A Case Study of Loss and Grief: Helping Students Cope and Understand the Challenges Surrounding Loss Using Children’s Literature

By Alissia Paglia
Death and loss within a school community is inevitable and can have a profound impact on both students and their teachers. I quote Carl Jung:

One looks back with appreciation to the brilliant teachers, but with gratitude to those who touched our human feelings. The curriculum is so much necessary raw material, but warmth is the vital element for the growth, and for the soul of the child.

This study provides practical suggestions for how teachers can utilize children’s literature as a resource to support students as they cope with grief as a result of a loss. There are various kinds of grief and loss that children may experience, however, this study focusses on death and the grief associated with it. Taking a case study approach, this research offers insight from experienced teachers and educational professionals from a Catholic elementary school. Exposing students to well written children’s literature can be therapeutic for children and allow educators the opportunity to listen, support and guide students. Children’s literature can act as a vehicle of expression and as an outlet where students can activate prior knowledge and relate to the experiences and feelings of the characters in the stories. Using qualitative methods, I conducted face to face interviews with consenting participants to gain insight about educational professionals’ experiences, beliefs, attitudes, motivations, values and concerns in regards to this research topic, and to provide a more in depth investigation. I intend to uncover the struggles educators have with this issue, while discovering the methods of teaching when using children’s literature to educate and support students.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are a number of individuals who have supported me throughout my research and journey in becoming an educator. I wish to acknowledge them and express my utmost gratitude.

I would like to thank Donna Duplak for her guidance and support as my research supervisor and instructor. I am truly grateful for her kindness, sense of humour, wisdom and inspiration throughout this entire process.

I would also like to thank my Student to Professional instructor Dr. Susan Schwartz for providing me with resources to aid in my research, for being so approachable and for contributing her meaningful input throughout this process.

Next, I want to thank Dr. Kimberley MacKinnon for guiding and preparing me for the initial steps of this research project. Her thoughtful recommendations helped shape this research study.

In addition, I would like to thank my course instructors, associate teachers and colleagues for sharing their expertise and perspectives. Their exemplary teaching, positivity and moral support have truly contributed to my development as an educator.

I want to express my thanks to my fellow MT classmates, for their ongoing support and for the time we shared together over the past two years. I will always cherish the special bond we’ve created in going through this together.

I wish to give a wholehearted acknowledgement to the participants of this study. Without their time and valuable insights this paper would not have been possible. I am grateful for their enthusiasm, openness and willingness to share their knowledge and experiences with me.
I want to thank the amazing teachers I have encountered over the years who have not only taught me, but who have touched and inspired me. They are true examples that teachers can positively have an impact on the lives of their students.

Most importantly, I want to thank the special people in my life from the bottom of my heart who have loved, supported and believed in me throughout this journey. A very important thank you to my family for giving me this wonderful opportunity and for their ongoing support, and motivation; I owe my success to them. To Joseph for his continuous love and encouragement, his humour when I needed it most and for always being there. To my friends for their positive spirits and for always cheering me on. The presence, moral support and encouragement of all of these important people have contributed immensely to my work. This process would not have been possible without them.
This research study is dedicated to:

Those children who have lost loved ones and are in need of support and care. May the stories you read and the characters you meet along the way help you to find comfort.

To all educators who by nature are dedicated to comforting the children they teach, whom are confronted with bereaved children after the loss of someone in their lives, and are committed to extending their help and support. May your compassion touch the lives of grieving children.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Introduction to the Research Study

Educators are often required to take on responsibilities that may present difficult challenges. As I aim to model a classroom that values inclusivity, support, comfort and empathy, I will explore loss and grief and the educator’s role in promoting these values using children’s literature. The truth is that loss, followed by grief is an inevitable part of life for both children and adults. It is essential that a mechanism for coping with a loss is established, especially at an early age, yet, it is a very sensitive topic that is often shielded from children. Thus, educators may find it challenging to generate a conversation with young students about the death of a family member, friend, acquaintance or pet.

Referred to by Danielle F. Lowe (2009) as bibliotherapy or therapeutic reading, children’s literature that conveys such experiences serves as a tool to open up conversation between students and educators. According to Lowe (2009), until the past few decades children’s books did not address sensitive topics such as death. Recently, more credited children’s literature has been published that deals with these issues and act as outlets to help children heal and cope (Lowe, 2009). This study provides a basis to develop an understanding of the factors that are exhibited when children experience loss. The views and strategies of other educators have helped me uncover the impact that the choice of literature used in the classroom can have on a child’s life.

The word “grief” will be used several times throughout this research study. To provide clarity and understanding the definition provided by James and Friedman (2001) will be used:
“Grief is the conflicting feelings caused by a change or an end in a familiar pattern of behaviour” (p. 9).

For the purpose of this study, “high quality children’s literature” is defined as:

- Age-appropriate literature that enables students to easily relate to the story, seeing the characters as reflections of themselves.
- Literature that sends a positive message to children about death and grieving.
- Literature that discusses diverse situations involving death and grieving.
- Literature that sparks emotion, allowing students to make the appropriate connections.
- Literature that matches the loss of the situation being dealt with.
- Literature that is informative and comforting for children.
- In a Catholic school system the literature often contains a faith component, mentioning Heaven and offering students hope.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to explore the use of children’s literature in the classroom as a method of expression to provide students with the guidance and resources they require to cope and heal, and to assist social, emotional and academic progress. Children’s literature can offer a voice for those children who may feel alone, those children who feel they are not understood, those children who feel isolated in grief, and those children who feel that they have no source of support. Sitler (2008) confirms that when teachers teach with a sense of awareness, they can provide pathways to healing.

By providing words and illustrations to use in the event of a loss, well-written, age-appropriate literature can be key to offering a safe, supportive and comforting grieving process for students. The power of a story enables both students and educators to put themselves in another’s shoes and feel his or her experience. Reading stories about loss is a way for both grieving children, their classmates and their teacher to understand and to connect to unique situations and life’s difficulties.
Educators need to be aware of reliable resources to integrate into course curricula for the K-8 learning environment. Students themselves also need to be aware of the sources available to them for learning about and coping with the loss of a loved one, the grieving process, and death itself. As teachers, it is our responsibility to create a solid foundation for our students by educating the child completely, thus providing guidance and support socially, emotionally and academically (Garrett, 2006).

**Research Question**

How might educators’ use of high quality children’s literature help children deal with grief?

**Sub-Questions:**

1. What outcomes might there be when educators use children’s literature with children dealing with grief?
2. What obstacles and challenges do educators face in helping students cope with grief?
3. How can educators’ personal reactions to grief play a role in how they approach it with their students?
4. How might children’s literature be used to help students cope with grief?
5. What other strategies can be used to help students cope with grief?

**Background of the Researcher**

My compassion and desire to make a difference in the lives of children have contributed to my passion to fulfill the needs of those I teach. I have learned that the values of patience and perseverance, and positivity, encouragement and support can help a child seek comfort even in the most difficult of times. I have observed that young children in particular are the most empathetic to individual situations; they are filled with curiosity and express no fear in questioning differences. Students of any age love stories, they not only listen to the story, but they experience the story, developing a special attachment to the books that speak to their own developmental fears, needs and experiences. As an adult, I also love stories.
When I think of the teachers in my past who have had the most profound impact on my life, I remember and appreciate their caring, comforting and supportive demeanors. Not only did these teachers educate me, they inspired me to one day become a teacher that will teach from the heart and touch the lives of my students in a way that allows them to see the light even in the most difficult of times.

Important to a teacher’s success is being prepared for any situation. In an environment where one is always working towards a goal, death is rarely part of the agenda. However, teachers are constantly required to assume additional responsibilities. So when a student experiences a loss, dealing with that loss in the classroom cannot, and should not be avoided. Teachers are part of the support system, a compliment to parents, friends, relatives and the community.

Children’s emotional distress is not left behind once they enter the doors of a school, or their classrooms. As educators we must be conscious of the reality that we will be confronted with on a daily basis by children who are heartbroken due to a difficult situation. It is during these times that a caring individual with a warm heart is required to step in. With the use of age-appropriate literature, I want to support my students throughout the experience of a loss that they may face and help them to get through it.

**Overview**

Chapter One includes the introduction and purpose of the study, the research questions, as well as how I became involved in this topic of study. Chapter Two contains a review of the literature, looking particularly at children’s literature as a mechanism to address the various issues surrounding children’s experiences with loss and grief, helping students develop coping
mechanisms and better understand loss, recognizing grief in the classroom, why children’s literature is an appropriate strategy, choosing supportive children’s literature and the various ways to implement children’s literature in a classroom environment where there has been an experience of loss. Chapter Three provides the methodology and procedure that have been used in this study, including information about the sample participants and data collection instruments. Chapter Four provides an analysis of the findings, which are organized in accordance to prevalent themes. Chapter Five includes a discussion of findings, implications and recommendations for educators. References and a list of appendices follow at the end.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Addressing the Issue in the Classroom

“Grief is a process that reshapes our inner world following loss” - Dr. Bruce Perry (2006)

Presented within the work “Helping Children Cope through Literature” by Danielle F. Lowe (2009) is the importance of responding to, and addressing a situation of loss within a classroom of students. Referenced in this article are Keith and Martin (2005) who state that it is unsympathetic when dealing with a sensitive topic such as death to avoid the issue and pretend that nothing is wrong, even with small children. Students can sense the pain of adults around them; thus, a willingness to discuss with them reassures them that you are open to talking about anything and that it is okay for them to share thoughts and emotions. It is damaging when children are not informed or misinformed about such situations and the changes that are surrounding them, as they are left to make their own conclusions which could be detrimental to their confidence, understanding and ability to cope. Since children are incapable of understanding the loss of a loved one on their own, the impact of the separation is unchangeable (Lowe, 2009). To children, the death of a loved one is a loss and it is the responsibility of the adults in their lives to provide them with the guidance that they need.

