Support for Grieving Students:
Ontario Teachers’ Perspectives on Grief Support Resources and Training and how they Affect Preparedness

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Abstract

The aim of this qualitative research study was to investigate the role of Ontario teachers regarding grieving students, and how prepared teachers feel to meet that role. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews with two fulltime Ontario College of Teachers certified teachers with at least 10 years of experience teaching in the Greater Toronto Area. Participants were asked about what they believe their role is in a grieving student’s life, the resources/training that they sought or that were made available to them, the efficacy of their board, and the overall challenges that teachers face when encountered with a grieving student. Interviews were transcribed and coded to uncover emerging themes consistent across the participants’ responses.

The participants reported that they believed teachers played a fundamental role in the lives of grieving students. The participants also reported receiving some training, but it was mostly teacher focused, and not necessarily focused on the students’ well-being. They reported wanting more training to be better prepared for assisting grieving students. Lastly, the participants regarded their administrative teams as somewhat helpful when supporting them in their efforts to help grieving students. As Ontario is currently undergoing a period of increased emphasis on both teacher and student mental health, this research offers insight into the early results of this initiative.

Keywords: Grief, Trauma, Loss, Mental Health, Bereavement,
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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.0 Introduction: Research Context and Problem

Death’s unavoidability and general unpredictability means that at some point in a teacher’s career s/he is likely to have a student(s) whom has experienced death and is actively grieving in the classroom. Because such a large amount of a student’s time is spent in school, but also because the student’s family may not be a source of support due to their own, the grieving student usually expresses those emotions in the school (Charkow, 1998 in Eppler, 2008). Teachers, therefore, play a critical role in assisting students through the grieving process. Part of this role includes recognizing symptoms of unhealthy grieving in students, and knowing how to help students to manage their emotional and psychological responses to the loss of a loved one. Teachers’ role is so critical because unprocessed grief may result in short-term and even persistent consequences on a child’s health (Akerman and Stathem, 2011, p. 3). The long term consequences are further espoused by Keitel, Kopala & Robin (1998) in Lenhardt and McCourt (2000): “Those who cannot resolve their grief may be at risk for depression, physical illness and increased risk of drug and alcohol abuse” (p. 192). The consequences of mental health issues arising from the death of a loved one are immediate, but also long-standing in that there is “significant functional impairment and increased risk of continued psychopathology in adulthood associated with anxiety and depression in youth” (Pine et al., 1998 in Ebesutani, Chorpita, Higa-McMillan, Nakamura, Regan & Lynch, 2010, p. 173). Recently, the Ontario Ministry of Education has placed an added emphasis on student mental health and well-being, as evidenced by the “Supporting Minds: An Educator’s Guide to Promoting Students’ Mental Health and Well-being” (2013). This policy document states that the teacher’s growing role now includes:
“promoting positive mental health at school; identifying students who may have mental health problems; and connecting those students with appropriate services” (2013, p. 6).

While this is a significant progression for the Ministry, and a major expansion of the teacher’s duties, investigating whether these initiatives have better prepared teachers to address mental health issues, specifically grief, deserves investigating. For a long time, grief as it is experienced by students and young children has not traditionally been a priority. It is only recently that equipping teachers with the ability to recognize and, or assess grieving students, has been considered an imperative part of a teacher’s role. Recognizing this shift is imperative to informing the newly emerging research. It is worth noting, however, that the word “grief” does not appear anywhere in the document, though it is possible that the learnings may be extrapolated to address grieving students.

1.1 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to uncover what resources and experiences helped to prepare a sample of elementary teachers for supporting students through their experience of loss and grief. While a teacher’s primary duty is to educate his/her students, a teacher also has a duty of care towards his/her students. I believe part of that duty is being well-versed and properly trained in grief supports for children. Equipping teachers with strong support systems and grief-management resources is imperative to identifying a student struggling with grief, and assisting a student who is suffering from the consequences emotional or psychological consequences of traumatic or complicated grief. The ultimate goal of the study is to highlight the weak spots of grief management training, and hopefully begin the process by which these shortcomings can be rectified.
1.2 Research Question

The primary guiding question for my research is the following: What resources and experiences helped to prepare a sample of elementary teachers for supporting students’ through their experience of loss and grief? There are also several supplementary questions to complement my main question:

- How do these teachers support students through their experience of loss and grief, and what outcomes have they observed from their students as a result?
- What general resources or training modules were made available to these teachers from the education system prior to (preventative) and after (reactive) having a student who experienced grief and loss following the death of a loved one (preventative resources)?
- What challenges have these teachers experienced supporting students through their experience of grief and loss following the death of a loved one, and what range of supports would help them to better confront them?

1.3 Background of the Researcher

I am interested in this research topic for 2 reasons: 1) my own early experiences with death and grieving; 2) my pursuit of becoming a teacher. I experienced death for the first time when I was in Grade 4 and know how difficult it can be handle those emotions at such a young age. Even in young children, death can provoke an existential angst that when unprocessed by a child’s presumable emotional immaturity can become an insidious force. I experienced such unchecked feelings as a child and my inability to process them resulted in a lasting depression. Over the next six years, I experienced another 4 deaths in the family. My unwillingness to share or reveal my grief led to intensified anxieties and depression. Naturally, these anxieties affected my school life, but perhaps more importantly, have had long term consequences on my mental
health as a whole. The persistence of these anxieties as a consequence of going untreated is supported by the research. Knowing that my situation is not common and in fact predictable sources my motivation for this research. As an aspiring teacher, I want to be as prepared and as well-versed in grief support as possible, so as to be able to assist future students through their emotionally and psychologically compromised times. As a researcher, I want to help inform other educators as well as other researchers who will continue to build on this under-researched topic. The possibility of this and other research producing assistance or structured support for teachers to then help students experiencing persistent grief is the driving force.

As a child, I wish I had received some support from the school force when I was experiencing difficulties handling the deaths in my family. In their defence, I was very secretive, concealing my anxieties for the most part. I am also not aware if any of my teachers were informed of the situation. Regardless, as the research has found, teachers still report being underprepared to deal with grieving students and students experiencing mental health issues stemming from that grief.

1.4 Overview

My research is presented in 5 stages. Chapter 1 provided the context for my research and the problem that I plan to address, as well as questions which I wish to answer. In Chapter 2, I review the literature in the field of student grief research and also in the field of teacher training/resources that exist of teachers in their work with grieving students. In Chapter 3, I discuss the research methodology, the relevant participant information, data collection and the limitations of the approach taken to collecting said data. Chapter 4 is a report and discussion of the research findings. Lastly, in Chapter 5, I discuss the implications of the research findings,
identify some discovered gaps and make recommendations for how these gaps in the research can be filled.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I review the literature in the field of student grief. Thus far, the research appears to be limited. While student mental health generally has been studied in some depth, mental health as it is affected by grief specifically seems to be underrepresented. Moreover, research on the topic that is focused on the Canadian context has been difficult to find. I begin by discussing the idea of Complicated Grief Disorder (CGD) and its contentious standing in the field of mental health. Then, I discuss the cognitive and academic consequences of prolonged grief. Next, I discuss the consequences of death and bereavement on a student’s mental health and the role the teacher plays with respect to these issues. More specifically, I discuss the emotional and psychological consequences of grief and the teacher’s role in assisting a student through that process. I then discuss teacher preparedness and the role teachers can play in eliminating stigmatization and sense of silence that intensifies these the stigmatization of grief and mental health issues. Next, I discuss the idea of a crisis intervention plan and the importance of teacher’s own mental wellbeing when faced with grieving students. Finally, I discuss the conclusions that can be made from this information and suggest possible steps for moving forward.
2.1 Complicated Grief Disorder: A Contentious Issue

Classifying grief as a disorder has been an idea of much debate recently. Traumatic or complicated grief disorder is often the result of a sudden or unexpected death and simply means a persistent grief or grief that peaks around 6 months and lasts longer than 6 months after the death (Prigerson et al., 1997; Wittouck et al., 2011). This does not suggest that normal grief is entirely completed by 6 months, but it is said to no longer be a force that occupies the focus of everyday (Shear, Simon, Wall et al., 2011). This concept is actually a fairly recent development, being first proposed in 1994 to be added to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Health disorders (DSM). Prior to the 5th edition of the manual (2013), the symptoms of complicated or traumatic grief were not disassociated from Major Depressive Disorder (MDD), meaning that individuals suffering from a longer and more difficult depression than most grievers were being ignored under the presumption of a natural process (American Psychiatric Association, 2013b). The point of contention in complicated grief comes from the issues of describing what are considered natural, human reactions to death, such as depression and anxiety, as “disorders”. In previous editions, the DSM had a “bereavement exclusion” clause. A bereavement exclusion clause “advis[ed] clinicians not to diagnose depression in recently bereaved individuals” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013a). There was an unwillingness to regard the grieving process as something that could develop into anything worse than natural grieving, potentially leaving individuals with a major mental health issue untreated. The bereavement exclusion has since been removed from the 5th edition of the manual, which was published in 2013; however, this is not necessarily good news. While grief intervention is beneficial when it is needed, it can also be harmful when it is not needed (Nicholson, 2009, in Akerman & Stathem, 2011). The removal of the bereavement exclusion creates more opportunity
to for grief intervention to cause harm rather than good, as the percentage of people who will likely face a mental health issue as the result of grief is rather low, only 10% (Canadian Mental Health Journal Association, 2011) and in children specifically 5% - 10% (Spuij, Prinzie, Dekovic, van den Bout & Boelen, 2013). This actually further emphasizes the need for knowledgeable teachers because if psychology professionals are more inclined to diagnose serious mental health issues, where natural, healthy grieving is taking place, interventionist programs may do more harm than they do good.

