BEREAVEMENT IN THE CLASSROOM:
HOW TEACHERS RESPOND
TO
GRIEF AT SCHOOL

A thesis presented
by
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to
The School of Education

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education

in the field of
Education

College of Professional Studies
Northeastern University
Boston, Massachusetts
February 2013
Abstract

Whether stemming from a tragic event in the life of a child such as the loss of a parent, or a community-devastating occurrence such as a natural disaster, it is likely that in the course of every school year teachers will encounter some facet of bereavement in school. Despite the frequency of such events and the seemingly wide availability of training resources, there are questions about the degree to which teachers feel trained or prepared to respond in these situations (National Commission for Children and Disasters Interim Report, 2009). Several possible causes explain the gap between theory and practice, such as a lack of understanding of the needs of bereaved students or teachers’ personal anxiety about raising these issues in the classroom (Atkinson, 1980; Cullinan, 1990; Hare & Cunningham, 1988; Lowton & Higginson, 2003; Pratt, Hare & Wright, 1985; Reid & Dixon, 1999), but little is known about the factors that teachers consider when determining the actions that they will or will not take to address the needs of grieving children. The purpose of this qualitative study was to utilize teachers’ experiences and voices to better understand the internal or external barriers that interfere with their sense of efficacy when implementing best classroom practices in response to bereavement-related situations at school.

This study focused on the perspectives of 37 elementary, middle, and high school teachers from seven suburban school districts and an educational collaborative in western Massachusetts. Data collection included:

- A Participant Profile Survey to provide descriptive statistics including prior levels of training and experience with the topic of grief and loss in the classroom;
- A 45-minute researcher-facilitated training developed by the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement;
- Seven focus groups, segmented by grade level, discussing participants’ own experiences in the context of information and best-practice strategies as presented in the training module;
- Researcher’s field notes;
- A Post-Participation Survey to deepen the understanding of the connection between experience, training, and other factors that could increase efficacy and strengthen the likelihood and quality of teacher response.

These data sets were thematically coded and analyzed in order to identify the key elements that support or hinder the application of best practice in response to bereavement-related concerns in the classroom. Results confirmed the complex interaction of individual, situational, and systemic factors that shape response, but the absence of training appeared to be most relevant to the subjects of the study. In a pre- post survey comparison of 26 of the 37 participants, 65% reported a positive change in their self-assessed level of confidence after completing the training and participating in the focus group. This finding reflected a statistically significant change (W=161; p = 0.006). Respondents attributed this change to the training/focus group experience, noting the value of small group interaction and problem-solving discussions with colleagues.

Results of the study are relevant to teachers and school leaders who seek to provide more supportive learning environments for students impacted by loss, and suggest considerations that will be useful in the creation of evaluation tools for professional development on the topic, and the mechanisms that may support or inhibit the transfer of professional development and training to actual practice.

*Key Words:* pediatric bereavement, school crisis, efficacy, teacher efficacy, natural disasters, professional development, focus groups
Acknowledgements

One hallmark of scholarly research is the recognition of its limitations. While I have attempted to conscientiously note these where applicable throughout this body of work, perhaps the most glaring limitation of any doctoral project is found in its byline. My pride in placing my name on the cover of this document is surpassed only by the humbling awareness of the many individuals instrumental in its development. I ask for indulgence as I use this space to make a likely inadequate attempt to acknowledge those without whom this work could not have been started, let alone completed. I also beg forgiveness from anyone who may not be specifically mentioned here, but who has no less helped to shape the course of this five-year endeavor.

I begin with gratitude to those who have been a part of the academic facet of this pursuit. This includes the administrative staff and faculty at Northeastern University’s College of Professional Studies, and my committee members, Drs. Chris Unger, Nena Stracuzzi and Donna Scanlon. To Dr. Unger, I have appreciated your ability to focus on the small details while never losing sight of the Big Ideas. To Dr. Stracuzzi, my steadfast advisor, I confess that there were times when I was fueled only by the resolve to be worthy of the confidence that you expressed in my ability to succeed. To my external reviewer, Dr. Scanlon, my admiration for you, personally and professionally, has been a constant in my life for the past 12 years, and there are no words to describe what your presence on the committee and your generosity of time, input, intelligence, and kindness have meant to me. A large debt of gratitude is owed to Shelly Bathe-Lenn, Bill Scatolini, and the board members, volunteers, and families of Rick’s Place Center for Grieving Children, who stood as constant reminders of the importance of this work. I also thank Dr. Anne McKenzie, Dr. Russell Johnston, and the school district superintendents who facilitated the launch of this study, and the 37 teachers who joined me on an expedition into some of the most
deeply personal and emotional terrain of their professional lives. I hope that I was able to accurately capture your voices and your ideas about how to make our schools and classrooms into safer and more supportive environments for children who are impacted by grief and loss.

On a parallel thread, the notion of being a scholar-practitioner implies a continuous exchange between ones academic and professional careers. I am deeply indebted to my colleagues at HWRSD for providing me with ongoing inspiration and encouragement. In particular, I express thanks to my cheering squad: Kate Belsky, Teri Brand, Andrea Noonan and Deb Tobias; to Janet Farrell, my daily lifeline; and to Superintendents Paul Gagliarducci and Marty O’Shea and Assistant Superintendents Donna Scanlon, Tim Connor and Beth Regulbuto for giving me the place and space to learn, grow, create and contribute. It is the HWRSD vision of school safety and student support that launched me on the path to my topic through avenues that I could never have imagined. For this I also acknowledge the imprints of the dedicated staff of the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Safe and Drug Free School (Safe and Healthy Students), especially Dana Carr, Tara Hill, Loretta McDaniel, Bill Modzeleski, Phyllis Scattergood and Madeline Sullivan; SAMHSA’s Margie Weiser; MADESE’s Anne Gilligan; and Dr. Ron Slaby at EDC. Within this group of esteemed professionals I give special mention and thanks to David Schonfeld, M.D., Director of the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement and the originator of the bereavement education module for teachers that became a core instrument of my research. To all those professionally affiliated with my project, I hope that you will recognize your considerable influence, and that through my work I have done some small justice to yours.

Finally, the contributions and sacrifices made by the friends and family of a doctoral candidate are equal to those made by the student—but woefully unrecognized. There is a
lengthy list of missed events, postponed appointments, unreciprocated invitations, and unfinished business. Thank you to my wonderful neighbors and friends for your patience and understanding, cheers to the Breakfast Club, and special appreciation to Jane Vottero and my Diane Lounsbury who not only dispensed tissues and advice, but hours of peer review time.

In a category of their own, I thank my cherished family and dedicate this work to them. To my parents, Sam and Mary Sapienza, thank you for giving me a solid foundation that included the love of learning and the value of persistence. To Auntie Frieda Lang, Ed.D., thanks for forging the path, and to my sister, Dr. Agnes Bain, thanks for paving the way. To my four children, thank you for your frequent and tangible assistance, and for being my greatest role models. Dr. Jason, thanks for your statistical wizardry, your technical guidance, and for teaching me that knowledge is a quest, and that learning is the ladder. Jeff, thanks for your programming brilliance, your thorough and thoughtful reviews, and for always urging me to be a little bold, to be honest with myself, and to see opportunities instead of obstacles. Jared, in addition to your chart magic and often-heroic technical assistance, thanks for encouraging me to be creative and spontaneous, and reminding me that play can be work, and that work should always be joyful. Jill, thanks for bringing me your daily dose of optimism (along with neck massages at the computer) and for being my personal symbol that everything is possible, and that every moment must be cherished as a gift. To my daughter-in-law, Elizabeth Exton, and my grandson Sam, thanks for expanding my horizon of joys and possibilities. Saving the best for last, I could not have arrived at this point without the grace, humor and the steadfast love and support of my husband and true companion, Jay. I strive each day to imitate your work ethic and your personal integrity. I know that we share the satisfaction of this culminating result, but please know that we share the credit, too. "Now we are so happy, we do the dance of joy!" (Bartokomous, 1986).
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Chapter I: Introduction

Problem Statement

The experience of grief after a significant loss will disrupt the lives of many children and impact many school environments every year, yet teachers frequently feel unprepared to recognize and respond to the needs of grieving children in their classrooms (Atkinson, 1980; Cullinan, 1990; Hare & Cunningham, 1988; Lowton & Higginson, 2003; Pratt, Hare, & Wright, 1985; Reid & Dixon, 1999). Estimates vary, but suggest that up to five percent of American schoolchildren may experience the death of a parent before high school graduation (Haine, Ayers, Sandler & Wolchik, 2008; National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement, 2010; Reid & Dixon, 1999; Tamborini, Cupito & Shoffner, 2011). Other critical incidents can occur that have a wider scale impact on a school community, ranging from the sudden death of a classmate to the devastation of a natural or man-made disaster.

Despite the strong likelihood that in the course of every school year, teachers in any classroom will encounter children who are impacted by grief and loss, there is evidence to suggest gaps in teacher training, preparation, and motivation to respond to these situations in the school environment (National Commission for Children and Disasters Interim Report, 2009). Some teachers may not feel that their training or experience has sufficiently prepared them to approach and appropriately support students who are struggling with grief (Reid & Dixon, 1999).

These concerns are relevant because studies also suggest that teacher avoidance can inhibit the healthy resolution of the grieving process (Papadatou, Metallinous, Hatzichristou, & Pavlidi, 2002). Left without the opportunity to process their grief in a safe and supportive classroom environment, students may develop a variety of academic, social, and emotional complications that can manifest as more complex mental health issues in childhood and throughout their lifespan (Cullinan, 1990). When tragedies of a larger scope occur, such as in
the case of natural disasters or large-scale events, unresolved grief can impede the process of recovery and lengthen the period of instability for the entire school community, preventing a timely return to learning (Schonfeld, Lichtenstein, Pruett, & Speese-Linehan, 2002).

With the likelihood that all teachers will encounter grieving students in the course of their careers and the uncertainty about whether an effective response will occur, both practical and scholarly work on pediatric bereavement have often included a best classroom practice context with advice or guidelines for teachers and schools (Klingman & Cohen, 2004; Milton, 2004; Newgass & Schofeld, 2000; Schonfeld et al., 2002). Little research has been done, however, to better understand the nature of best practice implementation challenges from the teachers’ vantage points. The purpose of this study was to focus on teachers’ perspectives as they consider their approaches to bereavement in the classroom. It explored the factors that teachers described as shaping their response choices when they encountered these situations in the classroom, and the conditions that they identified as either supporting or limiting their capacity to intervene and assist grieving children.

**Significance of the Problem**

Grief and loss are inevitable experiences in the course of childhood, all too frequently as a result of tragic events such as the death of a parent or other person of close significance in the life of a child. Based on data compiled from the United States Social Security Administration, Haine, et al. (2008) reported that the death of a parent impacts approximately 3.5% of American children under 18; and Tamborini, Cupito, and Shoffner (2011) noted that in 2004, 1.2 million children received Social Security death benefits. Some estimates indicate that as many as five percent of American schoolchildren will experience parental bereavement before high school graduation (National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement, 2010; Reid & Dixon, 1999).
These numbers do not consider the many other potentially significant losses that can occur such as the deaths of grandparents, siblings, teachers, pets, or other significant relationships in a child’s family, community, or social network (Milton, 2004); nor does it include the similar issues presented by events that are perceived by a child as traumatic such as divorce (Marwit & Carusa, 1998) or violence (Saltzman, Pynoos, Layne, Steinberg, & Aisenberg, 2001); nor the broader consequences of natural disasters or other critical incidents that have simultaneous impacts on several children or an entire community (Felix et al., 2010; Prinstein, LaGreca, Vernberg, & Silverman, 1996). Improving teachers’ capacities to recognize and support the needs of bereaved children in the school setting is a relevant topic for research, both because of the large number of children affected and the difficulties that they can encounter when grief becomes complicated. Maladaptive behaviors that might be observed and misunderstood in the classroom can include anger, withdrawal, inattention, impulsivity, disorganization, defiance, and other manifestations that can interfere with academic and social functioning in school and manifest as mental health concerns later in life (Cullinan, 1990; Kirwin & Hamrin, 2005; Schoen, Burgoyne, & Schoen, 2004). In most vulnerable times, children rely on the adults in their lives for stability and protection, but in the case of bereavement, the typical systems of familial support may be unavailable, having been disrupted by the same event (Dopp & Cain, 2012; Kirwin & Hamrin, 2005). When the circle of impact is more regionally or nationally diffused, such as in the aftermath of a natural or man-made disaster, the infrastructure of support can be compromised on a much larger scale. As the constant in the lives of children, especially during a crisis, schools become a prominent symbol of emotional recovery. It is frequently the teacher who interacts with the child on a daily basis with whom the grieving child may feel comfortable enough to process the impact of the loss (Reid & Dixon, 1999).
For these reasons, it is essential to provide school-based support for grieving children, but the equally relevant side of the equation is the level to which teachers are equipped for such a task. Research suggests that many teachers are not. Several explanations may apply, including personal and cultural barriers that inhibit many teachers from feeling comfortable about discussing issues related to bereavement with students who have experienced tragic loss; fear of increasing student distress (Milton, 2004); and feeling ill-prepared or untrained to manage the ranges of emotion that children might express (Atkinson, 1980; Cullinan, 1990; Hare & Cunningham, 1988; Pratt, Hare, & Wright, 1985; Reid & Dixon, 1999). In the domain of crisis management, it has been demonstrated that responders cannot effectively execute their jobs if they perceive that their training has been inadequate (Perry, 2004).

The issue is significant enough to have drawn national attention. Assessing lessons learned in the aftermath of tragedies such as the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 or the devastation caused by Hurricanes Rita and Katrina, the National Commission on Children and Disasters (2010) noted that most schools are not equipped to address the needs of children in crisis. The Commission’s recommendations for action reinforced the need to increase teachers’ capacities for understanding and responding to the needs of grieving children (National Commission on Children and Disasters, 2010). Because of the frequency of loss and bereavement in the childhood experience and the possible consequences of unresolved grief on social, emotional and academic functioning, classroom teachers need knowledge to recognize manifestations of grief, and strategies to confidently approach and assist bereaved students; and educational leaders need to understand how to increase the likelihood that this knowledge will be applied when a critical incident occurs. Further investigation is needed to determine how this can be most effectively achieved.
**Intellectual and Practical Goals**

**Intellectual goals.** As described by Maxwell (2005), intellectual goals are motivated by a desire for insight and understanding. The intellectual goals for this study were to understand the factors that influence teachers’ reactions to grief in the classroom and to explore teachers’ perspectives when considering their course of action in response to a grieving child. These goals were based on both the researcher’s field observations and a review of studies that explored teachers’ experiences and approaches to grieving children. Analysis of these interactions reflected the complex and interdependent dynamics of the child’s situation and/or the circumstances of the loss, the teacher’s background (knowledge, attitudes and level of comfort with the topic of death), and characteristics of the school environment. Exploring teachers’ perceptions along these dimensions also became relevant to achieving the study’s practical goals.

**Practical goals.** The study’s practical goals centered around identifying possible keys to strengthening teachers’ sense of efficacy in response to the challenges presented by grieving children in the classroom. By using teachers’ experiences and voice, this study created a clearer understanding of the internal and external barriers that might interfere with the implementation of training and best classroom practices in response to the needs of grieving children. This research also probed into the core of self-efficacy by identifying epistemic barriers, personal characteristics, and systemic attributes that compromise teachers’ perceived ability, and subsequent willingness, to supportively engage with students who are impacted by grief. This work contributes to future evaluation of training materials on the topic of grief in the classroom so that professional development can be better matched to the practical concerns of those who will be implementing best practices. In this regard, the study not only adds
insight to the problem of practice, but to the broader andragogic challenges of applied professional development in public schools.

**Document Organization and Content**

This thesis is presented in five chapters. Chapter I presents the blueprint for the study through the above introduction to the problem of practice, the intellectual and practical goals, and an exploration of the study’s theoretical framework of self-efficacy. Chapter II reviews the literature to identify what is currently understood about the needs of grieving children, the importance of teacher intervention on their behalf, and the mechanisms through which these interventions take place in the school setting. Identified gaps in the existing bodies of work affirm the goals and establish the merits of this additional research. Chapter III presents the study’s methodology, detailing the path that this research and its technical attributes have taken in the selection of subjects, site, and qualitative approaches including focus group design, data gathering, coding, and thematic analysis. Also described in the third chapter are provisions that were employed to strengthen validity and credibility, including adherence to strict ethical research standards and protection of study participants from potential harm. Chapter IV presents the findings of the study. Finally, Chapter V discusses these findings, draws conclusions about their relevance to the research questions, and projects the potential significance of contributions that the study will make in the ways that educators and educational leaders will approach professional development and best practices to create safe and secure classroom environments in which the needs of grieving children are addressed with competence and confidence. Appendices include all relevant supporting documentation that was used in the study or referenced within the report of findings.
Theoretical Framework

Maxwell (2005) described theory as providing a framework for further study and a way in which new learning can be conceptually organized. As such, efficacy theory offered a versatile observation point for this research, looking at teachers’ responses to grieving children when they do not have a sense of confidence in their ability to be effective, and considering ways that training might effectively increase their belief of success and willingness to persist in these types of challenging situations.

Efficacy theory. Bandura and Adams (1977) expressed personal efficacy as a social learning construct, derived from the individual’s experience of personal mastery, vicarious observation, self-evaluation of skill, and self-assessment of personal anxiety or stress levels. In academic research, efficacy theory has been used as a framework for understanding teachers’ perceptions and assessments of their own effectiveness (Fives & Buehl, 2010). The theory has been applied to measure the connection between attitudes and behaviors in a variety of school specific situations, such as teacher willingness to implement prevention curricula for at-risk students (Ransford, Greenberg, Domitrovich, Small, & Jacobson, 2009); school counselors’ openness to change (Holcomb-McCoy, Gonzalez, & Johnston, 2009); and teacher response to professional development (Ross & Bruce, 2007). When applied to the examination of teachers’ responses to grief and loss, the exploration of efficacy added to the understanding of what occurs when teachers do not have confidence in their ability to be effective. An exploration of scholarly literature around the topic of perceived self-efficacy also formed the foundation for further research aimed at discovering factors that increase or diminish teachers’ estimations of their willingness to persist when encountering such uncomfortable or challenging situations.
Much of what is understood about self-efficacy has evolved from the work of Albert Bandura as a component of social learning theory. Bandura (1997) defined perceived self-efficacy as "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" (p. 3). Central to this concept is the differentiation between knowledge and actual behavior because, as Bandura (1986) noted, “people often do not behave optimally even though they know full well what to do” (p. 390). Self-efficacy is a social learning construct, derived from the individual’s experience of personal mastery, self-assessment of skill, and self-assessment of likelihood of success (Bandura, 1983).

The construct of efficacy has been experimentally manipulated in various ways in order to extract its relationship to other variables such as skill, knowledge, or motivation. Bandura's extensive work has established a basic tenet, that self-efficacy is not determined by what a person can do, but rests upon what the person believes himself or herself capable of doing (Bandura, 1983; 1986). Efficacy theory has been applied as a framework for understanding teachers’ perceptions and assessments of their own effectiveness (Fives & Buehl, 2010); and connections between attitudes and behaviors in a variety of school specific situations, such as teacher willingness to implement prevention curricula for at-risk students (Ransford et al., 2009); and response to violence prevention training (Sela-Shayovitz, 2009). While few studies have directly made the connection between teachers’ perceived self-efficacy and their responses to grieving children, some of the earliest research on teacher response to grief in the classroom has validated the application of the efficacy lens in terms of the distinction between knowledge and behavior. Comparing responses that teachers gave to hypothetical situations with the ways that they described their actual interactions with bereaved students, Atkinson (1980) found significant differences between subjects’ knowledge of what should be done and the actions that were
actually taken in the classroom. Similarly, Hare and Cunningham (1988) found that exposing professional preschool and elementary teachers to a targeted training on awareness of the needs of grieving children resulted in a significant change in their level of knowledge but did not yield significant growth in the subjects’ assessment of their level of comfort when discussing death with children. Their analysis of pre- and post-tests revealed that despite significantly higher knowledge of grief, knowledge of children’s conceptualizations of death, and awareness of resources, the likelihood of attitudinal or behavioral change could not be established (Hare & Cunningham, 1988).

While self-efficacy presents a viable platform upon which to consider the variables of teacher response to issues of grief and bereavement in the classroom, it also introduces some dilemmas that shape the course of further research. If knowledge or skills-based training is important, but not sufficient to overcome the self-doubts of teachers who are uneasy about responding to grieving children, what other elements must be considered in order to reduce the barriers to an appropriate response? Efficacy theory supports these questions, but a further investigation into the literature is needed to understand its specific relevance to the problem of practice. The next section will summarize the bodies of scholarly literature that currently exist, and appropriately situate the proposed study between the field of existing knowledge and needed research.

Chapter II: Literature Review

The review of relevant literature included 65 sources on Self-efficacy theory, pediatric bereavement, school-based crisis intervention, and teacher response to death and bereavement in the classroom. Because of the small number of research studies applied to the specific problem of practice, and evidence supporting similarities between parental bereavement and other types
of stressful events, studies addressing teacher response to students impacted by other traumatic events such as natural disasters were also included. Capturing transitions in trends of thought over the past 30 years, the greater part of the review examined materials published in peer-reviewed scholarly journals between 1980 and 2012. Three electronic journal databases were searched: Academic Premier, EBSCO, and Google Scholar. A total of 56 studies, six reports, and three books were included. Studies included in the review contained a clearly stated research design that collected either qualitative or quantitative data relevant to the topic, the selected theoretical framework, or methodological considerations. Several published reference materials were included from noted authors and sources devoted to recent developments in the fields of pediatric bereavement, school emergency management, and crisis intervention. For a thorough exploration of the role of teacher efficacy, it was essential to incorporate the seminal work of psychologist Albert Bandura who is considered to be the originator of the theory of self-efficacy and the over-arching construct of social learning theory. From the extensive catalogue of both scholarly and theoretical works available, two foundational texts, one establishing the basis for social learning theory (Bandura, 1986) and the other amplifying the specific aspect of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) were selected and woven as reference points throughout the review.

This review of the literature confirmed that some attention had already been given to certain aspects of the problem of practice, and several key themes had emerged. Because self-efficacy is located at the intersection of emotions, knowledge, skills, and actions (Bandura, 1997), there is a strong correspondence between the theoretical framework and three bodies of research that will be presented as sections of this literature review:

- the manifestations of grief in the classroom,
- the evolving conceptualizations of teachers’ roles in bereavement response and crisis management in schools, and
- the interaction of systemic factors that might promote or inhibit efficacy when teachers are confronted with grief-related situations.

The literature review will conclude with a discussion of challenges and gaps in the existing literature and their implications for further study.

**Manifestations of Grief in the Classroom**

Much has been written about pediatric bereavement, although the literature is mixed in its distinctions between grief, bereavement, and traumatic loss. Some research has looked narrowly at the issue of trauma in children, focusing on exposure to violence or sustained abuse and the resulting psychopathology that can occur (Cole et al., 2005). Other studies have adopted a more inclusive approach, noting that a range of aversive or disturbing events can yield diverse human reactions with widely varying degrees and duration of distress (Bonanno, 2004; Macy et al., Behar, Paulson, Delman, Schmid & Smith, 2004). Still other have conceptualized bereavement as the event of death, and simple or complicated grief as its cognitive, emotional, and behavioral reaction, with the risk of developing pathology related to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in a more severe response to the event (Brown & Goodman, 2005; Pynoos, Goenjian, & Steinberg, 1998). Even the simplest terminology used to describe loss-related experiences in American culture is also subject to nuance. Kirwin and Hamrin (2005) define bereavement as the “internal process of having lost a significant other” (p. 67), while grief or grieving describes the person’s response, and mourning refers to the more public manifestations (Kirwin & Hamrin, 2005). Relevant to the current exploration of teachers’ experiences in the classroom, it was valuable to consider the main strands of bereavement-related issues: (a) death of a significant person in the
child’s life; (b) grief-response as a result of a critical or traumatic event; (c) grief and loss in a developmental context; and (d) a more holistic and inclusive view of pediatric bereavement that was best suited to the proposed study.

**Death of a significant person.** As previously noted, the majority of school-age children will be impacted by the death of someone familiar or close to them. Estimates vary on the frequency of parental bereavement among American schoolchildren. Based on data compiled from the United States Social Security Administration, Haine et al., (2008) estimated that the death of a parent impacts approximately 3.5% of American children under 18; and in 2004, 1.2 million children received Social Security death benefits (Tamborini, Cupito & Shoffner, 2011). This number does not include the deaths of grandparents, siblings, caregivers, teachers, or other significant individuals in a child’s family, community, or social network; nor does it reflect the similar issues presented when lives are lost as a result of natural disasters or other critical incidents that have simultaneous impact on several children or an entire community.

**Critical incidents.** While the frequency of such death-related loss and bereavement in childhood stands as one of the strongest justifications for the study of teacher attitudes toward grieving students and the variables that might generate more efficacious response, the less common but more vivid phenomenon of national tragedies has captured the attention of researchers, educators, and even the federal government over the last fifteen years. Assessing lessons learned in the aftermath of tragedies such as the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, or the devastation caused by hurricanes Rita and Katrina, the National Commission on Children and Disasters (2009, 2010) reported that most schools are not equipped to address the needs of students who are touched by such tragic events. A timeline sorting of research topics suggests that scholarly literature has also branched out in the last decade, from an individualized view of
death in the classroom to a more community-based view of grief and loss following critical incidents that impact on a larger scale. With its focus on emotionally charged and highly volatile situations, this development in the research has reinforced the importance of teacher preparedness and response. Some critical events, such as the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, will unfold during a typical school day (Ray & Pemberton, 2010) and will require ongoing response and management by classroom teachers in their aftermath (Felix et al., 2010). A useful connection can also be made to research that has studied teachers’ willingness to engage in crisis intervention related to violence, suicide, depression and other mental health needs (Kirchner, Yoder, Kramer, Lindsey, & Thrush, 2000; Reis & Cornell, 2008; Sela-Shayovitz, 2009; Taylor & Hawkins, 1991). These are important threads to connect, recognizing that, particularly when resources in schools are scarce, teachers are more likely to be expected to provide developmentally appropriate interventions that can be effective for the wider population of students (Han & Weiss, 2005).

Grief through a developmental lens. Unresolved grief has been connected to academic, social, and emotional complications that can manifest as more complex mental health issues in childhood and throughout their lifespan (Cullinan, 1990). Children process and react to death differently at each stage of development. Haine et al. (2008) described development as a “nonmalleable factor to be considered when working with parentally bereaved children.” Coping skills and protective factors vary with developmental stages. Dopp and Cain (2012) noted that social support from peers might be more relevant to the positive adjustment of older children following the death of a parent. The likelihood of regression after a significant loss increases the importance of teachers understanding of the developmental continuum as it pertains to students who are experiencing death of a parent or close relative (Gurwitch et al., 2004).
A holistic view of grief in the school setting. Relating a diverse scope of research to the questions posed by this study, it is necessary to recognize that students may be impacted by an unlimited number of losses, and that the interplay of the child and the situation is highly individualized. Summarizing R.H. Gurwitch, (personal communication, June 18, 2010), dichotomizing classifications of bereavement, grief, and traumatic loss can obscure their more useful common elements. Because the ultimate area of interest focused on the question of what impacts teacher efficacy when responding to bereaved children in the school setting, this investigation was best served by exploring these various strands of the literature in terms of their common characteristics. Children’s grief crosses the continuum of situational precipitants including the experience of a death of a loved one, or a traumatic or catastrophic event. Similarities have also been drawn between grief and reactions to divorce (Sandler, Wolchik, Davis, Haine, & Ayers, 2003) and exposure to violence (Pynoos, Goenjian & Steinberg, 1998). As previously noted, children can experience grief as a result of many different types of losses. In addition, there are many ways in which to categorize these experiences, from normal to complicated to traumatic, along the evolving axis of a child’s developmental status (Kirwin & Hamrin, 2005). For the specific problem of practice and the goals of this research, these distinctions were helpful only to the extent that they validated the importance of improving teachers’ capacity to accurately recognize and effectively support the wide range of needs of bereaved children, and the related challenges that they face in doing so.

Evolving Role of Teachers in Death Education and Bereavement Intervention in Schools

In the literature, teachers’ response to grieving children in the classroom has been historically linked to the topic of Death Education, and the role that schools could or should have in not only assisting children who have suffered significant loss but incorporating issues related
to death and coping with loss within the standard curriculum for all children (Atkinson, 1980; Cullinan, 1990; Hare & Cunningham, 1988; Pratt, Hare & Wright, 1985; Reid & Dixon, 1999). With an underlying assumption that teachers might not have the skills or inclinations to perform the tasks necessary to address these needs, a number of studies have offered some possible explanations for these gaps. One of the more prevalent theories points to teachers’ personal or cultural anxieties and attitudes about death leading to discomfort when approaching the topic in the classroom (Cullinan, 1990; Atkinson, 1980). Other explanatory theories have been hypothesized, including feeling fearful that an inadequate or inappropriate response may increase student distress (Milton, 2004); or feeling ill prepared or untrained to manage the ranges of emotion that children might express (Reid & Dixon, 1999).

**Death anxiety.** Self-efficacy theory engages the relationship between a person’s level of anxiety and their desire to avoid exposure to the anxiety-producing situation. As defined within the model of self-efficacy, anxiety is portrayed as “an emotion of fright indexed by physiological arousal or subjective feelings of agitation” (Bandura, 1997, p. 138). Applied to the problem of practice, researchers who have examined teacher response to grieving students have sought to establish a strong connection between death anxiety and willingness to approach or inclination to avoid intervention with bereaved children (Atkinson, 1980; Cullinan, 1990; Hare & Cunningham, 1988; Pratt, Hare & Wright, 1985; Reid & Dixon, 1999).

While several studies used scales to quantify death-related anxiety as low or high, (Cullinan, 1990; Hare & Cunningham, 1988; Pratt, Hare & Wright, 1985), Atkinson (1980) utilized a scale that was more descriptive of behaviors associated with death attitudes: avoidance, postponement, acknowledgement, acceptance with reservation, and acceptance. As one of the earliest works in this current collection of literature, Atkinson (1980) studied the concepts of
Death Education in schools, teacher intervention in death related issues in the classroom, and the mediating role of teacher attitudes in reported interventions. In addition to the death anxiety scale, a second questionnaire was administered asking teachers about actual death-related experiences (such as death of a national figure, another student, parent, close family member, pet, or other) in their professional roles. The most surprising finding was indicative of an underestimation of the number of times that teachers encounter death-related events in the classroom. As examples, Atkinson (1980) noted that teachers in a particular school might have reported an incident such as the death of a custodian, a student or a bus monitor, while their colleagues in the building did not report the same situation. Of even greater interest was the correlation between teachers’ death anxiety and a lower rate of reporting death incidents that might have affected their students. Teachers who scored as more avoidant in the death anxiety scale also tended to report more avoidant type behaviors when interacting with bereaved students.

