Irish Primary School Teachers’ perspectives of coping with childhood grief and loss in the classroom, due to bereavement, separation, and divorce.

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Declaration

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Abstract

This research project explores teachers’ perspectives of coping with childhood grief in the classroom, namely due to bereavement, separation, and divorce. Its central aim was to discover how comfortable teachers feel responding to such sensitive issues and how adequately prepared they felt to face these challenging situations. All the participants involved in this study were fully qualified, practicing teachers, with a variety of teaching years and experience. Employing a qualitative method of one to one semi-structured interviews, four main themes emerged. These surrounded: Initial Teacher Education (ITE), communicating with children about grief and loss, school and curriculum responses to bereavement, separation and divorce and conceptualizing grief and loss.

The findings of this study suggest that teachers may leave ITE feeling somewhat unprepared to tackle grief and loss in the classroom. Despite this, responses varied with some individuals feeling more comfortable and willing to discuss grief and loss issues, perhaps implying that a teacher’s character, personal experiences or fears may play a central role in how they respond to these sensitive topics. School and curricula responses to grief and loss was found to be of significant importance with a prevailing view that the SPHE curriculum does not adequately address grief and loss however experiences with additional programmes, such as Rainbow’s Ireland and Zippy Friends, was extremely rich and varied. Conceptualizing grief and loss was found to be a complex task, nevertheless there was a general consensus that there is a sense of grief and loss associated with a family breakdown but that it differs significantly to the feelings experienced following a bereavement. The findings also suggest that further research in this area is needed from an Irish context.
List of Abbreviations

Continuous Professional Development (CPD)

Department of Education and Skills (DES)

Growing up in Ireland (GUI)

Initial Teacher Education (ITE)

Irish Childhood Bereavement Network (ICBN)

National Council for Curriculum Assessment (NCCA)

Professional Development for Teachers Service (PDST)

Rainbow’s Ireland (RI)

Social, Physical, Health, Education (SPHE)

Zippy Friend’s (ZI)
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Chapter 1: Introduction

This research project explores ‘Teachers’ perceptions of coping with grief and loss in the classroom, due to bereavement, separation and divorce’. According to Wood (2000) grief is a complicated concept which can occur due to different types of loss, caused by difficult life events. Within all our lives there are losses but there are also losses that do not happen to every individual, these may be referred to as “circumstantial losses”, such as a family breakdown or a death of a significant other (Horn, Crew & Harrawood, 2013). Undoubtedly, grief and loss are universal, life altering experiences that are likely to impact on a child’s emotional wellbeing and permeate the classroom (Horn et al, 2013). As a result of this, there is growing pressures on teachers to educate students in areas of sensitivity, such as grief and loss, but also recognize and respond to these issues when they occur (Lynadh, Gilligan and Handley, 2010).

While the Department of Education and Skills (2010) imply that the classroom teacher is the best placed professional to deal with sensitive issues, research has consistently failed to support this assumption and instead argues that teachers do not feel adequately qualified to tackle such sensitive issues in the classroom (Dyregrove & Idsoe, 2013; Lynam, Connell & McGuckin, 2018; Reid & Dixon, 1999). However, a body of literature (Hare & Cunningham, 1987; Stylianou & Zemblyas, 2018) suggests that even if teachers were to engage in formal training at Initial Teacher Education (ITE) they may still feel uncomfortable discussing such sensitive issues, this may derive from personal experiences or fears of death, separation or divorce. In addition, how schools respond to these issues differs as SPHE programmes are selected by a whole school approach (DES, 2015), with some schools offering additional programmes for teachers and children. While there is a plethora of data available that explores grief caused by bereavement, there is a shortage of literature afforded specifically to grief caused by divorce.
or separation and moreover from an Irish perspective. It is hoped that this research project gives voice to teachers from an Irish context by primarily exploring how competent and comfortable they feel in responding to grief and loss issues in the classroom.