In “Gone but not Forgotten: Children’s Experiences with Attachment, Separation and Loss” Branch and Bison (2007) reaffirm that a loss of a loved one severs a special attachment that children have in their lives. The effects that may come with loss can be extremely harmful for children, thus, teachers must increase their awareness, open up discussion, and seek out the
appropriate literature and resources to assist with the process of grief. Cited within this article, is a report by Christian (1997), stating that a large number of professionals would agree that it is beneficial for children to be involved in the grief process.

Recognizing Grief

Dr. Bruce Perry’s article, “Death and Loss: Helping Children Manage Their Grief” (2006) discusses the grief process as it involves “emotional, cognitive, behavioural, and physical reactions” (Perry, 2006, p. 1). Children face a number of challenges during the grieving process, including actually processing the event, coping with the loss, and the accompanying thoughts and fears.

A teacher may be the adult that is most aware of children’s pain and confusion following a loss. Coming into contact on a daily basis allows the teacher to recognize the sadness, weariness, and difficulties academically. The cognitive development of children contributes to the differences in their grieving process in comparison to an adult. Further, in “Helping Children Cope through Literature” Lowe (2009) discusses this process and what behavioural patterns teachers should be aware of. She mentions a study by Schwiebert (2003) revealing that due to their overpowering emotions, a student who has experienced a loss may at one moment display intense grieving and in another demonstrate happiness.

An unfortunate truth, according to Smith-D’Arezzo and Thompson (2006) in “Topics of Stress and Abuse in Children’s Literature for Intermediate Readers” is that many “teachers are often too occupied with other duties to notice when a child is silently crying out for help” (p. 345). This must be acknowledged, as the importance of recognizing the needs of students within the classroom is crucial in facilitating a caring classroom environment. Since anger and
seclusion are often emotions displayed by grieving students and are observable in classroom settings, teachers should document this information and take action to best assist the students (Smith-D’Arezzo & Thompson, 2006).

Harold Ivan Smith (2004) is a well known grief specialist who in his book *When a Child You Love is Grieving* emphasizes the importance of ensuring that grieving children receive the necessary means of support following the loss of a loved one. The simple acts of empathy and care can make a major positive difference in a child’s life. His recollection of one supportive teacher who changed his life by simply comforting him following the death of his grandfather is truly inspiring. Smith (2004) states that though he may have never thanked her, “Her example of immediate compassionate care for a child was imprinted on my heart and memory” (p. 8).

**Why Children’s Literature?**

Lowe (2009) uses the term bibliotherapy (Galen and Johns, 1979) to refer to therapeutic reading, which helps children to relate to characters and cope with their emotions. She argues that appropriate books encourage readers and listeners alike to lose themselves within the pages of a story and escape from the stresses of daily life. To assist children through times of loss, it is best to provide them with opportunities to express themselves. When a child learns that he or she is not the only one dealing with a loss, it allows for a sense of ease. She cites Dreyer (1985) whom identifies three characteristics connected with the use of literature to assist children through difficult times. First, *universalization* reinforces that other children have experienced similar suffering; *catharsis* connects the reader to the characters in the story; and *insight* is where self-reflection and the application of knowledge and experiences onto others occurs.
Roberts and Crawford (2008) in “Real Life Calls for Real Books: Literature to Help Children Cope With Family Stressors” agree that literature is beneficial in helping students comprehend and cope, as it elicits personal tribulations, encourages a sense of hope, offers support, and teaches lessons on overcoming life’s obstacles. In addition, children’s books can provide students opportunity for meaningful discussion of the text, and their perceptions, thoughts and feelings. Highlighting the importance of the use of literature to increase children’s knowledge when dealing with loss, Roberts and Crawford (2008) emphasize that teachers can offer their students the resources they need to help them get through. We are not qualified to conduct psychotherapy with students, or rid of the pain a child feels, but, we are qualified to discuss students’ feelings and can offer a source to help them cope and heal. I believe that high quality children’s literature can offer even the youngest readers plentiful opportunities to find peace as they get lost in a story. To successfully handle the distress, frustration and anger that are a part of daily life, and to emerge with a sense of self-control, hope, and resilience it is essential for children to learn the coping skills needed (Roberts & Crawford, 2008).

Referenced by Roberts and Crawford (2008), Denise Johnson (2009) also suggests that quality children’s literature offers numerous personal benefits to children. She claims that literature serves as a point of reference for children to better understand their life experiences, and it provides insights into human behaviours, emotions, and troubles. Finally, literature stimulates children’s curiosity and encourages them to develop the skills necessary to address challenging situations.

Levine (1999), in “Children’s Cognitive Capacities: The foundation for Creative Healing” further illustrates the cognitive power of bibliotherapy, arguing that stories stimulate children's
natural creativity and ability to suspend reality. Levine states that two levels of consciousness operate simultaneously, "At the conscious level the child is focused on the content of the actual narrative, while at the unconscious level a search is performed for the child's experiences which parallel the narrative" (Levine, 1999, p. 145). Therefore, identifying with the characters in a story allows children to apply what they have learned from the characters to their real-life situations.

An important claim is made by Smith-D’Arezzo and Thompson (2006) in “Topics of Stress and Abuse in Children’s Literature for Intermediate Readers” to support the reasons for using children’s literature in the classroom; it is that children benefit from reading stories that reflect life’s challenges when the topics are handled in sensitive, developmentally appropriate ways, and offer control and hope to the characters.

Choosing Supportive Literature

Roberts and Crawford in “Real Life Calls for Real Books: Literature to Help Children Cope with Family Stressors” (2008) state that the selection of books for the classroom is key to accomplishing an affective literacy approach that develops coping mechanisms and a sense of understanding among students dealing with loss and grief. It is important as an educator to be sensitive to children’s circumstances and aware of their personalities when selecting books for the classroom. Some students will appreciate and respond well to literature addressing a difficult situation, while others may not be prepared to deal with the issue. Well-written books that tell a good story are important as children will prefer realistic literature with engaging story lines and illustrations (Roberts & Crawford, 2008). High-quality children’s literature contains fascinating characters, gives voices to children’s viewpoints, and addresses tough topics honestly and with hopeful intentions.
Roberts and Crawford (2008) explain that some stories are constructed directly around specific stressful situations, while others include coping and creative problem solving as part of a broader storyline. Books addressing real-life situations are effective with a wide range of age levels because their story lines evoke real feelings. They allow children to see painful changes or losses, disappointments, and other emotional stresses in the context of family life and to consider possible ways to solve problems.

Nicholson and Pearson (2003) in “Helping Children Cope with Fears: Using Children’s Literature in Classroom Guidance” discuss the importance of carefully choosing stories because of the importance of successful resolutions to grief. As cited, Pardeck and Markward (1995), suggest choosing books with captivating illustrations, engaging story content, useful information, and appealing writing form. They also cite Peller (1962) who suggests using stories containing animal characters, particularly with younger children because they eliminate factors such as age, gender, and race. Older children however, may prefer human characteristic that are more similar to them.

Also cited by Nicholson and Pearson (2003) is Schrank (1982) who suggests various other factors when selecting therapeutic books for children of any age. These include: problems or situations that are of interest or relevance to children; developed characters that allow for sufficient identification; story depth that enriches the meaning of life; situations in the story that are appropriate for the developmental level of the children; reading levels that are appropriate to the students; well written stories; opportunities for students to express their alternative solutions to situations or problems; and stories that are free of biases.
Based on the suggestions by various authors, it is concluded that various factors need to be considered when using children’s literature to develop coping methods, and understanding loss and grief within a classroom setting. When students can identify with the literature and make real life connections, they will appreciate the support and see the whole experiences as meaningful.

**Using Literature in Various Ways**

“*Real life does indeed call for real books: books that provide information, comfort, and models for coping with life’s difficult times*” (Roberts & Crawford, 2008, p. 8).

Throughout my research paper I will investigate various pieces of children’s literature that address specific issues, and demonstrate and explore the intended, and practical outcomes that are attached to using these methods of support in the classroom. Roberts and Crawford (2008) discuss using “real books” for the following purposes:

**To Inform**

Children’s books are wonderful means for increasing children’s knowledge base so that they can experience life changing events, gain new knowledge, concepts, and understandings to one day help them through scary changes surrounding loss. Through books and discussion, children have the opportunity to be exposed to dealing with difficult times. Knowing what might happen in situations surrounding death and ultimately loss, lessens children’s fears associated with these difficult times. Thus, books are useful in that they open children’s eyes to the real circumstances related to loss.

Margaret Wise Brown’s *The Dead Bird* (1935) first helped children understand the realities of death. Throughout their childhood, many children encounter dead insects or animals but may not have experienced the death of a family member, friend, or pet. Through this calm,
respectful book, children can begin to make sense of the concept of death. Discussing a fictional
death is a far less emotional approach to this topic than discussing a person who has died
with whom the child had an intimate relationship.

To Comfort

Children’s literature can also provide comfort. In the article “Bibliotherapy” Cook,
Earles-Vollarth and Ganz (2006) explain that while reading, being read to or read with, students
are exposed to valuable insights as they empathize with literature’s characters and/or storyline.
The more that children can relate to a book, the stronger an emotional connection and sense of
comfort they will feel. This connection allows students to find comfort in realizing that there are
others who face similar situations, thus providing a sort of catharsis (Herbert & Furner, 1997).

