“No Foolproof Formula”:
Teacher Identity and Classroom Support for Parentally Bereaved Students

By

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Abstract

This study addressed the following central research question: how have experiences supporting parentally bereaved adolescents reportedly been shaped by the teacher identity of three secondary school educators working in Toronto, Ontario? This qualitative semi-structured interview-based study presents data gathered through the participation of three teachers who have supported at least one grieving student. The findings from the interviews are contextualized by research literature in the areas of grief studies, school-based mental health support, and teacher identity. Five major themes emerged from these findings. Firstly, participants reported that cultivating an empathetic teacher identity communicates to bereaved students that they are caring and trustworthy adults. Secondly, the participants recognized that their role as empathetic teachers is circumscribed by both professional standards and ethics of personal privacy. Thirdly, they expressed common encounters with obstacles to supporting grieving students, which fall into one of two categories: lack of a formulaic response to grief or failures of communication. Fourthly, they perceived the significant positive impact involvement in such extracurriculars as art and sport can have on students throughout periods of mourning. Finally, they reported dissatisfaction with both pre-service and in-service training they have received on the subject of students’ mental health and, to varying degrees, reported an unmet need for more robust full-time guidance staff. The implications of these findings for various stakeholders are discussed and recommendations are made based on these implications.

Key Words: teacher identity, students, bereavement, grief, mourning, classroom support, mental health, extracurriculars, Ontario
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Chapter One: Introduction

1.0 Research Context and Problem

Teaching is not a technical profession. Alongside many other service-oriented vocations, teaching demands a high degree of personal investment. As such, the personal and professional identities of teachers often become conflated in complex and evolving ways. Indeed, teachers can often be heard speaking of their identity in dualistic terms: “I was in teacher mode so I couldn’t show that I thought his remark was funny,” or, “It was a tough day. I couldn’t wait to get home, take off my teacher clothes, and open a bottle of wine.” While some elements of the personal are eschewed from one’s teacher identity, this secondary self has been conceived of by scholars as “an overarching construct including beliefs, goals, and standards… [through which] teachers perceive themselves as teachers and the way they portray themselves to their students” (Schutz et al., 2007, p. 226). The image teachers have of themselves informs their pedagogical philosophy and practice; it follows, therefore, that this teacher identity also dictates the manner in which an educator will respond to intense emotional situations in the classroom.

As Barbalet (2002) observed, “emotion is a necessary link between social structure and social actor” (p. 2). Emotions, then, are among the larger building blocks of teacher identity. Teachers are obliged to conform to the social structure of the school and school board that employs them, yet are also afforded a degree of freedom in how they position themselves in relationship with their students. In a study of pre-service teachers in Ontario, Reynolds (1996) describes teacher identity as constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed on the shifting sands of personal experience and school cultures. Often the most powerful personal experiences that influence teacher identity formation are instances of emotional labour, meaning an effort to express, repress, or manufacture emotions based on a perceived need during particular
interactions (Williams et al., 2006). Encounters with students who exhibit signs of mental health problems are frequently cited (Andrews et al., 2014; Boelen & Van Den Bout, 2006; Kutcher et al., 2015) as examples of scenarios that demand emotional labour.

Especially in light of the Ontario Ministry of Education’s (OME) mental wellness initiative (emblematized by the 2013 publication *Supporting Minds*), schools have become the primary site for mental health intervention for students in the province (Millar et al., 2013). Evidence has shown that not only are Ontario secondary school teachers optimally positioned to assist students who are developing mental health problems, but also that the overwhelming majority (97%) of teachers indicate that it is their role to do so (Andrews et al., 2015). Unfortunately, only about one quarter (26.6%) of these teachers feel that they possess the requisite knowledge and skills to meet their students’ mental health needs. Considering that one in five Canadians will experience mental health problems within their lifetime, and compounded by the fact that seventy percent of these problems commence during adolescence (Canadian Association for Addictions and Mental health [CAMH], 2011), the likelihood of teachers encountering a student struggling with their mental wellness is near certainty. The vast gap between willingness of and preparedness among teachers attempting to support these students demands the attention of researchers and policy makers.

This study focuses on parentally bereaved students for three reasons. Firstly, adolescents who have experienced the death of a parent are at increased risk of such mental health problems as depression, anxiety, and behavioural disorders (Lutzke et al., 1997; Melhem et al., 2007). Secondly, parental death is a unique form of disruption in a student’s life because it sets in motion a complex grief process that is especially vulnerable to derailment in adolescents. At present, the provincial *Caring and Safe Schools in Ontario* (OME, 2010) policy does not address
the specific needs of grieving students. Nor does the Ministry of Education’s 2013 *Supporting Minds* policy on student mental wellness address grief beyond a brief mention of its plausibility as a cause for depression. Considering that three quarters of Ontario teachers feel unprepared to address the needs of students with mental health problems, it follows that this number would further increase if the problem in question were absent from available literature. Finally, there are very few extant studies of support for grieving adolescents in the classroom. There are no such studies in a Canadian context. This research constitutes a first inquiry into the relationship between bereaved adolescents and their teachers in Toronto, Ontario and Canada.

1.1 Purpose of this Study

In view of the problems identified above, the purpose of this research was twofold: (1) to discover best practices and obstacles three educators identify in an encounter with a parentally bereaved student and (2) to analyze how these experiences affected or affirmed these educators’ sense of teacher identity. I explored the role of teacher identity in supporting grieving adolescents by engaging three Toronto secondary school teachers in semi-structured interviews about an instance when they supported a grieving student. I aimed to identify the complex social and psychological factors that function as barriers and motivators to teachers supporting grieving adolescents. In so doing, I examined how these experiences are reportedly affected by these educators’ sense of professional self.

1.2 Research Questions

The central research question of this study was: how have experiences supporting parentally-bereaved adolescents reportedly affected or affirmed the teacher identity of three educators working in Toronto, Ontario? Subquestions that structure this inquiry include:

- How do these three teachers perceive their teacher identity and their role in supporting
grieving students?

- To what extent did the experience of supporting a grieving student bolster or challenge the teacher identity of these three individuals?
- What obstacles and helpful resources have these teachers encountered while supporting a grieving student?
- How might educators be better prepared or better supported to confidently meet the needs of bereaved students?

1.3 Background of the Researcher

I am an MT candidate at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education and a pre-service secondary school English and History teacher. My research background in literature and history has made me acutely aware of the ways in which human beings live storied lives. Underlying narrative structures and thematic demands shape the way we conceive of our society, our relationships, and ourselves. Such grand narratives as colonialism and Canadian multiculturalism inform our self-knowledge as citizens. The way we tell and retell the story of an argument we had with our partner tangibly affects our knowledge of that relationship. Stories we tell about our lives, our appearance, our opinions, and our passions all contribute to our ever-in-flux conception of self. My previous research in cultural history has consistently been motivated by inquiry into this mode of narrative meaning-making. While studying in the English Department at New York University, I wrote a thesis that analyzed geographic and cartographic language as a means of writing about gendered epistemologies in the poetry of Scottish women at the turn of the nineteenth century. My undergraduate thesis at the University of Toronto was an interdisciplinary analysis of “gypsies” as they are represented in the literary and legal narratives of the British Romantic period. It follows, therefore, that my research in education also
interrogates the relationship between storied experience and self, and the consequences of this relationship.

I also have personal experience with several ways in which teachers might respond well or respond poorly to the circumstances of parentally-bereaved students, having lost my father to cancer when I was fourteen. Few of my teachers demonstrated concern for my well-being. One berated me for taking two weeks away from school, claiming that I must not use my father’s death as an excuse to fall behind. I was an incredibly introverted adolescent, with a small but intimate group of friends. I was horrified, therefore, to learn that while I was absent, the principal broadcasted my loss over the morning announcements and requested that my peers say a prayer for me. While I was able to grieve in a healthy manner and went on to do well academically, these negative experiences with educators certainly did not support my healing. As a teacher now myself, however, I find that I am still among the majority of teachers who do not know how best to support grieving students. I have a vested interest in learning what resources and methods teachers find successful in supporting grieving students.

1.4 Overview

In pursuit of answers to the research questions above, I conducted a qualitative study using purposive sampling to interview three Toronto secondary school teachers about their experiences supporting a bereaved student. In Chapter 2, I review existing literature in the areas of grief studies, student mental health support, and teacher identity. Next, in Chapter 3, I explain in greater detail the design of my study, my methodology, and my theoretical framework. Chapter 4 consists of a report and analysis of my findings. Chapter 5 identifies the implications of these findings for my own future practice, and for other Toronto educators who will likely encounter bereaved students at some point in their careers. I conclude by addressing a series of
questions that were beyond the scope of this paper to adequately address, with suggestions for further research and inquiry in this area.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

The following chapter constitutes an analytical overview of existing scholarship related to the topics of this study, namely (1) grief, (2) school-based mental health support, and (3) teacher identity. I cast a rather wide net in seeking relevant scholarly books and articles because, as mentioned above, I was unable to identify any that directly treated the intersection of these three topics in an Ontarian, or even Canadian, context. The works presented are, therefore, temporally and geographically diverse. They are organized according to salient themes and trends, and evaluated based on the soundness and relevance of their methods and their claims.

2.1 Grief Studies: A Brief Historical Overview

Since Freud’s seminal 1914 publication, *On Mourning and Melancholia*, grief has been characterized in Western intellectual discourse as an inevitable and natural part of living with the certainty of death. Building on this characterization, Lindemann’s 1944 study of survivors of the infamous Boston Cocoanut Grove Fire went on to differentiate between *normal* and *morbid* expressions of grief, as defined by the duration and intensity of grief expression. His empirical study of these grieving families yielded basic timelines and stages of healthy responses to the death of a loved one. His findings have been, to varying degrees, confirmed and supported by research in the decades that followed. Notably, Kubler-Ross (1969) proposed that grief occurs in the defined linear stages that many of us are familiar with: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Over the past twenty years, however, these *stages* of grief have been largely replaced by the notion of *tasks* of grief.

In a 2002 study, Wolfelt, Brock, and Lazarus found that the sequential model of grief does not hold up to scrutiny. Indeed, to characterize divergence from the stages of grief as morbid or abnormal is a damaging error. Rather, these scholars found that grief involves a series
of six tasks, which do not necessarily present themselves in orderly sequence. These tasks are (1) acknowledging that death is a reality, (2) facing painful feelings of loss with the support of others, (3) integrating memories of the deceased person into current and future thinking, (4) redefining oneself after the loss, (5) coming to terms with and making sense of the death, and (6) developing new relationships and strengthening supportive ones. Knowledge of these tasks would function as an excellent baseline for teachers supporting grieving students, or for anyone touched by death of a loved one.

Wolfelt, Brock, and Lazarus (2002) also make a valuable contribution to grief studies by differentiating and defining the field’s three most frequently deployed terms: grief, bereavement, and mourning. While grief has frequently been defined as the personal thoughts and feelings associated with loss (Worden 1996), it is often written interchangeably with bereavement and mourning. For the duration of this paper, I will use the language designated by Wolfelt, Brock, and Lazarus (2002). Bereavement describes the experience of a loved one’s death, grief is the emotional and physiological response to this loss, and mourning denotes the outward expression of grief. Mourning, it is worth noting, is almost always influenced by cultural context; the funerary traditions and spiritual beliefs of the bereaved individual’s community cannot be underestimated or ignored when supporting a grieving individual of any age (Lopez, 2011).

The following subsections present grief studies literature relevant to this project. Firstly, it outlines major contributions in research specific to grief during adolescence, then discusses the relationship between grief and mental health, and the relationship between grief and academic achievement.

2.1.1 Grief and the adolescent years

While the culture of an adolescent’s family or community is undeniably a mitigating
factor in his, her, or their grief expression, Corr and Balk (1996) remind researchers that adolescents constitute a discrete cultural group of their own. Indeed, Nelson and Nelson (2010) propose that twenty-first-century adolescence itself is a cultural context with three defining features: the importance of technologically-mediated socialization, the centrality of peer groups, and the negotiation of identity. As Lopez (2011) argues, “because adolescents are so intimately connected with their developmental issues, it is critical that we view this stage of life as a key factor in understanding their grief experience” (p. 11). Ringler and Hayden (2000) emphasize, moreover, the special vulnerability of bereaved adolescents due to the biological and developmental changes occurring in their bodies as they transition into adulthood. The death of a close relative at a time when one is just beginning to reach physical and psychological maturity is a fundamentally different experience than the same loss would be in one’s later adulthood.

