and whether these subjects are taught as part of the curriculum in the classroom (Eiser, C., Havermans, T., Rolph, J., & Rolph, P., 1995), rather than how bereaved children are actually managed.

Although the family is most often the primary social environment for young children, peers and adults in the school environment become more important for older youth groups

(Rowling & Holland, 2000); here children form relationships with trusted adults outside their immediate family. An educational institution itself is a place where the majority of young people spend a large part of their lives and what they learn from staff and indeed other students may have far reaching effects (Coggan, Patterson & Fill, 1997; Holland, 1993). Children of primary and secondary school age (5-18 years) spend a large part of their day with individual teachers, such that school may be viewed as a 'secure second family' (Holland, 1993). In the USA, school has been interpreted not just as a place of education, but as the hallmark of vital socialization, hope for the future and providing a sense of community (Speaker & Petersen, 2000); this quality applies equally to most European schools.

Expanding on the school environment being able to provide a secure learning environment, Rowling & Holland (2000) assert that society has expectations of schools beyond those of academic achievement. Currently, school counsellors provide children with most bereavement support in the USA (Wass, Miller & Thornton, 1990) and Australia (Rowling & Holland, 2000). In the UK however, children do not usually have such a ready access to school-based counsellors although notable local exceptions do exist (see for example O'Hara, Taylor & Simpson, 1994). More usually in the UK the school itself must provide support to bereaved children for 'routine' deaths, as opposed to those occurring through disaster or trauma. Here teachers are often assumed by others to perform a supportive role in bereavement (Rowling, 1995) and the family separation and reorganisation (Tripp & Cockett, 1998) that may follow bereavement. Indeed, some researchers advise that an explanation regarding death from a schoolteacher is useful for children (Stuber, 2001) and others have proposed that teachers of newly bereaved children attend the funeral with that child as a source of support (Black, 1998). Certainly many teachers may be rightly perceived as an important contact in the student's bereavement experience (Reid & Dixon, 1999) at a time when parents may be under considerable emotional pressure. Although it is agreed that

children's behaviour may be very different following bereavement and that many factors would impact on children's responses (Lowton & Higginson, 2002), British teachers' reactions to managing bereaved children within their classes are largely unreported.

Sources of support for schoolteachers in this area such as education, training or bereavement support services appear to be patchy. Rowling & Holland (2000) assert that few schools have bereavement policies in place despite there being less likelihood of mishandling incidents if a framework has been developed beforehand. However, the authors do not address what currently happens in the UK in the event of a student's bereavement or how the management of 'routine' deaths of family and friends is handled. Despite extensive searching, we were unable to locate research that addressed specific difficulties experienced by British teachers in the classroom and teachers' perception of their role in the management of bereaved children.

### ***Aim of the research***

The focus of this research was to begin to explore the *practical* problems that bereaved children presented to schoolteachers in the UK, and how teachers responded to these concerns. Whatever teachers' views are of their role in death education, in practice they will most likely come into contact with bereaved children during the course of their career. As a small exploratory study, the paper does not address the influence of specific factors such as social class, gender or ethnicity on bereavement management, but rather attempts to examine how bereaved students are managed within British schools.

## ***Method***

### **Setting, sample and interviews**

Letters were sent to 36 staff members of 32 primary and secondary schools in Southeast London, England. All staff had had contact within the past year with a local bereavement service that aims to provide support and advice to children aged 5-17, their parents and teachers. Contact with the service ranged from referring a school child to seeking advice from the bereavement service staff. School staff were invited to participate in an in-depth interview to examine the effect that having a bereaved student in their class had had on themselves and the class, and how they had managed the situation. After reminder letters sent two weeks after the initial request, a total of thirteen staff members (response rate 36%) from eight primary and five secondary schools were interviewed at their school during 2001. Interviewees had contact with children aged 5-11 years (primary) or 11-17 years (secondary).

Staff were interviewed in order to provide information about their experiences and management of bereaved children. Teachers were interviewed in their own schools with the aid of an interview topic guide. Interviews lasted on average for one hour, with a range of 20-90 minutes. The topic guide derived from issues in death and bereavement literature and responses to a previous questionnaire sent to local primary and secondary schools (Shipman, Kraus, & Monroe, 2001). It was broad enough to allow participants the opportunity to talk about many different situations that had occurred in both their current and previous schools; indeed during their interviews respondents spoke about bereaved children they had currently in their class, plus other children that they had encountered during their career. Specifically, the topic guide covered issues such as how bereaved children had reacted to a death, how the bereavement had impacted on the class and teacher, how the teacher had attempted to support the students, and how death and bereavement were generally managed within the school.