Most studies have consistently demonstrated that teachers with greater death anxiety are less likely to report feeling comfortable or confident when approaching bereaved students. This discomfort has been shown to manifest as a lower rate of reporting death incidents and greater likelihood of characterizing avoidant interactions with students (Atkinson, 1980) and a lower perception of ability to assist (Cullinan, 1990). An exception was found among a combined sample of teachers and student teachers at the preschool level. Pratt, Hare, and Wright (1985) established a positive relationship between reported death anxiety and comfort with the topic of death in the classroom. This result was contrary to the researchers’ hypothesis, and the authors questioned whether the scale used to measure death anxiety had also identified an emotional openness to discussing death in the classroom (Pratt et al., 1985).
More typical were the findings of Reid and Dixon, (1999). As an often-cited study on the topic of grief in the public school classroom, investigators sampled 64 elementary and middle school teachers from a suburban Midwestern public school district, and examined their responses to a Death Attitudes Profile (DAP-R) and a 26-item survey querying previous amounts and types of training, perceived benefits of prior training, the array of grief-related circumstances that occur in the classroom, and teachers’ self-identified ability to respond in those situations. The study revealed that 51% of those teachers surveyed felt unprepared to handle the subject of death in their classrooms. There were situational differences reported in the teachers’ likelihood of response, with teachers feeling more comfortable about discussing death in the classroom when the bereaved child was not present. Qualifying their findings with the limitation of sample size, the researchers concluded that their hypothesis regarding the avoidance-anxiety connection was validated by the results, and that many teachers felt unprepared to handle the needs of grieving students and are uncomfortable about responding. Most teachers in the study did not feel adequately trained and expressed the desire for additional training.

Teacher training. According to Bandura (1997), having a lower estimate of one’s ability to successfully execute a task will be a barrier to situational performance, but will actually increase the likelihood of motivation in the training phase. Lack of training has been suggested as a barrier to crisis intervention in the public school environment (National Commission for Children and Disasters, 2010), but the type of training is as important as its content (Sela-Shayovitz, 2009; Taylor & Hawkins, 1991). Studying 161 professional teachers who had recently completed a professional development experience in crisis intervention, Taylor and Hawkins (1991) found that most teachers would be more willing to intervene in a crisis if they
had a better understanding of what behaviors to look for rather than training that focused on the
types of events that trigger the need for identification and referral of students at risk.

A limited amount of research has looked directly at the relationship between training
experiences and responses to grieving children. Hare and Cunningham (1988) contributed one of
the foundational and often-cited studies on the effects of a child bereavement-training program
for teachers. Citing the impact of death-related losses in the classroom and the challenges that
these difficult albeit inevitable events created for teachers, the authors pointed out that the
trajectory of adjustment for children experiencing loss is at odds with the levels of comfort or
skill of those who are in a position to help them. Building upon Molnar-Stickels’ (1985) work
with student teachers, the study focused on professional preschool and elementary teachers and
examined the impact of targeted training on awareness of the needs of grieving children. A
sample of 20 teacher volunteers was placed in either a control (survey only) or treatment (a four
hour Saturday training and survey) group. In the training experience, a developmental
framework was used to explain grieving children’s reactions and needs, and opportunities were
provided for discussion. Both groups completed the Leming Death Fear Scale, but the
experimental group was given the opportunity to discuss the relationship between attitudes about
death and ways of communicating with grieving children. Pre- and post-surveys were also
administered to both groups. Training produced significantly higher knowledge of grief,
knowledge of children’s conceptualizations of death, and awareness of resources for both groups.
Although teachers in the experimental group showed some growth in their level of comfort with
discussing death with children, the change was not significant as compared to those in the control
group. Because of the significant change in the level of knowledge that followed the training
experience but the lack of growth in level of comfort, Hare and Cunningham’s (1988) conclusion
that “knowledge alone did not significantly…change attitudes and behaviors” (p. 350) was supported by one of the basic concepts of self-efficacy theory. Carrying this connection further, the researchers wondered whether a different type of training experience, such as role-playing, might enhance perceptions of confidence. This would be a viable and desirable question in the application of self-efficacy theory, as Bandura (1997) noted that in addition to direct experience, mastery of occupational tasks can be achieved through other avenues such as modeling, instruction, or guided skill training and feedback (p. 439-443).

An additional training-related study comes from the field of pediatric nursing rather than public education. Kristjanson, Macpherson, Watkins, Cousins, and Dadd (2005) conducted an evaluative study of a one-day training program for nurses, and found that significant increases in both knowledge and positive attitudes towards bereaved children were sustained at a three-month interval. Although this study occurs at a different point in the landscape of scholarly literature, it is useful to note that educators are not alone in experiencing professional challenges of seeking training models that produce not only knowledge but also behavioral growth.

**Teacher role.** Although many researchers and practitioners portray the classroom teacher as a stabilizing presence in a crisis, and therefore in an ideal position to deliver emotional support, (Cullinan, 1990, Felix et al., 2010; Milton, 2004; Schonfeld et al., 2002; Wolmer, Laor, Dedeoglu, Siev & Yazgan, 2005), teachers themselves do not unanimously share this view (Lowton & Higginson, 2003). While the duties of the classroom teacher have evolved to include numerous wraparound functions that stretch beyond the academic achievement agenda (Milton, 2004), it is reasonable to believe that not all teachers will be equally equipped to assume roles that are more traditionally viewed in the mental health domain. Cullinan (1990), for example, found that while 94% of teachers believed that it was appropriate for teachers to help grieving...
children, 46% of the sample felt that the best way to help would be to refer the child to a counselor. Those teachers who did not feel that it was within the role of the teacher to provide a primary response to a grieving child also reported the lower levels of confidence in their ability to be effective in these interactions, either because of their discomfort with the topic or their fear of further harming the child with an inappropriate response.

Whatever the source of underlying reluctance, there is concern that teacher avoidance may interfere with the healthy resolution of the grieving process (Schonfeld et al., 2002; Papadatou et al., 2002), and there is even stronger evidence that appropriate responses from teachers will play a critical role in the immediate adjustment and long-term outcomes of grieving children (Cohen & Mannarino, 2011; Cullinan, 1990; Haine et al., 2008; Klingman & Cohen, 2004; Rosner, Kruse & Hagl, 2010; Tamborini et al., 2011; Papadatou et al., 2002; Reid & Dixon, 1999; Schonfeld et al., 2002; Wolmer et al., 2005). Even though finding that parental reaction and support seems to have the greatest influence on long-term outcomes, a six-year longitudinal study by Wolchik, Coxe, Tein, Sandler and Ayers (2008) suggested that support-seeking from other adults was positively linked as a predictor of post-traumatic growth.

As a final consideration in the justification for strengthening teachers’ capacities to respond appropriately to grieving children, research emphasizes that crisis is an evolving construct and that children’s grief should not be contained into specific tasks that can be completed on a timetable. Several studies have noted that in the case of parentally-bereaved children, symptoms of more complicated grief or maladaptive reactions may not surface for a period of time beyond the precipitating event (McCleachy, Vonk, & Palardy, 2009; Worden & Silverman, 1996). Worden and Silverman (1996) utilized children’s behavior checklists and interviews at various intervals during their two-year study of parentally bereaved children. Their
study found that while the majority of parentally bereaved children did not demonstrate symptoms of serious behavioral disturbance, those who did show symptoms did so at a higher rate than their non-bereaved peers in the comparison group. More importantly, the higher rates of withdrawal, anxiety, and clinically serious mental health issues were more significant at the second year mark of the study, leading the authors to conclude that the typical intervals of support for grieving children were not adequate. Intervention should thus be long term, and focus on building protective factors and resilience (Sandler, Wolchik, & Ayers, 2008). The needs of a grieving child could manifest very differently over time, and could be relevant throughout a child’s educational experience, even when there has been significant chronological distance from the precipitating event.

**Systemic Factors**

Finally, the literature presents some of the more systemic factors that might govern teacher response, such as organizational attributes, perceptions of school climate, and the level of disruption presented by the event in a crisis management context. While these themes are clearly interconnected both within and between many studies, it is useful to examine the refraction of the research through each separate facet of the self-efficacy prism.

**Organizational attributes.** Organizational structures, including teacher norms in schools, administrative and teacher turnover, school climate, and teachers’ perceptions of leadership and support in the larger environmental context will have bearing on their assessments of self-efficacy (Jaksec, Dedrick, & Weinberg, 2000; Ransford et al., 2009). Pragmatic issues such as not having sufficient time to reach out to grieving students has been cited as a barrier to delivering an appropriate response (Cullinan, 1990), reflecting elements in school structure or climate that can limit teacher response. In contrast, schools that have organizational structures
and communication norms in place for crisis management might provide environments in which teachers feel more supported in their efforts. For example, teachers who worked in schools with active crisis teams tended to have higher efficacy expectation scores in a study examining high school teachers’ assessment of self-efficacy in identifying students at risk of suicide (King, Price, & Telljohan, 1999). Organizational factors have a bi-directional impact, both contributing to teachers’ self-appraisals and potentially providing a strategy for increasing self-efficacy. It has been suggested that when levels of outcome efficacy are low, more organizational support might be needed to help teachers feel more effective in dealing with difficult issues such as school violence (Sela-Shayovitz, 2009). It has also been shown that when organizational elements are favorable for self-efficacy to thrive, teachers are more likely to go above and beyond when implementing interventions (Ransford et al., 2009), perhaps willing to consider actions that might stretch the limits of their traditional role.

**Teacher perceptions of school climate and culture.** Lowton and Higginson’s (2003) study took a qualitative approach to understanding the dynamics of bereavement management in Southeast London schools. The authors contended that there was little available to British teachers that could guide them in the task of supporting grieving students, and very little research that sought to understand the challenges that they may encounter in the process. Similar to Reid and Dixon (1999), the authors pointed to the critical role of the teacher when the more typical bereavement (not the result of a disaster or trauma) occurred, and sought to create a better understanding of the dynamics involved both at the individual and school level. A total of 13 educational personnel across a range of grade levels responded to the invitation to participate in the voluntary, interview-based study. Many factors were explored, including cultural norms that inhibited responses to grief. Cultural factors were thought to impact everything from a teacher’s
ability to express their own discomfort to the mechanisms through which teachers might (or might not) learn that there had been a death in the family of a student. Family factors were another major consideration for teachers, who expressed uncertainty about the family’s wishes about how the event would be handled at school. Some teachers did try to avail themselves of consultation support offered by an outside mental health agency in order to develop appropriate intervention strategies, but the authors recounted the experience of one teacher who found himself completely unable to respond when a student revealed that her father had died, and his explanation that he did not wish to cross religious or personal boundaries with the child. It was also found that those teachers who could relate to a personal experience were more apt to endorse and practice taking initiative with bereaved children. Strategies frequently used by teachers included home-school communication logs and emergency passes that would give students the opportunity to leave the classroom when needed. The authors criticized educational systems for their lack of flexibility and sensitivity to the tasks that teachers must perform when interacting with bereaved students, and called for more research on the interplay between the environment and the grieving child. Most research had focused on the needs of students and the capacity of teachers to meet those needs. Lowton and Higginson (2003) added a contextual framework for understanding of the needs of teachers in order to strengthen the quality of their responses to their students.

Further illuminating the deeply personal elements that can shape a teacher’s reaction to a grieving child, Rowling (1999) referred to and explored “the disenfranchised grief of teachers” (p. 317). This case study of Australian teachers sought to explore the context of grief in schools and took a more social/ecological view of the manner in which teachers respond. The study sample was drawn from a population of teachers in the greater metropolitan Sydney area where
several tragic events had occurred over a two-year period of time. Fifty teachers were interviewed about their beliefs and experiences. In operationalizing the concept of disenfranchised grief, Rowling (1999) mirrored some of the complex challenges to self-efficacy: loss of confidence in ability, loss of status, and loss of feelings of control and safety. The study attributed the disenfranchising element to the prohibition, either internal or external, on the expression, recognition, or public processing of these losses, creating a sense of shame and helplessness. Rowling’s (1999) work clearly pointed to organizational factors when delving into aspects of school policy and procedure that contributed to the unspoken aspects of what is considered appropriate or acceptable, such as the amount of bereavement leave granted to staff, or the ease with which teachers felt that they could attend the funerals of significant non-family members. Constraints that teachers felt as a result of spoken or unspoken norms were also seen as components of disenfranchisement, for example, the perceived expectation that teachers not show emotion when something like the traumatic death of a student occurs, even though written school policy included a care plan for teachers (p. 322). A second example included conflicts around a school’s handling of a serious automobile accident in which students were injured but no critical injuries or death occurred, with some staff members thinking that the school had over-reacted in its response plan but not necessarily recognizing this as a symptom of their own emotional responses. The author explored other issues such as gender roles and school and leadership management of tragic events. School leaders interviewed expressed their belief that it was their responsibility to “rise above” their own emotions and that they owed it to students and their staff to downplay the personal impacts of tragedy. The implications of the study, as noted by the author, included the need for supportive mechanisms for teachers when tragedies occur, and the observation that school and community culture must develop attitudes that acknowledge
the need to care for teachers as caregivers. In the discussion of self-efficacy, this qualitative analysis provided a window through which to view the interplay of the individual and the environment.

**Crisis management context.** Looking at practices of crisis management in schools as they relate to the topic of grieving children, various studies have examined the impacts of large-scale events on the school community. Research has assisted in the documentation of short and long term needs of students, as well as factors that have characterized the learning environment in schools after tragedies such as the Oklahoma City bombing, the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, and more recently, the enormous losses sustained in communities after hurricanes Rita and Katrina (Brown and Goodman, 2005; Black, 2005; National Advisory Committee on Children and Terrorism Recommendations to the Secretary, 2003). Related to gaps in crisis management procedures in schools, national level studies have revealed that schools are not well prepared to address the needs of students, particularly in the often ignored recovery phase of emergency management (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2007). In addition, federal guidance on best practices during the recovery phase of a critical event (U.S. Department of Education, 2007) and recommendations from the National Commission for Children and Disasters (2009, 2010) have given priority to the training of school personnel in trauma, bereavement, and the resulting needs of children after a critical event.

Taking a different but related classroom vantage point, a recent qualitative study by Ray and Pemberton (2010) looked retrospectively at the dimension of teacher self-efficacy and the manner in which their experiences with students in their classrooms on September 11, 2001 (9/11) modified their beliefs and level of confidence to teach about an emotionally and politically-charged event such as a terrorist attack. Noting that there was no standard preparation
for teaching about a disaster of this scale, particularly as it was unfolding, the study focused on 29 teachers who utilized real-time media as a teaching device on 9/11, and asked about their level of preparedness and the way in which their perceptions change as a result of their experiences on that day. The researchers found that the majority of those who responded to the survey felt that they were better prepared to address the emotional needs of students regarding terrorism, but confidence lessened when addressing fears about safety. Less than half felt prepared to deal with grief reactions, and 72% did not feel equipped to deal with behavioral issues that might surface among students who experienced difficulty with a terrorist event. While the authors noted that the sample size was too small and potentially biased towards respondents who would have been more reflective about their experience, the study was relevant to understanding teachers’ coping strategies during tragic and unpredictable events, and considered efficacy from one of Bandura’s (1997) theoretical dimensions regarding the impact of a successful experience on estimates of positive outcomes in the future. Ray and Pemberton’s (2010) study indicated that teachers indeed differentiated between their levels of comfort with the content and their challenges with the more emotional aspects of a critical situation. Capturing these differentiations, however, may pose some methodological challenges that will be discussed in the next section.

**Challenges in the Literature**

**Methodological observations.** Bandura (1997) noted that early studies on teacher efficacy limited themselves to examining teacher beliefs about their ability to impact student motivation, either in terms of academic success or ability to surmount social factors that typically characterize recalcitrant or unmotivated students, and recommended that the traditional survey-approach to the study of teacher efficacy should employ a multifaceted measures that allows
researchers to differentiate and more precisely refine elements relevant to the topic under investigation. Fives and Buehl (2009) incorporated a factor approach when in their study of student engagement, classroom management, and instructional practices along the differential axes of years of experience or grade levels taught. Findings reinforced the importance of looking at specific factor structures rather than taking a more global view of self-efficacy, particularly for teachers with more years of experience where impacts on ability to feel efficacious in student engagement could differ from feelings of efficacy in classroom management or instructional practices. The benefit of this approach is apparent when descriptive statistics are used to analyze results. For example, Sela-Shayovitz’ (2009) study of the effects of violence prevention training on teachers’ perceived self-efficacy revealed that that while teachers with more experience tended to report higher levels of confidence after training, those working at higher grade levels made lower estimates of their abilities to have positive outcomes when intervening with violence-related events at school. Fine-tuning these distinctions provides insight on the potential differences within the population that emerge from study results, but may not be sufficient to explain more subjective variations.

Because of the subjective, internally mediated elements of self-efficacy, a qualitative component to research may strengthen methodological validity. Fives and Buehl (2009), in addition to advocating for a factor approach to self-efficacy surveys, suggested that focus groups might be considered to identify possible interpretive variations in survey items. In addition, particularly around the related aspects of school climate and culture, quantitative measures alone might obscure their relevance to the individual teacher’s experience. Addressing this limitation, Lowton and Higginson (2003) and Rowling (1999) used qualitative approaches to delve deeply into teachers’ unique perspectives on grief and the manner in which norms and expectations
inhibited rather than facilitated effective response. As self-efficacy is defined as a highly contextual and self-referent concept (Bandura, 1997), similar qualitative approaches may provide more useful insights into the dynamics of teachers’ beliefs about grieving children in the classroom.

**Implications for further research.** Most of the studies within this review seemed to focus on teachers of young or elementary-level children, yet it appeared that teachers of older students might experience different types of challenges and have different inputs in their assessments of self-efficacy (Jaksec, et al., 2000; Sela-Shayovitz, 2009). Examining the phenomenon of teachers’ self-efficacy in response to grieving elementary, middle, and high school students could generate different perspectives on the issue. Also, as this review drew upon work that spanned three decades, it could be important to consider ways in which world events over the last 30 years have created different priorities in teachers’ roles regarding grieving children. Finally, while the available literature provided a very useful framework for understanding the factors that might make it difficult for teachers to respond to the needs of grieving children, very few attempted to investigate strategies that might conquer these barriers. Most studies that included elements of training or professional development measured changes in attitudes, but did not provided evidence of change in behavior. As noted by Bandura (1997), the composite of a teacher’s self-efficacy goes beyond the classroom to include aspects such as family, social and other circumstantial variables. These latter elements, however, are far beyond the teacher’s control. A pathway for further research would appear to be the exploration of strategies that would allow the teacher to move past the constrictions of their lack of control over the circumstances, and instead focus upon their abilities to impact students positively through
their responses, increasing the potential for change in teachers’ behavior. It was with these challenges in mind that the current study was constructed and executed.

Chapter III: Methodology

This chapter presents the questions that guided this study, and the corresponding research methodology that was designed and utilized. Methodological considerations include a portrayal of the site and participants, an explanation of the study design, and a thorough description of the methods used for data collection and analysis. The chapter concludes with a review of the measures that were taken to mitigate possible limitations and to assure validity, credibility, and adherence to ethical standards prior to the implementation of the research protocol.

Research Questions

1. How do teachers perceive their abilities to assist grieving children?

2. To what extent have teachers’ personal histories, prior training, or experiences in the classroom contributed to their sense of efficacy and level of comfort when dealing with grieving children?

3. Following participation in a professional development activity that presents best practices in support of grieving children, what do teachers view as potentially limiting constraints to employing those best practices?

Selection of Research Tools

A focus-group design was selected for this primarily qualitative research methodology with an embedded quantitative component (Creswell, 2009) that enhanced the study design and supported data analysis. The qualitative approach was best suited to the topic and to the core theoretical framework of self-efficacy. As the research questions suggest, teacher voice is the most essential source of data for an exploration of the complexities that contribute to efficacy
when responding to the needs of grieving children in the classroom. Self-efficacy is a highly contextual and self-referent concept (Bandura, 1997), and a qualitative approach would provide insights into the dynamics of teachers’ interactions with grieving children in the classroom. Lowton and Higginson (2003) and Rowling (1999) used a qualitative approach to delve more deeply into teachers’ unique perspectives on grief and the manner in which norms and expectations inhibited rather than facilitated effective response.

The focus group as a research tool is attributed to the work of Robert Merton in his sociological studies of American soldiers during World War II (McLachlan, 2005). Although frequently used in a marketing context, it has been applied extensively as a qualitative methodology in the fields of public health and education when the goal is to explore attitudes and beliefs within the framework of group interaction (Plummer-D’Amato, 2008). Focus group research was utilized in the exploration of prospective middle school teachers’ preparedness to address issues of sexuality in the classroom (Klein & Breck, 2010), school nurse and teacher perceptions of the impact of children’s fatigue on school functioning (McCabe, 2011), and elementary school teachers’ views about providing health instruction (Thackeray, Neiger, Bartle, Hill, & Barnes, 2002). In this vein, the focus group approach was an appropriate choice for the collection of data that was intended to explore the internal discourse between teacher understanding of best practice and the phenomenon of actual response to grieving children. As noted by Massey (2011), the direct expressions of experiences and opinions in a focus group approach “leads to a more thorough examination of a topic than can be had in an individually administered survey or interview” (p. 24). The focus group approach allows for targeted inquiry (Merton & Kendall, 1946) while using group discussion and interaction to bring to light the existence of diverse or even conflicting experiences (Morgan, 1997).
A quantitative component in the form of a researcher-designed Participant Profile Questionnaire facilitated different layers of data organization and analysis of the potential role of variables such as gender, years of experience, grade levels and subjects taught, and also established a profile of participants in terms of their prior training, experiential reference points related to the topic, and self-assessed levels of confidence. A follow up questionnaire, administered approximately two months after the sessions were completed, asked participants to reflect upon any new insights that they had gained as a result of the training/discussion sessions, and whether or not the experience had resulted in a change in their estimate of confidence when thinking about their responses to the needs of grieving children in the classroom. The preliminary questionnaire enabled assignment of subjects to grade-level segmented focus groups in order to ensure the best possible balance between homogeneity and diversity among available participants (Morgan, 1997). Participant selection and criteria for participation will be described in the next section.

Site and Participants

The target site of the study was a cluster of suburban school districts in western Massachusetts that were geographically and demographically similar, and had a previous history of collaboration around school safety and crisis management resources. (In accordance with the privacy contingencies promised to participants and approved by the Institutional Review Board process, the names and locations of the school districts will not be disclosed in the study or its findings.) Focusing on this defined geographic area increased the likelihood that prospective teacher-volunteers had shared similar large-scale experiences, had been exposed to similar training opportunities, and had access to similar community support resources. The researcher made preliminary contact with seven school-district superintendents to request their permission
to recruit study participants. In addition, the superintendents were asked to designate a contact person who would forward, via email, letters of invitation to teachers including a link to the preliminary survey. All but one superintendent agreed to participate, and designated a contact person for distribution of additional information to teachers within their respective districts so that recruitment could begin.

**Recruitment.** The initial correspondence to the superintendents contained a brief description of the study, and the request to forward study information and invitations to teachers in each district. Teacher dissemination included one detailed letter of introduction/invitation and two brief reminders. All direct teacher correspondence included a link to the Preliminary Participant Questionnaire, an online survey that was designed to gather demographic information and a basic overview of experiences related to the topic. To be eligible to participate in the study, prospective participants affirmed via the survey that they were Massachusetts licensed teachers at either the elementary, middle, or high school level, and could recall and share at least one experience relevant to the topic of bereavement in the classroom. Because of the incorporation of a training component, the participating superintendents had agreed that volunteers would be eligible to receive three Professional Development Points (PDPs), issued by the respective school districts. (Licensed Massachusetts teachers use the PDP system to accrue evidence of ongoing professional development during each licensure renewal cycle.) A certificate of completion was given to all teachers who participated in the training/discussion so that they could document completion of the training and receive the corresponding PDPs.

**Selection.** Ultimately, a purposive/convenience sample of 37 elementary, middle and high school teachers representing six school districts became study participants. Of the 65 surveys started during the initial enrollment phase, 40 teachers fully completed the survey and
indicated their focus group availability and scheduling preference. Following the framework for focus group study design advised by Morgan (1997), the sample was segmented into three broad categories by grade level: elementary, middle, and high school teachers. Each group was further subdivided in order to achieve an optimal range of between four and eight participants per group. This assignment process yielded a total of seven focus groups: three elementary and four secondary (two middle and two high school). Although a target had been set between 50-65 subjects, this goal was based on an over-enrollment strategy as suggested by Plummer-D’Amato (2008) to ensure a sufficient number of eligible participants in each of the groups. Similar recruitment and outreach strategies were used in all participating districts, but more than half of the responses came from the district in which the researcher was employed. Efforts were made to achieve a balance of district representation in the seven groups, but because group assignment was based on grade level and scheduling preferences of the subjects, one elementary group was comprised entirely of teachers from the same district.

**Study Design**

The investigation consisted of a four-part process:

1. Administration of the Participant’s Profile Questionnaire
2. Presentation of a brief training module on pediatric bereavement (delivered as a PowerPoint presentation in conjunction with the focus group discussion)
3. Facilitation of the focus groups
4. Administration of a voluntary Follow-up Survey

**Participant Profile Questionnaire (PPQ).** The PPQ was used to gather descriptive statistics including age, gender, ethnicity, teaching experience, number, amount of previous education about pediatric bereavement, and types of experience with death in the classroom.
Responses to the questionnaire were used to assign volunteers to segmented focus groups according to grade level and ensured that a balanced number of volunteers would be available in each category (grade level) of participation. Responses also revealed the range of previous experiences with grieving children that the subjects would bring, which assisted with the refinement of a Discussion Guide that had been developed for the focus groups. After the group compositions were determined, letters of confirmation were sent to those who met the criteria and volunteered to participate. As previously noted, this resulted in the enrollment of thirty-seven subjects. Selection was based on the following criteria:

- The teacher had at least one year of teaching experience in a public school setting, at the elementary, middle, or high school level.
- The teacher acknowledged having at least one experience with a grieving child in his/her classroom.
- The teacher agreed to participate in a training module on the topic of grief and bereavement in the classroom, and discuss his/her own experiences in the context of this training.
- The teacher gave informed consent (via the online survey) prior to the training/focus group discussion in accordance with human subject safeguards as approved through the Institutional Review Board process.

**Training module.** The training component was provided in the form of a module that was developed as a teacher resource by the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement (2010). The National Center is a non-profit organization established in 2005 and supported by the September 11th Children’s Fund and the National Philanthropic Trust. The Teacher Training Module, Children and Grief, was funded by the New York Life Foundation and has been
available at no cost on the Center website since 2010. The module contains fifty power point slides that explain the important role that teachers play in supporting grieving children, provide a developmental overview of the dynamics of pediatric bereavement, present specific strategies that teachers can use to improve children’s coping capacities through both anticipatory guidance and direct assistance, and emphasize the importance of self-care for teachers when extending support to grieving children. The presentation includes explanatory notes and can either be delivered in a training environment, or completed individually in approximately 45 minutes.

After a scripted introduction and review of the study protocol and informed consent process, each subject made an introductory statement that included a brief description of the specific situation that they had in mind when they enrolled in the study. The researcher then introduced the module. To ensure consistency across all focus groups, the researcher utilized the speaker’s notes to present the module’s six segments:

1. Impact of Grief on Children
2. Ways That Schools Can Be Helpful
3. How Children Understand Death and the Factors That Affect Bereavement
4. Identifying Distress
5. Providing Support
6. Importance of Self-care When Responding to Grieving Children

The PowerPoint presentation was paused briefly between each segment to provide teachers with the opportunity to make note of any comments that they might wish to make when the discussion took place. A specifically designed Participant Feedback Form (Appendix D) was provided for this purpose. These notes were collected at the conclusion of each session, and later
reviewed by the researcher for consistency with topics raised by teachers when the concepts were discussed in the context of their classroom experiences.

**Focused discussions.** The focus groups followed a protocol designed by the researcher that asked teachers to reflect upon their experiences with grieving children in the classroom in the context of the considerations and practices that had been presented in the training module (Appendix B). Twelve questions were developed for the interview guide (Appendix C). While the questions were aligned to the research questions and goals of the study and were intended to strengthen the validity of data analysis across groups, they were also designed to allow sufficient flexibility so as to generate authentic and organic discussion emerging from the experiences, observations, and insights of the participants (Morgan, 1997).

**Follow up survey.** Maxwell (2005) notes that even within qualitative design, subject participation and researcher involvement can create a process of change that can be considered as a research intervention. Even though the goal of the current study was not to evaluate the effectiveness of a specific training experience, the use of the training module as the foundation for discussion not only served as a vehicle through which to discuss teachers’ attitudes and past actions, but opened a channel of conversation about new points of view. In concluding remarks in all seven sessions, participants expressed their view that the training component of the study had increased their understanding of the needs of grieving and bereaved children in the classroom and would likely lead to changes in practice. Consistent with post-group considerations outlined by Morgan (1997), after the initial focus group data had been collected and preliminarily analyzed, it was desirable to seek additional data that could either clarify or confirm these findings. The researcher subsequently proposed and received Institutional Review Board (I.R.B.) approval to conduct a brief follow-up survey. Teacher-participants were asked to
complete a post-reflection questionnaire that compared their initial estimates of confidence in their ability to address the needs of grieving and bereaved children to their current estimates of level of confidence, and to identify any specific aspect of the training/discussion that a change (if noted) might be attributed to. The survey also asked respondents to note any aspect of the training that they would be likely to incorporate into their practice in the upcoming year, and gave participants the opportunity to make any additional comments. The additional information was designed to increase the relevance of the study through a better understanding of potential barriers in the transfer of knowledge outside of the focus-group environment, and to strengthen the study’s credibility through a means of triangulation that would not have otherwise been possible in a purely focus group design. This process is more fully described in the next section in which the data collection method is detailed.

**Data Collection**

Several methods of data collection were implemented. In phase one, the pre-questionnaires yielded data about participant characteristics that were analyzed through descriptive statistics: gender, years of experience, teaching level (elementary, middle or high school), amount of experience with grief in the classroom, and amount of prior training as reported on the questionnaire. These data sets permitted a detailed description of the sample and strengthened the richness and trustworthiness of connections that could thus be drawn between the participants and their expressed points of view (Plummer-D’Amato, 2008). Descriptive statistics also revealed any gaps in representation that contributed to the study’s limitations. Data collected in the preliminary survey included the participants’ summaries of their prior experience with grief and bereavement in the classroom, and estimates of the level of confidence that they felt when considering their ability to respond to the needs of grieving or bereaved
students. Analysis of these data points provided a better understanding of the sample as a whole, the entering orientations of individuals to the topic, and the ways in which the training/focus group experience might ultimately influence their points of view, particularly with regard to their own estimates of efficacy. This last aspect became especially relevant when the follow-up component was added.

