

# **RBK&C Education Psychology Consultation Service**

## **Working with teachers and schools, parents and children**

### **Issues no. 1: Endings**

#### **(ii) Coping with disasters: the death of a pupil - guidance for schools and colleges**

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***A tragic and maybe violent incident has occurred and a student has died –  
what's to be done?***

*This paper comprises:*

- **Key principles**
- **What's to be done?**
- **A plan of Action**

*It may make more sense to you to start with either Key principles on page 1 or What's to be done on page 3 or to go straight to the flow diagram of A plan of action on page 6 – there is no right way – just what makes sense to you at the moment – thank you for taking the time to read this paper and for the important work that you are doing in this area.*

#### **Key Principles:**

- Schools know the value and importance of relationships and community and the effects that these have on learning and achievement – this leads schools to know the importance of taking time to deal with the possible effects of such tragic incidents, which touch us all, this means dealing openly and thus showing that the school is indeed a caring community
- Schools make a difference and especially so for when these situations arise – at other times schools can make the biggest difference for disadvantaged children and young people by acknowledging and addressing their needs and giving support to their best hopes of their futures
- The more a young person is experiencing significant life events outside school, the more a school can – potentially – contribute to making a positive difference to that young person's life
- The ethos of a school is a key factor in supporting children, young people and staff in maximising their potential
- Individual teachers/staff are key people to individual children and young people when they are going through massive life events – they can be very important people in their lives outside their families

- The way a school deals with tragic incidents can help children and young people learn about the range possibilities for dealing with such events. However, it is worth remembering that sweeping death under the carpet has tended to become the main strategy in the dominant culture in this country over the past half century and so, understandably, we all tend to feel uncomfortable and to feel that we are in uncharted territory when these events occur.
- The school needs to be responsive and sensitive to family culture - and this is the hardest thing of all, since culture varies more within any ethnic group than between ethnic groups – we cannot generalise – we should aim to be sensitive and be prepared to ask people, for example, what are the beliefs and practices in their family. We should also be prepared to say what we have learned from our study of child development of what helps on these occasions, for example, that attending funerals can be very important in actualising loss.
- One loss can trigger another loss – students and staff in a school may be dealing with multiple losses and previous losses that are triggered– this needs to be acknowledged – not as a weakness, but as a reality
- Death is 'normal', but it is not treated as 'normal' in our lives – it is usually hidden away and we have few experiences to help us know what we do and how we do it - these sudden/tragic/violent/horrifying deaths are extreme – feeling extreme (whichever way around we feel that – extreme feelings of disassociation and/or extreme feelings of responsibility, anger and blame are not abnormal – they are normal.) People do not usually need to be referred to counsellors because they are feeling disturbed by sudden/tragic loss – we need to set up systems where people (staff and students) have time to address these issues as a part of a 'normal' processes in school when these events occur, so that we do not psychologise and pathologise 'normal' responses. It is usually much later when grief is unresolved or unaddressed that counselling may be needed. Your school's E.P. can help you think about when this might be needed.
- Staff in schools tend to take care of their students and not so much of themselves – any system in school needs to take into account the effects of these events on staff
- There are support agencies and staff in our schools who can be very helpful on these occasions, they work best when linked into an overall systemic strategy that has been worked out beforehand – rather than as isolated firefighters
- And last but not least, these incidents offer us important learning occasions as school communities

### ***Coping with disasters: the death of a pupil – what's to be done?***

The sudden and tragic death of a pupil affects *everyone* in school in different ways. How, and how much an individual is affected depends on how well s/he knew the child and his/her relationship with the child. We could refer to this as degrees or circles of relationship: some will have a high degree of closeness and others will be more distant. A person's need, on these occasions, relates to his or her degree of closeness or relationship to the person who has died. People who have other on-going losses will also have needs.

The class teacher (in a primary school) or form tutor and Year Team Leaders (TYLs) (in a secondary school or sixth form college), in their pastoral roles, are key people in the direct work with pupils. YTLS and senior staff will have key roles in work with staff, e.g. in supporting class teachers or form tutors in pastoral work with classes or tutor groups. These key staff are, therefore, under particular strain in the first few days following a tragic death. The strain experienced by these key workers, typically, continues over weeks and months. This needs to be acknowledged by the school management team. Inclusion teams (in schools which have them) can be very important in supporting staff and supporting staff in supporting students, as well as working directly with students or groups when that is appropriate. Similarly, outside agencies have a significant role in supporting staff, beyond what might be thought of as 'counselling', which can tend to individualise and miss the systemic and community dimensions of dealing with a bereavement.

