Preparing and Supporting Students with Experiences of Trauma, Grief and Loss

By

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Abstract

Although there are current efforts to prioritize the mental health of students, and break down the stigma surrounding mental health, educators are still faced with obstacles in supporting these students. Recent efforts by the Ontario government to put forth the Supporting Minds (2013) document, a resource for teachers to turn to in order to guide the support of student mental health all short of fully supporting teachers in this work. Insufficient training, resources and development are available to prepare educators to support students who have specific experiences of trauma, grief and loss within the classroom. Through a literature review and semi-structured interviews of two educators, this study looks to how educators are implementing effective strategies and methods to support young students dealing with matters of trauma, grief, and/or loss. Findings suggest that teachers use several strategies and resources such as connecting with students and families, accommodations, and utilizing universally beneficial practices. These techniques, strategies and resources are used to support students with trauma, grief and loss despite certain obstacles. They work through obstacles through making use of available resources, school climate, and building relationships.

Key Words: Trauma, Grief, Mental Health, Teacher Support, Accommodations, Community Building
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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.0 Research Context

Children are sometimes confronted with extreme change in their lives through events like trauma, death, and loss. These are events that can be difficult for people to come to terms with, especially young children. Educators must take on difficult responsibilities to support students in their educational, emotional, and social development. This challenging topic surrounding loss and trauma is an inevitable part of life, something that is often hidden from children, making it complex for educators to step in to openly discuss and support it in the classroom.

One example of the trauma students may face is the death of their parent(s). It has been estimated that 3.5% of children under the age of 18 have experienced the death of their parent (Social Security Administration, 2000). In the United States, the most common causes of death for people aged 35-54 are classified as accidents, this includes events like traffic accidents, homicide, suicide or fatal physical injuries; these are examples of events that would be unanticipated, and often traumatic to a child (Edgar-Bailey & Kress, 2010). Parental death places children at threat for numerous negative outcomes including mental health problems, Childhood Traumatic Grief (CTG), lower academic success and self-esteem, and greater external locus of control (Cohen, Mannarino & Belinger, 2006).

There are many other cases of childhood trauma that do not involve the death of parents specifically, such as abuse, violence, maltreatment, war, and more. Some children that deal with these heavy cases of trauma develop CTG, which impacts their grieving process and affects the day-to-day skills that allow children to thrive (Cohen & Mannarino, 2011).

As children who have faced troubling experiences, they are now faced with the consequences brought forward from their past. Nader’s (2007) research gives insight as to how
early childhood trauma creates a significant dysfunction in children in comparison to if a similar experience were to take place in adolescence or adulthood. Children’s brains are more vulnerable to situations of high stress which creates confusion of the sense of self, and interfere with the development and maturation of the body’s natural coping mechanisms (Nader, 2007).

The Ministry of Education has brought forward student mental health and wellbeing in current educational policy, but in order to further direct educators on how to put policy into practice further development of this research is crucial in Ontario. Teachers are seen as professionals responsible for a very large aspect of the welfare of children and are expected to create a safe, comforting, and friendly environment for students in order to foster learning (Holland, 2008). In 2013, Supporting Minds was created by the Ontario government to provide educators with information regarding early signs of mental health and addiction problems. Thankfully, mental health issues are not as taboo as they have been in the past, and this is now a priority in many schools. Because of this social development, it makes sense for teaches to play a role in supporting students with mental health issues and to promote classroom support for these students.

Another reason this topic is an important area for research for Ontario educators is because of the current influx of Syrian refugees who are present in Ontario classrooms that have experienced trauma first hand. At the time of research, since November of 2015 over 10,000 refugees have arrived in Ontario, approximately 50% of all refugees are children, and over 4 million of people identified as refugees have fled from civil war (Government of Ontario, 2016). A number of students have fled war-torn countries or fled for fear of persecution, and these students will be in our classrooms. These students carry scars that influence all aspects in their educational lives, “their experience is steeped in trauma” and educators must rethink their
teaching to connect to the lived experiences of these students (Feuerverger, 2011, p. 360). With this in mind, educators ought to carefully consider how and if they chose to actively play a role in supporting students hit with trauma, grief and loss.

1.1 Research Problem

While the Ministry of Education and School Boards claim to be committed to supporting student mental health, there is a lack of training, and support provided to teachers to feel comfortable with facilitating emotional, mental, and academic wellbeing of students dealing with grief and other traumas (Busch & Kimble, 2001; Holland, 2008). Teachers are not typically trained to manage grief and assist grieving students, and those that receive training still feel unprepared to communicate about the subject to the student dealing with the feelings of grief (Hatzichristou & Pavlidi, 2002; Holland, 2008; Papadatou, Metallinou; Schoen, Burgoyne & Schoen, 2004; Reid & Dixon, 1999; Sitler, 2009). Educators are in a difficult position, their roles require them to be in loco parentis, to act like a guardian of the child, but in extreme cases of trauma, grief, or loss it may be difficult to find a way to support the student in an effective way without taking on the role of other professionals that work with children. There is a common attitude that it is the role of a social worker and a psychiatrist to deal with the wellbeing of a child who is facing a significant loss in their lives and that the role of the teacher is to educate, however, it is the teacher that spends every day with their students, somebody who already has a strong relationship with the child (Holland, 2008). It is hard to make sense of how and what support educators should execute to make a significant and effective difference.

In addition to not being sure on how to help, many educators express a total lack of comfort with the matter, and many times try to avoid the topic in the classroom (Papadatou et al., 2002). In their study, Reid and Dixon (1999) found that only 12% of a sample of public school
educators received any academic instruction of children’s understanding of death. Without formal training in teacher education programs on the subject, and without much direction from schools (Busch & Kimble, 2001), it is no wonder that many educators feel uncomfortable when asked about this problem.

Teachers often feel anxious and unprepared when questioned about how they would work with grieving or traumatized students, several claim to have greater death avoidance and less neutral acceptance, meaning they try to stray from discussing topics regarding death and trauma, even if asked directly by a student (Reid & Dixon, 1999). By evading or not addressing these issues in the classroom, serious consequences can arise. Teachers are often unaware of the effects and signs of psychological trauma on learners; this impacts the student’s academic work, comfort in the classroom and social behaviour (Sitler, 2009). As an aspiring educator, I want to be aware of reliable resources to create a solid foundation for my practices, and avoid these negative impacts for my potential students.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

In light of this problem, the purpose of this qualitative study is to learn effective strategies and methods that teachers use for supporting young students dealing with matters of trauma, grief, and/or loss. I seek to share these discoveries with other educators and to further inform my own role as an educator of young children.

When an educator is prepared to face these challenges by developing a pedagogy of awareness, a teacher can reframe their own perceptions and help these troubled students reinvest in their learning and thrive (Sitler, 2009). Because teachers are such a constant presence in the lives of their students, it is essential for them to consider ways to aid their mental wellbeing, especially in such drastic cases where the future of these children are at stake. Educators are a
critical source of support to children that are struggling with trauma (Cohen & Mannarino, 2011), the role educators play in the lives of their students is one that holds a lot of power and responsibility. The responsibility here is to be prepared to support students who are struggling with the mental health consequences that come with matters of loss and trauma.

1.3 Research Questions

The main question that guides my research is:

How is a small sample of elementary educators supporting children dealing with trauma, grief and loss?

This main inquiry is further supported by the following subsidiary questions:

- What obstacles do educators face when helping students cope with trauma, grief and loss, and how do they respond to the challenges they face?

- What range of approaches do these teachers take for responding to students’ experience of trauma, grief and loss, and what outcomes do they observe from their students?

- What resources do these educators have to support them in this work?

- What experiences contributed to developing these teachers’ commitment to, and competence in, supporting students through their experience of trauma, grief and loss?

1.4 Reflexive Positioning Statement

I realize that to have a thriving classroom, students need a secure and stable environment. I recognize that sometimes this is challenged by a drastic change in the students’ home lives. Students ought to feel comfortable and at ease in the classroom, I believe that this is a place students that are dealing with trauma, grief and loss can turn to for acceptance, support and
expression. I have a passion for caring for others and want to learn how I can develop my practice to support these children in order for them to reach their potential.

I personally have never been affected by trauma first-hand, however, I remember the night my best friend’s father died in a terrible accident when we were in the third grade. I will never forget the pain I saw in her eyes everyday at school, I saw her mannerisms change and saw her fall behind academically because of her traumatic shock.

Now that I am ready to enter the classroom as an educator of young children, I want to be prepared in such instances and others, to support my students any way in which I can. I feel that prior to this research, I felt extremely uncomfortable with thinking about having to deal with such an experience in my own classroom and know many other future educators that feel the same way. I would like to shed light on research on the topic of childhood trauma, grief, and loss in order to build confidence for educators who feel unprepared to face this challenge.

1.5 Overview

To respond to the research questions I have outlines, I have conducted a qualitative research study using purposeful sampling to interview two teachers about their strategies for supporting students with experience of trauma, grief, and/or loss. In Chapter 2, I review the literature in the areas of methods to help children cope with their memories and emotions after traumatic events that can be implemented in the classroom. Next, in Chapter 3, I elaborate on the research design. In Chapter 4, I report my research findings and discuss their significance considering the existing research literature, and in Chapter 5 I identify the implications of the research findings for my own teacher identity and practice, and for the educational research community more broadly. I also articulate a series of questions raised by the research findings, and point to areas for future research.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I will review the literature in the areas of childhood trauma, grief and loss, teacher practices to support the mental health of elementary students in these severe positions. More specifically, I review themes related to teacher training and comfort in the realm of discussing this heavy subject matter with their students, and whether it is the place of an educator to play this role. From there, I will consider how to recognize cases of trauma, grief and/or loss in students, possible consequences and look into possible steps to take. Next, I review research on Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT) in order to understand ways in which educators can potentially support students going through difficult times through classroom activities based on clinical therapy activities such as implementations of the creative arts, journaling, storytelling, drama and bibliotherapy. I will then be reviewing the literature in the area of environmental supports for the students within the school and I consider school programs, classmate support and sense of belonging. Finally, I review methods that teachers can support emotionally distraught students’ self-esteem and other coping skills through preparation of classroom environment and community.

2.1 Teacher Training and Preparation

Without the need for an educational background and expert knowledge of mental-health of children or psychology, it is evident that teachers feel overwhelmed by the discourse surrounding trauma, grief, and loss (Holland, 2008). Questions of what steps to take, or whether it is the place of an educator to take on this role comes to surface. There is a common desire to protect children from emotional aspects of death (Schoen, Burgone & Schoen, 2004). However, this protective perspective does not benefit children in the long run, it produces harmful scars
and a lack of knowledge on how to cope with their own lives (Holland, 2008). This section breaks down teacher training and preparation into the feelings of uncertainty, choosing to ignore the issues, and comfort with giving the information to students.

2.1.1 Feelings of uncertainty

As previously mentioned, there is an overall problem concerning the level of comfort and confidence that educators feel when asked about students facing traumatic circumstances such as death, war or abandonment. In a study on teacher comfort levels on the matter, a majority of teachers when questioned were willing to listen to students’ worries and feelings on the topic of death, 94% considered it proper to help a grieving child but 46% reported feelings of difficulty and confusion and referred the student to a counsellor and did not implement classroom strategies to assist the student (Papadatou et al., 2002). It is clear that intentions were good, that there is a belief that a licensed counsellor would be able to provide superior support, but this is not entirely the case. Moore and Varela’s (2009) research shows that lack of support from teachers and classmates were the strongest predictors of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptomatology in children who experienced trauma after Hurricane Katrina. Because teachers are figures that play such a large role in the lives of their students, they often have an established relationship and have the potential to really help students that turn to them.