Confidentiality was assured for all participants, and assurance given that all interview material would be made anonymous in any reports. Pseudonyms for students, teachers and schools are used here. Twelve interviews were audiotape recorded and transcribed verbatim. One primary school Headteacher (Principal) refused permission for the researcher to take notes during the interview or for the interview to be taped. Notes from this interview were therefore made as soon as possible afterwards.

## **Analysis**

Interview transcripts and notes were imported into ATLAS-ti, a software programme for qualitative data. Codes were attached to a segment of text such as a word, phrase, sentence or paragraph. These codes were then grouped into categories, providing the conceptual foundations for analysis as described by Dey (1993). The categories were developed analytically with conceptual relations being established (Strauss, 1987). Further information on the codes and categories used is available from the authors. Teachers' responses to and management of bereaved students are explored here within the three conceptual categories, or themes, that were identified. Firstly, the wider societal influences on the impact and management of a student's bereavement are considered. Secondly, teachers' practical management of issues in the classroom arising from a bereavement is discussed, and lastly both the impact that bereaved students had on teachers, and the impact that bereavement was perceived by teachers to have on students are explored. Quotations from respondents are used throughout the paper to illustrate points.

## **Results**

One male and twelve female staff members were interviewed. Characteristics of the

respondents' schools are shown in Table One. It is significant that many schools had high proportions of students who spoke English as an additional language, received free school meals because of their parents' low income, were from ethnic minorities and had special educational needs. The majority of these schools were based in deprived inner-London areas, and students' academic achievements were significantly below that of schools in other areas. Only one respondent reported that their school had a bereavement policy in use, although this respondents' interview responses did not differ markedly from what other respondents said. However, as the entire sample had had contact with a child bereavement service, we are unable to judge whether the school with a bereavement policy was markedly different in its approach to students than those without such a policy. All schools had referred at least one child and their family to the local child bereavement service (this being the nature of recruitment to the study) although schools varied in the number of bereaved children they had referred in total and whether they had approached other services for advice. Respondents did not generally recall the total number of bereaved children they had had contact with, although those respondents who were in support roles appeared to talk about many more bereaved children that they had had contact with than those who were class teachers.

INSERT TABLE ONE ABOUT HERE

Management of the deaths of students' parents and grandparents were the most commonly cited scenarios whereby teachers had to manage bereavement within the classroom setting. For example, two student's fathers had died from cancer, one student's mother had died in a car accident and one student's father had died following a heart attack. Other scenarios included the management of students' reactions to the deaths of teachers, pupils, and national events such as the murders of 16 schoolchildren and their teacher, and

the injury of 12 further children at a primary school in Dunblane, Scotland, in 1996. No traumatic incidents or disasters resulting in multiple deaths within participants' own schools were referred to; rather both sudden and expected single deaths were discussed.

### **Societal influences**

Many societal influences were found to impact on teachers' management of bereaved students, at a national, local and family level. Respondents also noted the school's place in the community as an important factor in how bereaved children were managed by staff.

#### *National level*

The decline of mourning traditions in British society and lack of identification of bereaved people generally were regarded as influential in teachers' management of bereaved students. One Secondary staff member stated:

I think here in England, Britain, death is something that's pushed aside, and I suppose it must be something to do as well with the breakdown of traditional religious, religions, and that. But so many people don't seem to have a way of ritualising death. [Head of religious education, Avenue secondary]

Owing to British society's silence, respondents often perceived students as not being able to discuss their bereavement within the class. This appeared to be due to the low priority given to death and bereavement within the school curriculum, ensuring little time in the school day for discussion of such issues. Occasionally teachers would learn of students' bereavements through essays they had set.

### *Local level*

In examining the quality of students' socio-economic backgrounds, most respondents reported a wide range of socio-economic status, although being located in an inner-city area, there was a tendency for primary school respondents in this study to report a majority of deprived students in their classes. During their interview one respondent highlighted the local socio-economic profile of the school's pupils:

[We have] 22 children in care, which is a large number, but we have a very high mobile population, 22% which is very high, people coming and going. We had 66 new arrivals in the last year and a half; that's asylum seekers and refugees coming and going; we have 107 children on the special [educational] needs register out of a population of 345...and the socio-economic background of the kids is relatively poor. [Headteacher, Greentown primary]

