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School-based intervention supporting pupils affected by trauma, bereavement and loss: STAGES (Support, Trauma and Grief – Enabling Schools)

It has long been recognised in Craigie High School that pupils experiencing difficulties with attendance, conflict, anger, behaviour and learning often have the root of these issues connected to unresolved trauma and grief. As a school, we are committed to supporting our pupils to grieve healthily which is based upon the premise that all pupils are entitled to the very best experience in school we can give them. The vision we endorse as part of the STAGES model (Support, Trauma and Grief – Enabling Schools) is that all school pupils have a right to be consulted in their bereavement needs and have a support plan put in place to help them become successful learners. This is very much in keeping with the principles and guidance from the Scottish Government document entitled *Getting It Right For Every Child*, GIRFEC, (2007). STAGES also fits with Craigie High Schools status as a level 1 *Rights Respecting school* and our *Gold Health Promoting School* award, 2011.

School dealing with bereavement

Historically, school staff dealt with bereavement issues, when they became aware of them, usually through an adult somewhere in the system noticing there was a problem or by parents, carers or pupils taking the initiative to inform a member of staff bereavement had occurred. The information would then be taken to the Principal Teacher of Guidance (PTG), who would then refer on to an external agency who may or may not be able to offer support. A survey of multi agency staff employed in the child care sector in Dundee, taken by Barnardo's *Rollercoaster Service* in 2005, showed that staff would refer on to a range of 23 different agencies. In Dundee, we are fortunate

to have the *Rollercoaster Service* which has a specific remit for supporting children and young people affected by trauma, bereavement and loss, but even by referring on to *Rollercoaster*, such was the incidence of bereavement and demand for support there was a waiting time of two years before a pupil could be seen. Given that a number of years already had lapsed since the date of bereavement occurred this was an unacceptable time in the life of a child to wait for support. In the absence of any targeted support, many of these pupils would exhibit concerning behaviour resulting in school exclusions, non-school attendance, self-harming, angry outbursts etc. It felt like we were losing these pupils and they were becoming further isolated and entrenched in their adversity of unresolved grief.

It is useful to remember that bereavement affects all areas of a pupil's life, which can leave them vulnerable to poorer attainments or outcomes. Pupils often report a reduction in the ability to concentrate in class and there have been some cases where it has not been possible for pupils to sit exams. It is a huge challenge for pupils to grieve in a context of learning but it is also very challenging for staff whose responsibility it is to teach.

The STAGES model

By recognising the unmanageable waiting times and requests for bereavement support it was clear a more strategic approach was required to utilise existing human resources across whole school communities as well as building upon existing policies, guidance and procedures. For example, the revised Education (Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2007 where it recognises bereavement, as an

additional support need, and therefore there should be provision to make a plan of support. This could easily fit with GIRFEC and any number of pastoral care guidelines for staff to follow. The STAGES model was conceived initially by *Barnardo's Rollercoaster* then developed further in partnership with Dundee City Council Education Department. The partnership then extended to include the whole of Dundee City Council's other Departments and Health Services located within Dundee City. The STAGES model works by training and supporting school based and non-school-based staff to support pupils through the stages of grief and trauma.

One success criterion for STAGES was that families would feel supported throughout the child's school career and that staff would feel supported in their capacity to respond through training, consultations and working in partnership with a multi-agency team. The programme is delivered in conjunction with our Partner Agencies of Barnardo's, Dundee Education Psychology Service and Primary Mental Health team. The Craigie school cluster was selected as a Pilot area and a plan for implementing STAGES was agreed between the Headteachers of Craigie High School and associated feeder Primaries with Barnardo's being the main coordinator/contact.

The Pilot Project: STAGES at work

The first phase of STAGES was to consult with the school community - providing information to staff, pupils and parents and to identify the incidence of bereavement amongst the pupil population. At the same time training was provided to all school staff with specialised training being given to staff who volunteered to become Bereavement Support Volunteers (BSV).

Staff were asked to meet with a pupil to find out what their bereavement needs were and put these into a Bereavement Support Plan. Staff would then meet with the pupil regularly and work with them to talk through the issues facing them. A crucial means of establishing the pupil's desired outcomes is the use of solution focussed approaches to bereavement. A Bereavement Support Plan is created by the pupil with the support of the BSV where the pupil is able to indicate how they are affected by grief and trauma and what the steps to recovery will be. The session is followed up by

a therapeutic letter summarising the meeting which is typed up by the BSV then passed to the pupils where they are encouraged to share with their carers. Scales are used to produce evaluation of the work by recording start and progress points in relation to a range of factors around grief. The BS Plan becomes a record of the progress of the pupil. The worker from *Rollercoaster* initially provided support to staff through the first few sessions with pupils modelling the type of discussions and therapeutic techniques useful to productive meetings. Following this the staff then could contact Steve Sweeney (*Rollercoaster*) whenever they felt they needed some additional support.

A programme of continuing professional development for staff was included in the school CPD programme. New staff were given the same input so that all staff have the same level of knowledge and all staff have the opportunity to become a BSV.

We are currently working with 40 pupils and all are being supported by a member of staff in school. The level of support varies according to the need of the pupil. A typical response to school finding out that a pupil has become bereaved is for the PTG to contact home, make an offer of a Bereavement Support Volunteer and then a programme of support put in place. Steve Sweeney from *Rollercoaster* will work 1:1 with the BSV to support them through the initial meetings until they have developed confidence to continue with the pupil by themselves. All staff are given information about the process and then offered the opportunity to become a volunteer where more specialised support and training will be given.

