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Separation and Divorce in the Primary School: A critical consideration of the nature, incidence and impact on children, and possible school responses, both proactive and reactive

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Abstract

Many primary school children have to deal with parental separation and divorce. Though some argue it's a private family matter, the contact that teachers have with pupils places them in an ideal position to provide support through this difficult time. This article proposes proactive and reactive strategies that schools can employ to prepare children with the resilience to cope with and overcome these traumatic events.

Introduction

In the past, many teachers viewed their role primarily in terms of promoting academic attainment (Cohen and Garner, 1967); though educators soon recognised '...the need to provide support for the non-academic welfare of the[ir] pupils' (Purdy, 2013, p. 10). Initially attitudes to this pastoral element of school were ambivalent, and in many instances, the focus on academic attainment was still seen to dominate (Charlton and David, 2002). However, this imbalance has since changed, with pastoral care now classified as one of the main tasks of school (Dowling and Elliott, 2012). Indeed, Furedi (2009) reports that many teachers now recognise this aspect of school to be a central aspect of their role. This paper will explore a particular pastoral care issue that many schools currently have to deal with: parental separation and divorce. Particular attention will be paid to the impact this can have on children and the ways in which schools can respond.

Nature and incidence

Separation refers to the process when two adults decide to end their relationship and live apart, while divorce denotes, more specifically, the process of ending a marriage (Childline, 2016). Separation and divorce can be a challenging and upsetting time for all those involved (NSPCC, 2016); in fact, Hall (2007) regards it as 'one of the most painful and distressing events that anyone can experience' (p.19).

The decision to end a relationship or marriage is a difficult one, but when children are involved, feelings can often be magnified, making it particularly difficult (Menendez-Aponte, 2014) and stressful (Mahony *et al.*, 2015). In the past it was deemed unthinkable for divorce to occur when children were involved (Popenoe, 1993). Although some parents still agree with this, fearing that it would cause great harm to their children (Zastrow, 2016), others believe it may help them, perhaps because of reduced parental conflict (Arkes, 2015). Despite these differing opinions, the reality is that divorce involving children does happen (Young Minds, 2016).

The incidence of divorce has changed significantly over the years, with an overall increase in the number of divorces recorded in the Western world in the last 150 years (Hall and Purdy, 2013). In Northern Ireland (N.I.) during the 1970s, the number of divorces was around 500 per year, but within the next decade this figure had tripled (NISRA, 2010). Figures continued to rise up until 2007, but since then they have begun to fall, with a decrease of almost 19% in the period 2007-2015 (NISRA, 2016).

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Not surprisingly, given the fall in divorce, the number of children affected by divorce has also declined. In the period 2006-2015, the number of children under sixteen affected by divorce fell by almost 13% (NISRA 2007; NISRA, 2015a). Although, initially, these figures may seem pleasing, Relate (2016) acknowledges that we must not overhype the statistics as the number of marriages occurring in N.I also fell within this period (NISRA, 2015b). Moreover, Santín and Sicilia (2016) reported a similar decline in Spain, highlighting that this trend is not exclusive to N.I. While the fall in marriages is not as significant as the drop in divorces, it highlights the change in family structures. ONS (2016) further highlights this change noting that cohabiting couples are becoming the fastest growing family type in the UK. What is problematic is that the figures published by NISRA fail to acknowledge such families, thereby ignoring the children affected annually by the separation of their unmarried parents. If the statistics included the number of children affected by separation and divorce, they could arguably be more significant.

For those parents who decide to end their relationship or marriage, one of the biggest difficulties they face is sharing the news with their children (Baird, 2011; Dосkow, 2016). Hawthorne *et al.* (2003) stress the importance of communicating this news to children despite its difficulties. While parents of younger children may believe their child will be unable to understand, parents of older children sometimes believe that they are mature enough to see for themselves what is happening (Kalter, 2006). Consequently, many parents fail to discuss the situation with their children, which, unknowingly to them is one of the worst decisions they could make. Taylor and Andrews (2009) state that it is crucial parents are honest with their children so they don't exacerbate the situation in their children's minds. Moreover, Dосkow (2016) notes that a number of children often blame themselves for their parents' situation so it is important that parents reassure children that this is not the case.

