JOHN BALDING

Education on bereavement: the parental view

Within the pilot studies developing a curriculum-planning method for primary and middle schools, reported in *Education and Health*, September 1983, the views of parents, pupils, and teachers were sought on the value of including a number of health topics in the curriculum. The list of topics examined is shown below, and it will be seen that *Death and bereavement* is included. Respondents were asked to consider each topic in turn, and the adult groups were asked to judge how appropriate each one was for inclusion in the curriculum, against the following scale:

(a) Should be included;
(b) Useful but not essential;
(c) Not appropriate.

Currently, the enquiry method is undergoing further development and refinement in the light of research findings to date. It has been found that there is more than one reason for respondents choosing category (b), and at the next stage this will be split into two more precise statements. However, at this stage the categories (a) and (c) are regarded as clear statements of a respondent's view, and for two Exeter schools, with a combined response rate from parents of over 90%, the outcome for the parental response was as shown in Table I.

When compared with the response to the other 42 topics, *Death and bereavement* is one of the *least favoured*. Only four topics have a less positive response for inclusion in the primary-school curriculum (i.e., < 28% for School A, and < 24% for School B). These are shown in Table II, which also indicates those topics having more negative "not appropriate" responses (i.e., < 32% for School A, and < 27% for School B).

Conceptually, Table II displays similar or related feelings towards topics, namely the "least positive" and "most negative"

The checklist of 43 topics

How my body works	Water Safety	Stress and relaxation
Human reproduction	First Aid	Making decisions
Immunisation	Understanding minority	Care of hair, teeth, skin
Smoking	groups	Menstruation
Difference in growth and	Leisure activities	Sex roles
development	Illness and recovery	Physical fitness
Getting on with boys and girls	Drug taking and glue-sniffing	Eating habits / nutrition
the same age as yourself	Caring for handicapped people	Alcohol
Feelings (love, hate, anger	Responsibility for own behaviour	Relationships at home
jealousy)	Mugging	Talking with adults (GP,
Boredom	Bullying	nurse, dentist)
Separation from your parents	Death / bereavement	Swearing
Caring for pets	Care of feet	Shoplifting / pilfering (theft)
Vandalism	Honesty	Health and Social Services
Traffic Safety	Conservation	Building self-confidence
Safety at home	Pollution	Caring for old people

© J W Balding 1983	Positive (Should be included)	Negative (Not appropriate)
School A	28%	32%
School B	24%	27%

TABLE I
Percentage of parents responding to "Death and bereavement" as a curriculum topic.

responses, and almost inevitably topics found in one category will also be found in the other. Thus, *Stress and relaxation appears in every list and †Separation from parents is in three of the lists.

An unsuitable subject?

To find that many parents view *Death and bereavement* as unsuitable for inclusion in the school curriculum comes as no surprise. Handling one's own grief is a very personal thing, and perhaps a prescription for appropriate behaviour is ridiculous. However, insight into appropriate behaviour for people close to the bereaved person would be most helpful (see the interview with Richard Hawkins, opposite).

The pupils' responses in the course of the pilot survey work revealed no obvious pattern. For several age groups, the subject received one of the most negative responses of all 43 topics, while for one or two groups a very positive result

emerged. In one school, the pattern appears to suggest that the younger children show more interest than the older ones, but in the other school only the boys' responses support this interpretation. Clearly, this is something which will have to be examined further in future development of the enquiry method.

All teachers will experience the difficulty of having a bereaved child in the classroom, and the situation can be very uncomfortable both for the child and its classmates. The following questions are among those which need to be asked:

1. Do teachers attempt to cater for the needs of the bereaved?
2. Do they attempt to help the rest of the class to relate to the bereaved class member?
3. How well able are they to cope with their own feelings towards bereavement, and their experience of it?

The answer to the third question will have great influence on the other two.