**Rational for research**

The rationale behind this research is based on the following:

- Researchers own personal interest and experience in this area; Positionality of the researcher will be discussed deeper in Chapter 3.
- Enhance the researcher’s knowledge and understanding of how to respond to grief and loss in the classroom.
- Limited research undertaken and documented in Ireland.

**Objectives of the research**

The central aim of this study is to collect data that will explore teachers’ experiences and perceptions of working with children who have experienced grief and loss and ultimately assess their comfort and competency of dealing with these sensitive issues. In addition, this research paper aims to examine what training teachers receive at Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and how schools and curriculum help teachers to face the challenges that often accompany grief and loss in the classroom.

**Organization of the study**

This research paper is organized into five chapters:

1. Introduction
2. Literature Review
Conclusion

This section has provided the context and rational for the research study in which the pertinent issues were identified and discussed. The primary research question was explored alongside several sub questions, also detailed within this chapter was the researchers aims and motivation for conducting this research study. The next chapter will review existing literature salient to this study.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction:

The purpose of this chapter is to critically examine the literature relating to primary school teachers’ perspectives of coping with grief and loss in the classroom, namely due to bereavement, separation, and divorce. To begin this chapter, important definitions will be discussed in detail. Following this, the literature will review relevant statistics of bereavement, separation, and divorce in Ireland to date. The remainder of this chapter will then take a thematic approach that explores the following themes:

- Rational for this research.
- Theoretical lens underpinning the rational for this study.
- Irish primary schools’ response to bereavement, separation, and divorce.
- Teachers responses to bereavement, separation, and divorce.
- Training at Initial Teacher Education College (ITE) and Continuous Professional Development (CPD)

Definitions of grief and loss

Defining grief and loss can be complicated as a sense of loss can be personal and idiosyncratic (Fiorini & Mullen, 2006). In this study conducted by Fiorini & Mullen they define grief as:

Grief is an inevitable, never-ending process that results from a permanent or temporary disruption in a routine, a separation, or a change in a relationship that may be beyond the person’s control…..Although loss is a universal experience,
the causes and manifestations of it are unique to each individual and may change over time. (Fiorini & Mullen, 2006, p. 10)

Similarly, Wood (2008) discusses how grief is a complicated concept that manifests itself due to different types of loss, caused by difficult life events. Simply put Goldman (2000, p.3) states that “We grieve what we miss, and we want back”. Many academics further support this theory as they emphasize how bereavement is far from the only significant loss that children can experience as other losses encompass parental separation and divorce, imprisonment, illness, disability, moving house or school and loss of a pet (Holland, 2016; O’Brien & Mc Guckin, 2013). According to Monique (2018) these are considered “non-death” losses which include ambiguous loss and symbolic loss. The term ambiguous loss refers to circumstances whereby a family member may be psychologically present and physically absent (e.g. loss due to divorce or foster care). Whereas symbolic loss, also considered a non-death loss, has been applied to situations where children experience the loss of “stability” and a “future”, this can also be experienced alongside physical losses (e.g. the loss of a person or house). Nevertheless, grief is a healthy, natural reaction to losing somebody, places or things people care about (Wood, 2008). For the purpose of clarification this literature review will explore grief in terms of bereavement, separation, and divorce.

Statistics of Bereavement, Separation and Divorce in Ireland

In Ireland 31,116 people died in 2018 (Central Statistics Office, 2019). These are the parents, grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles, and friends of our 1.2 million children (Rainbows Ireland, 2019). To further inform us of the number of bereft children in Ireland we can look to a national longitudinal study conducted by Growing up in Ireland (GUI). This is one of the biggest and most complex studies undertaken in Ireland to date as it tracked 8,570 nine year
old’s for a seven year period to “examine the factors which contribute to or undermine the wellbeing of children in contemporary Irish families” (GUI, 2009). The data disclosed that just over three-quarters of the participants had experienced a stressful event in their lives. Of these stressful events, 43% was caused by the death of a significant loved one (GUI, 2009).