The impact of separation and divorce on children and young people

One of the major difficulties that separation and divorce can bring to children is the 'dramatic change in family life as they have known it' (Berstein, 2002, p.125). Croly (2013) identifies the losses associated with parental separation, explaining how children lose the family structure they once had, regular contact with one of their parents and the loving relationship once shared between their parents. As a result of these losses, children can often enter the process of grieving (Wood, 2008), a process more commonly associated with death. Although, the loss associated with death could arguably be regarded as greater, because of its permanency, Weiner-Davis (1992) and Moss (2009) suggest that for some children death can be easier to accept than divorce. Consequently, the impact separation and divorce can have on children should not be underestimated.

Dealing with the mixture of emotions associated with grief and learning to adjust to new family arrangements can affect a child's concentration and have a negative impact on their school activities (Bernstein, 2002). Having to pack and repack bags to visit each parent (Butler *et al.*, 2002) and, in some instances, having to undertake more household tasks (Riggio, 2004) can result in tiredness, which can also negatively affect school work. Furthermore, Carlile (1991) notes that children of divorce are more likely to be absent from school, bringing with it its own problems. In other children, however, school can provide a suitable distraction from their family circumstances (Hogan *et al.*, 2002), meaning not all children will experience a drop in their academic performance.

A child's behaviour can also be impacted by parental separation or divorce. As a result of the separation, children can often feel insecure and have low self-esteem (Rodgers and Pryor, 1998). This can cause children to behave like they are much younger (Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2016), by demonstrating regressive behaviours such as bedwetting, clinginess and nightmares (Dowling and Elliott, 2012). For other children, the intense feeling of anger they experience can cause 'acting out' behaviours (Bernstein, 2002). This can be shown through shouting and aggressiveness towards

parents or siblings (Dowling and Elliott, 2012), but can be more subtle such as a general moodiness (Hall, 2007). For older children, they may engage in more risk taking behaviours through for example, alcohol consumption (Jeynes, 2001) or becoming sexually active younger than their peers from intact families (Rodger and Pryor, 1998). In contrast, some children may respond to the family breakup by behaving in an impeccable way and becoming 'the perfect child' (Hall, 2007, p.76). What is clear from this evidence is that there is no single or universal response to parental separation.

In the longer term, Gruber (2004) reports that children of divorced parents were found to be less educated and have lower incomes compared to those from intact families. However, research with adolescents in Finland contrasted Gruber's findings, showing that parental divorce was not a significant predictor of educational attainment in adulthood (Huurre, 2006). Although there is some evidence on the long term impact of divorce, in comparison to the short term impacts (Bernardi and Radl, 2014) evidence is lacking. This may be because only a minority of people report the longer term implications (Coleman and Glenn, 2010). It is therefore unclear just how reliable these claims into the longer term impacts really are.

The overall impact that separation and divorce has on a child will depend on a number of factors, such as the degree of contact with parents both before and after the separation (Miller *et al.* 1999), the level of conflict between parents (Cummings *et al.*, 2008) and the degree in which the child was caught up in their parents' divorce (Odenweller, 2014).

The role of the school

Separation and divorce is viewed by many as a private matter (Spreng, 2004), and, for this reason, some educators believe that intervention related to it is out of the domain of school's responsibility (Cottongim, 2002). The issue is indeed a private one, meaning that teachers have to be careful of how they respond, but, since parental separation and divorce affects a significant proportion of schools' populations (Beausang *et al.*, 2012), it is something they cannot ignore. Mahony *et al.* (2015) agree, explaining that teachers are in an ideal position to facilitate support for these children because of the daily contact they have. Unlike other pastoral issues schools often deal with, parental separation and divorce is one that schools cannot prevent. Instead, their role is to be supportive and compassionate towards children experiencing parental separation (Hall and Purdy, 2013) but also to strengthen the resilience of all children (ETI, 2016), so they can adjust and bounce back (CCEA, 2007a) should they ever face this form of adversity. Schools responses can therefore be classified as both proactive and reactive.

Proactive

Creating and implementing a policy for separated parents 'ensures there is clarity across the whole school community' (Hall and Purdy, 2013, p. 143). It helps ensure that parents understand that the school is concerned with the best interests of the child, and will make it explicit that the school will work in partnership with both parents unless a court order states otherwise. Within this policy, it should also be made clear to parents that one of their roles is to inform the school of any changes in a child's home circumstances (Hornby, 2011a). If teachers are aware of these changes, they are subsequently better equipped to look out for any changes in a child's behaviour (Reynolds, 2011). The effectiveness of this type of policy will, however, be dependent upon how regularly it is reviewed and how well prepared staff are to implement it (Lodge, 2000).