There is an issue in the percentages mentioned earlier. They could be called vague, broadly sweeping. These numbers are likely to be complicated by the diversity of the Canadian context. People of different religious or cultural backgrounds are likely to produce varying results. Different socioeconomic positions, race, and gender are all likely to have differing influences on the grieving process. These are things which ought to be considered when helping a grieving student. For example, a study done on minority students from low economic status in which 78% were Black or Hispanic students found that 48% of the students reported the loss of a loved one as the hardest thing they have experienced, with 1 in 3 reporting the death of a family member and 1 in 5 reporting the death of a friend (Ickovics, et al., 2006 in Jenkins, Wang, Turner, 2014). Another study, by Rheingold (2004), found that nearly half (48%) of the Black students in low income areas reported having a family member die within the last year. Race, cultural background, and socioeconomic status play a major role grief statistics, so a blanketed, all-encompassing percentage is actually a misrepresentation of how many students are affected by both standard grief and the much more insidious complicated grief. When a student experiences a death, teachers and other mental health professionals have to be conscious of the many different factors that can influence a student’s grieving process.
2.1 Cognitive/Academic Stagnation

Grief and the mental health issues that arise from death have been shown to have consequences on academic achievement for students of all ages (Lawhon, 2004; Braden & Miller, 2007; Guzman, 2011; Brent et al., 2012). However, grief as it affects younger students (elementary level students) has not been studied in depth. Grief at these younger ages seems to be an under-considered element of mental health and student academic performance. Studying how death is processed at these younger ages is very important. In a study done in Chile, Guzman (2011) investigated how young children process death, and found that “mental health problems in first grade were one of the strongest predictors of lower achievement test scores 3 years later, supporting the premise that for children, mental health matters in the real world” (p. 2). One-fifth of Chilean schools implement mental health screenings for their students. The screenings are conducted by two organizations: the Pediatric Symptom Checklist (PSC) and the Teacher Observation of Classroom Adaptation Revised (TOCA). Guzman (2011) discovered a correlation between students’ mental health screening scores and their national standardized test scores; specifically, students who were deemed “at risk” on the PSC and TOCA tests and all received substantially lower scores on the national standardized tests. While this study was not conducted on the effects of complicated grief particularly, its implications can be extrapolated. Complicated grief consequences are far reaching, and set up students that have developed mental health issues, as a result of grief, for an early academic disadvantage. They face, and may continue to face, a lingering struggle in the classroom (Willis, 2002; McGlauflin,1998), and even into adulthood (Herlihy & Moore, 1993). Therefore, doing everything that can be done to relieve this struggle is an integral part of being an educator and even demanded by a teacher’s obligation of care to his/her students.
While the importance of the connection between mental health and academic development that Guzman (2011) found is important, there are some issues that still need to be addressed. Specifically, exactly what characteristics make an “at risk student” is not clearly defined. The “at risk students” are said to display mental health issues; however, exactly what those characteristics are (i.e. anxiety, depression, grief, ADHD) is not explicitly stated. Despite this lack of information, the study nonetheless provides important conclusions regarding the consequences of mental health. The specificity of the risks is not as important as the results the study produced overall: the potential for interventionist programs to improve students’ emotional and cognitive health.

Again, while Guzman’s finding are significant, there is debate about the degree to which normalized grief and complicated grief actually affects academic performance in the long term (Dowdney, 2000). A student’s personality is made up of many different combinations of so many different elements that it is difficult to conclude that grief interventionist programs were responsible for the student’s success or lack of success. The type of death (i.e. suicide, murder, accident, illness) and the relationship of deceased to the students are major factors that have to be considered. The importance of the relationship is supported by a study which found that students bereaved by the death of a parent were more likely to have their academic progress affected by the death (Haine, 2008). The student’s perception of the death is another major factor. These things in considered alongside a student’s gender, age, social and emotional development, cognitive level all complicate Guzman’s conclusion.

As previously mentioned, grief in itself is not considered a mental health issue; however, a prolonged grieving process in which a student succumbs to extended and persistent depression and/or anxiety is indeed regarded as a mental issue. While traumatic or prolonged grief may be
unavoidable, especially depending on the context of the death, there are things that can be done to ease the stress of a student experiencing such issues.

2.2 Death, Mental Health and the Role of the Teacher

The main focus of the present research is to investigate what grief support resources are available to teachers working within the elementary/primary/junior levels of education, and the efficacy of those resources. However, before discussing the main focus, it is necessary to discuss the mental health issues that can arise as a result of an ineffective grieving process. It is important to note that a blanketeted response to death is ineffectual and short-sighted. Not all death occurs under the same circumstances; therefore, not all assistance should take the same form.

Grieving children are often met with a silence from the adults around them. This seems to be because attention has not traditionally been placed on child grief. Child mourners have been understood through comparison to other, more studied demographics – being understood as simply a more or less sophisticated of version of an adult standard (Lenhardt, 2000). This silence is especially true in the case of a lost parent. The remaining parent’s own grief may make the parent an ineffectual means of support for the child (Clark et al., 1996), especially in cases in which a mother has died, and the daughter is grieving (Parkes, 1988). A child’s sense of grief is further displaced by parental authority, as according to studies from Dowdney and Haine (2000) in Akerman and Statham: “parents tend to report fewer symptoms and disorders in their children than children do themselves” (2008, p. 6). This makes the teacher’s role that much more important, as a teacher may be the child’s only consistent source of support. A consistent adult is an integral part of childhood grieving. Worden (2008) in Philpott (2013, p. 148) states that, “childhood grief is best facilitated in the presence of a consistent adult who is able to meet the child’s needs and help the child express feelings about the loss”. In the absence of a parent,
teachers, as consistent adults in students’ lives, are in the position to help student through the bereavement process, yet educators continue to express not being properly prepared to assist grieving students. (Adamson & Peacock 2007) in Brown, Jimerson, and Comerchero (2014) note that not only are teachers reporting feeling underprepared, but specialists are expressing these apprehensions too: “development, school psychologists have also reported that they lack specific training in grief awareness and crisis intervention, with the majority of their knowledge coming from their own reading on the topic, as well as from conferences or seminars” (Adamson & Peacock, 2007, p. 102). Teachers, who are educators and not clinical psychologists, experience apprehension, which is understandable; however, if even professional psychologists are expressing apprehension when confronted with a grieving child, grieving students are left vulnerable by a school staff that is not able to recognize the symptoms of grief, and not prepared to help that student through the process. Teachers and school psychologists have an obligation as central figures in a student’s life, making this unacceptable. Grief and the mental health issues that can result have been proven to be detrimental on cognitive development and on overall mental well-being, so it ought to be treated as the threat to education that it is.

2.4 Teacher Unpreparedness and Stigmatization and Silence

Students perceiving mental health issues as stigmatized conditions has been documented, as Kadison & Digeronimo (2013) identified it as one the main barriers to students seeking help (2004). Grief, while not categorized as a mental health issue, has the potential to develop into one, namely complicated grief, as Dyregrov states: “a child can have difficulties in accepting the death; she/he may have feelings of self-blame, anger, and lack of sense of safety… Complicated grief does not allow many comfortable or happy memories to exist until the traumatic memories have been processed” (p. 295). Once this occurs, students potentially face both short and long
term consequences to their cognitive, as well as emotional development. Teacher’s, in their unique position of care, possess the potential to prevent such an occurrence, or at the very least make the process a little less difficult. However, this potential can only be actualized if teachers are prepared enough to help.

Overall, the literature indicates that teachers feel unprepared with regards to dealing with students’ grief, and in turn, their mental health issues. Allen et al. (2002) as stated in Jimerson & Miller (2008) says: “A recent national survey of school psychologists indicated that the topic of grief and death was viewed as one of the most important topics for the training of future professionals in the field” (p. 286). Yet there seems to be a conflict between this statement recognizing the importance of understanding grief in students, and the level of preparedness that teachers are reporting, Short, Ferguson, and Santor (2009) in Bowers: “teachers…self-reported being unprepared to deal with or identify mental health problems” (2012, p. 2). This is significant because while grief itself is not considered a mental health issue, death is capable of producing such effects. If teachers are not prepared to help students when they are experiencing such effects, then those students lose the potential for much needed help. Not only do teachers feel underprepared to address mental health issues in their students, they are reporting feeling underprepared to address a grieving child as well.