An early piece of children’s literature that models a comforting means of coping for
children is Judith Viorst’s *The Tenth Good Thing About Barney* (1987). The main character in the
story reflects on the death of the family cat, Barney. The boy reflects on Barney’s life, telling the
10 good things about the cat in his eulogy. Remembering the good things about the deceased
is always comforting for children. A gentle approach to the emotions that are associated with loss
provides a starting point for discussion with children about the loss of a pet or a loved one.

Through sensitive texts and corresponding illustrations, the authors and illustrators of these types
of children’s books acknowledge the enduring love between a child and a loved one. Sharing
children’s literature about the death of an animal can provide a comforting opportunity for
children to express their feelings.
**To Model Coping Strategies**

Teachers can offer their students quality children’s books to model ways to cope with loss, by walking readers through possible solutions. Cook et al. (2006) suggest that well chosen stories provide a means for students to discuss the behaviours modeled by the characters and an understanding of the situations in which they find themselves, in place of talking about their own behaviours and situations. Thus, bibliotherapy offers children with metaphors for experiences, making it easier for those who previously were unable to express their thoughts and feelings verbally to learn ways to cope with problems (Pardeck, 1993).

**Approach/Extensions/Curriculum Links**

The approach to take when first confronting the topic of death in the classroom through children’s literature is something teachers may struggle with tremendously. Liotta Kolencik and Bernadoswki, in *Teaching with Books that Heal, Using Authentic Literature and Literacy Strategies to Help Children Cope with Everyday Problems* (2007), present the four segments of a literacy based lesson as: Discovery and Discussion: Setting the stage for reading; Exploration: During reading; Reading Between the Lines: Post Reading; and Beyond the Text: Lesson Extensions. This four part approach intends to pose metacognitive and reflective activities that will promote empathy and understanding, as well as reflect effective teaching practices for addressing, discussing and supporting students in difficult times.

Along with reading children’s literature, there are literacy lessons that can promote further support, understanding and thinking, as well as connections that can be made to the Ontario curriculum. The *Fully Alive* program of the Catholic curriculum for example, focuses on the ordinary experiences of family relationships, friendships, death, joys and disappointments.
Throughout the program students are encouraged to reflect, open themselves up to others and value their lives as unique manifestations of God’s love. Within this program, stories are a shared experience that students can examine, reflect on and discuss.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This study was conducted predominantly by qualitative research to obtain a thorough understanding of children’s experiences with loss, their grieving process and the positive impact that children’s literature has in helping develop coping methods. I carefully examined the available literature that pertains to the topic and conducted interviews with experienced teachers and educational professionals associated with a Catholic elementary school who have used children literature in situations of loss. These interviews provided me with insights into the use of children’s literature that discusses loss in various contexts and situations.

Procedure

i) Literature Review

The information for this study has been gathered by an extensive review of journal articles, books and online articles relating to children’s experiences with loss and grief, and using appropriate literature in the classroom to assist students with coping. The purpose of reviewing the literature was to gain background information on how using children’s literature is a beneficial tool for educators to support students who have experienced a loss, as well as informing their peers. These sources discuss and analyze various practices and methods of implementation, which have been compared to findings from the interviews.

These various literary works are by authors who have researched and studied children’s experiences with loss and grief, and have analyzed and implemented high-quality children’s literature to address and open up discussion of these topics. Through review of the literature I have drawn out specific themes and sub-topics that provide an extensive investigation of my
research topic. Along with literature presented and analyzed in the literature review, additional sources were discovered and referenced throughout the research study.

ii) Instruments of Data Collection

I conducted qualitative research for this paper, which was necessary to collect information on practical experiences. The mechanism used for the purpose of data collection was a general interview guide approach (Turner, 2010, p. 755) with consenting participants. I used this approach particularly due to the positions and specific experiences of the participants. The interviews were centered on experiences with children who have experienced loss and grief, and the use of children’s literature as a therapeutic tool. The questions allowed for thorough discussion and reflection upon the practice of responding appropriately to children’s experiences with loss and grief, and selecting, and exposing students to high-quality, age-appropriate children’s literature as a useful strategy. The primary source of data collection was three thirty-minute, one-on-one recorded interviews. I also collected additional data by engaging in two informal conversations where I was given verbal consent to take notes and use information. In preparation for my interviews I developed a list of interview questions, which were reviewed and approved by my research supervisor (SEE APPENDIX A). My research questions were divided into 7 categories: background information, teacher/educator’s use of children’s literature, strategies in practice, challenges/obstacles, enablers, teacher understanding and influence, and conclusions. Upon completion of my interviews I transcribed the voice recordings.

iii) Data Analysis

After transcribing my interviews it was apparent that I had collected a significant amount of information pertinent to my topic of study. Following the data collection process, I had begun
sifting through the information and met with my research supervisor having felt slightly overwhelmed with an abundance of useful data. During this meeting, it was concluded that I was on the right track and felt more confident in proceeding with the next steps; sorting my findings, coding and finding my themes.

Seidel (1998) discusses the process of coding and analyzing data. He describes the process using a comparison to putting together the pieces of a puzzle. He identified a common strategy used when solving a puzzle; identifying and sorting the puzzle pieces into groups by common identifiers. I kept this analogy in mind as I began to analyze my collected data and sort it into prevalent themes. I highlighted key words and concepts using different colours to identify different themes. I then organized and synthesized my data by creating a table. My table contained a column for my interview questions, a column for my themes, and columns for each of my five interviewees. I compiled the key points and the corresponding notable quotes given by each participant in response to each of my interview questions. This allowed me to arrange the participants’ responses in an organized manner so that I could examine and dissect my data methodologically. Once I completed this process I thoroughly reviewed my records and found reoccurring patterns in my interviewees’ responses, which I then sorted into overlapping emergent themes. As Seidel (1998) notes, some pieces will fit into the prescribed categories easily, others may be more difficult to sort. I found this to be apparent; however, this sorting process made analyzing the data much easier.

As stated by Wellington (2000), this process required numerous revisions, as I had to continuously refine the data to recognize and finalize the emergent themes. In
correspondence with my research advisor as well as a supportive instructor, I was able to
more successfully complete the data analysis process. I then gathered my themes and their
sub-headings, and correlated them with my literature review to write Chapter Four:
Findings. I then explored and reflected on implications and recommendations for
professional practice in Chapter Five: Discussion.

Participants

The participants in this study are teachers and educational professionals who have
experienced using, and are involved in promoting the use of children’s literature in helping
students cope with loss and grief. Through interviewing participants, I acquired useful data about
their knowledge and practice, as well as advice for my future practices. The participants all came
from the same Catholic elementary school setting and included a grade 1 classroom teacher, a
grade 2 classroom teacher, a teacher librarian, an administrator and a pastor; each with strong
backgrounds and powerful experiences.

Lucy is a grade 1 teacher with 12 years classroom experience in the primary division.
Stephanie is a teacher-librarian with 27 years teaching experience. She has taught as a classroom
teacher in the primary division, and for the latter 15 years she has been working as a teacher-
librarian. Victoria is a grade 2 teacher with 25 years teaching experience in the primary, junior
and intermediate divisions, and Special Education. James is currently the principal of a Catholic
elementary school with 30 years of teaching experience. Mark was ordained into priesthood in
1993, and is currently the pastor at the Catholic parish associated with this Catholic elementary
school.
I chose to interview these individuals in particular because I believed they would provide me with valuable insights from different perspectives on the “How,” “When” and “Why” of addressing students’ experiences of loss and grief through children’s literature. As a beginning teacher I want to gain knowledge from exemplary practitioners in the field of education to develop a strong foundation on how to inform, comfort and model the use of children’s literature when addressing death, loss, grief and helping students cope with this difficult situation in the classroom. Participants were selected based on the following criteria:

1. They hold positions within the educational profession and have had experiences specifically pertaining to the research topic.
2. They have valuable first hand experiences with loss, grief and children’s literature and are able to provide valuable insights to the research topic.
3. They sincerely care about their students and want to support their students.
4. They have demonstrated an interest and are willing to be involved with the research process and to open up about their experiences.

**Ethical Review Procedures**

To ensure the ethical research practices were put into place throughout the duration of the interviews and throughout the duration of the entire research process, I followed the ethical procedures for the Master of Teacher Program. This ensured careful consideration of the needs and concerns of my participants, that I conducted the appropriate oversight for the conduct of research, and that I established a basis for trust between myself and the research participants. The ethical review procedures began with an explanation of my research and presenting potential participants with the letter of consent (SEE APPENDIX B) to participate, which they then signed before participating in an interview. The letter of consent form directly states that the participants understand the topic of the interview that had been explained to them and that any questions that they may have had about the research had been answered sufficiently. Before signing the consent
letter, participants were made aware that if it was their decision to withdraw themselves from the research they were able to do so without penalty. Ethical standards remain in place so that participants are given the opportunity to revisit the transcribed interview responses, as well as obtain a copy of the transcription if they wish. Due to two of my participants having been uncomfortable with the process of being recorded, I engaged in informal conversation with them and was given verbal consent to include the information they shared for this study. My participants were all informed of the extent to which their contributions will be used, and that their participation and contributions to my research will be acknowledged.

Respect for my participants has been especially important throughout the processes of interviewing, transcription and analysis of findings. I have ensured that each of the participants are guaranteed that their contributions, names, and any identifiers will remain anonymous. For the purpose of this research each participant has been assigned a pseudonym which I have used to reference them. My research participants have been respected in all aspects and as a researcher I will ensure anonymity.

