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Bereavement Counselling: A Dilemma for School Counsellors?

Jenny Shumba, George Moyo and Symphorosa Rembe

Faculty of Education, University of Fort Hare, South Africa

Address for Correspondence:
Dr. Jenny Shumba
Faculty of Education
University of Fort Hare
South Africa
Telephone: +27786173985
E-mail: jennymshumba@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT The study sought to establish the challenges faced by counsellors as they offer bereavement counselling to secondary school learners in Harare. A qualitative methodological approach was utilized to obtain data from respondents and an interpretivist paradigm was adopted to capture experiences of four counsellors as they offered bereavement counselling to parentally bereaved learners. A multiple case study design was adopted for this study. The study revealed that counsellors experienced a plethora of challenges such as non-cooperation from caregivers and other colleagues in the school; having to deal with the complex nature of children's bereavement experiences; lack of expertise in assisting bereaved learners. As such the study concludes that counsellors face challenges in counselling the bereaved children in the selected schools and that learners do not get adequate bereavement counselling as counsellors lack confidence in carrying out their counselling duties. Hence, the study recommends that schools equip counsellors with skills so that they can implement counselling effectively.

INTRODUCTION

School bereavement counselling is crucial for the psychological well being of the grieving children. This paper first unpacks the concepts related to bereavement counselling.

School bereavement counselling in perspective

Postvention is an intervention rendered after a profound loss such as death of a parent. School counselling, as a postvention strategy, includes all the activities and support that help with the traumatic after effects among survivors of profound loss experiences (Corr& Balk, 1996), for instance, the provision of basic food, clothing and counselling. The main goal of postvention programmes is to maximise resilience, reduce risks and to change a situation that is risky and 'disruptive to the extent that one cannot continue through the normal passage of life ...without stress, dissatisfaction or unhappiness' (Connect Module 1, 2004:5). Situations such as these, invite organisations such as schools, to implement postvention plans to assist children at risk (Auman, 2007). Thus, school counselling is a component in the wide ranging postvention activities.

According to Auman (2007:34), it is important that the bereaved children get "bereavement support so they can learn and grow in an environment that provides stability, meets their need for solace and understanding and provides measures for their psychological health and wellbeing". Counselling as postvention, thus, helps children to work through their grief so that they can cope with other pressures such as school work. Auman (2007) also cites the school as the first place where the behavioural and emotional problems of orphans are often exhibited. Thus, the school needs to have mechanisms in place to cater for bereaved children. Other positive views on postvention are that it affords one the opportunity for re-evaluation of the loss and some even gain new strengths and insights from life before and be propelled into a forward looking present (Meiche, 2008). Counselling's primary purpose is the prevention and de-escalation of problems and it focuses on enabling the child to develop self esteem and the internal resources to cope with difficulties more effectively and it also includes remediation of mental health symptoms and problems. This calls for educators' or counsellors' support and the need for them to be trained to identify bereaved children's postvention counselling needs.

Furthermore, of key importance is that researchers and school counsellors acknowledge parentally bereaved children's strengths as well as risk factors. Both these, inform the strategies and interventions used in school counselling programs. School counsellors must be aware of and bolster grieving children's positive development as this helps them to cope with

grief (Eppler, 2008). Counsellors would need to be conversant with approaches to counselling bereaved children.

Challenges faced by counsellors in implementing bereavement counselling

Counsellors face a plethora of challenges in implementing school bereavement counselling. Some of the challenges are discussed below.

The school based counsellor's role is not clearly defined in most setups and has three main domains: academic, career and personal/social. This is evidenced by the American Counselling Association (1999) in Free Library.com (2010) which suggests that, in America, the school based counsellors provide individual counselling, conduct classroom guidance interventions, consult with parents, be developmental specialists in the school and be mental health specialists in the school, among other roles. Due to migration, student populations are increasingly becoming diverse in schools. Lee, (2001) in Free Library.com (2010) refers to this as the changing demographics of society. This further implies different cultures in the schools. The counsellor, thus, faces major differences in those who seek counselling. This scenario demands the counsellor to be culturally versatile (Lee, 2001) in Free Library.com (2010) so as to be effective in dealing with children's needs.