Teachers' reactions

My experience, when working with teachers, is that they are divided over the issue. One of the main problems for them is how to go about attempting work with a class on the subject. In preliminary work for this study, the teachers who were questioned did not, on the whole, feel that support materials and methods for introducing the topic in the class-

Should be included		Not appropriate	
School A	School B	School A	School B
*Stress and relaxation	*Stress and relaxation	Boredom	Boredom
†Separation from parents	†Separation from parents	*Stress and relaxation	*Stress and relaxation
Illness and recovery	Health and social services		Mugging
			Health and social services
			†Separation from parents
© J W Balding 1983			Care of feet

TABLE II
Topics ranking lower than "Death and bereavement" as suitable for inclusion in the curriculum.

room were required. However, if well-tried support methods and materials were available, I am sure that they would be in demand.

I have been present with teachers when they have reviewed film material for potential use in secondary schools. On every occasion, at least one teacher has felt strongly against the use of the film in question, while most of the others held the reverse view, and valued the film as potentially very helpful. When underlying reasons for the rejection have come to light, they have revealed that the film had reached personal experience of unresolved grief, and had renewed the pain for the teacher concerned.

Summary

My own view is that work in schools on this area of human experience could be most valuable. In holding this view, I appear to have the support of about a quarter of the parents in the reported survey, and appear to be at odds with the judgment of a slightly larger number of them. I am hopeful that the experience and ideas reported in other articles in this issue of *Education and Health* will give insight and support for work in schools. Having reached this point, I am facing the following questions:

1. What right have I to decide that the subject has a place in school when more than 25% of parents appear to disagree?
2. Have I implied that some teachers may be very ill-equipped to handle the subject? Teachers in social education should have the trust and respect of their fellow teachers, the pupils, and the governors; but they would also need to feel personally secure in connection with the experience of death and bereavement.

The next issue of **Education and Health** will include an article on computer diet analysis called

"A Micro in the Canteen"

Conversation with..

RICHARD HAWKINS

In this interview, the Venerable Richard Hawkins, Archdeacon of Totnes, Devon, comments on the role of the school in preparing pupils for personal loss, and on the problem of dealing with a bereaved pupil. — Ed.

Do you think that so-called "death education" — which includes accepting loss by death as something natural and inevitable — can be helpful in preparing someone for bereavement?

I would have thought that it is perfectly possible to explore the experience of loss itself. I believe that in bereavement literature there is quite a lot of emphasis placed on the fact that many of the patterns of bereavement are paralleled in the experience of other kinds of loss as well, so that a lot of what will be experienced in bereavement is also experienced following other kinds of loss. I imagine that to children the loss of animals, for instance pets, is one. I guess that sometimes the effects are something like moving house, in that part of the experience of moving house is the loss of what they have known and the loss of friends, and I would have thought that it's quite conceivable to explore that whole business, and for the question of the experience of losing somebody by death — that kind of loss — to be a natural part of it.

That is something which you can obviously do outside of a specific instance. But I think that this point is very difficult to get across at the particular time of bereavement, and it's not particularly helpful for somebody to be told, when they are feeling absolutely terrible in one way or another, "Well, actually, this is

quite a natural thing to happen". You can take that a bit later on, but in the first phase of bereavement I think you would experience that as extremely unhelpful, because it appears to deny the reality of the feelings that you have got at the time. What you want help with, on the whole, is the terrible way that you are feeling. Once you're through that then you can begin to look more calmly, rationally, at life and death and its place and so on, but on the whole it's not a very helpful thing to have thrust on you early on.

It may be difficult for a child to relate the death of a parent to any other sort of loss.

It's obviously partly a question of age. In a young child it is in fact very difficult, in the early stages, to comprehend what the loss is. You can know that Mummy is not there, but it is perhaps difficult for a young child to comprehend that Mummy will not be there tomorrow, or the day after. Adults, however much they may be shocked by it, do at least comprehend what death means; they do comprehend the finality that it represents in those sort of terms. The probability is that young children don't, and they have to keep having this explained to them over and over again, which seems heartless but which is in a sense necessary.