2.1.2 Grief and mental health

People who are bereaved under the age of eighteen have been shown to be 1.5 times more likely to be diagnosed with a mental health problem (Black, 1974; Dennehy 1966; Fauth, Thompson, & Penny, 2009). Studies by Lutzke (1997) and Melhem (2007) of bereaved children and teens found that they are at increased risk of developing depression, anxiety, and behaviour problems. Many monographs and articles, such as Rowling’s 2005 publication Mindmatters: Loss and Grief, seek to identify differences in the psychosomatic reaction of adolescent girls and boys. Since these studies rely on an assumption of binary gender difference to which I object, I am inclined to grant more veracity to those that acknowledge individual diversity instead. Stroebe and Schut (2005), for example, focus instead on such differentiating factors as circumstances of death and cultural context. While convincing evidence suggests that each individual manifests mourning differently, Dopp and Cain (2012) found that, following the death
of a parent, most adolescents show “increased sadness, fear, aggression, somatization, obsessive-compulsive symptoms...lower self-image, and traumatic symptoms” (p. 42). These common emotional expressions could function as signs of mourning, which teachers should be aware of.

While notions of abnormal grief are inherently problematic, as discussed above, research supports the idea of complicated grief. It has been well established (Bonanno & Kaltzman, 2001) that bereavement can magnify established mental health problems like mood and anxiety disorders. Beginning in the 1990s, scholars have attempted to define and diagnose this magnification by identifying a form of grief that manifests “unremitting and functionally-impairing symptoms” (Boelen & Van Den Bout, 2007, p. 155). In a 1997 study of 306 bereaved spouses, Prigerson and Shear used a test called Receiver Operator Characteristic (ROC) analysis to differentiate between healthy and complicated grief. Their findings were tested and confirmed in a subsequent study of 1,052 mourners (Boelen & Van Den Bout, 2007). Both tests yielded reliable criteria for establishing not only the contention that complicated grief is a distinct clinical entity, but also a series of signs that indicate mourners may be at risk of persistent mental health problems.

2.1.3 Grief and academic performance

Bereavement and school performance are two subjects rarely studied in relation to each other. The earliest example I am aware of is Grollman’s 1967 study of 49 Massachusetts children, two thirds of whom were achieving below their pre-bereavement standard one year after their loss. Of all the variables considered in Bedell’s 1972 study of female adolescents who had lost their mothers, school grades were the most affected. Additionally, Black (1974) found that school refusal and absenteeism were commonly reported among bereaved adolescents. Numerous studies in education have demonstrated a correlation between academic achievement
and self-image (Parkes, 1987; Jones, 1991); therefore, it follows that student bereavement is an area that warrants study by researchers and professionals in educational and psychological fields. I was, however, only able to locate two thorough and recent studies of academic performance among bereaved secondary school students, so it is worth examining their methods and findings at some length.

Abdelnoor and Hollins (2004) surveyed seventy-three adolescents throughout England who had lost a parent and twenty-four who had lost a sibling. The surveys distributed included a family history questionnaire, an examination results questionnaire, and a ‘feelings’ questionnaire. The examination results refer to the General Certification of Secondary Education (GCSE) examinations. The ‘feelings’ questionnaire was composed of the Spielberger State Trait Anxiety Scale (1973) and the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory (1991). The researchers treated this data in a primarily quantitative manner. Participants and the control group were individually matched for school, age, gender, and ethnicity. Abdelnoor and Hollins (2004) found that “there was a significant difference between the GCSE average scores of parentally bereaved children and controls…[and] there was a significant difference between anxiety scores of parentally bereaved children and their controls” (p. 46). The consistency of these results was maintained regardless of the amount of time elapsed since the bereavement occurred; therefore, Abdelnoor and Hollins concluded that “the effect of bereavement may be prolonged and that intermittent support could be needed” throughout secondary education (p. 52).

Another recent study (2014) by Schoenfelder, Tien, Wolchik, and Sandler, constitutes the first American research into the effects of a prevention program for parentally bereaved youths on educational expectations and job aspirations. Specifically, the study focuses on enrollees in the Family Bereavement Program (FBP), a 12-session group intervention for bereaved families
that includes caregiver and group therapy components. Interview data were collected from 244 randomized participants in “an urban metropolitan area in the Southwestern U.S” (p. 230) in four stages: pretest, three months later, eleven months after that, and finally six years after initial enrollment. These interviews aimed to quantify (1) educational expectations, (2) job aspirations, and (3) grade point average. Unfortunately, the study found no significant direct effects of the FBP on educational expectations or job aspirations of youth up to six years following program participation. While there were some limitations of the study – such as the use of a single-item scale to measure broad factors like educational expectations – this outcome strongly suggests that referring adolescent mourners to outside services is simply not the fix-all solution it is often perceived to be. Indeed, as demonstrated by literature reviewed in the following sections, research suggests that the school is the best venue for consistent support.

2.2 The Role of the School in Students’ Mental Wellness

Adolescents are at school for a substantial number of their waking hours; therefore, families are increasingly looking to schools as the preferred location for mental health service delivery (McLennan, Reckord, & Blarke, 2008). Additionally, schools have been found to be an environment with potential for stigma reduction, prevention, and early identification of mental health problems (Lean & Colucci, 2010). According to a recent study in the Canadian Journal of School Psychology, “schools have, by default, become the primary mental health system for students in Canada” (Millar, Lean, Sweet, Moraes, & Nelson, 2013). The findings of this study raised several concerns. Primary among these is the fact that most of the cases being referred for services were crisis-related. The researchers emphasize that students should be referred to services before they reach a crisis point. They stress, “it is vital that co-ordination and standards for the various services be established” and that early signs of mental health concerns be
identified (p. 105). The following subsections report on research into mental health support networks in Ontario schools, followed by suggested classroom practices.

### 2.2.2 Mental health support in Ontario schools

Fortunately, there is a far more substantial body of research literature on the subject of school-based mental health initiatives than on bereavement-specific initiatives. Indeed, in recent years, two important studies were conducted on the efficacy of Canadian resources and policies. Nipissing University faculty members Andrews, McCabe, and Wideman-Johnston (2014) published an article in *The Journal of Mental Health Training, Education, and Practice* that investigated the titular question: “Mental Health Issues in the Schools: Are Educators Prepared?” They enlisted 75 secondary school teachers from three school boards in Southwestern Ontario to complete an online survey, which consisted of 42 Likert-scale questions. The objective was to determine to what extent teachers felt prepared and willing to meet their students’ mental health needs. Ninety-two percent of participants indicated that they have had experience with mental health issues among their students. Arguing that “the role of the educator … has long changed from an academic guide to teachers, social workers, confidantes, guidance counselors, among many other roles” (p. 266), Andrews et al. recommend that mental health awareness and training should assume a higher priority in teacher education programs. Moreover, 86.6 percent of participating teachers *strongly agreed or agreed* that the responsibility for issues of mental health in students should fall on the school as an institution.

The Canadian government is responding to these demands. Kutcher, Wei, and Morgan (2015) tested a recent innovation in mental health literacy, called simply “The Guide”, in three Toronto schools. Teachers from the participating schools received a one-day training session on how to use The Guide from the Ontario Shores Mental Health Center. Then, throughout 2013,
these teachers implemented The Guide as part of their regular curriculum for Grade 9 Health and Physical Education. Among 175 students exposed to The Guide, data showed significant differences in mental health literacy and a reduction in stigma between pretest and posttest surveys. This success led the research team to conclude that The Guide’s efficacy comes from its site-based integration into the everyday activities of the school. The Guide “builds on existing classroom teaching processes and does not require additional investment in the purchase and application of standalone programs” (p. 582). The program is, therefore, an alternative approach to stigma reduction that avoids the major pitfall of a standalone program: namely, that teachers and students alike simply walk away and forget.

2.2.3 Positive mental health classroom practices

Considering Kutcher, Wei, and Morgan’s (2015) findings related to The Guide, evidence has shown that integrated classroom practice is arguably the most effective medium for teaching mental health literacy and identifying early signs of struggle. Grief-specific studies by scholars in the US and UK have also found that “familiar and established school support offers [sic] immediate and ongoing assistance for grieving children, helping them negotiate painful transitions, cope with their grief, and subsequently return to previous activities” (Dopp and Cain, 2011, p. 45; see also Ayyash-Adobo, 2001; Nastasi, Jayasena, Summerville, & Borja, 2011). There is a startling lack of research into how teachers might administer the necessary support to grieving students.

Of the existing literature, moreover, only one article (Lane, Rowland, & Beinart, 2014) differentiates between children and adolescents in suggesting methods of support throughout mourning. Aptly titled, “No Rights No Wrongs, No Magic Solutions”, this study aimed to gather accounts of how teachers responded to parentally bereaved students. The authors interviewed
twelve secondary school teachers in the United Kingdom. These interviews yielded six general processes for supporting grieving students: flexibility, openness, emotional support, emotionality, sharing, and communication with family. The twelve teachers also identified several “influential factors” (p. 656) that dictated how much emphasis they placed on each process. These influential factors include developmental needs, nature of existing relationship with teacher, circumstances of parental death, nature of relationship between student and deceased parent. Corresponding teacher factors included personal experience of bereavement, relationship with student, bereavement training, prior experience with bereaved students, and emotional tolerance in managing uncertainty. Ultimately, Lane, Rowland, and Beinart recommend that bereavement training should be part of initial teacher education so that teachers are enabled to respond to “the student’s individual idiosyncratic needs…rather than being hindered by needing to know the ‘right’ way to respond.”

Generalized studies (ie. not school specific) recommend implementing Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) strategies such as visualization and breathing techniques into the classroom (Cohen & Mannarino, 2011). Teachers might also share personal stories of loss and grief or use Bibliotherapy to use fictional stories to promote healing and acceptance. Heath and Cole (2011) provide a list of potential titles; these are, however, directed at audiences under the age of twelve and not of much use to the secondary school teacher. Another important element that is somewhat within a teacher’s control is ensuring bereaved students have supportive relationships with peers. High school students report peers to be their preferred source of emotional support (Carter & Janzen, 1994); bereaved adolescents, in particular, frequently list peers as sources of instrumental support (Gray, 1989). Dopp and Cain (2012) found, however, that bereavement also has the potential to undermine sources of peer support. Often peers can
become antagonistic or aloof after a friend’s parent has died, presumably as a result of discomfort or anxiety around talking about death.

2.3 Teacher Identity

How a teacher responds to the circumstances of a parentally bereaved student relies on a number of factors. Research (Schutz et al., 2007; Day et al., 2006; Reynolds, 1996) has shown that the most influential factor in generating responses to emotional situations in the classroom is the teacher’s identity as a teacher. Not to be confused with the social positioning of the teacher (i.e., racialization, gender, etc.), teacher identity describes a belief that “experience, culture, and personality are part of who teachers are, and they go wherever teachers go – including their classrooms” (White et al., 2005, p. 2). It is the framework within which teachers interact with other faculty members, administration, and their students. Williams et al. (2008) traced connections between how teachers envision their role and how they structure the layout of their classrooms, their lessons, and their relationships with students. Teaching is a profession that fundamentally deals in interpersonal reactions and often involves swift decision-making. In the classroom, therefore, Pajares (1992) found that teachers often rely on the intuition arising from their teacher identity rather than research and reflection when responding to emotionally challenging circumstances. When situations arise for which there are no easy solutions, “the teacher has no schema or cognitive resources to activate and apply…[so] they may resort to beliefs that can be riddled with problems and inconsistencies” (p. 228). If the beliefs that inform a teacher’s identity are problematic, the effect on students in emotional situations can be damaging.

Cooper and Olson (1996) explored teacher identity in a Canadian context, investigating the interconnectedness of personal and professional selves in the teaching profession. Their study
of pre-service teachers found that teachers, especially in the early years of their career, are constantly negotiating between their own personal knowledge of adolescence and the theories and methods they are taught in initial teacher education programs. Additional research has shown that this process of negotiation is ongoing. Castells (1997) found that an identity is different from a role because roles “are defined by norms structured by institutions and organizations of society…[whereas] identities are sources of meaning for the actors themselves, and by themselves, constructed through the process of individuation (pp. 6-7). If teachers remain attuned to this daily interaction of experience and context, their teacher identity is always, to an extent, in flux. The following subsection reports on literature relevant to the relationship between teacher identity and classroom support for bereaved students.

