

# How to handle death in the school

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# Issue/Problem

- Death touches the lives of all of us. Children are by no means immune. Death of parents, relatives, schoolmates, of school staff members, family pets are not so rare events. Youth suicide, life threatening illness and sexually transmitted diseases, violence in our society (including assault, rape and violent death) and war are some growing crises that children face.

- In school communities all these traumatic events have the potential to affect the mental health of those involved, the academic process of students, the worklife of teachers and the public perception of schools as safe, physical and psychosocial environments.

# Past approaches to loss and grief in schools

- a) Focused on children's experience of death, ensuring a grieving student had access to outside counseling and perhaps a teacher supporting the young person day to day and sometimes teaching about death in curriculum.

- Unsatisfactory
- No continuity of care
- Ignorance about all other members of school community who might be impacted by death

- b) Provision of grief and death education within the curriculum, support for those experiencing a loss and treatment for those at risk of experiencing long-term problems.
  - The intervention introduced usually after a loss had been experienced and conducted by outside agencies (specialists of a trauma team).

«Experience has shown that mental preparation and planning before a death or other critical event occurs leads to a much better handling than if one “takes things as they come”»  
(Dyregrov 1991)

# “New” public health approach

- An ecological perspective is adopted that involves recognition of people’s health being determined by their environment, not merely by identifying risk factors (being bereaved) that can be targeted and cured.

- **For school communities**, this shifts the emphasis from a focus on providing counseling services to individuals and groups, to focus on how the school as a social institution should create conditions conducive to positive mental health outcomes.

# Why school communities?

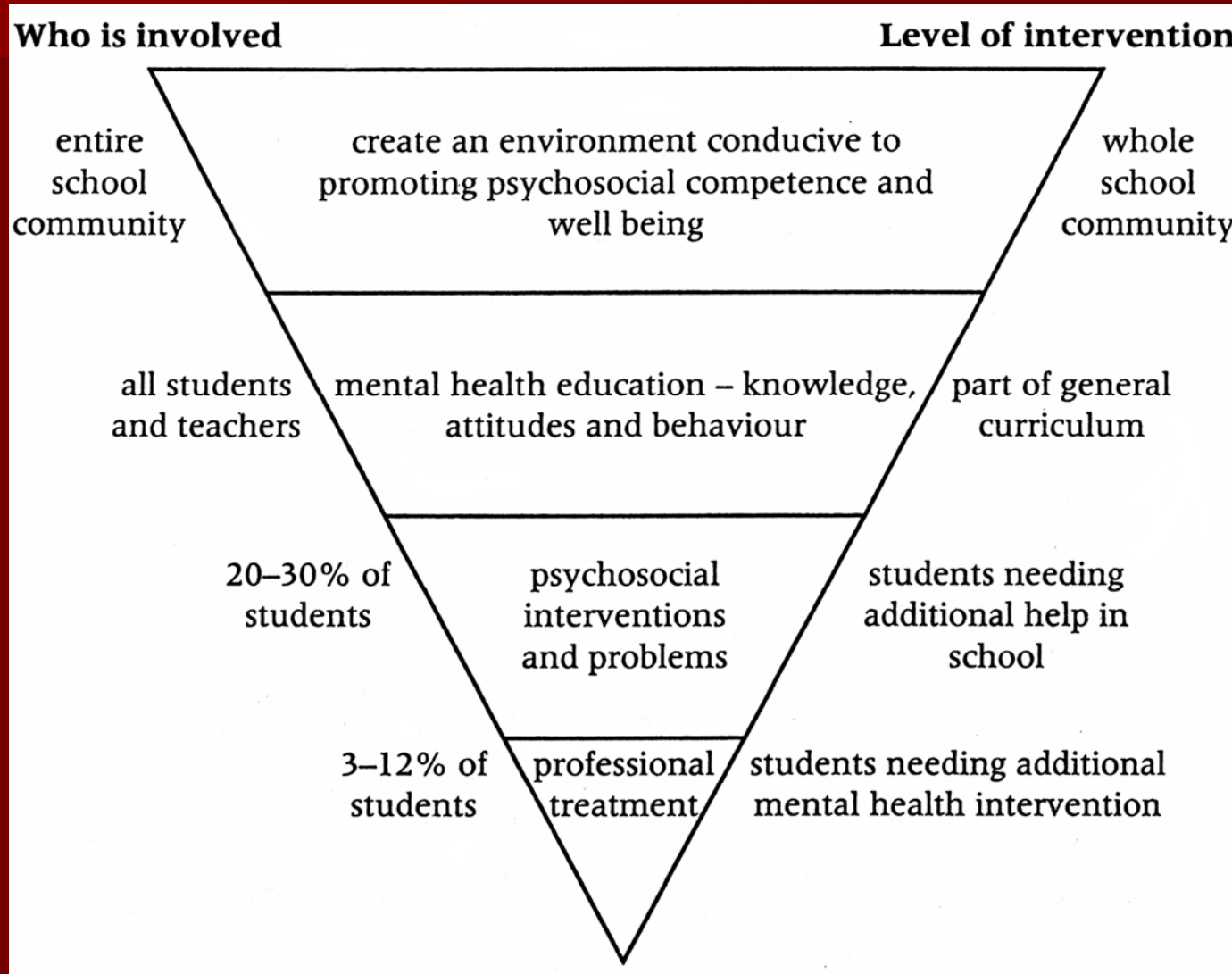
School is a setting with policies and practices that provide security, boundaries and connectedness and in times of emotional upheaval, comfort and healing. The “normality” of the school routine establishes these conditions.