Many of these highly mobile students often did not enrol at the school for long, causing difficulties for teachers attempting to form ongoing relationships with the student and their family, especially when teachers attempted to support bereaved students who had come from abroad. Furthermore, the culture of the local area itself was identified as being another barrier in teachers' relationships with both bereaved and non-bereaved students and their families, as an afro-Caribbean teacher observed when explaining how she felt inhibited in offering her support to a white bereaved family:

It's a difficult area, it's predominantly working class, it [hesitates] the white working class here, they are very nationalistic in their thinking, and they want everybody to think in the same way [laughs]. The culture as well, there is a culture of children playing out a lot, on the street, and a culture of violence...it's difficult. The parents themselves are difficult. [Class teacher, Highroad primary]

### *Family level*

Respondents also stated that they were often not informed of the family structures of many of their students and this impacted on their anxieties over performing a wide range of traditional activities, not always related to bereavement, such as helping primary children to make Mother's and Father's day cards. The increase in the numbers of single parent families in the UK (currently estimated by the National Council for One Parent Families at a quarter of all families in Britain) also influenced the practice of children who had lived with one parent being sent away to live with the other when their parent died, often never having lived with their surviving parent before. Most commonly the surviving parent was already in another long-term relationship when their child was bereaved:

Susan then went to live with Dad when Mum died; I'm not sure they'd ever actually lived together. I think he already had his new partner by then and that relationship has never been easy between the two of them [Susan and her stepmother] [Head of learning support unit, Longlane secondary]

Examples were also given of how other family structures contributed to the different experiences of teachers in their management of bereaved children. Two respondents who had had contact with children recently bereaved by the death of a grandparent recognised the importance of these relatives within some family structures, especially if students had been living with a single mother and her mother. Paradoxically, the death of a grandparent was also one type of students' bereavement that was not discovered by respondents until years after the death had occurred, when teachers asked students to write essays on a variety of topics.

### *The school as part of the community*

Against the various influences of society and family structures, respondents perceived their school's place in the community as providing safety, normality and routine to newly bereaved children, as the following quotation illustrates:

I think Matthew really wanted to come to school. Not necessarily wanted to do all his lessons and his homework but the whole social and personal side of school, I think, was one of the things that really kept him going. And the normality of it, you know, the fact that school goes on, everything goes on. You've got routine, you've got structure, it's predictable, it's very safe. [Head of year, Kingstown secondary]

During their interviews respondents were able to recount clearly the impact of students' bereavement within the classroom. Because of students' sense of security at school, they could expose teachers to behaviour that was not appropriate for them to display at home. One respondent gave the example of a 13-year-old student, Michael, who had recently been bereaved by the death of his father from cancer and was currently living at home with his mother and two older sisters:

What emerged was that Michael felt incredibly protective towards his mum and his sisters and that he actually said that he, all his anger and everything, he never let it out at home. He sat on it the whole time at home. So that when things happened at school, they could be relatively small things but they would trigger and then all the anger would come out. So we were in, it was rather a perverse situation, where he felt safe to be able to do it [misbehave] here and that there would be people [teachers] that would support him and mop him up, if you like, so that he didn't have to do it at home. And he was actually able to articulate that but obviously you can imagine the challenges that presented us with here, it was all really a very, very, very difficult time. [Head of year, Kingstown secondary]

In summary, teachers' management of bereaved students was influenced by British

society at a national, local and family level. In the next section we consider the practical ways respondents used to manage bereaved students.

### **Practical management of bereaved students**

Many ways in which respondents managed bereaved students were discussed during the interviews. The most commonly cited were contact with agencies outside of the school, involving the bereaved student's family, and methods of managing children within the school.

#### *Contact with external agencies*

Respondents recounted their experiences of managing the bereaved children that they had not referred to a child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS). In these situations respondents voiced their impression of not being 'expert' in their supervision of bereaved students and expressed uncertainty over whether they had 'done the right thing' in attempting to respond to these children. However, some respondents expressed the view that telephone advice and support given to teachers by the local child bereavement service was one way of managing individual situations where a formal referral to CAMHS was not appropriate:

Jonathan would go off and have his sessions with [bereavement counsellor] and then I would speak with [bereavement counsellor], we had that dialogue going the whole time. For me personally, I couldn't have managed the whole situation without all that professional advice and input. [Later] I had this really, really long conversation, just wrote everything down that she said and then was able to take that back to the senior management of the school and we based an awful lot of what we then did upon the sort of advice that she'd given us. [Head of year, Kingstown secondary]

In spite of easy access to a local bereavement service, two respondents expressed concern that even though a student could have a good short-term outcome following their bereavement counselling, the influence of their home environment could potentially negate any progress the child had made, as demonstrated in the following quotation:

But you see, the [bereavement] project and I both agreed that [sighs] this [Phillip's behavioural problem] was bigger than the both of us, in that it started before [the bereavement] and that as much as they can address the bereavement side of things, they can't address the issues which are long-term and have been there before.  
[Headteacher, Greentown primary]

In this case, the school staff member perceived the student's surviving parent as being a significant factor in the child's disruptive behaviour, both during his father's long illness and in being antagonistic in dealings with the school, emphasising the impact of the family on the school's management of bereaved children.