Furthermore, the number of separated and divorced people increased by 8.9% between 2011 and 2016 with figures rising from 203,964 to 222,073 (CSO, 2019). It is now estimated that one in every ten marriages in Ireland end in separation or divorce (Rainbows Ireland, 2019). Similarly, data from the GUI (2009) stated that 15% of children had experienced separation and divorce of parents. Children from one parent families are more inclined to encounter stressors in their lives, including the death of a family member, separation or divorce of parents or moving to a new house (GUI, 2009).

**Theoretical Framework underpinning research**

The rational for providing the following theoretical framework is to provide the reader with a better understanding of the authors intent of insight (Farrell, 2007). Therefore, in an attempt to answer the research question, it was deemed imperative to explore Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory. The reasoning for this is that this theory supplies insight on child development from a theoretical lens that is both practical and useful, it takes a holistic approach that explores the needs of children at school as a result of what is happening at home (Lynam, Connell & Mc Guckin, 2018). This ecological perspective works to demonstrate the power of social systems, in particular schools, to enhance resilience and extinguish vulnerability for children experiencing grief and loss in education (Martin-Hogins, 2014). The primary focus of this ecological systems theory surrounds how environments change and thus how this change impacts on the individuals who grows and live in these environments (Hayes, O’Toole & Halpenny, 2017).
Bronfenbrenner: Unexpected changes in children’s lives

A considerable amount of literature (GUI, 2009; Hayes et al., 2017 Lynam et al., 2018) applies Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory when highlighting the link between home and school in a child’s holistic development. The GUI (2009) included Bronfenbrenner’s model to highlight the child’s relationship with the world. Similarly, a recent study undertaken by Lynam et al (2018) draws on much of his ecological systems theory when discussing the effects of bereavement, separation and divorce on families and children alike. The report highlights the findings of a mixed method research project which explores pre-service teachers experiences of working with children experiencing bereavement and separation issues while on placement. Traditionally, individuals would associate separation, divorce, and bereavement with “at-home” issues however these issues are likely to pervade the classroom and impact on many different areas of learning for the child (Lynam et al., 2018).

Lynam et al (2018) discusses how families are constantly evolving and changing, thus this requires responding to the emotional needs and development of each family member. However, the paper does acknowledge that most changes are expected, namely transitioning from primary school to secondary school, and it is through socialization that we learn how to think, behave and feel when these changes occur (Lynam et al., 2018). When these transitions take place, most humans find the balance this is imperative for positive mental health, this is also known as adaptation process and is considered a first order change (Lynam et al., 2018).

Nonetheless, unexpected traumatic events happen in families and these are known as second order changes. One apparent “certainty” of childhood is that your parents will always be present and available, yet in the case of parental divorce or separation this “certainty” is partly removed, in the case of a parental death this “certainty” is completely removed (Holland, 2008). In line with Holland (2008), Rogers et al (2010) describes grief as the loss of an
“assumptive world”, from the perception that a general sense of stability and predictability of the world has been altered. Suddenly, the life of the family and the members requires reevaluation and adaptation, therefore the family’s relationship with the wider world, in particular the school community, also needs to be reviewed (Lynam et al., 2018). Bereavement, separation, and divorce are possibly the most common second order changes that children are likely to encounter in their lives and during their attendance at school (Lynam et al., 2018). Therefore, in line with the children’s family and homes the school is an environment where grief is likely to manifest itself.

The relationship between home and school has been widely investigated by Bronfenbrenner in which he theorised that the interaction between different social settings, namely the home and the school, impacts heavily on an individual’s development and wellbeing (Hayes et al., 2017). Cranwell (2007) echo’s Bronfenbrenner’s theory as he acknowledges that students spend a great deal of their lives in school and therefore the reactions of teachers is significant, as is the role of the school community, in responding to issues of grief and loss in an appropriate manor. With this body of knowledge, this paper will now investigate how curricula and pedagogical values of Irish Primary Schools respond to children who are experiencing grief.