2.3.1 Teacher identity and bereavement

Emotional situations, like encounters with parentally bereaved students, often create disequilibrium in teacher identity that causes individuals to reassess their own framework for interacting with students (Morris and Feldman, 1996). In an important early study, Cullinan (1990) inquired into the relationship between teachers’ personal death attitudes and the emotional support they are able to willing to offer bereaved students. Her study of 192 teachers in the New York State Catholic and Public school systems found that nineteen percent of participants has taught students whose parent had died. Despite 94% of participants reporting the belief that it was proper for teachers to help students through mourning, 64% expressed concern and doubt regarding the right words to say to a grieving child. Significant among Cullinan’s findings was the conclusion that “teachers with the most empathy, and who see their role to include helping grieving students, perceived themselves as being more effective in counseling grieving children” (p. 156). This data presents two relevant implications for the present study.
Firstly, a teacher whose professional identity includes empathetic responsibility to students may be more likely to confidently support a grieving student. Secondly, however, this perceived efficacy by no means implies actual efficacy. One of the purposes of this study is to examine the crux between perception and reality when it comes to teacher identity and effective classroom support for grieving students.

2.4 Conclusion

This literature review covered a diverse array of scholarly sources, which are thematically linked by their treatment of adolescent grief, mental health support in school environments, and teacher identity. I have highlighted areas where limited research has been done, specifically on the topic of practical classroom support for bereaved adolescents. This review flags key studies that have informed the design of the following study. I have covered relevant qualitative and quantitative studies of the effects of adolescent bereavement, the current opinion regarding the role of the school in mental health support, and the relevance of teacher identity to these two concerns. In light of the findings evaluated above, the purpose of my research is to localize the problem of supporting parentally bereaved students in a Greater Toronto Area context. By interviewing three educators in the Toronto District School Boards (Catholic, Independent, and Public), I aim to report on and evaluate their perceived best practices in supporting a grieving student. Using a qualitative approach, I will explore the extent to which their experiences with bereaved students affected or affirmed their professional identities.
Chapter Three: Methodology

3.0 Introduction and Overview

In this chapter, I describe the methodology used in my study of three GTA-based educators who have supported a parentally bereaved student in the classroom. I begin by defining my localist (Qu & Dumay, 2011) qualitative approach to this research, and then proceed to explain why this framework best serves the topic. Next, I present my instrument of data collection: namely, the localist semi-structured interview. I then introduce my three participants (with as much detail as their carefully protected anonymity permits) and explicate the purposive sampling procedures I enacted to locate these voluntary participants. Following this section, I explain the methods used to organize and analyze my data. Finally, I address any potential ethical risks associated with my project and explain how these have been anticipated and minimized in my interview protocol.

3.1 Research Approach & Procedures

Since its inception, qualitative research has been defined in shifting and often overlapping ways. As Creswell (2013) observes, the defining principle of qualitative research has changed “from social construction, to interpretivism, and onto social justice in the world” (p. 17) over the past thirty years. In summary, however, Denzin and Lincoln’s 2011 SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research provides, if not a definition, a mission statement: “[q]ualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world... [It] consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible” (p. 3). These statements are deliberately vague because qualitative research does not aim to unearth objective or universal truths about a given subject. It doesn’t purport to gain access to absolute knowledge; rather, qualitative researchers aim to “contribute to a body of knowledge that is conceptual and theoretical and is based on the
meanings that life experiences hold” (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006, p. 316). This notion of one’s research constituting a tile in a mosaic of knowledge – or a thread in a tapestry to use another metaphor – leads to qualitative projects that are reflective, complex, and localized. Qualitative researchers are acutely aware that their role of data collector cannot be genuinely objective or distant. Instead, they recognize the reciprocal meaning making between themselves and the participants in their study. These measures are taken to avoid the research becoming oppressive or invasive, in the sense that “the life of the interviewee [or ethnography subject, focus group participant, etc.] is ‘just there’ waiting to be described” by a dispassionate investigator (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006, p. 314). Qualitative research also differs from quantitative research in the sense that its findings emerge from complex inductive and deductive reasoning throughout the planning and data gathering process. This bottom up (Creswell, 2006) type of analysis not only allows for improvisation in response to unexpected information participants offer, but it also forces the researcher to constantly interrogate her assumptions or hypotheses. Qualitative research does not organize its data into preordained taxonomies, categories, or hierarchies; instead, “themes” emerge from the data itself.

This type of research is best suited to my topic for three main reasons: it deals with depth rather than breadth of information, it emphasizes the local, and it empowers the participant. My study focuses on the experiences of three individuals in a specific geographic location. I was interested in gathering thorough, detailed, and personal narratives of these individuals’ experience with a parentally bereaved student. Since I was not merely interested in cataloguing recommendations for teachers in a similar situation, it was imperative that participants are given the time and adaptive interview structure to tell fleshed-out stories. I was committed, moreover, to generating data that is specific to the city in which I currently live and work: the Greater
Toronto Area. Qualitative inquiry’s resistance to generalization in favour of situational, contextual, and personal data was a necessary element in the design and implementation of my study.

Qu and Dumay (2011) identify a sub-“position” of qualitative inquiry, which they call “localist.” Building on the work of Alvesson (2003), the co-authors describe localist qualitative inquiry to be guided by an understanding that all data are “situated accounts that must be understood in their social context” (16). This emphasis on the complex place-based interaction of institutional, communal, and personal forces that shape experience will be crucial in grounding my research in its locality.

Finally, practitioners of qualitative inquiry “want to empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices, and minimize power relationships that often exist between a researcher and the participants in a study” (Creswell, 2006, p. 185). As I explained in my reflexivity statement above, the topic of this study arises from my own experience and social positioning. I approach my participants as equally vulnerable to the emotional content of these interviews. By taking a localist qualitative approach to my research, therefore, I am attempting to create meaning through interpersonal interaction that places the interviewee and myself on equal ground. My primary goal is to encourage the three participants to tell me their own story, grounded in their own context, and without any preconceptions or premature conclusions on my end.

3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

My instrument of data collection is the interview. Qualitative interviewing can loosely be categorized into structured, semi-structured, and unstructured approaches. Structured interviews are mainly used in qualitative research to supplement other more adaptive instruments of data
collection because they tend to produce quantitatifiable and closed (e.g., yes or no) data. Unstructured interviews are also often done in conjunction with other such forms of inquiry as ethnography or focus groups (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). The semi-structured interview, which I used to conduct this study, lends itself to being the sole instrument in qualitative research because it is “generally organized around a set of predetermined open-ended questions, with other questions emerging from the dialogue between interviewer and interviewees” (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Digressions and improvisations are highly valued in the semi-structured interview, and the semi-structured interview protocol must anticipate the unanticipated. This means that leading interview questions must be broad enough that a diverse group of people has enough in common to respond to them. The more probing questions must, then, be specific enough that they can help interviewees to recall relevant details. As I have implied, it is also of high priority that the interviewer establish positive rapport with the interviewee/s. Participants must feel comfortable enough with the interviewer to disclose information. In this study of teachers supporting grieving students, intense negative emotions may resurface in the recollection of the event in question. My data will be meaningless unless I can establish trust and respect.

My interview guide is divided into four sections: (1) Background of the Participant, (2) Encounter with a Bereaved Student, (3) Academic Performance and Mental Health of Grieving Students, and (4) Suggestions for Beginning Teachers. The first section is designed to both ease the participant into the interview with straightforward, low-intensity questions and to give me a sense of their teacher identity without directly asking, “How do you conceive of your teacher identity?” For example, I begin with very fact-oriented questions like:

2. For how many years have you been a teacher?
a. At how many different schools have you taught?

b. If more than one, where were the other schools located?

I then proceed to more probing questions as:

8. How do you approach behaviour difficulties and disruptiveness among your students?

9. What do you believe to be the best way to approach a student who has been frequently absent or despondent?

The second section is designed to guide the participant through narrativizing their experience with a parentally bereaved student. It begins chronologically by asking:

11. How did you come to know that your student’s parent or primary caregiver had died?

From there, I ask open-ended questions that structure a reflective re-telling of events. The third section purposely does not assume any affect on the student’s academic performance or mental health, positive or negative. I simply inquire:

21. Please describe, if you are able, the academic performance of this student before the loss.

22. To what extent did the loss affect his/her/their grades?

a. How, if at all, did the loss seem to affect the student’s aspirations for success in school?

24. To what extent, if at all, did you observe signs of depression, anxiety, or other mental health challenges in the student during the time surrounding his/her/their loss?

Based on the participant’s response to these types of questions, I either proceed to asking about helpful resources or challenges and barriers they encountered in supporting the student’s academic and mental thriving. I conclude by simply prompting the participant to offer any advice they have for other teachers who find themselves supporting grieving students in their future
practice.

3.3 Participants

The following section introduces the participants in this study. Participants consented to engage in a semi-structured interview about their experience(s) supporting a parentally bereaved student in a secondary school classroom. The following subsections introduce who they are and outline how they were selected via sampling.

3.3.1 Sampling criteria

I chose participants for this study based on three inclusion criteria. Firstly, they must teach at a secondary school (grades 9-12) in the Greater Toronto Area. While it is necessary that they work at a school in either the TDSB, TCDSB, or a Toronto-area Independent school, where they personally reside is irrelevant. Educational qualifications are limited to a Bachelor of Education or equivalent program of study. It will be noted if the participant has further training in mental health support or grief counselling, but this was not a criterion for sampling. Finally, they must have had at least one experience supporting a parentally bereaved student. These criteria ensure that all participants are able to speak to the Toronto-based local context of the study, as well as provide data that are related to my central research question.

3.3.2 Sampling procedures

My sampling procedure was rather unavoidably purposive. It is difficult to randomly sample for such a specific experience among educators, despite how common I am discovering it to be. Several potential participants approached me voluntarily upon learning about the subject of my research through the grapevine of fellow teachers. It seems that many GTA-based educators desire to speak about support for grieving students and are happy to learn that some inquiry is being made into this area. In addition to word-of-mouth, I spread awareness of my project by
contacting several Toronto- and Ontario-based organizations over e-mail: Bereaved Families of Ontario, Seasons Center for Grieving Children, and the Canadian Center for Bereavement Education. This means that my sample is also one of convenience. Convenience sampling runs the risk of producing unwarranted generalizations because it represents a random cross-section of a population that meets the inclusion criteria (Robinson, 2014). I mitigated this risk as much as possible by making the geographically-dictated sample universe quite small; my hope is that if I do observe any generalizable phenomena, these observations can be framed as highly localized.

My sample is only three participants because I aim to gather data that has depth of emotional and contextual detail. My sample must, therefore, be “sufficiently small for individual cases to have a locatable voice within the study, and for an intensive analysis of each case to be conducted” (Robinson, 2014, p. 31). Since this is fundamentally an exploratory study, moreover, small-scale qualitative interview data is ideal because such research is intentionally generative and aims to indicate rather than conclude (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). Each individual case can contribute to growing knowledge of the subject, and a small sample size allows these individual cases to overlap and juxtapose in greater detail than if they were so numerous they needed to be reduced to dots on a graph to indicate meaning.

3.3.3 Participant Bios

Participant #1, referred to throughout as Gerald, has been teaching science for over twenty years. He teaches grades seven to twelve. His favourite course to teach is Grade 11 Biology because he majored in Biology at University, but he also enjoys the “absolute nature” of Grade 12 Chemistry. He coaches basketball.

Participant #2, with the self-selected alias of Caroline, has been in education for almost ten years. She is currently working as a guidance counselor, but has also taught Civics &
Careers, Phys. Ed., and Drama in the past. She has undertaken a great deal of training outside of mandated Professional Development and is a practitioner of mindfulness meditation, which she brings to bear on her teaching practice.

Participant #3, known in this study as Leon, has been teaching for ten years. He teaches both math and science, but enjoys Grade 11 Biology because it affords a lot of opportunity for inquiry-based lab exploration. He has worked as a guidance counselor in the past, with AQ certifications.