#### *Involving the family and surviving parent*

In the current study, respondents working in primary schools were more likely to report frequent contact with students' parents, as mothers brought children to and from school and teachers were often out in the playground at these times. Generally these respondents had a basic knowledge of the child's immediate family structure. Secondary school respondents reported that there was much less contact between themselves and their students' parents as many mothers returned to the workforce when their children were older, and children travelled independently to and from school. Here the family structures of many students were unknown.

For most respondents, writing to the bereaved family expressing the school's

condolences and offering practical support was usually the first (and sometimes only) contact with the family if the school staff were aware of the death of a student's family member. However, one respondent highlighted the uncertainty inherent in managing any potential ongoing issues concerning the death of students' family members. A student in this teacher's class had experienced the death of his father the year previously:

And she [Daniel's mother] has come to parents evening, but again you never know how far to pursue it, I never know whether I'm prying so I tend to focus on Daniel's academic work, and I, as I say with Daniel I haven't had any concerns because his behaviour hasn't changed. [Class teacher, City primary]

The issue of bereavement was therefore not raised with the surviving parent, as the student's behaviour did not cause any problems for the teacher or the class. Indeed, lack of behavioural changes, or the perception of a significant improvement in behaviour in some bereaved students may compound the silence from society that surrounds their bereavement.

During interviews respondents made distinctions between 'unsupportive' and 'supportive' parents. Respondents noted that the former made the school's management of bereaved students more difficult. These parents were identified partly by the two 'different worlds' that evolved for the bereaved child between home and the school, due to differences in adults' management of the student's behavioural problems. In the following quotation the student's father had died nine months previously and the student had recently been suspended for damaging school furniture. Negotiations with the child's mother over how to handle the child's behaviour were reported to be failing:

But it's interesting how some parents and carers can negate responsibility, you know, 'Oh, he's fine at home.' And you say, 'What, he doesn't kick the furniture [as he does at school]?' 'No, he's fine at home' [the parent says]. But then you'll hear from rumour someone say, 'You know they have a room in the house where they're

allowed to go and um, if they're angry they can just tear it to shreds.' It's got no furniture in, they're allowed to just pummel the walls and bang their head against the walls, this is their 'anger room'. [Headteacher, Greentown primary]

The supportive parents were usually very involved in the school's management of their child's bereavement, often initiating contact with the respondent after the death of a family member. The following quotation refers to a 15-year-old female student who died suddenly and unexpectedly in the week that her year group was due to leave school. The student's mother, Mrs Smith, became deeply involved in the school's management of her bereaved classmates by issuing an open invitation for students to attend the funeral and planning a memorial party for her daughter:

[The management of bereavement] was made easy to do because of Mrs Smith being so open with us. I mean had we just had a phone call from the friend of a friend, and not known the way she wanted us to sort of do the school side, I think it would have been more difficult. And I also think Mrs Smith was exceptional in the way that she wanted the school to be involved. [Head of year, Brookstone secondary]

### *Managing bereavement in the classroom*

In children of primary school age, maturity of understanding death and grief will also affect teachers' communication with their students. For one respondent, both his students' perceived immaturity and his lack of experience in dealing with death resulted in silence when a 5-year-old child informed the class that his father had been killed. Interestingly, this was the same respondent that felt unable to discuss this student's bereavement with his surviving parent:

I was stumped, I really didn't know, and that's maybe why I left it [talking about death] because I was reluctant

to pursue it because I didn't have the experience and I didn't know what the reaction would be, so I left it.  
[Class teacher, City primary]

A further reason this respondent gave for not discussing death and bereavement was the multi-faith nature of his class in this inner-London school. The time-consuming nature of the task of teaching very young children about different faiths' responses to death, for example the concepts of heaven and reincarnation, is apparent. However, a reluctance to discuss these issues was not only attributed to students' lack of understanding of death and religious beliefs. Respondents from secondary schools reported also having reservations of talking to bereaved students about the death, either because of feeling that they might be 'prying', or due to fears of upsetting the student further:

I don't want to pry, I don't want them to tell what they don't want to say. But sometimes it's knowing the right thing to say to get them talking because maybe they don't want to talk, or they don't feel they should or they feel they're being disloyal or it's too painful and they're worried that they might cry if they start talking. [Head of learning support unit, Longlane secondary]

Teachers who had been personally bereaved felt most keenly the importance of expressing emotions with bereaved children. One respondent recounted losing her mother at aged nine and subsequently being sent with her sister to live with her grandparents, her brothers staying with their father. She reported that nobody spoke to her again about her mother, despite communication being something that she desperately needed:

What I needed was words. I needed somebody to give me words to put on my experience. I needed to have some connection with my, with what I was feeling because I had no words for it, because no-one had given me words at home or helped me to have words. [Head of religious education, Avenue secondary]

Indeed, this teacher reported ‘dropping out’ of school after her mother had died and not returning to her education until her late teens. In the present study, respondents reported that the students themselves were occasionally able to initiate communication about the deceased after their bereavement counselling:

Francesca would explain where she’d been to the rest of the class, because I gave time for news and sharing and things like that, and she would often say to the class, ‘Oh, I’ve got some news, last week I went to go and talk about [her brother’s death]’, which is very open. I think she feels very secure within the class because she’s been with them for, I think it’s now three years, they’ve stayed together. [Class teacher, County primary]

In common with other findings (McGovern & Barry, 2000), many school staff reported being apprehensive of talking to students about death and bereavement, despite children initiating the discussion of these issues. However little attention has been paid to the *practical* ways that teachers manage bereavement in the class. Despite teachers’ reported uncertainty, from their accounts most children whom respondents knew to be bereaved appeared to be handled well. However, this is most likely due to the advice and support that each respondent had been offered by the bereavement service. The following section lists the most common methods that teachers used to manage bereaved students.

### Use of contact books

In Britain many schools use a ‘contact book’ as a method of communication between home and school, primarily concerning homework set. Parents, their child and all the student’s teachers may write in each student’s book, although it does not usually form part of the student’s school record. By using a contact book respondents were able to communicate

with students and their families without appearing to treat the student differently than the rest of their class. For very young children, messages were relayed to parents in the book, whereas children able to read and write were encouraged to write messages themselves. For respondents working in secondary schools, these books were used to ensure that all teachers who had contact with the students were aware of any arrangements that had been made, thus ensuring a consistent manner in the staff's treatment of bereaved students:

We have an arrangement where I've written [to subject teachers], in a lot of the contact books, 'Please allow [the student] to leave' and just initial. And that can be because they might blow, lose their temper and get excluded [suspended]. [Head of year, Brookstone secondary]

### Time out cards

In a manner similar to contact books, 'time out' cards were used by two secondary schools, allowing the student space and time during the school day. One respondent illustrated their benefit to both students and other staff members:

What it allows them to do is if they feel they can't cope with the situation they present the card, the member of staff signs it, the child then comes up here [the learning support unit] so they don't have to explain why. That happens. And it means that if they get into an argument, they want to leave the classroom, they can just go. [Head of learning support unit, Longlane secondary]

Again, one reason stated by respondents for giving 'time out' to students was to avoid fixed-term exclusions (suspensions) that might need to be given for unacceptable behaviour.

### Reduced days

Most staff members reported that they attempted to contact their student's parents about the bereavement. Occasionally, a surviving parent was reported to be heavily involved in the day-to-day practical management of their child's problems:

We had an agreement with Mum that if things were starting to kick off, that I would contact her, she would talk to him and if necessary Steven could go home, so that we were trying to avoid a situation where he was getting exclusions [suspensions], and rather that he was being allowed to go home. [Later] there was a time when Steven actually threw a chair. Now that's really, really serious, in a classroom, and they're big exclusions, about five to ten days.... But there are times when as a school you just cannot bend a rule like that because of the other children. [Head of year, Kingstown secondary]

This quotation illustrates the need for links with supportive parents beyond purely communicating with the school, but also raises the issue of balancing the needs of other students with that of the bereaved child. Unfortunately two children referred to in this study had been reportedly suspended after their bereavement for throwing furniture in school, despite numerous attempts at managing their behaviour being made to prevent fixed term exclusions from occurring.