The project itself is moving forward with its own momentum and changes have occurred from the original plan. Constant evaluation and discussions with *Rollercoaster* have resulted in an evolving programme and this year a development has been the inclusion of Barnardo's to do a basic awareness session of grief and trauma through the PSHE programme to all pupils in the school. Contact is then made with the home of all pupils where parents and pupils are given the opportunity to opt into support.

Training

Training is now an integral part of the development of staff in Partner Agencies eg SCSS, Xplore and other agencies who support

our young people. It is important that all staff who work with pupils have the same training and where additional support is needed then the external partner are often the one in the best position to support the young person.

Safeguarding is a key message given in training to staff. Being able to develop a mindful awareness of the personal issues we each bring to our practice should help to inform our responses and interactions with pupil's who are bereaved. An interesting fact that has been thrown up is that in supporting young people staff have realised that they themselves have some unresolved issues surrounding their own bereavement experiences and this has led to support being offered to the staff. In acknowledging these issues, we are leading towards a happier workforce who are in a better position to support the pupils. So there is now a circular system, which not only provides a service for the child but also makes provision to support the staff who support the child.

Barnardo's are part of our Community Learning Partners who meet regularly to discuss the support we offer within our school community. A main focus for the future is that of sustainability and having a process in place which be delivered within the school community.

Knowledge

Staff and pupils are increasing their knowledge of the symptoms of grief and trauma and the technical aspects of how this comes into play. It could be argued this is even in keeping with the curriculum for excellence – where, for example, linking the use of biology and how the body and brain in particular has evolved and functions, and how this relates to behaviour within systems - all contributes to a better shared understanding of how we cope and manage the process of grief. There are knock-on effects for staff who are not BSVs but who have to achieve success in helping pupils learn. BSVs are now able to communicate with teaching staff about individual pupils who are bereaved and in what ways they can be supported in class to maximise learning. The pupils themselves are given strategies for recognising their own coping styles and how they can begin to self soothe in a classroom environment.

An important aspect of the work of STAGES is to help pupils become aware of what grief is. Almost 100% of pupils asked if they know what

grief is say they do not know. An explanation of grief is given and the accompanying message that grief is normal. This is a huge relief to many pupils who previously thought they were “going off their heads.” There is also an emphasis highlighted in training with regards to child development and how grief has to be revisited with each sequential stage as it brings new meaning with the new cognitive abilities of the child. For example, a young person of 14 years may have experienced their loss at age 6 and has been carrying around the belief that the death was somehow their fault. This comes from the magical and egocentric stage of development that the world centres round the child and somehow they are the cause of all events. The 14-year-old may need to connect with the 6-year-old child within to help resolve the matter of guilt and self blame. This can be achieved by exploring the facts about a death and have conversations about cause and effect. Where there are clearly cases rooted in far deeper traumatic histories, the STAGES consultant to each BSV will engage in a parallel plan where the more in-depth therapeutic work takes place out with school but the day-to-day support takes place in school.

Statistics

Statistics are compiled so that we can check the involvement of ethnic minorities, LAC etc accessing the support. These have been used to evaluate the success of the Pilot Project and there are moves to roll STAGES out to other schools across our own and neighbouring authorities. In fact some of our staff and pupils have been asked to speak at Conferences etc. Pupils are actively involved in the process. Pupils Council views are sought, pupils groups produce leaflets, posters etc. Pupils' comments (following an in-school evaluation) indicate the strength of feeling. A larger scale evaluation in the school is part of our future planning.

Cluster approach

The school works closely in developing a cluster approach and links with Primary schools form part of our transition planning where pupils who are receiving support in primary are allocated a supporter for their 2-day transition days so that they know the process will continue.

Work with the local college to ensure that they are notified (with the pupil's permission) that a pupil has been receiving the support and

that the guidance structure in college will offer bereavement support to the pupil if they wish to continue. The BS Plan belongs to the pupil and encouraged to see it as a working document recording their feelings. It also contains information relating to the grief curve.

S6 pupils are being given one day training programme on supporting younger pupils with bereavement issues so that they can become peer mentors and work individually or alongside staff to support some younger pupils with their issues and how to recognise. Group based interventions are being explored as a way of supporting young people. These sessions will be delivered by a mix of in school staff, Peer Supporters and external agency support.

Following the input from *Rollercoaster* and the PTG, it was identified that a particular class this year, who are experiencing difficulties across the school, had up to eight pupils who had experienced bereavement (some of them multiple bereavements in a short period of time). That knowledge put a different light on their issues across the school and specific interventions have been initiated to support them. One of the biggest challenges is to change the perception of death and encourage pupils to be able to speak to their parents about this matter.

The Impact of STAGES

Reduced exclusions for at least two pupils who were experience severe anger responses resulting in many instances of insolent and offensive behaviour (a key category for exclusions).

Improved attendance of just over 10% for almost all of the pupils who were experiencing attendance problems.

It is interesting that our culture shies away from death more than anything else. In addressing this and being open about it, our

pupils know that dying is a normal part of life and that everyone will experience it. It is how we handle the grief that is important.

Pupils know we care. Some of the comments from pupils indicate that this was the most telling factor. Raising awareness amongst staff means that staff are perhaps more tolerant of some of the symptoms being displayed by pupils.

However, the main focus now is towards sustainability and how the programme can be progressed in schools.

Evaluation of the Pilot Project

STAGES is being evaluated by Dundee University (Jindal-Snape & Sweeney, 2011), and initial evaluations show an improved awareness, confidence and skills and practice among participating staff. Young people are also reporting the positive outcomes from the support available in school as a result of the staff development and training.

Further reading

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Jindal-Snape, D. & Sweeney, S. (2011). *Professionals' beliefs and training needs. Dundee: Report for STAGES (Support: Trauma And Grief-Enabling Schools) pilot project monitoring group*. Dundee University and Barnardo's Scotland.

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