**Irish Primary Schools response to bereavement, separation, and divorce issues**

In 2011 the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) led a public consultation to discover the key priorities for Irish Primary Schools. Central to their findings was one key priority, this surrounded implementing wellbeing as part of the national curriculum through Social, Physical and Health Education (SPHE) (Government of Ireland, 1999)

SPHE is defined as a subject which “provides particular opportunities to foster the personal development, health and wellbeing of the child” (GOI, 1999, p.2). Within the
wellbeing guidelines it suggests that positive mental health for children is inextricably linked with well-being. The term mental health promotion is understood “to strengthen people’s sense of control, resilience, and the ability to cope with life’s challenges” (Department of Education, 2015, p. 10). However, within the 52-page document on wellbeing, divorce and separation are not mentioned once, with bereavement being addressed on only two occasions. Firstly, the document suggests that small support groups should be designed for bereaved children. Following this the wellbeing document implies that sensitive issues such as bereavement should not “be treated in isolation but rather in the context of the overall SPHE curriculum” (DES, 2015, p.43). In recent years, a further report on wellbeing was released. This report explored wellbeing policy and frameworks across primary and post-primary however once more, grief or loss was not specifically mentioned within the report (DES, 2019)

It is salient to note however that the wellbeing policy does offer a number of resources for promoting wellbeing in schools, yet only two of these programmes addresses grief and loss directly, one is titled Zippy Friends programme (Partnership for children, 2002). This programme works to promote the emotional wellbeing of children aged between 5-8 years of age by increasing their coping skills under 6 themes, one of which is dealing with change and loss (SPHE Network, 2015). According to the ‘Wellbeing in primary school resource’ teachers engage in formal training prior to delivering this programme, receive a teacher’s handbook and also some suitable resources. Also addressed within the ‘Wellbeing Policy 2015’ (DES, 2015) was the need for peer supported programmes, this is in response to the recommendation by the wellbeing document to address grief in small, peer related groups. Thus, Rainbow Ireland is one of the programmes welcomed and recommended within the wellbeing policy. This is an afterschool programme that works to address loss caused by bereavement, separation and divorce, it is run by a volunteer either from an outside agency or from a member of school staff (RI, 2019). While both the Zippy Friends and the Rainbow Ireland work to tackle children’s
grief and loss in schools, neither programme is compulsory to schools, instead programmes for SPHE are selected by a whole school approach (DES, 2015). It could also be argued that although Rainbows Ireland and Zippy Friends are invaluable programme for children experiencing loss and grief, they are not implemented in every school and there is little literature available to assess how teacher’s find training for and delivering these programmes. Rowling (1995) argues that often teachers are identified as supportive, emotionally detached adults who can offer support and guidance to grieving children. However, according to O’Sullivan (2019) one certainty remains, teachers are on the front lines and it is difficult for them to be genuinely motivated and capable of promoting social and emotional wellbeing of children if they feel unsupported and uncared for themselves.

**Teachers’ responses to bereavement, separation, and divorce**

Research undertaken by the Department of Education (DES, 2010) implies that the teacher is the best placed individual to deal accordingly with children’s worries and overall wellbeing:

National and international research has consistently shown that the classroom teacher is the best placed professional to work sensitively and consistently with pupils and that s/he can have a powerful impact on influencing pupils’ attitudes, values and behaviour in all aspects of health education in the school setting. (Department of Education and Skills, 2010, Cir. 0022)