Training on this subject is commonly not thoroughly provided in general teacher training in many countries, especially in specificity towards traumatic events (Holland & Rowling, 2000). In addition to not having specific training on how to facilitate for students going through traumas, teachers do not receive training on how to manage their own grief which may occur from the overwhelming stress and emotion that comes along with having to think about the traumatic events students have experienced (Reid & Dixon, 1999). For educators who do work
with students dealing with trauma, grief, and loss, a feeling of failure can emerge which makes the topic difficult.

There are effects that present themselves after working with abused and traumatized students, which manifest as burnout, traumatization, or secondary trauma; symptoms appear as fatigue, sleeplessness, decreased morale, depersonalization and emotional exhaustion which all effect the way a teacher will perform their job (Lucas, 2007). Lucas further reports on teachers who claim they feel like they have no control, teachers feel the weight of the events that their students have in their lives, “I knew there wasn’t really anything I could say that would fill that void or make her mommy come back. And I knew that her mommy wasn’t coming back. I knew she was up for adoption” (2007, para. 21). Traumatic events in the lives of students bring immense emotional pressure on the teacher involved and this is another reason many educators feel uncomfortable with this subject.

It is a priority for the Government of Canada to promote the mental wellbeing of students, and efforts have been made through documents such as Supporting Minds (2013) which outlines suggestions on how to recognize signs of mental distress and how to address them, but does not go into much depth about topics of trauma, grief, and loss, rather looks at forms of general anxiety, depression and common addictions. Most educators still know little on how to manage the classroom effects of trauma (Sitler, 2009). Merimna, a nonprofit program for the care of children and families facing illness and death in Greece has actually offered counseling services to entire schools and educators who has children in their classes coping with serious illnesses or death (Papadatou et al., 2002). This huge effort was made after a similar strategy of pamphlets, similar to Supporting Minds, was given to schools to inform teachers and were found to be not sufficient in these areas.
2.1.2 Ignoring the topic

By ignoring the topic, it seems that there is a sense that students can simply move on, eventually. Nagy’s (1948) findings suggest that young children have skewed perceptions on death, thinking that it is reversible and preventable, possibly suggesting that they are unable to conceptualize death. The limitation to this study is that it may be quite dated, with the normalization of violence and death in media. However, there is little research about comprehension of death and trauma in childhood because of taboo nature of discussing these sensitive topics with children. The University of Rochester Medical Center (2016) claims that a child’s concept of death varies but school aged children develop a more realistic understanding of death being inevitable, permanent and universal, some of this understanding stems from the exposure to media, books, and video games. Although millions of children are growing up in conflict, research regarding the impact and perceptions on children is lacking (Fledman, Vengrober, Eidelman-Rothman & Zagoory-Sharon, 2013).

Strekalova and Hoot (2008) report on the special needs of refugee students and discuss how many educators may not want to talk about or acknowledge the stories of refugees. They claim that statistically the great majority of U.S. teachers are White, middle-class monolinguals that come from a secure environment; their experience with trauma comes from the screen. Given this background, Stekalova and Hoot (2008) claim that it is unlikely that these teachers are prepared to respond to the intense needs refugee children may have.

When it comes to dealing with sensitive issues like death with young children it is not helpful to pretend that nothing is wrong (Lowe 2009). It seems like the avoidance of the subject is a more comfortable place, but as educators, the duty lies in preparing our students for reality and providing them with the truth. By ignoring the problems, educators will only confuse, and
further complicate the wellbeing of the child. Pratt, Hare, and Wright (1985) report the findings of their study where teachers reported having ambivalent feeling about educating students and discussing topics relating to death in school, the main factors behind this reasoning being the naivety of the children, and fear for contradicting the beliefs being discussed at home.

Padadatou et al.’s (2002) research in teacher comfort regarding student loss suggested that 40% of the teachers who had discussions with their students about their loss experience was under the circumstances of realizing the student was displaying learning difficulties, instead of actively choosing to discuss for support, while 45% never openly-acknowledged the major loss. Adults often neglect children’s signs of grief, as they are often seen to be too young to mourn (Machon, Goldberg & Washington, 1999; Silverman, Nickman & Worden, 1992). However, as these signs are neglected, relationships with peers and educators are negatively affected and can possibly result in classroom problems that bring additional strain to all parties (Papadatou et al, 2002). By not acknowledging the serious realities present within the classroom community, especially if they are known among the community, this sends implicit signals of unimportance and a lack of interest, which can cause additional damage to students’ mental wellbeing.

2.1.3 Providing information to students and curriculum

The choice to openly discuss issues with your students is a window to provide students with information of real world problems, to allow them to ask questions, and think critically about what these issues mean to them. The primary goal when facilitating a coping process such as grief is to provide information that can reduce the anxieties about the future (Haine, Ayers, Sandler & Wolchik, 2008). By working with the student to understand that their emotions are valid, that the events did not take place because of their actions, and that what they have experienced can be openly talked about is key to helping the child comfortably cope and
understand what is happening to them (Wolchik, Tein, Sandler & Ayers, 2006). While it is not the job for teachers to conduct psychotherapy with students, they are in fact qualified to discuss students’ feelings and their problems because this heavily impacts their lives (Lowe, 2009). Clinicians find that by providing people, including children, information about the grieving process may decrease thoughts that could lead to adjustment problems, lack of understanding, and clarity (Haine et al., 2008).

It is crucial for teachers to feel more confident in discussing these topics because the data on teachers’ perceived ability to support bereaved students concluded that student support depended upon the educator’s perception of his/her role as a helper and his/her perceived comfort in dealing with death-related issues (Papadatou et al., 2002). In cases of CTG and other types of trauma, the lack of support from a professional who interacts with the student on a regular basis contributes to the danger of this student falling behind academically, and retaining emotional trauma from the lack of emotional understanding (Brown & Goodman, 2005). Haine et al. (2008) also share these findings and give the example of parental death, which place children at high risk for depression, anxiety, posttraumatic stress symptoms, and CTG, which all lead to lower academic success and self-esteem. It is important for teachers to understand what it means when students are struggling in such cases, and how to openly discuss, accommodate, and facilitate a comfortable learning environment where they can feel safe and supported, so they can overcome the emotional and mental hurdles they are faced with.

Papadatou et al. (2002) claim that several schools in Greece have a proactive program in action that incorporate a death education curriculum that is often planned in response to death-related events that have affected the school community. However, Busch and Kimble (2001) believe that educating children about the matters of death, loss and grief should be executed
before a crisis occurs. Children should be encouraged to ask questions and show their feelings in order to be prepared to cope for such experiences as a natural part of life. Holland (2008) suggests incorporating death into lessons through activities such as commemoration on known historical figures, planting a tree in memorial, observation of the seasons or studying the life cycles of animals such as butterflies to gain understanding of life and death, and using texts like *Charlotte’s Web*, can provide students with knowledge and connection to the nature of death as an ordinary experience in life.

Other topics that children of trauma may have been exposed to such as war and cases of abuse or abandonment are not so easily extended into the curriculum. Such areas are often discussed as “difficult knowledge” which acts as a representation of a social trauma and the educators’ encounters with the pedagogy, it is a difficult content and difficult subject to teach (Pitt & Britzman, 2003). Teachers are often warned to cautiously consider incorporating such matter into the curriculum because of the discomfort and unpleasant nature, which is augmented by the idea of discussing these heavy topics with children (Garrett, 2010). This again ties to the notion of ignoring the topic, hoping children will eventually some how come to terms with these issues somehow outside of the educational system. In cases of CTG, children often exhibit signs of avoidance, but research shows that though lessons that either implicitly or explicitly cultivates a sense of expression of true content and exposure may yield positive benefits (Brown & Goodman, 2005).

Garrett (2010) portrays the education of war and colonization as often “sanitized” and “devoid of death and violence” (p. 186). This is a path educators often take because they make the decision to censor and alter the information to protect children, but this becomes problematic when students who come from counties of war, and other non-privileged experiences, enter the
class. They bring stories of war, shock and panic with them. Feuerverger (2011), suggests that refugee students need a teacher to act as a facilitator for the students, to learn to understand their differences and how to accommodate to support their development.

2.2 Recognizing Trauma, Grief and Loss in the Classroom and Possible Consequences

Traumatic events which can lead to overwhelming feelings of loss, CTG, and PTSD. These events include childhood physical or sexual abuse, witnessing or being a victim of a domestic violence, community violence, severe accidents, potentially life threatening illnesses or medical procedures, natural and human made disasters (war, terrorism, death, etc.) (Cohen et al, 2006). Why does it matter to teachers if their students are struggling with potential trauma and grief? Loss accommodation can be meaningfully aided when people who are close to struggling children recognize their symptoms and meet their needs, by picking up on students’ behavior and communicating with the family and the student, and then continuing to consider how to assist the student based on these factors. In this way educators and the school community plays a significant role in facilitating the adjustment of the child (Papadatou et al., 2002). Cole, O’Brien, Gadd, Ristuccia, Wallace and Gregory (2005) discuss how open-communication with the parents, family or guardians will be one of the most important factors to increase the child’s chances for success. Creating this forum for discussion of observations, ideas and goals can facilitate the optimal growth and development of the child. This section develops ways in which educators can recognize trauma, grief and loss, and the possible consequences students can face.

2.2.1 Recognizing trauma, grief, and loss

By identifying symptoms of trauma though the daily interactions in the classroom, teachers can recognize when and what actions should be taken when it comes to their role in the class and if any further steps should be taken. Nader (2007) mentions the commonality of
beavered and traumatized students as being observers, who often do not participate, they prefer watching things happen. This behaviour is frequently noted by professionals as a common reaction to for these children, it is a way for them to fly under the radar and attempt to avoid any reoccurrence of the trauma, whether that reoccurrence be a physical repetition of the event, or having to simply think about or discuss the event (The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2008). On the other hand, other research points to students refusing to respond, not because they feel the need to watch but because they are trying to control the situation through defiance - this may be intentional or unconsciously by “freezing”; these students are often misdiagnosed as oppositional and defiant (Cole et al., 2005, p. 35).

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (2008) suggests that young children with experiences of trauma exhibit behaviours such as, clinging to teachers, regression of previously mastered stages, lack of developmental progress, re-creating the event in discussion or playing, increase of complaints of general health (headaches, stomach pain, etc.), over- or under-reacting to physical contact, sudden movements, lights and loud noises, new fears, questions about death and general changes of typical behavior. Students’ reactions will vary, and there may not be a sure set list for teachers to look out for. However, it is important to get to know your students in order to try to get a sense of what is going on and whether they need additional supports.

It is the role of a qualified healthcare professional or physician to diagnose and treat mental health problems, not the role of the educator. However, according to Supporting Minds (2013), educators play a supportive role in the diagnostic process in their observations from the school setting that may not be evident to others working with the case. Students rely on their classroom and education for support, it is crucial for this community to allow for the students to
feel connected, accepted, included and supported in their school environment, even if they feel reluctant to ask for help (Shocet, Dadds, Ham & Montague, 2006).

One thing to keep in mind is to recognize the cultural variety of students, and a close liaison with the family members of students can provide educators with what is appropriate and helpful for students in returning to school after a traumatic event, such as a death (Holland, 2008). Culture plays a large role in appropriate responses when recognizing signs of grief, this is important to consider because this changes how one may act when they are struggling with these issues, and it also changes what is appropriately seen as helpful.