Phase two represented the core component of data collection: the convening of the seven groups, the presentations of the training module, and the facilitation of the focused discussions. As previously noted, data generated in this phase included the transcription of opening remarks made by each participant, the collection of the participant feedback forms that were designed to correspond to each section of the training module, and finally, the focus group discussions themselves. In a focus group, data collection and analysis occur simultaneously at the individual and group level, as the nuances of group interaction are as key to data interpretation as the dialogue that takes place among the subjects (Morgan, 1997; Plummer-D’Amato, 2008). The researcher’s field notes play an essential role in data collection as the basis for both preliminary (Creswell, 2009) and ongoing qualitative observation in the form of analytical memos (Maxwell, 2005). As the focus group moderator, the researcher maintained field notes during the sessions that included both content and process notations. The notes included affective observations that established coherence with the subjects’ remarks: tone, facial expression, eye contact, or any signs of visible emotional distress. In an effort to corroborate group process, field notes also described seating configurations, the order of speakers in an exchange, and any major themes or ideas that became obvious in the course of discussion (Plummer-D’Amato, 2008). These initial themes served as the basis for the thematic mapping that took shape as the discourse data were transcribed. Each group session was audio-recorded, transcribed, and coded thematically. As
recommended by Creswell (2009), the coding process was iteratively clarified as both broad and subtle themes emerged.

In phase three, using the unique identification numbers that had been assigned to each subject, the data obtained from the follow-up survey regarding teachers’ levels of confidence were compared to responses on the preliminary survey. A Mann-Whitney test was applied to compare the size and direction of self-reported change. This non-parametric test was selected on the basis of the small size of the survey samples and the inability to assume a normal distribution of the groups from which they were drawn (Salkind, 2010). Open-ended responses from the follow-up survey were also analyzed and coded. The specific techniques of focus group data analysis are detailed in the following section.

**Focus Group Data Analysis**

Kidd and Parshall (2000) note that because of the intricacies and role of social discourse among study participants, rigor in statistical analysis is key to establishing and maintaining trustworthiness in focus group studies, and caution that analysis must be “sufficiently flexible to identify any undue influence of the group on any individual participant(s), or vice versa…” (p. 299). Applied to the current study, the task of data analysis was to carefully capture both the content of the discourse in terms of the themes that were generated, and the relative impact that the interactions themselves may have had on the development of participants’ points of view. How group members presented their ideas, considered each other’s opinions, and reached points of consensus or dissent were noted and explored in order to accurately represent and support any conclusions that were ultimately drawn. This was accomplished through application of a basic set of steps as depicted by Creswell (2009) for methodical preparation and arrangement of the
data, and through the use of a thematic analysis approach (Massey, 2011) to draw meaning and ultimately shape conclusions.

**Data preparation.** Each focus group was digitally recorded using an application on a computer tablet device. At the conclusion of each group, the researcher began with a note-based analysis (Beyea & Nicoll, 2000), reviewing field notes and any materials generated during the sessions, including any context was provided by simultaneous review of the participant profile surveys from each group. The researcher captured any impressions of the preliminary review in a brief analytical reflection or researcher’s memo (Maxwell, 2005), from which the preliminary branches of themes began to emerge. Next, the researcher reviewed the audiotapes and transcribed the discussions. This enhanced the researcher’s familiarity with the data sets and prepared the data for more rigorous analysis. Once the sessions were transcribed, the researcher performed two additional reviews of the audio recordings, simultaneously reading and correcting any transcription errors that were noted. When the accuracy of the transcripts had been established, the researcher began to create marginal notes seeking response themes for each focus group, beginning with four broad areas: (a) teachers’ understandings about grieving children; (b) teachers’ roles when assisting grieving children; (c) methods of incorporating the theme of loss in the classroom; and (d) practicing self-care when supporting children after a death or critical event.

**Data summarization.** Data summarization is the process of reducing the data set to look for apparent themes across the interviewed groups. To accomplish this, a two-dimensional grid was constructed with the rows representing each segment of discussion and the columns representing key words or phrases. The responses of each group were summarized, creating a tool that allowed the researcher to look for commonalities and differences in themes across each
group (Creswell, 2009), and beginning to highlight relevant comments or discussions that were illustrative of the clusters of ideas that emerged, which then served as the foundation for the coding process.

**Code generation.** Code generation is an iterative process to systematize the responses and provide a more fine-grained view of the data. To begin to generate codes, the researcher selected two focus groups and examined the transcripts in detail. Each response set was summarized into themes, which were named, clustered, renamed, and ultimately abbreviated into codes. These codes were applied to the remaining data sets (Creswell, 2009). As recommended by Massey (2011), three levels of thematic analysis were considered: articulated, attributional, and emergent data. Articulated data “deals with attitudes, beliefs, observations, experiences, opinions and preferences that are all referents to the question posed by the researcher” (Massey, 2011, p. 23). These data provide the most direct and explicit responses to the lines of inquiry as specified in the focus group discussion guide, and were typically grouped into themes for reporting purposes. Attributional data refers to those comments that supplied evidence to the more subtle aspects of the research questions, specifically the more underlying preoccupations that teachers had when thinking about their responses to grieving children in the classroom. These data were highlighted as illustrative individual remarks. Finally, emergent data is more of a by-product of the group process, and “touches on the larger themes and unifying concepts that are invisible before the study begins but that offer explanatory power for events related by the group” (p. 25). Emergent data were derived from the exchanges among participants in which their explorations of the topic created a new level of awareness or insights, crystallized through the merging of their experiences with the experiences of others in the group. These data sets were often prepared for reporting as whole segments of conversation. This tri-level
categorization of data and themes provided a depth of understanding that could be traced within and across groups, strengthening the interpretation of results.

**Interpretation.** Through the process of summarization, coding, and re-analyzing, it was possible to interpret what focus group participants ultimately felt about their capacity to address the needs of grieving children in their classrooms, which factors they considered to be most important in contributing to their sense of efficacy when they encountered these situations, and whether there were differences among the designated segmentations of the sample, specifically, grade levels. The design of this study generated data that could make a significant contribution to models used to prepare teachers to identify and respond to the needs of grieving children, potentially laying the groundwork for further research that could include the evaluation of particular types of trainings and their potential to impact actual practice when implemented.

**Limitations, Validity, and Credibility**

**Limitations.** The anticipated limitations included a small sample size focusing on 37 teachers in a targeted geographical range of six school districts, and the likelihood of a favorable participant bias towards the topic of teacher support for grieving children in the classroom that diminished the generalizability of results or conclusions. The selection of the focused interview design, however, emphasized and accommodated these intentional boundaries of the study. The research goal was to uncover potential characteristics and dynamics of the phenomenon of teacher response that would require further testing in order to be more broadly applied. While the focus group approach was selected as an effective tool for revealing these complex attributes, another inherent limitation was the degree to which participants would be willing to share personal experience or feelings in a group setting. The positive or negative impacts of the group dynamics were carefully considered in the analysis of results. Whenever possible, exchanges
between group members were viewed as the more relevant unit of analysis, minimizing any potential tendency to draw conclusions from the perspective of an individual group member (Morgan, 1997).

Another limitation was the unanticipated over-representation of subjects from the district in which the researcher was employed. While strict measures were taken to ensure consistency in the facilitation of each focus group and to control effects of researcher bias, the possibility of subject bias, specifically the familiarity and comfort that a large number of participants already had with the researcher, must be considered as a caution in drawing conclusions from the results that were obtained.

The role of the researcher as facilitator of the training module created another unanticipated limitation of the study, as participants had the understandable expectation that researcher was representing an even higher level of expertise on the topic than would be found if the training had been pre-recorded or delivered by a third-party. Finally, while the Post-participation Survey was viewed as an enhancement to the methodology, the voluntary, stand-alone administration strategy could only yield pre- and post-comparisons and parametric data analysis from the small subset of the sample that completed the online follow-up.

**Validity.** Employing strategies described by Creswell (2009), the validity of this study was established in its potential for “rich, thick description” (p. 191) as a result of the detailed accounts and descriptions elicited by the topic and the engagement of participants. Wilson (1997) expressed this capacity of focus groups to produce rich data sets generated by discourse, encouraging “self disclosure among participants in order to generate qualitative data which researchers may later analyze” (p. 209), which can potentially provide a less artificial research window to the phenomena being studied. In the focus group approach, capturing the interaction
among group participants, including the ability to track the formation and change of expressed ideas, was key to the rigor of the study. Rigor was maintained through the previously described three-step approach to transcription, constant comparison to the original field notes, and the continuous evolution of marginal notes and analytical memos. While traditional member-checking is not typically viable in the focus group format, each session concluded with the opportunity for participants’ closing remarks, a very preliminary summary of themes, and the collection of participant feedback forms, providing the opportunity for triangulation of data. Despite its previously described limitations, the addition and analysis of the Post-participation Survey provided an additional mechanism through which to seek consistency of the themes and experiences that emerged. Finally, a “peer debriefer” (Creswell, 2009, p. 192) assisted the researcher by reviewing surveys, transcripts, and codes.

**Credibility.** Credibility was enhanced through the inclusion of the training module experience, ensuring that all participants had a basic and consistent overview of the best-practice issues surrounding the needs of grieving children in the classroom, regardless of their prior training or experience. Trustworthiness was also strengthened through the use of descriptive statistics, increasing the likelihood that discrepant or unusual findings would be explained by other data collected, for example, the extent to which a teacher has received previous training or has either a great or small number of experiences from which to draw their impressions. The use of multiple focus groups (Kidd & Parshall, 2000) and the addition of a follow-up component (Morgan, 1997) also enhanced the credibility of the study particularly as it became possible to identify consistency across the seven groups and three grade-level that could not be simply attributed to the dynamics or influence of a particular group.
Ethical Considerations and Protections of Human Subjects

In order to maintain the integrity of this research, the guidelines for human subject protection established by the Institutional Review Board of Northeastern University were strictly followed. Possible sources of bias were disclosed to the Board, including the researcher’s affiliation as a sub-committee member on the National Commission for Children and Disasters, and role as an administrator in one of the targeted districts. Precautions taken to prevent harm from participation in this study were carefully outlined, such as the voluntary status of all subjects and the assignment of unique subject identification numbers to maintain confidentiality. This was especially important because, although participation was confidential, subjects had direct and personal contact with the researcher throughout the study and needed to be assured that any potentially identifying information would be protected. Application to the Institutional Review Board followed the approval of the initial Doctoral Project Proposal (DPP) by Dr. Nena Stracuzzi, the Advisor and Principal Investigator, and the Northeastern University doctoral program committee. When it was determined that a follow-up component would be desirable, an addendum to the study was developed by the researcher using the same guidelines for review. Both the initial and the additional Institutional Review Board documents are included in the Appendix (Appendix K-L).

Conclusion

A large number of school-age children will experience the impact of bereavement or grief each year, but many teachers do not have the training or skills needed to address the wide array of student concerns that can accompany these tragic events. The current study evolved from the recognition that additional research was needed to utilize teachers’ voices in an exploration of teachers’ abilities to meet the needs of grieving children in the classroom. A theoretical
framework of self-efficacy was not only was useful in defining the problem, but served to guide the current study towards potential implications for improved practice. Personal experiences and knowledge gained through scholarly study and review of the literature have reinforced the importance of this work, which will contribute to the improvement of teacher efficacy when responding to the needs of grieving children. This improvement will ultimately facilitate access to coping resources for the many students who may be impacted by acute or chronic grief in the school setting, and mitigate the numerous social, emotional, and academic consequences that can occur when the disequilibrium of a tragic event is prolonged. As further study and investigation in this problem of practice are pursued, new perspectives will be explored in the area of successful models for preparing teachers to identify and respond to the needs of grieving children.

Chapter IV: Research Findings

Reporting of the Findings and Analysis

This chapter reports and analyzes the findings of this study. It begins with a review of the research context, a profile of study participants using descriptive statistics, and an in depth presentation of key results in the context of three guiding research questions:

1. How do teachers perceive their abilities to assist grieving children?
2. To what extent have teachers’ personal histories, prior training, or experiences in the classroom contributed to their sense of efficacy and level of comfort when dealing with grieving children?
3. Following participation in a professional development activity that presents best practices in support of grieving children, what do teachers view as either supporting factors or limiting constraints to employing those best practices?
For each question, relevant survey responses and corresponding focus group data will be reported. The data will be presented according to findings that were common across all grade-level segments of the study, noting any results that appeared to be more specific to the experiences of participants at the elementary, middle or high school levels. As described in the methodology and when relevant to the analysis, focus group data analysis will be supported with pertinent examples of articulated or attributional comments and emergent themes that were generated by group discussion (Massey, 2011). Finally, the results of the Post-participation Survey will be presented, setting the stage for further discussion of the connection to the theoretical framework of efficacy and for a more complete exploration of the study’s capacity to offer new insights into the problem of practice.

**Study Context**

This study explored the array of circumstances, conditions, decisions, and dilemmas that influence teachers’ sense of efficacy when confronting issues related to grief and bereavement in the classroom. There were three main components to the research design: (1) the online Preliminary Participant Profile Survey in which prospective subjects elected to participate and for which they completed a brief online questionnaire that included scheduling preferences for grade-level segmented focus group assignments; (2) a three-hour focus group experience that included the presentation of a PowerPoint training module and; (3) a brief follow up survey administered online approximately six weeks after the groups had met.

**Preliminary participant profile.** Prior to participation, prospective participants responded to an online questionnaire that created a profile of participants’ gender, years of teaching experience, grade level or subject concentration, any prior training received on the topic of grieving children, examples of their own experiences with the topic, and a self-assessment of
their entering level of confidence when dealing with grief and bereavement-related issues in their classrooms. Those agreeing to participate in the study were segmented into grade-level defined sub-groups (elementary, middle, and high school) and then matched to a focus group according to their rank-ordered preferences for three possible corresponding group sessions during the month of July. Using this combination of grade level segmentation and scheduling preference, a total of 40 kindergarten through 12th grade (K-12) teachers were assigned to one of seven groups. Even though three teachers withdrew from the study because of scheduling conflicts, the group compositions remained consistent with the pre-defined study design of no fewer than four and no more than seven members from the final total of 37 participants.

Focus group/training module. Based on the grade-level teaching experience of the volunteers and their stated preferences for one of three possible groups at each level, a total of seven groups were conducted: three for elementary teachers, two for middle school teachers, and two for high school teachers. To establish contextual reference points for the investigation, teachers in each group were asked to introduce themselves and provide a specific example from their own experiences with grieving/bereaved students, and then participate in an approximately 45-minute training module on the topic of bereavement in the classroom, developed for teachers by the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement (2010). The module reviewed basic concepts about children’s grief, and presented best classroom practices for teacher response. After viewing the module, participants were asked to consider and then expand upon the situations that they had described in their opening statements as they were guided through a series of focus group questions that were aligned with the major segments of the training: characteristics of grieving children; teacher role in supporting grieving children and providing anticipatory guidance by incorporating the theme of loss in the classroom; and practicing self-
care when supporting children after a death or critical event. The questions were designed to elicit participants’ thoughts about factors that either supported or interfered with their capacity to effectively meet the needs of grieving/bereaved students.

**Post-participation feedback survey.** The post-participation survey was a secondary addition to the study design, inspired by the initial analysis of teachers’ concluding remarks that centered on perceived benefits from the training/discussion. By asking teachers to reflect upon their participation in terms of any changes that they perceived in their practices or their originally estimated feelings of confidence, the researcher was able to add a reflective dimension that was less influenced by the group dynamics in the focused discussion environment, seek corroborating data that could strengthen validity and trustworthiness, and explore potential areas of further research that would be more relevant to teachers’ post-participation experiences in the field. The feedback survey was linked to the exploration of the third research question, focusing on the alignment of best practice recommendations with actual practice. The relationship between the three research questions and the primary sources of data used to explore each question are illustrated in Table 1.
Table 1

**Research Questions in Relationship to Survey, Post Survey, and Focus Group Questions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RQ1. How do teachers perceive their abilities to assist grieving children?</th>
<th>Focus Group Question:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Survey Items:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Focus Group Question:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Types of experiences.</td>
<td>How did your previous training help you know what to do?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of experiences with the topic.</td>
<td>Preparedness for other situations (besides death)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estimated amount of previous training?</td>
<td>Aspects that are particularly challenging?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparedness from previous training. (rating)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RQ2. To what extent have teachers’ personal histories, prior training, or experiences in the classroom contributed to their sense of efficacy and level of comfort when dealing with grieving children?</th>
<th>Focus Group Question:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Survey Question:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Focus Group Question:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of confidence (pre-training/focus group)</td>
<td>Observations about children’s reactions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Hours of Training</td>
<td>Developmental perspectives observations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Types of experiences.</td>
<td>Training needed to be better equipped to handle (past) experiences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Situations that would be difficult/impossible to manage in the classroom.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RQ3. Following participation in a professional development activity that presents best practices in support of grieving children, what do teachers view as potentially limiting constraints or facilitating factors when employing those best practices?</th>
<th>Focus Group Question:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Post Survey Question:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Focus Group Question:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of confidence (post focus group)</td>
<td>New or different information presented in the training.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Components of training/discussion attributable to change.</td>
<td>Is there something that you wish you had done differently?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific insights from training/discussion that would likely be incorporated into practice.</td>
<td>Is there something you wish others had done differently?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Comments</td>
<td>Reasons why teachers avoid the topic of death in the classroom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Suggestions to help teachers feel more equipped.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Structures that support/inhibit self-care.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Summary Statements</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Study participants. The preliminary Participant Profile Survey yielded a total of 40 teachers representing six public school districts in western Massachusetts. Ultimately, 37 subjects gave their informed consent via the online introduction page, completed the survey including their grade levels and scheduling availability preferences, and were thus matched to one of seven focus groups conducted over a two-week interval in July 2012.

The sample was dominantly female (86%) with only five male subjects participating (one from the elementary level, one at the middle school level, and three at the high school level). Participants spanned almost all K-12 grade levels and reflected the perspectives of teachers in regular academic settings, teachers serving a broad range of students in special education or Related Arts, and teachers of students attending a vocational high school. Seven school districts were represented. More than half of the teachers in the study (58%) were enrolled from School District A (the community in which the researcher is employed). The remaining participants originated across six other districts.

The study invitation specified the pre-requisite of one year of experience in a public school setting, but attracted a large majority of veteran educators, including one recently retired teacher who was continuing to work as a substitute in her school district. Only one teacher in the sample reported less than 6 years of teaching experience. Across all grade spans, all remaining participants were teachers with at least 6-10 years of experience, and the majority (70%) had been in the profession for over ten years. Table 2 illustrates a composite profile of study participants.
Table 2

**Study Participants (N=37)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<table>
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<th>Grade Level/Type</th>
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<th>Middle</th>
<th>High School</th>
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<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>G</th>
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<table>
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<th>Years of Experience</th>
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<th>5-10</th>
<th>11-20</th>
<th>&gt;20</th>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Other descriptive characteristics of the sample were collected in the Preliminary Participant Profile survey, including the type and frequency of experiences with grief/bereavement issues in the classroom, the amount of previous training, and the self-assessed levels of preparation and confidence when confronting these issues in the classroom. These additional elements will be reported in the context of their links to the specific research questions explored by the study.

**Research Question 1: How do teachers perceive their abilities to assist grieving children?**

The first research question sought to establish an understanding of the ways in which teachers’ ideas about their abilities to help grieving children are constructed. To address this question, the researcher utilized survey data to create a situational portrait of participating teachers and the grieving students that they had encountered in their classrooms. Focus group discussions augmented this understanding within the framework of efficacy as teachers began to
explain, in the context of their experiences, their beliefs about grieving children in the classroom, what is expected of teachers and how well equipped they have felt to meet these expectations. The specific connection of survey and focus group data to the first research question is illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3

Research Question One in Relationship to Survey, Post Survey, and Focus Group Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RQ1. How do teachers perceive their abilities to assist grieving children?</th>
<th>Focus Group Question:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Survey Question:</td>
<td>Introductory statement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of experiences with the topic</td>
<td>Are there aspects that are particularly challenging?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examples of types of experiences</td>
<td>Is there something that you wish you had done differently?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Is there something you wish others had done differently?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Preparedness for other situations (besides death)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Experiences with bereavement-related issues in the classroom: frequency and type.

At the most fundamental level, the identification, and acknowledgement of grief and bereavement related issues in the classroom must precede any attempt that a teacher might make to offer support or assistance. The preliminary survey yielded a basic sketch, from the participants’ points of view, of both the frequency and types of experiences that had been encountered in the classroom. In the related focus group discussions, teachers added a deeper dimension to the types of experiences by discussing themes such as the intensity of impact on a specific student, the intensity of impact in the classroom or community, and the emotional toll on teachers themselves.
Frequency of grief and bereavement related experiences. When asked on the initial survey to estimate how many grief/bereavement-related experiences they had encountered in the course of their professional careers, estimates varied. Most respondents (15) reported only a handful of experiences (between one and five) and an almost equal number (14) reported between 6-10 experiences. A very small number (five) of teachers reported having between 10-20 experiences, and only two chose the option of “more than I can count.” While these retrospective estimates were generally moderate in number, comments made in the focus group discussions suggest that teachers do recognize a larger number of loss-related events in their classrooms in the course of their careers. As noted by one veteran elementary teacher, “Every year there is something that you have to deal with…that spreads throughout the whole environment--somebody's grandmother—grandfather—father—friend—wife—kids. It never ends.” Another participant, reflecting on three decades of experience of teaching in a Related Arts capacity, was especially in tune with the frequency of loss-related events in her classrooms, observing that “When you think of the thousands of kids that I've taught over the years and the volume of kids I see within a week, the chances of encountering somebody with some type of grief are pretty high.” This same teacher also observed that “…when I talk about grief, I'm [also] talking about… divorce. I see divorce as a loss of what was in their lives, that they can never get back,” noting the connection between the frequency of loss and the next aspect that was queried: distinguishing the wide array of grief and bereavement situations that might be encountered in the classroom.

Types of experiences. In both the preliminary survey and their introductory remarks in the focus group environment, teachers were asked to provide examples of the types of grief/bereavement-related situations that they had encountered. The goal of these inquiries, in
relationship to the research question, was to understand the entering orientation of participants’
points of view, looking at the range of situations that teachers may think to include when
considering the needs of grieving children in the classroom and assessing their own response
capacities and options. Having at least one experience with grief in the classroom was a study
pre-requisite, and the preliminary Participant Profile Survey asked teachers to briefly describe
one or more situations that they had encountered. These responses were coded by frequency, as
illustrated in Figure 1. The data were notable in terms of the both the range and concentration of
experiences that were reported by participants in the survey. Death of a parent was the most
frequent type of experience noted by the majority of participants (29). Death of a grandparent
was the second most frequent situation (17). Thirteen teachers reported the experience of a death
of a student in their classroom, and ten teachers indicated that they had dealt with the death of a
student who was not in their classroom, but connected to the larger school community. Fewer
numbers of teachers reflected on grief/bereavement experiences that were a result of other (non-
death) critical events in a child’s life, including death of a pet, illness, natural disaster, violence,
family separation as a result of Department of Children and Families involvement, or
incarceration. Only one teacher mentioned divorce as an example of a grief/bereavement related
situation in the preliminary survey.
Figure 1. Frequency of teacher-recalled events by type. This figure illustrates the range of experiences with grief or bereavement-related situations as described by participants in the preliminary survey.

**Focus group results.** These typologies carried into the opening statements of teachers in the focus group discussions as they were asked to introduce themselves and briefly describe the types of situations they had in mind when thinking about participating in the study. As found with the preliminary survey, loss in the context of a death was the primary topic reflected by teachers in their focus group introductions. Deaths of parents, grandparents, or siblings were most frequent reference points. All groups discussed helping students cope with the death of a peer as being a significant experience that they had faced in their classrooms, although this received greater attention from middle and high school participants. Impacts of suicide, fatal car accidents, or homicides were mentioned in all groups, but high school teachers spoke primarily of student-involved situations while middle and elementary participants spoke of the effects on
their students when these events occurred in their families. Teachers often qualified their responses to suggest a level of magnitude associated with the event, for example, death of a parent as a result of suicide, or loss of a grandparent who had resided with the family and been a very strong influence in a child’s life, or classroom and community reverberations from situations that had received considerable media attention such accidental deaths or traumatic injuries.

Even though the researcher’s scripted introductory comments (Appendix B) stated that any aspect of relevance to them would be considered relevant to the study, some teachers appeared tentative when they included other types of examples in their opening remarks. One elementary teacher began to discuss the impact that the death of a pet had on one of her students, but paused out of concern that it might “diminish the study” before she expressed the opinion that the loss of a pet might be as significant as the loss of a family member for some children. Several teachers at all levels directly asked if it was acceptable to mention a loss that was not specifically related to death. Overall, it seemed that elementary teachers were more likely to draw examples from a range of experiences with their students, while secondary teachers seemed initially less certain about the relevance of other types of losses to the topic.

As depicted in Figure 1, several teachers had entered the study with an already expanded view of grief and bereavement, including examples such as separation from family due to foster placement, loss related to chronic or serious illness, divorce, incarceration, or impacts of recent natural disasters in the local communities (a tornado, a microburst and an unseasonable blizzard occurring in western Massachusetts between June and October, 2011). These points of reference were reflected in preliminary focus group comments. For example, one elementary teacher
shared her impressions of the unique challenges faced when assisting students whose parents are, or have been, incarcerated:

…so that’s a loss for them, an adjustment for the whole family trying to figure out where things are going to end up… and even afterwards when they’re going through their program and get out… they’re not just able to get out and get back into the regular world, so this particular student would have visitations with his father but with someone from the court… with him… it just caused so much anxiety for that poor little kid.

As would be expected from the influence of a focus group environment (Morgan, 1997), once a broader orientation of bereavement-related concerns was introduced by one of the group members, teachers’ subsequent comments tended to recognize and convey the similar idea of recurring impacts from disruptive life events that might be processed or experienced as loss. Table 4 illustrates the range of grief and bereavement situations that participants were able to reflect upon when willing to consider circumstances beyond the death of a parent or someone closely connected to a child.
Table 4

Illustrative comments demonstrating the range of loss-related experiences in the classroom

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event Type</th>
<th>Illustration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Divorce</td>
<td>E2-75: I had a child--whose family was going through a divorce and an awful divorce. I mean some divorces are kinder and gentler to the family, and this one was awful, it was hideous. And this little girl was bereaving the fact that, “My family is gone--I’m no longer going to have the family that I always thought I was going to have.” You know it was that type of thing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terminal illness</td>
<td>M1-015: and I had two students who have lost parents to cancer. So it's kind of been long-term thing that the parents themselves, knew, that it was coming, and dealing with that with them and trying to help the child through</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural disasters</td>
<td>E3-071: The other instance was a little girl last year when we had the tornado, her house… The top of her house got ruined-- completely--devastated, and um she was sad, she was a child who wasn't a strong student, and she just declined after that happened and um it was June also, that we have the tornado so I think she just pretty much gave up, but um it's something that's near and dear to my heart, how to approach these children who are in need of support,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High profile situations/violence</td>
<td>M1-046: I have a little boy whose best friends and cousins with that young boy, xx, who was shot by a gun. It was an accident. So this little boy that I'm going to have has been affected by a tremendously. Has a difficult time coming to school wants to go home is very emotional and I feel like I'm not prepared to handle that situation appropriately. So I just want to make sure that I'm going to do the right thing for him and not only for him but for kids in the future.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Circles of impact after a traumatic event, such as suicide</td>
<td>M1-043: … but nothing really prepares you to see grieving teenagers crying everywhere… I had a child in my classroom whose sister was good friends with the girl so he had issues from it and it was like never ending and it touched everyone, everywhere and it was just one of those things where you think you might be [referring to graduate coursework], “well I read about this. Well I wrote about this.” But then when it comes time to do it, you don't feel prepared.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Greatest challenges. Some of the clearest windows into the ways in which participants perceived their abilities to assist grieving children came from the focus group prompts and discussions about situations that stood out as most exigent in the course of their careers. These
data were derived from thematic coding of the words used to capture the intensity of these experiences in introductory comments and in response to focus group prompts on the more significant challenges teachers had faced. The major categories of challenges stemmed from:

- Lack of training
- Classroom dynamics (balancing the needs of an individual child with the demands of, and effects upon, other students in the classroom)
- Personal proximity and managing one’s own emotions

These themes recurred throughout the study, becoming further developed in the context of the training module and the discussions that ensued.

*Lack of training.* References to training were woven throughout teachers’ views on the challenges that they had faced in the myriad of situations that had been encountered. In every group throughout all grade levels, numerous remarks were coded to teachers’ attributions of discomfort because of their lack of training. These included explicit comments about the absence of training, and also comments that conveyed an underlying sense of not knowing what to do, such as worries about saying the wrong thing, modeling inappropriate or avoidant responses, or crossing personal boundaries. Included in Table 5 are illustrations of ways in which participants connected their lack of training to their ideas about the greatest challenges that they had faced. While the specific topic of training was explored in greater depth in subsequent questions, these initial statements helped to frame the progression of participants’ views as the research progressed.
Table 5

Illustrative comments demonstrating concerns attributed to lack of training.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Illustrative comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fear of saying the wrong thing</td>
<td>E1-39: . . . you know, like everyone I’m very interested in knowing the right thing to do and what to avoid saying. . . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modeling appropriate response</td>
<td>E1-39: And that's why our reaction is so important because they're going to do these things and what's the appropriate and the good modeling and empathetic [response]…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher role: Concern about crossing boundaries</td>
<td>E2-75: . . . I don’t think I have had any preparation within the district on how to deal with it, what to say, what to do, what are the parameters, how far can you go . . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disconnect between training and demands of an extreme situation</td>
<td>M1-012: I don't know about you but I never got any training anywhere to prepare me for this--you know--nine-year-old little boy that had no parents. And what you do.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoiding and/or rationalizing avoidance</td>
<td>E2-75: I probably did as much avoidance as I possibly could rather than digging into it. It was just saying, “Okay, you know,” thinking that, “this will be your safe harbor to forget about that” when you know sometimes they’re not forgetting about that . . .</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Classroom dynamics. Issues related to grief and loss do not enter the classroom in isolation, and there are likely to be wide variations in children’s responses even when looking at one type of event. Participants frequently described the challenges that they faced when considering the needs of any one child’s experience within the context of their other classroom responsibilities. This included the issues of differentiating and accommodating the unique reactions of children, the collateral impacts that might occur, and the pressure to meet the already significant learning needs of a typical classroom of students, as illustrated in Table 6.
Table 6

*Illustrative comments demonstrating concerns attributed to classroom dynamics.*

**Category: Classroom dynamics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Illustrative comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Matching teacher response to unique needs of individual children, while balancing other classroom responsibilities | E2-22: You know, like the kid that was stone-faced, they’re having tuna fish and the other who’s sobbing, you wonder, you know it’s almost the one that’s sobbing that’s easier because the one that’s stone-faced… “What’s going on in there? Are you mad? Are you sad? Are you confused? And how can I get you to talk to me?”  
E2-75: … [He] waved goodbye to her as she got on the school bus, walked into the house and dropped dead of a heart attack. So it was very tragic for that family and…again, I’m not sure that I was adequately prepared on how to deal with this child. I did the best I could, but you know I also have twenty-three other little ducklings… how much can I focus? |
| Triggers in the curriculum | E1-07: (to E1-30) and piggybacking on what you said, every year there’s someone who is dying of cancer or something and we have these holidays and we have these timelines and I don't even know how to approach these kids on that, and I think that's one of those things that okay like we’re doing Mother's Day cards a Father's Day cards or in second grade we’re doing our biological timeline and there are gaps and losses in these children minds, “oh yeah you walked when you were 11 months…I didn't know you then but I'm sure that's what you did.” … How do you fill those gaps in their lives to make the transition? |
| Collateral impacts in the classroom | E1-18: …what do you do what do you say to the other kids in the classroom? …the kids kind of knew, they knew things, they knew something was going on and the girls that were close to her [knew] that the father wasn't well and… and they would sometimes get more upset than she would… |
| Facilitating interpersonal dynamics | E1-30: and kids will say things very bluntly to other kids… little kids will… you know they’re still just walk right up and say did your mother die of cancer? And just that matter-of-fact way and you have to stop and not necessarily protect the other child from it but it's just the way they say things to one another.  
E1-11: So it was I think it was her depression and her withdrawal and her loss of school affected her friendships and it was a huge, huge issue and it was really traumatic for her. So how |
we deal with the other students, absolutely.

