

Emotional Labour: Understanding the impact of repeated bereavements for the staff of Abbey Court School.

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Context

Abbey Court is a special school for pupils aged 3-19 with severe and profound learning difficulties in the south of England.

The school has been judged as outstanding in the last three Ofsted reports.

Due to the nature of the difficulties experienced by the children, many have much reduced life expectancies and an average of 2 – 3 children die each year.



The headteacher Karen Joy approached us (TIHR) to ask if we could help to understand the impact for staff in the school of repeated bereavements.

In addition to supporting Abbey Court, Karen felt this was an unexplored area and therefore had a wider contribution to make to special needs schools.



The inquiry questions

- How do pupil deaths impact for the staff team, individually, collectively and over time? Particularly are there any negative impacts and how do these manifest?
- How do staff cope with pupil deaths?
- Are the coping strategies perceived as helpful or unhelpful to their overall wellbeing?
- What characteristics of the school culture promote a healthy environment for staff and pupils? Are there any that work against this?



Methodology:

Interviews: We conducted 11 face to face interviews

Survey: sent to all 101 staff members, and completed by 42 of them – a response rate of just under 40%.

Observation: We also spent time in the school, getting a feel for the atmosphere and the culture.

Literature Review: A brief review to establish what is already known of the impact of bereavement and strategies to address it.



What we heard in the interviews

'Its one of the hardest jobs emotionally that I have had, it is quite hard to detach yourself away from it. A lot of people say once you have been working here a long time, emotionally you are able to step away from it but it is quite hard to get your head around. You think your life is hard and then you see some of the challenges that these families and children face, and you just think actually, they are the ones who have it hard. They have so many challenges and they are still the most wonderful children you would ever meet'.



The impact of bereavement

The predominant narrative was that whilst every pupil death was very sad; the staff had ways of coping which meant that they did not feel there were lasting negative consequences.

The interviews were very moving. Staff experiences of the death of some pupils remained very vivid. For some, emotions were very near the surface with several staff becoming tearful as they talked.

Several people said that the death of some pupils impacted more than others, not always in ways they could predict.



Ways of coping that were seen as helpful

Being professional

Taking a moment

Looking out for each other

Normalising death









Using humour

Focusing on the positive

Talking and support – many spaces formal and informal

It takes the 'right sort of person' to work here

Some noticed changes in colleagues:

-  going quiet
-  avoiding eye contact
-  being just fixed on the pupils rather than interacting with other staff
-  going solitary
-  over-reacting to little things
-  putting a barrier up
-  doing as if nothing has happened
-  being 'over emotional'



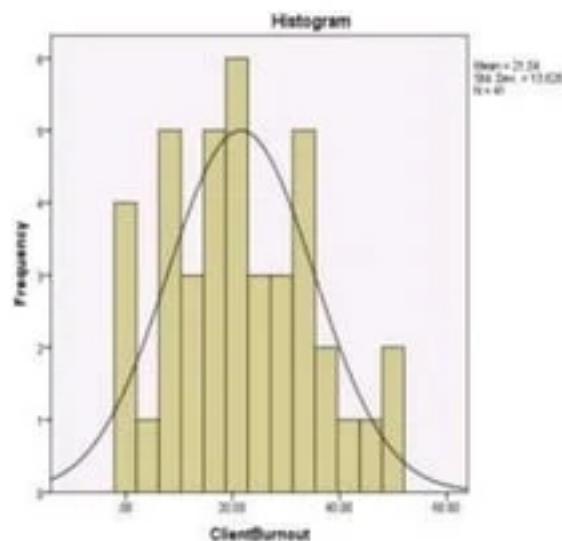
Survey findings

We used the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory which measures burnout at a scale of 0-100. Values closer to 100 signify higher levels of Burnout.

The average score for teachers at Abbey Court School was towards the bottom of the scale: 21.54.

There were no significant differences in relation to staff role, years of experience, age group taught and number of deaths experienced

For comparison: another study found the following averages among head nurses: 19.7, midwives: 38.4 and prison officers: 41.2