3.4 Data Analysis

Many methodologists and practitioners agree that qualitative data analysis “ideally occurs concurrently with data collection so that investigators can generate an emerging understanding about research questions, which in turn informs both the sampling and the questions being asked” (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006, p. 318). This adaptive and iterative method of analysis eventually reaches a point of saturation when no new commonalities or points of divergence emerge among data. How the data is then organized and analyzed depends on the researcher’s philosophical and practical agendas. The most commonly observed method of analysis is one that uses codes to identify and tag segments of text, which are in turn organized into categories and themes. Notably, qualitative analysis does not submit data to a pre-existing scheme or set of categories. Rather, the researcher discerns categories and themes after data collection has occurred.

3.5 Ethical Review Procedures

As I mentioned above, any interview-based study runs the ethical risk of being invasive, oppressive, or exploitative. The Government of Canada’s Tri-Council of major funding agencies issues a statement in 2010 that insists that
The cardinal principle of modern research ethics is respect for human dignity. This principle aspires to protecting the multiple and interdependent interests of the person – from bodily to psychological to cultural integrity… It is unacceptable to treat persons simply as means (mere objects or things) because doing so fails to respect their intrinsic human dignity. (Interagency Secretariat on Research Ethics, 2010, p. 63)

The literature on ethical risks of qualitative interviewing tends to categorize these risks along the same three lines: bodily, psychological, and cultural. Since the nature of my research does not affect the body, I am more concerned with psychological and cultural risks.

The first of these risks is that interviewees may feel exploited or experience unforeseen psychological harm. Klockars (1977) argues that ethical research occurs only when the researcher suffers equally with the participant. By extension, Reiman (1979) proposes that ethical research must further the participant’s freedom/wellness more than the researcher’s career. While both are correct, it is helpful to have some concrete suggestions for creating these conditions in one’s field research. Qu and Dumay (2011) suggest creating a relationship between researcher and participant that works to dismantle any perceived power imbalance based on either social positioning or the very notion of one person being a ‘subject.’ In my research, I plan to attempt to establish this relationship by disclosing my own relationship to the subject matter prior to undertaking the interview. My hope is that this will demonstrate that I am, in Klockars’s words “suffering” along with the interviewees and not simply extracting information from them.

While the subject matter of my study is emotionally sensitive, and some degree of emotion is to be expected, I will not press participants to answer any question that makes them feel undue distress. Qu and Dumay (2006) also suggest that researchers explicitly disclose the
intent of their research and obtain formal and informed consent from participants. Appendix A of this document is my detailed informed consent letter that all participants will sign. Finally, it is important to protect the privacy and identity of one’s participants. This has been assured in my research by the use of pseudonyms for the participants and the names of the schools that employ them. No identifying terms or phrases will make their way into my interview transcripts. Participants will be assured of this anonymity prior to the start of the interview.

The other main ethical risk involved in semi-structured interviews is the risk of participants feeling misunderstood or misrepresented. This is especially likely to occur when linguistic or cultural differences exist between interviewer and interviewee. As Qu and Dumay (2006) observe, “even when the interviewer and interviewee seem to be speaking the same language, their words may have completely different cultural meanings” (p. 241). Interviewers may also fall into a pattern of asking leading questions, or hearing the answers they want rather than the answers they are actually given by participants. One way to mitigate these risks is to cultivate effective and empathetic active listening skills. DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtre (2006) suggest the repetition of specific words used by the interviewee as probes for further clarification or elaboration. For example, if one of my participants were to disclose that he felt inadequate in his efforts to support a grieving student, I might respond by simply saying, “inadequate?” Rather than assuming what he meant by “inadequate”, this one-word prompt encourages him to think about and express his feelings in his own words.

3.6 Methodological Limitations and Strengths

While I have presented several arguments in favour of the semi-structured qualitative interview throughout this chapter, there are some limitations worth mentioning. In simple terms of technical issues, interviews depend on reliable audio recording and transcription to be useful
data. This recorded data must also then be safely and securely stored (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). I plan to minimize these risks by using a reliable device and recording a few test interviews in advance. These files will be stored in a password-protected folder.

The potentially fraught role of the interviewer, as discussed above, also presents a limitation. If one is unable to overcome the perceived power imbalance between interviewer and participant, the participants may not divulge their experiences as freely. Lack of reflexivity on the part of the researcher can lead to awkwardness at best and harm to the participant at worst. These risks can only be managed by my own self-awareness and willingness to adapt to the participants’ needs. This risk cuts both ways, however, as the participant in a qualitative interview can sometimes be mistakenly conceived of as a perfect teller of truths “acting in service of science and producing the data needed” to communicate their knowledge or lived experience (Alvesson, 2003, p. 14). I can mitigate this risk by resisting the urge to simplify, generalize, or consecrate any of the data offered by participants in my study. Only through reflective and critical analysis of the data can I avoid idealizing the interview situation as straightforward mining for truth and knowledge.

Despite these limitations, the qualitative semi-structured interview’s many strengths make it the ideal instrument for this study. As explored in greater detail above, the semi-structured interview offers the researcher depth and detail of response. It is an adaptable tool that lends itself to reflective research. The combination of open-ended, follow-up, probing, specifying, and structuring questions in my interview protocol yielded three unique yet comparable conversations.

3.7 Conclusion

In this chapter I described the methodology used in planning, executing, and analyzing
this study. I described distinguishing features of qualitative inquiry and, specifically, the semi-structured qualitative interview. I accounted for strengths, limitations, and ethical considerations that accompany the methodology I have chosen. This chapter also introduced the participants in my study and outlined the purposive sampling methods used to recruit these participants. The chapter that follows is a report on the data that emerged from interviews with these three participants.
Chapter Four: Findings

4.0 Introduction to Findings

The preceding Chapters One through Three introduced the purpose, context, and methodology of this project. Namely, this study of three secondary-school teachers working in the Greater Toronto Area investigates the relationship between teacher identity and classroom support for grieving students. The purpose of this investigation is not only to analyze how encounters with bereaved students affected teachers’ sense of identity, but also to discover barriers and best practices that emerged throughout these experiences. The literature review (Chapter Two) situated this central research question within the current state of scholarly conversation around teacher identity, adolescent grief, and school-based mental health support in Ontario. Chapter 3 explained the qualitative interview-based methodology used to pursue the original findings that this paper contributes to the aforementioned scholarly conversation. The following chapter discusses five significant themes that materialized through analysis of the three semi-structured interviews conducted with the participants of this study. Firstly, 4.1 considers all three participants’ commonly held view of positive teacher identity, which amounts to four important qualities: empathy, personal connection, consistency, and fun. Section 4.2 then highlights the emphasis participants placed on teachers’ respect for privacy and boundaries when conversing about any emotionally sensitive topics with students. Next, 4.3 describes barriers participants encountered in their effort to support grieving students, which can be categorized as either unpredictability or communication breakdown. Section 4.4 goes on to report various practices that have reportedly yielded strong support for grieving students and, finally, 4.5 identifies systemic issues participants encountered while supporting bereaved students in their
respective school communities. Each theme is articulated and contextualized among existing literature in the chapter that follows.

### 4.1 Qualities of Empathetic Teacher Identity and Why They Matter

All three participating teachers name empathy, personal connection, and fun as central to their teacher identities. They credit these facets of their identity as major factors in their success supporting bereaved students because these qualities position them as approachable, caring, trustworthy adults. Indeed, Leon articulated a theme that ran through all three interviews when he said, “I think my one resource for them is myself. That’s the one I usually give them.” The participants expressed the importance of their teacher identity, and resulting reputation with students, as a mitigating factor in whether or not grieving students feel supported by a caring adult at school. The following section unpacks the meaning of participants’ self-ascribed teacher-identity and the rationale behind their dedication to cultivating the corresponding qualities.

While only one participant, Caroline, explicitly said the words, “I’m incredibly empathetic” during her interview, all three participants described their approach to classroom presence in empathetic terms. There is consensus across the data that the ability to perceive (and strive to understand) the feelings and experiences of students constitutes a crucial tool in the belt of any teacher. Discussing how he goes about getting to know students at the beginning of term, Gerald stressed that “you have to have a very open mind as a teacher going into a classroom – that what you see on the outside may actually have a more significant root on the inside.” Essentially, he framed the encounter with each student in ethical terms; each one must be considered for the complex individual he/she/they are, with as little presupposition as possible. He poetically described a “root” on the inside of each student from which the branches of their behaviour and outward affect presumably grow. This root is not visible from the surface, and the
empathetic teacher remains consistently aware of this hidden causation – i.e., having a “very open mind.” In articulating this empathy-impulse, all three participants tended to use this type of figurative language. Gerald went on to describe how “if nothing else, [teachers] can act as the sounding board, a sponge, just to listen to it…you know, to encourage them that when they felt the need they should seek support.” Leon echoed the “sponge” metaphor, while also adding that empathetic teaching often means “being sincere, and being an ear. Sometimes kids just need to like have a peg board, right?” The effort to remain empathetic entails seeking out the relevant information that will help teachers glimpse the “root” of students’ behaviour or demeanor.

These teachers advocate frequent conversations with students that function as “check-ins,” especially when observing shifts in behaviour that make the teacher think, in Leon’s terms, “‘Hmm that’s odd, let me try to connect with him and figure that out…’” In order to become that sponge – ready to absorb the emotional water flowing from their students – my participants believe that teachers must observe and inquire. More crucially still, they must be prepared to act on the information they absorb to demonstrate that they have, indeed, heard the students and validated their struggles. When prompted to reveal the character of a teacher whose identity does not prominently feature empathy, Caroline responded with the following anecdote from her tenure as a guidance counselor:

[S]ome of [the teachers], like I said, are assholes. To the point that we had to go in with my VP and be like… ‘You’re doing this. Don’t fight me on this.’ And they’re like, ‘Well I’ve got this, and she hasn’t done this, or whatever.’ Sometimes I’ve gotta get the big guns and just say, ‘You’re doing this. Back off. She’s 16. Let it go.’

Essentially, Caroline described a teacher whose identity relies on strict enforcement of accountability. The “Well I’ve got this, and she hasn’t done this” tendency likely arises from a
teacher whose identity is predicated on either a sense of fairness (i.e., everyone else has done this task, therefore she must do the task) or tough love. Caroline’s empathetic teacher identity inspires her to insist this teacher “let it go.”

This link between empathy and perceived ability to support grieving students is consistent with findings in extant literature. A. L. Cullinan’s (1990) study of 192 teachers in New York State included “Empathy” as a factor in their survey about teachers’ self-perceived ability to aid grieving students. She found that “teachers with the most empathy, and who see their role to include helping grieving students, perceived themselves as being more effective in counseling grieving children” (p. 156). While the scope of neither Cullinan’s study nor this study includes the ability to confirm or disprove this perceived ability to counsel grieving students, this link between empathy and confidence in counseling students suggests that these teachers would be conscientious enough to notice a student exhibiting signs of mourning. Taking notice and communicating that one is trustworthy, moreover, constitutes a significant step toward connecting the student with additional support.

The findings of this study clearly indicate that it is crucial to ensure students are aware of their teachers as potential confidantes and supportive adults, but what tangible strategies to teachers employ to let students know that they are available as such? All three participants suggested a reciprocal exchange of personal information and anecdotes, which must be confined by professional boundaries. Caroline said that shortly after meeting a new class, “I always tell a story that’s of a semi-personal nature, but without being too personal, to let them know that I’m similar to them.” Leon expressed a similar sentiment, saying, “I’m quite open and honest about the experiences in my own life. The students see that, they see the sincerity and feel they can build a sincere bond with me.” The choice of words like “similar” and “sincere” in these
quotations suggests that these teachers have found students respond positively to the recognition that their teachers are relatable and that they feel genuine affection for students. Gerald elaborated on this evaluation of sharing personal anecdotes by stating:

It might start [with] them considering that there are adults out there that are open to discussion about things that are of significance that have nothing to do with what’s in a textbook or what’s on a whiteboard or whatever. So, I’d just say make yourself a person.

Don’t be an automaton.

Gerald’s teacher identity clearly involves more than subject mastery; he imbues with great significance his readiness to speak on topics that have nothing to do with the Biology and Chemistry Curriculum. His positioning of this identity in a person/automaton binary suggests that he has found expressing these extracurricular interests has humanized him in the students’ eyes.

