

Bereavement Counseling: A Dilemma for School Counselors?

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ABSTRACT The paper sought to establish the challenges faced by counselors as they offer bereavement counseling 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 counselors from two secondary schools as they offered bereavement counseling to parentally bereaved learners. A multiple case study design was adopted for this study. The paper revealed that counselors 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, and lack of expertise in assisting bereaved learners. As such, the paper concludes that counselors face challenges in counseling bereaved children in the selected schools and that learners do not get adequate bereavement counseling as counselors lack confidence in carrying out their counseling duties. Hence, the paper recommends that schools equip counselors with additional bereavement counseling skills so that they can implement it more effectively.

INTRODUCTION

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

School Bereavement Counseling in Perspective

Postvention is an intervention rendered after a profound loss such as death of a parent. School counseling, as a postvention strategy, includes all the activities and support that help with the distressing after effects among survivors of profound loss experiences (Corr and Balk 1996; Shumba 2012), for instance, the provision of basic food, clothing and counseling. The main goal of postvention programs is to maximize resilience, reduce dangers and to change a situation that is unsafe 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 organizations such as schools, to implement postvention plans to assist children at risk (Auman 2007). Thus, school counseling is a component of the wide range of postvention activities.

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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 well-being". Counseling as postvention, and thus helps children work through their grief so that they can cope with other pressures such as schoolwork. Auman (2007) also cites the school as the first place where the behavioral 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). The primary purpose of counseling 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 remedy for psychological health symptoms and complications (Carter 2014:1). This calls for educators' or counselors' support and the need for them to be trained to identify bereaved children's postvention counseling needs.

Furthermore, of key importance is that researchers and school counselors acknowledge that children who are parentally bereaved show signs of strength as well as risk factors. These factors shed light on the approaches and mediations that can be used by counselors in

schools. School counselors must take cognizance of and strengthen the grief-stricken children's tenacity as this helps them cope with grief (Eppler 2008). Counselors thus, need to be acquainted with methods of counseling children who are bereaved.

Challenges Faced by Counselors in Implementing Bereavement Counseling

Counselors face various challenges in implementing school bereavement counseling. Some of the challenges are discussed below.

The school-based counselor's role is not clearly defined in most setups and has three main domains, namely, academic, career and personal/social. This is evidenced by the American Counseling Association (1999) in Free Library.com (2010), which suggests that in America, the school-based counselors provide individual counseling, conduct classroom guidance interventions, consult with parents, are developmental specialists in the school and are 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 counselor thus faces major differences in those who seek counseling. Such a circumstance requires the counselor to be culturally versatile so as to be effective in dealing with children's needs (Lee, 2001 in Free Library.com 2010).

School counselors and teachers often succumb to triggers, which are a result of their past experiences. Capewell and Beattie (1996:51) in Reid (2002) refer to this as "transference", which is a "form of projection in which feelings from the past are unconsciously awoken within the listener". Hence, in the researchers' view, when a pupil loses a parent it can destabilize the teacher involved in supporting the child because caregivers of bereaved children are more prone to having their own past fears rekindled. Prior knowledge of triggers equips counselors 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 pre-judgments and prevailing understanding of phenomena (Moustakas 1994) and "let the phenomena speak for themselves unadulterated by our preconcep-

tions" (Gray 2005:21) to allow it to show itself so that new meanings can emerge. Failure to derole can affect the counseling process retrogressively. Counselors can succumb to stress and other psychosomatic symptoms.

Individual counseling requires several sessions (Child and Family Centre 2007; CONNECT 1, 2004), and as a result, the counselor needs adequate time to deal with each individual case. However, this might cause conflict in time allocation.

School counselors are inundated with heavy caseloads, as their client base is huge (Lohan 2006; Van Dyk 2008). It is not only bounded by the school fence but goes beyond to include parents, teachers, caregivers and other community members. Counselors may suffer from burn-out (Van Dyk 2008). Due to high levels of bereavement as a result of HIV and AIDS, many orphaned children are referred to counseling in schools, and consequently, schools offering such counseling services tend to be overstretched beyond their capacity (Shumba, 2012). Service delivery can be compromised by the heavy caseloads in a bid to save time. For example, a counselor can fail to give proper diagnoses. One wonders if such incidents occur in the secondary schools in Harare.

Van Dyk (2008) contends that counselors and educators are sometimes not prepared for the deaths of parents. In his study, Van Dyk (2008) postulates that counselors commented that they were "not used to the client's, school child's or student's parents dying" (Van Dyk 2008:315). Counselors 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 counselor 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 counseling 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 counseling of bereaved children. Furthermore, as Yates et al. (1996) put it, teachers in initial and continuing training need training in counseling. In Zimbabwe Teacher's colleges, programs are in place to train teachers in initial training for some basic

counseling 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 counseling. In Namibia, teachers in initial training at the University of Namibia have modules involving counseling, which aim to introduce or sensitize them on issues relating to counseling (Mushaandja et al. 2013).