Perhaps, the key problem with this statement however is that it assumes that all educators are confident and comfortable with addressing sensitive issue in the classroom (Rowling, 1995; O’Sullivan, 2019). A study in Texas explored teachers’ attitudes on coping with grief in the classroom, in which many participants reported feeling uncomfortable dealing with grief or any type of loss. This was due to ‘inadequate preparedness’ as the educators had not engaged
in any formal training at college or school on death education (Reid & Dixon, 1999). Lynam et al (2018) reported similar findings with respondents highlighting the need for more training at ITE to cope with grief and loss resulting from bereavement, separation, and divorce. Similarly, to the DES (2010) the Irish Childhood Bereavement Network (ICBN, 2018) state that teachers are in a strong position to provide support for the children in their classroom. While the ICBN (2018) concur with the DES (2010) viewpoint they further imply that most children who are grieving do not need a “bereavement expert” but instead need the support of somebody who can care and empathize with their current situation. In a study undertaken by Willis (2002) he discusses how children aged between 2 & 7 are “egocentric and often given over to magical thinking” (p.2), they may use the word “dead” but not necessarily understand it’s meaning. Therefore, this highlights the importance of teachers using concrete and understandable language when explaining death or divorce to children. Nevertheless, many educators “find it pedagogically challenging or even morally questionable to discuss issues of death and loss in the classroom” (as cited in Stylianou & Zembylas, 2018, p. 2). Long (2005) believes that this is as a result of teachers trying to shelter children from the harsher realities of life however research has shown that children are actually interested in death either as a result of personal loss or due to cartoons frequent reference to death (as cited in Stylianou & Zembylas, 2018)

This theme also emerged in other studies as Dyregrove & Idsoe (2013) conducted research in Norway surrounding teachers’ perceptions of their role facing children in grief. The study concluded that although there is a vital need to address children's grief at school, teachers felt that there should be a stronger emphasis placed on limiting the teacher's role in dealing with grievance by stating that there was some confusion surrounding where their tasks as a teacher ended and where those of a psychologist or social worker began. Interestingly however,
these perceptions result from the very fact that they do not feel adequately qualified to intervene with complex situations such as childhood grief (Dyregrove & Idsoe, 2013).

According to Branch and Brinson (2007), for some children the stress that accompanies divorce and separation is similar to that of having a parent die. While limited literature was available to support this assumption one study did draw attention to grief caused by parental separation and divorce. Holland’s (2008) research indicated that divorce and separation are viewed as a significant issue for 95% of Hull schools, 10% higher than bereavement ratings. Therefore, this implies that grief through separation may be a greater issue in schools than bereavement, this is due to the higher frequency of parental separation that occurs. The question however is whether teachers’ view grief experienced due to a bereavement as similar to the grief experienced following parental separation or divorce and more importantly how do they cope with these issues in the classroom.

In response to this query Branch & Brinson (2007) discuss how books can act as an invaluable resource for teachers when dealing with grief and loss in the classroom. Books model appropriate coping strategies for children who are dealing with strong emotions (anger, denial, confusion, withdrawal, anxiety) evoked by death, divorce and separation and therefore it is recommended to have a wide-ranging accessible library for children that addresses sensitive issues (Branch & Brinson, 2007). Again, the question remains, do teachers feel confident using books as a resource to introduce and talk about such sensitive subjects.

**Training at ITE and CPD for teachers**

There is a large volume of literature to suggest that teachers feel unequipped to adequately cater for a child who are experiencing grief or loss in their classroom (Dyregrove & Idsoe, 2013; Holland, 2008; Reid & Dixon 1999). The consensus pertaining from the
research above implies that teachers’ leave teacher training college insufficiently trained to tackle sensitive issues, such as bereavement and family breakdown. Nevertheless, Holland (2008) argues that although training at ITE is imperative, teachers also need to engage in CPD on grief and loss as refresher courses. Interestingly, there is also literature to suggest that if a form of bereavement education was offered to teachers, they may remain unwilling to engage in dialogue regarding death or divorce. In research undertaken by Hare & Cunningham (1987) they affirm this assumption as they discovered that despite teachers receiving training on grieving children, which significantly increased their knowledge, there was little to no improvement in their comfort levels when speaking about death in the classroom. Interestingly however, Hare & Cunningham (1987) concluded that training for teachers in this vicinity must be more concrete as opposed to theoretical. It could be debated that the main limitation with Hare & Cunningham study (1987) is that they fail to consider teachers’ personal experiences with death and their own personal death attitudes. Neimeyer (as cited in Cullihan, 1990) insinuates that:

Only if teachers have consciously touched death in their lives and have reached at least a tentative position in regard to it, living fully through it deeply, expressing themselves honestly and arriving at a considered personal position with respect to the meaning of death, can they successfully aid the student. (p.149)