· HS2-070: and then sometimes the students’ responses. Are not only different, but often antagonizing. You know, one student’s response will make another student angry: “Why are you responding that way, this is how I feel!” And then, you know, trying to mediate that, is something that I feel terribly ill equipped to do.

*Personal proximity and managing one’s own emotions.* Participants were acutely aware of their own emotions as they explored the topic of grief and loss. In six out of the seven groups, at least one participant had a visibly emotional reaction to their own or others’ accounts of situations that had been experienced. Sometimes, they described a loss that had been intensely close and personal for them, such as the death of a student that they had taught, or the terminal illness of a colleague, and the challenges in confidence that they faced when having to deliver a scripted response in the classroom, as captured by one high school participant’s observation that “You know, this loss affected me too--greatly. So am I supposed to be the wise person in the room that knows something? Or am I supposed to say, ‘Hey guys I'm just as confused as you are?’ And I never know what I'm supposed to say.” Other times, a student’s circumstances might bring a teacher to a specific place and time in their own lives that represent an unbearable situation. Personal emotions seemed to create the largest challenge when the event was sudden and extreme, or when a child presented sensitive information in the midst of a lesson or class discussion. Some participants were readily aware of their own limitations when discussing certain topics related to intense grief or loss, as one middle school teacher described her personal difficulty when responding to a student who was grieving the loss of a family friend’s suicide, “How do you put your feelings out of it and help somebody else?” Table 7 presents comments that are illustrative of the experiences shared by teachers as they reflected upon the challenges they faced when trying to manage their own emotions and reactions.
### Table 7

**Illustrative comments demonstrating concerns attributed to personal/emotional proximity.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Illustrative Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intensity of their own reactions:</td>
<td>· E1-09: how do you separate your own grief and feelings and trying to help the student?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>· E3-27: One of the instances I experienced with the death of a student. . . . What was so hard was dealing with the students, as I was grieving at the same time. And, um, I was at a loss as to what to say to them so that I wasn't bringing out my own grief. I was trying to help them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>· M1-043 And it's hard to separate your own feelings for, you know, this boy saying, “Well, my sister's friend. . . . She took her own life.” And I'm looking at it as an adult, saying like you're right this is awful, but she couldn't see ten minutes into the future and think this isn't the way to go? . . . How do you help somebody else? How do you put your feelings out of it and help somebody else?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>· M2-023: And so I try to talk to them, so that's been hard for me to kind of figure out cause I'm going through it myself, and at the same time I'm trying to maintain some kind of calm with them . . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>· HS2-070: …and we've had the mandatory &quot;Okay, you're going to talk about it with the kids&quot; and for me it's always been dead silence. I ask all the open-ended questions that I'm supposed to ask, but students don't talk, and so I'm always torn—about—Well, how human [should I be?] You know, this loss affected me too—greatly. So am I supposed to be the wise person in the room that knows something? Or am I supposed to say, hey guys I'm just as confused as you are? You know. And I never know what I'm supposed to say.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>· M1-046: . . . but a girl and two of her sisters perished in a fire that was caused by the boyfriend of a mother, and one of the girls was in my classroom and that was really—just—Everybody stops. You can't concentrate. That's all they think about. I still have her picture in my drawer in my classroom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>· HS1-035: She was stuck under the car from what I understand. And so she passed away and I found out when I came into work that morning and it was really hard because I had to tell a student she was really close with (voice cracks) and she—flipped—out—it was so hard. And then I had to tell the class that she was in, so that’s the one that struck me.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Teachers’ personal comfort level. · E3-027 . . . it’s for me, a fearful thing. And dealing with kids and the unknown as to how are they responding to the death of whomever, um, approaching each child individually and being appropriate in the response that I have to comfort them . . . (turns to E3-031) and you seem to have this naturally—I don’t.

· HS2-070: . . . and then how do you deal with that? You don’t want to just ignore it, but again, I don’t feel equipped to-- to do anything about it . . .

Research Question One Summary. While most participants were initially apt to take a more narrow view of grief and bereavement within the specific context of death and estimated relatively few experiences in a preliminary survey, in the group discussions teachers indeed acknowledged a wide array of grief/bereavement situations that they have encountered in the classroom. Examples included divorce, chronic illness, incarceration, job loss, death of pets, and natural disasters. Insofar as preliminary survey data, elementary teachers in the study tended to be more initially inclusive of many events in the lives of their children that could be processed as significant losses, whereas teachers of older students focused more on death-related topics. In the focus group process, however, it seemed that at all levels, once one participant introduced a broader range of experiences, the other participants would frequently follow suit. In the analysis and thematic coding of focus group data, it appeared that while teachers were understandably challenged by the magnitude or anomalies of a specific event, such as the suicide of a student or parent of a student, or a particularly high-profile situation, their confidence or sense of efficacy was calibrated by many other factors such as:

· whether or not they felt trained to handle the situation, including saying the right thing or understanding their role;

· managing the needs of the situation within the context of other responsibilities; or
• their own proximity/emotional response to the situation, including personal reactions to sudden events.

These basic themes were woven into the threads of their continued discussions, and are thus revisited in the context of the other research questions.

**Research Question Two: To what extent have teachers’ personal histories, prior training, or experiences in the classroom contributed to their sense of efficacy and level of comfort when dealing with grieving children?**

The second research question explored the more subjective influences upon efficacy and level of comfort that teachers feel when responding to the needs of grieving or bereaved children in their classrooms. Many of the key themes introduced in the previous findings were further developed in this context. Data collected and analyzed included two key questions from the Preliminary Participant Profile Survey specific to participants’ self-assessed level of confidence, and their reported level of prior training. Focus group questions and discussions encouraged participants to reflect upon the situations that they’d encountered in their personal lives. Teachers were asked to describe some of the reactions that they had observed in the classroom or school setting, and were invited to reflect upon what training, experience or knowledge they had drawn from when determining how to process and respond to the situation. They were also asked to consider any circumstances that, in their opinion, might be beyond their capabilities or beyond what could be reasonably expected of a teacher in the classroom. Table 8 depicts the relationship of survey and focus group data to the research goals of Question Two:
Table 8

**Relationship of Survey Questions and Focus Group Questions to Research Question 2**

RQ2. To what extent have teachers’ personal histories, knowledge (prior training), or experiences in the classroom contributed to their sense of efficacy and level of comfort when dealing with grieving children?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Question</th>
<th>Focus Group Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Types of experiences.</td>
<td>Observations about children’s reactions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When you consider the experiences you have had, how confident are you in your abilities to adequately address the needs of grieving children in your classroom?</td>
<td>How did your previous training help you know what to do?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Hours of Training</td>
<td>Training needed to be better equipped to handle (past) experiences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparedness from previous training. (rating)</td>
<td>Situations that would be difficult/impossible to manage in the classroom.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Survey results: Levels of confidence.** The underlying problem of practice at the foundation of the investigation was that many teachers are not confident in their abilities to address the needs of grieving/bereaved children in the classroom. To determine the extent to which this applied to the teachers who would participate in the study, the Preliminary Participant Profile survey included a question that asked potential subjects, on the basis of their previous experiences, to estimate how confident they felt in their abilities to adequately address the needs of grieving children in their classrooms. On a five-point scale, respondents could state whether they felt extremely confident, confident, neutral, had some reservations, or felt not at all confident.

As demonstrated in Figure 2, looking at the participants across all grade levels, only eight teachers expressed feeling extremely confident (1) or confident (7) about their abilities. Of the remaining 27, slightly more than half (14) expressed their uncertainty or ambivalence by endorsing the “neutral” choice, and thirteen said that they either had some reservations (10) or felt not at all confident (3).
Figure 2

Level of confidence

![Bar chart showing level of confidence](image)

Figure 2. Participants preliminary self-assessed confidence profile survey. This figure illustrates the distribution of self-assessed levels of confidence reported by subjects in the preliminary participant profile survey.

Focus group data. While the survey data revealed that only a few of the teachers participating in the study felt confident of their abilities when encountering grief/bereavement situations, the focus group discussions explored contributing factors. Themes generated by group discussion suggested that there were several variables that played a role in how comfortable or confident teachers felt, clustered within three main areas:

- Teachers’ personal histories
- Previous training
- Teachers’ perceptions of the difficulty or intensity of the circumstances that precipitated the need to respond

As discussions and clarifying questions became more vivid, the focus group dynamics also became more apparent, with teachers frequently building upon each other’s ideas, encouraging each other to provide more information, and offering emergent insights that were either
confirmed or clarified by fellow participants. Selected segments illustrative of both the content and process of these conversations are included within the text of this section.

**Personal history.** For many study participants, personal history seemed to create a very significant reference point from which they processed the needs of bereaved children and considered the challenges that teachers might face when grief/bereavement enters the classroom. Many participants shared highly personal stories and established deeply emotional connections to the situations that they described. As previously noted, it was not unusual for teachers to be visibly emotional when speaking about grief and loss and the sadness that they had witnessed or experienced themselves. In six out of the seven sessions, at least one teacher became tearful either while speaking or in response to another participant’s description of a situation. The most common orientations seemed to be (a) personal losses, i.e., teachers describing their own experience in losing a parent or close relative at a young age or relating to an experience that they had with a family member’s reaction to loss; and (b) teachers reflecting on their own cultural imprints, such as upbringing or family norms, and describing these impacts upon their comfort level in either discussing death or considering the needs of grieving children.

**Personal losses.** Many teachers in the study drew from a deep well of personal experience as they talked about how loss has impacted their reactions in the classroom. One elementary teacher felt that processing loss in her own life had improved her ability to better understand students’ experiences, stating that “…it was great for kids because it was also helpful for yourself in thinking through your own experience with death--like how I felt--like okay, that was normal.” This perspective seemed particularly true of teachers who had experienced the death of a parent and were then able to incorporate this as a backdrop for potential aspects of a
student’s experience. One elementary teacher recounted her memory of attending her own father’s wake as an example during a discussion about children attending funerals:

E3-031: So many kids are left out of wakes and funerals. And…

E3-071: it’s closure—you know, depending on the time-- (other members express agreement)

E3-031: yeah—and you know, once that’s done, you can’t go back—and

E3-057: You know, I lost my dad when I was 25 and he was 52, and …I saw him in the cof—the casket—and I kept going back and kept going back to realize that he’s dead…I could not get over that he passed away. And, um, I can understand how that can be closure for a lot of people, and probably children. You know, to understand that reality of death.

Sometimes, the parallels that teachers drew between a students’ situation and events in their own lives created great empathy, but also some emotional challenges, as was the case in one middle school teacher’s poignant recollection of a personal flashback when one of his sixth grade students continued to speak about his deceased father in the present tense:

M2-051: [His] father… he had cancer, went into the hospital, and pretty much he was going in to be cured he was going in for a [procedure], doctors and everybody were positive, and he died unexpectedly. But the boy that I had in my classroom, first half of the year, kept on talking about things that he was doing with his father—“My dad’s going to come in for a conference,” or at open house—“My mom’s going to go to my sisters’ teachers and dad will come see you.” It had gotten better throughout the year, but for me-- I was in middle school myself when my father died, (Researcher’s note: # gets teary) and it’s not just when the
person dies, in fact when you have a terminal illness that's almost the relief—but-you know—childhood shouldn’t have to end—it’s the innocence of childhood. It was when we found out that he had cancer-- that pretty much-- (Researcher’s note: # struggling to maintain composure here)--yeah, your childhood innocence is gone then.

These personal experiences often shaped subjects’ beliefs about how they should respond as teachers and, for some, created frustrations regarding the extent to which their colleagues might not have the same depth of understanding, as their schools’ approach may have been to move on more quickly than that with which they were comfortable. One elementary teacher explained that even though she was a young adult when her mother had died many years earlier, she still felt this loss as a defining aspect of her life and clearly understood that the grief process could not be confined to an acute phase of time after the event:

E3-28: I think that that has been key in my life. That, that trauma has made me a more sensitive person, and you do get stronger in the broken places. But--I still grieve. (Voice cracks) Still miss her, right? (Group assent) Or him? Or grandfather? So, you know, there's still that, um-- lack of--despite the fact that I'm in a very compassionate building with some wonderful people, I think there is still this "well okay it's been a couple of months, they've had the summer,” (sigh) so we are all in a different place, and different level of you know, sensitivity?

And ability? Training? To really be able to help kids like this…

As illustrated by this teacher’s remark, the lines between personal history, training and classroom experience can converge around issues such as how long teachers might consider a tragic event as being a significant factor in that student’s life. A middle school teacher also recalled how the
“carry on” message that she had received when she herself was a grieving student was relevant to her thoughts on how schools should respond:

M1-46: In high school my very best friend…died in a tragic car accident and…at the time I didn't realize it but when I look back a few years after the event and realize, no one dealt with it. There really weren't any adults in the building that helped all of us grieve through it and we were all together in this one. [Science] class. She was a part of it and there were 16 of us. … We just stopped working.

We wouldn't let anybody sit in her seat.

_Cultural imprints._ The cultural imprints of upbringing were described as having influence on the way in which teachers perceived their roles or effectiveness when interacting with grieving children in the classroom. Some teachers had a very clear sense of the bearing that cultural norms may have had on their own attitudes, as one high school teacher noted,

HS2-70: …and I come from a background where nobody talks about anything…

You know, I've got the (nationality) heritage. No one talks. (group laughter) so talking about death is not something that I grew up around. And so now that I'm in a position of authority when it comes up, I just want to run for the hills.

The following exchange among elementary school participants provides further insight on the imprints that upbringing may have on teachers’ ease when discussing the topic of death with students, and also demonstrates the extent to which the focus group environment was able to generate emergent awareness among participants:

E2-25: Well actually, [xx] just made a comment that also brought it up. I guess some of it also comes from my background… Parental background--what religion you are brought up, and what is said to you, and so on. And the way that
I was brought up, things were very--my parents are very open--so some of it comes from that, for me, I think my own comfort level. It was all discussed. So I'm comfortable with it. Discussing it, and letting a child talk about what's being said to them--

E2-75: And honestly, that is what is a variable with everybody, is that you have different experiences, (E2-25: Oh, yeah!) You’ve been given thoughts to that. I think that’s what the training does, is help even out some of those things. (E2-25: I agree.) E2-75: because…I'm very sarcastic and I use humor and kind of like this dark humor because my [children] grew up knowing that if I died I wanted them to put a dump sticker on me and bring me to the landfill. And I always said it is a joke and they knew it was a joke, but I said, that was my way of kind of handling it like and making kind of light of it, and--I think everybody is different so I never felt that I handled this stuff in the classroom well…

E2-25: Was it your background? Do you feel that some of it comes from your own experiences, your own relationships?

E2-75: Well I come from a Catholic background, where you would go to the typical two days of wakes, and then the funeral, but I never really had anybody close to me die until I was 17, so I was older…

E2-22: I agree. I've never thought of it before, but I think it's your background. My parents are very open about death and what happens… And they were very good about asking, what do you want to do? How much do you want to know?

**Prior training.** In the context of the second research question, training quickly emerged as an important theme in participants’ overall initial thoughts on the topic of bereavement in the
classroom. Direct exploration of participants’ prior training was central to the understanding of how subjects self-assessed their capacities to assist grieving children. Three preliminary survey questions provided the foundation for subsequent focus group discussion on the type, amount, and impact of prior training. Participants were asked to describe their previous training experiences on topics related to grief and bereavement in the classroom, estimate the number of hours of training completed, and consider how well prepared they felt on the basis of the training that they had sought or received.

_Type, amount, and impact of prior training._ The absence of formal training was conspicuous among study participants. More than half (21 teachers) said that they could not recall receiving any previous training related to the topic. Almost one third of the sample (12 teachers) stated that they had independently sought information on their own. Only six participants stated that training had been provided by their school/district as professional development, and seven teachers noted that they had received training in the form of relevant materials provided by school counselors or administrators in response to a specific incident. Even for teachers who had sought or received training, the amount of training estimated by study participants was sparse. Only three teachers believed that they had received ten or more hours of training on the topic. About 20% estimated between one and three hours of training, and 16% stated that they had received between four and ten hours of training. The absence or presence of training was an important aspect, but the equally relevant question was whether or not the training they’d had was viewed as helpful to their feelings of being prepared. In the Preliminary Participant Survey, most subjects did not feel that their prior training had prepared them to respond to the needs of children in their classroom. Only four teachers endorsed the choice of “very well prepared” or “well prepared” and four teachers considered their preparation to be
“adequate.” In contrast, fourteen teachers felt that they were either “not very” or “totally unprepared,” nearly equal to the 15 participants who stated that they had received no prior training at all.

In response to the specific focus group question asking about how previous training had potentially helped them to feel better prepared, most teachers used this as an opportunity to reflect upon the ways in which they felt that their lack of training had impeded their effectiveness when encountering grief and bereavement situations in the classroom. At the lower extreme, this connection was captured by one elementary teacher’s statement that “I never felt that I handled this stuff in the classroom well. I had more than avoidance… because I didn't really… have the training…” Another teacher reduced the problem to the most basic terms, stating: “I don't think we've gotten any training, so that would be a gap!” Most teachers discussed the absence of training in the context of professional development within their respective school districts, but in each focus group at all three levels teachers also acknowledged that this was not an issue that received a great deal of attention in pre-service teacher preparation:

E2-025: I mean when you enter your undergraduate, did anyone ever broach the subject (laughing) I mean, did you ever talk about the grieving child? I didn't even get through my student teaching and there was a child that died. And, you don't talk about it. It certainly isn't part of our required undergraduate study. You don't talk about it.

Corroborating survey results, teachers who had participated in some form of training did not necessarily feel that their training had prepared them for the intensity of certain types of experiences, as noted by one middle school teacher who concluded her description of a particularly challenging situation that she had encountered by declaring, “I don't know about you
but I never got any training anywhere to prepare me for this, you know, nine-year-old little boy that had no parents. And what you do.” Another teacher in the same group concurred, noting that even though she had been pursuing graduate study in school counseling, when she had encountered a tragic situation in her classroom “it was like never ending, and it touched everyone, everywhere, and it was just one of those things where you think you might be, ‘Well, I read about this. Well, I wrote about this.’ But then when it comes time to do it, you don't feel prepared.”

**Perceptions of difficulty or intensity of the experience.** While highly individualized, a teacher’s experiences in the classroom and their perceptions about the level of difficulty or intensity of the situation appeared to have bearing upon feelings of confidence or level of comfort. Relevant themes within this category remained highly consistent with those previously reported:

- Unanticipated triggers within the curriculum
- Sensationalized or extremely sensitive situations
- The challenge of simultaneously managing classroom dynamics
- Sense of loss of control.

**Unanticipated triggers in the curriculum.** Several teachers noted that they struggled when the curriculum content presented unintentional triggers for students, and teachers at all levels recalled times in the typical school year when great sensitivity was required. Table 9 illustrates participants’ examples of seemingly routine classroom activities that could provoke discomfort and difficulty for both the students and the teacher.
Table 9

*Illustrative comments demonstrating examples of triggers in the curriculum*

| Holidays | M2-051: I had a neat assignment last year, make a Father’s Day card using ten of the vocabulary words. The kids love doing it.  
M2-023: But for those who don’t have fathers…  
M2-051: A couple of kids, one girl who lives with her grandparents, the paper’s blank and she’s visibly upset, and she’s like, “I don’t want my father to get this, can I make it for my grandfather?” And I’m like, “Absolutely.” And then that one kid whose father… I totally overlooked it… and he’s just sitting there… (M2-050: Right, his father’s dead?) …he ended up making one, asked if he could bring it to him in the cemetery. |
| --- | --- |
| Curriculum content | M2-051: one thing that became an issue and has been an issue over the years, I teach human biology and health, and there’s about a week’s worth of lessons on disease, and we talk about cancer, and it’s tough to talk about when a kid just lost his father to cancer, or somebody else loss their parent… I don’t know where to stop. It’s part of the curriculum, it’s an important part of the curriculum, but it’s -- I mean I’ve had kids over the years who have just asked if they could go to the nurse, and like absolutely… absolutely.  
HS2-070: Teaching English--We do *Dead Poets Society*… which has suicide, where he shoots himself, so it's like, you know, how do you have these things interact? [later in session] I had ninth grade for 10 years, I’ve taught *Romeo and Juliet* every year--the thought entered my head every year, what if some kid kills himself while were reading this play? What do I do then? What will I do then? You know? (Researcher: did it ever happen?) HS2-070: no, thank God. |
| Special projects | M2-050: We had a group discussion [after the student’s research project presentation.] … I never knew we had so many students that had either a divorce or separation or different losses, it just all of a sudden started coming out.  
*Highly publicized or sensitive situations:* For some teachers, their level of confidence was most challenged when responding to an unusually difficult or sensitive situation. The topic of suicide or homicide, for example, was discussed as a challenge for teachers at all grade levels. |
Table 10

Illustrative comments demonstrating challenges of highly publicized or sensitive situations

Suicide of parent  E2-022: And I think it’s just real… You know, cancer—you-- you, it’s sick; there’s and end. You know even heart attack there’s more justification, they loved you, it was an accident, and as hard as that can-- but suicide. It’s just really hard to explain, and to grapple as an adult, and as a child, I mean, I can only--you just feel like, “Well what, they didn’t love me?” Like, “So they left me?” I mean there’s just so many questions. I feel like no matter who you are and how big your expertise is, it’s very difficult to comfort.

Homicide/incarceration  E2-075: I am thinking of a situation we had at XX school…[describes an attempted murder in a family]… It was a very public thing. [Parent] ended up going to jail, and the children just-- all of those things--I mean it was just their life. That situation that's out of your control but it changes everything about your life— forever—um—you know, [parent] was in jail, … so that was really difficult..

Student suicide  M2-023: we had a student who [possibly committed suicide] and we didn’t get a lot of information from that but it was very difficult in the classroom…we were sent an email to read to our students about it and I was extremely uncomfortable about that because I had no information and “how are they going to handle this and what am I--” and we had to read it within the next five minutes and I didn’t have time to even comprehend what was going on. So I just felt very… a lot of teachers were very upset and very … felt that that was handled in a way that was not comfortable for any of us.

Classroom dynamics. As noted previously, grief does not occur in isolation in the classroom. Teachers often must confront the dual challenge of supporting the child at the center of an event, and then managing the wide range of potential responses among the peers. These challenges were often characterized by their developmental nuances. Elementary teachers discussed the ways that classmates could be more matter-of-fact about displays of emotion in the classroom, such as crying, but might be confused and fearful when they learn about the source of a grieving student’s distress.
E2-22: and I think on your [the teacher’s] end it's very much centered on the child it is going through it. And when you know the rest of your class, especially when they're young--the rest of your class, doesn't know. If the a child is crying, they know to comfort the crier--to hug, you know, to pat their back, but they don't know what to say. They don't know what to say or how to react. They have questions, what did he die how did he die they're going to go home and ask their parents. They're going to ask the child. Some aren't going to ask the child. Really close friendships, now aren't friendships anymore because you have all that class dynamic--especially at a young age, and I think about…

E2-75: someone who's been on this earth for seven years, right?

E2-22: Right, exactly! And them… We struggle as adults on what the right thing to say is, they have a really hard time with grappling with it too, and then you got residual fears, well it happened to your dad, is my dad next? (E2-75: That's an important point.) E2-22: and if I hang out with you, is my dad [going] to go next if I'm still your friend? And that's a valid concern for them. It's a fear!

Middle and high school teachers also encountered difficulties when navigating through the diverse range of reactions that older students might have when some students have detailed knowledge about an event and other students are completely unaware.

M2-023: [The student] that got killed in [an accident] and they just sentenced the man that had done that so the kids towards the end of the year were starting to talk about it a lot--and you don’t know whether or not--and it’s a weird position--some are talking about it and some are not, [and] you don’t want to traumatize the whole group.
**Sense of loss of control.** In the analysis of these data relative to participants’ sense of confidence and their perception of challenge, a common denominator became apparent. Teachers acknowledged the discomfort that arises from feeling a loss of control, as one high school teacher observed,

   HS-17: That's the hardest thing, especially in an educational setting because we all know so much about so many things, and were so good at organizing and controlling our classroom and being on top of so many things, juggling so many balls at the same time and this is the one that we can't do a damn thing about.

   You know? It's terrifying.

An exchange between two middle school participants revealed a similar concern:

   M2-069: a lot of it is about us wanting to have some sense of control…”what the hell am I going to do IF…”

   M2-050: but what do you do when you can’t let go of that control?

Whether it was the sense of being blindsided by an unanticipated event or student reaction, or the personal identification with a child’s grief, or perception that one’s training was not well matched to the demands of the situation, the greatest challenges could often be characterized by circumstances that felt beyond the teachers’ control.

**Research Question Two Summary.** Very few of the teachers in the study perceived themselves as confident when considering their abilities to assist grieving children in the classroom. In preliminary survey results and focus group-generated data, study participants made many direct connections between their level of comfort and confidence, and their self-assessed level of preparedness, personal backgrounds, and their actual experiences with grieving children in the classroom. Most conspicuous was the general absence of prior training among
teachers participating in the study. Even for those teachers who reported previous training, the amount was sparse and not typically considered to be a match for the actual situations that teachers had encountered. Most reference points for training were opportunities provided by school districts, but teachers also acknowledged that their pre-service experiences had not supplied them with the tools to respond. In the absence of training, many teachers drew from their own personal experiences with grief and loss, with several participants relating to the topic on the basis of losses that they may have experienced in childhood or even later as adults. Usually this tended to facilitate sensitivity towards their students, but occasionally teachers described situations in which they had been burdened by these memories as they attempted to maintain calm objectivity in the classroom. When characterizing situations in which they felt the greatest gap between their sense of confidence and the demands placed upon them, participants’ examples clustered around several categories: unanticipated triggers in the curriculum, events that were highly publicized or sensationalized, and the variables of classroom dynamics. While teachers used very different examples to convey their challenges in these areas, the common link seemed to be those situations in which teachers felt out of control. The next question provided participants with the opportunity to examine these variables in the context of best practice recommendations.

**Research Question Three: Following participation in a professional development activity that presents best practices in support of grieving children, what do teachers view as supports and potentially limiting constraints to employing those best practices?**

The third research question was intended to delve into the complex relationship between best practice and actual practice. Its goal was to illuminate the realities of teachers’ day-to-day experiences that create barriers to providing the support that grieving children might need. As
they considered the various components of best practice described in the module, there were a range of factors that teachers focused on that might present limits or constraints on their capacity to implement recommended strategies. Data analyzed included the coded transcripts from the discussions that ensued after the training module had been presented, and results of an optional post-session survey administered approximately six weeks after the training/discussion component had been completed. For this question, the focus group discussion will be presented first, followed by results obtained from the Post-Session Survey. The relationship of focus group and survey questions to the research goal of question three has been similarly reversed in Table 11 to represent the emergence of the Post-Survey questions from the data obtained through the focus group analysis.

Table 11

**Relationship of Focus Group and Post Survey Questions to Research Question Three (RQ3)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Group Question</th>
<th>Post Survey Question:</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New or different information presented in the training.</td>
<td>Specific insights from training/discussion that would likely be incorporated into practice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there something that you wish you had done differently?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there something you wish others had done differently?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasons why teachers avoid the topic of death in the classroom.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structures that support/inhibit self-care.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggestions to help teachers feel more equipped.</td>
<td>Level of confidence (post focus group)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closing Comments</td>
<td>Components of training/discussion attributable to change.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
While there were common themes among groups and across the three grade levels, there were some differences in how some of these themes might manifest developmentally in elementary and secondary settings, and these are noted in the data analysis.

**New or different information generated from the training.** Upon completion of the training module, participants were asked if there had been any information presented in the training that had been new to them, or presented in a way that was different from what they may have seen in previous training experiences. The purpose of this question was to provide an opportunity for discussion of the training topics while probing, in a non-threatening manner, any concepts that may have either been in conflict with views that had been expressed prior to the presentation, or had become crystallized into new insights. There were three concepts from the module that received greatest attention from participants and prompted the most discussion regarding the obstacles that teachers may face when applying recommended best practices in the classroom:

- Scope, frequency and duration of grief
- The language of response
- Guidance around wakes, funerals and memorials

**Frequency, scope, and duration of grief.** Even after they had established, in their own opening remarks, that grief/bereavement issues were common in their teaching experiences, participants expressed surprise at the statistics presented regarding the number of children that are impacted by grief and loss. HSI-041: “I was surprised to learn…I think it was 5% of kids that have lost a parent. I didn't realize it was that high. That's a huge number.” When recognizing the likely magnitude of the issue within the school-age population, conversations often extended to the scope and longitudinal impact that a traumatic event might have on a child.
Participants agreed that most attention is focused on a child at the point of impact of a particular event, such as the death of a parent, and even though the loss will continue to be experienced at specific intersections of development, or re-experienced through some of the routine activities in the school year, this may be outside of the teacher’s view.

E2-063: One thought I had was that it wasn't just the loss of the person, but it disrupts the whole system. It disrupts the normality of their daily lives. So I guess when you hear about it, you don't really think about that whole picture. I mean I think you do as much as you can, but to hear that it does affect-- I guess it created an awareness for me today. But it affects, not just their school, it affects their home life, it affects their activities outside of school, that normalcy that they had before.

While this insight was expressed across all grade levels, an even more fundamental concern became apparent at the middle and high school levels regarding the likelihood that teachers would know whether or not a child had experienced a tragic event even if it had happened earlier in their lives. Teachers of older students indicated that this knowledge might never be communicated formally and they could entirely miss something of tremendous significance, a situation that haunts one middle school teacher who also served as an athletics coach:

M2-051: … the entire team showed up [when an award had been established in honor of a deceased parent of a team member]… I had not known that another kid on the team… his mother or father had died… I just didn’t know it… I think one of the biggest regrets I had… I didn’t find out ‘til after the season ended…

(Researcher’s note: visibly emotional and haunted by this memory) I should have known… I can’t imagine what that kid was going through
Elementary teachers in the study seemed more confident that they would have access to in-depth information about their students, citing the frequency of parent-teacher communication, parent-teacher conferences, and practices such as special/confidential concerns lists generated by school nurses, or parent questionnaires at the beginning of a school year.