Mental health issues as stigmatized issues among students has been established (Kadison & Digeronimo, 2004). Grief, more specifically, has not been stigmatized necessarily, but students have been found to be reluctant to share their grief (Harris, 1991). Be it from stigmatization or from some other sort of barrier, silence and apprehension from grieving students can be detrimental to the student because a lack of signals for teachers or family to interpret means potential for oversight (Lenhardt, 2000). A study by Dyregrov (2004) in
Akerman and Statham (2011) found that a “lack of perceived support from parents, classmates, and teachers has...been associated with more post-traumatic stress and lower attainment in school” (p. 7). Interviews with adults done in the Project Iceberg study (Holland, 2001, in Akerman and Statham, 2011) who had experienced the death of a parent as a young student also expressed the good that simple recognition of their situation would have done:

Adults recalling their experiences of losing a parent when children, in the Project Iceberg study reported feeling ignored, isolated, embarrassed or different when returning to school and believed that what would have helped was simply an acknowledgement of their loss and a kind word, with no need for a heavier intervention. (p.12)

Knowing how to behave around a grieving student is a skill. It is natural to assume a student may feel singled out by bringing attention his/her loss; however, this assumption and subsequent silence can make student feel alienated, intensifying depressive symptoms which they might be feeling. Teachers informed in how to communicate with bereaved students are an integral part of the grieving process. Whether it is recognizing when a student needs major intervention therapy or a simply when a student needs acknowledgement of what the s/he is experiencing, teachers play a major role in creating environments in which students are comfortable sharing and treating their issues. Teachers also play a major role in erasing the stigmatization of mental health issues and grief.

Stigmas not only affect how students perceive others, but how they perceive themselves. This stigmatized perception of self will affect a student’s comfort to share his/her emotional or psychological reactions to grief. Children often feel reluctant to share their emotional or psychological responses with their parents, especially if the loss was that of the other parent (Lenhardt, 2000, p. 4). Highly stigmatized deaths (i.e. suicide, murder, AIDS) also increase this
silence as they student may not feel likely discussing the reality and the student’s peers and teachers may not know what to say to the student (Helping the Grieving Student: A Guide for Teachers, 2003, p. 26). This silence from the child can be harmful because it can be misinterpreted as showing no symptoms of trauma at all; however, a data analysis done by the Childhood Wellbeing Research Centre found that while “initial grief responses tend to decline over time, mental health and other problems can persist or even increase” (Akerman & Statham, 2009, p. 6). When a student appears to be having trouble with a death, but is not actually expressing his/her emotions, teachers are encouraged to look for physical signs of trauma (Akerman & Statham, 2009, p. 7). Teachers, through proactive and reactive approaches, possess the potential to relinquish, or at least reduce, these stigmas in their classrooms.

2.5 Crisis Intervention Plan and a Teacher’s Personal Well-Being

Sometimes, a school will experience an extreme tragedy. In the event of such an occurrence, it is argued that every school district, regardless of size, needs a “crisis intervention plan”. A crisis intervention plan “delegates responsibility and identifies who will conduct grief counseling…disseminate information, and assess the needs of the student directly involved in the crisis” (Lovelace & Thompson, 2000, p. 4). The idea of a crisis intervention plan is something I found only once in the literature. Detailed, well-thought-out approaches to a death crisis seems like an integral part of crisis response, yet it was almost non-existent in the literature. While the crisis prevention plan is for extraordinary scenarios, it is a resource with which teachers ought to be equipped. As mentioned earlier, teachers are reporting a sense of discomfort when dealing with issues of mental health and grief; however, there are many different, research-supported approaches for teachers to use with grieving students.
An important, but overlooked aspect of being able to help a grieving student is a teacher’s own mental health. According to Brown et al.: “professionals must also engage in continuous self-care to maintain their personal well-being and prevent burning out” (2014, p. 8). Having to play the role of both teacher and semi-grief advisor can be exhausting, and a teacher who does not maintain his/her own mental health is likely to feel strained, possibly resulting in a reduced sensitivity towards the student and compromised learning environment for the whole as well. A teacher’s ability to help the student can be further compromised by his/her own unresolved issues, as Maschi (2010) in Brown states:

Because practitioners who work with bereaved students are exposed to the physical and emotional responses of children toward their loss, including more complex emotions and trauma, they are at greater risk of being affected on a personal (e.g., triggering unresolved feelings of loss) and professional level (2014, p. 11).

A teacher affected by his/her own personal issues may be less capable of assisting a grieving student, and again may become an ineffective teacher for the class as a whole.

A major issue in the literature is that while there are plenty of articles discussing the unpreparedness that teachers are expressing, few discussed exactly what resources teachers were given. When different approaches were discussed, they were done so in vague, theoretical terms, but none discussed how teachers are expected to become well-versed in these approaches to student mental and grieving. Thus, while one can get an idea of what is possible, it is unclear what is actually being done.

2.6 Overall Conclusions and Lack of Research into Efficacy of Resources

It must be noted that many of the sources used are not Canadian, but American. A lot of the conclusions drawn had to be made with the presumption of the universality of the human
condition. To my knowledge Canadian based studies and sources are uncommon. Finding Canadian based studies was difficult and the majority of literature I did find was American-based. I was also able to find British sources, and Chilean sources as well, but research specific to the Canadian context was in rare supply. This is an issue because there are subtle and explicit cultural, and socioeconomic differences between Canada and the United States. The more pertinent issue is that research in the Canadian context is so difficult to find. It would appear that not much research has been done in the Canadian context, leaving a large hole in the field of educational research, ultimately leaving students in need of grief support intervention underserved, and teachers faced with grieving students unsupported.

It must also be noted that researching the efficacy of childhood bereavement intervention therapy approaches is very difficult because sample sizes are often small, lack comparison and the inherent difficulty of attributing improvement or lack or improvement to a program, when one has to consider all the different factors that make up a student’s personality, as well as the varying contexts in which a death can occur, attributing success or failure to a type of intervention or program is very difficult. Nevertheless, researching the efficacy of grief intervention programs as well as teachers preparedness and comfort, is important work because there is so much potential for grieving students to suffer serious, long lasting harm as a result of unhealthy grieving processes. Harm can be done through inaction on the part of the teacher, but also be created through good-intentioned, yet unwarranted intervention on a student whom does not need it. Grief, and how to handle it, is a sensitive issue that takes the utmost consciousness of individual circumstances. There are many subcategories and variables to consider when faced with a grieving student; therefore, extensive research into this topic is necessary for informing teachers towards making the best assessments they possibly can; however, research into the
success or lack of success of specific resources was difficult to find. The same approaches were mentioned often (i.e. bibliotherapy, group therapy, art therapy) across several pieces of literature; however, exactly how teachers learned to use these resources and how the teachers came into contact with these resources was difficult to find. More research needs to be done on the effectiveness of these resources and how teachers become familiar with them. I hope my study will help provide some much needed insight into the efficacy of grief support resources that teachers receive.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I introduce the research methodology and discuss the rationale behind each decision taken and how these decisions are supported by the research purpose and questions. I will begin by discussing the research approach and procedures before introducing the instruments of data collection. I discuss the participants (sampling criteria, recruitment procedures, and a place-hold for participants’ biographies), before discussing the data analysis procedures, followed by the ethical considerations of the research. Next, I discuss both the strengths and limitations of the methodology in section 3.6. Finally, in section 3.7, I conclude the chapter.

3.1 Research Approach and Procedures

I will conduct this study using a qualitative research approach, using semi-structured, in-person interviews with 2-3 primary/elementary teachers. Interview questions have been formulated using the relevant literature and existing research. Qualitative research has been regarded as a co-production of knowledge between the interviewer and the interviewee (Bjørnholt and Farstad, 2012). Qualitative research does not seek numerical findings, but a
deeper understanding of the nuances of a particular problem, respecting and taking into account different perspectives (Abawi, 2008). Because the literature has affirmed my assumption that the existing grief support resources and training for teachers are ineffective, the goal of the present study is to gain insights from the teachers themselves regarding how they have experienced this ineffectiveness, and why they think this reality exists.

Wanting to gain insights from teachers of different experience ranges, qualitative research, in its respect for different perspectives, is the best means of gaining these insights. Qualitative research, as a potential co-production of knowledge, means semi-structured interviews will create the best space for this production. The research that I have conducted, combined with the experiences of the teachers, should complement each other, and produce potential deep insights into the issue of ineffective grief support for young students. In person, semi-structured interviews would be ideal because the emailed, questionnaire-style interviewing would not allow for the moments of elaboration that in-person interviews would allow for.

3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

The primary instrument of data collection for my research will be semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews are valuable because they give the interviews structure and purpose. The interviewer has questions that need to be answered and can determine beforehand what the most important and least important questions are (Edwards & Holland, 2013). However, the loose nature of semi-structured interviews provides the opportunity for spontaneity. If the interviewee should bring up something unexpected, but valuable, semi-structured interviews allow for the pursuit of these new angles (Edwards & Holland, 2013). This same loose structure also allows for greater pontification from the interviewees as they are not confined within rigidly-structured questions and interviewer expectations.
At this phase in my research, I have not uncovered whether there are any policy documents pertaining to grief support systems for teachers; however, should the interviews possibly produce a knowledge of these documents, they will be used as data in addition to the interviews, as they would likely provide informative contrast to what teachers report. If presented with the opportunity to observe a staff meeting on the topic of grief, or to observe a classroom in which the topic of grief is being discussed with the students, that too will be considered data to be interpreted and entered into the findings of the research.

The in-person interviews will be recorded by myself using the recording feature on my personal computer, as well as handheld digital recorder, to ensure that if one means of recording fails or somehow goes missing, there will be a backup option available.