Culture plays a very important role in how students exhibit signs of mental health difficulties stigma, beliefs and several other factors contribute to this variation (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013). For this reason, it is important to support and respect the values of other cultures while also making sure the needs of your students are being met. Saldaña (2001) explains that through cultural competence, educators accept and respect variance though ongoing self-assessment concerning culture where the consideration to the dynamics of difference, knowledge, and readiness to adapt resources and techniques to meet the needs of minorities. Jerome (2011) explains it is not expected of educators know all the possible cultural protocols of their students, but it is something to keep in mind, in addition to the fact that a family’s culture or ethnicity does not assure an understanding of the family’s personal cultural values, beliefs and degrees of practice.

To be an educator is a strenuous job with a list of endless expectations to be met because of the huge responsibility and weight they hold in the lives of children. Teachers are often busy people, occupied by other duties and simply do not notice when children are really crying out for help (Smith-D’Arezzo & Thompson, 2006). It is crucial for these students to be acknowledged
and for their needs to be met. Often students dealing with traumas such as CTG, exhibit signs of anger, seclusion and avoidance that can be spotted in a classroom setting; it is crucial for teachers to document the information and take action in order to make sure the student has all the support possible (Cohen & Mannarino, 2011). Through observation and logging of students’ progress and notable changes or disruption, it is clearer to notice when and why certain behaviours or changes can happen (Feuerverger, 2011). This provides more insight in cases where information needs to be documented for use of other professionals and also for your personal use to see what may or may not be working for the student.

2.2.2 Academic consequences of trauma, grief and loss

Students with trauma, grief, and loss in their lives face many obstacles, many of which themselves in school. Because of many of these obstacles, their ability to socialize and reach the full potential in academia in hindered. Trauma and CTG have been proven to impact school performance in students, students with these problems show a decreased reading ability, lower GPA and a higher rate of school absences (The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2008). Key areas that affect these areas of academia and school socialization are communication, self-regulation, and structure.

2.2.2.1 Communication

One of the specific academic consequences which students with experiences of trauma face is in language development. Cole et al. (2005) explain that trauma disrupts the learning process for children; impeding their processing and ability to communicate successfully, this in turn leads to issues in relation to language arts, and a variety of subject areas, and the general sense of self-expression.
Other symptoms from grief and trauma such as hyper arousal, being easily startled and sensitivity make focusing at school a frustrating and difficult to accomplish; in turn, students’ grades, confidence amongst peers, and ability to maintain relations with peers (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

2.2.2.2 Self-Regulation

Self-regulation asks children to translate what they experience into information they can use to regulate thoughts, emotions, and behaviors (Florez, 2011). Self-regulation is crucial for a student’s success in the classroom, but it is one of the biggest problem areas for traumatized children (Cole et al., 2005; Nader, 2007). Children who are not able to effectively regulate their anxiety or discouragement tend to distance themselves from learning activities and opportunities instead of engaging or challenging themselves the way students who effectively self-regulate do which allows them to relax and focus on learning cognitive skills (Florez, 2011). Because traumatized and otherwise emotionally distracted students are unable to self-regulate and focus on developing their cognitive skills, this can lead to several entry points for problems in academia.

In addition to the dissonance socially and academically, the inability to effectively self-regulate has physical consequences on children. Cole et al., (2005) suggest that in their high-stress state that develops from ineffective self-regulation, children often complain about symptoms such as headaches, stomach pain, fatigue, sleeplessness, eating disorders and other health problems. If these symptoms are prevalent, they can heavily influence students’ performance and participation at school.
2.2.2.3 **Structure**

Cole et al. (2005), suggest that another barrier that traumatized students face is in their struggle to order and make sense of their daily experience because of the chaos and traumatic events that disrupt their lives. This challenge can negatively impact students in the classroom, making reading, writing, organizing information and processing difficult tasks. Often children who have faced trauma and grief struggle with effective problem solving and planning because of the overwhelming sense of frustration and inability to focus, leading to poor habits of organization (Nader, 2007).

2.3 **Activities to Support a Healthy Mind**

It is very important for teachers to consider strategies in their practice that benefit all their students to learn content from the curriculum. Studies into differentiated learning support how there are a variety of implementations of lessons and activities that help students reach the educational goals expected of them through a variety of different ways to reach this endpoint. This is something that ought to be considered in cases where students are subject to trauma, loss, and grief. Such students require opportunities to exert control over aspects of their lives and to make meaning in their daily lives by connecting to other students (Sitler, 2009). To teach with awareness is to consider specific activities that can be fused into lesson planning to meet the needs of these students that require such support to reach learning goals and learn valuable coping tools.

Clinicians often encourage parents and educators to provide increased feedback and opportunities to boost self-esteem; activities like art foster this kind of emotional support for students (Haine et al., 2008). Considering implementations of certain activities that some counsellor use in therapy with traumatized children without psychoanalytical overstepping is one
way that educators may give emotionally traumatized students a path to a more successful education. Considering Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy, the creative arts, journaling and forms of storytelling serve to guide educators how to support student mental health in the classroom.

2.3.1 Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy

Many of the activities I will outline are used in Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT), a form of clinical therapy where these activities are forms of intervention that are used in sessions. Research suggests that the most effective evidence-based approach to treat CTG is CBT (Edgar-Bailey & Kress, 2010). CBT is a method often used by counsellors and clinicians to give patients methods to cope with the ways trauma has impacted their daily lives. There are a variety of interventions that include promoting sensory based, calming activities, some will be further explored below as ways that can be implemented in the classroom and regular activities for the entire class while also potentially benefiting any students struggling with emotional trauma (Edgar-Bailey & Kress, 2010). These activities are used to promote a sense of control, self-confidence and self-expression.

Trauma-focused CBT has been proven to decrease an array of child psychological problems through these forms of interventions (Haine et al., 2008). It is imperative for counsellors to use the specific techniques of the general interventions to reach a certain degree of training because it often begins by using prompts that explicitly relate to their trauma. Edgar-Bailey and Kress (2010) do not suggest or condone using their outlined techniques without this training. However, general introduction to the methods without deep psychological prompting on the matter of the trauma is not necessary, without this prompting these activities may benefit traumatized children to express any emotions and foster a sense of belonging in the classroom.
2.3.2 Creative Arts

This activity is very open ended. Research has shown that creative arts are an expressive form of therapy for people of many ages struggling with emotional trauma (Rambo, 1996). This varies from practices of using paints, sketches, sculpture and more. Edgar-Bailey and Kress (2010) highlight the interventional use of creative arts to facilitate a sense of control, allowing students to choose their own mediums, tools and parameters for art projects foster a sense of control to explore any given topic for the project. This can be easily executed in countless lesson plans in the arts curriculum or even cross-curricularly. Rambo (1996) argues that the creative arts are beneficial for children who feel that verbalizing their feelings to be a part of the creative process that provide a distance from the stresses of written or verbal expression. The use of visual images offers a tangible alternative to the images left in the minds of the traumatized. Expressing their feelings or experiences through creative means allow the children to bring forth sentiments they may not want to discuss verbally while allowing the child’s skillset in communication to develop.

The explicit counseling methods within this intervention are outlined as mostly prompts dealing with themes related to the trauma. This is not something that should be carried out in a classroom setting; this is where the line is drawn between teacher and counsellor (Cohen & Mannarino, 2011). The classroom is no place to bring up these forms of questions to traumatized students because as educators it is our role to educate and have the best interest of the students in mind. Allowing students to engage with visual arts will be beneficial to their mental health and development. (Haine et al., 2008) But keep in mind that there should be no psychoanalyzing in these activities. Alternatively, the implementation of creative arts is beneficial due to the power of creating a therapeutic setting and environment for growth (Rambo, 1996). Activities involving
the arts and the others listed, all work in a way to create a sense of a calming environment while still allowing for a form of expression.

2.3.3 Journaling

Journaling is a common activity cross-curricularly, and is frequently implemented as writing and reflecting activity; this is another activity where expression can be used effectively to accommodate class activities to support students that may be going through trauma. Journal writing provides an opportunity for students who feel difficulty expressing themselves fully in class (Doll, Kereakoglow, Radhika Sarma & Hare, 2008). This form of reflection is highly beneficial for students undergoing CBT. Journaling can highlight connections between feelings and behaviours and provide an outlet for suppressed emotions (Edgar-Bailey & Kress, 2010). To get all students to have an outlined time to journal provides a way for students struggling with their emotions to express themselves in concrete words instead of being lost in their thoughts and memories. To use journaling as a means to gain understanding of a student’s thoughts, perceptions and experiences on any subject the student feels comfortable with provides teachers with a way to assess students who may not be participating as frequently as others and a way for students to express any thoughts they may be dealing with (Doll et al., 2008).

In cases where there is an awareness of the child working with a therapist or other counsellors, this is an excellent way to create a means of connection to this other professional. It is essential that in cases where strong emotion is exhibited that this information be passed on to this other professional in order for a qualified individual to help the student learn how to deal with their emotions (Edgar-Bailey & Kress, 2010). The limitations here are that there may be excess psychoanalyzing on the part of the teacher on such activities; it may become an activity that could be read into too much when an entry may not be what it seems.
Further, Papadatou et al. (2002) suggest that team approaches involving educators, mental health professionals and family members to facilitate the child’s adjustment to loss is highly beneficial. Again, the limitations here may be that the content written by the students may be interpreted too much, or may be information that should not be shared with other people, even if it is individuals working or living with the child. However, this is one of the activities that can easily be implemented by all the members of this team to support the child and facilitate communication. As an activity journaling is a tool that students can implement in their lives and become meaningfully embedded in their long-term memory instead of an activity that may be forgotten at the end of the year (Doll et al., 2008). Journaling provides a learning opportunity in the form of writing, but in addition is something that students can walk away with as a way to express themselves and cope with their emotions for years to come.

2.3.4 Storytelling, Drama & Bibliotherapy

Feuerverger is an educator who often works to support refugee students in Toronto. She praises the practice of storytelling to help these struggling students dealing with memories and feelings of loss and distress. If educators really care about these vulnerable students in our classrooms, they must “rethink and reshape our understanding of teaching and learning that is more fundamentally linked to the lived experiences of students coming from places of war and other oppressions” (Feuerverger, 2011, p. 373).

As educators, it is essential to keep in mind the importance of differentiating learning for our students. This continues to be true for students that are coming from places of trauma, dealing with negative memories that will impact their ability to be fully present in the classroom. By telling stories that can be read in a variety of formats, be acted out dramatically or through
puppets educators can aid the expressive process and validate feelings students are feeling
without directly talking about specific events (Edgar-Bailey & Kress, 2010).

Students with trauma or faced with a recent death often exhibit low self-esteem; through
drama and activities life positive self-talk and I-Messages with role play helps student reframe
their emotions and increase self-esteem (Haine, et al., 2008). Storytelling or drama help frame
heavy themes in a larger context of a plot that can help students better understand themes of
death and trauma.

The use of stories of course transfers to literature. Lowe (2009) discusses the benefits of
bibliotherapy in the classroom. Expression through text offers readers to find solutions through
the stories’ conflicts and characters, educators can implement this strategy to guide students to
cope with their emotions. Lowe (2009) suggests providing families with annotated bibliographies
of books to support families in difficult times and by using life-crisis books occasionally in the
classroom, which enables an open communication “expression and protection” (p. 12). The
choice of literature is essential here, the use of appropriate books will give teachers insight on
students’ lives and provide teachers to see if there might be further professional assistance
needed (Smith-D’Arezzo & Thompson, 2006). This benefits students who are struggling with
traumatic crises and all other students by providing valuable social lessons of empathy and
understanding of the world.

Another activity that fosters a safe environment where students may express their
emotions is through joint book reading which has been identified as a useful method in
discussion and understanding of death and trauma (Haine et al., 2008). This is a technique where
a teacher can provide family members with texts or a list of texts that can foster this connection
to children. Reading with the student is a beneficial way for students to find a way to support
their adaptive expressions of emotions. Limitations with this method would be that this might be too confrontational for some students; they may feel uncomfortable jointly reading about these themes. Alternatively, reading these texts alone may also cause confusion and fear. Here it appears that the execution of reading texts on themes of trauma could be a choice for students, as they might be able to choose what they feel more comfortable with.