School counsellors and teachers often succumb to triggers which are a result of their past experiences. Capewell and Beattie (1996:51) refer to this as "transference", a "form of projection" in which feelings from the past are unconsciously awoken within the listener. Thus, in the researcher's view, the pupil's loss can destabilise the teacher involved in support since carers of bereaved children are more open to having their own existential fears triggered. Prior knowledge of triggers equips counsellors to be on guard and to derole each time they enter into sessions with clients. Like in phenomenological studies, this calls for "bracketing" by the researcher so as to set aside prejudgements and prevailing understanding of phenomena (Moustakas, 1994) and "let the phenomena speak for themselves unadulterated by our preconceptions" (Gray, 2005:21) to allow it to show itself so that new meanings can emerge. Failure to derole can affect the counselling process retrogressively. Counsellors can succumb to stress and other psychosomatic symptoms.

Individual counselling requires many sessions (Child & Family Centre, 2007; CONNECT 1, 2004) as a result the counsellor needs a lot of time to deal with each individual case. This might cause conflict in time allocation.

School counsellors are inundated with heavy caseloads (Lohan, 2006; Van Dyk, 2008) as their client base is huge. It is not only bounded by the school fence but goes beyond to

include parents, teachers, caregivers and other community members. Counsellors may suffer from burnout (Van Dyk, 2008). Because of bereavement overload due to HIV and AIDS, many orphaned children are referred for counselling in schools as such schools offering counselling services are overstretched beyond their capacity. Service delivery can be compromised by the heavy caseloads in a bid to save time. For example, a counsellor can fail to give proper diagnoses. One wonders whether this situation pertains in the secondary schools in Harare.

Van Dyk (2008) contends that counsellors and educators are sometimes not prepared for the deaths of parents. In a study by Van Dyk, counsellors commented that they were "not used to the client's, school child's or student's parents dying" (Van Dyk, 2008:315).

Counsellors can encounter resistance from caregivers especially in abusive homes. Caregivers who are abusive would try to cover up their actions by being vindictive towards the counsellor as they feel that their actions are being monitored (CONNECT Module 2, 2004).

Literature highlights major concerns in lack of capacity in schools with regards to counselling service provision. Suggestions are that teachers are ill-equipped to deal with loss (Reid, 2002) and at the same time lack training on dealing with grief issues (Lohan, 2006). To redress the situation, schools need to have clear policies on how to effectively deal with the counselling of bereaved children. Furthermore, as Yates, Clinton and Hart (1996) put it, teachers in initial and continuing training need training in counselling. In Zimbabwe Teacher's colleges, programmes are in place to train teachers in initial training for some basic counselling techniques (Morgan ZINTEC Teacher's College Syllabus for Life Skills Education, 2009). However, a cursory look at Life Skills Education syllabi for teacher's colleges revealed that content was mostly aligned to HIV and AIDS counselling.

There seems to be a general view that some schools do not have bereavement school policies. In a study by Yates *et al.* (1996), 70% of surveyed teachers had no policy on discussing loss and death in classrooms. When confronted by a bereaved child, the teacher would be in a quandary. Resources are needed to empower the teacher or counsellors so that the bereaved child can be assisted. The study aimed to ascertain whether Harare schools had bereavement policies.

METHODOLOGY

The qualitative methodological approach was adopted for this study and the interpretivist research paradigm was used as it provides best fit of the phenomenon being studied challenges experienced by counsellors in counselling bereaved learners.

Design

The study was a multiple case study of 4 purposively selected secondary school counsellors from two secondary schools. The multiple cases were selected as they were considered information rich sites (Johnson & Christensen, 2012; Mertens 2010). Counsellors were selected for the reason that they were bearers of privileged information as they were in contact with the grieving secondary school children. The school counsellors were selected to provide data on their experiences in dealing with bereaved children as they are in constant contact with them in school.

Case selection

Whereas populations and samples are prominent in survey research, in case studies, the focus is on "case identification" (Rule & John, 2011:13; Gerring, 2007:211); "case selection" and "case description" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003: 450). In support of this, Terre Blanche *et al.* (2006:460) assert that, "case studies are ideographic research methods; that is, methods that study individuals as individuals rather than members of a population." It is in this vein that the researchers, embarked on case selection that is described below. We purposively selected the 4 cases for this study on the basis of my judgement about which ones would be best suited to the research purpose (Maxfield & Babbie, 2006). Extreme case purposive selection was used to select participants as it is used to select units that have special or unusual characteristics (Wiersma, 2000:238). The counsellors were selected due to their interaction with the bereaved learners.