Limitations

Due to all participants coming from or being associated with the same Catholic elementary school, the scope of my study is limited. Additionally, the limited scope of this research is also related to a small sample size, time constraints, limited number of questions asked and a selective nature of my literature. There are various frameworks, theories and issues that could be addressed and acknowledged when discussing the unavoidable situation that a teacher may be faced with: children who are dealing with loss and grief. There are various types of losses that may occur in children’s lives, including death of a loved one, divorce, or a major
move. However, for the purpose of this study I am focusing on loss as a result of death. Further, there are endless opportunities for utilizing children’s literature and the benefits that it can bring to the process of understanding loss, and coping with loss that have not been touched on.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Introduction

The findings of this research have been divided into five prevalent themes and corresponding subheadings to dissect the collected data. These themes are closely connected and can be seen as informing one another. After carefully analyzing the research data, it has been revealed that these educators exhibit a common understanding of the outcomes associated with children’s literature, their knowledge of common obstacles; although personalized based on experiences, their understandings of the role of the educator, their understanding of children’s literature as an effective coping mechanism, and their knowledge of other plausible strategies that educators may use when dealing with such a situation.

OUTCOMES

*Children’s literature is a great conversation starter and provokes questions; the discussions that take place and the connections made after the story is read are most important.*

While differing in their approaches, individual experiences and assigned roles in the education system, all interviewees were explicit in their knowledge and understanding of children’s literature as a springboard for educators to initiate conversations, and to engage in dialogue with children to explore, express and connect with their feelings and emotions as they come to experience loss. This was reinforced as interviewees cited specific experiences with the use of children’s literature as being instrumental in supporting students. Regardless of their roles, experiences and their level of expertise in this area, they recognized the importance of children’s literature. All interviewees articulated the role that children’s literature has played in their own experiences as educators and how it exposes students to a topic that unfortunately is often shielded from children. The information they provided correlates directly with Dreyer’s (1985)
three qualities of children’s literature when supporting grieving students, previously mentioned in the literature review: *universalization*, *catharsis* and *insight*.

Teacher librarian Stephanie is the main source of support, knowledge and expertise in the area of children’s literature. She articulated the power of children’s literature through the opportunities and the outcomes it provides students when read to them:

- It can help students to connect to their fears, their doubts, and their feelings. Literature can help to spark the conversation. It’s the one that if the discussion needs to be had it’s the one that will start it, or you could start it through it, but it’s up to the adults that read them along with their students and children to be sensitive enough to draw out the connections that need to be made to match the need of the child. Even using literature might help provoke questions, there’s some kids that don’t naturally question and they just let life come out in front of them...Literature and after you read it with your own children or your students will help bring out those questions and help them understand. I just find it’s a great introduction to a theme, a great introduction to a conversation, and they love being read to so why not open up that conversation in a comforting, secure way.

Stephanie’s perspective is supported by Branch and Bison (2007); they emphasize the importance of taking action by opening up discussion with the appropriate literature to assist children with the process of grief. Stephanie emphasized the post-story discussion that takes place throughout her interview, she said for example, “Reading it is one thing, then making the connection. It’s the discussion that we have afterwards that is the most important.” It is essential for children to make these connections and learn the skills needed to cope with the pain, anger, and sadness and to emerge with a sense of calmness, hope, and resilience (Lowe, 2009).

Grade 1 teacher Lucy expanded on successful outcomes when she described one of her experiences. A young female student in her class had lost her grandfather and grieved in silence, showing no sign of emotion. Her concerned mother contacted Lucy asking her if she could read a
book she had bought for her daughter called “Heaven is for Real for Kids” by Todd Burpo (2010). She hoped that her daughter would open up after being read to by her teacher, in a supportive classroom setting with her peers. Lucy talked about the outcome of this situation:

> When I read the story...it allowed her, I don’t know, I don’t know what it broke in her to feel that she could talk about it...we were all kind of just listening...the other children were speaking up and telling her ‘Oh, my grandfather is there too’ or you know, ‘That happened to me too’. It was almost like a support group and it was interesting to see the other little ones stepping forward and saying the same thing, so I think that helped her too.

Lucy’s example demonstrates how children’s literature prompts discussion, expression of thoughts and emotions, and activates students’ prior knowledge when they can relate to a situation in a story. Wolfelt (1991) states that often children respond to death with an apparent lack of feelings due to emotional shock. However, like Lucy’s student, when children know that they are not the only one who has experienced a loss they feel a sense of comfort. Grade 2 teacher Victoria discussed approaching the topic as a read aloud, therefore making it a part of her literacy program. She talked about how her students have reacted after a read aloud:

> Some have cried, some get really emotional they don’t understand, lots of personal stories. They want to share a lot and they have lots of personal questions. So, ‘My dog died, my grandfather died, my bird died’, so everybody has a story about death, everybody thinks they know about death.

Lowe (2009) recognizes these read alouds as a form of therapeutic reading, particularly due to the expression of feelings and emotions that both Lucy’s and Victoria’s students displayed. Their insights reaffirm that when children are given the opportunity to discover that they are not alone in experiencing loss, it allows for a sense of comfort.

Principal James talked about using literature as a starter piece, to broach the subject and open up conversations. Consistent with the research gathered and analyzed in the literature
review, evidently, with the guidance of an educator children’s literature provides students with an outlet for expression, activates prior knowledge and allows them to connect with the story and its characters. Though participants did not advocate using death related children’s literature routinely, these types of stories prove to be particularly beneficial when the situation arises. One of the main reasons bibliotherapy is effective in school settings is that it demonstrates that teachers, librarians, administrators, counsellors and other educators know and understand their students’ needs (Cook et al., 2006). My participants are not qualified psychologists or counsellors, but they are definitely supportive adults who can discuss students’ feelings and make the appropriate connections with literature. Through books and discussion, children get the opportunity to be exposed to emotions and difficult life situations that they may have never understood, or had known how to deal with before.

OBSTACLES

_Educators may struggle with overcoming their own discomforts and fears as adults and need to avoid instilling personal beliefs about death in students._

All interviewees expressed a rather challenging role for the educator when addressing death in the classroom and supporting the grieving process. When asked about the obstacles that educators face when supporting grief in their classrooms and/or school their responses were generally consistent with one another’s. Like most children, many adults are uncomfortable, afraid and too overcome with emotions when a loss occurs or when the topic of death arises, causing them to remain silent. Additionally, as an educator it can be quite difficult to support students without displaying personal biases, values and beliefs. In the Catholic school system religious beliefs are common amongst all, however, familial and cultural values and beliefs continue to exist.
Lucy described that the most prevalent obstacle she faces is a lack of information of her students’ existing knowledge and their familial beliefs:

Basically it’s just what they’ve been taught at home. I don’t know because some families don’t talk about it, it’s a taboo, or it’s too painful for them maybe to talk about it, but then that pain translates into the children an idea that maybe it’s not a thing to talk about, that it becomes something that you know shouldn’t be talked about and we just have to deal with it silently...I truly believe that it should be an open discussion. I feel that it is one of the best ways to grieve and to cope, to talk about it and give them the avenue to express their feelings. But, I don’t want my beliefs to offend anyone that doesn’t feel the same way, so I try to gauge where they’re coming from, and then you know take it from there.

These types of situations are unavoidable and can become problematic for any educator. It is increasingly problematic however for the grieving child. Lowe (2009) discusses how damaging it can be for children when they are not informed or misinformed about a situation of loss that has occurred in their lives. If left undiscussed, children are left to cope on their own and to form their own conclusions, which can be emotionally and socially damaging. Nonetheless, it is the adults in the children’s lives who hold the responsibility of providing them with the support they need. It is for this particular reason that reading children’s literature is appropriate. As claimed by Levine (1999), when stories reflect life’s challenges students can unconsciously make connections to their personal situations, particularly when they are handled in a sensitive and appropriate way. If unsure, educator’s can gather as much information as possible to provide the best guidance that students require without overstepping boundaries.

Stephanie on the other hand addressed the reactions of the adults; teachers in particular and their personal challenges with discussing death and confronting grief:

At times just the reaction of the adults. I think some teachers aren’t comfortable, not always, addressing it and talking about it because I don’t
think, well some adults are very bad with it, with overcoming their grief you know...If they’ve had a loss themselves of someone that they’ve had a hard time getting over it. I think if they’re uncomfortable, I’m talking about teachers, uncomfortable approaching the subject with their class because that will evoke all kinds of emotion from all kinds of kids and that’s a lot to handle, so that’s one of the obstacles.

Additional to teachers’ feelings of discomfort she went on to say:

We’re almost too protective too because we’re afraid someone is going to get upset and so many different kids at different levels and levels of understanding on it that, I think that’s an obstacle of it. That is an obstacle as well, we are very protective of our children, our own children and the children that we teach, so you know we don’t want to upset them.

Teachers have their own discomforts in discussing the topic of death with students. They may fear the topic of discussion themselves and/or boast overprotective tendencies as adults. These are signs of sensitivity, compassion, and concern for young children and their emotions. However, one must consider whether fear and overprotectiveness could potentially be harmful for children during a time of loss, contradictory to their motives. As mentioned in the literature, it is unsympathetic of adults to avoid sensitive topics such as death with young children. As an adult who has frequent contact with children, it is important to be conscious of a child’s pain following loss and to put their needs first.

Victoria also touched on the protection of the child, however she spoke more specifically to the circumstance of loss that has occurred. Refraining from conveying personal biases, feelings and opinions are also mentioned as obstacles.