If a child believes that Mummy may come back tomorrow — how should a teacher or parent handle this?

On the whole, with the experience I have had, I think that I am on the side of those who say that with children you should always be honest and as explicit as you can. Indeed, it is most important not to end up giving the child false information out of the desire to ease pain or shock. It can be very difficult, because you may not always know what the child is taking in, or what effect your words and phrases mean. But as a general principle I think I would look for explicit and honest statements about death to children, because on the whole I think that they do in fact cope, but like most

people cope better with the truth than with half-truths. So I would want to convey the information to the child as explicitly and directly as I could.

One gets the impression that death education is something which schools are feeling more and more obliged to take up because the parents are failing. Do you feel that this is something for which parents are, on the whole, to blame?

Well I think I would agree that it is something which people find difficult to talk about freely. I'm not quite sure why I think that is, in the sense that I am not sure whether it is death itself and the implications of death that people are afraid of, or whether it is the experience of bereavement that people are afraid of, or whether it is the experience of dying that people are afraid of; because they are all slightly different aspects of the one thing. Quite a lot of dying these days is a clinical business, in the sense that it is hospital shrouded, and the last days of many dying people are now almost hidden from friends and relatives and are often made as dignified and as painless as they can be. A sort of controlled event. The experience of watching somebody die nowadays is considerably distressing, but it may, in a perfectly proper and humane sense, be a slightly blander experience than it would have been for past generations and very much an experience that takes place somewhere else other than at home. You've had to go into the hospital and see your twenty minutes of it and then go away again, rather than quite so often have it happening at home.

That's a very complicated area, because it's the conflict between offering the most advanced care you can against separating it from family life and being at home and all that this represents. And I think that in many other areas there is a big conflict at the moment in our society, about whether it's better to have slightly less expert care but to have the right context, or whether you sacrifice the context at the cost of having more expert care.

It isn't so difficult to talk about the death of someone who doesn't specially concern you, but it can be embarrassing to have to face someone who has been bereaved.

I would agree entirely that one of the very difficult areas that we find, generally speaking, is the business about how to cope with and speak to people who are recently bereaved. I'm sure that's absolutely right and I'm sure that it's even more powerful with children. In a way I think that it's a bit cyclical, in that one of the problems in knowing how to cope with the bereaved is that we perhaps don't generally talk about death very easily; and therefore when it comes to a crunch moment we don't have the facility that would help us at a difficult time. And one of the reasons which prevents us from talking about death easily is the business of speaking to bereaved people, which we find difficult. I think that the two interact in a way. I think that if in fact we were able to talk about the whole business of death and dying more naturally than we do, more confidently than we do, we could pick our way with bereaved people more certainly.

When you lose somebody, it is such a personal thing that you cannot expect anyone to understand your feelings; perhaps you do need to feel cut off for a time?

Yes, I feel that this is a very important area for adults and children. I think it's very unhelpful to make any approach to people which appears to minimise or to take away the feelings which they have got about their loss. Part of the trouble is that so many well-meant but unthinking attempts to comfort the bereaved take the form of trying to minimise what's happened, as if that would somehow help, whereas quite the contrary is true. Very often what most people want is the right kind of assurance that what they're having is an awful time, that they are feeling terrible. They don't need somebody to go through every inch of that territory with them: just somebody who is in the right way capable of recording the fact

with them, that they are having a very bad time, and is content to leave it at that. That I think is quite supportive. And I think, therefore, that perhaps for many people the establishment of that bridge is quite useful so long as you don't attempt to bring the people across it in one direction.

So I think that it is helpful to make the approach to people and, if you genuinely can, to register that you recognise that they are having a very awful time, but not to take them in any direction from there, because most people work through grief satisfactorily and can cope. They will perhaps cope more comfortably with the right kind of support, but I'm absolutely sure that the wrong kind of thing is to minimise what's happened, or to force the pace of it, and I'm sure that must be true with children too. I think that maybe it's important for a child to feel that it could say something if it wanted to, and that what it had to say would be received, whatever it was. But not that you get a child into a corner with a can opener.