Data Collection

Phenomenological in-depth interviewing was conducted with counsellors in order to capture their experiences with bereaved learners (Ribbens-McCarthy 2006). The in-depth interview was the sole instrument used for data collection. This method sought to give voice to the counsellors.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using the thematic approach. Transcripts were read to tease out the recurrent themes.

Issues of rigour in qualitative research

To ensure quality in this research the researcher used mechanically recorded data and presented verbatim accounts of the respondents as this guaranteed credible data. Phenomenological bracketing was also employed so as to capture unadulterated data from the respondents.

Ethical issues

Permission to conduct the study was sought from the Ministry of Education, Sport, Arts and Culture Head Office, Harare Provincial Office, District Education Office and School heads. Participants were assured of their anonymity and confidentiality as codes were going to be used for the schools and respondents. Assurances were also given to the counsellors that the data would be used only for research purposes. Tape recording was done with the participants' signed consent that emphasised voluntary participation.

FINDINGS

Respondents in the study were identified using codes. Counsellors from school M were coded as C1M and C2M whereas those from school LM were coded as C1LM and C2LM.

QUALIFICATIONS

The study found that the counsellors in both schools were teachers who had their other teaching load apart from providing counselling services. When asked whether they had counselling qualifications. The following responses were given:

C1M *I have a Certificate in Education. Currently, I am simply a Justice for Children Trust Co-ordinator, with no professional counselling qualifications*

C2M *I hold a Graduate Certificate in Education from the University of Zimbabwe and A Certificate in Systemic Family Therapy from CONNECT*

CI LM *I have a Graduate Certificate in Education*

C2LM *I am a bearer of Bachelor of Science Honours in Counselling Degree*

Of the four counsellors two had counselling qualifications. Although C1M held a Certificate in Education, which is a teaching qualification, she did not have any counselling qualification. According to her she was just a coordinator for Justice for Children Trust. One wonders whether she had the requisite skills to counsel bereaved children.

Counselling children with other basic needs

All four school counsellors interviewed indicated that they faced many challenges in counselling bereaved children. Some of the challenges highlighted include convincing pupils to persevere against the children's lack of basic subsistence materials such as food, uniforms

and shelter. For example counsellor C2LM, felt that she would not be doing enough to counsel them emotionally when their other needs were not met.

Counselling abused children

Counsellor C1LM also claimed to have other challenges, such as counselling abused bereaved children as caregivers are generally not forthcoming to assist them and solutions to their plight is generally limited.

Her claims were that:

Yes, the knowledge and skills are there but in terms of crisis e.g. abuse, the solutions are rather limited. Pupils will not have alternative relatives to stay with or a home to move in quickly. Relatives refuse with documents e.g. death certificates of deceased parents for pupils to access help. ***(C1LM)***

Abuse issues seemed to be a common feature in counselling of the bereaved children as was mentioned by the counsellors, however, no child mentioned it. C2LM also indicated that she sometimes had challenges in counselling abused bereaved children (girls) as they were abused by caregivers. The following were her words:

I feel I can counsel the girls but sometimes it is very difficult when girls have been raped by breadwinners because everybody in the family turns against them. There are several pupils whose parents or guardians say that they were raped and were in a worse predicament than themselves (pupils).

The process of reporting is rather slow because some of the cases ought to go through psychological services. ***(C2LM)***

According to C2LM, counselling abused girls who will be abused by the family breadwinner puts both the counsellor and the child in a dilemma because if the case is reported, all the other members who depend on the breadwinner would be in against her as they feel she would have betrayed the whole family and she would be subjected to more torture over and above her other bereavement experiences. The counsellor too would be in a dilemma because it is mandatory that all abuses should be reported.

Failure to adjust after bereavement

The school counsellor also faces a dilemma in dealing with bereaved children as the children fail to adjust to their bereavement and that choices will be made for them. When they are abused no immediate solutions are proffered. C1-LM has this to say:

CILM *The pupils find it difficult to adjust to their predicament. Pupils have no choice in decisions made about them... they are abused in several ways and in most cases there are no immediate solutions to these problems.*

This statement implies that the counsellor felt there were anomalies in the way bereaved children were treated but had no means of helping or changing the situation.

Counselling beyond the school walls

C2LM indicated that bereavement does not only affect the children, but also the remaining parent with negative impact on the bereaved learners. Hence, counselling went beyond the learner to the school children. C2LM states:

There have been lots of children involved in grieving. Lots of counselling was involved in the area. Some parents crying and pupils were affected by the parents. Some parents were also called for counselling because their grieving affected their children so much. Some pupils were counselled because they were now engaged in behavioural problems.