3.3 Participants

In the following three subsections, I discuss the sampling criteria by which I will be determining the eligibility of participants. While I am looking for particular participants, I am also looking for a range of participants for the comparative potential; therefore, the study requires different versions of sampling criteria and sampling procedures. However, a standard version can be established with the relevant modifications applied for the desired participants.

3.3.1 Sampling criteria

The following criteria will be applied to participants to ensure that the most applicable teachers are interviewed:

1. Teachers who have had at least one student experiencing grief in their classrooms.

2. Teachers who have been OCT certified, and working full-time for:
   a. 1-5 years, or
   b. 5-10 years, or
c. 10 years or more

3. Teachers who work, or have worked, in a school board either in the Greater Toronto Area (e.g., York Region District School Board, Peel District School Board) or the Toronto District School Board.

4. Teachers who have received grief support training and resources as either:
   a. Pre-death, or pre-emptive measures – grief support that is worked into curriculum, or done as just general training.
   b. Post-death, or reactionary measures – grief support that is implemented after a student has begun the grieving process.

The first requirement is in place to ensure that the participants will have had some direct experience with a grieving student(s). While teachers in general will likely have some knowledge to share on grief support systems and resources, I am interested in the unique, intimate knowledge and insights that a teacher with direct experience with a grieving student can provide.

Full-time experience within a profession is highly valuable experience, which is why the second requirement is in place. However, the second requirement also establishes the need for a range of years of experience. Because the literature has found that the topic of student grief has only become a recent concern (Bower, 2012), I am ideally looking for a range in years of experience so as to be able to contrast the experiences with the goal of uncovering whether or not the quality of training correlates with the increased sense of importance.

The third requirement is done for practical reasons – I can only travel so far and still conduct face-to-face interviews, but is also in place because I would like to learn about the school boards that I will likely be a part of in the future.
The fourth requirement is meant to assure that knowledge about both pre- and post-grief support systems is gained. Knowing how teachers are being equipped to teach students generally to manoeuvre these feelings before they even occur is just as important as knowing how teachers are being equipped to help particular students after a death has occurred in the student’s life.

3.3.2 Sampling procedures

I used a mix of convenience and purposeful sampling. However, because I believed the greatest insights would come from teachers who had actually had to implement this training, purposeful sampling was my primary means of recruiting teachers who had had these experiences particularly. Purposeful sampling seeks participants that meet specific requirements, and also establish a range of participants (Koerber & McMichael, 2008). As I sought participants with particular experiences with grief, but also with a range of years of experience, purposeful sampling was the ideal means of sampling, along with convenience sampling whereby participants were recruited through prior connections and were held to be representative of a larger population (Koerber & McMichael, 2008). Regardless of whether or not a teacher had experienced a grieving student, that teacher should still have had some exposure to grief support training, and could still report his/her concerns about enacting this training. These means of sampling were be enacted via the following procedures.

As a means of beginning the purposeful sampling process, I began by snowballing, a process whereby more particular participants were recruited through a secondary dissemination of information by people readily connected to the field (Koerber & McMichael, 2008). To recruit participants for my study, I began by contacting my Associate Teachers (ATs) from my first two practicum placements to provide them with an overview of my research study and participant criteria to see, one: if they themselves qualified to participate and if they would like to
participate, and two: to see if they could refer me to any other potential participants. In addition to contacting my ATs, I planned to contact the York Region District School Board and Toronto District School Board, as well as several school principals to share an overview of my study and the participant criteria. I had planned to ask all contacted individuals and organizations if they would further disseminate my research study to anyone they feel might be a relevant participant. However, I found my participants before this became necessary.

Finally, I had planned to contact the Principal of St. Joachim Elementary School to ask for her help in distributing information about my research study. Two of the siblings killed in the recent drunk-driving tragedy that occurred in Vaughan on September 29th, 2015 were students at St. Joachim Elementary. Interviewing their teachers would have provided the most recent insights into the current state of grief support resources for teachers.

3.3.3 Participant bios

The first participant, Monica, is a full-time teacher in the Catholic School Board. At the time the interview was conducted, she has been teaching for 37 years at an all-girl secondary school with roughly 700 students. The primary subjects she teaches are Math, and Italian. She has had to address the grief and trauma in her classroom, and in her school generally, many times over the years.

The second participant, Rachel, is also a full-time teacher, but at the York Region District School board. At the time the interview was conducted, she has been teaching for 14 years. She teaches at a mostly Chinese, mostly affluent school. She teaches the entire curriculum with the exception of Physical Education, French, and Music. Rachel has not had many experiences with grieving students, but she does have some experience.

3.4 Data Analysis
The transcription process is an essential aspect of a research study. I will begin analyzing the data by first transcribing the interviews in Microsoft Word on my personal password-protected computer. The transcribing process is expected to take roughly three hours per one hour of recording, so overall this process should take about nine hours. All participants’ names will be replaced with pseudonyms or numbers, and will not appear anywhere within the transcriptions. The next step will be to code the data. The transcription process is so important not only because it is important to transfer spoken language to written language for analysis purposes, but because transcribing is the beginning of the analysis itself. The attention to the detail of everything the speaker has said is likely to reveal familiar themes without even searching for them. The attention that is paid to tone is also likely to produce interpretive responses in the transcriber that would likely have gone missed had this process not taken place. Coding is an imperative part of the research study because it requires that the coder, in developing the code, look for thematic commonalities – a process that leads to a greater understanding of the topic being investigated (Weston, Gandell, Beauchamp, McAlpine, Wiseman, & Beauchamp, 2001).

### 3.5 Ethical Review Procedures

In order to ensure the comfort of the participants, it will be made clear before the interview starts that the participant will have the right to withdraw their participation at any time, will have the right to decline any question. To further ensure the participants’ comfort, as well as anonymity, all participants will be informed that they are going to be assigned a pseudonym and that any defining features of their place of employment (e.g., name of the school, its location, etc.) will be omitted.
Due to sensitive subject matter being researched, there is a potential for vulnerability and heightened emotional responses. I will minimize the risk of creating this discomfort by sending the participants the questions two-three days in advance so that they can know what to expect, and if inclined, either make requests to omit certain questions or to refuse the interview entirely. Their decisions will be respected and I will thank them for their time regardless of their decision.

Participants will also be made aware that the interview will be recorded on several devices, from which it will then be transcribed. Participants will be given access to the interviews before any further steps are taken to ensure their approval. Any redactions that the participants asked to be made will be honoured before moving forward, and any elaborations or clarifications will be recorded and transcribed as an addendum to the original transcript.

The consent letter (Appendix A) will reiterate all of this information to the participant in written form and will also provide an overview of the whole study, the ethical implications, as well as the specifics and expectations of participation. Participants will read and sign the consent letter immediately before beginning the interview. Recording and all data will be stored on my password-protected computer and will not be transferred to any other device. This data will be stored on my computer until September 1st, 2017 – 3 months after my graduation from the Master of Teaching program.

3.6 Methodological Limitations and Strengths

Because the literature has already established that a problem exists, and that teachers are reporting feeling underprepared to address grieving students, qualitative style interviewing is one of the biggest strengths of this research study. The problem has been established; what is yet to be known is why and how that problems exists – qualitative research, in its potential to create moments in which the participants will be able to answer with sophistication, sharing their
insights, and allowing them to elaborate and digress on those insights, will enter first-hand perspectives into the dialogue. The teachers with first-hand experience on the topic hold knowledge that cannot be learned anywhere else. The semi-structured interview approach is a further strength because while it gives the interviews direction and purpose, it also allows spontaneous questions to be formed and for unexpected insights to be capitalized on. Despite this, the methodology also has its limitations.

The nature of the study (i.e., a small-scale study) only allows for a maximum of three participants. While these participants may provide valuable insights, they still only represent a very small portion of the teaching population. At best, their feedback will sophisticate my knowledge of the issue, and provide new insights to inform future research; however, I will not be able to generalize the findings because their representation is so minimal. By the end of this process, I will more than likely not have findings from which conclusive claims can be made, but something to offer to the discourse of this field, something for further researchers to use and build upon. I have also only been approved to interview teachers, which means three very relevant demographics are excluded: principals, parents, and students. Their voices are central to this topic, but the limitations of the study mean they cannot be considered.

3.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I covered the research methodology by beginning with the research approach and procedure, and discussing the strengths of the qualitative approach and the semi-structured interviews. I then went over the instruments of data collection, establishing interviews as the main means of accumulating data and touched on why they were being used as such. Next, I established the range of professional years of experience. I chose a large range because I wanted to see how teacher preparedness could be changed over time. Specifically, whether
experience or training more mindful of student mental health created more of a sense of preparedness among teachers. I required that these teachers have fulltime employment as I believed they were more likely to have had direct experience with grieving students, participated in professional development, and made regular contact with the school board. There was no elaboration on participant biographies, as at the current stage of the study, participants are yet to be found. Then, I discussed how the data collected will be analyzed: through a process of transcribing and coding to find thematic commonalities across the participants’ answers. After that, the ethical implications were discussed: maintaining anonymity, consent, risk of participation and the right to refuse questions or to remove oneself from an interview entirely. Finally, I discussed the limitations of the study with regards to types of participants, and also went over the strengths of the study. These included, particularly, the potential of semi-structured, qualitative research to create spaces in which experienced teachers are given the opportunity to give insightful, elaborate answers to questions. In Chapter Four, I will report on findings from the research and insights that have been provided.