The head and senior management team of the school play a key role in planning and managing the school's action plan and in supporting pupils and staff on such tragic occasions as well as over the medium and long-term. They will benefit from backing from agencies outside the school, which can provide a sounding board for the school at such a time.

It helps if a school has a broad framework for action or action plan that can be followed on such occasions. The whole staff of a school in which an action plan has been previously developed, and reviewed regularly, are likely to feel far more confident and competent when it comes to coping with tragedy than the staff of a school which does not have such an action plan.

In the invaluable booklet *Wise Before the Event*<sup>1</sup> it is suggested that school management teams and governors should develop a plan that involves the following steps:

- 1. Identifying Potential Disasters*
- 2. Identifying Support Agencies and Personnel*
- 3. Developing a School Critical Incident Management Plan*
- 4. Clarifying Roles - for all Personnel including Ancillary Staff*

This provides an excellent framework for schools in drawing up plans.

### ***General considerations:***

In any instance of bereavement it is important to try to make sure that school's plans take into account the wishes of the bereaved parent/s and family/families.

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<sup>1</sup> *Wise Before the Event Coping with Crises in schools* by Bill Yule and Anne Gold 1993 distributed by Calouste Gulbenkian -

Any member of staff who is already going through a personal significant bereavement will be even more affected when a tragic death affects the school community and this needs to be taken into account – not in the sense that they are in any way lacking, but rather that they are already dealing with other pressing business. A loss may trigger a previous loss for staff and students and this needs to be understood and taken into account. But we should not assume we know about the experience of loss of others. We need to be sensitive about checking with the person, in a tentative fashion about any idea we may have that they may be dealing with a significant life event which may make it harder right now to be as fully involved with as others might – and then make allowances, if need be.

### ***Key tasks with people in school:***

All staff are likely to be involved *in some way* in the arrangements that are made on the first day or days that such events hit a school. One immediate key task when there is a tragedy, such as the sudden death of a member of the school community, or a disaster involving many pupils, is to provide for everyone in the school:

- adequate information about what has happened – as soon as possible and from senior sources – this shows that the school is addressing the event
- the opportunity and the support to talk openly about what has happened - this includes practical aspects, such as arranging cover, which often turns out to be the most important action
- the opportunity and the support to commemorate, publicly in school, the person who has died - this will need to take place immediately and also later, in the medium and long term
- the opportunity for the class or tutor group most affected to have time together at the start of the day as soon as possible following the incident and to reflect in tutor time on what has happened

It is also important that, as far as possible, the school keeps to its normal routines since these routines can provide a sense of stability and security at such difficult times. This is all a matter of balance and of being aware of the possible circles of relationships and of the needs of different people.

### ***Key tasks with people out of school:***

Another immediate key task, usually for the Headteacher and Senior staff, is to make contact with people outside the school. It is best if these jobs are allocated before an incident occurs – see *Wise Before the Event*. People who will need contacting include:

- the bereaved parents and family – to offer condolences and to try and help the family access any practical help they may need and to ascertain what has happened
- the local education authority officers and services and school governors – to work out how best to utilize any support that may be available to the school – according to what the school feels might be useful
- the parents and families of all the pupils in the school – to clarify what has happened and the action the school is taking
- community networks that may be able to provide support for the family, should they wish it

*and*, if the death is sudden and violent:

- the education department press office about what support might be available to the school in dealing with the press
- the police - ditto

