

‘Children come to school with more than the bags on their back’

Discussing grief support in Irish schools

Introduction

The quote ‘Children come to school with more than the bags on their back’ (Lynam, 2015) encapsulates the profound reality that pupils bring their life experiences, including grief, into the classroom. Grief remains a sensitive and often misunderstood topic in schools, creating additional hurdles for pupils. Educators play a vital role in creating a nurturing school environment that provides empathy and support through understanding and compassion, within appropriate boundaries.

In 2022, a significant resolution was passed in Congress, advocating for teachers to have access to bereavement leave equivalent to civil service members; Circular 78/2022 implemented this provision, ensuring that teachers received the necessary support. In 2023, the Minister for Education announced an investment of €5 million to pilot a programme of counselling supports for primary school pupils in the school year 2023/24. The Irish National Teachers’ Organisation (INTO) said this new service was in response to a campaign it led on addressing the need for mental health support in primary schools (INTO, 2023).

These supports are greatly welcomed and essential in the school environment. But in terms of grief support, we must remember that only a small number of young people will need specialist supports after a death, and we need to be careful not to pathologise all grief experiences (Jones et al., 2015). As educators, we must be familiar with understanding what an expected response to grief might be for young people and understand when professional help is needed. Otherwise, there is the risk that children are automatically receiving unnecessary professional help.



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Grief remains a sensitive and often misunderstood topic in schools, creating additional hurdles for pupils. Educators play a vital role in creating a nurturing school environment that provides empathy and support through understanding and compassion, within appropriate boundaries. This article discusses the grief responses of young people and how we can support them by empowering teachers through understanding.

Research continues to emphasise that the school environment plays a role in young people's grief (Azuike et al., 2022). Seventy per cent of all schools are likely to have a bereaved child on roll at any one time, but staff often lack the skills to help pupils navigate this taboo topic, which can lead to complex mental health problems in adulthood (Stokes, 2014). Statistics for Ireland are limited, but by extrapolating from UK statistics an estimated 36,000 to 60,000 school-going young people in Ireland have experienced bereavement (McLoughlin, 2012). The national longitudinal Growing Up in Ireland study indicates that 43% of respondents had experienced the death of someone important to them by age nine (Williams et al., 2009). It is therefore essential that we understand what bereaved young people need and how teachers can be empowered to address those needs.

Experiencing the loss of a loved one during childhood is linked to challenges in social, behavioural, and mental well-being throughout adolescence and adulthood (Høeg et al., 2023). Furthermore, despite their significant role *in loco parentis*, many teachers have consistently expressed feelings of inadequacy, lack of training, and fear of exacerbating situations while supporting grieving pupils (Morell-Velasco et al., 2020). This shows the urgency of bridging this gap and empowering teachers to help grieving young people effectively while respecting the boundaries of their role.

This article discusses the grief responses of school-age young people and examines how we can support them by empowering teachers with an understanding of grief theories.

Three-tiered approach

Challenges and barriers currently exist in providing adequate support to bereaved young people in schools. To increase awareness and provide appropriate support for grieving pupils, we need a three-tiered approach to tackling: (1) the educational environment, (2) the social environment, and (3) support services and resources.

Educational environment

The educational environment poses challenges due to time constraints, curriculum pressures, and a lack of consistent policy approaches in schools for 'normative' bereavement. These complex hurdles are driven by the need to cover a rigorous curriculum and the pressures of meeting academic standards, resulting in educators having limited opportunities to focus on issues beyond core curricula areas.

The absence of a standardised approach to 'normative bereavement', which excludes any critical incidents, adds another layer of challenge. A consistent

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framework or set of guidelines across schools is needed to address the typical grieving process using recent understandings of grief – for example, the dual process model (Stroebe & Schut, 2010) and continuing bonds (Klass et al., 1996). Without adequate and up-to-date training or discourse, educators may also find themselves caught between their desire to help and the fear of making things worse for their pupils.

Social environment

In the social environment, we need to enhance peer reactions and foster social support while combating the pervasive stigma and misunderstanding of grief (e.g., it takes a year to get over your grief; you experience grief in linear stages). The stigma associated with death inhibits open discussions and expressing of emotions, leading to feelings of isolation and increased difficulty in seeking support.

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School ethos plays a vital role in supporting grieving pupils and fostering a compassionate and inclusive environment. A child experiencing grief needs a school community that understands and acknowledges their pain. An ethos of empathy, sensitivity, and support can provide a safe space where grieving pupils feel seen, heard, and valued.

Support services and resources

The availability of support services and resources also presents challenges, notably insufficient bereavement support services and a lack of teacher training. Schools often encounter limitations in accessing specialised bereavement support services or professionals who can offer guidance and assistance to teachers and students. Consequently, the availability of adequate support systems in schools is hindered, exacerbating the difficulties faced by bereaved young people.

The investment of €5 million to pilot a programme of counselling supports for primary school pupils in 2023/24 is a start, but further accessible support for all students is necessary, particularly in post-primary schools.

Conclusion

Educators play a pivotal role in fostering a nurturing school environment for grieving young people. There is a need for consistent incorporation of grief education across all programmes in initial teacher education, the development of clear 'normative' bereavement guidelines that include recent developments in grief theory, and the allocation of time in the curriculum for discussion of grief and coping strategies (e.g., through SPHE, English, Science, Religion).

By doing so, educators can feel empowered to provide appropriate support. In 2022, Circular 78/2022 effectively implemented provision for bereavement leave for teachers. We saw pilot programmes and teacher organisations advocating for mental health support. Now we must continue to work towards understanding and addressing the grief experienced by young people and ask, Are we doing enough?

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