Thus, this suggests that teachers are more capable of helping children in the grieving process if they can surpass the fear and pain of loss themselves (Cullihan, 1990). However, it is suggested that the emotional scars suffered by educators may prevent adequate handling of sensitive issues such as death, separation, and divorce (Cullihan, 1990). According to Holland (2008) many teachers reported wanting to help children experiencing grief however due to a lack of training they were “wary of causing upset”. Likewise, Reid (2002) suggests that
teachers who are unable to respond to grief issues may care quite a lot, however due to unresolved grief themselves they may struggle in helping that child.

**Implications of lack of training at ITE and CPD on teachers and children**

Difficulties can arise when children return to school following a loss (Holland, 2016). Holland (2004) established a training course for teachers known as “Lost for Words”. The aim of this course was to raise awareness for educators who are working with children experiencing loss by giving them insight into the loss process, the effects of loss and how best to help a child who is grieving (Holland, 2007). A previous project named “Iceberg” (n.d) was also undertaken by Holland (2007) in which he focused primarily on parental death. “Lost for Words” was based on the findings of “Iceberg” however Holland focused on loss in a broader sense as opposed to parental death. Within the Iceberg project many children reported feeling ignored, isolated, embarrassed, uncertain, and different when they returned to school following a loss (Holland, 2008). Within Holland’s (2008) study he highlighted how many teachers felt unsure about how to broach the topic of loss and as a result it led them to ignore the child and act as if the death did not occur. However, in terms of a response, many of the children who participated in the Iceberg project implied that a kind word or acknowledgement would have comforted them greatly and “there would have been no need for further intervention” (Holland, 2008). To further support this Shaw (2004) and Dooley & Fitzgerald (2012) advice that on many occasions children just need access to one good adult to listen to them without offering solutions. Likewise, in a study conducted by Schonfeld & Thomas (2015) he supports Holland as he highlights how many school personnel worry they will say the wrong thing or start a conversation that there are unprepared to deal with, as a result they say nothing at all. However, silence conveys a great deal, as it implies that the teacher is unprepared, unconcerned or unaware of how to provide support at a time when a child needs compassionate and trustworthy adults to help them (Schonfeld & Thomas, 2015).
Conclusion

With Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological System Theory in mind it is apparent that the way in which schools and teachers respond to sensitive issues can greatly influence a child’s wellbeing and participation at school. However, a broad number of studies indicate a lack of teacher confidence and comfort when dealing with sensitive issues due to grief and loss. The reasoning for this is two-fold. Firstly, there is a lack of teacher training on loss both at Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and throughout continuous professional development programs offered at schools. Secondly, teachers own personal anxiety and fear surrounding death or other emotional issues heavily impact on their willingness and ability to engage in dialogue encircling grief and loss. What is interesting to note however, is that most of the studies mentioned above correlated grief with death and failed to acknowledge grief caused by separation and divorce. Conversely some studies did recognise the significant impact of grief experienced by a child due to separation and divorce. Nevertheless, it is apparent that there is a gap in research that needs to be filled as divorce and separation are increasing in Ireland. Aligning with this, there appeared to be a lack of research conducted with regards to death anxiety in teachers and how this made the teacher in question feel.
Chapter 3: Methodologies

Introduction

This chapter outlines the research design that will be employed for this research project. The chosen methodology will be discussed alongside a number of vital considerations made throughout the research design. The primary purpose of this chapter is to discuss the chosen methodology and justify its suitability with regards to the research question.