2.4 Practices to Encourage Growth

It is important to find methods to encourage the entire class to work together in the everyday actions of the class. Above, I have outlined the research that supports some ways of using activities that can be implemented as course work to support students who struggle with mental traumas. Now I will discuss some important research findings regarding classroom organization that can help support students struggling with trauma, grief, and loss through a safe environment and classroom support.

2.4.1 Creating a safe environment

The research on suggested activities to support the academic growth and mental well-being of students with trauma is essentially useless without ensuring that your classroom is an environment in which all students feel safe and comfortable. Haine et al. (2008) found that children’s adjustment following a major stressful incident is greatly subjective to the snowball of stressful events that take place following the event. It has been known that many students rely heavily on the education system for support, this support comes from the routines, community and connectedness when students become supported, connected, accepted and included by all members of the school environment (Shochet et al., 2006).

This is a key to why creating a classroom environment where the student can feel safe and without strenuous pressures be able to deal with their emotions positively after experiencing
a traumatic event. Olson (2003) suggests using the first two weeks of schools to create these rules and expectations together. In creating a classroom environment that makes your students feel safe and included it is important to, as a group, collectively come to an agreement about setting rules and establishing a rapport between members. This consistent and controlled environment is effective in groups where members were victims of PTSD (Rose, 1998). By creating a place where there is a sense and logic behind rules, there is also support and ease for students that may feel anxious about unexpected events.

Professionals who work closely with children need to be educated regarding the importance of promoting and modeling positive practices such as warmth and open communication to support student’s adaptation. Lowe (2009) states that when a child is feeling a sense of loss or grief stemming from their home life it is imperative for teachers to acknowledge that the routine and structure in the classroom may be the only consistency in a child’s life, making it a valuable place for them to grow and feel comfortable if the stability of the classroom is in practice.

Kalish-Weiss (1989) discusses the successes of schools that develop a mental health team where the team meets with school personnel each week to discuss and share relevant information and suggestions on specific classroom problems, issues of child abuse, absenteeism, isolated children and more. Such a model may be beneficial in inner-city schools or schools where there has been a loss or trauma in the community.

2.4.2 Classmate Support

There is a limit to how much support the peers of a traumatized child can be prepared for, especially depending on the age of the children. However, effective interventions including a classroom component to encourage and strengthen relationships of students help students regain
a sense of normalcy as soon as possible, and by helping them cope with the majorly negative impacts they internalize when they would otherwise feel excluded from the group (Moore & Varela, 2009). After an event like a death, Maierman (1997) encourages teachers to prepare classmates for a pupil’s return by discussing how to respond appropriately in order to minimize isolation. This is a problematic view, is it appropriate to discuss the nature of a single student’s home-life to the class? Limitations here would be that the other students may feel awkward, anxious or act out and end up ostracizing the student. However, Moore and Varela (2009) say it may be beneficial to discuss these themes before events occur, for example, discussing death and what is widely considered respectful to certain cultures and ways that the students may be able to help someone who is feeling down.

One way to promote inclusion is by providing an increase of effective collaborative learning experiences in the class. By enforcing peer building activities between classmates and small group work or pair work in assigned groupings, it has been found that students tend to cope and decrease negative interactions (Moore & Varela, 2009). Activities in group work tend to help students learn content as well as aspects of socialization through activity which may prove to be highly beneficial for students who are not receiving this sort of skill training at home by their families due to extenuating circumstances (Rose, 1998). By providing a setting for meaningful interactions that work together to support a common academic goal, while also bringing forth aspects of community, teachers can provide assistance to the class as a whole, while also possibly benefitting students of trauma.

2.5 Conclusion

In this literature review, I examine research related to childhood trauma, grief and loss, and how teachers can assist these students to support their academic development and mental
health. I reviewed the common feelings of teachers who reported on being an individual who is not prepared nor qualified to discuss and support matters of trauma. I weighed the opposing views of sheltering the children from the harsh nature of the world and exposing them to the truth by providing information to the class through incorporation of matters of death. Further, I examined several consequences that trauma loss and grief can present in the lives of students, along with activities and practices that may prove to be beneficial for students dealing with their own personal trauma that can be used for the entire class. In my research, I raise several questions regarding the limitations on some activities due to cultural differences or simply individual preferences and levels of comforts that students may have; it is hard to say if these applications can really benefit all students. This points to the need for further research on how to find methods to accommodate learning activities for students that may be fraught with their traumatic memories and emotions.

By focusing on how teachers show a dedication to supporting students struggling from traumas I hope to contribute further to the instructional practices emphasized in the existing research. It is my hope to provide a greater understanding and comfort for educators to grapple with the “difficult knowledge”, to consider being comfortable to help your students understand some of these grand topics that hold so much weight in our culture. I also wish to provide educators with a greater confidence in being able to truly be there and assist students who are confronted with trauma, grief and loss in their lives by providing them with tools to allow these students to cope and develop academically, socially and emotionally.
Chapter 3: Methodology

3.0 Introduction

This chapter works to outline the research methodology and framework of my study. First, I begin with a discussion of the general approach and its procedures before speaking to the main data collection instruments. Then, I elaborate on participant sampling and recruitment by providing the sampling criteria, outlining the procedures and delivering backgrounds of the participants. I then review the data analysis procedures and the ethical considerations pertinent to this study, which focuses on manners in which teachers support students with trauma. Next, I shall carefully consider a range of methodological limitations to my study, and speak to its series of strengths. Finally, this chapter concludes with a summary of key methodological decisions followed by my rational for these choices given my purpose and related questions within this research.

3.1 Research Approach & Procedures

The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand the strategies, barriers, and perspectives of two teachers who implement in class support for students who have experienced trauma. The collection of data will come from two main procedural phases. This research study will be conducted using a qualitative research approach using both a literature review with a careful consideration of existing contributions to the research, and semi-structured interviews with educators with a demonstrated commitment to the area of study. These two forms of analysis will contribute to my overall findings to answer my outlined question.

I have chosen to use qualitative research for several important reasons. One, being that it is an activity that “empowers the individual to share their stories, hear their voices, and minimize that power relationship that often exists between a research and the participant in the study”
Qualitative study provides a method to compose findings based on lived experiences in relation to a specific theme, creating an “essence of the experience” (Creswell, 2007, p. 157). I rely on this manifestation of experience and perspective from individuals I deem as reliable sources of information. Their experiences and observations that have emerged as a product of their practices provide data that add richness to my study.

I chose to approach my research with this idea in mind. Qualitative research works to dig into the themes from the perspective of the participants, instead of relying on the interpretations and biases of the researcher (Jones, 1995). This is done to minimize the power relationship between researcher and participant (Creswell, 2007). The data, which came from these qualitative methods, are coded and categorized to allow themes to emerge as ways to respond to my research question. By framing my data collection in a semi-structured interview, I aimed to develop a comfortable and receptive way to collect my data, because qualitative methods provide this sense of ease, it in turn produces a means for participants to open up and allow the researcher to take part in an in-depth exploration of what these participants think and do, and imperatively, why.

3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

The primary instrument of data collection used in this study is the semi-structured interview protocol. Using the semi-structured interview protocol is one effective way as outlined in the previous section of conductive qualitative research. These interviews are more open ended than highly structured interviews, which leaves more room for the participants and researcher to make use of the flexibility (Jackson II, Drummond & Camara, 2007) to elaborate or explore unanticipated data in the moment. Thus, semi-structured interviews are a method in which a
researcher may carefully shape their collection of data in any way they see fit to make the most of their collection while still maintaining a framework and following a format.

To present my findings of how teachers demonstrate support in-class for students with trauma, I believe this instrument of data collection is the most advantageous to yield the most relevant and rich information. To position one’s self as a questioner first and a listener second is a key aspect of the semi-structured interview process. To be able to follow the prepared questions, while being able to develop and refocus these questions in the situation of the interview is tied to accepting this secondary role of a listener (Creswell, 2007). Instead of simply asking questions, an interviewer also listens for opportunities to produce a more prosperous result though pushing questions further, which is why the semi-structured interview protocol is the main instrument of my data collection in this research study.

3.3 Participants

To receive data that is valuable to a study, it is crucial to consider your participants carefully in order to obtain relevant data in order to respond to the research question. Here I review the sampling criteria I established for participant recruitment to have participants that offer this valuable data, and I review a variety of possible avenues for teacher recruitment. I have also included a section where each of my participants will be introduced by outlining their qualifications, professional history and demonstrations to the content of this survey. Below I outline the methodological selections related to my research participants.

3.3.1 Sampling criteria

The following criteria is considered when recruiting participants for this study:

1. Participant is a practicing Ontario elementary teacher
2. Participant is or has been a full-time, generalist teacher
3. Participant has had more than 5 years of experience in the profession
4. Has valuable first hand experiences with students with trauma, loss and/or grief
5. Has a demonstrated commitment to support students with the mental health consequences related to trauma

The sampling criteria I have developed for my study are relevant to my research in order to be able to produce the most fruitful and in depth data to relate to my research question. I have chosen for my participants to be elementary school teachers in Ontario who are full-time generalist teachers, I selected these criteria because I want to know how these teachers are prepared to implement their relevant strategies in a “mainstream” classroom. I have outlined that my participants must have a minimum of 5 years of experience in the profession of teaching, this is because I want to consult teachers who have had sufficient time to develop their practices in the field, and who have had a fair amount of time to reflect on their practices. I also stated that I require participants who have had direct experience with student(s) in their own classrooms who have faced trauma to be able to gain insights from their observations and techniques that they have implemented. Finally, I required that my participants show initiative in this subject matter by having demonstrated some form of commitment to support these students; their passion behind the topic is the perspective I wish to learn from.

3.3.2 Recruitment procedures

This qualitative research will comprise of two non-probability sampling strategies: convenience and purposive sampling. I have utilized the method of convenience sampling in order to make use of its ability to consider participants who are geographically proximate and readily available to the researcher (Marshall, 1996). For this study I relied on participants that I
recruited that were geographically desirable, I contacted participants who are located in the Greater Toronto Area.

As the name suggests, it is the most convenient method of sampling, however it does bring its own limitations, simply relying on convenience sampling could produce a sample of participants that are not relevant and related to the population or the study (Merriam, 2002; Marshall, 1996). Thus, I will be combining convenience sampling with purposive sampling. By developing sampling criteria in purposive sampling, a researcher can select participants who have abounding insight on the subject (Merriam, 2002). The criteria listed in the section above are the requirements that I have for each of my participants.

While combining both convenience and purposive sampling methods I have recruited my participants for this study by making use of my connection to existing contacts within the teaching community. I engaged in conversations of my research with my associate teachers during my practicum placements in schools, and drew upon their references regarding other teachers that thought were interested in participating in my study. I have also contacted principals with my participant criteria and ask that they distribute my information to other teachers they think would have a connection to the topic of the study. I ensured that my potential participants did not feel any pressures or obligations to participate in this study by providing them with my contact information and requesting they contact me if they felt comfortable instead of requesting their personal information from my connections and approaching them first.

3.3.3 Participant biographies

Both educators are currently teaching in Ontario schools, specifically in the Greater Toronto Area. Each teacher has had over 5 years of experience in the profession, where they have spent some or all their experience as a generalist mainstream classroom teacher.
Participants indicated that they are devoted to making a difference by finding ways to support students with the mental health challenges from experiences of trauma, grief, and loss. The participants of this study will remain anonymous through the following pseudonyms.