## Remembering

Children need support from adults not just when they are newly bereaved; they often experience problems such as social withdrawal, anxiety and lowered self-esteem for many years after a death (Worden & Silverman, 1996). A commonly reported way to remember teachers or pupils within the school was to create a memorial, most usually by planting a tree or making a garden area. In remembering those who had died, students had the opportunity to decide the nature of a memorial, thus involving them in the management of the bereavement.

Two respondents additionally reported escorting students to a grave to remember a parent on the anniversary of their death. More commonly however, respondents stated that they learnt about students' bereavements through essays that they had set the class to write. Through writing such assignments, the students were occasionally reminded of their past bereavement after the years of silence:

They had to write and think about events in their own life and Abigail wrote about the death of her grandmother last year. And when she brought me up her book and I was reading it and I said, 'Gosh, that's really moving.' And of course she just began to weep, you know. And she'd never, hadn't spoken to anybody about it...I've had that sort of experience with so many of them where they will suddenly tell you, do some bit of work and you'll say, 'Oh, what's this about?' or, 'I didn't know that'. And it's six months later, a year, three years later. So I think that's the difficulty for a lot of students, the kind of secret nature. [Head of religious education, Avenue secondary]

The impact on a teacher and child of a bereavement revealed in this way may be immense and raises issues for the future management of the student and staff members.

The paper has thus far focused on the practical ways in which bereaved students were managed within the school and their local community. The final section focuses on the impact that managing bereaved students had on respondents themselves.

### **The impact on teachers of bereaved students**

The schools' customary response to the parental bereavement of a student was reported to be to send a letter or flowers to that child's family. Most respondents affirmed that they would attend a funeral if specifically asked by a member of the child's family, or if they knew the deceased well. However, many staff members voiced the dilemma of wanting

to show support for the child and family, but being unsure whether they were acting in an ‘appropriate’ role in that instance. Furthermore, the demands of attending a funeral in the combined roles of teacher, friend and colleague were expressed. In the next quotation, the respondent recounted the enormous impact that attending her friend and colleague Shirley’s funeral, and later the funeral of a student, had:

Going to funerals, I found them all particularly difficult personally because [pauses] I felt because of my role with pupils and with staff, that I’ve had to be very supportive of other people. And sensitive towards other people. I can’t just sort of be there for [hesitates]. With Shirley, Shirley was a friend of mine. And with her [death] it was all too much, actually. I found it all deeply distressing. [Later] With the funeral of the pupil [pauses] I don’t know, I just [pauses], obviously you get upset. But I didn’t feel able to really let go and really sort of face it properly until I was away from work and away from colleagues and away from, you know, relatively young children who were just so deeply distressed by it. And, you know, I just felt, ‘I can’t, I’ve got to be strong, I’ve got to be strong’ all the time. [Head of year, Kingstown secondary]

Despite teachers’ anxieties about their management of death and bereavement issues in the classroom, all secondary school year head participants (who were often responsible for providing support to a year group when a student or member of staff had died) made reference to their surprise at students’ mature impeccable behaviour following a death that affected the whole school. Three quotations here illustrate well the poignancy of this finding in the present study:

That [assembly to remember the murders of students by a gunman at a primary school in Dunblane] was extraordinarily moving because it was the first time I ever, ever, ever experienced our students, we’re talking 1200, coming into the hall in absolute silence, without being asked [to be silent]. Without being asked. It was the most moving experience. [Head of religious education, Avenue secondary]

Things like that [wearing the correct uniform] I didn't have to nag them, it was quite odd, I didn't have to nag them about uniform once because it was exactly a fortnight between her [student] dying and the funeral. There wasn't one girl out of uniform, not one girl in trainers [sports shoes]. And not one single girl was rude. I mean in terms of their behaviour it was almost like holding themselves together and doing what they thought was expected. It was quite a relief, because as soon as we'd had the service on the Monday, I'm not saying they were back to their old tricks but the noise level was a lot higher and the trainers began to appear again and things like that. [Head of year, Brookstone secondary]

All those difficult assemblies [three; two announcing the deaths of teachers, and one a student] that I've talked to you about, you know, the children's behaviour was just impeccable in every single year group throughout. No incidences whatsoever of anybody doing or saying anything inappropriate. Yeah, they were just absolutely amazing. [Head of year, Kingstown secondary]

The element of 'surprise' in these accounts is not confined to the respondents in this study; Nias has also observed, 'I have been surprised in some schools by the level of care which pupils will show towards their teachers if they are encouraged to do so (1997:18).'