Purpose of the research

The literature reviewed in the previous chapter offered a large amount of material on the research question from an international context however limited literature was available from an Irish context and moreover from an Irish primary school teachers’ perspective. In line with this, this research was encouraged by personal experience which supports Creswell’s (2007) theory that “research problems are often found in personal experiences with an issue,[or] a job related problem…” (2007, p.102). During the researcher’s time working within an educational setting as a Special Needs Assistant it became apparent that there was a lack of confidence and competence by both teachers and SNA’s to cope with levels of grief and loss that many children were presenting with in the classroom and school community. On many occasions, school personnel expressed their discomfort and lack of confidence on addressing sensitive issues such as bereavement, separation, and divorce. Similarly, this was one of the reoccurring themes that pervaded from the literature review, mostly from international literature. In order to add to the body of literature from an Irish teachers’ perspective the research methodology that appeared to be most applicable was qualitative research.
Research Design

Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2007) maintain that there is no blueprint for research planning however he does acknowledge that each research design is influenced greatly by the idea of ‘fitness of purpose’. Thus, the aim of the research determines the research design and instruments being implemented (Cohen et al., 2007). As the purpose of this research is to investigate “Teachers’ perspectives of coping with grief and loss in the classroom, due to bereavement, separation and divorce”, a qualitative approach will be adapted and underpins the framework of this research. The main reason for choosing this research design derives from the fact that qualitative research enables the researcher to draw some meaning out of ‘real life’ situations by taking a holistic approach (Silverman, 2005). Moreover, qualitative research gives a more accurate reflection of the participants perspectives in contrast to quantitative findings, which create extensive numerical data (Creswell, 2008). The most significant reason for taking a qualitative approach surrounds the sensitive nature of the research question and a desire to take a holistic approach to draw out truthful and meaningful responses from participants (Denny & Weckesser, 2018; May, 2001). Furthermore, Janesick states that:

We have lost the human and passionate element of research. Becoming immersed in a study requires passion: passion for people, passion for communication, and passion for understanding people. This is the contribution of qualitative research. (Janesick, 2000, p. 394)

Therefore, this is another central reason for adopting the chosen research approach.

Phenomenology

Research in which the central aim is to explore how individuals experience a particular phenomenon belongs to qualitative research and a phenomenological approach (Abawi, 2016). In a study undertaken by Creswell (2007) he highlights how phenomenologists describe what all participant’s share in common as they encounter a particular phenomenon (e.g. grief, loss or anger).
Research Method/Instruments

According to Denscombe (2007) qualitative research consists of the researcher networking with participants through interviews, questionnaires and focus groups. Cohen et al (2007) highlights how open-ended questionnaires are an attractive instrument for small scale studies yet some limitations can occur with this method as during data analysis it may be difficult to translate opinions into numbers. Furthermore, practical problems can arise with this method as often participants become pre-occupied with the more demanding task of writing in their own words and thus devote less time to reading instructions (Cohen et al., 2007). Nonetheless, questionnaires are a popular choice amongst researchers as it helps them to overcome the time limitations that often occur when collecting data. Similarly, group interviews offer the same time saving benefits as they are prearranged and also limit the number of the disruptions that need to be made to a school community. Nevertheless, there are some disadvantages with this research method. While having multiple interviewees present can supply two versions of events, leading to a more reliable and complete record, it can also be detrimental as individuals may retreat on front of others, especially if it is a sensitive topic (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Therefore, a group interview was not viewed as the most favourable research method due to the sensitivity of the research question.

Data collection taking a phenomenological approach tends to rely heavily on interviews as an appropriate research instrument (Denscombe, 2007). To encourage the participant to engage fully in the interview Robson (2011) argues the ‘semi-structured’ or ‘unstructured’ interviews are best suited. With this knowledge the researcher has decided upon a semi-structured method as it enables the interviewer to be more flexible with regards to opened ended questions and the sequence in which they are answered, thus allowing the participant to expand on areas of interest. Furthermore, Stewart et al (2018) highlights how the flexibility of this approach allows for discovery and elaboration on important elements that the researcher may
not have been aware of or view as relevant to the researcher. In line with this, the researcher plans to conduct one to one interviews, the reasoning for this is twofold; firstly due to the sensitive nature of the research question and secondly this method allows the researcher to fully engage with each participant.