# Health promoting school framework

A comprehensive approach to all health issues in schools involves:

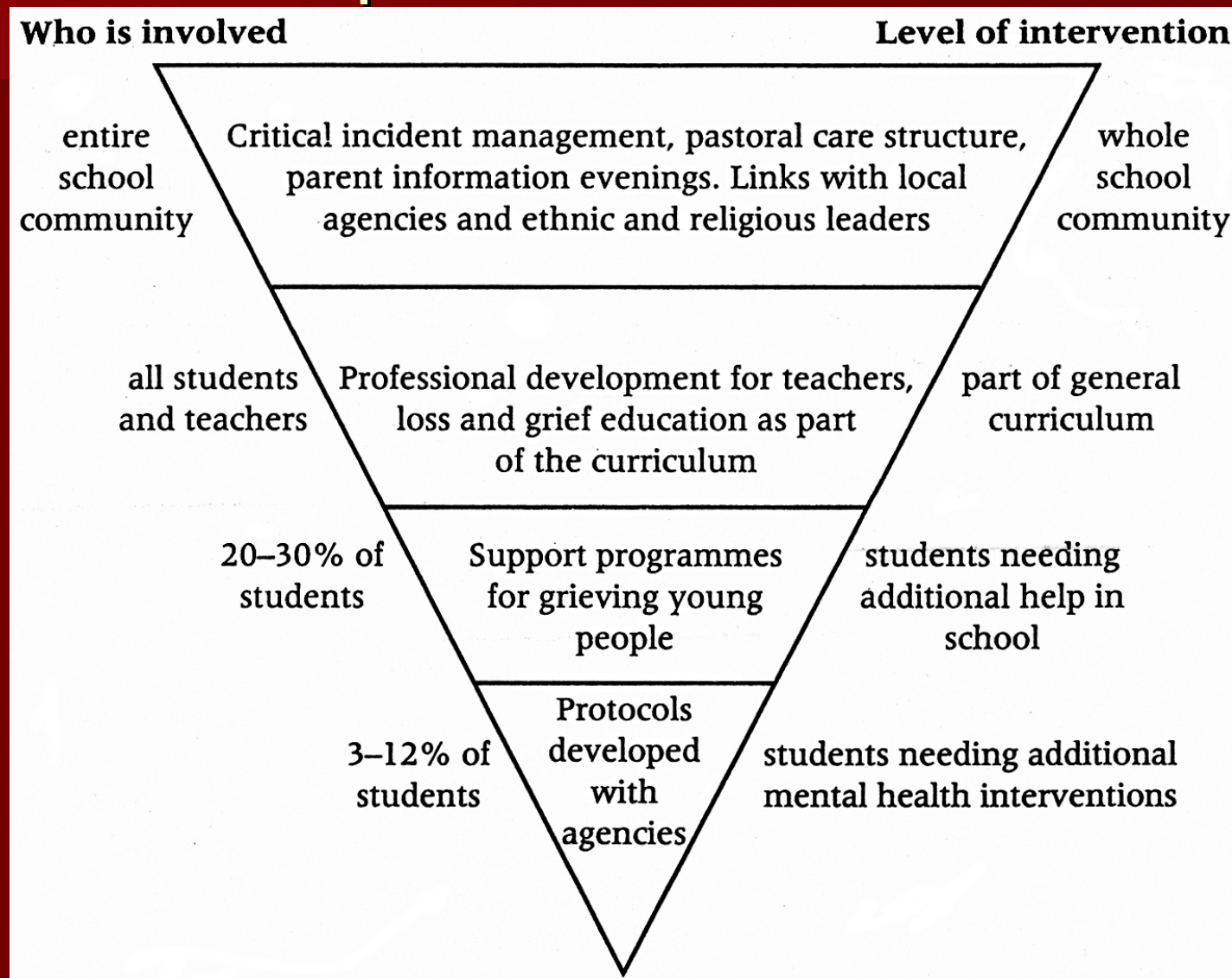
- a sequential curriculum
- provision of training for teachers
- active participation in learning by students
- organizational structures and processes of the school environment.
- well-developed partnerships with parents & service providers