E2-075: every year when I sent them my letter welcoming them, I also sent a parent questionnaire or feedback sheet…


Even teachers of younger students, however, gave examples of experiences in which they might learn about something significant from a child, such as a divorce or a death, and not be certain about whether or not the parent(s) intended to share the information. When the family is forthcoming, teachers interpret this as an invitation to be involved and to offer support to the child. When information comes from the student, or indirectly from another source in the community, teachers are left to struggle with how far they should go to pursue the information because, as one elementary teacher noted, “you have to be willing to go beyond that role of the teacher of the child. Now you become somebody in relationship to the parent and that's difficult.”

**The language of response.** The training module included concrete guidance for teachers on how to respond. This included a segment with examples of unhelpful remarks that well-intentioned adults might make to students, and offered alternative language that would convey
support while leaving the door open for further communication. This section generated the most
correspondence in all focus groups at all grade levels. Teachers acknowledged that finding the right
words was something that they often struggled with, and most reactions suggested that this was
the most unique and the most valuable aspect of the training module. One of the more
controversial discussion points sparked by this segment, however, was whether to share personal
information with students as a way to demonstrate empathy or understanding. While the training
module suggested that it was not helpful to attempt to compare losses, most teachers expressed
the belief that the ability to share a similar experience was useful when finding ways to connect
with grieving children. Secondary-level teachers seemed to be more likely to use examples from
their own experiences, subscribing to the view of one middle school teacher who noted that,
“Sharing personal information may be highly appropriate and that may open the door for them to
share. That connection.” Several participants strongly defended their use of personal examples
and challenged the guidance that had been given in the training module, as illustrated by a high
school teacher who felt very strongly that sharing the experience of her own father’s death had
helped establish a better connection to grieving students:

HS1-021: It’s not about my story, it’s about ‘I’ve experienced the same thing that
you experienced--it’s really difficult.’ And that it’s never been about my story
and that’s why the, ‘what to say what not to say,’ really kind of bothered me. I
can understand where they're coming from, it's not supposed to be about your
story…but I think kids view us as not having the same experiences that they’ve
had and I felt that it was important for them to realize that, you know, when I was
your age this happened to me too and it's hard.
Even as they admitted that they had used self-disclosure when reaching out to grieving students, teachers acknowledged that sharing of personal information can be risky on several levels. Participants gave examples of colleagues who had received negative feedback from parents or administrators or both when they had made personal disclosure statements to students and had been misunderstood. Others noted that a teacher is emotionally vulnerable when becoming personally connected to a situation that occurs in the classroom and must decide whether or not to make this investment, as expressed by one elementary teacher as having to…”open myself up to the family's grief which then [rips the scab from] your own.” Speaking from the vantage point of working with older students, one high school teacher captured the essence of the emotional turmoil that, in his view, went with the professional territory:

HS2-070: …when you think of teaching as a profession, the job itself, regardless of whether anyone's passed away or not, this is an incredibly emotional job. You're dealing with highs and lows of teenagers all day long. And you know, how you process it is how the kids respond, so you're keeping that in mind and, um, you're already dealing with a lot on your plate emotionally anyway--every single day as a high school teacher. I mean other grades too, sure.

**Guidance around wakes, funerals and memorials.** Equally strong feelings were expressed in response to a component of the module that discussed the value of rituals associated with grief and loss, specifically wakes and funerals. While participants understood and agreed that aspects were important in the grieving process, they generally did not feel comfortable or capable of discussing this with their students, linking back to previously noted concerns about roles and boundaries. As noted in the exchange among one group of elementary teachers,
however, participants were able to evaluate the guidance offered in the module and determine, through the process of emergent discussion, that a teacher could have a role in sharing guidance with families who might be seeking advice.

E2-063: Because I don't feel that that's my place. They may have different cultural backgrounds, and I only know my, and maybe a little outside of that, but I don't know all religions, and how they practice, and I don't feel that, beyond that I don't feel-- I don't know, I just think it's stepping outside of my, um, boundaries.

E2-22: while encouraging the parents, to talk to them, they might have very very very strong feelings, even whether research says it's good for the kids to go or what not, they might have very strong feelings as to, no, they don't want that to happen, and they might feel offended if you talk to them about it. That would make me nervous.

E2-063: It feels like it would be their place, and their decision.

E2-075: what I noticed… it seemed to me that that section was more of a recommendation. Have this knowledge, or recommendation, if a parent asks you that sort of thing. You know what I mean? (E2-025: mhmhm.)

E2-063: That’s possible.

E2-075: Like a parent may have their own way of doing it, but if they came to you and said, “I don't know, should I--I've never had to do this--Should my child go to the funeral?” Then you have something that you can say--

E2-063: To reference… that's true. You're not just coming from [your own opinion]…
E2-075: “Well, you know what? The recommendation is this…” That's the way I interpret that more than you need to be proactive in that part of it.

E2:063: okay… that makes more sense to me. (to E2-075) Thank you for clarifying.

E2:075: I mean that's just the way I interpreted it.

Not unlike their elementary counterparts, middle and high school teachers also grappled with the limits of their roles when addressing the topic of wakes and funerals, and they too focused upon differentiating the job of the teacher from the job of the parent. For older children, however, this tended to center around the impacts that these rituals had on students, and what teachers considered to be a very unsettling practice of young people attending wakes and funerals with classmates instead of adults. In all four of the secondary-level groups, teachers described situations in which their students had attended services for peers (or parents of peers) and had extreme reactions that were difficult to process. In several examples, teachers recalled the experience of students returning to school after a funeral and being unable to function in the classroom, but schools not being ready to handle the fallout. Other teachers described emotional scenes at wakes when unaccompanied students (often those with less direct connection to the situation) were overcome by emotion. An emergent insight as these issues were discussed, however, was that the parents might be equally uncertain and confused about how to deal with these situations. Teachers acknowledged that this placed additional pressure on school personnel to fill in the gaps, as one middle school teacher observed, because:

M1-74: I think it just gets to everyone's comfort factor with death, I mean, people generally aren’t comfortable with death and I think parents don't know what to do so they do rely on the schools even though we may not be the ideal candidate to
facilitate it, but they, you know, people don't typically know what to do so they avoid it.”

This line of discussion mirrored elementary teachers’ views that school personnel could incorporate best practice knowledge into more productive communication with parents, for example, conveying “that message that parents should be with them, or guardians, or whatever, the adult… should be with that child if they want to go…”

**Why teachers avoid grief-related topics in the classroom.** While the issue of avoidance had already surfaced relative to training, history, and experience as explored in the second research question, this aspect of inquiry dealt more with practical barriers that might interfere with best practice recommendations as presented in the training module. Responses tended to focus more on systemic issues:

- Perceptions of roles and boundaries
- Characteristics within the school environment that may inhibit or compromise teachers’ responses

**Teachers’ roles and boundaries.** The module described the essential role that teachers have in supporting grieving children in the classroom, explaining that teachers are in a unique position of providing objective, consistent, and safe environments for students to explore their feelings during times of crisis. In focus group discussions most participants agreed with this point of view, noting that as familiar and trusted figures in children’s lives they often know the students better than those who are more formally designated in a supporting role, such as adjustment or guidance counselors. Still, the issue of boundaries and the roles that the teacher has in supporting grieving children was prominently reflected in considering the barriers to implementing best practices.
The concern about trespassing into private territory around religious or cultural beliefs was not only a factor as teachers considered the training module’s very clear emphasis on the previously noted importance of children participating in wakes and funerals, but as they thought about having more in-depth discussions with students in general. As one middle teacher noted, “my anxiety is not knowing their background enough to know what they believe about death in order to address it in a way that they can understand. That’s the first thing that comes to my mind: ‘Geez what’s this kid’s, you know, religion or faith or what does he know about death and what’s his mind thinking about it?’” Teachers also question whether they have the level of relationship with their students that would justify the discussion of topics that they consider to be so intensely private. As one of the high school level participants explained, “I don’t want to feel like I’m trying to pull something out of the kid that he doesn’t want to talk about… that’s not a role that I want to have.” Again, this seemed to be a more prominent worry among teachers at the secondary level, while elementary teachers seemed more concerned about preserving parent or family privacy. Barriers to best practice here included the previously described conflicts that teachers face when information is coming primarily from the child and not from an adult family member; or deciding what to do when teachers are concerned that the way in which a family is handling a loss is detrimental to the child’s adjustment. Approaching parents in these situations is something that many of the teachers in the study reflected upon as a struggle, as demonstrated by the discussion sparked when one teacher described a particularly difficult situation in which an elementary student had been distressed about not being allowed to see his grandfather who was critically ill:

E3-031: …so my policy now is, I have to say to the child ‘I don’t want to betray your confidence, but is it okay if I talk to mom and dad?’ … They [students]
need a voice sometimes. And it's been hard sometimes because I've come up with some opposition a few times. Most of the times the parent will say, 'Oh thank God they talked to you. Because they couldn't talk to me.' But you do get those parents where, 'Oh, why didn't they talk to me?' And they get angry at you, so you kind of have to approach each one [differently] you know, I'm always apprehensive when I make that phone call, or I'll say to the parent, ‘Can you come after school? Just for a few minutes, I'd rather talk to you-' (E3-057: face-to-face) ‘face-to-face.’ But, boy when you're dealing with grief--Because they are grieving too! (Group assent) and here's this outside influence coming in saying, “I'm not telling you what to do, I just need to tell you how your child is feeling” and it's hard when they say "how come they came to you?"

Researcher: Have others had that uncertainty about how to approach parents in that situation?

E3-057: Yes. Sometimes it's because you know you're hearing from the child, about the situation. [Instead of] the parent saying to you: ‘You know, this is what's happening in our family right now, please be aware of the sensitivity of the child,’ or something like that. (E3-027: Communicate.)

E3-057: Right, and when it's the child telling you, and not the parent first, that makes it a little--You know sometimes you just have to take a step back and think, ‘Well, you know what, the parent’s probably so involved in whatever is going on so that's probably what it is, they just haven't had time, you know, to even think about ‘Oh, I've got to tell the child's teacher,’ you know?’ So it's, so you always have to take a deep breath, I think, and – and think, what are those possibilities, so
that when you call the parent up, you can say, you know, um ‘I'm understanding there’s something happening in your home, from the child’s’--So anyway, so, you know, that becomes a little, I guess, uncomfortable.

E3-031…sometimes we’re in uncomfortable situations but you have to think for the good of the child. And I always say that the parent, ‘For the good of the child I am making this phone call to you and you really need to understand that. I'm not trespassing on your’….. But boy, it's a fine line sometimes.

When parents initiate the conversation, through a note or a phone call intended to alert the teacher about something that is going on in the child’s life, the teachers tend to perceive this as an invitation to become involved and are more apt to feel comfortable about reaching out--both to the child and to the parent who has basically given their permission. Experiences at the secondary level suggest that this becomes increasingly less likely as children get older. For either younger or older students, when the parent has not been forthcoming, teachers must plot their approach very tentatively, looking for the right balance between expressing care and concern and intruding in private matters.

For a few teachers, however, the desire to protect students’ privacy seemed to stem as much from their own discomfort as it did from their concern about the students’ needs. A number of teachers, even after the module was presented, continued to express the belief that many children needed the school environment to be the place where they could set their feelings of grief and loss aside and maintain a sense of normalcy, and that teachers should be careful not to push too hard. For some teachers, this was about finding the right balance while leaving the door for communication open. For others, the idea that some children prefer a sense of normalcy seemed to create the justification for not responding more proactively. One elementary teacher,
who had verbalized a very high level of discomfort with the topic, courageously shared the insight that her rationalization about normalcy had served to justify her discomfort-driven avoidance:

E2-075: I probably did as much avoidance as I possibly could rather than digging into it. It was just saying, “Okay, you know,” thinking that, “this will be your safe harbor to forget about that” when you know sometimes they’re not forgetting about that.

_Inhibiting characteristics within the school environment._ The previous section presented participants’ personal ideas about the roles and boundaries that might define their responses or interfere with the application of best practice. A parallel set of concerns clustered around the more external elements or cues that make it difficult for teachers to engage in the recommended practice of inviting opportunities for students to share feelings either within the classroom setting or in private conversations. At all grade levels, participants discussed

- practical barriers, specifically time and academic priorities; and
- systemic barriers, including patterns of communication, school norms, and leadership.

Practical barriers: time and academic priorities. Participants across all grade levels acknowledged that the most significant practical barriers were by-products of the basic function of public education: accomplishing the demands of the defined curriculum in the allotted academic year. Many teachers spoke specifically to the pressures of having to attend to academic and social-emotional demands of their students at the same time, as expressed by one of the elementary participants:
E2-025: I'm thinking about you know a lot of things that we deal with all the time, constantly, day-to-day we deal with, and is not necessarily in your curriculum. It gets in the way. I'm sorry, but that's just a little bit in the way.

E2-063: All the different losses!

E2-025: Right! When so and so's parent dies, (E2-063: Right.) and the second graders treat them like a pariah, and how do you teach them to read when they're dealing with all of that stuff? And in a classroom of twenty-three kids when ten of them are living in a single-parent home, they are going through all sorts of grieving, and okay, but I'm still supposed to make sure that I get them ready for MCAS [state-mandated assessment]!

These comments were particularly aimed at the training module’s highly emphasized best-practice concept of providing students with time and opportunity to share their thoughts or feelings. Participants emphasized that this recommendation had to be balanced with the goals of the daily lesson plan or the looming implications of statewide assessment. Such pressures were also at the center of a dialogue between members of one of the high school focus groups:

HS1-035: I think if you have one of those teachers who have their lesson plan [all planned out] from the moment the kids walk in to the moment they leave, it doesn't leave a lot of time for them to check in because they're so worried about getting …the kids ready for MCAS or whatever else is coming up and sometimes they lose that personal connection with the kids. The bell rings and they're on their way, running to the next class so that they can do the same thing.

HS1-021: It's increasingly becoming more difficult to try and balance everything when there's so much; you keep getting told you got to do-- **One. More. Thing.**
The faster pace and academic priorities at the secondary level might prevent teachers from getting below the most surface issues for a bereaved student such as making up work or missing assignments after an absence, as noted by once high school teacher who described a typical conversation: “…it was always like, ‘Oh! Okay, I didn’t realize that was going on. Let me know what's going on, if we need to adjust assignments, let me know.’ And then the train moves on.”

Teachers at the elementary level weighed different concerns through a developmental lens:

E3-031: You have to be ready to open the floodgates. (group vocalizes assent).

E3-057: ‘cause you don't know what’s going to come out.

E3-028: And often times in second grade (laughs) every child wants to be heard and they want to tell their story and we have time constraints and it's just a reality of our world. Not that you want to cut anyone off, either that day, or in that half-hour that you've allotted. They may need to go to lunch or [a related arts class] or what have you…One child might be hesitant to talk on that day but if you extended to the next day, you have to be ready. It takes time.

The time factor was also considered as teachers reflected upon another key point in the training module: that the impacts of a death or loss in a student’s life were long-lasting and would be experienced in different ways and at different stages of development. As one group of elementary teachers discussed:

E2-075: I mean, you deal with the death, but then you’re so busy as a teacher, you go on and you forgot that this is going to be a long-time thing for the child. That's
another thing, is that we think it's a finite event. And that's the way we might personally think about it…

E2:065…we might have a set schedule

E2-025: [Or] we may only be looking at it from a fourth grade perspective.

E2-075: But it's not finite for this kid.

In the push to move on, middle school teachers also noted that attention would be reactive, and compartmentalized. As one group discussed the practice of making counselor support available to students at the point of greatest impact, they pointed out that this was often very time limited and did not take ongoing needs into consideration. This insight led one teacher to voice, “I wish that they would follow that up. They do it right away. When the event happens and it's gone. I wish there was follow-up with that.” Another middle school teacher added, “There is a want to think, ‘Counselors are available so we have it covered,’ and to think that nothing will come up, so just to put your faith in ‘nothing will come up’ [which] is not only not practical but not even reasonable.”

Organizational barriers. As the above comments suggest, there is a fine line between the practical barriers that push the desire to return to routines, and organizational barriers that serve to diminish teachers’ roles. Within the cluster of organizational barriers described by participants, most fell into one of two categories: school culture, and the closely related component of communication. Participants noted that certain aspects of their schools’ culture made it difficult for them to know when and how to respond, and in some cases seemed to diffuse the sense of responsibility that teachers might feel, as illustrated in the following discussion at the high school level.
HS1-021: I think it's very difficult for a classroom teacher. You get an e-mail in the morning, and you know you had a child coming into your classroom that’s dealing with something like this, and I often walk a tightrope between, all right, how many people have they seen already today? (HS1-020: Yeah). …it's very hard to figure out their comfort level [when] you're dealing with an individual, and everybody wants to help them…but you could be the fourth teacher or the third teacher that that they’ve had in a day. The guidance counselor’s probably called them down and maybe the APO’s called them down to see how they're doing. It's like—‘where do I stand in the attempts to be supportive of this child?’ I mean all of those are really really good suggestions but three people did it before you, [and now you’re trying to do it too, and] it’s like, “is this help? Or is it overload for them?”

Researcher: And the thing that’s unique at the high school…

HS1-020: They see different people all day long.

Related to the previous discussion of roles and boundaries, aspects of school culture can sometimes convey the message that it is not the teacher’s place to respond. Participants at all levels indicated that many school crisis response protocols reinforced the role of counselors and clinicians when dealing with critical incidents, a message that for some participants suggested a restricted view of what teachers should provide in the classroom. One middle school teacher, reflecting upon the strong encouragement given in the module to utilize the classroom setting as a source of primary support, revealed an even more negative divide between school structure and best practice advice:
M1-014: Usually, the staff is told in sort of a collective way. I haven't experienced an empowering message. I haven't heard: “And you’ll probably be dealing with these feelings in the classroom.” It doesn't seem to be acknowledged that something is going to happen in the classroom, so I just sort of assumed that it must not occur in the classroom. …you see it right in front of you and it’s sort of like fight or flight. You feel like, “Oh, no! I'm not qualified! I’m not equipped! I’m not qualified!” You know? But in reality, [by using] responsive listening, and validating their feelings, if you're a person who can be in the moment, it's going to happen naturally. But by [administration] not validating that it could happen, it made me feel like I couldn't handle it.

Messages like the above may be indirectly conveyed in school protocols that do not acknowledge the role of the classroom teacher, or may be very directly reinforced in interactions with other school personnel. Particularly among secondary participants, there was the belief that not all colleagues would be open to the notion that the grieving process can have continued impact and that opportunities for communication may be important long after a traumatic event has occurred. One middle school teacher characterized this attitude as avoidance of a “very difficult subject” because “… lots of times people are more comfortable with [taking the approach of] ‘it happened and we’re moving on’ as opposed to sitting down and really trying to figure out how to help the kids.” Another teacher recalled an example of more overt collegial resistance to his attempts to help a student in need of extra support during class time:

M2-051: …she had missed like a month of school, nobody knew why. She came in, she was a complete basket case, and she asked if she could talk. I asked the teacher in the next room, “Can you watch my class for a few minutes?” and she’s
like, “You’re going to have to wait for the guidance counselor. You’re not a guidance counselor.’’ So I left my class alone for a few minutes. You can’t say, “You’re going to have to wait ‘til tomorrow until a guidance counselor’s here.”

M2-050: Not when the child chooses you. They choose you.

M2-069: Right… that’s really important

When teachers considered the importance of allowing these private conversations, however, they also reflected on the intense pressure they felt to be available in the moment that they were needed, a problem that was definitely not amenable to the environmental constrictions of the certain number of minutes in a class period or the fact that teaching is, for the most part, a solitary profession, as recognized by another middle school teacher:

M2-052: I rarely have someone right there, I mean, [another teacher] was down the hallway, but that was still—(M2-050: two classrooms away.)

M2-052: --two classrooms away. So physically, if a child did start to start [wanting to talk], I would feel horrible if they were to start something and clearly want to talk to me, not a counselor or anybody else, and then it’s like: Do I leave the other kids in the classroom? Go into the hallway? That’s--well, “Gee--what’s happened to that student?” So that’s not really the best situation, so I don’t know-there’s no answer.

M2-051: You can imagine how the kid would feel if you’re like, “See me tomorrow.”

M2-052: Right, it feels so cold to say, “That sucks that you’re going through that. Put that on the back burner.” That’s horrible--I mean I feel that that’s horrible. And I can only imagine what that child is feeling, like another door’s closed.
Communication. Communication patterns within the school were seen as another barrier to implementing the best practice recommendations that had been presented in the training. In many schools, e-mail communication was the preferred method of notifying teachers about incidents that may have occurred, but this form of notification had disadvantages and frustrations. One high school teacher explained that because of her schedule, she might not get e-mail communications until her prep block at the end of the day, and “sometimes it's-- you’re thinking about--you haven’t responded--and I walk this [line between] ‘Am I here to teach or am I here to watch the e-mail every 2 seconds?’”

While electronic communication was noted as somewhat inefficient for teachers, the exact opposite seems to hold true for students, creating an entirely different barrier to the ability to strategically manage a critical event in school. Although only mentioned by middle school teachers, students’ rapid access to information via text messaging and other devices makes it difficult to stay ahead of the impact that certain information may have on large numbers of children simultaneously. One middle school teacher described watching as the news about a highly sensitive and widely publicized incident spread through a school assembly “like the wave at Fenway [Park].”

M2-069: I watch the cell phones ring, and I watch the wave go right in front of my face as the kids-- (demonstrates how kids start to whisper as they find out)-- and it went right through the auditorium, so that I knew by the time we walked out of the auditorium, every kid in that place knew what had occurred…. And that was how it started. With no ability to cap it or control it or anything.

When schools attempt to mitigate this, they may find it necessary to move more quickly with their own staff as they try to stay ahead of the information explosion. Another middle school
teacher referenced her previously noted discomfort over having to read a hastily prepared statement after an apparent suicide, acknowledging that school administration is sometimes in an impossible situation.

M2-023: Well, that’s why they wanted us to read the script about the [student who died of an apparent suicide.] Because of technology, [they were] afraid that these kids were going to find something out before we were able to say it to them in a calm way about that happening. …Our thing is to try to get it out there and to the kids if we know ahead of time before lunch. Cause at lunch then it goes wild.

(Group concurs)

Self-care. The final component of the training module focused on the importance of physical and emotional self-care or support for teachers themselves when addressing the needs of grieving children. Participants noted that school-based helping professionals such as adjustment counselors or school nurses often fulfilled an important peer support role. Teachers in smaller schools, whether at the elementary or secondary level, spoke of the support that colleagues provide to each other, especially when an event has impacted the larger school community, but teachers in larger settings seemed to see self-care as a much lower priority. The differences in school environments relative to opportunities for self-care were evident in this exchange among high school teachers:

HS-041: When I had that concern about the student I sat in the nurse’s office where I could talk to her--and guidance counselors have always had time to process things with [us]--it was more centered towards the students, not so much toward myself. But I think they’d be open to that.
HS1-021: I have to agree. It was more geared toward the students than the coping of what the educator might need…

HS1-035: …maybe because the school is smaller, I did have administration coming down and, “Do you need to take a break? Is everything ok?” So they would check on me throughout that day or the next day.

HS1-040: I mean thinking back on that one incident that really I had a hard time with--it would have been nice to talk to somebody who could help through that process.

When the topic of self-care was probed after the training module was presented, conversations invariably shifted from school-based supports for teachers during difficult events to the availability of additional layers of resources for students, most frequently, school adjustment counselors. The underlying message seemed to be that for participants in the study, their self-care was mainly defined by their success in accessing and deploying appropriate resources for their students.

**Incorporating training into practice.** One of the final focus group questions asked participants, from the vantage point of their own experiences and the training that they had received, to consider what they might suggest to help teachers feel more prepared to deal with issues of grief and bereavement in the classroom. Also, as the session was about to end, participants were given the opportunity to make concluding remarks. Comments focused on the aspects of the training module that dealt with:

- Offering anticipatory guidance
- Becoming more aware of longitudinal impacts
- Disseminating training for systemic change
**Anticipatory guidance.** Anticipatory guidance, as explained in the training module, includes strategies and activities that could be performed in the classroom to set the stage for the wide variety of situations that might be encountered in the course of the school year. Even after exploring the barriers of time and logistics noted in the previous sections, many of the participants could visualize utilizing teachable moments to create classroom environments in which difficult topics could be explored. Elementary teachers noted examples of children’s literature that could be used effectively to open conversations and help students explore various types of loss, as described by one kindergarten teacher:

E2-022: But, you know … it always amazes me, you could hear a pin drop and they get it. They get it. And it will spark stories of a loved one that maybe they have lost, even if it's a pet, you know, because a pet is just as loved as--you know--it's a family member. So it really is, a wonderful story to--pave the way--for anyone that might need to talk about something that even happened a year ago to them.

Elementary and middle school teachers from one district spoke about using one of their existing practices of a daily morning meeting or advisory period as the ideal forum for introducing related topics and even discussing, in advance, how students and the teacher would handle sensitive situations, including how a student might access a teacher for private conversations if the need were to arise.

**Becoming more aware of longitudinal impacts.** One of the concepts that seem to resonate strongly with participants was the idea that grieving students might need ongoing support, and that the type of support may change as they continue to develop. Teachers had previously discussed the tendency of schools to focus attention, support,
and resources on the acute phase of the situation, and the assumption that grief would be resolved within a specific period of time. Participants at all grade levels used the focus group environment to identify the ways in which the experience of loss could resurface at various intersections throughout students’ development, many noting that this was something that they had not previously considered. Teachers also connected this aspect to some of the constraints that they had previously identified, including the pressures that they feel to keep pace with their routine responsibilities, but began to form ideas about how this awareness might impact their interactions with students, as noted in this exchange between two high school participants:

HS1-041: Well I never gave it a second thought because--with doing this, that, and everything else and being added to, never gave it a second thought of a week later or well maybe not a week later. (HS1-021: Right, three months later. That it comes back.) I never gave a second thought… You know, how are you today are you okay? (HS1-020: Yeah.) So that will stick in my head now. If these kids come back with their bands [commemorative wrist bands typically worn in memory of someone who has died], I might ask, you know, “how's that going?”

To something like that. So that was very good, that's what I'm coming away with.

**Disseminating training for systemic change.** As the groups concluded, participants consistently spoke of the benefits of the training that they had received in conjunction with the study. Some spoke directly about intentions that they had to implement some of the ideas that had been discussed. Others formulated their intentions to bring the training materials (which had been included on a DVD that was included in each participant’s resource packet) back to their schools and share them with other faculty and staff. Several teachers wondered why such a
training could not be included in one of the mandatory professional development items that were usually scheduled at the beginning of the school year, or perhaps made available online as something that could be accessed when needed. This exchange as an elementary focus group concluded was illustrative of ways in which participants began to attach training concepts to specific concerns that they had raised in earlier discussions.

E2-63: So training should include not only how to deal with that with that one student, but (E2-22: Yeah!) the peers. Educating the peers, how they can help the student and maybe not have the fear or be aware of…

E2-22: …or make the parents aware at home that so-and-so said this to so-and-so at recess and just maybe just ask them a question about it because it has some underlying effects probably and that's something to definitely be--aware of….

E2-75: it’s not a simple question--with simple answers. It's pretty complex and far-reaching when you start thinking about all of this.

Participants also discussed ways in which they might improve communication in their schools so that there would be a greater likelihood that teachers would be aware of situations both as they transpired, and as students made transitions to other grade levels. This conversation among middle school teachers demonstrated intentions that participants had to strengthen communication mechanisms:

MS1-012: I need to go and advocate at my own building for… first thing that comes to mind, the special concerns list [a system of communicating sensitive issues] would solve so much.

MS1-074: I think it’s the communication piece. Every single teacher, cafeteria person has been part of these kids’ lives.
MS1-046: They need to know.

MS1-074: And you handle a child gentler if you know that they’ve been through some sort of crisis like this. And I think you might not be as demanding with homework or you might be a little more sympathetic with--

MS1-046: Just knowing… and you don’t even have to know the whole gory thing—just to say “Johnny’s having a tough time at home, and can you just be aware of that,” or something.

Post-participation follow up. Approximately six weeks after the sessions had been concluded, participants were invited to take one more opportunity to reflect upon the training that had been provided, the discussions that had been generated, and the implications that this experience may have had in their self-assessment of confidence. Twenty-six of the 38 participants, (68%), responded to the follow up survey. The voluntary survey consisted of three multiple-choice questions, one open-ended question, and the opportunity to provide comment on any aspect of the training and discussion. The following questions were asked in an online survey format:

1. In your preliminary survey, how did you describe your level of confidence? (Refer to Participants Post-participation Survey invitation.)
2. How would you describe your confidence level now?
3. If you have noted any difference above, was there an aspect of the training/discussion that most contributed to any change in your level of confidence?
4. Is there a concept or insight from the training/discussion that you are most likely to utilize in the upcoming school year? (Yes/No, with comment box)
5. Other comments.
Confidence. Respondents were asked to consider the level of confidence that they had expressed prior to the training/focus group experience and select the choice that best reflected their post-training level of confidence. Because each participant had been assigned a unique identification number, pre- and post-survey, it was possible to compare the extent to which individual respondents’ confidence had improved as a consequence of the training. Sixty-five percent of teachers responding to the post survey (17/26) assessed a change in their confidence level after the training/discussion. The remaining nine teachers indicated that they had experienced no change in confidence. Of this group, five had previously assessed themselves as confident in their abilities prior to the training. Using a Mann-Whitney test to compare pre and post survey responses, results showed a statistically significant increase in teachers’ confidence levels after the training (W=161; p = 0.006). The reported level of change among the 26 respondents is illustrated in Appendix S.

Estimated growth in confidence. A summary of the pre and post self-assessment data in Table 12 shows that while all reported change went in a positive direction, the most significant change occurred in the Neutral to Confident categories.

Table 12

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interval</th>
<th>Extremely Confident</th>
<th>Confident</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Some reservations</th>
<th>Not at all confident</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preliminary Self-assessment</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post Self-assessment</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A visual image of the upward shift in confidence as reported by twenty-six subjects who responded to both the pre and post-participation surveys is presented in Figure 3.

![Comparison of confidence pre/post self-assessment](image)

Figure 3. Comparison of confidence pre/post self-assessment. This figure illustrates comparisons of self-reported levels of confidence before and after the training/focus group participation.

This figure presents a visual illustration of the impact of the training/discussion experience on the levels of confidence reported by 26 subjects approximately six weeks after their participation in the focus group.

**Participants’ attributions.** When asked what aspects of the training and/or discussion could best explain the changes that had been reported, participants were varied and fairly evenly distributed in their responses. Six respondents (29%) noted that they had found the discussion to be the most valuable, while an equal number emphasized the benefit of the materials and resources that had been provided. Five respondents felt that the presentation itself had been the most valuable to their increase in confidence, and four individuals described other factors such as validation of either best practice approaches or an improved sense of confidence through the knowledge that their struggles and apprehensions were not atypical among their colleagues.
Those responding to the follow-up survey were very specific about the components that had the greatest impact on their level of confidence. Several comments suggested that there was an awareness of the combined benefits of the experience, as was the case for one elementary teacher who observed, “After having discussions about other teachers' experiences and watching the PowerPoint I felt that my confidence level increased. I was also able to digest the material that was given to us at the training over the summer.” Table 13 represents a sampling of illustrative comments from the follow-up survey. Follow-up survey comments are included in Appendices Q and R.

