Songwriting for grief and loss: An intergenerational project between hospice patients and primary school children

Giorgos Tsiris, Donna Hastings, Becky Chaddock, Stephen Fischbacher & Margaret McLarty

Background
In 2019, as part of its expanding community engagement and health promotion work, the Arts and the Family Support services of St Columba’s Hospice in collaboration with FischyMusic implemented an innovative intergenerational project raising death and dying awareness.

Why music?
The arts play a vital role in enabling hospices to engage with their local communities and to promote healthier attitudes towards death and dying. In diverse forms, formats, and media, ranging from one-off performances to long-term projects, the arts can bring people together in creative and non-threatening ways (Hartley, 2011, 2014). With diverse applications in palliative and bereavement care, music and songwriting in particular can be a powerful way to express, articulate and share experiences of loss and change as well as to change perception and to build emotional resilience and social bonding (Heath & Lings, 2012; Tsiris et al., 2011).

Why working with schools?
Children and young people are catalysts in any sustainable social change. Working with schools is crucial not only for shaping healthier attitudes towards death and dying awareness in society, but also for raising childhood grief awareness and equipping school communities to support children. This seems particularly important considering that around 111 children are bereaved of a parent every day in the UK (Child Bereavement UK, 2017).

The project: Processes and outcomes
Hospice patients and children from Victoria Primary School were brought together to explore, express and share through music their experiences of grief, change and loss in life. Structured in six main steps, the project involved both school-wide input for students and staff as well as more focused songwriting work with a group of ten PS-6 children self-named ‘The Victoria Rockers’.

Step 1: School staff training
Training session and songwriting workshop on understanding childhood loss and bereavement and how to support this in the school setting.

Step 2: Music workshops
School-wide music workshops on ‘Hello’ and ‘Goodbye’ with a focus on emotional wellbeing, introduction to the hospice.

Step 3: Hospice visit
Educational visit of the songwriting group, ‘The Victoria Rockers’, at the hospice. Joint arts workshop with some Day Therapy patients to reflect on own experiences of loss, change and transition in life.

Step 4: Songwriting
Four songwriting sessions at the school, creation of CD covers, recording and editing of the ‘Change Matters’ song.

Step 5: School performance
Performance of Change Matters and closing workshop with the whole school community including families.

Step 6: Closing event at the hospice
Public event as part of the Creativity and Wellbeing Week attracting media coverage. Reflecting on the whole project: performance of songs, exhibition of children’s and patients’ artwork, photos from the project process, verbal reflections from children, patients and school staff participants.

“Loved meeting and remembering people” Child

“Meeting B… We both had the same sadness” Child

“Being lifted, had a great time, good to mingle with lovely children” Patient

“I will introduce it (loss) as a subject that should be talked about and tell the class it’s OK to talk about it” School staff

“Sharing names (with patients) and how they were feeling. How they were happy even though they had cancer and were dying” Child

“Honest talk about death” School staff

Future directions
Contributing to the growing field and evidence base of the role of the arts, including the arts therapies, in palliative and bereavement care (e.g., Clements-Cortes, 2016; Wood, Jacobson & Griffin, 2019), this project has served as a pilot. Its outcomes highlight the importance of promoting and supporting conversations about death and dying for children, and they feed into the development of similar intergenerational projects with other schools, community groups and arts organisations within the hospice’s catchment area.

Looking ahead, such intergenerational arts projects can help hospices to re-imagine and expand their role. This includes re-positioning hospices as resource hubs for their local communities by fostering partnerships and opportunities for open dialogue and creative action around death, dying, change and loss.

References