3.3.3.1 Emily

Emily is currently teaching grade 3 in a GTA public school. She has had experiences teaching kindergarten to Grade 5 classes in her 19 years of teaching in multiple schools in the Peel District School Board. Her strong personal connection with her students and desire to provide students with tools and strategies for life have led Emily to develop a particular expertise in supporting mental health in her classroom.

3.3.3.2 Robert

Robert has been teaching for 12 years, he is currently employed at an independent school in the GTA where he has been working for 5 years teaching Grade 5. Prior to this, Robert has worked for the Toronto District School Board where he taught grades 4 to 6. Robert credits his devotion to the area of supporting students with trauma, grief, and loss to his own life experiences and desire to make a difference surrounding the stigma of mental health.

3.4 Data Analysis

In this section I outline how I have analyzed my data after completing my interviews. Merriam (2002) calls the analysis of data a way to support a conclusion by supplying strong premises in an inductive manner. First, I worked to transcribe my interviews. From there, I began the coding process of these transcripts using my research question as an interpretive tool. This data analysis process involves considering a unit of data in relation to other units of data while searching for common patterns in the information (Merriam, 2002). Each transcript was coded independently by identifying categories of data and themes within categories.
Next, I interpreted the categories and themes next to each other and synthesized themes where appropriate. Wellington (2000) explains that this process requires multiple revisions to refine the data and solidify its themes. Finally, with these categories in mind I made meaning from the data and produced my findings in combination with what existing research has already found. Seidel (1998) refers to the process of data analysis as completing a puzzle, where a researcher must identify and sort the pieces into groups of common identifiers in order to produce a whole where each piece contributes to the larger picture. For this study, I have carefully considered the spectrum of common themes that contribute to my research to present my findings.

3.5 Ethical Review Procedures

According to Jackson II et al. (2007), effective research implements standards of trustworthiness. It is crucial to keep ethical procedures in mind when conducting research, which is why I have committed myself to insuring that I have followed several precautionary measures to ensure that my participants feel comfortable and that my data is secure and reliable. Following ethical protocol is crucial to conducting valuable research because it promotes “knowledge, truth, and avoidance of error” as research aims to do (Resnik, 2015, para. 7). All aspects of this research study followed the ethics protocol for students in the Master of Teaching program at the University of Toronto’s Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

One of my ethical procedures involves the anonymity of my participants and other people that could be identified in relation to them. All participants are assigned a pseudonym to protect their identity; their identities will remain confidential to respect their privacy. Additionally, any identifying markers related to their schools or students are excluded from this study. All
information relating to the study has been stored on my personal computer under password protection and will be destroyed after 5 years.

There are no known risks associated with participation in this study. There is the possibility of minimal risk, in that it is possible that the subject matter or particular question may trigger an emotional response for a participant, thus making them feel uncomfortable or vulnerable in the situation. In order to prevent this, I have taken several preventative steps to ensure that my participants feel comfortable with their interviews. Interviewees have been sent a sample of general questions and subject matter that will be discussed in the interview to prepare the participants. Additionally, participants have been issued letters of consent they are required to sign and return (Appendix A) that outlines their agreement to participate in one audio-recorded semi-structured interview and are notified that they have the right to withdraw from participation in the study, at any stage in the development in the research without penalty. Interviewees have been informed prior to their interview that they have the right to withdraw from answering any question(s) they do not feel comfortable answering. Participants have also been provided with the opportunity to review the transcripts and clarify and retract any statements they see as fit.

In the review of the careful consideration of ethical protocols in research, the ethical principles of honesty, integrity, respect for intellectual property, confidentiality are imperative to implement in order to produce a rich study (Resnik, 2015). These ethical decisions were enacted to produce the safest experience for my participants and to procure valuable information.

3.6 Methodological Limitations and Strengths

Because of the ethical parameters that are granted for this research project, I was only able to collect my data through interviews of a small sample of participants. The first limitation
to the study design due to this restriction stems from the small sample of participants. Because I have only interviewed a couple of educators I am not able to generalize my findings in a broader context of all educators who have experience with students with trauma. Similarly, I cannot expand my interviews to other important people who play a role in the subject matter of this research such as students and parents who could potentially provide other perspectives on strategies and feelings on the matter.

Another issue is the requirement to obtain data through interviews. Creswell (2007) explains that a large distinguishing feature of qualitative research hinges on its ability to observe phenomena first hand. However, I was unable to partake in classroom observations to witness potential strategies at play in the classroom, nor was I able to conduct surveys to be able to obtain general information that limits my findings. Being able to observe classrooms I would have been able to see first-hand how students with trauma and other students in the classroom respond to the implemented strategies. I would have also been able to witness for myself what an execution of the strategies would looks like, as opposed to simply trying to visualize and comprehend the practice based off the explanation of the participants. Additionally, the interview process can influence the data; the dynamic between researcher and participant can be intimidating and can be corrupted by participants’ desire to please the researcher. Merriam (2002) finds this true and says it can lead to potential shortcomings in the data.

However, these constraints have been put into consideration in this study by weighing the strengths as more significant to my research. The inability to generalize my findings is not a part of my research question; I will be looking for a small variety of samples that educators implement as strategies. Because I had the opportunity to interview my participants I was able to hear what my participants truly believed in more depth than observations or surveys could
produce. Through the process of a semi-structured interview I was able to tap into the passion that my participants had on the subject, giving them a voice to express their feelings. As Jackson II et al. (2007) expressed, there is a considerable advantage to this design in the ability to be flexible within the interview context.

Being able to interview my participants also provides the opportunity to understand multiple accounts that have occurred over time and how they have progressed, this would have been information I would be unable to obtain from a short period of observation or survey. This chance for educators to voice their beliefs, experiences and knowledge creates space for teachers to make valuable meaning to their lived experiences by bestowing this information on to other potential educators who can then enact these productive practices.

The opportunity for interviews also promotes a key standard expressed by the Ontario College of Teachers, which relies on the ability to reflect on practices. By interviewing these participants, they have been offered an opportunity to reflect on their practices and express their significance to the study. The interview process brings this enriching discussion that benefits all parties involved. It provides meaningful information to the researcher, brings a reflective discussion for the participants and in turn benefits students by the means of this form of research and reflection that can be incorporated into the practice of multiple educators.

Another highlight to this method of data collection is that the semi-structured interview, as previously mentioned, gives room for open discussion and the opportunity to hone in on the specifics that can be of most value to the study. Merriam (2002) says that qualitative data in interviews are sometimes perceived as generalizations or being controlled by the researcher in his or her favour, but he believes that being knowing this and keeping one’s biases in mind can effectively produce specific content that is still reliable. Therefore, I will keep my own biases
and assumptions as a constant practice of reflection and insure to keep my participant’s own opinions at the forefront of my research.

3.7 Conclusion

In this chapter I have established the research methodology. I began with a briefing of the research approach and procedure, considering the value of qualitative research and bringing forward the distinguishing characteristic of experience it can provide. Then, I explained the instruments of data collection used for this research, including both the literature and interviews, but identifying interviews as the primary source of data to represent my findings because it is from these real-life examples that I wish to understand and examine. In this discussion of the benefits of interviews as a method of data collection, I specifically spoke to the benefits of semi-structured interviews, drawing on the convenience and adaptability it provides the researcher to alter the interview process to yield the best results. I followed this by providing background on the participants of this study, which highlights the reasons as to why they were selected in relation to this study.

I shared the criteria for my study and why I believe my study required Ontario elementary teachers who have worked in the generalist setting for a minimum of five years with valuable and meaningful experiences and commitment to students with trauma, loss and grief. I have described the procedures for recruitment of these participants, which involved purposive sampling for the purpose of maximizing the value and depth of the data obtained. I continue by describing how I have analyzed the data, reviewing interviews individually before investigating for commonalities exhibited in patterns and themes.

I followed with a discussion on ethical issues such as the sensitive and emotional nature of the content of my study that were considered in the methodology and ways to direct these
potential issues were provided. Finally, I reflected on the methodological limitations of this study, such as how I have only interviewed a small select sample of educators, and was unable to partake in classroom observations, nor hear from the families or students of these teachers. I also shine a light on some of its strengths, like the convenience of the semi-structured interview, and the ability to provide reflection on real-life experiences. In the following chapter I will report on the findings of this research.
Chapter 4: Research Findings

4.0 Introduction

This chapter serves to present and examine the findings that emerged from the data analysis findings that emerged from the data analysis of two semi-structured interviews with two Ontario elementary school teachers; both interviews took place in quiet corners in a coffee shop in Vaughan, Ontario. In the process of data analysis, I continually referred to my initial research question: How is a small sample of elementary educators supporting children dealing with trauma, grief and loss? The purpose of this research is to aid educators in the development of comfort and skill in supporting this work. Findings are organized in the following four main themes:

1. Teachers utilize a range of approaches when supporting trauma, grief and loss by introducing practical skills, accommodations, and facilitating dialogue,

2. Educators seek resources through the school community and independent research to inform their work in supporting students with trauma, grief and loss,

3. Educators face obstacles when supporting students with trauma, grief and loss in relation to a lack of training, conflicting beliefs and insufficient resources,

4. Teachers build competence and commitment in supporting student mental health linked to personal experiences, the school climate and student needs.

These themes are further broken down into sub-themes to organize specific ways in which participants responded to these themes. In each subtheme, I will illustrate Emily and Robert’s voices and beliefs, then provide examples and quotations to support the data, and connect these findings with existing literature. Ultimately, I shall review my findings, present the significance of these findings, and make further recommendations.
4.1 Teachers Utilize a Range of Approaches when Supporting Trauma, Grief and Loss by Introducing Practical Skills, Accommodations and Facilitating Dialogue

Both Emily and Robert highlighted a range of approaches they turned to in order to support students with trauma, grief and loss. These approaches act as practical suggestions that can be considered when planning or developing pedagogical tools. Value lies in these strategies, as these are the approaches that both participants felt were central in their work.

Participants addressed the need to create meaningful relationships with students in order to deliver stability and trust while informing possible approaches to take. Next, participants attributed student achievement to being presented with the right accommodations to thrive. Finally, teachers make use of practices of inclusion and learning that is in fact beneficial for all students.

4.1.1 Educators make a conscious effort to get to know their students and create meaningful relationships in order to best support students of trauma, grief and loss

Throughout the interviews, participants addressed the significance of working to create a strong relationship with the student to learn ways to support, and to show the care and compassion to the student.

Robert spoke to the impact the teacher role plays in a child’s life, relating to the idea of in loco parentis, arguing that it is part of an educator’s job to get to know each student, show care and do the absolute best to use these relationships to make the learning experience accessible for all. Robert stated:

Making sure I have a strong relationship with my students come through having conversations to show I care. By getting to know them and showing them I cared allowed us to share a trusting relationship that makes both of our jobs easier.
Emily voiced similar strategies by touching on the social and emotional needs of students with trauma, grief and loss. She explained, “Showing your students that you are someone they can confide in goes a long way. They might not have that in their lives, or they crave it, seeing it as a sign of approval and want the structure.”

This notion of students of trauma, grief and loss seeking structure and approval in school is echoed by Sochet et al. (2006), who stated that students are heavily relying on the education system for support in community and connections within the school community to succeed. In supporting students through creating relationships along with a sense of trust, these educators work to form structure and predictability for students who need these factors to reach their potential.

Similarly, both participants considered extending these relationships further into the students’ lives by connecting with members of the family or guardians. Emily voiced the usefulness of connecting with parents or guardians. By opening a dialogue with other people who are in the lives of these students, educators can collaborate, communicate and plan together to find what suits the student best. “You get the best sense of what you can do, together, to help. You can get a sense of interests, triggers, and strategies that have been tried and tested to inform your work,” Emily reasoned.