Chapter 4: Research Findings

4.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss my findings from semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with two teachers: one from the York Region School Board, and one from the Catholic School Board. Both have had some exposure to grieving children, and both have shown interest in expanding their own knowledge around grief support and resources for students. The goal of my research was to learn what sort of support systems, training and, or resources were available to teachers to help with students experiencing grief. A secondary goal was to learn what gave teachers the most anxiety when addressing grieving students. With these goals in mind, I hope to add something
valuable to the literature on the topics of student mental health and grief. My findings are organized into 3 main themes, with 2-3 subthemes for each. They are as follows:

1. A Primary Role for Teachers with Grieving Students is to Engage them in Conversation
   a. Teachers identified individual and class conversation as imperative to addressing grieving students
   b. Creating a safe classroom environment before and after incident is important
   c. Participants believed resource were to be allocated primarily by the teacher, then by the administration

2. Teachers get Their Resources from Their own Research and Their Administrative Team
   a. Administratively provided resources were mostly helpful, but overall, participants preferred to seek resources themselves before going to their administrative teams

3. The Main Challenges Facing Teachers are Silence around Subjects of Grief and Limitations of Resources and Professional Knowledge
   a. The culture of silence affects kids and family, the administrative team, and the teachers themselves.
   b. The participants were concerned about the applicability of aged resources, though they regarded their intuition and familiarity with students as assets to be valued when assisting grieving students

I begin by describing each theme, then reporting the relevant input from the interviewees, before discussing the finding within the literature. I conclude each theme with a summary, and possible next steps that can be taken.
4.1 A Primary Role for Teachers’ with Grieving Students is to Engage them in Conversation

Personal belief about whether a teacher should serve a purpose beyond simply teaching dictates a teacher’s approach to grief support, as well as mental health support generally. While being a competent teacher is important, most teachers would likely agree that their job demands much more than that. While not meant to play the role of psychologist or school therapist, as a primary presence in a student’s life, teachers have a tremendous potential to be positive forces for their students. A way to serve this potential is to become well versed in what to do if students experience a trauma and show signs of needing support for their grief. Both Monica and Rachel recognized this additional responsibility, as Rachel stated: “the kid is with you even longer than they really are at home. So, you are a big part of their lives. You can’t just ignore it,” and Monica: “We’re the front line. We see the students for the longest period of time…we have to support them as much as we can, whether we want to or not.” The teachers seem to have highlighted that so much time spent with the students creates a fiduciary relationships and almost places an obligation for them to be more than teachers. Participants agreed that teachers play a significant role in facilitating a student’s grief process. They recognized that amount of time spent with the student gave them that obligation: “We’re the frontline. We’re the ones that see the students for the longest period of time…we have to support them as much as we can…that’s your job.” These are not the opinions of overbearing teachers, that role is supported by the literature as well (Charkow, 1998 as cited in Eppler, 2008, pg. 189).
4.1.1. Teachers identified individual and class conversation as imperative to addressing grieving students

Both teachers indicated that conversation is a powerful tool for addressing grief. They suggested that addressing the issue, not ignoring it, is important. Making oneself available, as Rachel stated: “tell[ing] them I was there for them” and “ask[ing] them if they need anything,” seems to be a simple first step towards addressing a student’s grief. Monica reiterated this approach: “give them the opportunity to discuss how they feel about a situation that has happened.” An essential part of this first step, they suggested, is the attitude with which you make it. Being empathetic, and accommodating is necessary, Monica: “you have to allow that student to feel the comfort to come to you at any time,” and wrapped up the sentiment plainly with this: “Be kind and understanding and supportive, and accommodate.” While Rachel did not use the word “empathy” directly, its implication can found in her responses: “Tell them you’re there for them…[let them know] they have someone else to deal with.” Interestingly, Rachel did not mention accommodations; however, this does not suggest she believes a grieving student should not be accommodated, it just did not come up.

Interestingly, in asking answering what they believed their role was, both participants also mentioned what their role was not – to push the student, as Rachel stated: “I would not push them to tell me anything about it…If they said ‘no’, then I would leave it…they won’t want to talk to you at all,” and: “I would not push them even if I knew they were struggling with it.” Monica added some nuance to this: “Don’t pry too much…Have the students say thing to you.” She highlighted the importance of “allowing the student to lead” once a foundation of trust had been built: “the students have to trust you.”
Not pushing the student to share was mentioned several times by both participants. The importance of not pushing the grieving student to share is in fact supported by the literature. Grief intervention is generally believed to be beneficial, but is considered potentially harmful if its application is not necessary (Nicholson, 2009, in Akerman & Stathem, 2011, pg. 9). While the participants knew not to push, they seemed to suggest that it would just quiet the child even further. They did not discuss the actual potential for harm that pushing can create. An overzealous teacher can do more damage than good by assuming a student who had experienced a death needed help. I missed an opportunity by not asking how a teacher would approach a student who had been showing signs of extended or “Complicated Grief” – grief that extends beyond 6 months (Shear, Simon, Wall et al., 2011). Whether or not grief that lasts beyond 6 months should be categorized as its own condition is a contentious issue. Extended or Complicated Grief was not disassociated from Major Depressive Order until 2013 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013b). Now that it is considered its own thing, grief intervention has more potential to be dangerous as students rightfully grieving may be treated as though they have a problem. A potential heightened by the fact that mental health issues stemming from grief only occur in about 5% - 10% of kids (Spuij, Prinzie, Dekovic, van den Bout & Boelen, 2013). I do not think this low percentage points to an insignificant problem, but to the high potential for a major one, as grief support/intervention could be overly applied to a natural process. While teachers themselves would not be responsible for treating students, as the first line of defence, they do play a major role in suggesting further assistance to the families of the students, and because they spend so much time with their students, their opinions certainly carry some authority. If teachers do have such a potential to influence, then it must be important that they are capable of making the most informed recommendations possible.
Participants mentioned the importance of discussion not just with the one student, but a larger class discussion as well, as a means of creating a safe classroom environment, which will be discussed next.

4.1.2. Creating a safe classroom environment before and after incident is important

Participants indicated that an important aspect of creating a safe classroom environment, as well as a means of addressing grief, is whole-class discussion, but they each referenced it for different purposes. Rachel suggested class discussion to address tragedy in the media: “[I would] probably read pictures books and talk as a class maybe when the child wasn’t there, as long as you got permission to do it, you could talk to the whole class then, and prepare them for when they do comeback,” as a means of creating a safe environment, but also communicated the same message of not pushing as well: “I would also tell them not push if she doesn’t want to talk to you about it.” But overall, she did not believe grief was good thing to discuss without the correct context: “I wouldn’t just do it because I felt like it.” However, as a means of discussing the sense of grief that can arise from tragedies in the media, or to even address the situation a peer might be experiencing she did advocate for reading grief related picture books: “If I had a student in my class who wanted me to share with the rest of class…there’s a lot of books on different topics…so, I think I would read some of those as long as they were okay with it,” as a means of working out such feelings

Monica too suggested discussion as means of helping the class understand one of their peers who was experiencing grief: “giving them the opportunity to discuss how they feel…not only with me, but maybe with the rest of the class.” Like Rachel’s, Monica’s approach is reactive, creating the safe environment post-incident – perhaps they can only be reactive, as establishing a class conscious of how to approach grief may lack enough context to be relevant.
As Monica teaches Math and Italian, she referenced this need for context and relevancy as well, concerned that the reading of literature with grieving themes may be non-applicable in her context, at least particularly in the Mathematics context. While great programs, and extensive resources that are freely accessible exist (Loss, Grief and Growth is a good example), one thing that seems to be missing is subject specific materials, and so Monica’s perspective may be entirely justified, or completely erroneous.

Establishing the classroom as a place for effectively processing grief for students has been established in the literature. Because the family is not always the most supportive force in a grieving student’s life (Clark, et al., 1996), as they tend not to report mental health issues in the child as often as the child self-reports (Dowdney & Haine, 2000), and are also suffering from their own afflictions (Clark et al., 1996), the teacher and the classroom as a supportive figure/system becomes increasingly important. This importance is emphasized when considering the fact that students have been found to have internalized stigmatization about grief (Kadison & Digeronimo, 2004), and therefore, have an apprehension to share their feelings (Harris, 1991). Furthermore, if students perceive a lack of support from their family, friends, and peers, their level of post-traumatic stress has been found to increase, while their will to attain in school decreased (Dyregrov, 2004). All of these findings necessitate the establishment of the classroom as a safe, supportive space for grieving students, even for potentially grieving students, as the lack of this safety could have major consequences for the affected student.

4.1.3 Resources are to be allocated primarily by the teacher, then by the administration

The participants felt similarly about who is responsible for allocating resources, and how one is to do that. They felt the teacher was primarily responsible for getting resources, be it through their own research, as Monica stated: “being that there might not be that support at
home, then I had to train myself on how to deal with the students,” and Rachel: “I am good at researching…I don’t think I’d bother [referring to asking the principal for help]. I’d probably just do it myself,” or by asking their administration team for help, “There have been a few that I could go to…they would find resources for me.” Rachel never did ask, but believed her administration team would have been helpful had she asked: “I think they would have [helped] had I asked for it.” Participants also advocated for seeking expert help inside and outside the school, but again to do one’s own research, Monica: “I had to go to speak to guidance counsellors…to school psychologists…psychologists that I know…other staff members…read up on the internet, different articles.” Participants seemed to indicate that the allocation of resources was a shared responsibility, which leads to the next theme.