Table 13

Post-participation feedback

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category/code</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Discussion with colleagues</td>
<td>Listening to other people and how they handled the process, understanding that I am not alone in feeling some trepidation toward the subject, and having the opportunity to air our concerns and having them validated was helpful.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training/Content</td>
<td>Specific answers to specific questions were outlined and discussed, thus giving the teacher a lot of confidence in going forward</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources</td>
<td>I thought the materials provided were very helpful to keep on hand as a reference, which I have done. The CD is fabulous to have.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other: Validation</td>
<td>It validated the fact of how important dealing with a child's bereavement is.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Likelihood of application to practice.** Only five of the teachers who responded to the post-participation survey did not answer affirmatively when asked if there had been a concept or insight that they would be likely to utilize in the upcoming school year. One participant explained that as a recently retired teacher who was currently used as a substitute, she did not believe that this would be within her role. One stated that she had already had a significant amount of training on the topic, and the other three respondents did not offer explanation for their answer. The remaining 21 teachers identified numerous ideas that they would be likely to
incorporate into practice. The categories of insights that were shared in the post-participation survey were closely aligned to those that had been described by participants as concerns in the preliminary survey. Teachers focused on strategies that had addressed concerns such as knowing what to say in difficult situations, communicating with families and other school staff, and managing both the acute and longitudinal impacts of grief and bereavement. Concerns that were not reflected in the post-survey included providing anticipatory guidance and/or balancing the needs of individual students within the group dynamics of the classroom, incorporating best practice in response to non-death-related circumstances, incorporating best practice in response to large-scale or high-profile events, and the importance of self-care for teachers when addressing the needs of grieving children.

Teachers’ comments in response to this question included some very specific ways in which they visualized incorporation of the concepts that had been presented. As the school year had already resumed when the post-participation survey was disseminated, two teachers gave very specific examples of ways that they had already implemented materials, resources, or ideas drawn from their involvement in the training/discussion. One teacher indicated that she had been able to effect school-wide implementation of a practice that would ensure that significant information about students would be passed on from year to year, stating that “I was thinking about how schools should continue to support students who have [had losses] in the past. … We are now providing information on past deaths (mother, father sibling) at our school through the health concerns reference.” The coded distribution of themes analyzed from follow-up survey data and comments illustrating the participants’ intentions to incorporate strategies into practice are included in Appendices Q and R.
**Research Question Three Summary.** The underlying premise of the research project was that teachers’ perceived confidence and sense of efficacy around their abilities to respond to the needs of grieving children was situated at the intersection of training, experience, and characteristics of the situations that they might encounter. The third research question sought to learn more about these variables, with specific focus on what participants believed would either support or interfere with the application of best practice after they had completed a training on the role of teachers and schools in responding to grief and bereavement related issues in the classroom.

This was accomplished initially through the analysis of focus group discussion after the training had been presented. To delve more deeply into the potential impacts of training on actual practice, a post-participation survey was added to the study methodology and administered to participants approximately six weeks later. Data analysis revealed that study participants at all grade levels were struck by information that they’d received on the frequency of loss in the lives of school-aged children, and insights regarding the longitudinal impact that a significant loss might have on the life of a child, long after the specific situation had occurred. This was considered highly relevant to teachers in the study who noted that the school environment is generally able to focus upon the acute phase of a significant loss, but the recurring impacts might not be considered.

Further contributing to this observation, teachers noted that particularly at older grade levels, the communication patterns in schools might not be organized around building ongoing support for students and various junctures of their development, even though it was widely agreed that most teachers would wish to have this information and would be considerate of a student’s life circumstances if they were known. Nonetheless, most participants acknowledged
that even at the point of immediate response, many teachers might struggle with the basic issues of knowing what to say, finding opportunities to open communication with grieving students, and discerning roles and boundaries.

Time was noted as one of the main constraints to the application of best practice response, particularly in terms of opening up opportunities for students to express themselves, but training, or the absence of training, was attributed to be the most consistent hindrance. This finding served as the rationale for the post-participation survey, posing the question of whether the training experience would be perceived as facilitating a change. More than 70%, (28 out of the original 38 participants) completed the voluntary questionnaire, and 26 surveys were matched to preliminary data for comparison. Of the 26 surveys received, 70% of the respondents reported that their sense of confidence had improved as a result of their participation. Teachers attributed this improvement to different components of the experience, however. Some gave priority to the content of the training, others to the opportunity it presented for discussion, and still others focused on the value of the resources that had been shared. Many participants anticipated that they would implement some aspect of the benefits they had derived, particularly the awareness of the importance of longitudinal support and being more open to discussing sensitive issues with their students. Some reported that they had already had the opportunity to do so within the first few weeks of the new school year.

Chapter V: Discussion of the Research Findings

In this final chapter, the previously reported results are positioned within the study’s theoretical framework, the review of literature, and the capacity of the current inquiry to advance the understanding of the problem of practice. After a brief overview of the rationale, methodology, and summary of key results, findings are discussed through the prisms of Efficacy
Theory and prior scholarly research. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the practical aspects of the study, including its limitations and its potential for current significance, future application, and further investigation.

**Summary of the Problem**

Loss, grief, and bereavement are inevitable experiences in childhood. Estimates of the frequency of loss among American schoolchildren vary, but suggest that up to five percent of American schoolchildren may experience the death of a parent before the age of sixteen (Reid & Dixon, 1999), and 90 percent or more will have experienced the death of a person of significance before they complete high school (National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement, 2010). These estimates do not include the many other circumstances that are processed as loss in the lives of children, including chronic illness, divorce, change in economic status, or major life disruptions through natural or man-made disasters. Despite the strong likelihood of encountering children who are impacted by such critical incidents, it has been suggested that American teachers are poorly equipped and lack training, preparation and motivation to respond to these situations in the school environment (National Commission for Children and Disasters Interim Report, 2009). The purpose of this qualitative focus-group study was to utilize teachers’ experiences and voices to create a better understanding of the internal or external barriers that interfere with effective response when loss, grief, and bereavement enter the classroom. The study also looked at the role of self-efficacy in mediating participants’ self-assessed confidence when these often emotionally charged situations were encountered in the classroom. To ensure a common reference point for the understanding of best-practice recommendations, a professional development-training module concentrating on bereavement in schools was incorporated into the focus group procedure. Three research questions framed the investigation:
How do teachers perceive their abilities to assist grieving children?

To what extent have teachers’ personal histories, prior training, or experiences in the classroom contributed to their sense of efficacy and level of comfort when dealing with grieving children?

Following participation in a professional development activity that presents best practices in support of grieving children, what do teachers view as either supporting factors or limiting constraints to employing those best practices?

Review of the Methodology

A primarily qualitative methodology was selected to accomplish this study. A quantitative element was subsequently added to address ensuing questions about the effect of the imbedded training/discussion component upon teachers’ self-reported levels of confidence and self-assessed likelihood of best-practice implementation. The study centered upon the perspectives of elementary, middle, and high school teachers drawn from six suburban school districts in western Massachusetts. Recruitment of the sample was purposeful, seeking the involvement of educators within a defined geographic range and having at least one year of teaching experience and a willingness to share their perspectives on the topic. Ultimately, the study enrolled a convenience sample of 37 subjects based on scheduling preferences and availabilities for one of the grade-level segmented groupings. Data collection involved the following components:

- A Preliminary Participant Profile Survey to determine descriptive statistics including prior levels of training and experience with the topic of grief and loss in the classroom
A 45-minute PowerPoint training module developed by the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement (2010) and presented by the researcher

A total of seven focus groups, segmented by grade levels, discussing (1) participants’ experiences with bereaved children; (2) factors that impact their confidence; and (3) supports and barriers to implementing best practice

Participant Feedback Forms, collected at the conclusion of each session

Researcher’s field notes

A Post-Participation Survey to note changes in levels of confidence and to deepen the understanding of the connection between experience, training and other factors that could increase efficacy and strengthen the likelihood and quality of teacher response.

Descriptive statistics provided a better understand the study’s strengths and limitations from an analysis of participant attributes. Qualitative data, specifically, open-ended responses in the pre- and post-surveys and transcripts from the digitally recorded focus group sessions, were analyzed following the three-step process recommended by Creswell (2009): (1) data organization; (2) data review including marginal notes and analytical memos; and (3) detailed analysis through coding. The coding process, also adapted from Creswell (2009), consisted of (1) the selection and reading of two transcripts while recording marginal (column) notes and analytical memos; (2) code development, including listing of major topics, assigning codes to topics, assigning categories to codes, and performing analysis relative to the significance of categories and codes vis-à-vis the research questions, (3) using the analysis to determine most significant themes, and (4) selecting appropriate comments and segments of focus group interaction that were illustrative of the thematically coded data. Key categories and themes were reorganized to identify the elements that best represented participants’ understandings about
grieving children in the classroom and illustrated their perspectives on factors that support or hinder the application of best practice in response to bereavement-related concerns. A strong response rate of 70% on the voluntary post-participation survey also enabled a quantitative comparison of change in confidence among 27 respondents who assessed their levels of confidence both before and after their participation in the focus group/training study.

The findings of this study emerged from an amalgamation of a scaffolded examination of data connected to each research question blended with the heuristic characteristics of focus group methodology as recorded and analyzed in the dynamic exchanges among participants. A combination of survey and focus group data created an understanding of the context in which teachers perceived the needs of grieving children in the classroom, their confidence in their capacities to address those needs, factors that might support or limit the application of best practice strategies in the classroom, and the extent to which a training experience might influence teachers’ sense of efficacy when considering their capacities to respond to grieving children in the future.

Summary of the Findings

Prior to their participation, very few teachers who enrolled in the study perceived themselves as confident in their abilities to assist grieving children. Of the 37 participants, only eight teachers (21%) expressed feeling confident. Of the remaining subjects, 14 expressed their uncertainty or ambivalence by endorsing the “neutral” choice, and 13 indicated that they either had some reservations (10) or felt not at all confident (three).

Contributing factors. In the analysis and thematic coding of focus group data, it appeared that while teachers were understandably challenged by the magnitude or anomalies of a
specific event, such as a suicide or a situation that had received great media attention, their confidence or sense of efficacy was also calibrated by three groups of factors:

- Skill and training factors, such as whether or not they were equipped to handle the situation, including saying the right thing to a specific student or using the classroom setting to provide guidance to all students
- Individual factors such as their own cultural imprints or their proximity/emotional response to the event
- External factors, such as managing the demands of a sensitive situation within the context of their many other responsibilities and the norms or climates within their schools.

While teachers’ perceptions of roles and boundaries also formed a significant cluster of concerns within the external variables of the school setting, it should be noted that these same themes were often mingled within categories of skills/training and personal orientation. This finding was in itself an example of the inter-related links that contributed to the problem of practice being investigated.

**Skills and training.** Not surprisingly, the most consistent thrust of discussion around teachers’ sense of confidence centered upon training. In all seven focus groups, at all grade levels, the reported absence of formal training at the pre-service level and in subsequent professional development was viewed by participants as a major gap in their ability to understand the dynamics of grief/bereavement, the needs of children, and their role as a classroom teacher when called upon to react. About 57% said that they could not recall receiving any previous training related to the topic. Even for teachers who had sought or received training, the amount of training estimated by study participants was sparse. About 20%
estimated between one and three hours of training, and 16% stated that they had received between four and ten hours of training. Only three teachers believed that they had received ten or more hours of training on the topic. Beyond time spent in training, equally relevant to the question of efficacy was whether or not participants viewed prior training as helpful to their sense of being prepared.

In the Preliminary Participant Survey, most subjects reported that they did not feel that their prior training had prepared them to respond to the needs of children in their classroom. Only four teachers endorsed the choice of “very well prepared” or “well prepared” and four teachers responded that they considered their preparation to be “adequate.” In contrast, 14 teachers claimed that they were either “not very” or “totally unprepared,” which was nearly equal to the 15 participants who stated that they had received no prior training at all. In focus group discussions, participants concurred that schools needed to do more to better prepare teachers to address the needs of grieving children in the classroom. According to respondents, this was a component of professional development that had either been overlooked in their schools, or one that, in participants’ estimations, was dispensed reactively and often superficially after an event had occurred. It was also consistently noted that this type of training was not part of the pre-service experience of any of the teachers enrolled in the study.

The absence of training might also explain the narrow view that most participants had on the manifestations of grief in the classroom. When asked to describe grief or bereavement situations that they had encountered, most participants used the death of a parent or close relative as their reference point. Although a large array of other situations were mentioned in the course of the discussions, including divorce, chronic illness, incarceration, and natural disasters, an important finding was that teachers seemed to need encouragement to generalize the loss-related
characteristics or reactions to other significant events in the lives of children besides death. Teachers who are not trained to take a broader view of grief and bereavement may miss opportunities to provide needed support at other critical times in students’ lives.

**Individual factors.** The study demonstrated the manner in which individual factors contributed to participants’ estimations of efficacy and level of comfort when dealing with grieving children. These included personal histories and upbringing, and the personal vulnerability that teachers can feel as they travel into the intensely emotional territory of students’ grief. During focus group discussions, several teachers used life experiences such as the memory of the death of someone close to them as reference points when describing their beliefs about grieving children in their classrooms. Rich exchanges occurred around the connection between teachers’ own upbringings and cultural norms, and the level of comfort that they might feel when pursuing topics related to grief and loss with students. As noted by one teacher, “It was all discussed [in my family of origin]. So I'm comfortable with it. Discussing it, and letting a child talk about what's being said to them.”

Participants at all grade levels demonstrated profound emotional exposure as they described some of the challenging situations that they have encountered. Discussion of personal histories and experiences tended to uncover deeper and sometimes difficult emotions for teachers, and some were able to connect these feelings to their sense of discomfort with grieving children in the classroom. As noted by one high school teacher, “when you think of teaching as a profession, the job itself, regardless of whether anyone's passed away or not, this is an incredibly emotional job.” Teachers were mindful of the ways in which their own reactions impact their students, and saw themselves as responsible for modeling an appropriate response. This awareness seemed to be at times overwhelming when a very difficult or sensitive situation
had occurred, as captured by another high school participant’s reflection that “… this loss affected me, too--greatly. So am I supposed to be the wise person in the room that knows something? Or am I supposed to say, ‘Hey guys I'm just as confused as you are.’”

**School environments: Roles, responsibilities, and boundaries.** As teachers assessed the components of their own internal response mechanisms, the importance of their school environments surfaced. Study participants described ways that educators may struggle to find the appropriate balance: simultaneously supporting grieving students, reacting to the responses that an event might trigger for other students in their classrooms, remaining accountable to professional expectations, and respecting the privacy and cultural values of students and/or parents. Established school protocols for critical incident management often appeared to complicate their ideas about their roles and their feelings about being able to execute their responsibilities.

Across all groups and grade levels, teachers described similar experiences of having limited prior knowledge and receiving reactive, just-in-time training after a significant or tragic event had occurred. Teachers referred to informational materials that might be distributed, typically including scripted comments, warning signs, and instructions to refer distressed students to a counselor. Participants noted that these communications usually focused only on the acute stage of the event, and did not tend to recognize the long-term impacts that these situations might later have on a child an entire classroom. Teachers expressed the understanding that most critical incident management procedures were designed with the goal helping students by maintaining predictable routines and structures. Unfortunately, from the point of view of some of the participants, the push for a rapid return to normalcy tended to minimize the residual impacts after the immediate phase of the crisis, and left teachers to determine their own course of
action. As noted by one middle school participant, “there is a want [administratively] to think ‘counselors are available so we have it covered,’ and to think that nothing will come up, so just to put your faith in ‘nothing will come up’ [which] is not only not practical but not even reasonable.” This message can sometimes make the option of avoiding the topic in the classroom quite attractive and viable, as noted by the courageous admission of one elementary teacher:

E2-075: I probably did as much avoidance as I possibly could rather than digging into it. It was just saying, “Okay, you know,” thinking that, “this will be your safe harbor to forget about that” when you know sometimes they’re not forgetting about that.

Concentration on the acute stage of a critical incident may result in a failure to recognize and plan for the longitudinal impacts on a student or group of students. This finding seemed particularly true for teachers at the middle and high school levels, where communication with parents tended to be more focused on the practical concerns of the school year, and the transfer of information from teacher-to-teacher and school year-to-school year might fade as time goes on. Teachers described being sometimes blindsided when topics in the curriculum or other routine events would unknowingly trigger reactions for students who had experienced significant losses at earlier stages in their lives. At all grade levels, teachers recognized that systems for communicating critical information were fundamental to the ability to deploy best practice responses. Most participants reflected on the absence of these systems in their schools, but some teachers presented examples of specific school structures that were intrinsically more congruent with best-practice recommendations. These included classroom organizational models that provided a daily class meeting or advisory period; formal communication mechanisms from
school nurses or counselors that ensured the transfer of students’ critical (non-academic) information from year-to-year; and supportive critical incident management structures that acknowledged teachers’ needs for self-care and consultation with peers and other professionals.

**Impact of training experience on levels of confidence.** A voluntary follow-up survey was administered as an addition to the study, designed to better understand the relevance of these themes once teachers had left the summer training/focus group environment and were facing the realities of a new school year. Twenty-six participants (70%) responded to the follow-up survey. As illustrated in Table 14, seventeen (65%) of those who responded to the post-participation survey reported a positive change in their self-assessed level of confidence after completing the training and participating in the focus group. Using a Mann-Whitney test to compare pre and post data, these findings showed a statistically significant increase in respondents reported confidence levels (W=161; p=0.006).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Extremely Confident</th>
<th>Confident</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Some reservations</th>
<th>Not at all confident</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preliminary Self-assessment</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post Self-assessment</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A qualitative component of the post-participation survey also asked participants to reflect upon whether any changes noted could be attributed to the training or related discussions. Those teachers who reported a change in confidence gave the discussion format and the distributed resource materials a slight advantage over the actual content of the training itself. Respondents also cited specific aspects of the program that they intended to incorporate into practice,
including the importance of longitudinal support and being more open to discussing sensitive
issues with their students. Three teachers used the post-participation survey to communicate that
they had already utilized training or materials in the new school year, and one respondent stated
that she had been able to implement a new communication protocol to insure that critical
information would be carried from teacher-to-teacher and year-to-year. The themes and
examples of newfound awareness expressed by participants in the post-participation survey are
illustrated in Table 15.

Table 15

Post-training awareness themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Implications for personal practice</th>
<th>Implications for systemic practice</th>
<th>Implications for both personal and systemic practices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frequency with which loss occurs</td>
<td>Importance of communicating information, short-term and from year-to-year</td>
<td>Providing anticipatory guidance or “teachable moments” for students and families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognition of other significant life events that might be processed as loss</td>
<td>Operationalizing procedures for commemoration activities</td>
<td>Importance of creating opportunities for private conversation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developmental implications of loss, the wide variations in the ways that children might process grief and the longitudinal implications of loss throughout a child’s life, particularly at significant milestones</td>
<td>Desire for required annual training and schoolwide availability of resources</td>
<td>Managing family dynamics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowing “What to say/what not to say.”</td>
<td></td>
<td>Acknowledgement of teacher role</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Discussion of Findings in Relationship to the Theoretical Framework of Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy was selected as the theoretical lens for this research. Self-efficacy theory provided a useful paradigm in which teacher’s insights could be both appreciated and explained. It also enhanced the understanding of the avoidance tendency that participants described when they did not have confidence in their ability to be effective. Self-efficacy, as conceptualized by its originator, Albert Bandura, is a social learning construct, derived from the individual’s experience of personal mastery, vicarious observations, self-assessment of skill, and self-assessment of likelihood of success, regulated by personal anxiety or stress levels (Bandura, 1983; Bandura and Adams, 1977).

For the teachers in the current study, these elements were intertwined. Experience of personal mastery was clearly a factor in self-assessments of skill, both for teachers who felt initially more confident and those who did not. For the small number of teachers who expressed confidence, some were likely to reference either extensive experience with students or experiences from their own upbringing as contributing to assertions of efficacy, as with one elementary teacher’s declaration that, “I think…that [personal] trauma has made me a more sensitive person” or a middle school participant’s observation that “… every teacher has their own skill set. I was probably the most comfortable, based on my skill set dealing with trauma.” On the other hand, teachers in the study who described feeling less confident were apt to focus on situations that had been extremely difficult for them, and as demonstrated by several teachers, carried regrets that continued to haunt them as they replayed student encounters in which they did not feel helpful or effective.

Other findings demonstrated the manner in which experiences and self-assessment of skill might crystallize around the perceived ability to implement best practice. One teacher who
had reported a significant amount of experience and expressed a high level of confidence was able to easily incorporate the recommendations of a highly versatile and inclusive approach to grieving students while affirming her own skills:

E3-031: So when you think of the thousands of kids that I've taught over the years and the volume of kids I see within a week the chances of encountering somebody with some type of grief are pretty high, and when I talk about grief I'm talking about deaths, beloved people in their lives, pets, divorce, I see divorce as a loss of what was in their lives, that they can never get back. And I've always been very sensitive to grieving, had a lot of loss in my life.

Another teacher incorporated her previous experiences and upbringing in her self-assessment of her willingness to approach students with sensitive issues, noting that “the way that I was brought up, things were very--my parents are very open--so some of it comes from that, for me, I think my own comfort level. It was all discussed. So I'm comfortable with it. Discussing it, and letting a child talk about what's being said to them.”

Personal mastery, self-assessments of skill, and expectations of success also were closely intertwined throughout the data. A participant in one of the high school groups provided detailed insight into the dynamics of this process, as he described feelings of great apprehension when trying to facilitate classroom discussion after a critical incident had occurred:

HS2:070: …and I find that when I try to open things up, it tends to just be silent, and then when the class ends, they’ll go to their friends and they’ll talk about it. So I think that--I don’t see the fruits of what I do… having that uncomfortable, awkward silence when nobody wants to talk…
Negative self-assessments, a poor sense of mastery, and low expectation of success can collude to generate a negative and anxiety-promoting belief. This same participant consistently expressed the view that whatever course of action he attempted was likely to have a poor outcome and create considerable anxiety for him in the process. As defined within the model of self-efficacy, anxiety is portrayed as “an emotion of fright indexed by physiological arousal or subjective feelings of agitation” (Bandura, 1997, p. 138). Self-efficacy theory engages the relationship between a person’s level of anxiety and their desire to avoid exposure to the anxiety-producing situation. Relevant to other findings in the study, some participants acknowledged that their levels of anxiety, heightened by the discomfort of not knowing what to do in the past, had led to avoidance. While avoidance is itself an attempt to reduce anxiety, some teachers conceded that they could mitigate their uneasiness by assuring themselves that their role was to maintain stability and a sense of normalcy in the classroom rather than “opening the floodgates.”

Consistent with Self-efficacy theory, some study participants’ insights suggested that efficacy might be hindered by the lack of opportunity to practice responses through training, and the embedded messages in school culture that are interpreted as signals that teachers are not expected to be capable of addressing the needs of grieving students. While this was an underlying theme in the numerous references to school crisis response protocols that instruct teachers to refer distressed students to counselors, one teacher captured the impact that this had on her confidence to intervene:

M1-014: I haven't experienced sort of like an empowering message like I haven't heard like-- “and you’ll probably be dealing with these feelings in the classroom” and you know it just doesn't seem to be acknowledged that something is going to happen in the classroom… and you see it right front of you and—and-- you know,
it's sort of like fear flight, you know… you feel like, “Oh, no! I'm not qualified!
I'm not equipped! I'm not qualified!” You know?

The finding that school protocols might inadvertently sabotage efficacy by failing to emphasize the teacher’s role strengthens the link between self-efficacy theory and the current study. According to Bandura (1997), having a lower estimate of one’s ability to successfully execute a task will be a barrier to situational performance, but will actually increase the likelihood of motivation in the training phase. It is possible that for those who participated in the study and responded to the questionnaire, a valence was created between the exploration of their anxieties and an openness to integrate best practices, measured in their reported increase in confidence.

**Summary of theoretical framework in relation to the findings.** The findings of the study are well served by Self-efficacy theory. One basic tenet is that self-efficacy is not determined by what a person can do, but rests upon what the person believes himself/herself capable of doing (Bandura, 1997). The study explored the personal and experiential factors that allow some teachers to feel confident when they consider the needs of grieving children and the application of best practices to support these students in their classrooms, and explained why many teachers might come from orientations that lessen or negate their expectations of success. Efficacy theory also supports the study’s findings of increased confidence among teachers after their participation in the training and focus group discussion. In addition to creating a forum for teachers to explore their feelings and behaviors among colleagues who had shared similar experiences and concerns, the content of the training centered around the important role that teachers had in supporting grieving children, addressed and attempted to neutralize some of the barriers that teachers might encounter, and gave specific examples of language or procedures that
teachers could visualize themselves implementing in the future. Efficacy theory, and the related findings, thus lay the foundation for recommendations and areas of further study that will continue to narrow the gap between knowledge and practice.

**Discussion of the Findings in Relationship to the Literature Review**

As explained in the Chapter Two, the current research was developed from the investigation of three main bodies of literature:

- Facets of grief in the classroom
- Evolving roles of teachers in death education/bereavement intervention in schools
- Systemic factors related to critical incident response in schools.

**Facets of grief in the classroom.** While the literature is mixed in its distinctions between grief, bereavement, and traumatic loss, a more holistic approach was selected for the study, as some research notes that a range of aversive or disturbing events can yield diverse human reactions with widely varying degrees and duration of distress (Bonanno, 2004; Kirwin & Hamrin, 2005; Macy et al., 2004). The body of literature focusing on grief in the classroom was used both to establish a better understanding of the problem of practice and to provide points of comparison with findings from the current study. These findings have validated the relevance and the scope of this issue.

As previously stated, a majority of American school children will at some time in their educational careers be impacted by the death of someone close to them, but many other events in the life of a child can be processed and reacted to as loss. Similarities have been drawn between grief and reactions to divorce (Sandler et al., 2003), exposure to violence (Pynoos, Goenjian & Steinberg, 1998), and traumatic events such as natural and other disasters (R. H. Gurwitch, personal communication). One notable conclusion from the current study, revealed through
analysis of the Participants’ Profile Surveys and opening remarks in the focus group session, was that teachers may not recognize the grief-like components of the many varied circumstances that unfold in the classroom. Despite receiving descriptive information about the study that suggested a more open interpretation, most study participants focused on death-related loss in their Preliminary Participant Profile and in introductory comments made in the focus group; As such, it seems possible that the terminology of grief and bereavement is culturally linked to death, and that this may obscure the more generalized relevance of the topic and the related skills. This is a tentative conclusion, and difficult to ascertain from the data, particularly because the training module mentioned the relevance of other losses but also focused primarily on teachers’ roles when supporting children who had experienced a death, and thus would have influenced the dominance of this theme in the focus groups. It was noted, however, that once a more inclusive definition was incorporated into the discussion, teachers would rapidly begin to share similarly widened examples, suggesting that even a small redirection could create a change in the way that the topic is viewed.

Children process and react to death differently at each stage of development, and grief can be re-experienced as they arrive at different developmental crossroads. Haine et al. (2008) describe development as a “nonmalleable factor to be considered when working with parentally bereaved children.” In other words, coping skills and protective factors vary with developmental stages and regression can occur, increasing the importance of teachers’ understanding of the developmental continuum of grief (Gurwitch et al., 2004). The grieving process can also have a long trajectory, as demonstrated by Worden and Silverman (1996), who found that maladaptive symptoms of grief could take as long as two years to significantly manifest for some children. Teachers in the present study acknowledged that they typically did not consider the
developmental and longitudinal impacts of previous losses when reflecting upon their responses to grieving children, and as expressed by one elementary participant, grief is often looked upon in schools as a singular event in a child’s life instead of something that becomes an integral part of a student’s personal narrative throughout the developmental and educational trajectory. When exposed to a training experience that emphasized the likelihood that loss continues to be experienced differently over time, participants in the study were able to consider strategies that would improve practice in their school settings, such as incorporating systems to ensure that information is passed from teacher-to-teacher, year-to-year.

**Evolving roles and responsibilities of teachers in death education and bereavement intervention in schools.** The literature review established a link between investigations of teacher response to grieving children, the role that teachers should have in Death Education (referred to in the current study as Anticipatory Guidance), and the reluctance that teachers might have to fulfill these roles (Atkinson, 1980; Cullinan, 1990; Hare & Cunningham, 1988; Pratt, Hare & Wright, 1985; Reid & Dixon, 1999). One of the more popular theories in earlier research was that teachers’ personal or cultural anxieties and attitudes about death led to discomfort when approaching the topic in the classroom (Atkinson, 1980; Cullinan, 1990; Hare & Cunningham, 1988; Molnar-Stickels, 1985). These studies were typically quantitative, comparing subjects’ scores on death anxiety scales with responses on questionnaires regarding their levels of comfort when addressing certain types of loss in the classroom. Cullinan (1990) concluded that emotional issues hinder teachers the most, a finding that was consistent with later studies using death anxiety as the basis for their theory about why teachers are reluctant or entirely avoidant in their responses. Although the current study did not specifically measure death anxiety, qualitative focus-group data suggested that teachers who admitted to being uncomfortable with
the topic of death were more likely to disclose avoidance of direct intervention with students, and some teachers clearly reflected upon their own upbringing, cultural norms, and attitudes when characterizing their anxiety. Teachers provided often vivid accounts of their own cultural imprints as determinants of their comfort level, and for some participants these were indeed considered as major inhibitors to their ability to apply best practice strategies such as inviting private conversation or using teachable moments for whole class discussion. The literature also revealed other explanatory theories for teachers’ unwillingness to take on a more supporting role, such as the fear that an inadequate or inappropriate response may increase student distress (Milton, 2004); or feeling ill prepared or untrained to manage the ranges of emotion that children might express (Reid & Dixon, 1999). These themes were similarly supported in the current study, in which the specific “what to say/what not to say” component of the training module elicited the greatest amount of discussion in all focus groups and was consistently offered as one of the most valuable aspects of the module in participants’ concluding remarks.

Training, or more specifically, the absence of training, is both a prevalent topic in the literature and the most consistently underlying theme in the current study. Lack of training has been suggested as a barrier to crisis intervention in the public school environment (National Commission for Children and Disasters, 2010) and participants in the current study often corroborated the belief that training had either not been made available or had not been appropriately matched to the more challenging situations that had been encountered. Previous research has studied the relationship between teachers’ training experiences and responses to grieving children. As with the current study, Hare and Cunningham (1988) and Molnar-Stickels (1985) utilized instructional components in their research to examine the impact of targeted training. While these studies revealed a significant change in the level of knowledge that
followed the training experience, results did not indicate similar growth in level of comfort as compared to control groups. Hare and Cunningham (1988) concluded that “knowledge alone did not significantly…change attitudes and behaviors” (p. 350), indeed illustrating one of the fundamental concepts of self-efficacy theory. The current study took Hare and Cunningham’s ideas to the next step, using teachers’ voices to explore variables beyond knowledge that facilitate applied practice. For the participants in the current study who responded to the follow-up survey, the opportunity to discuss the topic in the focus group setting and the ability to access the accompanying resources were considered more relevant to increases in confidence than the training itself.