All three participants’ conscious efforts to form personal connections with students exemplify how teacher identity functions like a feedback loop between personality and practice. James-Wilson’s (2001) study of the influence of ethno-cultural identity on emotions and teaching found that teachers’ “professional identity helps them to position and situate themselves in relation to their students and make appropriate and effective adjustments in their practice” (p. 29). In addition to sharing personal anecdotes, the participants make sure to build in authentic interactions with students throughout their lessons. Over the span of their careers, ranging from seven to twenty years, they have developed reliable methods that arise from their teacher identity, but constantly adapt to the individuals in the classroom. Caroline, for example, shared that she will “try to find some common ground with kids, develop some relationships… you know, play some little drama games to get them comfortable.” Gerald relies on similar semi-
structured activities, creating a sense of community in the room “by building in activities in the first couple weeks that require a lot of group work to get them to get to know other students they don’t know, but also require me to pop from group to group and interact with individuals.” Leon takes a more structured approach, holding brief meetings with every student during the first three days of class. These three teachers work to build professional identities that are genuine, yet adaptable to changing circumstances. By forging strong personal connections with their students, they position themselves as adults with whom students can breach difficult subjects; they are all able, therefore, to support these students through emotionally trying times because they have built that foundation of trust.

In addition to the personal connections that arise from an empathetic approach to teaching, all three teachers emphasized the importance of bringing fun into the classroom. A playful, creative environment permits students to be themselves, while consistency provides a solid structure within which they can do so. Gerald explained:

The hardest people to get to trust you, I’m gonna say, are teenagers, and if you can find an avenue of making – and for me it’s making my classroom kind of, I’m gonna say, fun and light-hearted – that you can find an avenue for kids to communicate with you and feel free to say, within reason obviously, free to say what’s on their mind. Often that opens them up to being free to say things that expose bigger picture issues with them.

Gerald identifies a connection between fun and trust that inspires students to let their guard down. They see him as someone who laughs with them and makes them laugh; therefore, they begin to see him as someone they can trust with the heavier emotions. Caroline expresses a similar sentiment when she says, “I’m not a fan of throwing up a PowerPoint. If I throw up something it’s gonna be creative in nature. Creativity evokes emotion in kids and then they hook
onto their learning.” Likewise, Leon describes lab experiments in the following terms: “If it’s a dissection day, you’ll see them in lab coats and goggles running around doing dissection. It’s always go go go in my classroom.” In these teachers’ experience, the effort they invest in creating a fun atmosphere in their classrooms generates a substantial return in students’ level of comfort.

Ultimately, the three participants lay the groundwork for the support they offer students in emotionally difficult circumstances in the very fabric of their teacher identities. Notably, all three of these teachers have experienced students feeling comfortable enough with them to share the story of their bereavement. These shared qualities of empathy, personal connection, and fun actively shape this comfortable manner with which their students approach them. In a study of 182 students with behavioural issues from 14 different schools, Cothran, Kulinna, and Garragy (2003) found that students reported that they could, indeed, perceive when a teacher “doesn’t care” and that they found it much easier to adhere to classroom policies “when teachers used communication tactics to exhibit care” (p. 439). Likewise, the present findings demonstrate that students know which teachers care about their emotional lives. This connection between teacher identity and classroom support for grieving students is crucial because, as Pianta and Nimetz (1991) found, students differentiate teachers from other adults, which enhances teachers’ ability to act as a solid foundation upon which more systems-based approaches (i.e. family-school partnerships, wraparound services) can be built.

4.2 Privacy, Boundaries, and the Reasonable Limitations on Classroom Support

While all participating teachers stressed the importance of empathetic connection with students, they also maintained that it is important for teachers to be aware not only of professional boundaries, but also of the extent of their personal ability as a resource for students
in emotional distress. Across all three interviews, the participants strongly recommended a team approach to supporting grieving students that mobilized the full capacity of the school’s student success team. They also cautioned beginning teachers to be wary of taking on more than they are equipped to handle when students disclose emotional, personal information. My findings suggest teachers should maintain an open line of communication with the guidance department and, in some cases, administration so that students receive help from trained professionals as needed.

The notion of respecting privacy and professional boundaries featured prominently in all three participants’ accounts of support for students during emotionally trying times. While discussing the classroom teacher’s role in supporting bereaved students, Gerald summarized his observations by saying, “I think you really need to – without crossing any professional student-teacher boundaries – make yourself personal and available to the kids.” Teachers should be approachable and available to students, but should be careful not to unintentionally transgress any official or unofficial boundaries. The Ontario College of Teachers’ in loco parentis policy dictates that teachers are responsible for acting in the spirit of caring and conscientious parents, but this policy has certain important limitations; ultimately, we are not their parent. Symbolically, Leon spoke for many teachers when he said, “a lot of us, we call them our kids because they’re like our kids.” He recognized, however, that they are not actually their kids and that this distinction is of grave importance when teachers encounter a bereaved student.

Teachers, as explored above, become significant adults in the lives of a child who has lost a parent and it is crucial to prevent this relationship from becoming one of singular dependency.

The participants also stressed that teachers must respect the individual student’s comfort level in terms of privacy. They explained that every bereaved child they encounter is comfortable with a different degree of sharing personal information. Some enjoy when schools hold memorial
services for their lost loved one, while others resist the idea of even telling their teachers about the bereavement. Professional boundaries also extend to online platforms, specifically with reference to the sharing of information. Leon communicated his dismay at the actions of a board trustee in the aftermath of a student’s death by gun violence. This student was in his math class and he heard news of the young man’s death through non-professional and unofficial channels. He recalled, “the night before we found out, when it happened, it was heart wrenching because we learned about it not through professional communication; it was through Twitter. It was a trustee who just basically blurted it out. We were all like, “What?” Leon perceives tact to be crucial in respecting the boundaries of bereaved students. While this was not an instance of parental death, Leon used this example to illustrate what is meant by “professional boundaries.”

Caroline explained that in her role as guidance counselor, she is careful to respect the wishes of surviving family members:

If there is a death in the family, usually that can bring tears at random times and it is important to let the teachers know…we’ll talk the parents, “Do you mind if we disclose this to teachers?” and if the answer is no, obviously we wouldn’t.”

Here, she recognizes the value of sharing information about a student’s personal loss, but subordinates this communication to the more imperative respect for that student’s preference regarding privacy.

While privacy and confidentiality are of the utmost importance, all three participants emphasize the importance of a strong, communicative team approach to supporting those students who do choose to disclose their bereavement to teachers. Leon articulated this point by saying, “I’m not a doctor…we have our Child and Youth Workers who have a litany of resources down there…Don’t feel that you’re not doing your job if you’re referring out. That’s what
they’re there for.” He is right to remember that he is, indeed, a teacher and not a doctor (or a psychologist or social worker). Teachers’ training and capacity to support these students only extends so far. All three participants related scenarios wherein teachers overstepped their capabilities to the detriment of the student they were trying to help. Caroline spoke for her guidance department when she said,

> What we don’t want teachers to do is – sometimes teachers find out something and take it on themselves to counsel and counsel and then we don’t hear about it and it actually gets in the way, because now we haven’t helped them in their other classes. That’s really – I love teachers who connect with their kids, for sure, but you have to do it to a limit.

In addition to lacking certain qualifications, teachers who take on the full burden of supporting grieving students potentially prevent that student from receiving support in their other classes. Leon expressed a similar sentiment, “as professionals we have to share a discourse of information so that we’re all prepared to scaffold that kid properly.” A team approach, which mobilizes the capacity of the school’s guidance and student services, has proven most effective in the experience and opinion of all three participants.

In addition to the unintended hindrance to supporting the student, teachers taking on sole responsibility for a grieving student can have devastating consequences for both the teacher’s career and the student’s wellbeing. Caroline cautions young teachers not to “go in and, sort of, overcompensate because they want to be liked by the kids” because “it can get them into hot water.” She recalled instances when teachers have lost their jobs because they attempted to singlehandedly care for a student. More problematic still is the danger this tendency poses to the student. Caroline emphasized that teachers must take the duty to report potential harm seriously.
In encounters with students who may be depressed, anxious, angry, or sad in the aftermath of bereavement, she insisted teachers must refer students to trained professionals:

   God forbid, something happens to that kid and you kinda take it on yourself to have a conversation with them about, maybe, why do they cut themselves, and they promise you it isn’t anything, they just do it here and there, well… God forbid.

She perceives the decision regarding whether or not students are a threat to themselves or others to be beyond the scope of a teacher’s role. The tragic irony of situations where teachers who care a great deal unwittingly prevent students receiving the help they need can be avoided by connecting them to available resources.

This emphasis on the ethical boundaries of teachers’ involvement in the emotional lives of grieving students is largely absent in existing literature on the subject. In fact, most studies conclude that there is need for more teacher involvement. For example, Cullinan’s 1990 study found a “discrepancy between the vast majority of respondents who thought it proper for a teacher to help a grieving child, and the substantial number who believed that the best action was to refer a grieving student to a counselor” (p. 157). In her discussion of these findings, Cullinan attributed this discrepancy to teachers’ belief that “they had no time to talk with a grieving child in the classroom” and “with this type of belief system, it may not be possible to provide the appropriate assistance” (p. 157). The findings of the present research suggest that, in many cases, the “proper” way for a teacher to help grieving students is to refer them to a counselor. Indeed, contrary to Cullinan’s notion that teachers who refer students to resources outside the classroom are not providing “appropriate assistance,” the participants in this study suggest that a referral to guidance is the most appropriate assistance classroom teachers can provide. Lane, Rowland, and Beinart’s (2014) qualitative study of twelve teachers supporting bereaved adolescents
corroborates these findings, but only briefly reports, “teachers encouraged students to engage with other sources of support including school counselors, bereavement charities, chaplains, and child and adolescent health services” (p. 647). The risks associated with teachers failing to refer students to other sources of support, however, are not accounted for in extant literature.

4.3 Barriers to Support: Unpredictability and Miscommunication

The participants in this study identified a number of disparate obstacles they have encountered in supporting grieving students, but the array of specific barriers fall into two broad categories: unpredictability and failure of communication. Firstly, they perceived there to be no foolproof formula or strategy teachers can enact because each student’s needs differ based on context and personality. Additionally, all the successful methods the participants described are predicated on the notion that speaking about one’s grief is essential to integrating the loss into their new daily reality; communication breakdowns can, therefore, seriously limit the effectiveness of a teacher’s efforts.

Gerald described the challenge of responding to the individual needs of each bereaved student. When asked if his own experience with parental bereavement ameliorated his ability to support grieving students, he recalls,

there used to be a commercial on TV for bits-n-bites, which was an animated guy sitting on his lawn chair and he pulls out a handful of bits-n-bites and it’s like two pretzels and a cheese stick and, I don’t know, then he pulls it out again and it’s no pretzels and whatever. Then he says, ‘It’s a whole different ball game in every handful’ And I think that’s what it is – it doesn’t matter if we’re talking student or teacher, adult or kid, outside of education, you can have the same bag of bits-n-bites but what you pull out of it and what you require of it are entirely different things.
The bits-n-bites metaphor articulates a barrier all three participants encountered in supporting grieving students: everyone grieves differently. Every student is different and every loss is different. Just as every handful of bits-n-bites is still bits-n-bites but produces a different mixture of snacks, grief is always grief but it manifests in drastically different ways. For example, Gerald recalled that, in one instance, it was “almost a relief to the student when her mother did pass. She knew it was an inevitability.” By contrast, Leon described a student whose father was murdered, for whom the death was incredibly shocking. These students differ not only in terms of background and personality, but the circumstances surrounding their loss also dictate the extent and nature of support they require. Spoken like a true science teacher, Gerald reported,

I don’t think taking students from a much more heterogeneous background and putting them in the same situation that you can come up with a formula, sadly. It’s like all other things – I wish there was sort of a more, you know, ‘Do this, do that, do that, do that…

Maybe do this instead… you know, step 3a and step 3b’ but I just, I don’t think there is.

This notion that there is “no formula” aligns with the title of Lane, Rowland, and Beinart’s similar qualitative study of teachers supporting grieving adolescents: “No Rights, No Wrongs, No Magic Solutions.” This study also found that “tolerating uncertainty… helps the teacher listen to the individual student’s idiosyncratic needs thus enabling the teacher to respond to these rather than being hindered by needing to know the ‘right’ way to respond” (Lane et al., 2014, p. 660). While uncertainty and unpredictability can be barriers, the three participants suggest that the only way to surmount such barriers is to approach every grieving student without any presumption or preconceived notion of what is best for them.