## ***Discussion***

This paper has described how a small sample of primary and secondary school staff in the UK responded to problems that bereaved students present, and the impact that having bereaved children in the classroom had on teachers. The paper has also demonstrated the influence that British society has on how far teachers felt able to address bereavement issues with the student's family and wider community. However, despite the majority of staff reporting uncertainty over doing the 'right thing' in responding to a death, situations appeared to be handled well. The reported sensitivity of children when responding to death, despite being surprising for respondents, is an important finding and needs to be kept in mind when working with bereaved students.

Two thirds of teachers contacted declined to be interviewed for this study, citing time pressures as the main reason for refusal. Differences between primary and secondary schools in managing bereaved students are therefore not explored, due to the small number of respondents from each type of school. However, as the research was designed to be an exploratory study of teachers' management of bereaved students, the findings are not intended to be generalisable to all schools, but rather attempt to outline the problems that respondents experience in the impact and practical management of such children.

By recruiting teachers to the study who had already had bereaved students and contact with a local bereavement service, respondents may have been biased in their responses to death and management of bereaved students, although school staff in this sample noted the difficulties of providing care and support to these children. Holland (1993) found that 71% of schools in Humberside, UK, had a bereaved child, and in a more recent study, 88% of 229 nursery, primary, secondary and special schools in Southeast London reported having bereaved children in school (Shipman et al., 2001). The management of bereaved students therefore appears to be an issue for the majority of school staff in the UK and other countries.

Societal factors influence the quality of bereavement support that a teacher can give, both within the class and with individual students. Here the teachers sampled reported high levels of deprivation and educational disadvantage in their students with a high turnover of students. However, a supportive social and cultural context would acknowledge the normalcy of grief as a life event and would have plans to respond to it, for example the inclusion of death and bereavement on the curriculum (Yule, 1989). Relationships with students' family members are also important when managing a child's bereavement, although as this paper suggests, this will often be difficult to achieve in practice. In the context of reducing school violence in the USA, Speaker & Petersen (2000) suggest restructuring schools such that they

come to be seen as a ‘town’ or ‘community centre’ that supports, includes and engages the entire family within the scope of the educational setting. By engaging with parents and carers, this approach may also be relevant for managing bereaved students.

As Wilson (1997) observes, an increase in the number of single parents and ‘broken homes’ in the UK may have contributed to issues such as bereavement not being addressed within a local community, but rather by referral to various professional agencies. For example, British schools are required to seek advice from professionals such as educational psychologists if they themselves are unsuccessful in meeting the special educational needs of particular pupils (Department of Education, 1993). Indeed, in their management of bereaved students respondents in the current study reported variously having consulted social workers, psychiatrists, and CAMHS in the time before the local child bereavement service had existed. However, teachers tended to refer only those children with severe behavioural and/or academic problems, and reported not always being aware which children saw health and social care professionals once a referral had been made, echoing concerns of teachers elsewhere in the UK that there is little ongoing communication between health and social agencies and schools (Webb & Vulliamy, 2001).

Many studies in educational research demonstrate that parents’ attitudes to, and involvement in their children’s learning influences their children’s achievements (Webb & Vulliamy, 1996; Coggan et al., 1997; see Edwards & Aldred, 2000, for a review). Maclure & Walker (2000) caution however that little empirical work has been focused on encounters between parents and teachers, and has not addressed how these relationships might be sustained. This raises the question of how the effectiveness of social services can be measured when other factors, particularly the behaviour of the surviving parent (Dowdney et al., 1999), are influential in the outcome of a child’s bereavement.

Time and curriculum pressures are two of the most significant obstacles to dealing

with death and grief in the British classroom; indeed, it was pertinent that so many respondents cited these pressures when declining to participate in the study. There is little free time within the British educational system for teachers to deal with issues that fall outside the curriculum. Many teachers are overburdened in the classroom and overwhelmed by administrative duties outside it. It cannot be assumed that they will have the time, energy, resilience, or desire to commit their own scarce resources to building or maintaining 'caring' relationships in the classroom (Nias, 1997). It seems prudent to suggest that training teachers, although important, may alone not be the most effective way of supporting bereaved children in school, but rather that external agencies provide bereavement support and assistance to British teachers through direct work, consultancy and input.

