Supporting the bereaved child: teacher's perceptions and experiences in Greece

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ABSTRACT *The purpose of this national survey was to explore the general perceptions of Greek teachers (n = 1792) about bereaved children, and investigate the experiences of those who had a student who grieved over the death of a relative (n = 590, 33%) and those who had a class which grieved over the death of a classmate (n = 215, 12%). Findings suggest that most educators are perceptive of children's grief responses and changes in academic performance and behaviour. They consider their role significant in supporting bereaved students, but feel inadequately prepared and request specialized knowledge and skills. Educators who had a student who grieved over the death of a relative expressed considerable difficulty in openly discussing the loss with their student, yet described changes in their own and in the peers' attitudes towards the bereaved student. While the death of a family member was likely to be perceived as a private affair, the death of a student was experienced as a community loss that disrupted school life, and educators were more likely to discuss and engage in collective activities that commemorated the death of the child.*

During the past few decades, research findings have revealed that childhood bereavement is largely affected by the quality of support that children receive throughout the mourning process. The needs of bereaved youngsters are better met in an accepting and caring family environment which allows open expression of feelings and concerns, and promotes sharing of personal experiences (Figley, 1983; Kaffman & Elizur, 1983; Green *et al.*, 1985; Vess *et al.*, 1985; La Grande, 1988; Vachon & Stylianos, 1988; Worden, 1996). Quite often, however, the surviving parent or family members fail to recognize a child's grief responses and mistakenly believe that they are too young to mourn. Sometimes, absorbed by their own grief, adults are unavailable and experience difficulties in supporting the child, talking about death, sharing feelings, and answering his/her questions (Crase & Crase, 1984; Hummer & Samuels, 1988; Fitzgerald, 1992; Oates, 1993; Deaton & Berkan, 1995; Rowling, 1996; Stevenson, 1998; Machon *et al.*, 1999).

Under these circumstances the school can assume a significant role by

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helping the bereaved child to regain control over his/her life and by providing a sense of safety and stability. The presence of a sensitive and concerned teacher who acknowledges the student's needs and accompanies him/her through mourning is crucial in facilitating childhood adjustment to loss (Blackburn, 1991; Stevenson, 1998, 1999). When children's grief responses are neglected or misinterpreted, relationships with educators and peers are negatively affected and are likely to cause classroom problems which become an additional source of strain for all concerned (Wass, 1991; Stevenson, 1995, 1998).

Even though research studies are in agreement that the loss of a significant person causes major changes in several areas of a child's life, findings are inconsistent as to how self-esteem, school functioning and relationships with peers are affected (van Eerdewegh *et al.*, 1982; Martinson *et al.*, 1987; Balmer, 1992; Silverman & Worden, 1992; Fristad *et al.*, 1993).

In Silverman & Worden's study (1992) of 125 bereaved children aged 6–17 years, the large majority of the sample coped effectively with the loss, while only 17% displayed significant behavioural problems within the four month period following the death. According to the findings, children's grief responses are part of a natural process, which helps them to accommodate the loss experience into their life and to keep an ongoing connection with the deceased (Silverman *et al.*, 1992; Worden, 1996). The mourning process is best understood within the context of the child's family and social system, which includes the school community.

Studies which explore school behavior and school performance are based mostly on children's and parents' reports, whereas experiences of educators who have had a bereaved student in their class have not been systematically studied. Only a few studies describe teachers' attitudes towards bereaved children and towards death education (Cullinan, 1990; Machon *et al.*, 1999; Reid & Dixon, 1999; McGovern & Barry, 2000). Cullinan (1990), who studied teachers' death anxiety and perceived ability to support bereaved students, concluded that student support depended upon the educator's perception of his/her role as a helper and his/her perceived comfort in dealing with death-related issues. While the majority of the respondents who participated in the study were willing to listen to students' worries and feelings (87%) and considered it proper to help a grieving child (94%), 46% reported difficulties and tended to refer their student to a counsellor. Teachers' discomfort in discussing grief in the classroom was evidenced in Reid and Dixon's survey (1999) of elementary, middle school teachers and other school staff. Sixty-one percent of the respondents reported having discussed death with their students, while 51% among them felt "minimally prepared" or "completely unprepared" to handle the subject.

Educators acknowledge their lack of knowledge and skills, and express a need for specialized training. Moreover, they ask for specific guidelines, particularly when a school community is faced with the death of a student. Under those circumstances they feel totally unable to support students and often perceive their personal grief as a threat to their professional identity (Rowling, 1995). Various death intervention programmes have been described in the