In addition to unpredictability, the participants described various ways in which communication barriers can problematize their efforts to support grieving students. Gerald’s
suggestion that teachers should “give [grieving students] opportunities to express their concerns, their thoughts, to have their catharsis” summarizes the underlying assumption all three participants make about support for bereaved students: that talking about their loss is crucial to integrating it into their new reality. The notion of catharsis – or the process of releasing, and thereby providing relief from, strong or repressed emotions – suggests that these teachers have found students who have the opportunity to talk through their emotions are best able to prevent their grief from overwhelming them.

The first type of communication barrier involved diction and semantics. In discussing communication breakdowns with grieving students, Gerald recalled a “boy who still referred to his mother in the present tense as if she was still alive – obviously there was a huge barrier there – just the actual recognition and acceptance.” Clearly, supporting this student through conversation about his loss would be a complicated matter because he appeared to be coping with his loss through denial. Gerald found it impossible to discuss the student’s needs throughout the tasks of grief because the student refused to acknowledge his loss. In this circumstance, there was little Gerald could do as the classroom teacher and he chose to refer the student to the guidance department. Similarly, Leon’s experience supporting a young man whose father died made him more cognizant of his choice of words surrounding family. He reported, “this interaction was a learning experience for me. Like, when I hand a test back I will no longer, say ‘I need Mom or Dad to sign this’ I’ll say instead, ‘I need a parent or guardian to sign it.’ I just make a mental note.” Failure to exhibit sensitivity in one’s language can seriously undermine a teacher’s other efforts to communicate his/her/their openness and availability as a trusted adult. As Leon explained, “semantics can change a kid’s, you know, perception of even what you think or what you know. Like, ‘Oh you don’t know what the hell you’re talking about. You don’t
know what my life’s like.” If it seems that a teacher assumes every child comes from a nuclear family, or that everyone’s home life includes a Mom and a Dad, students can feel alienated by that teacher. Students may also conclude that the teacher cannot possibly relate to their situation at home if they make such assumptions.

The other communication barrier participants encountered concerned communication with surviving parents and caregivers. Across the literature on school-based support for bereaved students, communication with parents has been linked to successful support for students in mourning. Lane, Rowland, and Beinart’s (2014) findings again demonstrate a similar theme. They report that “participants identified how communication with the remaining parent is important, but… complicated” (p. 658). Referencing two different bereaved students, Gerald recalls how access to the surviving parent was simply not possible or respectful. In the first student’s case, “the father had left years ago and had an estranged relationship with the daughter and even in the time of her mother’s ultimate sickness and passing, the father never reappeared to take any ownership, responsibility, or care for his daughter.” In the second student’s case, he remembered,

I met what I assumed would be her mother when she booked the appointment but was actually one of her sisters who came to talk to me who was barely above high school age herself. So, I think the Mother’s situation in that case, which was clinical depression, was obviously a huge barrier to being able to have a dialogue at a bigger level about her child about her father’s suicide as well.

Absence of a surviving parent and the surviving parent’s own grief were both obstacles to communication about the student’s needs in school. The collaborative parent-school approach to supporting these students throughout their grieving was not an option.
Leon also cited language barriers and cultural differences as obstacles to maintaining open lines of communication with students’ surviving family members. He recalled of a student whose family immigrated to Canada from Colombia shortly after his father’s death that the “caregivers, one, they couldn’t speak the language to communicate with me, two, they weren’t around or coming to meetings that they set. I don’t put the blame on them, but it was a bump, you know?” The language barrier was exacerbated by the inaccessibility of face-to-face conversation because “on the phone it’s very difficult to translate.” Leon has, in past cases, enlisted a translator for conversations with parents whose primary language is not English, but over the phone this is difficult to accomplish. Once again, a dislocation in communication between school and home impeded the participant’s perceived ability to support the grieving student.

4.4 Overcoming Barriers Through Inclusive, Supportive School Community

The barriers identified in section 4.3 are challenging but possible to surmount. In addition to the support that teachers can offer, all three participants agreed that an inclusive school community with rich extracurricular opportunities is highly beneficial to students’ wellbeing throughout their period of mourning. An adaptable combination of routine (enforced within reason), peer networks, and extracurricular activities can create an environment that supports students through their grief.

All three participants referenced the significance structure and routine can hold for a student whose life has been drastically altered by the death of a parent or primary caregiver. Gerald reported that for many grieving students, the “best defense was to just get back to routine.” Caroline recalled that, in the case of one student whose primary caregiver (a grandmother) had died, “she was really worried about the routine and what this was gonna mean
for [the family] as a unit.” These findings reveal that the reliability of school routine can be comforting for students who are worried about the interruption of routines at home; moreover, these changing routines of home life function as daily reminders of the student’s loss, so if school remains predictable this can ease their distress. Gerald recalled offering a student the option of foregoing her final exam in Grade 11 Chemistry. He explained,

You know what, I don’t care if you’re having a bad day or just having a normal day – that quite literally is the last instruction on all my exams: ‘In the grand scheme of your life this is meaningless.’ But for that girl I think it actually had a meaning.

The bereaved student chose to write the exam because it was the standard activity for that time of year and studying for it, writing it, were comforting routines.

Gerald mentioned that the accommodations he offers grieving students are consistent with accommodations he offers students in any distressing situation, be it illness, anxiety, etc. Or, in his words, “in keeping with – my sort of, my policy and vibe towards kids at that age when they’re dealing with issues of all manner.” Leon reported enacting a similar policy:

So I would give him accommodations like, ‘You get extra time but you’re gonna come after school and work with me…You’re gonna sit in front of me and we’re gonna learn it together.’ So that’s the way I work in my school. He wouldn’t be the only one, there would be other students there too so he wouldn’t feel singled out. I mentioned the breakfast club, so there’s incentives right? You get snacks for the kids. You say, ‘OK Lunch and learn! You’re gonna sit and eat lunch with me and we’re gonna learn this material.’ That’s the accommodation I look at and that’s what we did.

This approach bolsters the comforting aspects of routine, while also reducing stigma around the student’s grief. Both of these teachers send a message to the bereaved student that they deserve
extra support and accommodations, but that they are neither weak nor out of the ordinary for requiring such supports.

Another aspect of school community that participants report provides a high degree of positive support for grieving students is strong peer relationships. Carter and Janzen (1994) found that high school students list peers as their preferred source of support, and the findings of my research support this conclusion. George expressed that the school at which he works is “a small tight-knit community – kind of like a small town, everybody knows everybody else – across grades within grades, and every student I saw [a grieving student] interact with had a hug for her and supportive words.” While the social lives of high school students are complex and largely out of the control of classroom teachers, the participants offered the suggestion that involvement in extracurriculars can positively impact students’ return to school life after a significant bereavement. The student Gerald described above “was an active member of student council and I think, for her, it was largely therapeutic to be at school.” Her return to school was characterized by interactions with a student body that knew and respected her. Likewise, Caroline described a student whom she recently supported through her grief in the role of a guidance counselor: “she was a leader for other kids, so I think she knew she couldn’t just disappear into the shadows. You know what I mean? She probably got strength from being distracted and having to get out there with the kids.” School involvement for these individuals was a source of strength and solace.

By contrast, when asked to describe students who had a more difficult transition back into school after a bereavement, Caroline explained that they were “less involved, less apart of the social fabric of the school, less…you know, lower social capital so, not as big a network of social relationships that, you know, they could lean on for support.” Not every student will be
interested in running for school council or taking on a leadership role in a student club; however, the participants reported that schools which best support grieving students are those that provide diverse opportunities for students of all abilities and interests to find their niche. Gerald suggests that “as a teacher you’re in your best interest to encourage students to find opportunities to – again, there’s lots of things they’re dealing with – to visit avenues that allow them to understand that other people are going through similar issues and give them opportunities to express their concerns, their thoughts.” So, despite limitations on a teacher’s control over peers’ responses to a grieving student, teachers have the potential to create safe spaces where students can find likeminded individuals and create the “social capital” to which Caroline referred.

Student councils and clubs can not only be impactful resources for students socially, but can also provide students access to creative and athletic outlets for their emotions. Gerald, who works at an arts academy, reported that “for a lot of the kids at our school, whatever the issue is – in particular bigger picture things – often their pursuit of their art is there greatest therapy.” Leon concurred, “Oh yeah, absolutely. I was an arts student myself. I was music. The arts areas are emotional outlets for sure.” As a guidance counselor, Caroline also frequently uses music and multimedia as resources in her office to support grieving students. She explained,

If they just wanna listen to, like, Green Day, then I’ll blast it! But yes, for sure, providing them something, or at least asking, ‘When you’re feeling down what’s something that distracts you?’ and I’ll find out what that is and suggest, ‘Maybe do some extra art this weekend. Just take some time for yourself and do some art. Try to channel your pain through the artwork.’

According to the participants, sport can also function as an emotional outlet. In the case of a bereaved student Leon encountered, “The only thing he wanted to do was play soccer. That was
his main outlet, the reason why he would come to school.” In addition to providing a healthy outlet for the intense emotions associated with grief, arts and sport can create motivation for grieving students to get out of bed, leave the house, and return to life at school. If students do not come to school, teachers are unable to assess what supports they need throughout their time of mourning. Several studies have shown that the support and stability provided by schools are critical in nurturing and stabilizing adolescents and children after a significant bereavement (Sandler et al., 2003, 2010; Schonfeld, 2010). The draw of creativity and athletics creates incentive for those grieving students to be in the classroom where teachers can observe them and connect them to appropriate resources.

4.5 Systemic Concerns in Supporting Bereaved Students

The participants in this study expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of both pre-service and professional development training around supporting students’ mental wellbeing that are currently offered by the Ministry of Education. Of the three participants, moreover, there were varying degrees of affirmation that their guidance department was operating at optimal effectiveness.

When asked whether or not they had received training in mental health first aid or bereavement counseling, participants expressed two qualms with the training they had received: (1) during in-service Professional Development it tended to be delivered by people who did not have the appropriate qualifications, and (2) during pre-service training it was not sufficient (if offered at all). Gerald’s explanation of professional development experiences was as follows:

They largely involve, I’m gonna say, a ‘specialist’ – put it in quotes – coming in and speaking with us like someone from the board, a board head of guidance, and speaking with the staff as a whole just about very common generalizing mental health issues
prevalent in teens today and often that is followed by sort of smaller group workshops where I’m gonna say it’s a lot of brainstorming about a particular topic, say, how you would deal with a situation within the classroom or a particular type of student within the classroom. Followed by a group pow-wow at the end sharing your findings with others… or, your thoughts more than findings.

This account raises three significant points. Firstly, Gerald’s insistence that the word “specialist” be put in scare quotes demonstrates his lack of confidence in the person’s claims to be a specialist. Secondly, the phrase “generalizing mental health issues prevalent in teens today” suggests a vagueness that left Gerald with little by way of concrete strategies or information. Finally, his resistance to terming what emerged from these sessions as “findings” reveals that he hesitated to imbue the ideas these sessions produced with validity. Caroline expressed similar sentiments when she recalled individuals who overstepped their qualifications in attempts to support grieving students: “You can’t have people pretend to be the pros.” In order to be effective in her role as a guidance counselor, Caroline went outside her teacher training and professional development opportunities to seek additional training. For example, she is certified as a solution-focused counselor through University of Toronto’s Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work.

Participants also reported a lack of training in areas of mental health and student exceptionalities as part of their initial teacher training. Caroline expressed the belief that “every teacher should be trained in the classroom to be open, empathetic, compassionate, and to be a form of a guidance teacher while in the classroom.” Leon articulated a similar sentiment,

I wish all teachers had a guidance course under their belt. I wish all teachers had an understanding of what connections you have to build with a child. Even having an ESL
course or Spec Ed course under their belt is so important. Just so they can access resources and know how to connect with their students in a more helpful way.

Essentially, the participants reported a varying level of unpreparedness among the teachers with whom they work and they credit inadequacy of both professional development and initial teacher training for this unpreparedness. Teachers can be as open-minded, empathetic, and communicative as possible, but if they are not familiar with the resources and strategies to implement in supporting grieving students, they are unlikely to be successful.