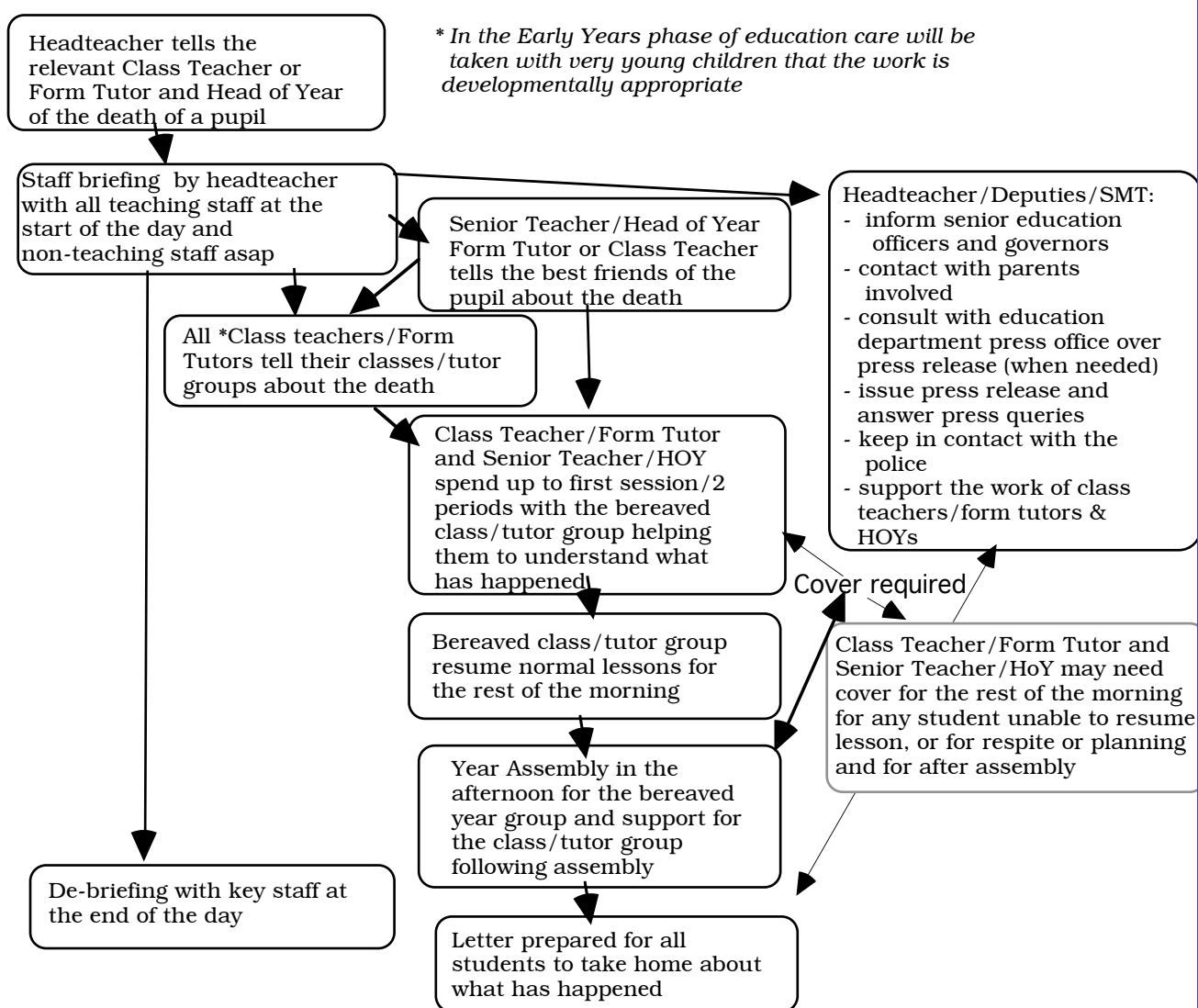
and possibly

- local borough services such as health and housing

### ***A plan of action:***

A plan of action helps in circumstances such as these to provide a framework for possible action. Obviously, there are major organisational differences between primary and secondary schools and sixth form colleges, however, the key elements in a plan of action are similar in both settings: these are actions based on the key tasks (referred to above).

### ***The key tasks on day one or soon after might be arranged in the following way:***



***This is not intended to be prescriptive, but rather to indicate the range of tasks that could usefully be addressed in a secondary school that was dealing with a major incident involving the death of a student. It could be amended to suit the school and to suit other school settings.***

***Medium term tasks will include:***

- providing opportunities and support for the pupils and the teachers most affected to continue talking about what has happened – with regular discussions, briefings and de-briefings for key staff and all staff (daily, then weekly and so on)
- consulting with the parents of the bereaved pupil and arranging for relevant pupils and staff to attend the funeral
- planning and carrying out school-focused commemoration and working out how to involve the parents in that process

***Longer-term tasks will include:***

- introducing strategies to monitor and support children and staff who were most affected
- making sure that people who are new to the school know about what has happened, which children were most affected and in what way, and how to get further help if it is needed
- marking anniversaries
- keeping track of, and taking account of, any long term legal processes or any related public events which may be upsetting for members of the school community
- reviewing guidelines for coping with disasters with the whole school
- reviewing the element of “loss and change” within the PSE curriculum, and support strategies to teachers in this area
- reviewing the school's admissions policy so that we ask for and record information on significant bereavements when a pupil enters the school

*- Please feel free to consult with your school's educational psychologist on this -*

***PLEASE FEEL FREE TO AMEND THIS PAPER AND PROVIDE US WITH ANY FEEDBACK OR IDEAS THAT YOU HAVE FOUND TRIED OUT THAT WOULD BE USEFUL FOR OTHER SCHOOLS TO HEAR ABOUT***

***- THANKS VERY MUCH! –***

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*Issues no. 1 Endings (ii) Coping with disasters: the death of a pupil - guidance for school staff in primary and secondary schools and sixth form colleges*

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