To this point, I have not found any research providing insight into what a larger sample of teachers believe about where resources primarily ought to come from. If my participants are emblematic of a larger attitude about the allocation of resources, then we have a stepping stone with which to continue this research, but it must be acknowledged that they represent a very small portion of the educational community.

4.2 Teachers get Their Resources from Their own Research and Their Administrative Team

Having resources, or go-to measures can help a teacher become more comfortable with supporting grieving students. Both teachers reported two main avenues for acquiring resources: 1) personally seeking, and 2) administrative offerings, both venues having their pros and cons. At times, the resources sought were the same ones; only who sought them changed.
4.2.1 Administratively provided resources were mostly helpful, but overall, participants preferred to seek resources themselves before going to their administrative teams

Despite having a significant difference in frequency with which the participants sought help from their administrative teams, they had similar attitudes towards the helpfulness of them: administration is marginally helpful. When asked if she often had to move beyond the administration, Monica replied, “Yeah, depending on the administration team. If you have a team that are doorknobs, then yes, you have to go beyond them.” She continues, claiming that through her 37 years of teaching experience, she has experienced it all and at times, the administration can be helpful: “There have been a few that I could go to and they would help me out and they would find resources for me,” but others who have said: “I don’t know. You’re on your own.” When asked if this sort of response is due to lack of training or lack of empathy, Monica responded: “Both, depending on the person. It’s probably both.” Rachel did not speak to lack of empathy or training, but she held a similar opinion of the administration. She spoke of a student she had had in her class that had had a dying mother. When asked if the administration had offered assistance, Rachel replied: “Not really. I think they said ‘Let me know if you need anything.’” It was then on Rachel to follow up with administration if she needed anything. Both of these participants have painted a picture of an only somewhat helpful administration. Resources were sometimes not offered, but when they were provided, were found sometimes to be helpful, but sometimes not helpful. Rachel referenced the “Rainbows” program, but felt it may be dated, as well as the “Bell Let’s Talk” initiative that offered, but has issues with it only being focused on the teachers’ mental health, with no focus on the students. However, to the participants, the administration’s role is more than just offering available resources.
To Monica and Rachel, the administration is responsible for training modules and workshops as well. However, this is slightly misleading as they work with teacher feedback, and so the allocation of resources might be accurately described as a collaborative process. If enough teachers request grief support training as part of their Professional Development, then presumably administrators would likely seek the relevant resources for the teachers. Monica noted her administration teams for this, but expressed their shortcomings: “They’re working towards it [mental health workshops], but they’re still not doing a really good job about it. They do the best they can with the resources available to them.” She also pointed out their limited capabilities: “They can’t just go ahead and train us on mental health issues if they’re not given the okay by the board because ultimately the board has to pay these people to come in and train us.” These participants seem to be indicating two tensions in play: limited resources provided by their administration, and the administration’s limited capacity to give teachers the training they ask for. Though not entirely dependent on their administration teams for resources, the administration plays an important role in providing them to teachers, but if the administration can only do as permitted by the board, then perhaps more research needs to be done into the attitude of the board towards student mental health/grief training.

Rachel also mentioned being briefed on how to address tragedy in the media: “when there has been big explosions or things like that, we’ve been briefed…if anybody talks to you about it, this is the things that you should tell them, and there is help in the school if anybody needs.” Monica too was prompted on how to address particular tragedies, she was given actual scripts, and they were given something had happened within the school as a community: “We had a script given to us with what we could say and how we could say it.” For teachers that are uncomfortable addressing these occurrences on their own, scripts seems like an invaluable
resource, though neither participant expressed whether or not these scripts were helpful, just that they were given.

Both participants mentioned mental health training/workshops for their own well-being. This seems to suggest an added importance to a teacher’s own mental health. This added importance is supported by the literature: “professionals must also engage in continuous self-care to maintain their personal well-being and prevent burning out” (Brown, 2014, pg. 8); however, neither teacher had been given any training into student mental health/grief. This same lack of training is also supported by the literature, as students/kids had been understood as simply as a less sophisticated version of an adult standard (Lenhardt, 2000). While none of my participants were doing this, understanding student/child grief as adult grief “lite,” as the research states, is not good enough. Knowing that such a perspective exists explains why so many teachers report feeling underprepared and undertrained.

It was mentioned earlier that participants felt it was part of their role as a teacher to allocate resources. They did not believe it was exclusively their role, but that they had partial responsibility. Both their approaches were mentioned briefly. As mentioned, Monica’s research ranged from talking to mental health professionals in and outside of the school environment, as well as doing her own research online. Rachel mostly used the internet to find resources, though she too believed that talking to other staff members was a good idea. Both advocated for talking to other teachers who may have had the students or had a student who had experienced similar issues. It is interesting to note that while both participants felt they should receive more training regarding student mental health and grief, they also both reported themselves as the primary source of resources, whether sought themselves or initiating assistance from someone else. This is seemingly a contradiction that needs to be resolved. Although, it could be interpreted as
wanting/needing a foundation through training with which to inform one’s own allocation of resources.

4.3 The Main Challenges Facing Teachers are Silence, and Limitations of Professional Knowledge

Assisting students with grief is not an easy thing. The highly emotional and vulnerable state of the students mean teachers have to be very sensitive when trying to help them. Participants, almost unanimously, identified the same challenges, with some varying input as well. Challenges ranged from a personal sense of ineptitude, to a lack of support to a general silence that plagues the air of mental health and grief.

4.3.1 The culture of silence affects kids and family, the administrative team, and the teachers themselves.

Though the words “culture of silence” were never used by either participant, the phrase captures what seems to be a pervasive unwillingness to discuss grief and mental health generally. Rachel and Monica, without using these words, seemed to point to this silence as a primary challenge to supporting a grieving children. This silence manifested itself 3 ways: 1) a silence among kids and family; 2) from the administrative team; 3) through the teacher’s own silence.

Both Monica and Rachel discussed what they saw as what seems to be a significant obstacle to helping a grieving student: the student themselves. As Rachel stated: “But really if they’re not telling you what’s bothering them, there’s not much you can do at that point,” and Monica: “It’s up to the child. It’s up to the student. How willing they are to talk to you.” If a student is just not willing to speak with his/her teacher, there is not much that teacher can do, especially abiding by the “do not push” approach. The teacher seems trapped in a catch 22: to push is to potentially cause more harm, but to ignore is to potentially allow a student to fester in
their problem. This problem is made worse by silence from the family, as Monica points out: “there might not be that that support at home, then I had to train myself.” This silence can be complicated by the fact that a lot of students in Canada have parents who do not speak English, and so cannot communicate even if they wanted to. Monica mentioned the silence of the family as an additional challenge to assisting grieving students. The literature has recognized this as well – they sometimes credit the silence to grief in the family as well – but also establishes that this silence placed even more importance on the role of the teacher (Charkow, 1998, as cited in Eppler, 2008, pg. 189). The family is as affected space, not supporting the child has been found to occur, especially with the death of a parent (Dowdney, 2000 & Haine, 2008). Further in that study, Hain (2008) claims: “parents tend to report fewer symptoms and disorders in their children than children do themselves” (pg. 6). Without a consistent adult in the family, the teacher must step in to be that consistent figure, as a stable adult is essential to facilitating childhood grief (Worden, 2008, as cited in Philpott, 2013, pg. 148). The increased importance of the teacher to the grieving child further validates the idea the teacher plays a role beyond simply teaching.

The administration plays a crucial role in assisting the teacher to assist the student; however, they are not exempt from their own forms of silence in the form of a lack of support. When Monica was asked about if she has felt supported by her administration team in the past, she responded: “Yeah, depending on the administration team. If you have a team that are doorknobs, then yes, you have to go beyond them,” and Rachel: “I don’t know. You’re on your own.” This is not silence in that they will not actually talk to the teacher, but silence in that they do not do as much as they ought to to help, potentially adding unnecessary pressure.
Without help from the administration, teachers can still turn to their fellow teachers. While Monica and Rachel did not feel that they were particularly silent, they had perceived this issue in their fellow teachers, as Rachel stated, “I think a lot of them would have my same philosophy on it…we help students.” Though not stated explicitly, she does seem to be leaving room for the idea that emotionally available teachers is not a given. She does not clarify whether this is due to a lack of caring, or a lack knowhow, however. Monica identified this same issue: “Some teachers can’t speak…just their belief, I guess.” Monica too did not identify if this silence is due to a lack of empathy or a lack of competency.

4.3.2 The participants were concerned about the applicability of aged resources, though they regarded their intuition and familiarity with students as assets to be valued when assisting grieving students

The discussion revolved around pre-emptive resources/training. Rachel had the most to say about this issue, offering honesty about how time constraints affect their ability to familiarize themselves with grief support:

at this point there’s so much else to look into that I don’t think I would look into it further, if it didn’t come up. I’d like to say I would, but I probably wouldn't just because I have so much else to do.

