

Resurgence of feelings phenomenon

School personnel need to be aware how the impact of past loss experiences, particularly those connected with their professional lives, can be triggered by teaching about loss and grief, and by supporting grieving students. Teachers have been recognised as 'disenfranchised grievers'. Disenfranchised grief is what people experience when they incur a loss that is not, or cannot be, openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported. Disenfranchised grief of teachers may be created by personal-professional duality:

- teachers' need to be 'human'
- teachers' professional beliefs
- duty of care for young people.

There are three triggers for disenfranchised grief:

- the relationship with the person is not recognised
- the loss is not recognised
- society does not give the person that role.

For school personnel, the phenomena occurs because teaching is a profession based on human interactions where emotional connections are made. There exists the belief among teachers that you have to hide your emotions to manage students or a class. Yet if something traumatic occurs, it may involve intense emotional responses from students.

Being affected by grief may influence teachers' views of themselves as competent professionals. Teachers may believe that they have to set an example of 'coping' by controlling situations and their emotions, for example, by not expressing or acknowledging their grief.

The implications for school communities are:

- the need to provide a supportive structure in the workplace
- that appropriate debriefing is offered to staff
- acknowledging that the death of a student could be a teacher's most feared loss ('it could be my child').

Thoughts and feelings from previous losses can be triggered by current loss experiences and discussions about loss. Sometimes people are conscious of this connection, but at other times it can be at a subconscious level, particularly if the loss was traumatic or at an earlier developmental age. The classroom teacher may be alerted to these instances by what appears to be an 'overreaction' to an event or discussion. For example, an adolescent's first broken love affair could trigger fears of abandonment, which was previously experienced when this person's parents separated years before. Teachers will need to follow up on these reactions, either seeking information from other staff or talking with the student or the caregivers. Any of these may be followed up by a referral to the school counsellor / psychologist.

How to respond to an upset child

It is possible that students may get upset during a lesson about grief. Setting up a procedure to manage such an occurrence needs to be done before lessons are taught. The class should be informed at the beginning of the lesson:

'If anyone feels upset or sad about the things we discuss and does not want to stay in the classroom, you may go to [name a safe place that has already been arranged]'. Follow-up with the student after the lesson.