

Bereavement: Challenges and Opportunities for Schools

Mary F. Lappin

6

Research Example: A Personal Account of Bereavement

This autobiographical essay (part of the University of Michigan's Child Bereavement Project) was written by Ellen Waisanen (aged 16) about the death of her father. The essay is a poignant, first-person account of an adolescent's crushing sense of loss, her deep yearning for her father and her frustration with her peers who try to understand how she is feeling, but fail: 'I try to share with my friends and tell them about him, but they all either get uncomfortable, letting their eyes wander everywhere but to me, giving noncommittal responses and shifting their weight from one foot to another about sixty times a minute; or they think it means I'm all depressed and decide to come and shower their pity on me. God, it drives me nuts' (p. 292). Movingly, Ellen recounts her visits to see her father in hospital and recounts his struggle to communicate with her as the cancer and the side-effects of the treatment rendered his body almost unrecognizable. This is a personal, heart-wrenching story of love, of a daughter realizing the depth of love that her father felt for her and now realizing just how much she loved and continues to love her father, even after his death. It is also a reminder of just how profound and enduring the pain of parental loss can be for bereaved young people, struggling to understand their own emotions, and adapting to a world which is empty of the physical presence of a loved one, but full of often unexpected reminders of past connections.

Reference

Waisanen, E. M. (2004), 'Daddy'. *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, 9(4), 291–8.

Research Example: Social Networking and Bereavement

This study explores how the use of social networking sites (such as Facebook or MySpace) facilitates adolescent bereavement following the death of a peer. The research focused on 20 social networking profiles of adolescents who had died suddenly between 2005 and 2007. Researchers collected their data by reading the comments posted posthumously on the profile sites in the months following the death of the peer. The results were then analysed in light of research into adolescent grieving and coping strategies. It was noted that, when comments were posted, they were almost exclusively addressed directly to the peer who had died, rather than to other site users. Comments varied and included reminiscing about shared experiences in the past, updates about what had happened since the peer's death, discussion of the bereavement process and a range of emotional commentaries such as expressions of depression ('I am hurting and the sad part is no one can see it'), anger ('I hate the fact that u did this to yourself'), guilt ('It kills me that you didn't try to talk to me man') and even humour ('I know that your looking down and thankin god that you don't have to sit through 90 minutes of Trigonometry! Lol'). For most, the comments represented a way of coping with their loss and of maintaining a relationship with the peer, thus suggesting that online social networking sites can support the grieving process by allowing young people to reflect back on their relationship with the deceased and to express their emotions freely and often very powerfully.

Reference

Williams, A. L. and Merten, M. J. (2009), 'Adolescents' online social networking following the death of a peer'. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 24(1), 67–90.