Teachers and parents alike describe feeling uncomfortable with discussing death with children (McGovern & Barry, 2000), reflecting the wider problems of society in acknowledging issues surrounding bereavement. Recent empirical work demonstrates bereaved children's need to talk. For example, Dyregrov, Bie Wikander, & Vigerust (1999) found that children themselves reported a good response by teachers to one pupil's death, although one child stated, 'we should have talked a little more about him [pupil]'. In the present study we found that students reported mature responses and impeccable behaviour following a bereavement indicate a high level of empathy amongst young children; a similar level of sensitivity and empathy towards those who are bereaved has also been found in American children (Balk, 1989). These findings suggest that it may be possible for school staff to involve students more formally in the management of bereavement, such as assisting in the planning and implementation of special assemblies.

Whether class teachers should take responsibility for death education is a recurring theme in the education and bereavement literature (e.g. Eiser et al., 1995; Jackson & Colwell,

2001; Leckey, 1991; Gunn, 1990), despite Jackson & Colwell (2001) finding that 65% of 250 children believed that death should be discussed with them in primary school. Together with society's silence and teachers' reluctance to 'pry', staff may inadvertently complicate children's grieving process through omissions and refusals to answer questions leading to a diminished capacity to understand (Cunningham & Hare, 1989). Both children's bereavement reaction and educational outcomes will be adversely affected if grief is unmentionable in society (Yule, 1989), as seen here in the case of the teacher who, following her mother's death, did not go back to her education until her late teens. Children may 'mark time' until an adult enters their world who will enable them to express thoughts and feelings and facilitate grief (Raphael, 1984).

Some students excluded from school for a fixed period see an early link between school and home as a central feature of preventative disciplinary action (Pomeroy, 1999). Difficult pupil behaviour is a sensitive issue within schools (Millar & Ferguson, 2000); the paucity of such studies reporting exclusions following bereavement may be explained by access difficulties. Pupils at most risk of exclusion include those from families who are under stress and those pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties (Gordon, 2001), risk factors that may be found amongst many bereaved students. Indeed, a 'downward spiral' of negative events occurring after the bereavement of a child has been explored in the Cascade of Events model (Christ, 2000) formulated to demonstrate in theory how bereavement may set off many subsequent negative events that a bereaved child has to experience. These include moving home or school, severing social ties and the family experiencing a reduced income.

The effects of stressful events that teachers may be expected to participate in, such as attending funerals, need to be made explicit so that support is given to staff as well as students (Rowling & Holland 2000). Sadly a lack of support for teachers from the education

system generally (Creese, Norwich & Daniels, 2000) may prevent this from being given. Like other duties such as child protection (Webb & Vulliamy, 2001), teachers' pastoral care role appears to be understated and largely unacknowledged; teachers may have to manage both recent bereavement and current reactions to past bereavements during their working day.

It is clear from this exploratory study that future research needs to explore the factors that influence how children experience their bereavement and the ways in which students can be involved in the school's management of bereavements. Further research is also required to explore the interaction between children's bereavements and their social environments. Models of involving and supporting the family, school staff, and local community in a child's grief can then be developed and compared to find the most effective way of supporting these children.

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School	Respondent	Gender	Pupil age range <sup>1</sup>	No. and gender of full-time pupils	Pupils eligible for free school meals (%)	Pupils from ethnic minorities (%) <sup>2</sup>	Pupils on school special educational needs register (%)	Pupils learning English as an additional language (%)
City	Class teacher	Male	3-11	350 mixed	55	80	35	75
Highroad	Class teacher	Female	3-11	300 mixed	50	40	35	45
County	Class teacher	Female	4-11	305 mixed	15	15	25	5
Redfield	Class teacher	Female	3-7	225 mixed	15	35	20	10
Blackwood	Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator	Female	3-11	335 mixed	55	15	40	5
Greentown	Headteacher	Female	3-11	260 mixed	45	40	35	25
Greymarsh	Headteacher	Female	3-7	260 mixed	25	50	50	20
Browntree	Headteacher	Female	3-11	210 mixed	30	35	25	N/A
Longlane	Head of learning support unit	Female	11-18	1445 girls	35	55	25	30
Kingstown	Head of year	Female	11-19	620 girls	20	N/A	20	5
Brookstone	Head of year	Female	11-18	1255 girls	30	35	15	10
Lowriver	Head of year	Female	11-19	1215 mixed	55	60	30	35
Avenue	Head of religious education	Female	11-19	1055 mixed	30	40	30	N/A

Table One. Characteristics of primary and secondary schools: data taken from Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) inspection reports and rounded to nearest 5% to maintain respondents' anonymity. Pseudonyms are used for schools.

<sup>1</sup> Pupils less than 4 years old attend nursery. Pupils aged 4-11 attend primary school. Children aged 11-19 attend secondary school.

<sup>2</sup> N/A: data not available