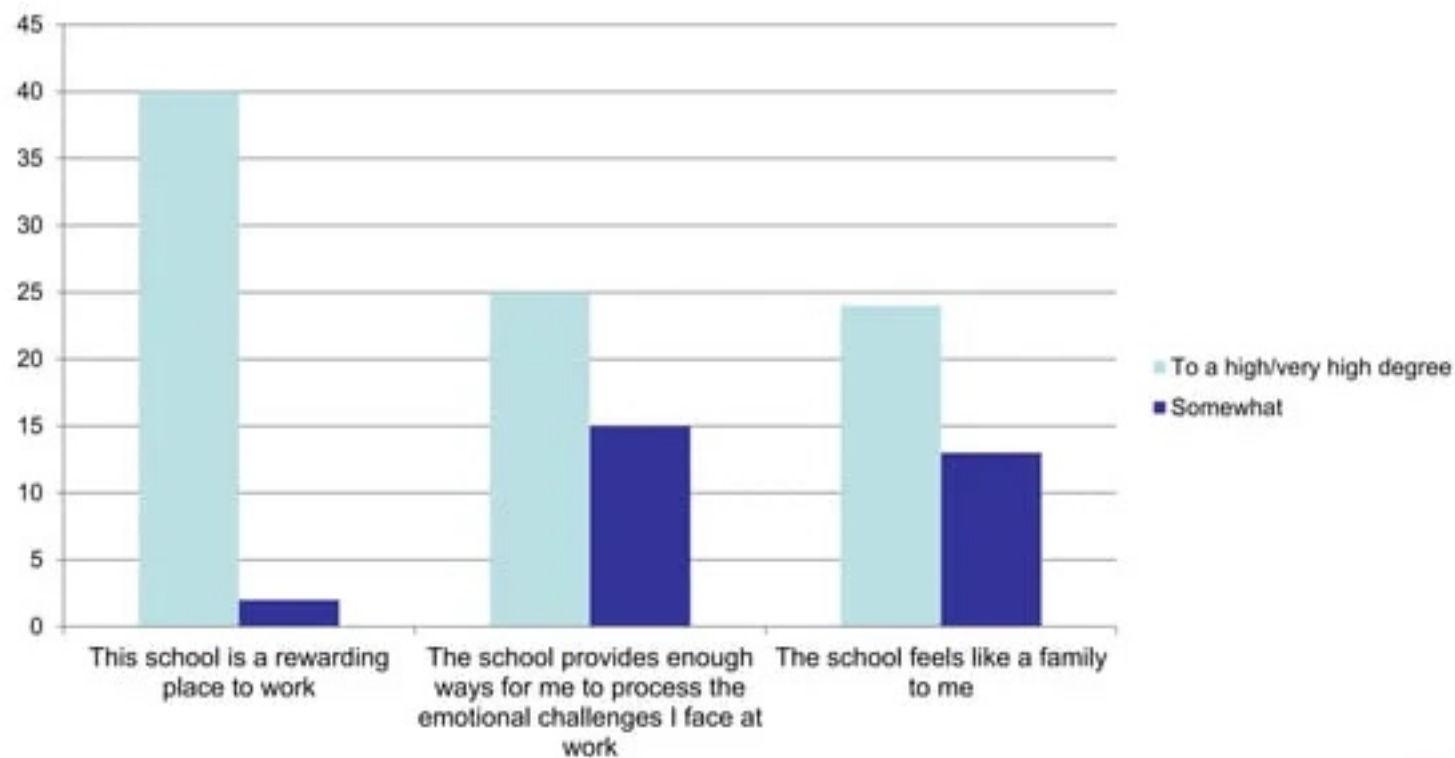


Questions from the client related sub-scale of the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory

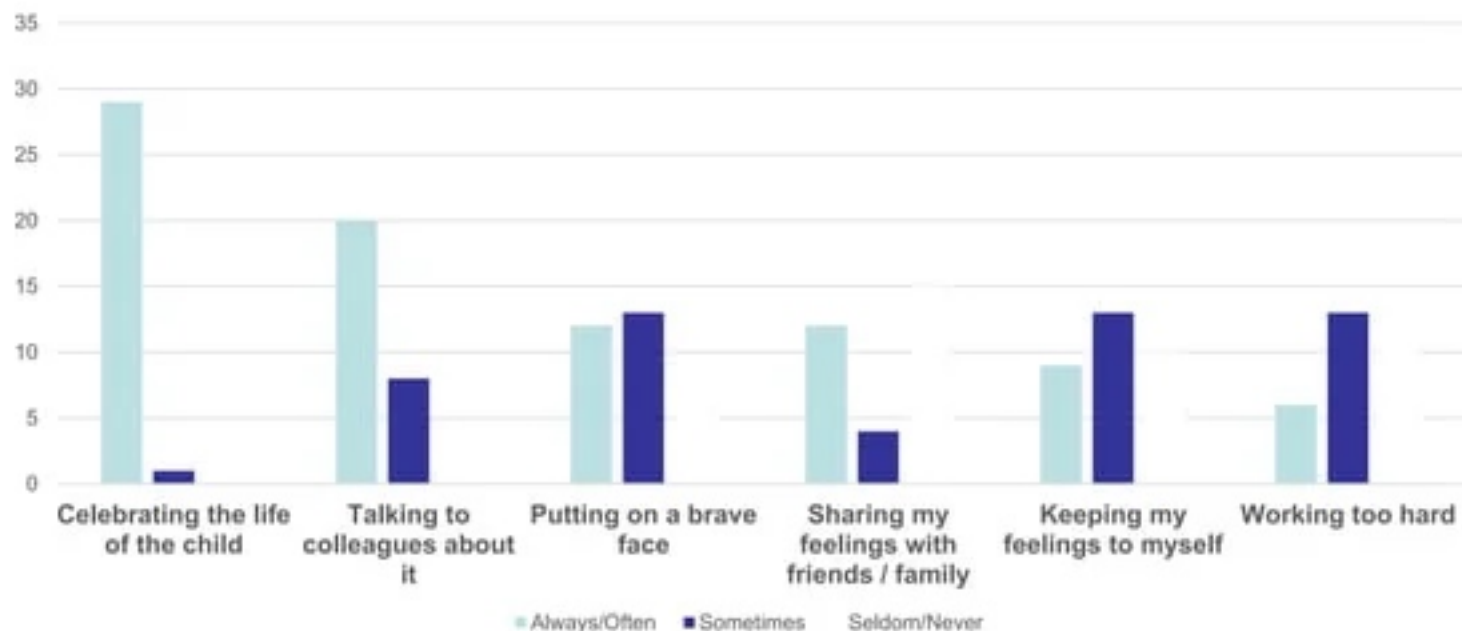
	To a very high degree	To a high degree	Somewhat	To a low degree	To a very low degree
I find it hard to work with pupils	0	0	4	10	27
I find it frustrating to work with pupils	0	0	2	17	22
It drains my energy to work with pupils	0	0	14	18	9
I feel like I give more than I get back when I work with pupils	0	5	12	12	12
How often do you	Daily	Often	Sometimes	Seldom	Never
... feel tired of working with pupils?	0	1	11	14	15
... wonder how long you will be able to continue working with such pupils?	1	3	5	14	18



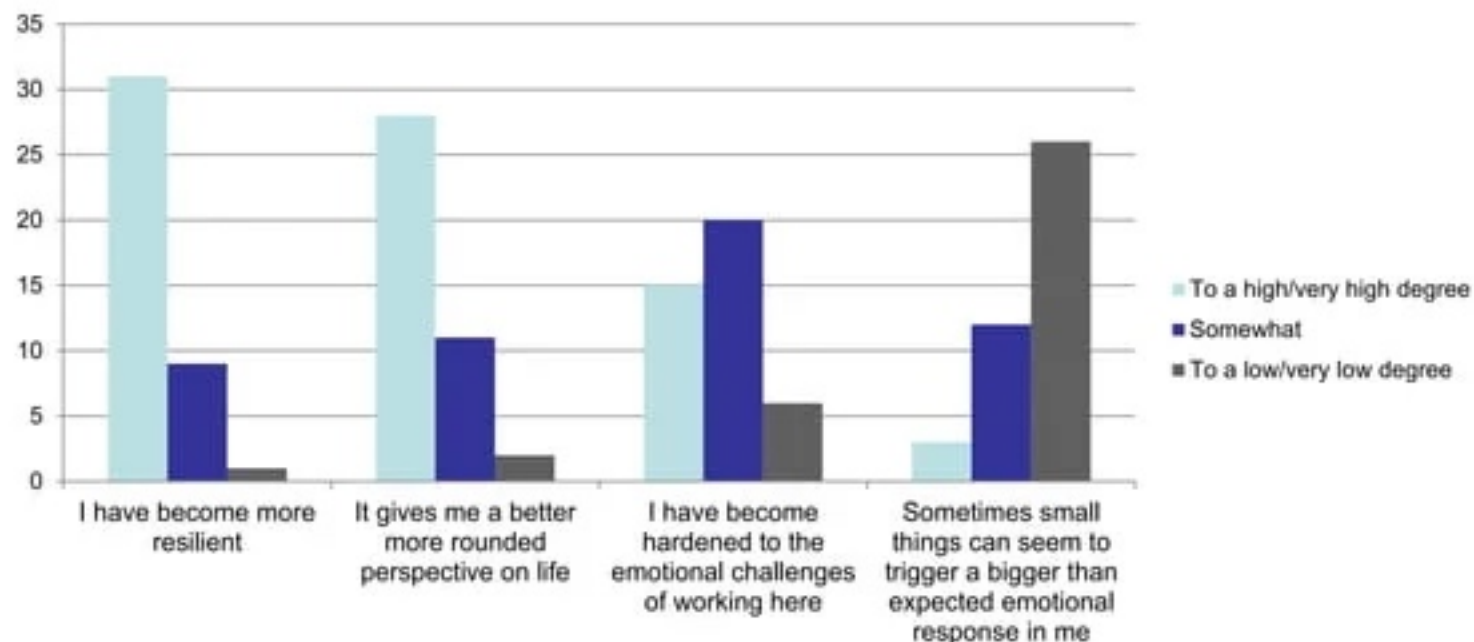
What is the school like?



