Addressing the Need for School Based Support for Bereavement and Loss: Perceptions, Experiences and Intervention

Submitted by Wendy Thomas (510016666) to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the Doctorate of Child, Community and Educational Psychology in May 2010

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Signature: ..........................................................
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Abstract

Effects of loss on the emotional health and well-being of children are wide-ranging and increase the risk of longer term impact on educational success and mental health (McLanahan 1999; Abdelnoor & Hollins 2004a). As frontline workers, school staff hold a role in identifying and supporting pupils at a universal level. How staff view the issue of loss and their role in supporting this is therefore pivotal. A survey design using two devised online questionnaires and semi-structured interviews identifies the experiences and perceptions of school based staff on the issue of loss for schools in one local authority. Using interactive analysis, qualitative and quantitative data from senior leaders in 20 schools, 25 additional school staff members and 9 multi-agency professionals is triangulated to determine perceptions.

A range of effects across social, emotional, behaviour and learning are well recognised by staff although behaviour is used as the most frequent indicator of those at longer term ‘risk’. A more structured and rigorous school response exists for loss through death compared to family breakdown despite some specific staff concerns for pupils experiencing loss through multiple changes in the family. Whilst staff members indicate a high expectation to support pupils with loss, they report lower confidence in doing so. A series of influencing factors on staff perceptions are identified at a contextual, situational and individual level. Factors that could be targeted by Educational Psychology Service to help schools build capacity are highlighted, with future considerations for support with identification, training and supervision.
Abstract

This second phase of a two part research design investigates how an Educational Psychology Service can increase the capacity of schools to support pupils who have experienced loss. Following a survey design identifying staff attitudes on the issue of loss for schools, a multi-method case study approach is used to research the implementation of a 6-week ‘Loss and Change’ intervention programme. Seven secondary age students participated in the group intervention for pupils who have experienced loss, facilitated by two Educational Psychologists working alongside a member of school staff. A grounded theory approach analysed data from observation, semi-structured interviews and self-report measures. Eight key processes that impact on the effectiveness of the programme are identified and the positive effects spanning social, emotional and behavioural mechanisms are reported for six of the participants. Potential implications of this model of practice for Educational Psychology Services seeking to develop the capacity of schools to support loss are discussed.