Robert shared this sentiment, sharing a story about a student whose mother was diagnosed with terminal illness. A contact teacher, the student, the family, the school social worker, and himself connected to discuss the illness and how he would cope with his feelings. With continual communication and check-ins with this “team”, the student was able to find comfort. “He was open to the supports because of how engaged the team was, he saw his mother being supportive of this plan and he took to it,” Robert suggested.
Research by Kalish-Weiss (1989) proposes that schools that adopt a similar group approach to supporting mental health of students have greater success in supporting students in comparison to schools that do not implement this approach. The foundation of both participants’ strategies is rooted in the idea that a team approach to support the mental health of a student is effective and enhances student comfort levels.

4.1.2 Teachers provide accommodations in the classroom in order for students with trauma, grief and loss to feel safe and included

Given the effects that students with experiences of trauma, grief and loss may live with, both participants outlined the importance of accommodations and modifications.

Robert noted the importance of working with students to find accommodations that work best for them. In terms of accommodations of schoolwork, Robert suggested time increases are important, “I often see that they may not have an environment to focus in or have their minds occupied.” With this in mind, he gives students additional in class time to complete tasks and makes sure that students have all the necessary tools to focus that work best for them. Giving them this opportunity allows for them to overcome any of their struggles in structure and self-regulation. Robert suggested offering tools such as headphones and privacy folders to limit distractions.

Emily shared similar responses as Robert, claiming that accommodations are very important in supporting students. She explained that she feels that each one of her students with experiences of trauma, grief or loss differed, and she spent a lot of time trying varied methods to find the best way to accommodate everyone. She outlined her most useful strategies in accommodations, “the most practical accommodations are breaks, chunking, strategic seating, extensions, and using positive reinforcement strategies.” Such strategies allow for students who
are struggling the effects of trauma can create a beneficial climate and optimal opportunities for the students to work in class and alleviate, limit, or compensate for some of their issues.

Both participants noted this important need for accommodations for successful learning. Robert additionally suggested a need to keep in mind changes in routine, as this is a common trigger. He often warns students ahead of time in the case of a fire drill or if there will be a change in scheduling.

Educators hold power and responsibility in the lives of our students; part of this responsibility is to support students in their struggles with matters of mental health, through careful considerations on ways to make learning accessible (Cohen & Mannarino, 2011). For Robert and Emily, their responsibility to make learning, and the learning experience something that can be available for their students is demonstrated through their efforts to best accommodate their students.

4.1.3 Teachers provide practical tools and strategies for mental health to support all students

Many of the strategies participants infuse in their classrooms are good for all students, but necessary for some. Emily spoke for all participants in relation to providing tools and lessons that help support students with trauma or loss, but also are highly beneficial for all students: “It’s not just for the struggling students!” Both participants mentioned using practices that benefit all their students, not just a few, pointing at lessons that provide meaningful rich content and skills useful for anyone at some point in their lives.

Robert stated that it was necessary to provide a set of coping skills for mental health for all students; he lets his students retreat to an alternate setting when they feel overwhelmed. Robert provided some examples on how this works in his class,
Some students have the ability to retreat to the therapy rooms which are supervised, but all students have the right to take a break at any point and retreat to our ‘cozy corner’ or go for a walk down the hall.

Robert explained that although only some students have the approval to visit certain therapy rooms, he still finds ways to mimic their effect in his own classroom for all students to benefit from, which promotes an acceptance and diminishes stigma that might be tied to only one student having such opportunities.

Emily utilizes meditation and mindfulness in her classroom to teach students skills to overcome stress and overstimulation to help students learn to self-regulate. She highlighted, “it’s a tool that works magic for all my students and it doesn’t set certain students apart from the bunch.” Emily also actually teaches aspects of mental health in her class with facilitating dialogues about feelings and asks students to respond via art pieces or journal entries, calling this work “normalizing emotions and teaching empathy.”

Implementing activities such as journaling and proving coping tools to all students is something all students can take with them beyond the end of the year, such practices benefit all types of students (Doll et al., 2008). Educators are making strides in the realm of mental health of all students in teaching practical tools of understanding and coping, this effort is highly beneficial for students living with the impacts of trauma, grief and loss, but also fantastic for others.

4.2 Educators Seek Resources Through the School Community and Independent Research to Inform their Work in Supporting Students with Trauma, Grief and Loss

Participants outline a variety of resources they use in order to inform their efforts to support students with trauma, grief and loss, and where they find them. Emily and Robert both
use a variety of resources to find the best possible strategies and ways to implement them. In these findings lies value in the ability to highlight ways in which educators can locate information and tools for their own practice in this work.

Emily and Robert both address the ways they rely on the rich resources their schools, peers, community have to offer to inform their practices in supporting students with trauma, grief and loss. However, participants also noted that they spend a significant amount of time seeking additional information outside of the school community.

4.2.1 Teachers find supports within their school, peers and community in order to inform their approaches in aiding students with trauma, grief and loss

Both participants found that their school community and the school board was one way to access supports, resources and training in relation to aiding students with trauma, grief and loss.

Emily utilizes the Supporting Minds (2013) document; “although it is relatively new and doesn’t specify these explicit issues in mental health, it does do a good job of bringing mental health strategies forwards,” she explained.

Robert also acknowledged the use of Supporting Minds (2013), but hinted towards more practical integration of resources within Peel District School Board: “PDSB in the last few years has made a strong push for the awareness of mental health through initiatives such as mental health week and addition of professional resources and PD courses.” Robert credited his development in this practice from the suicide intervention and anxiety professional development courses through Peel District School Board.

Additionally, both participants acknowledged the importance of connecting with peers in the school and making use of the In School Review Committee (ISRC); Robert explained that “the ISRC got me started on trying to think of next steps.”
As being members of schools who support students and teachers in the realm of mental health through efforts of communication and development, these educators have a higher chance of effectively supporting students (Kalish-Weiss, 1989). As a priority of the Government of Canada and the Ministry of Education, the mental wellbeing of students has been brought forth in schools, however, some educators claim that this is not enough.

4.2.2 Educators search for strategies to support students in their mental health due to a lack of specific practical resources

Although in-school and district community resources are helpful, teachers still feel the need to look for additional resources to inform their practice in supporting students with trauma, grief or loss.

Robert said he often looks at online resources and forums to develop his knowledge and inspire some strategies or tools to help his students because “what we have isn’t enough.”

Emily also pointed to utilizing Internet resources to help her in this venture. She was willing to provide some examples: “I turn to the internet, CAMH [Center for Addiction and Mental Health] online resources, the National Traumatic Stress Network toolkits.” In her personal research, she also finds motivation to take on some workshops for expressive arts and mindfulness that she feels like she would not have been offered if she had not come across them on her own.

In Greece, Merimna, a non-profit organization for the care of children and families facing illness and death partner with schools to offer counseling and programs for educators (Papadatou et al., 2002), this is something our students could also benefit from. But as Lucas (2007) suggests, teachers are often expected to develop their own competency on whatever is presented
in their class. The participants found that although our schools and the Ministry of Education are making efforts to develop in the realm of mental health, it is not quite enough.

4.3 Educators Face Obstacles when Supporting Students with Trauma, Grief and Loss in Relation to a Lack of Training, Conflicting Beliefs and Insufficient Resources

Both participants recognized a variety of obstacles when working towards supporting students coping with trauma, grief and loss, and responded to these obstacles in different ways. These obstacles are important to review because it supports existing research on the many challenges educators face when attempting to support students in their mental health but narrows in specifically on the issues of trauma, grief and loss.

Participants highlighted similar themes, which emerged in literature on the topic, such as a lack of confidence due to insufficient training and preparation to be able to efficiently help students struggling with the aftermath of traumas, grief and loss. Another emerging commonality is the barrier of and beliefs that connect to the topic and the role of an educator in the larger picture. Finally, participants acknowledged the impact the role plays on their own wellbeing through sentiments of feeling overworked and unsupported. Regardless of these obstacles, participants emphasized the importance of their work in aiding students with specific mental health issues.

4.3.1 Teachers acknowledge a lack of training and development in the area of mental health, which lead to a sense of being unprepared

Many of the obstacles outlined by both participants related to being faced with the need to support a student, and feeling as though they were unprepared to do so. They connected this feeling to a lack of focus devoted to mental health in pre-service training and a lack of practical resources.
Emily explained how when she looks back at the first time she received a student with an Ontario Student Record “containing serious content”; she instantly thought that she was not trained to support these extensive needs. Emily looked back to her pre-service training and reflected, “we never learned about supporting [mental health], it was a couple of minutes spent on how to fix it in regard to classroom management.”

Robert had a similar experience with feelings of being ill-equipped to face these matters in practice, he explained that supporting mental health was not covered or discussed in any practical ways, he claimed, “it was not a topic that was on my radar until it presented itself to me.” From this lack of training and experience, my participants felt worried and confused about what they should do to support issues such as trauma, grief and loss in students.

Both participants commented on the efforts of the Ministry to highlight the importance of mental health presently, but feel as though there ought to be more practical supports in place for educators to turn to in specific training, developments and strategies in relation to trauma. Most educators are not primed with information and strategies on how to manage students with traumatic histories (Sitler, 2009). It is upon having a student with these exceptional needs that educators are often developing the skills to support instead of relying on previous knowledge and training, as Robert and Emily suggested.

4.3.2 Teachers were challenged with conflicting opinions regarding student readiness and teacher role in discussion of mental health issues

Emily and Robert both touched on the topic of how there are issues in regard the views concerning the teacher and student role. This issue concerns whether it is the place for educators to support students in their mental health, and whether students were ready to talk about issues of mental health.
Robert felt as though it was unquestionably the role of a teacher to be able to work alongside peers in a team effort to do what is best for the student. “From understanding and trying your best to be supportive and connecting with other educators and professionals for their insight and observations is a part of my responsibility to set my students up for success,” Robert noted.

Emily had a similar viewpoint. She made her case by providing an analogy connecting supporting mental health to physical health. She stated:

If a student had broken an arm I would care, right? Sure, I know it’s not my job to put the cast on, but if I realize it’s broken, I’m going to tell someone. I’m also going to figure out the best way for the student to be comfortable with that cast so he can be able to still feel like he is who he is, like he belongs and he is safe with us, and that he is able to learn. Emily’s analogy served to argue how supporting a student with trauma, grief or loss in the class is something that is required of teachers, although she noted that not all people feel the same way; some people believe that this is beyond the scope of a teacher.

In addition to this one critique, Emily pointed to the obstacle of people believing that students may not be ready to learn about difficult content, or wish to ignore any issues. Emily noted that it is important to be careful regarding content and consider student readiness, but believes that with careful consideration educators can approach these topics with students, and it needs to be done because like the broken arm, it might occur to any student.

Lowe (2009) agrees, claiming that educators need not to be viewed as professionals attempting to psychoanalyze student, but that they are qualified individuals who have the ability to discuss students’ feelings and problems which positively impacts students’ lives. Emily and Robert made the point to show that their involvement in the mental health of their students is
crucial in maintaining their responsibility to support students in their learning and wellbeing and that for this to be effective, students should play a role.

4.3.3 Teachers highlight issues from a lack of support and resources resulting in feelings of being overwhelmed

The previously mentioned obstacles in addition to several others come together to create a sense of feeling overwhelmed and overworked in educators working to support trauma, grief and loss. Both Robert and Emily mentioned the strain in attempting to do their own research and implementing trial and error strategies to find the best ways to support various students on top of the other demands teaching entails leaves them feeling drained. “With a lack of resources specific to the needs of these students, I find myself scouring for tools that don’t always work, sometimes something you might imagine would be practical actually leads to additional behavior issues. It’s quite disheartening,” Robert shared.