So it’s very difficult to help a grieving child knowing it’s self-inflicted so that’s an obstacle for sure, and challenging not to show your own bias, your own feelings and your own opinions, and just to do what’s best for the job, just get the job done.
Even the most experienced teachers may find themselves uncomfortable discussing the topic of death and dying, and may even avoid the subject altogether. Naturally, individuals turn away from such topics or approach them with uncertainty. However, coping with death is crucially important to children in developing the skills to handle life’s challenges. I will note an important statement made by grade 1 teacher Lucy during our interview, “It’s important to just, even if you’re not comfortable talking about it just to let them talk, just listen and sometimes that’s all you need to do is just let them say what they want to say and that’s enough.” Children deserve the opportunity to express themselves through the support of their teachers and through literature that allows them to make meaningful connections.

**ROLE OF THE EDUCATOR**

*When approaching grief with their students, educators need to demonstrate openness; take an approach that practices and teaches empathy; be a good listener and a supportive adult; know and understand students and their situations; and be aware of different children’s literature titles that might be appropriate for use with their students.*

Educators have the power to provide their students with the resources to help them get through a loss; children’s literature is pivotal in increasing students’ knowledge. All of my interviewees saw this to be true through their varying responses, each demonstrating a thorough understanding of their roles. Though varying in their approaches to establishing their roles in such situations, their intentions for addressing and supporting such situations are alike. It is so important for educators to express sensitivity towards the circumstances their students are dealing with and to be conscious of their students’ emotions, level of understanding and individual personalities when addressing the topic of death and selecting literature to share. Before engaging in a sensitive discussion, the classroom environment must be set up in a way that promotes comfortability with the expression of thoughts, ideas and emotions. Children will
sense compassion; their teachers’ willingness and openness to act as a supportive adult will provide them with a feeling of comfort, which is beneficial to their grieving process. Opening up the topic of death with students requires the selection of high-quality children’s literature that students can identify with and make meaningful connections to; gaining knowledge and developing understandings to help them through their loss. Lucy shared how her relationship with her students has played a role when addressing such a difficult topic:

You can’t help but create a bond, and I tell them all the time ‘You know we’re a classroom family...I’m trying to guide you and teach you just like mom and dad do.’ So I try to just let them know I care...in hopes that they could come to me if there’s anything wrong, if they want to talk.

Her willingness to support students and provide them with an open, caring and safe environment is clear in the way she describes the connection she establishes with her young students. She also made insightful comments during her interview such as, “I just allow them to know that if they want to talk about it they can, it’s not something I will shut down and refuse them to address or you know explore with questions and what not.”

Teacher librarian Stephanie shared valuable insights on how she establishes an open environment in the library:

Okay we talk a lot lately about student voice, promoting student voice...we talk about it in a big group, then a small group, and then we do pair share...sharing their ideas and then bringing out the ideas to the full group. I hope that’s promoting it’s okay to talk...helping the environment be conducive to listening...I also for my older students do a lot of virtual stuff online...They’re anonymous when they reply to books and talk about them. So if the theme of grief or loss came up in one of the novels...or a situation came up in one of the novels...they can actually reply and tell the rest of the group how they feel but no one knows who they are and at the end they don’t have to share who they are...It’s providing an environment that if they need to say something they feel they might be judged on their name is not there right.
Promoting student voice on issues that are important to learning and meaningful to real life situations is critical to developing in students a feeling that they can express themselves, and that their thoughts are valued. What is special about Stephanie’s emphasis on student voice is that it reaches all students while exposing them to quality literature, and gives them an opportunity to express themselves without judgement and through different means.

Victoria’s described her approach to fostering a supportive, caring and trusting environment for her students:

I always talk about our school class being a family, so we’re a family in the classroom, and then we are also a family at school, and then we are part of God’s family. So I tell them, ‘You have your family at home, then you have your family in the classroom, then you have your family at school, your family at church which is bigger, and then everybody.’ I try to show them the different circles of people that love them, so we talk about how we care for each other and how we stand up for each other. We do a classroom promise, it talks about being a caring environment in the class, then we do virtue education so every month we have a different virtue and then of course our religion, we have our Family Life curriculum.

Describing the relationships that exist in her students’ lives as different types of families provides them with an understanding of love, comfort and empathy. It is important to note her connection to faith as well; an important relationship to establish and adhere to within a Catholic school.

Handling the situation of grief in the classroom requires an empathetic approach by teachers. Lucy shared a frequent practice that occurs in her classroom:

For example we do prayers everyday and sometimes I’ll ask the children if they have any special intentions....and then kind of just allowing them to talk about it if they feel like it...and I just listen, I let them talk about it just to kind of gauge how they’re feeling and just let them release whatever it is that they want to say. So I do that with them I just listen, I just stand back for those minutes right. I try to have the child talk about their loved one that has
passed. I try not to focus on the negative you know, that they’re gone, that they’ve passed and what not, and just try to focus on the fact that they’re in Heaven with Jesus now and you can still talk to them in your prayers.

The practice of opening up conversation through prayer is specifically important to the Catholic school system. Allowing students to feel comfort through faith and prayer gives students an additional outlet when seeking support. Lucy’s administrator James demonstrated support for this practice throughout his school by saying that faith base is common for everybody so it allows that sense of community and understanding of death from a Catholic lens; there’s a homogenous grouping to start with to allow for some comfort. Within the Catholic system students and educators always have religion, their faith to fall back on providing them with additional guidance in times of struggle.

Conducive to a faith based setting are educators who act as good listeners and supportive adults. Lucy explained her position on this saying:

I think it’s important that the teacher just becomes someone neutral that they know they can bounce ideas off of or ask questions about things that maybe they can’t at home, and feel like they are going to get an honest answer and they’re not going to be judged, and there’s no worry of them offending or anything like that. I don’t want to say a friend, because you don’t want to cross that boundary with students, but just a really good listener and just a support system there I think is important.

It is important for educators to recognize that if the children want to talk, there should be an adult there to listen to them. Dr. Alan Wolfelt (1990), validates that, “We learn much about how children view death by simply listening to them” (p. 19). Establishing an environment and a relationship that provide these expressive opportunities will assist students through trying times.

Victoria provided a similar notion of support within her classroom:
You have to have a relationship with them. You need to be approachable, you need to be open because otherwise they aren’t going to talk to you they’re not going to feel safe. You have to have, I always say you have to have a relationship with the kids, they need to like you, and you need to genuinely like them, you need to get to know them, and when you’re caring and approachable they’ll open up to you because they’ll feel safe.

The faith component that is present within a Catholic school is where the role of Pastor Mark is important. When I spoke to him he mentioned handling situations of loss by taking a “more liturgical approach” to his interactions with young children. Through his conversations he gives children the opportunity to talk, while mentioning “how incredible God is” to provide children comfort.

To select the most effective literature and achieve powerful outcomes, the environment, relationship and level of understanding between educators and their students must be well established. Selecting the most appropriate literature to use with students is critical to developing the necessary skills for coping and understanding loss. Teacher-librarian, Stephanie is the expert on choosing the most suitable literature:

Well, you have to know your students, you have to know the child because knowledge of how they take things, how deep thinkers they are, I think that’s important. Don’t be afraid to talk, don’t make the conversation directly related to the child that has the loss, make it more of a big group, small group setting...Find good books that will naturally lead to questions and sharing of thoughts on the subject.

Stephanie’s perspective of the educator’s supportive role focuses on knowing your students in order to choose the most appropriate literature and to approach the topic. This point of view is cited in the work by Schrank (1982), who emphasized selecting books that amongst many other factors contain problems and situations that students can identify with, and provide students with a chance to express their personal experiences and alternative solutions to their problems.
Stephanie continued by saying:

When I go buying I’m looking for those books that are sensitive to the subject, that talk to it, that talk about the loss. Not that it wouldn’t be in an appropriate way, but in a way that’s sensitive to where the child might be...Books that try to correspond to the type of experience the child is having...It has to have a Heaven component in a Catholic school. It needs to offer hope...and characters, if there are books with characters their age and if they’re younger and it has a younger character in the story, that connection is easier to make so I tend to look for those as well.

Like Lucy and Victoria, Stephanie touched on the Catholic influence of her approach. Books that connect students to their faith, offering them hope in that there is a special place where their loved ones have gone is important to the grieving process in the Catholic school system. I have provided a list of titles of children’s literature for educators to use when such a situation arises (SEE APPENDIX C).

**COPING MECHANISM**

*Children’s literature that deals with grief evokes emotions, and when shared sensitively and empathetically by teachers, can send a positive message to students that it is okay to talk about their feelings and their loss.*

Children’s literature elicits meaning, connects with emotions, experiences and situations, and provides knowledge, understanding and support for children while coping with difficult situations. When asked about selecting the most appropriate and effective children’s literature, and developing and enhancing particular skills in their students when dealing with loss and grief, interviewees displayed the utmost concern for their students’ emotions. They strive to develop the necessary skills for coping and understanding death not only within those students who have experienced such situations personally, but also for those who have not. In doing this, it is important for educators to model sensitivity, empathy and that it is okay to talk about the feelings and emotions that they are experiencing.
Teacher-Librarian Stephanie said:

I want them to understand that crying is okay...I want them to understand that memories are important and to hold onto them. Skills like empathy and compassion, because if we have the conversation in a big group that’s what I want everyone else to understand, and the child that is going through it, they’re dealing with it in a deeper more personal level, but everyone around I hope that they get that compassion comes from knowing and learning about what’s happening. Emotions, and understanding the feeling part of it.