A policy for parental separation may help parents realise the importance of sharing information about a child's home circumstances, but it is unlikely to be enough to facilitate it. The need for a strong learning partnership between teachers and parents is vital if this sort of information is to be shared. Many parents can be reluctant to share this personal information with teachers, but if teachers and

parents have built up a strong professional relationship this can make it much easier for parents to do so.

The change in family structures in recent years has meant 'the traditional nuclear family of two parents and 2.4 children has become a museum piece' (Woolfson, cited in Telegraph, 2009). Not only do some children grow up with their parents living in separate households, but, for some, they are 'likely to experience a number of different family models through their childhood' (Hall and Purdy, 2013, p.129). Although the N.I Curriculum makes no specific reference to separation and divorce within the primary phase, it is important that family diversity is recognised by school administrators and within the school curriculum (Beausang *et al.*, 2012). Through PDMU children in primary school can explore relationships and different family types (CCEA, 2007b). In addition, schools can also make use of reading books that include the full spectrum of families. This not only helps educate other children about the families their friends may have, but it helps reduce those feelings of being different. However, if teachers choose to introduce these books just as a child in the class is experiencing parental separation or divorce, parents may feel it is drawing unwanted attention to their change of circumstances.

Reactive

There are a number of ways in which schools can respond when a child experiences parental separation or divorce, but, as mentioned previously, because children respond differently to this, not all responses will be suitable for all children. Teachers must use their professional judgement, to implement strategies they feel would best support the individual in their class.

One of the easiest ways a teacher can respond is by being an active listener. Children can become overwhelmed with their feelings and can often feel as though their world is falling apart. Being able to share their concerns with a supportive adult can be a massive help for some children, particularly those who are worried about talking to their parents for fear of upsetting them. Furthermore, Carlile (1991) stresses that it is important that teachers provide children with opportunities to communicate their feelings in non-verbal ways: through drawings, puppets or stories.

It's also important that teachers are considerate of a child's change of circumstances. Many children find Mondays and Fridays particularly difficult, leaving one parent at the end of the week and the other on a Sunday (Francke, 1983). Teachers need to be understanding towards these children and must become trained to look out for subtle changes in behaviour that may indicate the child is having a 'bad day'. Being understanding of the difficulties children have is also vital. For some children, they become overly clingy towards their parents (Hall, 2007), which can subsequently mean the drop-off to school is difficult. Teachers could try to make this less stressful for both the child and parent by encouraging the child to attend breakfast club, where they could get dropped off a little earlier avoiding the main rush of the other children. The strategies put in place do not have to be complex: it's simply a matter of trying to reduce the difficulties the child faces.

Additionally, if a child forgets a homework, it may not be possible for the child to bring it in the next day if it was completed in one of their parents' houses whom they will not see until the next week. Teachers need to show some consideration in respect of homework (Hall and Purdy, 2013), but as Croly (2013) points out, children often do not want to appear different from their peers, so if it seems that they are 'getting away' with things other pupils are not, this can have a negative effect on the child. Moreover, some teachers might believe ignoring certain behaviours is being considerate of a child's circumstances, but lowering expectations can in fact contribute to the decline in some children's self-worth (Hall and Purdy, 2013). Therefore it's best for teachers to maintain expectations in terms of both behaviour and academic attainment.

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Molepo *et al.* (2012) recognise that children who experience parental separation or divorce are likely to become oversensitive to any form of criticism. When giving feedback to children on their work, teachers should be aware of how children could respond to their suggestions for improvements. Teachers should focus on positive reinforcement and should recognise that at a time when self-esteem can be low, praise can be particularly valuable. For this reason, ensuring children maintain engagement in extracurricular activities provides a further opportunity for these children to experience praise (Hall and Purdy, 2013).

Despite a school's best efforts, on occasions some children may need support from external organisations to help them overcome the separation and divorce of their parents. Schools should not see this as a failure on their part, nor should they withdraw completely their own support systems. The child will be most effectively supported if the school and external organisations work in partnership.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while schools may not be able to prevent parental separation or divorce from occurring, they play a crucial role in preparing children with the resilience to overcome such issues should they occur. They also have a role to play in implementing a number of reactive strategies to support the children who have faced parental separation or divorce. It is crucial that teachers acknowledge that no two children will react in the same way. Therefore, teachers need to tailor their responses to the individual child and the individual circumstances. If teachers are expected to deal with this pastoral issue, they need to not only have a general understanding of the impact separation and divorce can have on children, but they will also need to have the skills and knowledge to react accordingly.

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