This scenario indicates that school counselling goes beyond the boundary of the school and should cater even for the other systems around the child, such as parents. The counsellors therefore need to have skills to accommodate the learners with their panoply of challenges and the other systems around them. This is also reflected in the captions below:

CILM *A pupil was being sexually abused by a guardian who happened to be the only close relative to the pupil. The aunt whose husband was the abuser/perpetrator defended her husband. The pupil is HIV positive and on medication. The matter was referred to Justice for Children but no immediate solution was found.*

C2LM *A mother lost a husband who was a breadwinner and the children caught her crying all the time, so the children got so affected. I called the mother and recommended her to go for AIDS test. She did and she was found positive and was counselled and she is now living positively.*

From the above statements it is evident that counsellors encounter challenges as they have to deal with more than bereavement counselling but other problems such as sexual abuse, extend family issues, HIV and AIDS and parental counselling and advice. Hence, their roles are not well defined.

Fear of shortcomings by counsellors

Data also indicated that the counsellors had concern and some fear over their shortcomings in terms of providing counselling to children who have lost their parents. For example C1M and C2M indicated that:

Sometimes, otherwise, I am usually generally at a loss because these children would like to receive every day attention, day to day affection. Of course, the words of comfort release

their stress. What they really hunger for is permanent (everlasting) affection. Above all, society should sympathise with them by helping them financially.

*The fear of failing to reach at eh to them financially cripples feelings of identifying with them. That is, whenever I am counselling them, the greatest obstacle is failure to gratify them in a way as far as solving their material needs. The children need to be financially cushioned and not to be only "God-empowered," so to speak.**(C1M)***

*My inability to source income to alleviate the financial burdens of pupils- BEAM. This facility is not really accessible at secondary school level. **(C2M)***

These two seem to have phobia that they might fail to help the bereaved children. They can talk to them and encourage them but they feel it is more than counselling that these children need; they need money and unconditional love that cannot be obtained from strangers. This could imply that the role of the counsellors should go beyond mere talk but to include other facets that would make the bereaved child emotionally, socially, physically and mentally healthy. The support given by government, BEAM, is not helping the secondary school learners who are the concern for this current research.

Role conflict

One counsellor intoned that there was lack of time and role conflict to concentrate on counselling. She confided that;

***C1M** There is generally no time for me to have one to one sessions with bereaved children. I have my own work load which includes teaching many classes and marking piles and piles of books. I have to do counselling as and when I am free from my other duties.*

From the caption above it can be noted that counsellor C1M who is a full time teacher, regards the counselling role as a part- time assignment that does not take precedence over her teaching role. The researchers question the counsellor's commitment to counselling of bereaved learners who are in dire need of this service to enhance their mental health.

Failure to identify bereaved learners

Another challenge that counsellors face was brought to light by C2LM when she intoned that:

C2LM sometimes it is hard to know which child is bereaved. Information filters to us teachers a long time after the bereavement. At times we hear about the death of a parent when the child starts to exhibit misbehaviour or is frequently absent or has even dropped out of school. This is unfortunate. As counsellors we need to know these things early so that we can assist the learners.

The counsellor brought out some crucial information. Apart from failure to identify bereaved children, it would appear that the school does not have a policy on reporting of bereavement as the teacher cum counsellor suggests that information on bereavement just "filter" to them. This is an unhealthy situation in a school as children are let out to fend for themselves in stressful situations and some are allowed to go through the sieve as they drop out of school. The children's challenges could have been curtailed had there been a proper reporting and identification policy on bereavement.

Lack of support from colleagues

Another issue raised in the interview was lack of support by counsellor's colleagues at school. C2LM indicated that:

There is lack of support from colleagues. One was actually arguing that giving too much support emotionally and otherwise would worsen the plight of these orphans and that they would have to stand up and face their own struggles. ***(C2LM)***

It appears that the counsellor saw a contradiction in the way counselling should be done and what colleagues viewed as counselling. One colleague actually advocated for the counsellor not to render too much emotional support on the bereaved children. It could be that the other colleague intended to say there should not be too much attachment that inhibits normal functioning and encourages too much dependency.

The data above reflects that there is lack of synchronisation in the delivery of services in the two schools visited as the counsellors did not enjoy support from colleagues; there was lack of financial resources and this constrained service delivery; there was lack of confidence in dealing with these children; and, there was lack of individualised attention due to shortage of time for more one to one meets and dealing with sensitive issues that did not enjoy prompt or positive response.