She then discussed the issue of general training’s relevancy: “It’s not prevalent; it’s not something I need to do with my class and I’m not going to,” before finally discussing the issue of obsolete resources: “if I spend time looking up something that’s relevant now, once it is relevant, it’s not relevant anymore, so there’s no point.” Rachel expressed legitimate concerns – she had only had 1 student in 14 years of teaching that may have needed grief support. For that reason, Rachel believed it was only necessary to seek resources reactively. Monica too felt that a teacher
can really only look up resources once the problems occur: “as the situations would come up, that’s when I would go and ask for help… I still do that.” This reactive response is mirrored by the school culture as a whole. Rachel reported: “the general teacher’s college didn’t say anything about it. Because they have so much else to deal with that they’re not going to talk about that,” and when asked if she would bring it up as a general knowledge, she said: “I don’t know if I would just bring it up one day… because they’re so little (Rachel is a Grade 3 teacher).” She did acknowledge that it could be brought up with Grade 6s under the right circumstances (the media, as mentioned earlier).

These tensions are not to suggest that teachers are flying entirely blind when it comes to helping students through the grieving process. Both participants highlighted the intuition as a means of helping students, Rachel: “when a student comes into your class you can kind of read - you get to know them, you can see if they’re upset that day or not” Monica expressed a similar sentiment. After sharing a story about how she helped a student, I asked how much of it was training and how much was intuition. She replied: “It’s intuition. It’s intuition.” She seemed to be saying that teachers have some foundation to go on, and it is important to recognize that. This suggests that it is not to say that without training, one would be entirely incapable of helping a human in need, or that they would lack empathy or perspective. The resources may be more for further steps once an issue is recognized.

Neither participant mentioned having proactive/pre-emptive resources. They both gathered resources as situations called for them. It is difficult to determine whether this reactionary approach is supported by the research. Crisis intervention (Lovelace & Thompson, 2000) plans were supported to address classroom/school wide grief, but I did not find much in the way of pre-emptive resources – ways of building a classroom culture in way which would
provide students with some basic tools for handling a death should it occur. Extrapolations can be made from Lovelace and Thompson (2000) to be applied to the individual griever, though that would just be conjecture. However, it would be hard to support such an approach, as grief responses tend to decline over time (Akerman & Statham, 2009, pg. 6). It would seem a teacher needs to have some immediate go-to tools. However, as discussed, it may be unrealistic to expect this sort of pre-emptive approach, due to time constraints and applicability over time. Nevertheless, Proactive resources, approaches that foster positive and respectful ideas surrounding grief, can also foster a de-stigmatized, safe space for grieving students to feel as though they will be coming pack to a positive environment.

4.3 Conclusion

In this chapter I discuss the finding that these participants considered themselves as playing a central role in the grieving student’s life. They identified conversation, both with the individual students, and the classroom as a whole, as imperative to this role, though they both acknowledged that respecting the student’s disinterest in conversing is equally important. This role seems to be best satisfied when teachers are trained adequately, and contain a basic sense of empathy. Furthermore, I discuss how teachers acquire these resources. They reported that the administration is not wholly reliable nor wholly unreliable. They praised their administrations for the emphasis they have placed on teacher mental health, though they acknowledged more could be done to prepare students to address student mental health, including grieving students. Ultimately, these participants reported that they considered themselves to be the primary means of resource allocation. Lastly, I discuss what seems to be the main barricade to improving teachers’ sense of preparedness towards grieving students, and their ability to assist grieving students: silence. Silence seems to impact every aspect the issue, from the allocation of
resources, to their relationships with the students, and as these participants, and likely most teachers, believe a teacher’s role is not just to teach students, but to help them out when their needs exceed the classroom, this silence proves to be especially consequential.

In Chapter 5, I expound the implications of my findings and research, making recommendations for further steps that might be taken.

Chapter 5: An Overview of Key Findings and Their Significance

5.0 Introduction to the Chapter

In this chapter, I discuss the implications of my research as they pertain to my own practice, as well as the larger educational community. After, I expound to make recommendations for future practice in policy, and for stakeholders in that community. Finally, I identify areas that could benefit from further research before concluding and discussing the overall significance of my findings.

5.1 Overview of Key Findings and Their Significance

My findings were separated using 3 main themes, with 2-3 subthemes for each:

1. A primary role for teacher’s with grieving students is to engage them in conversation
2. Teachers get their resources from themselves and their administrative team
3. The main challenges facing teachers are a culture of silence, limited resources, and lack of professional knowledge

I found that the participants had nearly identical ideas about what the teacher’s role is for grieving students: conversation. Conversation, both with the affected students and with the class as whole, seemed to be a foundational part of a teacher’s role – not to ignore or suppress conversation, but offer oneself for dialogue with the students, to simply make oneself available.
Participants suggest these dialogues should be empathetic, but also student driven, and perhaps most importantly, should not be pushed on the students. If a student is uninterested in talking, then that is it (not to say that a teacher cannot offer support in other ways, but whether or not conversation happens is up to the students). These types of conversations can help foster what I interpreted as being their second role: creating a safe classroom environment. Through conversations about media occurrences, or the affected student (with student permission), a vital part of the teacher’s role is creating an environment in which grieving students are comfortable, and in which students generally feel comfortable to discuss such issues. Finally, participants seemed to indicate that a big part of their job involves the acquisition of resources with which to help grieving students.

In the second theme, participants indicated that they draw resources from two sources: 1) themselves, and 2) their administrative team. Their own research involved browsing the internet, the library, and seeking mental health professionals. Notably, both participants had a reactive rather than proactive approach towards resource acquisition (wherein they preferred not to seek resources in advance of issues rising in their classrooms), though they both noted increased training in student mental health would be a good thing. The administration was believed to share responsibility for equipping teachers with resources, either through their own research, the distribution of scripts, or mental seeking mental health professionals for training modules/workshops upon teacher request. Teachers still believed they were responsible for initiating first contact with administration in the event of a grieving student.

In the third theme, participants indicated that the main challenges to their work addressing grief were silence around these issues, limited resources, and a lack of professional knowledge. The silence came in three forms: students and family silence, administrative silence,
and the teacher’s own silence. I do not think this issue of silence points to the problem of mental health and grieving as thing not to be talked about, as a thing to be ignored or endured alone, but instead highlights the discomfort that some people feel or that lack of knowing what some people feel when confronted with these issues. The silence did not seem malicious, but anxious, and uneasy. This silence is perhaps the product of, or is exacerbated by, a lack of resources and training – perhaps further worsened by the inapplicability of aged resources and a lack of mental health training in general. Nevertheless, participants did not report feeling completely underprepared, as they both spoke to the effectiveness of simple intuition and familiarity with students as a means of identifying issues and addressing them.

5.2 Implications

The findings from these two teacher interviews have greater implications for the educational community as a whole, and for my own practice as well. Within the educational community, the implication seems to be the importance of collaboration; for myself, the importance of readiness.

5.2.1 Implications for educational community

As it stands, I have not found many implications for the overall educational community, but the ones I found do seem to carry significance. The first implications involves the shared responsibility of resources/training. The allocation of resources/training modules, and who is responsible for the allocation of such resources, was a major point of conversation during the interviews. While both participants indicated that resources were a shared responsibility, Rachel specifically mentioned that in a position where she needed help with a grieving student, she would likely begin by searching independently, engaging the administrative team only if needed.
If this approach is indicative of common behavior, then a possible implication is that some teachers will not seek assistance until they come to realize their own limitations of research.

Both participants also referenced training that they had received for their own mental health. The impression they gave was that training to address personal mental health was common practice. However, as neither participant received training regarding student mental health, a couple implications seem to arise: 1) those responsible for offering this mental health training, are concerned with teachers primarily, not students. 2) a teacher with good mental health is imperative to assisting students with all their needs, perhaps especially their mental health needs.

Finally, while we both participants communicated a comfort when addressing students experiencing grief, they did attest to this not being true of all teachers. The attested either through presumption, or actual experience in which one of them knew a teacher who did not address or engage a student who was experiencing grief. There seem to be two implications here: 1) some teachers may not consider it a part of their job to address students’ emotional/psychological needs, and 2) some teachers simply might not know how to support, or might not feel comfortable addressing a grieving student’s needs. If these implications are true, I believe this suggests the greater educational community has work to be done to improve the attitudes of these teachers which may exist.

5.2.2 Implications for myself and other teachers

Implications for myself and other teachers were more obvious. Both participants made a point of emphasizing that whether or not conversation between student and teacher takes place, once the teacher has offered, is entirely the student’s call. The implication here is that as much as I am supposed to be in control of their classroom, I am not in control of a student’s emotional
development. And while it can be expected that some students will not want to talk, even when they need help, students do not always need help processing grief. Whatever the reason the student does not need/want help, it is important not to force myself into the student’s grieving period if I am not needed there.