For Emily, it is also a demanding task physically and emotionally. She finds that “the hunt to find what works” takes a lot of legwork on her part, although she quickly claimed it is no burden to do this work, that it is the content of the student lives that shock and overwhelm her in some cases. Additionally, Emily explained that there is a pressure she feels in thinking about how not every teacher may work this hard to support the student in need:

They won’t always have teachers who will lie on the floor with them to help them breathe when they are over-stimulated. I want to do my part in equipping these kids with as much as possible so they can have a set of strategies and will be able to advocate for themselves.
By considering herself as someone who is devoted to this work, she fuels a fire that leads to some stress and additional pressure in addition to the emotional stress relating to the content of the traumas of students.

In working with and assisting students with experiences of trauma, grief and loss, educators can be affected with burnout, traumatization, or secondary trauma; symptoms appear as fatigue, sleeplessness, decreased morale, depersonalization and emotional exhaustion which all affect the way a teacher will perform their job (Lucas, 2007). The obstacles that present themselves in supporting students with these traumatic experiences can potentially snowball into sentiments of exhaustion and stress which both participants acknowledged is something that can be a reality of the job.

4.4 Teachers Build Competence and Commitment in Supporting Student Mental Health Linked to Personal Experiences, the School Climate and Student Needs

Both participants spoke to the ways in which they gained their drive and expertise in working to support students with experience of trauma, grief and loss. To know what contributes to the confidence and competence of these participants, what works to inform what can be done to overcome the challenge of reported teacher uncertainty and comfort levels in supporting trauma, grief and loss of students. By providing the stories and opinions of the participants, others may be informed of ways to overcome this particular obstacle and others.

Specifically, participants spoke to their personal experiences, whether that be a connection to struggles with mental health, or a complete lack of such a history, and how these impact the way they see their roles as educators. Robert and Emily also make the most out of existing school climate and adapt it to suit their own approaches on a micro level. Participants
also considered the needs of students, and the potential impact they can have on the lives of these students.

4.4.1 Educators’ prior personal experiences or lack of experiences in issues of trauma, grief and loss build a sense of passion and drive to support students

Emily and Robert have attributed their devotion and drive to their own personal experiences. Robert shared that his own personal life experiences helped keep this form of support a priority for his teaching; “having had my own history with trauma and grief in childhood gives me an understanding and empathy.”

On the other hand, Emily has “lived a pretty sheltered life, oblivious of the possibility of other children living with such heavy experiences.” Emily claimed that her privilege and lack of experience made her exceedingly motivated to educate herself, connect with students and do all that she can to support when she came to the realization that her students could have these struggles.

Streklova and Hoot (2008) claim that the privileged middle class that a majority of teachers are from, will not be able to support intense needs of students from trauma. Emily makes a conscious effort to support her students despite her realization of her privilege, but can see that this might prevent her in supporting all the needs of her students in need. Robert seemed to distinguish his past as something that informs his devotion, but Emily who doesn’t share this type of experience still felt that her lack of experience is a motivating factor. The different pasts of the participants appear not to have affected their motivations in support, but they present themselves as different perspectives working towards a common goal.
4.4.2 By working with the school, educators are able to build their competence in creating effective supports for students with trauma, grief and loss

Participants found that their schools have adapted to support students and this is something that motivates and informs their efforts.

Emily spoke to the brilliant integration of mindfulness and inclusivity that her school has incorporated that she began to use during actual class time. She demonstrates this in breathing and relaxation methods with her students, claiming, “the students really respond to our mindful practices; it’s something that was presented in an assembly for the entire school but now I take it further in my class and see which practices work best for them.”

For Robert, the school really focuses on the need for a team approach and continual check-ins regarding students. “With all of the teachers that will interact with one of these students with these specific needs, we really work together to communicate what practices are working and what practices aren’t,” he explained. “I take that model further by insuring I have regular communication at home or with other professionals that might be involved in the case.”

Feuerverger (2011) argues that in cases of students with trauma, it is essential for teachers to rethink what it means to teach, that educators ought to consider how lived experiences in the classroom and effective routines will be what helps these students. Through communication and incorporation of self-regulation skills, both participants utilize their schools’ resources and models, and extend them to be able to uncover what works best for their students in need.
4.4.3 Educators are most inspired and driven by their desire to make a difference in the lives of students who have been faced with issues stemming from experiences of trauma, grief and loss

As previously mentioned, the connection with students with trauma, grief and loss is a key factor in teachers’ strategies. For Emily and Robert this relationship goes beyond and creates a motivation to want to make a difference in the lives of students with trauma, grief and loss.

Robert spoke to his philosophy regarding the impact a good teacher can have on a struggling child. He believes that schools should work towards insuring that there is a positive climate for students, and teachers ought to play an active role in guiding, supporting and doing whatever a child needs to thrive. Robert addressed this by saying:

School is a space for children to enter and have the opportunity to be safe, predicable and a stepping-stone for success. Not all students have stability in their home lives, and I want to ensure I can provide that feeling in my students who desperately need that support

Emily found similar passion from wanting to make a difference in students’ lives. She said:

There’s no way to know that the teacher they have next year will be as devoted to providing practical skills and strategies to support these issues. Personally, I see this as a key part of my job, so I’m more than willing to put in the time to make a difference. I want to give them these tools so they can go on to use them when they need it at any point in their lives.

Emily realizes the responsibility and opportunity she has as an educator and chooses to step in and do all she can to facilitate growth and learning for these students.
When an educator is prepared to face the challenges in supporting students with mental health needs by developing a pedagogy of awareness, teachers reframe their understanding of teaching and help troubled students reinvest in their learning and thrive (Sitler, 2009). Both participants turn to their devotion to their students to reframe their perception of what their responsibilities are as an educator of young children. With that perception, they have developed a passion and devotion for supporting students with trauma, grief and loss.

4.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, this study found that teachers use several strategies and resources such as connecting with students and families, accommodations, and utilizing universally beneficial practices. These techniques, strategies and resources are used to support students with trauma, grief and loss despite certain obstacles. They work through obstacles such as lack of training, conflicting attitudes, and lack of resources through their passion for supporting students. This passion comes from their prior life experiences, use of school climate, and desire to make a meaningful impact on the lives of students.

These findings make a meaningful contribution to the current literature by concentrating on how educators focus on supporting specifically elementary students with trauma, grief or loss, and offer practical tools, strategies and resources educators can make use of in their own classroom.

Next, in Chapter 5, I demonstrate the implications of how educators are working to support students with trauma, grief and loss. I will also give recommendations for the Ministry to provide more funding and resources to be supplied to schools to provide specific on-going support and professional development. Then I shall state potential areas of additional research on how whole schools can support student mental health.
Chapter 5: Implications

5.0 Introduction to the Chapter

In this chapter I discuss the implications of this research. First, I will present an overview of key findings on supporting students with trauma, grief and loss, and highlight their significance. Next, I will discuss the implications of my research, both in the broader educational research community, and then the implications for myself as a teacher-researcher. I will continue by making recommendations for the educational community and stakeholders who are associated to this research with these implications in mind. Then, I will establish areas for further research that needs to be considered. Finally, I conclude with a summary of my findings and comments.

5.1 Overview of Key Findings and Their Significance

The findings of this study connect to much of the literature in the area, I have sorted these findings into four major themes to answer the research question: How is a small sample of elementary educators supporting children dealing with trauma, grief and loss? In this section, I outline these findings and their significance.

As discussed in the previous chapter, educators are utilizing a range of approaches when supporting students with trauma, grief and loss. Both the one-on-one relationship with the student, and the relationships in the support “team” provide trust, knowledge and understanding. Teachers are providing a variety of accommodations such as chunking assignments, additional time, positive reinforcement, and others in their academic supports of students with experiences of trauma, grief and loss. In addition to these supports, educators are presenting practical tools and skills for all students through classroom activities and lessons. Research has suggested similar practices such as journaling, visual arts and academic accommodations (Doll et al., 2008; Edgar-Bailey & Kress, 2010; Feuerverger, 2011; Haine et al., 2008), in addition to a wide variety
of possible approaches in supporting student trauma, grief and loss. This finding suggests that the optimal method to find an approach that works best for a student is through developing relationships to educate and inform teacher choices. Additionally, this finding highlights the practical integration of skills and strategies to support mental health throughout the entire classroom.

In their efforts to support their students, educators are seeking resources to inform their practices. Emily and Robert spoke to supports they found within their schools, communities, and amongst their peers such as the ISRC, lesson plans from other educators, and the Supporting Minds document. However, educators spoke to insufficient practical resources specific to the issue of trauma, grief and loss available to them in schools. Thus, participants spend a lot of time searching for strategies on their own.

Literature on teacher resources for the classroom in supporting student trauma, grief and loss are minimal. Much of the literature in the area focuses on Childhood Traumatic Grief and support for mental health professionals (Cohen & Mannarino, 2011; Rambo 1996), or simplistic class resources such creating a classroom community (Moore & Varela, 2009; Rose, 1998; Smith-D’Arezzo & Thompson, 2006).

Relating to the need to search for additional information, participants noted several obstacles in their efforts to support trauma, grief and loss. Upon reflecting on their training and professional development, Emily and Robert said there was insufficient training and development to prepare them to support these students effectively, it was only upon being face-to-face with a student of trauma that they sought information. The participants mentioned a challenging conflict amongst outsiders who question student readiness and teacher role in the discussion of sensitive mental health issues. Participants denounce their critics claiming that it is
in fact their duty to bring these issues forward to positively impact their students in the long run. Although Emily and Robert were quick to say that this work was not a burden, they did acknowledge feeling overwhelmed in their efforts of trial and error, and general strain.

Many resources echo the lack of training and qualification that educators have in relation to mental health (Holland & Rowling, 2000; Reid & Dixon 1999; Sitler, 2009; Papadatou et al., 2002) but these findings suggest that these obstacles are something that was overcome by these specific educators, meaning that there are simple steps educators can take to overpower these challenges. Additionally, in relation to obstacles in burnout from this type of work is supported by research by Lucas (2007), however, there is a need for adjustment in the assumption that this burnout will be so intense that it strongly affects teacher performance frequently.

Finally, Emily and Robert credited their built competence and commitment in supporting student mental health to various sources. Both participants credited their experiences of trauma, grief or loss, or lack thereof, as a passion that fueled their efforts to try to set their students up for success. Participants credit some of their competence to making use of their school initiatives of climates to connect to their methods of support. These efforts include utilizing mindfulness initiatives in the classroom, and having regular dialogues and check-ins with peers. What both participants credit their drive and competence in support is the desire to make a difference in the lives of students who have been faced with issues stemming from experiences of trauma, grief and loss.

The literature in this area suggests that educators may be incapable to truly understanding how to develop competence in the areas of trauma due to the position of power and probable chances of privilege due to their profession (Steklova & Hoot, 2008). This finding is significant as it challenges this assumption, showing that even if educators do not share similar struggles,
they can still develop a passion and desire to help through their connection to their students and the utilization of resources around them.

5.2 Implications

In this section, I outline the implications of my research. I begin with a discussion on the broad implications of the educational community, focusing on what information they should know. I continue the discussion of implications of my research for myself, as a teacher and researcher, to inform my practice and development.

5.2.1 Broad: the educational research community

My research implies tools, strategies, and resources that can be utilized by various individuals in relation to supporting students with the mental health consequences of trauma, grief, and loss through the accounts of my participants and a review of the literature.