There seems to be a general view that some schools do not have bereavement school policies. In a study by Yates et al. (1996) in Reid (2002), seventy percent of surveyed teachers had no policy on teaching about loss and bereavement in classrooms. When confronted by a bereaved child, the teacher would be in a quandary. Resources are needed to empower teachers or counselors so that the bereaved child can be assisted. The current study aimed to establish whether Harare Secondary 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 counselors in counseling bereaved learners.

Design

The study adopted a multiple case study design of four selected secondary school counselors from two secondary schools. The participants were purposively selected. These multiple cases were selected as they were considered to be laden with relevant information (Johnson and Christensen 2012; Mertens 2010). The four counselors were selected because they were carriers of information on counseling of bereaved children as they were in continuous interaction with the devastated secondary school children. The school counselors 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 and John 2011:13; Gerring 2007:211), "case selection" and "case description" (Denzin and Lincoln 2003: 450). In support, 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 the case selection that is described below. The researchers purposively selected the four cases for this study, as they judged them to be best suited for the research purpose (Maxfield and 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 counselors were selected due to their interaction with the bereaved learners in school.

Data Collection

In-depth interviewing was used for data collection in order to capture the counselors' experiences of counseling 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 counselors.

Data Analysis

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

Issues of Rigor in Qualitative Research

In order to guarantee rigor in this study, the researcher captured data using mechanical recorders so that it is unadulterated. Verbatim accounts of the respondents were used so as to ensure credibility of data. Reflexivity as well as bracketing were also employed so as to capture untainted data from the respondents (Shumba and Moyo 2014).

Ethical Issues

The researchers sought permission to carry out the study from the Ministry of Education, Sport, Arts and Culture Head Office, Harare Provincial Office, District Education Office and Secondary School heads. The school heads acted

as gatekeepers for the children. The researchers used codes for schools and participants to assure them anonymity and confidentiality. Counselors were given assurance that the data would be used only for research purposes. Data was recorded using tape recorders with the consent of participants.

FINDINGS

Respondents in the study were identified using codes. Counselors 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 counselors in both schools were teachers who had other teaching responsibilities other than providing counseling services. When asked whether they had counseling qualifications, the following responses were provided.

C1M: I have a Certificate in Education. Currently, I am simply a Justice for Children Trust Coordinator, with no professional counseling qualifications.

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

C1LM: I have a Graduate Certificate in Education.

C2LM: I am a bearer of Bachelor of Science Honors in Counseling Degree.

Of the four counselors, two had counseling qualifications. Although C1M held a Certificate in Education, which is a teaching qualification, she did not have any counseling qualification. According to her, she was just a coordinator for the Justice for Children Trust. One wonders whether she had the requisite capacity and skills to counsel bereaved children. Qualifications seem to be one snag some "school counselors" had.

Counseling Children with Other Basic Needs

All four school counselors interviewed indicated that they faced many challenges in counseling bereaved children. Some of the challenges highlighted include convincing pupils to persevere against the children's lack of basic sub-

sistence materials such as food, uniforms and shelter. For example, counselor C2LM felt that she would not be doing enough to counsel them emotionally when their other needs such as physiological ones were not met.

Counseling Abused Children

Counselor C1LM also claimed to be facing other challenges, such as counseling abused and bereaved children, as caregivers are generally not forthcoming to assist them and solutions to their plight are generally limited. Her claims were that:

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

The issue of abuse seemed to be a common feature in counseling bereaved children, as mentioned by the counselors. However, no child raised the issue. C2LM also indicated that she sometimes had challenges in counseling abused bereaved children (girls) as they were in some instances 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) (Shumba and Moyo 2014:151).

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

Failure to Adjust After Bereavement

The school counselor also faces a dilemma in dealing with bereaved children as the children fail to adjust to their bereavement and the choices that will be made for them. When they are abused no immediate solutions are proffered. C1LM had this to say:

C1LM: 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 counselor felt there were anomalies in the way bereaved children were treated but had no means of helping or changing the situation.

Counseling 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, counseling went beyond the learner to the school children. C2LM states,

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

This scenario indicates that school counseling goes beyond the boundary of the school and should cater even for the other stakeholders around the child, such as parents. Therefore, the counselors 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 following captions.

C1LM: 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 (Shumba 2012: 190; Shumba and Moyo 2014).

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 counseled and she is now living positively.

From the above statements it is evident that counselors encounter challenges, as they have to deal with not only bereavement counseling but also other problems such as sexual abuse, extend family issues, HIV and AIDS and extend their services to providing parental counseling and advice. Hence, their roles are not well defined and are confined to the school and the learners only.

Fear of Shortcomings by Counselors

Data also indicates that the counselors have concern and some anxiety over their shortcomings in terms of providing counseling 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 sympathize with them by helping them financially (Shumba 2012).

The fear of failing to reach out to them financially cripples feelings of identifying with them. That is, whenever I am counseling 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 through BEAM, which is facility that is not really accessible at the secondary school level (C2M).

These two seem to have concerns that they might fail to help the bereaved children. They can talk to them and encourage them, but they feel it is more than counseling that these children need, they need money and unconditional love that cannot be obtained from strangers. This could imply that the role of the counselors should go beyond mere talk but to include other facets that would make the bereaved child emotionally, socially, physically and mentally healthy. The Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM), a government fund that assists children facing financial difficulties with school fees, is not helping the secondary school learners who are the concern for this current research.