DISCUSSION

Many challenges on counselling bereaved children emerged in literature but the data shows that there are extensions to it (Yates, Clinton and Hart, 1996; Lohan, 2006; Van Dyk, 2008). Data revealed that some of the school counsellors interviewed, though trained in counselling, lacked confidence in handling sensitive issues such as bereavement. It could be due to lack of skills in handling emotionally charged learners. This is not a new phenomenon in literature. Herlihy, Gray and McCollum (2002:55) contend that:

School counsellors deal routinely with complicated situations in which students have acute counselling needs, including cases of severe depression, suicidal ideation, pregnancy,

substance abuse, school violence and child abuse. To respond to these needs, counsellors must have both strong clinical skills and a keen awareness of the legal and ethical ramifications of any actions they may take or fail to take.

This could imply that whatever action the counsellor takes he/she must take cognisance of the ethical issues around it. However, this problem can be compounded by the fact that over and above gazetted ethical standards, there might be other ethical issues and standards that are context specific with culture and other statutory laws playing a part in influencing them. Hence, there is need for schools to make an assessment of cultural and ethical issues that either impair or promote their counselling service provision. Holland (2001) indicated that although the issue of childhood bereavement was rated to be very high in the Hull and Humberside schools in the UK, some counsellors lacked skills to support bereaved children. This signalled a training gap in these schools and this scenario also signals the same gap in the training of counsellors in the schools in the current study as some counsellors indicated fear of counselling boys or learners with sensitive issues. What appears to be peculiar is the phobia shown by the counsellors which can imply that bereaved children may be left to find their own means of dealing with their bereavement.

The counsellors also expressed that there was lack of support from colleagues. This need for support from colleagues was also emphasised by Tatar (2009) as it would make the job of the counsellor lighter.

Other findings included lack of financial resources to assist orphaned children, lack of individualised attention due to shortage of time and space for more one to one confidential sessions, slow responses to reported abuse cases. There was no readily available research literature to support or refute these findings. However, Gwirayi (2011) in his study on child sexual abuse corroborates the finding on slow responses to reported abuse cases. He found that some reported abuse cases were unceremoniously dropped and the cases were dropped after clandestine deals between the police and perpetrators. This leads the researchers to ask: Then, who guards the guards? How safe are the children in a context that can be so callous? Is this not adding injury to the already injured? Above all, how then can bereaved children be counselled so as to survive in a social milieu full of callousness?

CONCLUSION

It can also be concluded that counsellors face many challenges in counselling the bereaved learners in the selected secondary schools and that the learners do not get adequate bereavement counselling as the counsellors were not confident enough to conduct it. Another

conclusion is that there cannot be a standard practice for counselling bereaved learners as their problems are varied and hence need individual treatment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that:

- Policies be crafted for proper implementation of bereavement counselling in schools. There is need for crafting and institutionalisation of identification policies and reporting policies so that schools have proper and secure data bases with information on bereaved learners that can be accessed by counsellors.
- All stakeholders be conscientised of the need for open communication so that counsellors can get information on bereaved learners so as to help retain them in school and at the same time help them to adjust to their predicament. The study also recommends that there should be a free information flow in the school. Children, staff and parents and guardians need to be furnished with information on bereavement supportive organs within the school and in the community to help empower them and to reduce risk factors around them. They need to be made aware of referral option around them.

- Schools engage in capacity building of their counsellors through in-service training of their teachers so as to improve service delivery. On the same note, Pre-service teacher training should prepare students for bereavement counselling to alleviate the phobia that engulfs counsellors when dealing with bereaved children. Furthermore, counselling practice in schools should be tailored with the knowledge of bereavement theory in mind and teachers and other school staff should be equipped with deeper understanding of how children react to bereavement.

- There is need for the secondary school curriculum to take cognisance of the bereaved learner's dire need of bereavement support. Serious consideration should be given on inclusion of bereavement issues in curriculum. Inclusion can be in the form of time tabling of Guidance and Counselling, teaching loss awareness across the curriculum, or death studies and death education. This might prepare both learners and counsellors for the advent of bereavement and its consequences. However, consultations with various stakeholders need to be done in this regard to ensure acceptance of the programme and avoid tissue rejection.

- Further research be carried out to establish the perceptions of other stakeholders such as learners and parents on the the provision of bereavement counselling in schools.

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