*Teacher role.* Cullinan (1990) found that while 94% of teachers believed that it was appropriate for teachers to help grieving children, 46% of the sample felt that the best way to help would be to refer the child to a counselor. In the same study, those teachers who did not feel that it was within the role of the teacher to provide a primary response to a grieving child also reported the lower levels of confidence in their ability to be effective in these interactions, either because of their discomfort with the topic or their fear of further harming the child with an inappropriate response. Questions about roles and boundaries were similarly prevalent among the participants in the current study. Teachers reflected upon the numerous responsibilities that they must attend to in their primary duties as educators, and some questioned whether they were in the best position to deliver the type of within-classroom support that was presented as best practice in the module.

Similar to Lowton and Higginson’s (2003) qualitative study in which teachers expressed discomfort and uncertainty about the family’s wishes about how an event would be handled at school, participants in the current study also expressed significant discomfort when their
attempts at support required them to push upon boundaries with parents. These feelings surfaced particularly around discussing sensitive issues with religious connotations such as suicide, advising parents about young children’s attendance at family memorial rituals such as funerals, or (when a classmate dies), urging parents of teens to accompany their sons or daughters to wakes or funeral services rather than allowing them to attend alone or with peers.

Findings of the current study demonstrated that despite the challenges that they identified, participants concurred with the best-practice idea that that the classroom teacher often has the most intimate understanding of the student, can recognize what is typical behavior for that student, and is viewed as trusted and familiar helpers by parents and caregivers. Similar themes that have served as the basis for many of the works previously cited, (Cohen & Mannarino, 2011; Cullinan, 1990; Haine et al., 2008; Klingman & Cohen, 2004; Rosner et al., 2010; Tamborini et al., 2011; Papadatou et al., 2002; Reid & Dixon, 1999; Schonfeld et al., 2002; Wolmer et al., 2005), and reinforce the value of ongoing study so that teachers will be better equipped to fulfill this potential.

**Systemic factors.** The literature review included research on systemic factors that might govern teacher response, such as organizational attributes and leadership, perceptions of school climate, and the level of disruption presented by the event in a crisis management context. This line of inquiry into the research is relevant to the current study in two ways. First, there is a connection between organizational structures such as norms, staffing stability, school climate, and leadership/support, and teachers’ assessments of self-efficacy (Jaksec, Dedrick & Weinberg 2000; Ransford et al., 2009). More specific to the problem of practice, pragmatic issues such as not having sufficient time to reach out to grieving students were cited as a barrier to delivering an appropriate response (Cullinan, 1990; Lowton & Higginson, 2003). Schools that have
organizational structures and communication norms in place for crisis management appear to provide environments in which teachers feel more supported in their efforts as noted by King et al., (1999) who found that teachers who worked in schools with active crisis teams tended to have higher efficacy expectation scores when identifying students at risk of suicide.

Similarly, in the current study, teachers who worked in schools where certain classroom organizational frameworks were used (such as morning meetings or formal student advisory programs) tended to convey a stronger belief that they could pursue more sensitive topics with an individual student or with groups of students. It is possible that schools that incorporate these types of designs also communicate confidence in their teachers and provide the organizational support that increases the likelihood of success. In contrast, one of the more interesting results of the current study was the finding that the critical incident management procedures in their schools gave some teachers the implicit message that they were not well equipped to handle the needs of grieving children, and that those needs would be short-term and best managed by mental health personnel. Not surprisingly, these teachers were apt to question their own capabilities and express less confidence prior to training.

**Summary of the literature review in relation to the findings.** Prior research into the problem of practice has established that most teachers are not confident when faced with the challenge of responding to the needs of grieving children in the classroom. This lack of confidence has been attributed in the literature to (1) teachers’ anxiety and discomfort with topics such as death; (2) absence of training, both in the development of an understanding of grief in the classroom, and on specific ways that teachers can support grieving students; and (3) systemic attributes of the school setting that may restrict teacher response. These variables contribute to teacher avoidance of the topic and the perception that intervention is outside of their role, preventing the delivery of
timely support that is essential for grieving students and also ignoring opportunities to teach essential coping strategies to all students who will inevitably encounter life events that will be experienced as significant loss. Findings of the current study have corroborated previous research by not only affirming the presence of these key variables, but exploring the problem of practice from the teachers’ point of view, particularly around the concept of what contributes to or limits teachers’ levels of confidence as they consider best practice. While the findings of the present study reinforce the role of all three of the previously identified personal, systemic and training factors, the results emphasize the absence of training as most basic to the understanding of teacher response. Figure 4 presents a schematic that conceptualizes the training gap in the way that it may interact with other variables.

Figure 4

*Training in the context of school culture and teacher role.*
This schematic illustrates a self-perpetuating cycle that inhibits teacher effectiveness when responding to grieving children in the classroom. It centers around the absence of basic training to teachers. The unrecognized need for teacher training may accompany school practices that minimize the teacher’s role and are reactive and confined to the more acute or conspicuous phases of the event. Grieving students’ ongoing adjustment needs may extend well past a defined period of time, but teachers have not been trained to communicate information forward in the school setting, or to anticipate or recognize residual impacts and students’ needs. Routine classroom events may trigger completely unexpected reactions in grieving students at a later point in time, leaving teachers to feel unprepared and not equipped address these issues when they arise. From an efficacy point of view, teachers’ feelings that they do not have the capacity to be effective in their efforts to help these students will increase anxiety and avoidance, and reduce the likelihood that they will willingly engage with students on loss-related issues, or seek training when they do not believe that they will have the likelihood of success. The lack of training perpetuates this cycle.

**Validity and Limitations**

Validity in focus group research can be problematic as the data are generated by the constant interplay of guiding questions and participant interaction. Verbatim transcription of all seven sessions and simultaneous comparison of transcripts, field notes, participant reflection forms ensured that the data were recorded accurately and that the nuances of discourse were captured and corroborated. Triangulation was facilitated by the use of these three data sets. The additional component of the Participants Post-participation Survey further strengthened internal consistency as it asked participants to reference the specific aspects of the training and insights from the discussion that had most contributed to their self-reported increases in confidence when
they were back in the field and no longer influenced by the focus group environment. Providing a uniform training module ensured that all participants had the same frame of reference when discussing questions related to recommended best practices. In addition, the speaker’s notes in the PowerPoint module were read verbatim in each of the seven sessions to minimize the potential for any variability in the information presented. Whenever possible, the group was considered as the unit of analysis in the coding and categorizing of data, thus maintaining the integrity of the focus group design and allowing for the impacts of the interactions themselves to be noted.

Despite these procedural safeguards to validity, it would be appropriate to question the level of researcher involvement in the study and the potential for bias. Because the researcher also delivered the training module as a component of the focus group process, the participants understandably responded as they might in any training experience, asking questions about the content and seeking the researcher’s opinion on certain examples that they chose to share as they processed the training concepts. To the extent possible, the researcher would restate the content of the module and defer to the group to share their ideas about what was being presented. Nonetheless, the use of the module and the researcher’s role in its delivery took on intervention-like characteristics (Maxwell, 2005), and careful recording of the ways in which participants’ points of view evolved was necessary to ensure that the data were reflections of the process and not biased by the researcher’s role. Should a similar study be conducted again, it is recommended that the training component be pre-recorded or delivered by a person other than the researcher.

The primary limitations of the study were the small size of the sample and the imbalanced representation of districts and grade levels. While size was not a barrier to being
able to generate rich data sets in small focus group environments, the segments were uneven, with fewer participants representing middle and high school perspectives. As a result, it was not possible to draw any clear conclusions about the variations between teachers of older and younger students, and it was preferable to analyze the data for common themes across the groups while making notations when possible differences emerged that could be broadly and tentatively attributable to grade level distinctions.

A more difficult limitation to overcome, however, was the predominance of participants from district A. In retrospect, it was not surprising that many volunteers came from the researcher’s own district, as there would be an inherent willingness to respond favorably to a request made by a familiar and likely trusted colleague, especially if involvement was perceived to be helpful to that colleague. To the extent possible, groups were strategically assembled to distribute district representation. Also, the level of familiarity within the groups was considered when coding data so that themes did not get undue emphasis simply because they were more elaborated by participants who might be familiar with a particular situation. Another limitation resulted from the use of a convenience sample of volunteers, which may have yielded a majority of participants with a favorable bias towards the topic. Similarly, while the Participant Post-participation Survey results enabled a determination of statistical significance in the increase in confidence among participants, it is not known whether the same effect would have been found if all participants had completed the follow-up questionnaire.

Finally, as stated in Chapter II, while the use of the focused interview design created intentional boundaries for the study, and was well suited to the task of uncovering potential characteristics and dynamics of the phenomenon of teacher response, only further testing will identify findings that are relevant to a wider population and can be more broadly applied. These
potential avenues of future exploration, as well as the practical significance that might be drawn from the conclusions obtained, are discussed in the next section.

**Conclusion**

While many available resources describe the needs of grieving children in the classroom and provide advice to teachers and schools as to how these might be addressed, both scholarly and theoretical research over more than three decades has suggested that teachers are not equipped to respond to these needs. This study sought to utilize teachers’ perspectives and voice to better understand the gap between best practice and practical application. Thirty-seven teachers from elementary, middle, and high schools in seven western Massachusetts districts completed preliminary surveys and participated in one of seven focus group/training sessions. In these three-hour sessions, personal experiences and points of view were shared while participants simultaneously considered the practicality of information presented as best practice in a pre-selected training module. Consistent with previous research, only a small number of teachers enrolled in the study expressed confidence in their abilities to manage issues related to grief, loss, and bereavement in the classroom. The challenges noted by participants included (1) uncertainty about roles and boundaries including family privacy, (2) managing the needs of grieving students with the demands of their daily responsibilities and, often, their own deeply personal reactions to the situations that arise, and (3) addressing large scale or unexpected situations that felt to be out of the teacher’s control. The key reasons for these challenges were (1) internal factors such as teachers’ own cultural imprints and upbringing, (2) systemic factors within schools that diminish effectiveness, such as poor communication or protocols that emphasize short term interventions by specialized personnel such as counselors and underplay or ignore the role that teachers will have in addressing residual or long term impacts of a critical
incident, and most especially, (3) lack of training. Despite these challenges and limitations, when processing events in the focus group setting, teachers demonstrated the ability to integrate information and specific strategies presented in the training. Participants valued the components of the training that provided them with specific guidance about what to say to students when they are approaching sensitive topics, and how to interface with families in a way that respects cultural values but still enables schools to provide support. They were also able to articulate insights about how this learning would be incorporated within their classrooms or schools. These emergent ideas appeared to be later sustained when a follow-up component of the study was administered. A voluntary post-participation survey was offered six weeks after the initial focus group. Of the 26 who responded, (70% of total), seventeen (65%) reported a positive change in their self-assessed level of confidence after completing the training. These findings indicated a statistically significant increase in confidence when the data sets were compared on a Mann-Whitney test (W=161; p = 0.006). Respondents attributed this change to the information, strategies and resources that they had received at the training, but most agreed that the opportunity to explore the topic and share experiences with colleagues had been of greatest value.

**Significance of the study in the field.** First and foremost, this study reinforced the need for schools to incorporate training for teachers on how to respond to children who have experienced significant loss in their lives. The study demonstrated that given appropriate training, teachers were able to incorporate a wider view of loss-related situations that can impact students, which is the first step to identifying students in need and then taking action to meet those needs. Since findings suggested that a more inclusive definition of loss might increase teachers’ awareness of opportunities to both support students and build their resilience through a
wider range of life experiences, teacher training and related materials should explicitly emphasize this point. The findings of the study are valuable to the development of evaluation tools for professional development materials on this specific topic, and can be generalized to create a better understanding of the mechanisms that operate in the transfer of professional development and training to actual practice.

The study also reinforced the role that efficacy plays in strong professional development. Findings suggested that teachers’ participation in the training/discussion experience led to a statistically significant increase in self-assessed confidence, and that respondents attributed this change to the affirmation they received from small group discussion and problem-solving. The content of conversations was intensely emotional and teachers often used personal stories of loss as reference points, features that would not be possible in a training that was delivered in a large assembly or online format. For the participants, the group interaction around the materials and concepts seemed to be more meaningful than the presentation itself in terms of creating potential growth in confidence and, intuitively, increasing the likelihood of practical application.

This study was also able to highlight specific practices in schools that might hinder appropriate response. When school structures resort to reactive approaches, specific to the acute stages of an event and relegated to school-based mental health personnel, the lingering effects in the classroom over days, weeks or beyond might be underestimated or completely neglected. Systems of communication that do not consider the longitudinal impacts of significant losses in children’s lives result in information being lost or minimized as children matriculate through their school years. Teachers may then be blindsided when they do not realize the potential emotional triggers that can occur in routine classroom curriculum or activities. Policies that emphasize grief and loss response as being strictly in the domain of mental health professionals
fail to take into account the importance of the relationship that teachers already have with their students, or the fact that the residual impacts of the event will continue to be experienced long after the acute phase of a crisis. In order for teachers to implement best practice, schools and school leaders must develop systems and protocols that reflect best practice response, and, most importantly, must make a fundamental commitment to training that recognize the key role of teachers.

**Future directions.** As previously noted, the size of the sample and the personal content of focus group data have presented a number of themes that should be explored with larger and more diverse populations. Larger studies would could also examine differences related to age, gender, years of experience, and grade level perspectives. While the current study has developed a beginning understanding of what is needed to transform knowledge about the needs of grieving students into best practice in the school environment, more work must also be done to learn about the types of training that are most effective in terms of their sustainable impact on teachers after a longer period of time has passed. A case study approach following teachers through a typical year after training had occurred would be most valuable to further this knowledge. Also, because the motivations of a voluntary group of subjects may be very different from the realities of a typical school faculty, a similar study could be conducted as action research, using a schoolwide setting to add the perspectives of teachers who might not be represented in the current study. Finally, because of the prominence of systemic variables in the data collected, a similar study conducted with school administrators might shed light on the practical barriers and concerns that school leaders face when they consider the implications of best-practice recommendations.
While further research will be beneficial, some aspects of the current study may be more expeditiously applied. This study supports a holistic and developmental view of grief in the school setting. The range of experiences noted by teachers verifies that students encounter many varied types of losses. Fostering a broad and developmental definition of grief could lead to more accurate identification of students who are coping with difficult situations and who would benefit from the generalization of best practice approaches. At the same time, teachers need tools to address the most challenging situations that they may encounter. Based upon the findings of this study, these situations would include strategies for talking to children when a very large scale or highly publicized tragedy occurs, specific guidance for dealing with the topic of suicide in the classroom (even for very young children who could be affected by the suicide of a parent or close relative), and techniques and organizational frameworks for managing classroom dynamics when sensitive issues are being discussed. In a similar vein, schools need to place more emphasis upon anticipatory guidance in the classroom, both in the incorporation of coping skills around themes of loss, and in the development of classroom norms that convey openness to the discussion of sensitive or troubling issues. In such an environment, both teachers and students will benefit from an approach that helps them process emotions, build resilience, and acquire skills to cope with the most challenging circumstances that might be encountered through the lifespan.
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Endnote

Appendix A – Preliminary Participant Survey With Informed Consent

**Teachers and Bereavement Participant Profile Survey**

1. Thank you for your interest in my doctoral study about teachers’ experiences with grieving students in the classroom.

The following preliminary survey is being administered to collect some basic information that will allow me to schedule training/discussion groups based on grade levels and experience. The survey also contains some scheduling options that will hopefully make your participation as convenient as possible.

**Purpose of the research study:** This study will look at whether teachers feel adequately prepared to respond to the needs of grieving children in their classrooms, and examine some of the supports and barriers that teachers encounter when working with students who have experienced a tragic event such as the death of a parent.

Why are you being asked to participate? I am seeking a total of 60 teachers representing local elementary, middle and high schools. You must be a licensed teacher with at least one year of experience, and be willing to describe at least one specific bereavement-related situation that you have encountered in your classroom.

If you meet the eligibility criteria and have an interest in learning more about the study, please indicate “yes” below and you will be directed to a Statement of Informed Consent. When you have read the statement and indicated your consent to participate, you will be directed to the survey. Please note that completing the survey does not obligate you to participate in the study. Also, note that the specific contact information that is requested in the survey (name, school/district, phone number and email address) will only be used for registration purposes. Neither your name, nor the name of your district or school, nor any identifying details about the situations we discuss, will be used when the results of the study are compiled.

Thanks in advance for your assistance! If you have any questions about this study, please do not hesitate to contact me by e-mail: kahn.g@husky.neu.edu or by phone, (413) 221-0134.
Cina S. Kahn
(413) 221-0134

**Eligibility:**
I am a licensed Massachusetts teacher with at least one year of public school teaching
Teachers and Bereavement Participant Profile Survey

experience, and can recall at least one experience related to grief or bereavement in the classroom.

☐ Yes
☐ No

2. Informed Consent (After indicating your consent below, you will be automatically directed to the survey.)

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies, Doctor of Education Program
Protocol Title: Bereavement in the Classroom: A Qualitative Study of Public School
Teachers’ Sense of Efficacy When Addressing The Needs of Grieving Students

What you will be asked to do in the study: First, you will complete this brief on-line
questionnaire that will provide some background information and will assist me in
scheduling you into the appropriate follow-up training session/focus group.

The training session/focus group will be conducted in small groups of approximately 4-6
teachers at similar grade levels. On the day of the group meeting, you will receive an
introduction to the study and be asked to briefly describe one or two specific experiences
that you have had with the issue of grief in the classroom. Next, I will present a 45-minute
training session on Teacher Response to Grieving Children, developed by the National
Center for School Crisis and Bereavement. We will then have a guided discussion about
the ways in which the topics that are covered in the training are experienced in actual
practice. At the conclusion, we will summarize the key discussion points and you will have
the opportunity to raise any other issues that may have been overlooked in the
conversation. The discussions will be audio-recorded for transcription and analysis
purposes only.

The training session/focus group will take place at Lower Pioneer Valley Educational
Center in West Springfield. The study will last approximately three hours, including the
training module and the focused discussion group session.

The possible risks or discomforts of the study are minimal. You may feel emotional when
answering questions relating to bereavement. You can refuse to answer any question and
can leave the study at any time. Expected benefits include the information you will receive
through completion of the training module. It is also hoped that your responses may help
Teachers and Bereavement Participant Profile Survey

We learn more about how teachers respond to grieving children and how schools might develop support systems.

Because this study involves a training component, you will receive a certificate of participation (3 hours) that can be applied towards professional development points through your school district if you choose. You will also receive a copy of the training module and a packet including a DVD and other helpful resources on the topic of children and bereavement.

Your part in this study will be handled in a confidential manner. Your information will be assigned a code number. If you provide specific examples in the course of the discussion, the names and situations will be altered in order to protect your privacy and that of your students. Any reports or publications based on this research will use only group data and will not identify you, your school or any individual as being of this project. All audio-recordings will be destroyed following transcription and analysis.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may withdraw at any time. Your decision to participate or not will have no affect on your standing at your school.

If you have questions about electronic privacy, contact Mark Nardone, NU’s Director of Information Security at 617-373-7901 or privacy@neu.edu. If you have questions about the study, contact Gina S. Kahn, M.Ed., CAGS, 1.413.221.0134 or kahn.g@husky.neu.edu. You may also contact Dr. Nena Stracuzzi, the Principal Investigator overseeing the study at n.stracuzzi@neu.edu.

If you have questions about your rights in this research, contact Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: irb@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

☐ I have read the Informed Consent Statement and agree to participate. Please direct me to the preliminary questionnaire.

☐ I do not wish to participate.
Teachers and Bereavement Participant Profile Survey

*3. The following information will be used for pre-registration and contact information only. A unique ID# will be assigned to each study participant. Personally identifying information will not be used when results from the study are presented or referenced.

Name: 
School and District: 
Grade/Subject Taught: 
Home Address: 
City/Town: 
ZIP: 
Primary Phone: 
Alternate Phone #: 
Summer e-mail: 

4. What is your preferred method of receiving additional information/ schedule confirmation about the study?

☐ telephone  ☐ e-mail  ☐ regular mail

5. Gender:

☐ Male  ☐ Female

6. How many years of public school teaching experience do you have?

☐ 1 year  ☐ 2-5 years  ☐ 6-10 years  ☐ 11-15 years  ☐ 16-20 years  ☐ 21-25 years  ☐ more than 25 years of public school teaching experience

7. Please indicate the grade level in which you have had the most teaching experience.

☐ preK-2  ☐ 3-6  ☐ 6-8  ☐ 9-12

Specialized subject area if applicable, including Related Arts:
8. What type of formal training have you received on the topic of assisting grieving children in your classroom?

☐ I do not recall receiving any training or professional development on this topic.
☐ I have independently searched for and read books and/or articles on the topic.
☐ Relevant training materials have been provided to me by a principal, guidance counselor, or other school personnel after a specific incident has occurred.
☐ I have received inservice training at my school or district.
☐ I have attended at least one training or seminar outside of my school on the topic.
☐ I have taken at least one graduate level course with emphasis on the needs of grieving or bereaved children in the classroom.

If you are able to recall course titles or a specific resource or program that you have used for this type of training, please list:

9. How many total hours would you estimate that you have spent on the above trainings (including any independent research that you have done on the topic of pediatric grief or grieving children in the classroom)?

☐ 0 hours - I have not received prior training.
☐ 1-3 hours
☐ 4-10 hours
☐ 10-20 hours
☐ More than 20 hours

Comments:

10. To what extent do you believe that the training you have received has helped you feel better prepared to manage the needs of grieving children in your classroom?

☐ Extremely well prepared
☐ Well prepared
☐ Adequately prepared
☐ Not very prepared
☐ Totally unprepared

Comment (optional):
11. In the course of your teaching career, how often would you estimate that you have encountered grief/bereavement-related issues in your classroom?

- [ ] I can not recall any grief/bereavement situations in my classroom.
- [ ] 1-2 times
- [ ] 3-6 times
- [ ] 6-10 times
- [ ] 10-20 times
- [ ] More than I can count

Comment:

12. Please give a very brief description of the type(s) of grief/bereavement situations that you have encountered in your classroom.

13. When you consider the experiences that you have had, how confident are you in your abilities to adequately address the needs of grieving children in your classroom?

- [ ] Extremely confident
- [ ] Somewhat confident
- [ ] Neutral
- [ ] Some reservations
- [ ] Not at all confident

Other (optional)
14. When the surveys have been processed, you will receive additional information about the schedule and the agenda for the training module and facilitated group discussion. Please indicate your preference for participation based on your grade level group. Every attempt will be made to accommodate scheduling preferences.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First Choice</th>
<th>Elementary Grades pre K-4/5</th>
<th>Middle Grades 5/6-8</th>
<th>High School Grades 9-12</th>
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<td>Second Choice</td>
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<td>Third Choice</td>
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If you are unable to participate at these times and would like to be contacted with alternate dates, please provide your e-mail address below:
Appendix B – Focus Group Protocol and Facilitator’s Script

Researcher’s Checklist:

Pre-Meeting Set-up
☐ Put first names and Participant ID # on folder with removable sticky-note
☐ Check contents of resource folder:
  • CD with PowerPoint and digital copies of all materials
  • Participant Feedback Form with Participant ID#

Site Set-up
☐ Set up refreshment table
☐ Set up registration table/ name badges, notebooks, extra pens, resource folders
☐ Place and test digital recording equipment
☐ Set up projector and cue Power-point training module

Group Protocol
☐ Welcome
☐ Read the study introduction
☐ Collect the informed consent pages 1 and 2
☐ Ask folks to take out the reflection sheet and make additional notes to the first box about some of the situations that they have in mind; use for taking notes during the module; will be collected
☐ Focus group ground rules: Confidentiality; everyone’s experiences and points of view matter: engage one another; feel free to disagree or present an alternate point of view;
☐ Go around with introductions/ brief description of situation.
☐ Introduce the module (why it was selected; why speakers’ notes script must be followed)
☐ Begin the discussion guide… remind that this is just a guide, and any topic that they see as relevant is… relevant.
☐ At conclusion of the session, go around the table for a summary statement
☐ Collect materials; ask if there are any questions. Follow up contact: 413-221-0134.

Study Introduction:
“Thank you for participating in this research study. I know that you have already received detailed information about what the study is about and what you will do as a participant, but I would like to briefly review a few of the important details. The purpose of the study is to learn about the factors that influence classroom teachers’ responses to grieving children… both the things that support effective response and the things that might get in the way. You were selected to participate in the study because you expressed an interest in the topic, you have been a licensed public school teacher for at least one year, and you have at least one experience with grief in the classroom that you would be willing to discuss. Confidentiality is really important, so we will begin by introducing ourselves by either first name or nickname, and sharing a little bit about the experience that each of you thought about when you were considering becoming involved in the study. Even if you use specific information to describe that experience, there will
be no identifying data reported in the study that could identify you, your district, or the situation that you are describing.

After we complete our introductions, we will move to the training component of our session. I will present a training module titled “Children and Bereavement: How Teachers and Schools Can Help.” This power point module was developed at the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement, and it reviews some of the considerations and best practices that are recommended for teachers when they encounter bereavement issues in the classroom. Because we will not discuss the module until it is completed, I will ask you to jot down notes, questions and reactions on the Participant Feedback Form, which will help us during the discussion that follows the presentation. I will need to collect these forms at the end of our session, but you will notice that they are coded with your Participant ID# so I will be able to return them to you when the study is completed.

When we’ve viewed the module, we will discuss some of the key concepts that were presented in the context of the example that you’ve been thinking about. Other examples might come to mind after the discussion gets going, and it is fine to bring these into the conversation. We will be using a focus group methodology, which means that although I will be presenting a number of pre-established questions, which appear in your packet, the actual data that is collected from today’s session will come from the conversations that you have with one another as you share your various experiences and observations. Your interactions with each other about the topic are every bit as important as what we actually talk about. My own role will be to help summarize and clarify some of the themes that I am hearing, to make sure that we get to the heart of what is being discussed. Before we adjourn, I will share a few of my preliminary observations and ask whether those are accurate…and if there might be anything else that we have missed. In addition to the notes that I take during the session, I will be making voice recordings of our discussion. The recording devices are only to help my memory when I later transcribe the dialogue that was generated by the group. I will not be using actual voice recordings in my final report or in any presentations that I make about this study.

A total of seven sessions are currently planned, three elementary sessions and four secondary sessions (two middle and two high school groups). When all of the groups are completed, my goal will be to identify as many of the important themes as I can, and see what conclusions can be drawn about ways that teachers can be helped to be more effective when encountering situations related to grief and bereavement in school.

Does anyone have any questions or concerns about what we’re going to do? If you have no more questions and are still comfortable with participating, please initial the top of page one of the study description. I will collect the first two pages and store them until the study is completed, but please keep the third page for reference—it is a copy of the survey that you completed.”

**Introduction of the Module:**

The module was developed at the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement by David Schonfeld, M.D. and Robin Gurwitch, PhD and is made available at no cost for professional development through the Center’s website at the Cincinnati Children’s Hospital. The program
consists of 68 power point slides covering a developmental perspective on children and grief, ways in which teachers can assist grieving children, ways in which grief situations impact schools, and the importance of self-care when supporting the needs of grieving children. You have a handout of the PowerPoint in your folder, but I would also like to call your attention to a CD in the right pocket that includes the PowerPoint and the speakers’ notes. As each section of the module is presented, I will pause so that you can jot down brief reflection on the relevance of the section to their experience. These individual notes will be collected at the end of the session.

(While we’re mentioning the folder…the folder is also stuffed—literally—with a collection of resources on a wide range of related topics. I think you will find this information to be helpful as you expand on the training that we’ll review today, and if you are ever in a situation of needing some additional information.)
Appendix C – Focus Group Discussion Guide

1. What information in this training module was new to you, or presented in a way that you had not thought about before?
2. The module talks about the different ways in which kids process death or loss.
   a. When you think about the situation(s) that stand out for you in your experiences with grief or bereavement in the classroom, what are some of types of reactions that you have seen?
   b. Is having a developmental perspective about the way that kids react to grief helpful to you as a teacher?
3. In the preliminary questionnaire, the amount of previous training ranged from not at all, to quite a bit.
   a. How did your previous training help you know what to do in this situation?
   b. OR… was there an aspect of this situation that you found especially difficult?
   c. What other training might you have wanted in order to feel better equipped to handle the situation?
4. Is there something you wish you had done differently as you think back on the situation?
5. Is there something you wish that other people had done differently?
6. Can you think of any bereavement-related circumstances that would be difficult, or even impossible for a teacher to handle in the classroom?
7. The module mentions that some teachers might avoid discussions of death because it is a taboo subject, or they are worried about saying the wrong thing, or they are themselves uncomfortable with the topic. Do you feel that this is true?
8. What are some other reasons why it might be difficult to discuss death or loss in the classroom or in the school environment, or take advantage of some of those “teachable moments?”
9. Besides a death, the module mentions other situations that will have similar effects on children such as natural disasters.
   a. If you have experienced these other types of events during your teaching career, did you feel prepared to manage the impacts that these events would have on your students?
   b. What might have helped you to feel better prepared?
10. The module emphasizes the important role that teachers play in supporting children who experience loss. Do you have any suggestions that would help teachers be quipped for that role?
11. At the conclusion of the module, the importance of self-care is discussed, especially when the circumstances have an impact on the whole school community.
   a. In your experience, what are some of the school structures that support self-care for teachers when these types of events occur?
   b. What might interfere with self-care?
12. Any additional thoughts/ summary statements?
Appendix D – Participant Feedback Form

Reflection…

The one or two specific experiences that come to mind:

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<th>Please jot down any aspect of the power point that seem relevant to the above experiences:</th>
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<td>Ways that schools can be helpful…</td>
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<tr>
<td>How children understand death/Factors that affect bereavement…</td>
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<td>Self Care…</td>
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Appendix E – Letter of Introduction to District Superintendents

Dear (Superintendent),

In the past several years, our districts have worked together on a number of common concerns related to school safety and crisis response. At the classroom level, these concerns can take many forms, from the misfortunes that affect the everyday lives of children such as the death of a parent, to tragic events that impact a whole school or community, to widespread critical incidents such as last year’s natural disasters. Across this array of issues, there is the common thread of teachers’ need to respond to loss and grief-related issues in the school setting. In the course of my professional work I have observed a need for additional training in order to prepare teachers for the key role that they have in stabilizing and supporting students through the potential range of bereavement-related situations. I have also become interested in the obstacles that can interfere with teacher efficacy when grief enters the classroom environment. My interests have become the focus of my doctoral studies at Northeastern University. I am writing to ask for your permission to reach out to teachers from your district so that I may invite them to participate in my related dissertation research this summer.