How do you respond to the death of a pupil?



What about the long term impact?



What accounts for these findings

Much of this we believe is because there exists a supportive and containing culture in which staff and pupils can thrive.

Significant and critical aspects of this are, a culture that:

- ✓ pays attention to leadership practices,
- ✓ has a particular philosophy towards death,
- ✓ creates spaces to discuss the work and the associated emotions,
- ✓ provides clarity of purpose, role, and identity,
- ✓ focuses on the positive,
- ✓ supports staff through structures, processes and policies.



Here I am a teacher,
not a mum – so it is
very different

We talk, we laugh. We
understand the meaning of life
and death. We are well
prepared to understand death.
We share stories. If needed we
take a break.

We are educators,
we aren't carers, we
care for the children
of course we do.
Caring is not the
primary role.

There are times when things
are emotionally and physically
challenging....these are more
than compensated for by the
reward of the children and the
amazing team work.



Some of the data made us want to think further

1) Balancing Acts

- During the interviews staff sometimes censored themselves whilst speaking. Stopping a sentence and starting again. This was often when describing some of the fine balancing acts they have to manage.
 - Being emotional but not too emotional
 - The right sort of caring
 - There were many statements along the lines of *"I know this sounds bad but..."* *"I don't mean to be harsh but..."*
 - Being open and bounded

Staff need to work to resolve internal personal dilemmas or relational dilemmas – how do I get the balance right in a way that feels ok for me **and** that looks ok to others?



Emotional Labour

(Hochschild 1979, 1983)



We found the concept of emotional labour helpful in understanding different responses.



Deep acting / reappraisal – altering inner emotional state to experience more positive emotion *cognitive reappraisal (reappraising or reinterpreting the situation to alter its emotional impact)*.



Reappraisal and deep acting strategies are positively associated with enjoyment and lower levels of anxiety, anger and frustration.



Surface acting / suppression - faking unfelt emotions, or hiding felt emotions, suppression consists of hiding emotions after they occur.



Suppression and surface acting strategies are more closely associated with anxiety, frustration, physical health difficulties.

2) How OK are emotions?

Several staff became tearful during the interviews and apologised profusely. Not an unusual response in a work context however it might indicate that tears are not quite ok.

Some staff were tearful describing situations that happened a long time ago – possibly an indication of some un-processed emotions, maybe indicative of suppression.

There is such a strong emphasis on positivity in the school we wondered how easy it might be for someone to say they were not feeling positive.



Very few people owned that they struggled with their responses to death or challenging events. Those that did said it was only momentarily or this was something in the past, now able to manage better.

However several people felt they saw others struggling; going quiet, withdrawing, over-reacting.

This may indicate it is difficult to admit that one is struggling and it can only be named by someone else.



3) Asking for help

Very few people mentioned asking for help as a way of coping.

This made us wonder about the 'type' of person that is drawn to this work. Maybe those motivated by, valuing and personally identifying as helping others. As well as cultural norms.

Identifying and asking for ones own needs to be met might be difficult and possibly seen as negative.

In the interviews staff frequently spoke about the other pupils, the families of the child who died. We had to continually draw the conversation back to their own feelings and responses.



4) Containing the containers

The senior leadership in the school are clearly doing many things well in creating a containing work environment that enables staff to work compassionately with pupils.

Staff on the whole appear able to work without either being overwhelmed by or cut off from their emotional worlds.

We were curious about what happens for the senior leaders. Where were their containing spaces and support. This was raised in a couple of the interviews and there were hints in the survey data.



A supportive and containing culture

Pays attention to leadership practices that:

- provide clarity of purpose, role, and identity,
- create spaces to discuss the work and the associated emotions,
- promote a particular philosophy towards death,
- focus on the positive,
- support staff through structures, processes and policies.



Questions and discussion



Breakout room discussion

How do the issues raised in this talk resonate for you?

- From your own experience?
- For your own workplace?
- For your own work interests?