Role Conflict

One counselor intoned that there was lack of time and a role conflict to concentrate on counseling. She confided that,

There is generally no time for me to have one-to-one sessions with bereaved children. I have my own workload, which includes teaching many classes and marking piles and piles of books. I have to do counseling as and when I am free from my other duties. (C1M)

From C1M's comment, one can note that the counselor, who is a full-time teacher, regards the counseling role as a part-time assignment that does not take precedence over her teaching role. The researchers question the counselor's commitment to counseling of bereaved learners who are in dire need of this service to enhance their mental health.

Failure to Identify Bereaved Learners

Another challenge that counselors face was brought to light by C2LM when she intoned that,

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 misbehavior or is frequently absent or has even dropped out of school. This is unfortunate. As counselors we need to know these things early so that we can assist the learners (C2LM).

The counselor 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-counselor suggests that information on bereavement just "filters" to them. This is an unhealthy situation in a school, as children are left 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 can be curtailed if there is a proper reporting and identification policy on bereavement.

Lack of Support from Colleagues

Another issue raised in the interview was lack of support by the counselor'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 counselor saw a contradiction in the way counseling should be done and what colleagues viewed as counseling. One colleague actually advocated that the counselor should not 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.

In summary, the data above reflects that there is lack of synchronization in the delivery of services in the two schools visited as the counselors do not receive support from colleagues, there is lack of financial resources and this constrains service delivery, there is lack of confidence in dealing with these children, and there is lack of individualized attention due to shortage of time for more one-to-one meetings and dealing with sensitive issues that did not enjoy prompt or positive response.

DISCUSSION

Many challenges on counseling bereaved children emerged in literature but the data shows that there are extensions to it (Lohan 2006; Van Dyk 2008; Weston 2010; Yates et al. 1996). Data revealed that some of the school counselors interviewed, though trained in counseling, 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 et al. (2002:55) contend that,

School counselors deal routinely with complicated situations in which students have acute counseling needs, including cases of severe depression, suicidal ideation, pregnancy, substance abuse, school violence and child abuse. To respond to these needs, counselors must have both strong clinical skills and a keen awareness of the legal and ethical ramifications of any action they may take or fail to take.

This could imply that whatever action the counselor takes, he/she must take cognizance of the ethical issues around it. However, this problem can be compounded by the fact that over and above gazette ethical standards, there might be other ethical issues and standards that are context specific with culture and other stat-

utory laws playing a part in influencing them. Hence, there is a need for schools to make an assessment of cultural and ethical issues that either impair or promote their counseling service provision. Holland (2001) indicates that although the issue of childhood bereavement is rated as very high in the Hull and Humberside schools in the United Kingdom, some counselors lacked skills to support bereaved children. This signals a training gap in these schools and this scenario also signals the same gap in the training of counselors in the Harare secondary schools in the current study as some counselors indicated anxiety in counseling boys or learners with sensitive issues. What appears to be peculiar is the uncertainty shown by the counselors, which can imply that bereaved children may be left to find their own means of dealing with their bereavement. The unease points to the need for skills for school counselors. Lessons can be learnt from the Namibian situation where counselors are encouraged to join counseling organizations so that they keep abreast with the changes in the society (Mushaandja et al. 2013).

The counselors also expressed that there is lack of support from colleagues. This need for support from colleagues is also emphasized by Tatar (2009), as it would make the job of the school counselor lighter (Shumba and Moyo 2014). Other findings include lack of financial resources to assist orphaned children, lack of individualized attention due to shortage of time and space for more one-to-one confidential sessions, and slow responses to reported abuse cases. There is 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 cases of abuse. He found that some reported cases of abuse are unceremoniously dropped, especially 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 counseled so as to survive in a social milieu full of callousness?

CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that counselors face many challenges in counseling the bereaved learners in the selected secondary schools and

that the learners do not get adequate bereavement counseling as the counselors are not confident enough to conduct it. Another conclusion is that there cannot be a standard practice for counseling bereaved learners as their problems are varied and need individual treatment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends the following.

- ♦ Policies must be crafted for proper implementation of bereavement counseling in schools. There is need for crafting and institutionalization of identification policies and reporting policies so that schools have proper and secure databases with information on bereaved learners that can be accessed by counselors.
- ♦ The study also recommends that there should be a free information flow in the school with all stakeholders being conscious of the need for open communication so that counselors can get information on bereaved learners so as to help retain them in school and at the same time help them adjust to their predicament. 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. Children, staff, and parents and guardians should be made aware of referral options around them.
- ♦ Schools ought to engage in capacity building of their counselors 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 counseling to alleviate the phobia that engulfs counselors when dealing with bereaved children. Furthermore, counseling 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 cognizance of a bereaved learner's dire need of bereavement support. Serious consideration should be given on inclusion of bereavement issues in curricu-

lum. Inclusion can be in the form of timetabling of Guidance and Counseling, teaching loss awareness across the curriculum, or death studies and death education. This might prepare both learners and counselors 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 program and avoid tissue rejection.

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

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