During July/August 2012, I will be assembling focus groups involving a total of sixty K-12 classroom teachers, hopefully recruited from our seven LPVEC districts. In small groups, they will complete a training module developed by the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement—“Children and Bereavement: How Teachers and Schools Can Help.” After the module is presented, I will be guiding the groups of about 4-6 teachers through questions that consider information from the module in the context of an actual bereavement-related experience that they have had in their teaching career. The discussion is designed to identify the variables that support or inhibit teacher efficacy when responding to grieving/bereaved children. This research will be helpful in customizing future professional development on this topic, but also has broader relevance to the connection between any PD and actual practice. Participation will be totally voluntary, and the participants will remain anonymous in all study-related reports. School districts will be formally acknowledged for their assistance in the study, but will not be specifically linked to the data that are collected.

I am asking for your permission to make this training/study opportunity available to K-12 teachers in your district. The sample e-mail letter of invitation is attached. With your approval, I would follow up with your Curriculum and/or Guidance Directors and/or Principals, or whomever you believe would be the best person(s) to forward this invitation electronically to your teaching staff. I would also hope that those participating in the study could be authorized to exchange their Certificate of Participation in the 3-hour program for equivalent PDPs from your District Professional Development Administrator.

In addition to the possibility of earning 3 PDPs, participants will receive a copy of the training module and a packet of resources and training materials that can be freely shared with their colleagues in the fall. It is also my hope and intention that the lessons learned from this study will contribute to the strengthening of our ongoing regional emergency and crisis management training resources, and identify ways that our districts can continue to work together to be better prepared for crisis response.

If you would agree to help me identify potential participants from your district, please contact me by email to confirm your permission and to let me know who you would like me to contact to disseminate the email invitation. If you have any questions about the study or its methodology, please do not hesitate to contact me by email (kahn.g@husky.neu.edu) or by cell phone, 413-221-0134. Thanks in advance

Sincerely,

Gina S. Kahn, M.Ed., CAGS
Appendix F – Participant Recruitment Letter (Sent via E-mail)

Dear (School District) Colleague,

I am the Safe Schools/Healthy Students Program Director for the Hampden-Wilbraham Regional School District and currently a doctoral candidate at Northeastern University’s Doctor of Education Program. With permission from your Superintendent, I am inviting you to participate in a research study that I am conducting for my doctoral thesis, which will focus on teachers’ experiences with bereavement in the classroom.

As a classroom teacher, you know that grief and loss are all too frequent occurrences in childhood. It is estimated that 5% of American school children will face the death of a parent before the age of sixteen, and the majority of our students will encounter the loss of a close family member or other significant person in their lives, perhaps even a friend or classmate. Other events, such as personal tragedies or natural disasters, can trigger similar grief responses.

Who can participate?
I am seeking a total of about 60 teachers representing local elementary, middle and high schools. You must be a licensed teacher with at least one year of experience, and be willing to discuss at least one specific bereavement-related situation that you have encountered in your classroom.

What are the logistics?
The study session takes approximately three hours. A number of morning or afternoon scheduling options will be available during the months of July and August. The sessions will take place at the Lower Pioneer Valley Educational Center in West Springfield.

What will participants do?
Following the completion of the online questionnaire, you will be scheduled for the training and small-group discussion session at which you will have an opportunity to discuss the concepts presented in the training and share your own experiences with other colleagues from schools in the Lower Pioneer Valley Educational Collaborative region. The training module, “Children and Bereavement: How Teachers and Schools Can Help,” was developed by the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement with support from the New York Life Foundation and the September 11th Children’s Fund. The discussion questions are open-ended, and will focus on the supports and challenges that teachers encounter and the degree to which they feel prepared to meet the challenges presented by grieving students.

What will participants receive?
Because the study is centered on a training experience, you can receive three PDPs for your completion of the training session/focus group. In addition, you will receive a copy of the training module, and a packet of resources and materials.

How do I get more information?
Detailed information, a statement of Informed Consent, and a preliminary survey is available by accessing the link below. Please note that participation is completely voluntary, and completion of the survey does not obligate you to participate. If you have questions or would like more information, please contact Gina Kahn at 413-221-0134, or by email, kahn.g@husky.neu.edu I hope that you will join me in exploring this interesting and important topic. If you are interested in participating in the study please click on the link below to access the online questionnaire:

https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/TeachersAndBereavementParticipantQuestionnaire

Sincerely,

Gina S. Kahn
Appendix G – Participant Recruitment Letter (First Reminder)

Dear School District Colleague,

Recently, you received some information and an invitation to participate in a research study that I will be conducting this summer. Knowing that this is an extremely busy time of year, I thought I would take another opportunity to reach out and invite you to participate. As you recall, I am the Safe Schools/Healthy Students Program Director for the Hampden-Wilbraham Regional School District and currently a doctoral candidate at Northeastern University’s Doctor of Education Program. With your Superintendent’s permission, I am inviting you to participate in a research study that I am conducting for my doctoral thesis, which will focus on local teachers’ experiences with bereavement in the classroom.

As a classroom teacher, you know that grief and loss are all too frequent occurrences in childhood. It is estimated that 5% of American school children will face the death of a parent before the age of sixteen, and the majority of our students will encounter the loss of a close family member or other significant person in their lives, perhaps even a friend or classmate. Other events, such as personal tragedies or natural disasters, can trigger similar grief responses.

Who can participate? I am seeking a total of about 60 teachers representing local elementary, middle and high schools. You must be a licensed teacher with at least one year of experience, and be willing to describe at least one specific bereavement-related situation that you have encountered in your classroom.

What are the logistics? The study takes approximately three hours. A number of morning or afternoon scheduling options will be available during the month of July and August. The sessions will take place at the Lower Pioneer Valley Educational Center in West Springfield.

What will participants do? Following the completion of the online questionnaire, you will be scheduled for the training and small-group discussion session at which you will have an opportunity to discuss the concepts presented in the training and share your own experiences with other colleagues from schools in the Lower Pioneer Valley Educational Collaborative region. The training module, “Children and Bereavement: How Teachers and Schools Can Help,” was developed by the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement with support from the New York Life Foundation and the September 11th Children’s Fund. The questions are open-ended, and will focus on the supports and challenges that teachers encounter and the degree to which they feel prepared to meet the challenges presented by grieving students.

What will participants receive? Because the study is centered on a training experience, you can receive three PDPs for your completion of the training session/focus group. In addition, you will receive a copy of the training module, and a packet of resources and materials.

How do I get more information? Detailed information, a statement of Informed Consent, and a preliminary survey is available by accessing the link below. Please note that participation is completely voluntary, and completion of the survey does not obligate you to participate. If you have questions or would like more information, please contact me at 413-221-0134, or by email, kahn.g@husky.neu.edu I hope that you will join me in exploring this interesting and important topic. If you are interested in participating in the study please click on the link below to access the online questionnaire:

https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/TeachersAndBereavementParticipantQuestionnaire

Sincerely,

Gina S. Kahn
Appendix H – Participant Recruitment Letter (Second Reminder)

Dear School District Colleague,

As you begin your well-deserved summer break, I would like to take one more opportunity to remind you about the research study/training that I will be conducting this summer, focusing on local teachers’ experiences with bereavement in the classroom. If you have been considering participating but have not had the opportunity to respond, please know that the link for additional information, Informed Consent and the preliminary survey will remain open until the goal of recruiting approximately 60 local K-12 teachers is met.

Please remember that participation is completely voluntary, and completion of the survey does not obligate you to participate. If you have questions or would like more information, please contact me at 413-221-0134, or by email, kahn.g@husky.neu.edu I hope that you will join me in exploring this interesting and important topic. If you are interested in participating in the study and have not already completed the online survey, please click on the link below:

https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/TeachersAndBereavementParticipantQuestionnaire

Sincerely,

Gina S. Kahn
Appendix I – Confirmation of Participation

Dear (Participant)

Thanks again for your interest in taking part in the upcoming training/study on Teachers’ Response to Bereavement in Schools. I am writing to finalize scheduling arrangements. You are currently assigned to participate in the (Elementary/Middle/High School) level training/focus group that will meet on (Day/Date/Time).

The session will take place in the conference room at the Lower Pioneer Valley Educational Collaborative/Career Tech Center, 174 Brush Hill Avenue, West Springfield, MA 01089. Directions and a final confirmation will be sent by mail. If this date/time is not convenient, or if you have any additional questions, please contact me by email: kahn.g@husky.neu.edu or by phone at 413-221-0134.

I appreciate your willingness to participate in the training and share your perspectives on a topic that impacts so many of our students. Looking forward to seeing you!

Gina

PS- I am still seeking a few more study participants at all grade levels. If you know of a colleague who might be interested, please feel free to forward my contact information and/or the link to the preliminary survey.

https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/TeachersAndBereavementParticipantQuestionnaire

Thanks again!
# Appendix J – Focus Group Distribution

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<td>9-12 English</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>11-15</td>
<td>1-3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Rating Key: Preparedness**

0 – no response  
1 – totally unprepared  
2 – not very prepared  
3 – adequately prepared  
4 – well prepared  
5 – extremely well prepared

**Rating Key: Confidence**

0 – no response  
1 – not at all confident  
2 – some reservations  
3 – neutral  
4 – confident  
5 – extremely confident
Appendix K – IRB Study Approval Document

NOTIFICATION OF IRB ACTION

Date: May 30, 2012
IRB #: 12-04-11

Principal Investigator(s): Nena Stracuzzi
Gina S. Kahn

Department: Doctor of Education Program
College of Professional Studies

Address: 20 Belvidere
Northeastern University

Title of Project: Bereavement in the Classroom: How Teachers Respond to Issues of Grief and Loss in School

Participating Sites: Lower Pioneer Valley Educational Collaborative – permission letter on file
Various school district permission letters on file

DHHS Review Category: Expedited #6, #7

Informed Consents: One (1) unsigned consent form as preface to online survey

Monitoring Interval: 12 months

APPROVAL EXPIRATION DATE: MAY 29, 2013

Investigator’s Responsibilities:
1. The informed consent form bearing the IRB approval stamp must be used when recruiting participants into the study.
2. The investigator must notify IRB immediately of unexpected adverse reactions, or new information that may alter our perception of the benefit-risk ratio.
3. Study procedures and files are subject to audit any time.
4. Any modifications of the protocol or the informed consent as the study progresses must be reviewed and approved by this committee prior to being instituted.
5. Continuing Review Approval for the proposal should be requested at least one month prior to the expiration date above.
6. This approval applies to the protection of human subjects only. It does not apply to any other university approvals that may be necessary.

C. Randall Colvin, Ph.D., Chair
Northeastern University Institutional Review Board

Nan C. Regina, Director
Human Subject Research Protection
TO: Office of Human Subject Research Protection

FROM: Gina S. Kahn

SUBJECT: Request for Modification IRB# 12-04-11

PI: Dr. Nena Stracuzzi, n.stracuzzi@neu.edu.

CONTACT/STUDENT INVESTIGATOR: Gina S. Kahn, M.Ed., CAGS, 1.413.221.0134 or kahn.g@husky.neu.edu

DATE: September 16, 2012

TITLE/IRB Bereavement in the Classroom: How Teachers Respond to Issues of Grief and Loss in School (IRB# 12-04-11)

Requested Modification: I am requesting a modification in the above-named study for the purpose of exploring an aspect of the focus-group data that has been collected. In concluding remarks in all 7 sessions, participants expressed their view that the training component of the study had increased their understanding of the needs of grieving/bereaved children in the classroom. I am proposing to administer a brief follow-up survey to provide credibility to this finding by asking the teacher/participants for a post-reflection that compares their initial estimates of confidence in their ability to address the needs of grieving/bereaved children to their current estimates of level of confidence, and to identify any specific aspect of the training/discussion that a change (if noted) might be attributed to. In addition, I would like to know if there has been any aspect of the training that they believe they will be likely to incorporate into their practice this year, and to give participants the opportunity to make any additional comments. The additional information will increase the relevance of my study through a better understanding of potential barriers in the transfer of knowledge outside of the focus-group environment.

Risk: There are no increased risks to participants in this voluntary follow-up study. Additional precautions have been taken, however, to ensure privacy and confidentiality, particularly because the questionnaire is directly only towards current participants.
1. Initial contact/invitation will be made by email (except for the two participants who have indicated preference for correspondence via U.S. Mail. (sample letter attached)

2. The researcher has removed all identifying data from the preliminary survey and replaced it with the unique ID number assigned to each participant at the beginning of the study. For the purposes of ensuring accuracy in the follow-up communication, the researcher has created a spreadsheet that only lists name, ID and email address (or mailing address if preferred). The researcher will create drafts of the email/letter addressed to the 38 participating subjects, and will check each correspondence twice to ensure that the participant number and address on the correspondence is an exact match to the participant number and address on the spreadsheet. This will be checked twice before the emails (and two letters) are sent.

3. A new informed consent has been created to explain the follow-up questionnaire and ensure that participants understand the procedure and their right to refuse to participate.

4. The researcher will check the SurveyMonkey account daily and record responses by participant number.

5. The SurveyMonkey link will be open for approximately two weeks after the initial invitations are sent.

6. Approximately 7 days after the initial invitations are sent, a brief follow-up invitation will be emailed to any individual who has not participated. This will be the only reminder.

Link: [https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/ClassroomBereavementFollowUp](https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/ClassroomBereavementFollowUp)
NOTIFICATION OF IRB ACTION
MODIFICATION APPROVAL

Date: September 20, 2012  IRB #: 12-04-11
Principal Investigator(s): Nena Stracuzzi
Gina S. Kahn
Department: Doctor of Education Program
             College of Professional Studies
Address: 20 Belvidere
             Northeastern University
Title of Project: Bereavement in the Classroom: How Teachers Respond to Issues of Grief and Loss in School

MODIFICATIONS: Addition of a follow-up online survey to assess the impact of the training/focus groups on participants' initial sense of confidence dealing with grief/bereavement in the classroom. New recruitment letters and consent text have been created for follow-up study.

Participating Sites:
Lower Pioneer Valley Educational Collaborative - permission letter on file
Various school district permission letters on file

Original Protocol Approved: May 30, 2012

DHHS Review Category: #6, #7

Informed Consents: One (1) unsigned consent form as preface to follow-up online survey

As per CFR 45.46.117(c)(2) Signed consent is being waived as the research presents no more than minimal risk of harm to subjects and involves no procedures for which written consent is normally required.

Monitoring Interval: 12 months

APPROVAL EXPIRATION DATE: MAY 29, 2013

Investigator's Responsibilities:
1. The informed consent form bearing the IRB approval stamp must be used when recruiting participants into the study.
2. The investigator must notify IRH immediately of unexpected adverse reactions, or new information that may alter our perception of the benefit-risk ratio.
3. Study procedures and files are subject to audit any time.
4. Any modifications of the protocol or the informed consent as the study progresses must be reviewed and approved by this committee prior to being instituted.
5. Continuing Review Approval for the proposal should be requested at least one month prior to the expiration date above.
6. This approval applies to the protection of human subjects only. It does not apply to any other university approvals that may be necessary.

C. Randall Colvin, Ph.D., Chair
Northeastern University Institutional Review Board

Nan C. Regina, Director
Human Subject Research Protection

Northeastern University FWA #4630
Follow-Up Survey Proposed Invitation

Ver.2012-9-19

APPROVED

NU IRB# 12-07-01
VALID: 07/07/12
THROUGH: 12/31/13

Dear [NAME],

I would like to take this opportunity to express my sincere thanks to you for taking part in my research study on Bereavement in the Classroom. While I am still in the process of analyzing the data generated during the discussions, please know that your experiences, insights and participation have already made a significant contribution to my dissertation research, and your time has been very much appreciated.

As we embark on a new school year, I would like to invite you to participate in a brief follow-up reflection survey. In particular, I am wondering whether you feel that the discussion and/or training has had any impact on your initial sense of confidence dealing with grief/bereavement in the classroom, and if you've had any additional thoughts on the topic since our meeting in July.

Below is a link to this voluntary follow-up survey, which should take about 5 minutes to complete. To help you consider the question about changes in your level of confidence, I have included the relevant portion of your initial participant survey along with the unique number that was assigned to you at the beginning of the study. The survey link will bring you to a cover page that describes this additional component and asks you to indicate your consent to participate. If affirmative, you will be taken directly to the three-question survey. Please copy your participant number in the space provided on the informed consent page before answering the questions. To continue to protect your privacy and confidentiality, only your participant number will be associated with the results of the survey.

Thanks in advance for your assistance! The link will remain open until Friday, October 5, 2012. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me by e-mail: kahn.g@husky.neu.edu or by phone, (413) 221-0134.

Gina S. Kahn

Survey Link: https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/ClassroomBereavementFollowUp
Participant ID# 018 (you will be asked to copy this on page two of the survey)

Reminder Correspondence (Approximately 7 days after initial correspondence)

Dear [NAME],

Just a quick reminder that the link to the voluntary, follow-up research survey on Bereavement in Classroom will remain open until Friday, October 5. If you are planning to complete the survey but have not not had an opportunity to do so, you may still use the following link to access the survey:

Survey Link: https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/ClassroomBereavementFollowUp
Participant ID# 018 (you will be asked to copy this on page two of the survey)

Whether or not you choose to participate, I would like to thank you again for your participation in my study in July. I appreciate your significant contribution to this research.

Best regards,

Gina Kahn
(413) 221-0134
Appendix M -- Follow-Up Survey Invitation

Dear ____________,

I would like to take this opportunity to express my sincere thanks to you for taking part this past July in my research study on Bereavement in the Classroom. While I am still in the process of analyzing the data generated during the discussions, please know that your experiences, insights and participation have already made a significant contribution to my dissertation research, and your time has been very much appreciated.

As we embark on a new school year, I would like to invite you to participate in a brief follow-up reflection survey. In particular, I am wondering whether you feel that the discussion and/or training has had any impact on your initial sense of confidence dealing with grief/bereavement in the classroom, and if you’ve had any additional thoughts on the topic since our meeting in July.

Below is a link to this voluntary follow-up survey, which should take about 5 minutes to complete. To help you consider the question about changes in your level of confidence, I have included the relevant portion of your initial participant survey along with the unique number that was assigned to you at the beginning of the study. The survey link will bring you to a cover page that describes this additional component and asks you to indicate your consent to participate. If affirmative, you will be taken directly to the four-question survey. Please copy your participant number in the space provided on the informed consent page before answering the questions. To continue to protect your privacy and confidentiality, only your participant number will be associated with the results of the survey.

Thanks in advance for your assistance! The link will remain open until Friday, October 5, 2012. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me by e-mail: kahn.g@husky.neu.edu or by phone, (413) 221-0134.

Gina S. Kahn

Survey Link: https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/ClassroomBereavementFollowUp

Participant ID#xx (you will be asked to copy this on page two of the survey)

Reminder Correspondence (Approximately 7 days after initial correspondence)

Dear ____________,

Just a quick reminder that the link to the voluntary, follow-up research survey on Bereavement in Classroom will remain open until Friday, October 5. If you are planning to complete the survey but have not had an opportunity to do so, you may still use the following link to access the survey:

Survey Link: https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/ClassroomBereavementFollowUp

Participant ID#xx (you will be asked to copy this on page two of the survey)

Whether or not you choose to participate, I would like to thank you again for your participation in my study in July. I appreciate your significant contribution to this research.

Best regards,

Gina Kahn
(413) 221-0134
Appendix N – Consent Form for Online Follow Up Survey

Thank you for your continued interest in my doctoral study about teachers' experiences with grieving students in the classroom. The following provides details about this follow-up survey component and Informed Consent to continue participation. After indicating your consent below, you will be automatically directed to the follow-up survey.

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies, Doctor of Education Program
Protocol Title: Bereavement in the Classroom: A Qualitative Study of Public School Teachers’ Sense of Efficacy When Addressing The Needs of Grieving Students

Purpose of the follow-up survey:
This follow-up survey is being administered to better understand how the training/focus group discussions may have impacted participants’ initial sense of confidence dealing with grief/bereavement in the classroom.

Why are you being asked to participate?
You are being invited to complete this follow-up survey because of your participation in the initial training/focus group discussion on the topic of bereavement in classroom.

What you will be asked to do in this follow-up component of the study:
You will be asked to complete a brief (four question) survey, which should take about 5 minutes to complete.

Risks and Benefits: There are no risks or benefits associated with this follow-up component of the study.

Privacy and Confidentiality: Your responses to the follow-up survey will be handled in a confidential manner. To protect your privacy, you will transfer the unique code number that was given to you at the beginning of the study in the space provided below. As with the other components of the study, in the event that you provide specific examples in your follow-up comments, the names and situations will be altered in order to protect your privacy and that of your students. Any reports or publications based on this research will use only group data and will not identify you, your school, or any individual as being of this project.

Your participation in this follow-up survey is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the follow-up survey, you may exit the survey at any time. Your decision to participate or not will have no affect on your standing at your school, or on the certificate of completion that you have received for your previous participation in the training/focus group component of the study.

If you have questions about electronic privacy, contact Mark Nardone, NU’s Director of Information Security at 617-373-7901 or privacy@neu.edu. If you have questions about the study, contact Gina S. Kahn, M.Ed., CAGS, 1.413.221.0134 or kahn.g@husky.neu.edu. You may also contact Dr. Nena Stracuzzi, the Principal Investigator overseeing the study at n.stracuzzi@neu.edu.

If you have questions about your rights in this research, contact Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: irb@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

☐ I have read the Informed Consent Statement and agree to participate. Please direct me to the preliminary questionnaire.

☐ I do not wish to participate.
Appendix O – Post Participation Survey

Please enter your unique participant ID# (included in your follow-up survey invitation):

1. In your preliminary survey, how did you describe your level of confidence in responding to the needs of grieving children in the classroom? (If uncertain, please refer to the information provided in the invitation to participate in this follow-up survey.)

- Extremely confident
- Confident
- Neutral
- Some reservations
- Not at all confident

Other (options):

2. How would you describe your confidence level now?

- Extremely confident
- Confident
- Neutral
- Some reservations
- Not at all confident

Other (options):

3. If you have noted any difference above, was there an aspect of the training/discussion that most contributed to any change in your level of confidence?

4. Is there a concept or insight from the training/discussion that you are most likely to utilize in the upcoming school year?

- Yes
- No

If yes, please describe:
Please use this additional space to add any additional comments or insights related to the topic/discussion.
## Appendix P – Types of Experience: Illustrative Comments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of experiences by grade level</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Elementary</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E3-28 The other that comes to mind our children who will share with me about grandparents who have passed, even infants, siblings that they never knew, and I don't know… if this is going to cover the scope of things other than grief related to death but, and also, deaths of pets is one thing that comes to mind, but also… coping with a chronic illness, either their own or within the family.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E3-71 The other instance was a little girl last year when we have the tornado, her house… Completely… Devastated, and um she was sad, she was a child who wasn't a strong student… so I think she just pretty much gave up,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>So there's always that discussion about cancer and will it kill you and does everybody die of cancer… I can't remember a year that that hasn't come up in a very, very, very long time.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| **Middle**                          |          |
| MI-015 I had two students who have lost parents to cancer. So it's kind of been long-term thing that the parents themselves, knew, that it was coming, and dealing with that with them and trying to help the child through. |
| M1-012 You know it's never ending. And I think that that's part of the problem we face it every single day. Whether it's parents or [specific person] or kids… This is my fifth year in [District], I taught 20 years [another district] and we had two suicides while I was [there] and that's a whole other can of worms for the siblings that are left behind. |
| M1-046 There were many events the children losing their loved ones. But one event, which was pretty significant…[three children] perished in [an event] that was caused by [a family member] and one of the [deceased students] was in my classroom and that was really… just…(pauses) |

| **High School**                     |          |
| HS-035 But here and there throughout the year it’s always been they know somebody at their high school that has passed away, and I know there was a suicide in [neighboring town] so a couple of kids that I had knew that student… I had a student whose dad passed away and when she brought that up the other student I had her dad passed away about six years ago so that brought that out…so they struggle through how to deal with it. Even going to the wake for this young lady, a lot of kids didn't know what to do, so helping them understand what to do |
| HS-021 I think the longer that I teach the more I see |
students who are in a generation where they grow up losing very few family members or friends and it becomes even more difficult for them to understand rightly or wrongly how however it works the cycle of life and that you are going to be only here for a certain amount of time and I think because they have very little experience with grieving and bereavement, it's very important to try to help them through it.

· HSII-017, so the first thing I initially thought of was 9/11… um… and then we’ve had a couple of stretches, two years in particular where we’ve lost a number of students and recent graduates and there was a murder… in… it was just horrible, um… but unfortunately, we also just lost [parent well known in the community], and his kids have gone through our school so that was probably the thing that has been sticking in my mind because it is the most recent experience

· HSII-044 my main one was we had one year that was horrific. I’ve been in the school system for over 20 years, taught at [high school] had a couple of students over the years that have killed themselves, committed suicide… Years ago… This one year in particular that really struck home for me… [student] was in a car accident… um… And [another student] pulled her out of the wreck, had a broken back, she was in intensive care for a long time. She pulled her out, but she was already dead. And then the driver of the vehicle was… one of my students…
### Appendix Q – Coding Key for Applied Practice (Post Survey) With Illustrative Comments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category/Code</th>
<th>Intended Strategy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Longitudinal impact. Opportunities for students to express feelings.</td>
<td>Remembering that grief changes over time and that children need to express their feelings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“What to say.” Longitudinal impact</td>
<td>How to respond specifically to a student initially and checking in with them from time to time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--</td>
<td>It is difficult to predict what information might be used when much of it depends on the &quot;unknown&quot;.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developmental influence</td>
<td>Truly reach out to the families to help your student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--</td>
<td>I am not currently in the classroom except as a sub teacher; therefore it would not be my role.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of resources</td>
<td>The literature provided was helpful and I am sure will be a helpful tool down the line to utilize.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of resources</td>
<td>Yes, I would, as I mentioned before, seek help if I wasn't sure how I could help.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness of signs and symptoms</td>
<td>Yes, everyone grieves differently... there really is no perfect norm to go by...flexibility is key</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--</td>
<td>No… I have a lot of experience in this area.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication. Schoolwide impact. Longitudinal impact</td>
<td>Yes. The idea of making sure all faculty/staff are fully aware of difficult situations throughout the building. Communication!!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--</td>
<td>Yes. I would try to incorporate everything we spoke about, not just one thing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness of signs and symptoms</td>
<td>The seminar reinforced that children cope differently. I have kept that in mind when listening.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Longitudinal impact</td>
<td>Yes. Although we discussed supporting kids through the grief process, I was thinking about how schools should continue to support students who have lost their parents/siblings in the past. It is really important for current teachers to be aware of any deaths that students have experienced, so they will be sensitive when talking with kids about parents, siblings or any projects that focus on families. We are now providing information on past deaths (mother, father, sibling) at our school through the health concerns reference sheet that the nurse provides to each team of teachers. It was very helpful to hear from other teachers how they have supported kids through the grief process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness of signs and symptoms</td>
<td>All children are different and express themselves in very different ways</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness of signs and symptoms</td>
<td>Yes. That teachers can look at a child's behavior from a more neutral position and recognize if it matches up with what is developmentally appropriate and expected.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developmental aspect</td>
<td>Yes. That teachers can look at a child's behavior from a more neutral position and recognize if it matches up with what is developmentally appropriate and expected.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opening opportunities for discussion.</td>
<td>Yes. The idea that I could act as a sounding board for a grieving student and can refer them to persons with more expertise also.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources.</td>
<td>I learned about the keeping in contact with the student on a regular basis through this training/discussion. I never would have thought about it. I always assumed that the ones left behind were dealing with it and talking to counselors if needed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Longitudinal impacts</td>
<td>Yes. I actually currently have a student going through a difficult time and have been reviewing the resources from the training and will use them in my discussions with the student.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of resources.</td>
<td>Yes. Mostly, the importance of listening and paying attention to how important others think their grief is.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category/code</td>
<td>Comment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>---------</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Discussion with colleagues | Sharing experiences was very beneficial.  
The overall group discussions  
Sharing experiences with others to understand how they have dealt with bereavement issues. Being prepared in advance with strategies that enable you to respond appropriately and helpfully, without which you may not be able to handle or deal with situations that arise unexpectedly.  
Listening to other people and how they handled the process, understanding that I am not alone in feeling some trepidation toward the subject, and having the opportunity to air our concerns and having them validated.  
Hearing others’ reservations and anxieties helped me realize that there is no textbook response to tragedy affecting the classroom. |
| Training/Content | To comprehend that the grieving process is unique for everyone and no two situations are exactly alike nor can we truly compare our own personal experiences with grieving to students grieving.  
Specific answers to specific questions were outlined and discussed, thus giving the teacher a lot of confidence is going forward  
The training was great and the materials that Gina provided us for future reference will be very helpful when needed. I am hoping to share this information this year with the staff at our school at a faculty meeting.  
Already had a student who lost a grandparent… I felt more comfortable to talk, share than I would have before the training. I feel that she is more likely to share in the future if she needs help coping. The discussion may have happened anyway but the training made it easier.  
I feel that the training and discussions both made me feel more confident and comfortable discussing grief with my students. The resources…were also very helpful…to reinforce what was discussed at the training.  
Shared experiences of fellow members in my group and the handouts that went with the presentation. |
| Resources | I think that I would feel more comfortable approaching the subject with a child, and I feel that I would find help if I didn't know how to help the individual struggling.  
I thought the materials provided were very helpful to keep on hand as a reference— which I have done. The CD is fabulous to have.  
Yes! Having resources has already been useful since I had a student whole lost his mom to a suicide last week. At least I have some materials to help me assist him.  
The literature and information handed out at the summer session was beneficial. |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Other: Validation</th>
<th>No. I reaffirmed what I knew. Extreme confidence to me is over confidence, which may not allow for adjustments for individual situations and students.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Validation</td>
<td>Yes, it validated my responds to the needs of grieving children in by building. That my actions and reactions in handling this topic were correct. I did what I thought was correct but, now I know it is.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No level in change in confidence but reminded that even though I've have this experience personally the focus needs to be on the individual currently experiencing the bereavement. I've never made myself the focus but it is something someone with similar experience needs to keep in mind.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Realizing my levels of experience and competence when compared with those of other educators I respect.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>It validated the fact of how important dealing with a child's bereavement is.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix S – Level of Confidence (Pre- and Post-Survey Comparison)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade level</th>
<th>Confidence 1</th>
<th>Confidence 2</th>
<th>Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Some reservations</td>
<td>Some reservations</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Confident</td>
<td>+1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Confident</td>
<td>+1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Some reservations</td>
<td>Some reservations</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Confident</td>
<td>+1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Not at all confident</td>
<td>Some reservations</td>
<td>+1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Confident</td>
<td>+1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Confident</td>
<td>Confident</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Confident</td>
<td>Extremely confident</td>
<td>+1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Extremely confident</td>
<td>Extremely confident</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Not at all confident</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>+2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Confident</td>
<td>+1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Confident</td>
<td>+1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Some reservations</td>
<td>Confident</td>
<td>+1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Confident</td>
<td>Extremely confident</td>
<td>+1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Confident</td>
<td>+1</td>
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<td>Confident</td>
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<td>Some reservations</td>
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</tr>
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<td>+1</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Neutral</td>
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<td>+1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Not at all confident</td>
<td>Some reservations</td>
<td>+1</td>
</tr>
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