The teacher has to cope not only with the suffering child, but with the attitude of the class toward the child. Should "death education" involve the aspect of coping with others' bereavement? The emphasis in the literature tends to be concentrated on the bereaved person.

I would guess that one of the most positive contributions a teacher could make in the school setting is not so much what is done with the child, but what he or she does with the class, to help the other children grasp a little bit of what the child may be feeling and how it may or

may not want to be approached. Certainly I would agree that both for adults and children one of the considerable strains and pressures on the bereaved is coping with other people's feelings about their bereavement. I'm sure that this is true of children who can perhaps think it through less consciously. I suspect that children probably either have an instinctive reticence with each other about it; in other words they would leave a bereaved classmate alone if they didn't know what to say, or if they did say something it would be much more likely to be direct, spontaneous, and explicit which, I suspect, the child concerned is much more likely to expect and to be able to receive. But I'm sure that a lot of that would go on quite unperceived by adults.

What adults do with children is so much coloured by this very strong drive to protect children, and I think that in this area, and perhaps in others, this drive can get out of hand. In fact we overprotect or we protect in the wrong way, and from my own experience that is particularly so in the area of disguising things for children, by using words and phrases which they take in quite a different sense from what we mean, and makes them more confused. My professional interest in that is the way that adults will often use sentimental and superficial religious expressions to interpret the facts of death, so goodness knows what impressions are in the child's mind. The expression "Jesus has taken your Mummy away" sows all kinds of trouble for us in the future. But there are other equivalents of that sort of remark. You can see that the instinct is to be helpful and not hurt the child, but I think that there are often instances where one needs to be as simple and direct with the child as possible and the child will cope.

Elsewhere in this issue we have taken extracts from some publications on bereavement and children in school. Are there any comments that you would care to make?

I think that my initial reaction would be that I would rather want to see these

recommendations as perhaps things that a teacher might be alert to. It's a bit laid out like a mandatory programme for action. For instance, on page 110, *Promote discussion with positive explanation of the loss. This will help to release tensions.* I don't think that the experience of loss is open to calm disposal by a neat programme of counselling. I don't think it's like that. I think it is something which will work through individual children, as in adults, in a variety of ways. Very often a child will work through it "naturally". There may be points at which it will be helped by the right kind of support or alertness, and I think that I would support what you suggested earlier on, that there may be children who, quite naturally and helpfully to them, do not want to talk about it, particularly at first. They are too busy sorting it out in their own minds. When they have come to terms with that, then they will talk about it, but to have an external pressure to talk about it when they are confused themselves won't necessarily help them a bit. They may in fact feel that they are constantly being pursued to talk about it, and this is just another pressure to cope with, rather than something which is actually going to help them.

On the other hand, it is also stated on page 111 that "teachers can offer greatest sympathy while admitting to the child that loss is something which he has every right to express in intense and overt grief".

Yes, I would support that. I also note that *There is no real comfort to be offered for the loss of a loved one.* I think that's a very important thing, because teachers need to recognise that they are going to feel helpless at a time when they want desperately to help. I think that, like so many of us in that situation, you must come to terms with that, otherwise you will spring in to offer inappropriate support. Such support has nothing to do with the needs of the child, it's to do with your feelings of not being able to cope with the recognition that you can't do anything about it.

I think that with children, as with adults, there are times when you have to accept that people are having a very awful time. It may not actually be very helpful to try and take it away from them, they may have to live through it and it may be the right thing to do. If you have been encouraged to feel that not only death education but the child's experience of death has now become a part of the curriculum, then obviously you will feel that there is a duty to perform, and that you must guide this as you would everything else. I don't think it's that kind of learning at all.