Stephanie’s response thoroughly emphasizes the skills that children can develop by means of exposure to children’s literature. She mentioned her own emotions:

If I get weepy we talk about you know, ‘Why is Mrs. sad?’, or ‘What brought that emotion about?’ so they know that certain stories affect me in a certain way, and that’s okay and we talk about the connection...You know what? They like to talk, they like to talk.

Making note of her own emotions is a way of helping students understand the power of feelings, and that expressing emotions is a sign of experiencing a connection to the story being read.

According to Branch and Binson (2007), demonstrating expression of personal emotions is so important for children to observe as they often mimic the reactions of an adult. If the adult is demonstrating little or no emotion, children may turn away from grieving, seeking help from others, and developing coping skills. Victoria added to the use of children’s literature and included what she aims for students to get out of the experience:

I use it all the time, so if I have, not just a student who has lost a parent, but just in general I find that students, especially kindergarten students and young primary students don’t have any concept of death. They really don’t understand it, so you need to read lots and lots of books just to give them an idea...Specifically the virtue of empathy, trying to be able to put themselves in someone else’s shoes who maybe have lost a parent and how do they feel, and just to teach them walking in love because its difficult.
Reading aloud to children is a strategy that not only helps students cope, but also helps them to understand and develop important character skills such as empathy. Lowe (2009) discusses how it is “natural for readers to analyze, empathize, and internalize story attributes” (p. 2). When children display these reactions to a story, it is important that their teacher helps guide them in making connections to themselves and to their own lives. Lucy discussed her choices of literature, ensuring a positive message is relayed to her students:

I like to choose examples that have a positive outcome. Now this book [Heaven is for Real for Kids] was a good one, it had a really good positive message. It was you know Heaven is a beautiful place, it’s filled with love and all of that so if I had to talk to them or read to them again I would use this book.

She went on to say that she wants her students to develop, “Faith in God that He’s there, that He exists, and He’s going to take care of us when we’re gone, and there’s another place for us to go to it’s not just this, and that it’s not anything to be afraid of.” After reading a story with a positive message, in order for the experience to be most effective educators must explore the children’s reactions and guide the discussion. Along with that note, Stephanie stated:

The ability to talk about it without fear, to understand it’s a part of life...To appreciate the value of life...An appreciation for God and to understand that people feel the loss because they’ve loved right, and so that’s a wonderful thing that they’ve had. To celebrate that part of why they’re grieving is because they’ve had a loving relationship with whoever they’ve lost, so that’s what I hope, those are the things I hope to bring.

As demonstrated by participants, with an approach that models positive coping mechanisms; the situation, the characters, the words, and the illustrations in a story can allow for children to see how to support one another’s emotions. Roberts and Crawford (2008) support this in saying,
“Teachers can thoughtfully offer them [books] to children...in an honest, open, and respectful way; introduce literature as a tool for developing coping skills; invite children to read together; and create safe places for talk and discussion” (p. 8). When educators provide students with quality children’s literature they can bring about these reactions. It is important to recognize these educators’ mentions of Catholic beliefs, including God and Heaven. To them, children’s books are vehicles of increasing children’s knowledge so that they can encounter life-altering events prepared with the skills and understandings to one day guide them through the challenges surrounding loss (Roberts & Crawford, 2008). In a Catholic school it is often important for these books to expose students to religious beliefs, particularly for another means of support during difficult times. Victoria shared with me that she often relies on literature by pastor and author Max Lucado. His biblically inspired children’s stories desire to share God’s love, offering children and the brokenhearted with hope and encouragement. Pastor Mark named Joseph’s Catholic Bookstore as a place that he has often visited and contacted when in search of children’s literature that supports grief and loss with a Catholic perspective.

OTHER STRATEGIES

Other strategies to help teachers deal with students coping with grief includes making use of professional support and sharing resources, and in a Catholic school, incorporating religion and faith.

Selecting and implementing children’s literature to support grief often requires the collaborative effort of various individuals. I want to emphasize the importance of seeking assistance from colleagues when selecting high-quality children’s literature to support grieving students. When educators collaborate with and support one another they learn from one another, become better practitioners and their students have higher outcomes. Furthermore, I gathered that
though children’s literature is a significant avenue of knowledge and support for children, there are additional means and resources to assist educators when such situations arise. Four of the participants highlighted the support from colleagues, educational professionals, board level assistance and their faith. Pastor James acts as support for the entire school community, but, he also mentioned the names of professional programs and services that he often turns to that specialize in supporting grief.

Thoughtful practitioners will want to look for children’s literature that goes beyond an instructional role. Though these types of books may be helpful in providing and clarifying information, literature that is less didactic and more inviting should be considered. Often educators lack knowledge and expertise in selecting the literature that best supports a particular situation. Participants commented on seeking professional support when obtaining children’s literature. School principal James talked of the teacher librarian knowing a broad spectrum of what’s available. With that being said, his staff member, Grade 2 teacher Victoria referenced her teacher-librarian as well saying, “The teacher librarian would help me by giving me resources; books and things I can use for students in my class.” It is clear that Stephanie, the teacher-librarian is committed to her role as a guide and that her colleagues view her as a main source of information. She said, “I would hope that I am a support in trying to put resources in their hands to be able to use for their classrooms.” As an instructional partner, the teacher-librarian plays a leadership, and collaborative role with her colleagues to successfully implement children’s literature for a specific purpose. Cook et al. (2006) support these findings when discussing librarians as excellent resources for teachers who seek assistance in selecting children’s literature, and planning and implementing activities for bibliotherapy.
Professional Support

It's not just the individual skill of a teacher that raises student outcomes; rather, teachers become better at their craft when they have the space to collaborate with and learn from one another. - (Mishook, 2011, p. 1)

The support of professionals whose practice is rooted in direct involvement with children dealing with a wide range of challenges plays a prominent role when a child is experiencing grief. It is the partnership between teachers, social workers, other educators or support staff as well as parents that contribute to a network of support systems and services. For educators, the presence of these knowledgeable colleagues within the school provide them with extra assistance when a situation of loss arises.

When asked, “What support do teachers have in dealing with these difficult situations?” grade 2 teacher Lucy stated, “We have our social worker and we have our child and youth worker in the building”. Teacher-Librarian Stephanie also demonstrated awareness of the support from other professionals in the field if required:

I know that there is support from our social worker, I know that there is board staff, there is a crisis centre as well, so if we were to need support as a staff I know that the board would have people that can come in and speak to us.

Grade 2 teacher Victoria expanded on the available support from colleagues, professionals, and services when she said:

The social worker, teacher-librarian, parish priest, sometimes even the youth program coordinator, she’s really good too and I’ve gone to see her as well with grieving kids...The social worker would give me strategies...another person who would support me is the SERT teacher, she would give me strategies and contacts as well. I may not know for example that there is a grieving group that meets at the funeral home once a month, but the social worker and the SERT would...Our colleagues have their own experiences...Teacher librarian, social worker, principal, special education teacher. At the board level we have itinerant teachers that can help, there is the parish, and there is the program they have for staff it’s for support so there is counseling, psychologists...It’s separate from the board but covered by the
board so it’s confidential. You can go and access their services if you feel that you need them and it remains confidential, so it’s something that the board offers to staff that you can take them up on.

Through ongoing interaction with the students in the form of individual counselling, group interactions, or social and academic activities, the child youth worker and social worker seek to provide ongoing support.

James spoke of his job as administrator being to support those who are providing support. As a key guide for his staff, he brings years of knowledge and experience. He is a source of information for his staff, provides them with direction and offers them advice on the most appropriate approach to take when initial strategies taken may not produce successful outcomes. However he himself seeks additional support from the board binder, social workers, priest, parish and Tragic Events Response Team (TERT). TERT provides resources and various means of support for schools within its board. He expanded by saying that it offers practical materials such as letters to go home to families, to classrooms, and to staff. They can anticipate things that may come up and they provide coping strategies, for example, keeping a book of remembrance in the front foyer of the school. TERT provides resources for bereavement, prayers and liturgies, and numerous resources for principals and teachers.

Additionally, making connections to the Ontario Curriculum can be seen as an avenue of support for educators in addressing the topic of death in a practical way. For example, Grade 1 teacher Lucy takes the approach that death is a part of life, it’s a natural cycle of things. She explained, “In grade one they’re learning about living things in science, so they’re learning that everything is born, it grows, it changes, and then it dies, and so I try to link that to our life in that
you know we’re born, we grow, we change, we die too.” Tying this concept into the science curriculum is an easy approach to introducing death and helping students understand that it is a part of life. There are also many classroom activities that children can engage in that tie into various areas of the curriculum.

Religion and Faith

“In When a Child You Love is Grieving, Harold Ivan Smith (2004) states that the above words of Jesus can be rephrased, “Blessed are the children who mourn, for they must be comforted” (p. 33). As mentioned in previous statements by the participants in this study, within the Catholic school system religion and faith become sources of comfort and support for educators and their students. When helping a child, or children understand death, and comforting them through grief, faith becomes a significant source of strength, hope and encouragement. In addition to reaching out to the parish and the pastor, prayer, reflection and discussions about religion are common strategies when grieving in a Catholic school.