Both participants also highlighted empathy and intuition as both tools of experience and nature, and while it is important to trust these tools, they can only be expected to go so far. If I have intuition about how to help a person in need, and the empathy to do so, yet I were to continue to report feeling underprepared to do it, the implication is that these tools are limited, and concrete approaches and resources are needed to continue where empathy finds its limitations. As an aspiring educator concerned about not satisfying the mental health needs of grieving students, I would say that one of the main things to carry forward from this study is the significance of breaking the silence that seems to surround all aspects of the topic, yet also respecting the silence that some students require. Breaking this silence, where it ought to be broken, would seem like the best way to open the doors to professional development, and resource allocation – a necessary door to be opened in the interest of supporting grieving students.

In the next section, I make some recommendations based on the implications found.

5.3 Recommendations

It must be noted that the recommendations are based on the findings from a very small sample of teachers. However, much of what they had to say was reiterated by the research, which at least adds a bit more weight to their input. If this reiteration suggests that the participants’ feedback is emblematic of larger issues, then several recommendations can be offered to the
larger educational community. I have broken down these recommendations to be directed at:
teachers, administrative teams, faculties of education.

5.3.1 Teachers

- It is important not to regard grieving students as though they have a mental health issue.
  While, yes, sensitivity to their emotions is imperative, and yes, loss can result in mental
  health issues, grieving is a natural process, and the emotions that come along with them
  are not always, perhaps not even often, indicative of a larger issue.
- Try to keep yourself in a good mental health state. Having a healthy mental state is one
  the best ways of ensuring that you are capable of fully helping a grieving student.
- If you feel underprepared to help a grieving students, either in theory or in reality, it is
  best to ask for help from all avenues that can support it.
- Engaging the family is an essential part of assisting with a grieving student. However, the
  family – because they are either affected as well, or because they simply do not have
  insight into their child – are not always the best source of information. Nevertheless,
  engaging the family remains important.

5.3.2 Administrative teams

- It is important that if the members of the administrative team know a teacher has a
  grieving student, to approach that teacher with offerings of help and resources, as a
  teacher might not seek help themselves, or might not seek help until they have drained
  their own resources.
- As mentioned in the literature review, teachers reported feeling underprepared to assist
  grieving students, or students with mental health needs generally. Administrative teams
  could possibly quell this anxiety by offering training pertinent to the mental health of
students, or even grief-specific mental health training, regardless if it is asked for, but especially if it is requested.

5.3.3 Teachers college

- Neither participant reported having had any preservice training on addressing students experiencing grief, or mental health generally (it must be acknowledged that to have this experience in 2017 is not as likely, as the added importance on mental health has hopefully made this a thing of the past). While the issue of relevancy of resources over time, as brought up by Rachel, may justify this, certainly any sort of general training would help ready teachers to address grief if they must.

5.4 Areas for Further Research

Something that I think would benefit student grief research would be to learn more about the effectiveness of pre-trauma/pre-grief approaches, such as, making grief a topic to be explored in literacy class. Exploring grief through fiction, or even non-fiction, may help prepare students with foundation for processing grief before trauma occurs. This is by no means supposed to suggest that students will be fully prepared to have a healthy grieving process through literature, but it seems possible that confronting these feelings before they become person could help students in the event of a personal trauma.

As mentioned earlier, in “4.1.1 Teachers Identified Importance of Individual and Class Conversation,” I missed the opportunity to ask the participants how they would respond to a student experiencing complicated grief (grief lasting longer than 6 months). While complicated grief as it affects young students has been studied, how teachers actually interact with, prepare themselves, and help these students seems to be an area that would benefit from further research.
There is an entire field of study around grief support that uses art as therapy. While I did not include references to this approach, I did research it. While researching, the thing I noticed was missing was teacher perspectives on art therapy addressing grief. Some teacher feedback on the effectiveness of such an approach would be a beneficial addition to the current body of research.

5.5 Concluding Comments

In this chapter, I expound on the findings to suggest what some greater implications might be, before making some recommendations for practice based on these implications. Finally, I made some suggestions for areas of grief support that could use some more research.

The ubiquity of death means that teachers are likely to encounter a student who has experienced or is experiencing grief in their classroom. To aspiring teachers, it would seem that knowing what to expect and how to do best by those potential grieving students is an integral part of the job. My research into grief support resources and training for teachers, though representative of a microcosm of the educational community, is a minor step towards informing future and current teachers of what to expect from grieving students, and how to be a positive element of a student’s grief, whether it is being a fundamental part, or staying out of it altogether.

This information seems particularly relevant in Ontario in 2017, as the influx of Syrian refugees increases the likelihood that a teacher may have a student who might be grieving for a myriad of reasons. Grief is natural, even necessary, but that does not mean it is easy to carry. The whole educational community, and perhaps especially teachers who have a fiduciary responsibility to their students, ought to be as prepared as possible to assist students experiencing grief, but also students with mental health issues generally.
References


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Guzman, M. P., Jellinek, M., George, M., Hartley, M., Squicciarini, A. M., Canenguez, K. M.,


Appendices

Appendix A. Letter of Consent

Date:

Dear ________________________________,

My Name is Matthew Danton and I am a student in the Master of Teaching 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 how elementary teachers are prepared and supported to work with students who have experienced the death of a loved one. I am interested in interviewing teachers who have experience in this area and who have supported students during their time of grieving. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

Your participation in this research will involve one 45-60 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, as well as 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. 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 Angela MacDonald. 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, and I will share a copy of the transcript with you shortly after the interview to ensure accuracy.

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,

Matthew Danton

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 by Matthew Danton 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

Introductory Script: Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study, and for making time to be interviewed today. This research study aims to learn how elementary teachers are prepared and supported to work with students who have experienced the death of a loved one. This interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes, and I will ask you a series of questions focused on your own personal experiences and perspectives on the topic of grief resources and training that teachers receive. I want to remind you that you may refrain from answering any question, and you have the right to withdraw your participation from the study at any time. As I explained in the consent letter, this interview will be audio-recorded. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Background Information

- How many years of professional teaching experience do you have?
- How many of those years have you been full-time?
- What grades do you have experience teaching?
- What is your current teaching position?
  - Grades / subjects taught?
  - Do you fulfill any other roles in the school in addition to being a teacher?
- Have you always worked at your current place of employment?
- Can you tell me more about the school you teach in? (e.g. size, demographics, program priorities)
- Can you tell me more about what experiences have contributed to developing your commitment to supporting students’ through their experience of grief and loss?
- Can you tell me more about what experiences contributed to preparing you to offer this kind of mental health support to students who have experiences grief and loss?
  - Personal experiences?
Educational experiences? (e.g. university course work, teachers college, training, additional qualifications, professional development etc.)
  • What formal training have you received and from whom?
  • Do you feel that the training you have had prepared you to support a grieving student?
  • Were there any concerns that this training raised for you? How were your concerns addressed?

Professional experiences? (e.g. jobs, teaching experience)
  • How, if at all, were you prepared to teach elementary aged students about the topic of death, loss, and grieving as curriculum material (i.e. not only in response to a particular students’ experience)?

Teacher Perspectives/Beliefs
  • In your view, what is the role of schools and teachers in supporting student mental health?
  • What range of mental health needs have you see from your students?
  • What is your perspective on how well schools do in meeting the mental health needs of students?
  • In your view, what are some of the key barriers that get in the way of doing a better job of supporting student mental health in schools?
  • How would you describe the role of the teacher when a student has experienced loss and is grieving?
  • Do you believe that teachers should be an essential figure in assisting students through grief?
  • What space, if any, do you believe grieving should have in a classroom and why?
  • In your view, who is responsible for making sure a teacher is equipped to handle the subject of death, loss, and grief with young students? What should this type of preparation look like and why?
  • From your perspective what are some of the key considerations that need to be made when supporting students through their experience of loss and grief and why?
• In your view, at what age is it appropriate to begin teaching students about death, loss, and grief (without waiting for it to be something they experience)?

Teacher Practices
• How do you support students who experience loss and grief?
  o What are some primary ways that you respond?
  o Can you walk through me what this process looks like?
  o What resources do you use, and how do you become aware of the resources available to you?
  o Can you provide me with some examples?

What has been your experience applying the specific training you have received when you have encountered a student experiencing grief?
• How have your students responded to your efforts?
• What did you learn from this experience?
• What strategies that you were taught were successful? Which ones failed? Why do you think that is?
• We have been talking mostly about how you react when a specific student is experiencing loss and grief. Now I would like to shift and talk with you about how you approach this topic with all of your students, as a learning opportunity (i.e. proactively). If applicable, can you tell me how you have taught your elementary aged students about the topic of death, loss, and grief?
  o What curriculum did you connect this work to?
  o What were your learning goals?
  o What opportunities for learning did you create?
  o How did your students respond? What outcomes of learning did you observe?
    What questions did they have?
  o What resources do you use to support you in this work?

Supports and Challenges
• What range of factors and resources support you in the work that you do with students in relation to the topic of death, grief, and loss? (e.g. training, leadership in school, support from colleagues, access to councillors, professional development support etc.)
• What have been the primary sources of support and professional preparation for you in this area?
• What have been some of the major challenges you faced when addressing a grieving student? How did you respond to these challenges?
• Did you feel like there was anything else that could have be done to help you overcome those challenges? How might the education system further support you in meeting these challenges?

Next Steps
• Do you have any professional goals in the area of responding to students’ experience of grief and loss?
• Do you have any advice regarding grief support for beginning teachers who may feel uneasy about the topic, but committed to supporting these students?

Thank you for your participation in this research study.