Even if teachers know to take a team-based approach to supporting grieving students, the participants reported varying degrees of effectiveness regarding the guidance team at their schools. Caroline, who works at an elite independent school, expressed a high level of satisfaction with the guidance team. She described its composition as follows:

Currently I’m the grades 7-9 counselor – it’s just me – and then there are two other counselors who do grades 10-12 and then we have a student success coordinator, who does pretty much – students who have accommodations and learning needs. She’s full time. Then we have the social worker who, you know, takes it to another level, or provides extra support. And then within our department we also have student life, which is sort of like managing extracurriculars and cocurriculars. They sort of all exist in the same location. And the success of it so far? Really good. I think we’re evolving… it’s really starting to kind of get solidified in what’s the best practice in guidance and we’re starting to do that.

The advantage of an independent school is that they have the freedom to allocate funds to meet the evolving needs of an ever-changing student body. They noticed a higher need for resources to support students’ mental health and they created full-time positions for a social worker and a
student success teacher. Leon’s school is in a quite different position. He works at a school that is “recognized by the ministry as a school-at-risk in an inner city area of the city.” With this recognition comes funding to support programs for the school’s “at-risk” student population. Leon explained that funding for guidance counselors in his board is decided on a per-student basis; therefore,

Because our sections only dictate for two full-time counselors, we’ve had to sit and look at what we’ve been given by the board and put together a third guidance counselor. So, we should always have three, but unfortunately numbers on paper dictate two. But we have three full time guidance counselors, one child and youth worker, who is actually funded by the grant itself.

Without the grant from the ministry, Leon’s school would not be adequately equipped to support its student population. He reported feeling “lucky to have a full-time Child and Youth Workers and a full-time social worker dedicated to helping us out… I think we need it. We definitely use it.” Both participants provided evidence of a robust, but still quite busy, guidance team. They report that with these full-time positions filled, the departments meet the students’ needs.

Both Caroline and Leon’s schools would be considered an exception, however, in the Greater Toronto Area, as an independent school and a school receiving regular supplemental funding. Gerald’s school, by contrast, is allocated the typical per-student number of student success professionals. He reported that,

There is a social worker but she is there on a transient basis. She’s not a fixed position at our school. She will come in in crisis situations, or be called in crisis situations, and we do not have a resident psychologist. That’s not to say we don’t have access to one for kids who are in need, but generally that is outsourced, including, I know we’ve had kids
who end up at Sunnybrook and/or North York Hospital if they’re in a crisis of, I’m gonna say, greater magnitude.

Gerald went on to describe the guidance team at his school to be “very limited and certainly overwhelmed.” While he extolled the dedication and effectiveness of the two guidance counselors working in the department, he reported that these individuals were “overwhelmed.” According to a recent study of school-based psychology staff in the Canadian Journal of School Psychology (Millar, Lean, Sweet, Moraes, & Nelson, 2013), “one concern is that many of the cases referred to mental health services are crisis related.” Gerald described this very concern, with the social worker only being called in when students have reached a crisis point, or with students being hospitalized. In view of all three participants’ reports about the state of their guidance departments, these findings suggest that guidance departments are more effective when they employ full-time staff to make appropriate early interventions when a student shows signs of emotional or mental distress.

4.6 Conclusion

Analysis of the above findings yielded five significant thematic insights. Firstly, participants reported that cultivating an empathetic teacher identity, in their experience, communicates to bereaved students that they are caring and trustworthy adults. Secondly, the participants recognized that their role as empathetic teachers is circumscribed by both professional standards and ethics of personal privacy. Thirdly, they expressed common encounters with obstacles to supporting grieving students, which fall into one of two categories: lack of a formulaic response to grief or failures of communication. Fourthly, they perceived the significant positive impact involvement in such extracurriculars as art and sport can have on students throughout periods of mourning. Finally, they reported dissatisfaction with both pre-
service and in-service training they have received on the subject of students’ mental health and, to varying degrees, reported an unmet need for more robust full-time guidance staff. This qualitative study was limited to three participants; therefore, a much larger-scale study would be necessary to investigate to what extent these findings are idiosyncratic to these individuals or universal throughout the Greater Toronto Area.

In the following chapter, I discuss the implications of these findings. The chapter will highlight both broad and narrow implications of the key findings and make specific recommendations for further inquiry into their emerging themes. It will conclude with suggestions for further research in this area of inquiry and some reflective closing remarks.
Chapter Five: Conclusion

5.0 Introduction

This chapter will provide an overview of the study’s key findings and discuss their significance within the landscape of educational research. It will discuss both broad and narrow implications of the findings and outline recommendations for teachers and other such stakeholders in the wellbeing of grieving students as parents, administrators, specialist school staff, and teacher education programs. Suggested areas for further research will follow. The chapter will conclude with reflective closing remarks.

5.1 Overview of Key Findings and their Significance

This qualitative study of three GTA-based educators’ experiences supporting parentally bereaved students yielded several significant insights. The findings of the research emerged in five key themes: empathetic teacher identity, professional boundaries, barriers to support, inclusive school community, and systemic concerns. These five categories showed consistent data across all three participants, with remarkably minimal divergence or disagreement.

Firstly, all three participants perceived their teacher identity – the image teachers have of themselves that informs their pedagogy and practice – was the most crucial element in their ability to support grieving students. They credited their fun classroom environment and personable affect as the groundwork upon which their classroom support system is built. Their experiences suggest their tendency to share personal (but not too personal) anecdotes and to encourage open, honest dialogue with students demonstrated that they are caring adults who can be trusted with intimate or difficult disclosures.

The participants qualified this endorsement of personal support, however, by cautioning teachers to know and respect professional boundaries. They suggest that teachers must be aware
of the limitations of their own qualifications, the duty to report potential harm, and the student’s own right to self-determination and privacy. All three participants acknowledged that, experienced educators though they may be, they are not trained mental health professionals. Their impulse to support students through difficult times is tempered by an awareness of the extent of their ability. Taking sole responsibility for a student’s wellbeing through mourning also prevents other teachers, administrators, and even parents from fully understanding the student’s situation. A team approach that includes the Guidance Department and parents/guardians is recommended. Significantly, the participants also advocate clear identification of the student’s individual privacy needs. Some students enjoy public memorial or prayer services; others prefer to grieve without the attention of the wider school community.

The barriers that participants encountered in supporting grieving students fell into two categories: unpredictability and communication breakdowns. Each individual grieves differently and every loss is different. It is, therefore, challenging to develop a system or procedure for supporting bereaved students. No one formula universally applies; as with many other areas of teaching, differentiation of approach grounded in knowledge of the student is recommended. Communication can also be a challenge when supporting a grieving student. Participants shared experiences where the language they habitually use in the classroom can undermine students’ confidence in their ability to empathize. For example, using the phrase “parent or guardian” instead of “Mom and Dad” communicates to students that a teacher does not make heteronormative assumptions and does not expect that students come from two-parent families. Failure to develop a keen awareness of language has the opposite effect: students receive the message that their teacher will not understand their reality. Communication with surviving parents/guardians can also be a barrier to supporting grieving students. This difficulty in
establishing lines of contact is perceived to be exacerbated when the surviving guardian is an English Language Learner.

According to the participants, these barriers can be overcome when a school establishes a supportive community through extracurriculars and consistent routine. Involvement in arts, sport, and student government can create opportunities for grieving students to find community, self-expression, and fulfillment as they re-integrate after bereavement. The participants also suggest that teachers should be as consistent as possible in their accommodations for students in exceptional circumstances. If teachers have a clear classroom policy on exemptions, extensions, and extra help, grieving students may feel less stigmatized when seeking these accommodations. The participants perceive this consistency to have a positive effect on students’ attitudes toward seeking help in times of distress.

Finally, the participants identify broader systemic barriers to supporting bereaved students, in both their training and their student success departments. Their discussion of Pre- and In-Service training suggests that both teacher education programs and professional development sessions are insufficient in preparing teachers to support grieving students. They express a desire for mandatory guidance/special education courses in initial teacher education, which they had to seek in advanced qualifications. Furthermore, they express dissatisfaction with professional development; specifically, they perceive the people who lead P.D. on mental health to be under-qualified. While two of the three participants come from untypical school environments – one independent and one “high-risk” – they all perceive a shortcoming in Ontario’s public schools’ guidance funding allocation. They have found that students often receive professional support only once they have reached a crisis point.
This study sheds light on a seldom-researched facet of teacher experience in Ontario. It responds to the central question, “How have experiences supporting parentally bereaved adolescents reportedly been affected by the teacher identity of three educators working in Toronto, Ontario?” The qualitative research suggests that teachers perceive their identity as teachers to be foundational to their ability to support grieving students. Whether in the extent of their perceivable empathy, their habitual respect for professional boundaries, their relationship with parents and colleagues, or their involvement in extracurriculars, all three participants suggest that their ability to support grieving students is strongly linked to their lived perception of themselves as educators.

5.2 Implications

The following section of this chapter provides an overview of this research’s salient implications. Broad implications for Ontario’s educational community and educational research generally are identified. These are followed by a discussion of narrow implications for my own professional identity and practice.

5.2.1 Broad implications: The educational community

The key findings of this study have broad implications for five stakeholders in the educational community: students, teachers, parents, administrators, and teacher education programs. The following section highlights how this research contributes to an understanding of the current state of affairs among these five stakeholders in Ontario.

Firstly, the participants’ experiences with bereaved students imply that students respond positively to empathetic teaching styles. Students tend to trust teachers who cultivate an approachable, trustworthy persona in the classroom. The participants also suggest that students possess a keen awareness of teachers’ word choice and language use, and may base their
assumptions about a given teacher on these linguistic tendencies. Students may also find solace in a return to community and routine in the school after bereavement. Those students who have opportunities to find friendship and self-expression in art, sport, clubs, or committees may experience a smoother transition back into school life throughout mourning.

Implications for teachers are largely related to the implications for students mentioned above. The findings of this study suggest that teachers who present a personal, fallible, co-conspirator-in-learning character may be likelier to gain the trust of grieving students. Strict “tough love” approaches to supporting grieving students are reportedly less effective. Specifically, teachers may be failing to support students by insisting on equality (read: “all the other students did this task, so you must also do it” or “you have to return to normal life now”) rather than equity, or, creating conditions for all students to succeed based on circumstance, strengths, and needs. Conversely, teachers may also be taking on too large a role in their efforts to support grieving students. Well-intentioned as these efforts may be, teachers can undermine their own ability to support students by failing to refer them to outside services. This tendency to act as sole support can cause teachers to cross professional ethical boundaries. It can also prevent students gaining necessary access to social workers, therapists, or other trained health care professionals.

Implications of this study for parents/guardians are also implications for teachers because they involve a failure of communication between these two stakeholders. Surviving parents and guardians may not be sufficiently supported by school communities. Specifically, my findings suggest that English Language Learner parent/guardians may not be provided the opportunity to speak with teachers about their child’s needs after bereavement. Teachers who do not speak the
parent/guardian’s L1 may not have access to a translator or may not be aware of their options for communicating with these parent/guardians.

Administrators, according to my findings, may not be providing adequate professional development opportunities for teachers who wish to better support students through emotionally distressing times. Teachers seem to be frustrated by reported disorganization and poor quality of PD opportunities in this area. Allocation of funds to student success and guidance departments may also be insufficient. The absence of a full-time Social Worker, psychologist, or Child and Youth Worker in most schools may be causing students to reach crisis point before they are granted access to any services.

The participants also expressed a desire for more training in social/emotional student support in their initial teacher education programs. Teachers may not be receiving adequate pre-service exposure to the increasingly prevalent mental health problems students in the Intermediate/Senior grades experience. It is noteworthy, however, that several significant province-wide changes have been made to teacher education programs since the participants earned their Bachelors in Education. This negative implication may already be showing improvement. My own training at OISE (2015-2017) included an entire course devoted to Special Education and several modules on mental health in both my Anti-Oppressive Education and Issues in Education courses.