# WHO model of school-based mental health promotion



Research indicates that, next to personal resources, a major factor that influences the outcome of grieving for young people is the support they receive from adults and their peers. This support needs to be provided in the range of ways identified in the mental health promotion framework.

# Loss and grief in a school-based mental health promotion framework



# Elements of this comprehensive approach to loss and grief

Curriculum  
teaching  
& learning

School  
organization,  
ethos &  
environment

Partnerships  
& Services

# Curriculum teaching & learning

- Loss experiences need to be included as a part of existing personal, social and life skills programmes (not just included after a crisis has occurred).
- Understanding feelings and reactions as well as teaching skills to enable individuals to cope and to be supportive to others.

- Training of teachers to handle this issue and use of active learning and teaching styles.
- Training needs to involve cognitive and emotional aspects as well as pedagogical skills.

# School organization, ethos & environment

(School as a caring environment)

- Student welfare and pastoral care practices, policies and guidelines integrated into school mission.
- Clear procedures for referral of students to outside agencies.
- Availability of school-based counseling service.

- A peer support programme.
- Recognition and allowance for staff grief.
- Processes for early identification of “at risk” children and situations that result from loss experience.
- Critical incidence management plan.

# Partnerships & services

- Inter agency collaboration for referral for mental health problems.
- Involvement of outside bereavement support agencies, police and community health & social services.
- Parent-school liaison to support grieving students.
- Relationship with local religions leaders.
- Invitation of indigenous leaders and members of ethnic communities to school to talk about grieving practices.

# Results

- The curriculum of this comprehensive approach facilitates the normalization of grief through education. The orientation is to teach skills to enable individuals to be supportive to others. It establishes a role for school communities as social systems that have the capacity to support members and to meet the needs of teachers, parents and students in a proactive way.

# Lessons

- This approach emphasizes the role of the school as a social institution, because young people look to peers and teachers to help define the reality of their loss, express feelings associated with it, provide support and access to information and integrate the experience into their lives.

- The healing environment a school provides can shift the negative orientation of painful experiences to one that is positive and provides opportunities for the growth of individuals and the strengthening of the school community.