Grade 2 teacher Victoria stated, “We’re fortunate, we teach in the Catholic system so we can bring religion and our faith into it...We’re fortunate because we can draw back on that.” She seeks comfort in praying with her students, saying “We pray for the people who have died and for the family.” Smith (2004) emphasizes practicing prayer when he references Elizabeth Reed, who reminds us that it is natural for children to pray for those they love and have lost. Preserving the memory of those through prayer is extremely helpful for children. However, Smith (2004) stresses the importance of praying with the child as it provides opportunity for discussion.
Administrator James and Pastor Mark both referred to *Rainbows for All Children Canada*, a volunteer-driven program that provides support for grieving youth and adults. The program works in partnership with schools, faith communities and social services to create grief support systems and assist vulnerable, grief-stricken children in various capacities (Rainbows Canada, 2011). This program, highly spoken of by these participants is often contacted as a reliable source of support when such situations occur and require appropriate action. The program’s website also offers numerous resources and an extensive amount of information for individuals to access.

Though not mentioned by interviewees, religious education qualifications are required by the Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association (OECTA) in order to teach in the Catholic school system. Throughout these courses, Catholic educators are given resources and practical strategies to align their current practices with the voice of the church, helping them make faithful connections when supporting grief. In addition, the *Fully Alive* program in the Catholic curriculum is closely associated with religious education and addresses various aspects of life, and life’s experiences.

**Additional Support**

Along with seeking support from colleagues, professionals, programs and religion there are alternative strategies that teachers may utilize. These may be their own personal approaches. For example, Grade 2 teacher Victoria shared a common practice:

I’ll put together a package for them. So I’ll tell the parents, I’ll say, ‘Listen, I’ll put together a package and there will be a little colouring book in there, pages to draw on and colour, and crayons, and there will be some books to read, and maybe a little video,’ but they all have to do with death and grieving just at a children’s level to help them.
Victoria provides this package for her students as something extra to help them through grieving. In *A Rainbow of Hope* author Linda Hagler (2005) references Gaffney (1998) who says, “As they are allowed to talk and later draw pictures, their artwork may provide insight into their perception of the loss” (p. 12). Alternatively, some children may feel more comfortable expressing themselves through drawing, colouring or writing. She also discussed a different approach she takes when addressing the topic of death with students, besides using children’s literature:

> Usually through celebrations, we have celebrations like Remembrance Day and Easter that speak specifically to death. So Remembrance Day being the first one in the year you talk about how some of the soldiers didn’t make it home, they gave their lives, and that’s usually the first time they’re hearing about death and there’s a lot of questions about it. Then, Easter again because Jesus dies and then comes back to life, so usually through celebrations.

Important celebratory days such as the ones Victoria mentioned occur throughout the year and naturally bring up the topic of death. This provides an avenue for discussion as students may have many questions and concerns. There are books and resources that offer suggestions and activities for teachers to approach the topic effectively in an authentic way. Smith (2004) provides a myriad of practical ideas, strategies and activities to engage in with a child who is grieving. Some of his suggestions that may be useful for educators to know, besides or along with those that have already been discussed are: creating artwork, journal writing, creating a memory box, planting something, writing and sending cards, poetry writing, and writing letters. Additionally, *Growing Through Grief: A K-12 Curriculum to Help Young people Through All Kinds of Loss* by Donna O’Toole (1989), which was lent to me by a colleague, provides a multitude of suggestions, strategies, activities and resources for educators to implement with students from grades K-12. All of
these activities have the potential to be integrated into various areas of the Ontario curriculum, and incorporated into daily routines while offering children grief therapy simultaneously.
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Research in supporting students through grief with the use of high-quality children’s literature has provided me with valuable insights and has reinforced existing understandings of this topic. Conducting this research study in an area of personal interest has allowed me to reflect on my knowledge, understandings and practice as a beginning primary-junior teacher. My perspectives on the value of children’s literature to open up discussion, increase understanding and provide children with comfort has been affirmed through the literature and my findings.

Death is the most permanent loss that we face; because children lack the knowledge and skills to adjust to these situations, they are tremendously vulnerable to loss. Following a loss, there is no best way for a child to grieve and there are no prescribed approaches to eliminating the pain from children. However, as educators we have the responsibility to show compassion and help that child, or those children who are grieving. Through exposure to children’s literature that addresses the topic of death and models positive healing strategies, we are creating an open communication within our classrooms that support expression. Though a challenging topic, these practical strategies for educational professionals to approach these inevitable situations are caring, understanding and compassionate. Knowing their students and the support that is available can help educators choose practices that fit specifically with the children’s needs, and the message that they wish to send their students.

My experience in conducting this research through the examination of literature and conducting interviews with educational professionals has deepened my knowledge of the power that children’s literature has to help, comfort and guide students through difficult situations. I
understand that this is a very difficult and sensitive topic for many individuals, both children and adults. However, the power that high quality, carefully selected children’s literature has to address that difficult topic, to spark that often dreaded conversation, to raise those burning questions that students may have, and to bring comfort in releasing emotions is comforting for me as an educator. As a beginning primary-junior teacher, I know that it is crucial that I create an environment that allows for the building of strong, trusting relationships with my students so that meaningful discussion about sensitive topics can take place. Author Mem Fox (2001/2008) sums it up perfectly:

   The fire of literacy is created by the emotional sparks between a child, a book, and the person reading. It isn’t achieved by the book alone, nor by the child alone, nor by the adult who’s reading aloud—it’s the relationship winding between all three, bringing them together in easy harmony (p. 10).

In response to this quote, I have learned through my findings that it is my responsibility as an educator work closely with my students to help them make meaningful connections to literature, and to support their emotions. Most importantly, I have learned through this research study that the most effective teacher is the caring, compassionate, and supportive teacher.

**Connections to Literature**

   There is a relationship between the information collected, the themes generated in the literature review, and the findings gathered through interviews with practicing teachers and educational professionals.

   A review of the literature establishes evidence that children’s literature offers students the opportunity to connect and find solutions through the characters and situations within a story,
and thus within themselves. As educators we can use children’s literature as a method of expression to provide our students with the guidance and resources they need to cope and heal (Lowe, 2009). All participants agree that children’s literature is an effective way to address the topic of death with students and to help guide them through the grieving process. In addition, they believe that children should be involved in the grieving process. Literature supports that reading children’s literature to or with students can jump-start insightful conversations; though some children may not express their feelings initially, they will absorb what they hear. Reading a book where the characters deal with death is be beneficial and helpful for children. As Lowe (2009) states, “Individuals of all ages appear to lose themselves in stories” (p. 1), as educators we can utilize children’s literature as an expressive means to provide the appropriate guidance, resources and support that our students require so that they can cope and heal.

Participants emphasized the importance of the role of the educator, which I view as an important element in effectively paving the road to healing and coping for the children we teach. When I speak of the role of the educator, I refer to the avenue in which they approach the topic of death and grieving. As confirmed by participants, the relationship that educators build with their students is crucial to achieve successful outcomes when discussing this topic. Safety, trust, comfort and empathy are key ingredients to getting to know your students, establishing openness, understanding their situations and being a supportive adult in their lives.
Once this environment is established, educators can then seek out children’s literature that is most appropriate and effective for use with their students. Sitler (2008) validates that it is our responsibility to build a foundation for the students we teach. Through exposing children to children’s literature that addresses death we are creating a space within our classrooms for open communication. By taking this approach we are educating as well as offering social and emotional guidance. Using high quality children’s literature can bring hope into the lives of our students.

**IMPLICATIONS**

**As a Researcher**

Though a considerable of information was collected, this project does have its limitations. The number of literature sources examined and the sample size of the participants interviewed were limited due to the timeframe of this research project. In addition, interviews were conducted focusing on practicing educators from one particular Catholic elementary school, limiting the scope of the findings. Examining the perspectives, responses and approaches from public school educators would be an interesting comparison and perhaps much broader in scope. I imagine that it may be slightly more challenging within a public school to select the most appropriate and effective children’s literature, due to differing beliefs, and faiths. Regardless, literature is a highly effective approach to introducing the topic and opening up discussion, increasing understanding, reflection and offering students hope.

Next steps would be to speak with educators from different educational settings and if possible, students who have experienced grief and have found comfort through children’s literature. Speaking to students would be particularly beneficial. Though the educator must take
the appropriate approach to assisting their students with grief, the practice is more about the benefits for the students. Further, observations of a read aloud to gather insights on specific teacher practices and student behaviour during such a situation would be of value.

This study provides general approaches to using children’s literature as a means of comforting students and helping them cope with grief, as opposed to step by step instructions. However, it is important to keep in mind that each group of students, each child, each situation and each educator is different. This approach requires personal perspectives, knowledge and understanding of your students.

It is important to note that this study forms the early stages of ongoing discussion about the benefits of children’s literature and the principles of its approach to helping children cope with grief following a loss.

As a teacher

It is fundamental for educators to understand that forming a trusting relationship with students is a process. To comfort students and engage in discussion about sensitive situations and corresponding emotions, it is critical that we genuinely care for our students and provide them with a safe and comforting environment. Observing and listening diligently is essential to getting to know and understand our students. We must have a keen sense of our students’ knowledge and understanding about death. In addition, it is important to recognize the individuality of our students and the particulars regarding their feelings, behaviours and visible reactions to a loss. As educators we are often the adult who is most aware of a children’s pain from a loss; seeing the sadness and difficulties daily. It is important to remember that ignoring the situation is detrimental for a child’s healing process; however, it is also important to gauge when the child is
prepared to address the situation and their emotions. It is our responsibility as educators to “work with children in safe, nurturing environments to facilitate their engagement in the process of healing” (Branch & Binson, 2007, p. 43). Thus, building strong and sincere relationships with our students, and connecting with them on multiple levels is of benefit for them and for us.

