

Chapter 7

Assisting Teachers With Grieving Students: Strategies for School Counselors

Kimberly Tharpe

Azusa Pacific University, USA

ABSTRACT

The educational setting has provided students with supports in the event of emotional struggles such as grief. Teachers are often the first individual a student seeks for support and some understanding. This chapter involves dividing the content into logical, structured sections that guide educators and counselors through understanding the role of the school, school counselors and teachers when effectively assisting grieving students. Issues of grief associated with the impact of COVID and the school will be addressed. A brief theoretical background examining relational developmental systems (RDS) metatheory as a conceptual framework will be discussed understanding the outcomes of school relationship and connectivity. Additionally, specific strategies for school counselors will be provided, to utilize when assisting teachers with grieving students.

INTRODUCTION TO UNDERSTANDING GRIEF IN THE EDUCATION SETTING

Experiencing the death of a loved one or caregiver is one of the most distressing and commonly reported traumas experienced by school-aged youth (Alvis et al., 2022; Linder et al., 2022). Data from 2015 shows that approximately 140 minors worldwide experienced parental death (Alvis et al., 2022). Estimates indicated that over 6% of school-aged children in the U.S. would experience parental death before

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Assisting Teachers With Grieving Students

the age of 18 (Alvis et al., 2022). These statistics rose during COVID-19 (Tempski et al., 2020). Some racial minorities, such as Black and Hispanic students, experience grief at a higher rate than White students. The issue of bereavement for school-aged children is essential because grief, and especially unaddressed grief, is associated with an array of mental and behavioral health issues that can compromise learning and educational outcomes, including but not limited to depression, maladaptive social behaviors, developmental impairment, suicidal ideation, poor academic outcomes, and posttraumatic stress symptoms (Alvis et al., 2022). Therefore, understanding grief, identifying grief-related symptoms, and supporting students through the grieving process are critical skills for educators. Educators, including teachers and school counselors, serve a crucial role in cultivating a supportive and empathetic learning environment for students who are grieving the loss of a caregiver or loved one so that students can thrive emotionally, socially, and academically.

Grief is a multifaceted experience encompassing psychological, emotional, and cultural domains. This chapter offers aspiring school counselors an empirical exploration of the role of schools and supporting teachers with strategies for working with grieving students. Key concepts related to grief in the context of education, and a description of the theoretical underpinnings of the relational developmental systems meta theory and its practical applications to strategies school counselors can leverage. An exploration of the multidimensionality of grief, including psychological, emotional, and cultural components will also be presented. The chapter concludes by discussing practical strategies and tips for school counselors based on three case studies as well as a discussion of the impacts of COVID-19 on grief in the context of education.

Understanding Grief

Each young person's reaction to grief is different, depending upon a variety of factors, such as ongoing developmental processes, disposition, and cultural context. Because children and adolescents depend significantly on adults in their immediate environment for support in navigating the grieving process of a parent or adult caregiver, teachers, and school counselors serve a critical role in supporting students through this process and mitigating the potential development of long-term maladaptive mental, emotional, or behavioral consequences (Alvis et al., 2022). According to the American Psychological Association, grief is described as the experience of emotional pain, discomfort, or anguish after a loss. This discomfort may be characterized by feelings of separation anxiety, psychological distress, using the restroom on themselves, apprehension toward future events, and sometimes, a sense of confusion (APA, 2022). Addressing grief in an educational setting requires acute sensitivity and understanding of the potential psychological and emotional

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