First, this research speaks to a need to utilize a wide range of approaches in order to support students with experiences of trauma, grief, and loss. However, there is a lack of resources for educators to rely on to inform their efforts (Sitler, 2009). These findings present a clear need for more specific and applicable resources for Ontario educators that ought to be developed by the Ministry. Currently, educators are turning to each other, and search for sources outside of the education community to find effective methods to support and accommodate students with trauma, loss and grief.

The importance of connecting with students with experiences of trauma, grief and loss emerged as a key finding. As a key strategy for support, this implies that a valuable resource is our students. One obstacle that is presented in this research is the conflicting beliefs regarding student readiness for support and discussion, and teacher preparation and qualification in areas of trauma, grief and loss. This debate overshadows the more important question of how to prepare
teachers with the tools to support and educate students about mental health issues which ought to be considered by administrators and Faculties of Education. Until there are more developments in teacher training and resources, collaborating and experimenting through connections with students is something that participants and research by Sochet et al. (2006), suggest is recommended.

The research also implies the benefits of working collaboratively with students, their parents/guardians, other educators, and other professionals in the lives of the students. Implementing a holistic “team” approach of support proves to be something that benefits the students, informs the efforts of and opens dialogue for the other members devoted to supporting those students (Kalish-Weiss, 1989). Implementing such an approach proves to inform educators where their training may have failed them, and provides a greater sense of ease in an area that can be high-stress or uneasy for some educators.

5.2.2 Narrow: professional identity and practice

I believe that this research gives meaning to my role as an emerging teacher-researcher through informing my own practice in the context of the Ontario classroom, where an increase of students with experiences tied to mental health are emerging. I also see the value this research has in the education community where research takes place for the sake of reflection and evolution of our educational practices. This study has given me knowledge about the value in considering research and turning to other peers as a means of a significant network of ideas and information.

Additionally, my findings have informed my understanding of how I can work to support students with experiences of trauma, grief and loss. After studying the experiences of my participants, and the available literature I have a greater sense and comfort in being able to build
strong relationships with my students and other people in the lives of my students in order to support their mental health.

I understand that another approach for supporting my students is providing accommodations for ease and inclusion. By utilizing my relationships with my students and the community, I will implement accommodations that are the best suited for each individual student to support their mental health and their learning. I will also provide all my students with effective tools and strategies to support mental health.

From this research, I have been prepared to turn to resources from my community, and peers to inform my efforts to support the mental health and academics of my students. With this in mind, I will become a member of the community who will offer to share my own strategies and tools with others in community to create a larger system of support and information and minimize some of the obstacles educators face in this area.

The obstacles that I have presented from this research works to inform how I will strategize my implementation of these approaches and resources. I intend to educate myself though additional qualifications and workshops in order to gain insight that was left out of teacher training. As stated, I intend to be a member of my community who is willing to talk about these issues and bring any sort of knowledge and support I can to my future schools to break down stigma, build my own competence in the area, and potentially inspire other educators to do the same.

5.3 Recommendations

The recommendations that arise out of this research focus on what teachers can do to support students with experiences of trauma, grief, and loss in their classroom, and additionally, how other stakeholders and the educational community can contribute to these efforts. These
recommendations are targeted towards teachers, schools, faculties of education, and the Ontario Ministry of Education.

5.3.1 Teachers

Teachers ought to make use of available professional development and training in areas of mental health to equip them with tools, strategies, and resources to prepare them to support their students. Because of the lack of pre-service training in mental health in programs of the past and at the time of this study, it is crucial for educators to find methods to educate themselves in this area due to their significant roles in the lives of young people.

Teachers also need to make efforts to create a strong sense of community in their classrooms to make all students feel safe, included and cared for. In such a community, the research suggests that the discussion of mental health can take place. Such conversations and lessons can help prepare students, equipping them with tools and strategies they can utilize in their own lives. These discussions also work to break down stigma surrounding mental health, and hopefully will contribute to the continual progress of support and development of mental health in the community over time.

5.3.2 Schools

Schools need to develop structures in place for educators to turn to in addition to ISRCs in relation to mental health. Creating frameworks or structures for teachers to follow to facilitate the holistic “team” approach that can benefit students and other stakeholders involved.

In addition to facilitating a “team” initiative in the support of student mental health issues relating to trauma, grief and loss, schools should consider implementing existing initiatives as tools to regulate and support mental health. Initiatives such as Daily Physical Activity and
Mindfulness are practices that can be beneficial for certain students struggling with their mental health, while also providing benefits to many other students.

5.3.3 Faculties of Education

To prepare potential educators with possible strategies in supporting students, and talking to students about mental health, faculties of education ought to be considering ways to provide more in-depth special education course, or provide a separate mandatory course on mental health. Providing more time and content related to mental health can prepare teacher candidates to learn signs for identification, and a variety of strategic planning and accommodations to apply for the varying needs of their students. With recent focus on mental health from the Ministry of Education, this ought to be done in teacher education courses to reflect the rising statistics and needs of students.

5.3.4 Ontario Ministry of Education

In addition to the Supporting Minds document (2013), there is a need for more practical resources specific to supporting trauma, grief and loss in the classroom that educators may turn to. Continual and evolving funding for research on mental health in relation to student learning and development is also critical. Despite the complex and varying needs of students with experiences of trauma, grief and loss, there needs to be more specific documentation and available resources developed for Ontario educators. This is imperative with the current influx of refugee students coming into Ontario classrooms in addition to the other students who face trauma in Ontario.

There is also a need for more resources in schools for supporting the mental health of students. This includes support staff trained in special education, councillors, social workers, and
child/youth workers. The purpose of this is to create additional support in the school community to join the rounded approach of support.

5.4 Areas for Further Research

In this section I outline possible areas for additional research in supporting students with experiences of trauma, loss and grief. Due to the aforementioned limitations, and gaps that have presented from data collection there are several possibilities to extend this area of research.

There is potential to provide rich data in the exploration of students’ experiences with and without support of their mental health in the classroom context. By interviewing students who have had experiences with trauma, grief and loss, valuable tools, strategies and resources could be highlighted to inform the educational community. Another way to explore a student perspective on the area would be to observe educators implementing their strategies in the classroom and noting the responses from the students.

Another possible area for research is through extending the scale of this research. By interviewing more than two educators, mental health professionals, and members of the educational community. Increasing the scale of participants and their relation to the topic, there is the possibility to present a variety of views and experiences to richen the research literature.

Finally, researching the effectiveness of a school-wide initiatives and “team” approaches to supporting the mental health of students with experiences of trauma, grief and loss can provide concrete data about the benefits of these approaches to the education community. By looking at schools before and after they implement such approaches over time, there is potential to bring forward important data that can make change in school policies.
5.5 Concluding Comments

Educators who are devoted to supporting students with the mental health consequences of trauma, grief and loss do so through creating meaningful relationships, providing accommodations and creating a classroom climate focused on mental health. They have found resources in their community, in their schools, and in their peers, in addition to searching for resources online and through other organizations. They have gained competence through their own experiences, making the most out of their school community, and being inspired by their students. Educators with the drive and passion to support student mental health have the capability to make a significant impact in the lives of their students.

Faculties of Education, Schools, and the Ontario Ministry of Education need to make additional resources accessible for educators in order to combat feelings on uncertainty and provide practical approaches for educators to implement with their students dealing with the mental health consequences of trauma, grief and loss.

This research has provided specific context in the realm of mental health relating to trauma, grief and loss by providing examples of approaches, and sources for resources from Ontario educators. As a school leader stated in Supporting Minds (2013), “Removing the stigma around mental health and allowing for meaningful conversation about it between students and school officials could be the difference between life and death, between a successful adolescent and one who falls behind” (p. 8). As teachers are such a constant presence in the lives of their students, it is essential for them to consider ways to aid their mental wellbeing, especially in such drastic cases where the future of children is at stake.
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Appendix A: Letter of Consent for Interviews

Date:

Dear ______________________________,

My Name is Gabriella Legin 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 educators are supporting children dealing with trauma, grief and loss. I am interested in interviewing teachers who are elementary school teachers (K-8) with a minimum of five years of experience working in a classroom that have demonstrated commitment to support students through their experience of trauma, loss, and/or grief. 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 Dr. Angela MacDonald-Vemic. 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,

Gabriella Legin

Course Instructor’s Name: Dr. Angela MacDonald-Vemic
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 Gabriella Legin 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 educators are supporting children dealing with trauma, grief and loss. This interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes, and I will ask you a series of questions focused on your experience and strategies concerning the support, within the classroom context, of students with trauma. 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

1. How long have you been a teacher?

2. What grade do you currently teach and what other grades have you taught (if applicable)?

3. Can you tell me more about the school you teach in? (e.g. size, demographics, program priorities)

4. What experiences have contributed to developing your commitment and preparation to supporting students through their experience of trauma, loss, and grief?
   a. Personal experiences?
   b. Educational experiences? (e.g. university studies, certifications, training, teachers college, additional qualifications, professional development)
      i. Have you had any kind of training or preparation to be equipped to support students with trauma prior to becoming a teacher?
c. Professional experiences?

5. When you entered the teaching profession did you feel prepared to support students with trauma or grief?

**Teacher Perspectives/Beliefs**

6. What role do you believe schools and teachers should play in supporting students’ mental health and why?

7. In your view, how well do schools typically do in meeting students’ mental health needs? What evidence of this have you seen?

8. More specifically, in your view, what is the role of teachers in supporting students through their experience of trauma, grief, and loss and why?

9. From your perspective, what are some of the primary needs of students who have experienced trauma or loss?

10. How do you think teachers can most effectively support students with trauma, grief and loss?

11. In your view, how well do schools typically do in meeting these needs? What evidence of this have you seen?

12. What sparked your devotion to committing to support students with trauma in the classroom?

**Teacher Practices**

13. Is the topic of mental health something that you raise with your students in our formal teaching practice?

   a. If yes, what curriculum do you connect this to?

   b. What aspects of this topic do you teach and why?
c. Can you provide me with one or two examples of how you have taught students about mental health?
   i. What were your learning goals?
   ii. What opportunities for learning did you create?
   iii. How did your students respond? What outcomes did you observe from them?
   iv. How, if at all, was the lesson assessed? What did you assess?

14. Have you taught students (whole class) about trauma, death and the experience of loss?
   a. If yes, what were your learning goals, how did you meet them, and how did students respond?
   b. What resources did you use to facilitate these lessons?
   c. How did you approach this topic with students?
   d. What questions did they have?

15. What kinds of skills or strategies do you hope to teach these students? How are they beneficial?

16. What kinds of considerations do you make before talking with students about death and loss?

17. Now, can you tell me how you have supported specific students through their experience of trauma, death, and/or loss?
   a. Who were you students, and what had they experienced?
   b. How were you made aware of their experience?
   c. What range of supports did you offer these students and why?
   d. How did these students respond to the support you offered?
e. Where / how did you learn to enact these range of supports?

f. What specific resources aided you in supporting these students? (e.g. books, videos, songs, websites, collaborating with counsellors, communicating with families)

**Supports and Challenges**

18. What kinds of resources and support inform your efforts to support students through their experience of trauma and/or grief and loss?

19. What range of challenges do you experience when supporting students who have experienced trauma and/or grief and loss?
   
   a. How do you respond to these challenges?

20. Can you tell me the most challenging experience you faced in supporting a student who had experienced trauma, grief or loss?
   
   a. How did you handle it?

21. In what ways could the education system further support you in meeting the challenges you face in this work, and further support students through this experience?

**Next Steps**

22. What are some topics or skills that you would like to learn more about to help you support students’ mental health in schools?

23. What advice do you have for new teachers to help them learn how to support students who have experienced trauma, grief and loss in the classroom?

24. Is there anything else you would like to add?