Teachers are not therapists nor are we trained to be, but we are skilled observers of children. We must acknowledge that when a child is grieving we cannot solve the entire issue, but can we comfort, assist and be of support for our students during these times. I have learned that though it can be difficult to see a student’s pain and suffering, by simply acting as a compassionate adult in their lives we can make a difference. The child that we notice, listen to, or comfort may never say “thank you” but these acts of compassion and care do not go unappreciated, unnoticed and most definitely not without a sense of comfort.

As educators we can create an environment and implement strategies that can contribute positively to building resilience in children. Children’s literature that models coping mechanisms, provides information and promotes coping and resilience in children are positive contributions. Bernard (1995) indicates that the presence of one caring individual in the life of a child who expresses compassion can provide support for building resilience. This is validated by the results of a 1989 study by Werner and Smith who found that in the lives of resilient children, outside of the family circle, the most positive role model was a favourite teacher.

Therapeutic reading or bibliotherapy should not be tackled impulsively (Cook et al., 2006). Due to its potential to spark extensive discussions and prompt powerful emotions,
according to Cook et al. (2006) using children’s literature to help students cope with, and understand loss “is a deliberate course of action and strategy that requires forethought, concern, and preparation” (p. 94). With this being said, educators must understand that for this to be a highly effective approach it is important that literature is chosen thoughtfully and carefully, and with consideration of potential reactions to, and questions from the story. Additionally, planning for follow-up discussions and providing opportunity for interpretation, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of the characters, situations and coping strategies from the story is important (Cook et al., 2006).

There are various appropriate strategies and approaches to support children through loss and the commonly experienced emotions resulting from grief, including; sadness, anger, confusion, depression, frustration, loneliness, and withdrawal (Branch & Brinson, 2007). Children’s literature models coping strategies for children who are learning to deal with powerful emotions, as well as provide information and help address questions (Jalonga, 2004). Therefore, to ease concerns that may hinder the overall progress of grieving children, educators, according to Branch and Brinson (2007) must conform to the importance of children being actively involved in the healing process. By encouraging your students to express their feelings, listening to them, and recognizing their individual needs you can provide the most appropriate means of support.

**Recommendations**

The following is a brief list of recommended practices and advice for educators based on data from the interviews as well as findings from the literature.

- *Do not be afraid to talk about death*
Establish a safe environment for your students
Establish a trusting relationship with your students
Take the time to get to know your students
Be conscious, look for the signs of grief
Allow open and ongoing discussion among students in your classroom
Engage in reflection with your students
Model coping mechanisms for students; reassure students that it is okay to express emotion
Share your own feelings, thoughts and emotions; show students how to express their emotions in a healthy way
Be sensitive to the way different families, cultures and religions face death
Realize that it may take a long time for children to process death; it is not an easy topic
Do not be afraid to ask for help
Share ideas and resources with your colleagues

Keeping in mind the components of “high quality children’s literature” when selecting children’s literature for use:

Keep your students’ age level, and level of understanding in mind
Seek out literature that matches the situation being dealt with
Choose stories that are well-written, engaging, visually captivating and informative
Choose books that address real-life situations
Choose children’s literature that will allow children to find connections with the characters and the situation; stories that they can relate to
Choose stories that elicit real emotions
Choose stories that relay a positive message and model positive coping mechanisms
Share various pieces of children’s literature that displays a variety of different situations of death and loss
Share various pieces of children’s literature so that different families, cultures, genders, and physical attributes are represented
Choose stories that are free of biases
Choose stories that offer students comfort and hope
If in a Catholic school, you may want to select children’s literature that contains a faith component

CONCLUSION

Independently, children often lack the knowledge, the resources and the experiences to cope effectively with a significant loss. Without the help of supportive adults they may fail to overcome the losses which will occur in their lives. As educators we directly encounter our students daily, therefore it should be our responsibility to be aware of our students’ behaviours
and emotions. Those children who we help can build and grow from their experiences, gaining the knowledge and resilience to deal with life’s difficulties. Experiencing loss is never easy nor enjoyable for children or adults, but it is inevitable. Though adults should not force children to express emotion before they are ready, they should provide an opportunity for children to mourn in a healthy way. The natural grief process that occurs following a loss is crucial for children, thus it cannot be ignored.

The best, most successful, and inspiring teachers are those who support and genuinely care about the well-being and overall success of their students. All students deserve a safe space where they can grow, question, think critically, and express themselves. Exposing children to high quality children’s literature that addresses death and grieving provides these opportunities. Literature comforts students, informs them and offers them peace in that they are not alone when suffering a loss. It invites them to remember their troubles, while bringing hope, offering means of support and teaching them life lessons to overcome their own obstacles. Appropriate books encourage children to get lost within the pages of a story, escaping the sadness they are experiencing. They can demonstrate that the characters in the story have also experienced similar suffering, offering them hope. When teachers make the effort to bond with students and build strong relationships, the outcomes following a story will be far more successful. By guiding them in understanding, students can acquire the skills they need to express emotion and cope.

Children’s literature goes beyond just reading, it is the connections made, the perceptions and emotions brought up from the text, and the discussions had that are most important. Though children may not comprehend the total meaning of death, allowing them an opportunity to learn and experience the grieving process is significant (Wolfelt, 1990). In sum,
Dr. Seuss is precise in saying, “The more that you read, the more things you will know, the more that you learn, the more places you’ll go” (1978). Children are lured into stories that speak to them and their experiences, teaching them important lessons and skills that contribute to their development and understandings of life. When a child I know is grieving, I can be that one caring adult in their lives by discovering that piece of children’s literature that speaks to them. They may find hope and peace, and learn the skills to overcome a difficult situation. I can be the teacher that makes a difference in their lives.
REFERENCES


Schwiebert, P. "How to help your children." We were gonna have a baby, but we had an angel instead. 2003. Grief Watch. http://www.griefwatch.com/info/how_to_help_your_children.htm.


APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview Questions

I have selected interview participants who have had experiences using children’s literature. As have interviewed individuals with different positions in the education system; teachers, a librarian and a school social worker, I will ask them questions that pertain to their particular positions and that will allow them to provide me with their different experiences and viewpoints. For example, I may ask the librarian about the approach she takes when providing teachers with resources. In addition, I may ask the school social worker about his involvement with teachers in supporting the grief process. The following are general questions that will be modified according to the participant:

A. Background Info.
1. a) For how long have you been teaching?
b) What is your current role in the education system?
c) What grades have you taught?
d) Have you always taught in the Catholic board?

2. a) Are there any resources available to you that can assist you in supporting your grieving students?
b) How have they helped you?

Teacher/Educator’s Use of Children’s Literature
3. How have you handled the situation of grief in your classroom/school? Please include your own emotions.
4. How have you used children’s literature to help students deal with grief?
5. How do you think teachers can most effectively use children’s literature that addresses and explores grief and loss?
6. How do you select the most appropriate and effective children’s literature in supporting students through grief?

C. Strategies in Practice
7. How do you address the topic of death with your students?
8. What kind of skills do you hope to develop or enhance in your students through the topic of death?
9. What strategies do you use to foster a supportive, caring and trusting environment?
10. How have your students reacted to children’s literature that addresses the topic of death?

D. Challenges/Obstacles
11. Can you tell me about a situation where you dealt with grief in your classroom/school?
12. a) What obstacles did you face when supporting grief in the classroom/school?
b) How did you overcome these obstacles?
13. Tell me about your most challenging experience in supporting a student’s difficulties in dealing with grief? How did you handle it?

E. Enablers
14. What do you see the role of the teacher to be in these difficult situations?
15. What support do teachers have in dealing with these difficult situations?

F. Teacher Understanding & Influences
16. How does your relationship with your students play a role when addressing such a difficult topic?

G. Conclusion
17. What advice do you have for teachers to help them deal with grief situations?
18. Is there anything you would like to add?
Appendix B: Letter of Consent for Interview

Date: ________________

Dear ________________,

I am a graduate student at OISE, University of Toronto, and am currently enrolled as a Master of Teaching candidate. I am studying “How teachers’ use of high-quality children’s literature may help children deal with grief.” This study is for the purposes of investigating an educational topic as a major assignment for our program. I think that your knowledge and practical experience will provide greater insights into this topic.

I am writing a report on this study as a requirement of the Master of Teaching Program. My course instructor who is providing support for the process this year is Dr. Susan Schwartz. My research supervisor is Donna Duplak. The purpose of this requirement is to allow us to become familiar with a variety of ways to do research. My data collection consists of a 30 minute interview that will be tape-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient to you. I can conduct the interview at your office or workplace, in a public place, or anywhere else that you might prefer.

The contents of this interview will be used for my assignment, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates and/or potentially at a conference or publication. I will not use your name or anything else that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information remains confidential. The only people who will have access to my assignment work will be my research supervisor and my course instructor. You are free to change your mind at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may decline to answer any specific questions. I will destroy the tape recording after the paper has been presented and/or published which may take up to five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks or benefits to you for assisting in the project, and I will share with you a copy of my notes to ensure accuracy.

Please sign the attached form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. Thank you very much for your help.

Yours sincerely,

Alissia Paglia
Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by ________________ (name of researcher) and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described.

Signature: _________________________________

Name (printed): _________________________________

Date: _______________________________
Appendix C: Children’s Literature Titles

The following is a short list of suggested children’s literature titles that can help children develop the skills to understand death and overcome grief. With guidance from educators, children can make meaningful connections and understand the messages presented in the stories.


Buscaglia, L. *The fall of freddie the leaf*. New Jersey: Slack, Charles B.


*Catholic Specific Literature*