5.2.2 Narrow implications: Professional identity and practice

This study affirmed some of my intuitions about supporting grieving students and either complicated or overturned others. I came to this study as someone with personal insight into the student’s experience of school-based bereavement support. My positive experiences with concerned, caring teachers caused me to believe that all teachers should take on responsibility
students’ emotional wellbeing. This implication that arose from personal experience is affirmed in my findings, but in a modified, more complex version. I had not previously considered the potential perils of overinvestment in a student’s grief. While students may benefit from the presence of a caring teacher, they may also suffer the overzealous care of a teacher who fails to refer them to necessary services. I also realized that the decision to announce my father’s death over the P.A. was also grounded in a similar caring impulse. At a Catholic school, it seemed appropriate to my teachers and administrators that they should ask the school community to pray for me. They did not consider how this violated my privacy because they did not ask my permission. I would have declined the offer. Throughout my career as a teacher, I will now be acutely aware that every student grieves differently. I will never assume what it best for a student, as I may previously have done. Perhaps a future student of mine would find comfort in a public memorial service after a parent’s death. Perhaps, like me, they would not. The important insight is that one should ask before acting.

The implications of this study around extracurriculars resonated with a facet of my own experience that I had actually forgotten. Shortly after my father’s death, I tried out for the Varsity rugby team. With one notable exception, we were terrible rugby players: new to the sport, not especially fast or agile, unaccustomed to physical training. We were all, however, young people working through a variety of social and emotional issues. The camaraderie was hugely therapeutic for the whole team (not to mention the regular ability to hit practice-bags with the full force of our bodyweight) and our coaches knew to prioritize this healing over winning games. I will carry this insight with me through my involvement with extracurriculars as my career unfolds.
I had also not previously considered the added barrier ELL parents/guardians would face in ensuring school support for their grieving child. My Mom never had to worry that my teachers would not understand her at parent-teacher interviews. The frustration the three participants in this study expressed at their inability to communicate with ELL parents is a feeling I am highly likely to encounter in my career as a teacher in the diverse city of Toronto. Like my participants, I will aim to find ways to break down these barriers. Enlisting the help of a translator is an excellent option if available. In the event that this is impossible, however, I am now aware of the need to seek alternatives. Google Translator is not perfect, but in a face-to-face meeting it would be far better than nothing. Where phone conversation is not feasible, perhaps I could write letters or e-mails.

Ultimately, this study has broadened my perspective on an issue that has hitherto been very personal. Through my explorations of relevant literature and the generous interviews my participants offered, I have been able to create enough objectivity to take a nonjudgmental view of teachers who behave differently toward grieving students than I might be inclined to do. It has also exposed me to the perspectives of different stakeholders and forced me to reflect on the limitations of my own ability to support bereaved students, despite my experience.

5.3 Recommendations

In light of the implications discussed above, this study yields several recommendations for teachers and administrators. I focus on these two stakeholders because students and parents should not be held responsible for the support they receive in schools. It would not be ethical or even practical to recommend grieving children and their caregivers take any particular course of action because one of the major implications of this study is that everyone grieves differently.
Rather, the responsibility falls to teachers and administrators to ensure students receive support in the classroom and school community after bereavement.

Firstly, teachers should work to cultivate a reputation among students as a trusted adult. The participants credit their success in this area to sharing personal anecdotes and creating a fun creativity/collaboration-based classroom atmosphere. Teachers should also develop strategies for getting to know their students well enough to notice when their behaviour changes. This relationship-based teacher identity foregoes the notion of teacher as expert imparting knowledge in favour of a more dynamic notion of teacher as nurturer of curiosity and care. Teachers can work toward destigmatization of grieving students by creating clear policies around accommodations for exceptional circumstances. If students know that anyone has access to an extension or extra help when they need it, they may feel less ashamed to seek support. Teachers can further cultivate these relationships through involvement in extracurriculars. Participants in this study suggest that coaching or facilitating a club allows students to see their teachers in a different light – as someone who is not there to administer tests and judge their work, but rather an adult who takes an interest in their development and wellbeing. Finally, teachers should work to establish lines of communication with all parents, but especially those who are new to Canada or the English language. Language should not be a barrier to parent involvement in their child’s school life, particularly during the trying times following bereavement.

Administrators, to the extent of their ability, should work to provide students with a variety of extracurricular opportunities as well as a robust student success team. Funding should be allocated to creating as many opportunities as possible for student to find their niche or their community within a school. Priority should also be placed on maintaining strong arts and Physical Education programs. Creativity and physical activity are both linked in my findings to
positive outcomes for students. Administrators may not be able to control the formation of exclusive cliques, but they can foster opportunities for students to form positive peer support groups through shared interests. Priority should also be placed on strengthening guidance/student success departments. All participants in this study affirmed the substantial positive effect of a social worker or psychologist’s presence in a school. Moreover, the data’s emphasis on teachers recognizing their own limitations relies on the presence of someone more qualified, to whom teachers can refer grieving students.

5.4 Areas for Future Research

This study was limited to qualitative data grounded in the experience of only three individuals. In light of the lack of more robust research into teacher support for grieving students, especially in an Ontario context, this study has raised many more questions than it has answered. Larger-scale studies would be required to bolster or verify my findings. Some possible areas for future research include:

1) Exploration of the link between empathetic teacher identity and classroom support for students in distress. Does this link reported by my participants resonate with the educational community in Ontario more broadly? Do the qualities of empathetic teaching identified by my participants persist in a larger sample?

2) Interventions for teachers who take on too great an emotional burden. How prevalent is this tendency? What support can be provided to teachers who feel they are their students’ only wellness resource?

3) Strategies for improving communication between teachers and parents who are English Language Learners. What technology can support these interactions? What are schools
doing that works well? How well are schools in Ontario including English Language Learners in the parent-school community?

4) Further research to support the participants’ perceived link between extracurriculars and bereavement support. Do grieving students seek involvement in arts and sport? If so, how can schools meet this need?

5) Investigation into how well teacher education programs are responding to the demand for more training in areas supporting student mental wellness. How effective are special education courses? Should a guidance course be mandatory?

6) A study of how funds are allocated to Guidance and Student Success departments across the Ontario boards. Are budgets being used efficiently? Should they increase?

Ultimately, the most important perspective that is missing from this study is that of the grieving students themselves. A larger study of student perceptions of their teachers’ efforts (or non-efforts) to support them after bereavement would be a strong complement to the findings of this MTRP.

5.5 Concluding Remarks

This research has, from the earliest stages, felt like a small first step down an important avenue of inquiry. While I was able to find literature on the topics of adolescent grief, school-based mental health support, and teacher identity, as far as I know this is the first study that brings all three of these areas together in an Ontario context. I found that interest and enthusiasm was high when I discussed the project with other educators at varying stages of their careers. Every teacher with whom I spoke about my central research question felt that it was an important question to ask, but that they had no ready answer for it. After completing this study, I am more confident in my ability to support grieving students in my future practice, but I also feel I have
only scratched the surface of a complex issue. The question of teacher support for bereaved students is hitched to larger-scale questions about the priorities of teacher education and provincial funding for schools. I hope to be among a group of teacher-researchers who will return to these big questions throughout the course of our careers.
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Appendix A – Informed Consent Contract

April 13th, 2016
Dear ________________________

My name is Wendy Byrnes and I am a student in the Master of Teaching (MT) program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). A component of this degree program involves conducting a small-scale qualitative research study. My research will focus on classroom support for parentally bereaved students in grades 9-12. I am interested in interviewing teachers who have experience supporting a student grieving the loss of a parent or primary caregiver. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

Your participation in this research will involve one roughly 60-75 minute interview, which will be transcribed and audio-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient for you, outside of school time. The contents of this interview will be used for my research project, which will include a final paper and informal presentations to my classmates. I may also present my research findings via conference presentations and/or through publication. You will be assigned a pseudonym to maintain your anonymity and I will not use your name or any other content that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information will remain confidential. Any information that identifies your school or students will also be excluded. Only myself and my research instructor will have access to any identifying information.

The interview data will be stored on my password-protected computer and the only person who will have access to the research data will be my course instructor. You are free to change your mind about your participation at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may also choose to decline to answer any specific question during the interview. I will destroy the audio recording after the paper has been presented and/or published, which may take up to a maximum of five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks to participation.

Please sign this consent form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. I am very grateful for your participation.

Sincerely,

Wendy Byrnes
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 from this research study at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me, Wendy Byrnes, and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described. I agree to have the interview audio-recorded.

Signature: ________________________________________

Name: (printed) ________________________________________

Date: ______________________________________
Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Opening Script

Good morning/afternoon, and thank you for volunteering to participate in this interview. My name is Wendy Byrnes. I am a graduate student and pre-service teacher at OISE and I am conducting a study of three secondary school teachers in the GTA who have supported a parentally bereaved student in the classroom. I aim to learn about challenges and obstacles teachers have faced throughout these encounters with grieving adolescents and best practices that emerged from the experience. I hope to learn, furthermore, how this experience can affect teachers themselves. This interview is sub-divided into four sections, which are designed to guide you through telling me your story. I will begin by asking about your professional background and daily practice, school and surrounding community. Secondly, I will ask you to describe your relationship with one or more bereaved students. Finally, the interview will close with any suggestions or advice you would like to offer beginning teachers. Please understand that your anonymity will be strictly protected and I pose these questions without any judgment or presumption. This interview should take between forty-five and sixty minutes to complete. Before we begin, do you have any questions?

Section A: Background of the Participant

1. Please state your name for the recording.

2. For how many years have you been a teacher?
   • At how many different schools have you taught?
   • If more than one, where were the other schools located?

3. Which grades and subjects do you teach?
   • Which of these do you prefer?

4. Do you have any training in mental health first aid or grief counselling?

5. Please briefly describe the social positioning of your current school’s student body.
   • socioeconomic status of neighbourhood
   • ethnically and religiously diversity
   • gender and sexual diversity (e.g., active Queer/Straight Alliance)

6. Describe your school’s guidance/social work/psychology team. What is its composition and how would you assess its effectiveness?

7. How do you go about getting to know your students at the beginning of the term?

8. If I walked into your classroom on any given day, what would I see?
   • set up (desks)
   • decorations
Section B: Encounter with a Bereaved Student

We’re now going to move on to speaking about your experience with a bereaved student in your class.

11. How did you come to know that your student’s parent or primary caregiver had died?

12. Did his/her/their parent die suddenly or as the result of a prolonged condition?
   a. If prolonged, were you aware that the parent was ill or otherwise suffering before his/her/their death?

13. What, if any, details of his/her/their loss did the student disclose to you personally?

14. To what extent did you communicate with the surviving parent/caregiver?

15. How much time, if any, did the bereaved student spend away from school after the loss?

16. When the student returned to class, how did you find other students responded to his/her/their loss?
   • Were peers supportive?
   • Were they evasive?

17. To what extent did the school’s administration become involved in the grieving student’s life at school?

18. To what extent did you offer accommodations (ie. extended deadlines, forgiving certain assessments) to the grieving student?

19. Have you experienced the loss of a parent or primary caregiver?
   • To what extent did this experience, or lack of experience, with parental bereavement affect your confidence in supporting a your student?

20. Did you provide any personal counseling or advice to your grieving student?
   • any books, films, songs, or other resources you recommended?

Section C: Academic Performance and Mental Health of Grieving Student

Finally, let’s move on to discussing the student’s academic performance and mental health.

21. Please describe, if you are able, the academic performance of this student before the loss.

22. To what extent did the loss affect his/her/their grades?
   a. How, if at all, did the loss seem to affect the student’s aspirations for success in school?

23. How positive were the student’s social interactions with peers and teachers before the loss?
• Did this change after the loss?

24. To what extent, if at all, did you observe signs of depression, anxiety, or other mental health challenges in the student during the time surrounding his/her/their loss?

25. What, if any, resources did you find useful in supporting the student’s mental and emotional wellness?
   • Any people?
   • How did you use this resource?

26. Did you encounter any barriers to supporting this student in a way you felt would be effective?
   • If yes, please describe this barrier.
   • How did you work to overcome it?
   • To what extent were you successful?

Section D: Suggestions for Beginning Teachers

27. In closing, do you have any other suggestions to offer beginning teachers who are likely to encounter a parentally bereaved student at some stage of their careers?

Thank you very much for taking the time to speak with me today. Our conversation will constitute a significant part of my research project, which will be completed in the spring of 2017. I just want to remind you once more that all identifying information about you, including the school at which you work, will be kept strictly anonymous. If you would like to read the final piece, I would be happy to send you a copy over e-mail.
Enjoy the rest of your day ☺.