**Data Collection**

Prior to recruiting any participants, the researcher obtained permission from the board of management, the principal, and teachers by supplying them with information letters, detailing the motivation for the research, aims and goals. Upon approval from all parties the researcher will than began to gather data. Research by Opie (2004) proposes that when conducting small scale interviews, it is advisable to limit the number of participants to no more than 6 people; with no more than 10 questions with the interview process taking around 45 minutes to complete. The reason for this surrounds the time constraints that are placed on a researcher when conducting small scale research and the necessary time transcribing each interview takes. In line with this it gives the researcher more time to sufficiently analyse the contents of the interview.

**Ethical considerations**

In addition to conducting a research project, researchers must be fully aware of ethical issues that may arise and thus they need to anticipate what these issues may be (Opie, 2004). Clark (2019) defines ethics as “the cornerstone for conducting effective and meaningful research” (p. 394). Wellington (2015) defines ethics as way in which research will be conducted and the moral principles adhered to that ensure no detriment or harm is caused to any participants during the data collection process or analysis of findings. Hence, prior to conducting this research, ethical permission was granted from Marino Institute of Education Ethics Committee (MERC) in which the researcher was required to state the
nature of the research, the main aims of the research, how this study would be conducted and how the rights of the participants would be adhered to. According to Denscombe (2010), this a routine procedure when the proposed research involves data collection straight from people. Due to ethical considerations and the sensitive nature of the research question the researcher will not include children in this research study, instead all data will be collected from practising teachers.

To recruit participants, the researcher will firstly gain permission from the board of management and the principal of the sample school by supplying information letters. As previously mentioned, once all participants have received an information letter on the research project and have signed the consent form, only then will the data collection process occur. According to Opie (2004) when conducting qualitative research interviewer’s need to question how the interview may improve a situation and how some interviews may be stressful for participants. Similarly, Miler & Brewer (2003) discuss the significant role the researcher plays as they discover the participants personal beliefs & feelings and act as somewhat of an intruder into that individuals lives. Therefore, throughout the research process the confidentiality of the participants is of the highest concern as participants involvement in research should never impact on their lives or job (Opie, 2004).

As the participants have a right to privacy, their confidentiality will be treated professionally ensuring that pseudonyms will be used throughout the research. The participant will be informed at the time of the interview that their rights to privacy are being adhered to. They will be reminded that for the purpose of collecting data the interview will be audio recorded. Any audio recordings or transcripts will be stored carefully and securely on a device, such as a laptop, which will be locked and secured using a personal password. The audio recordings will be transcribed within 5 days of the
interview being completed. Once all the data is compiled and transcribed the audio clips will be removed from devices, carefully. If at any stage the participant does not want to engage further in the project, any previously recorded interviews will be removed, most importantly the participants will be made fully aware of this prior to participation. Similarly, the confidentiality of the school will always be protected warranting that no information will be disclosed that will cause the school to be identified.

**Positionality**

It should be noted that the researcher has never personally experienced any bereavement, separation and divorce yet has previously worked with children experiencing grief and loss. Therefore, the researcher would identify themselves as a significantly empathetic person. Every effort will be taken during the data collection process and analysis to avoid bias and interpret the data in a fair manor although it should be acknowledged that a certain amount of personal experiences and opinions may arise naturally during the data collection process and in response to the nature of the research instrument. Nonetheless, having an awareness of positionality has been reported to benefit both the research and analysis process as it allows the researcher to critically analysis and consider their inclusion in the project (Nicholas, 2009).

**Reliability and Validity**

According to Long & Johnson (2000) there is strong imperative for ‘rigour’ to be pursued in qualitative research to ensure that findings hold conviction and strength. In order for research to be vigorous it must have reliability and validity. However, within Golafshani’s (2003) study many theorists debated how transferable these concepts are to qualitative research and instead conceptualized reliability and validity as “as trustworthiness, rigor and quality in qualitative paradigm” (p. 601). To achieve reliability and validity Golafshani argues that the researcher must eliminate bias and increase truthfulness. Considering this, the researcher will
ensure that they remain professional and objective when gathering, analysing, and interpreting data, whilst constantly reminding themselves of the research question to ensure that it is being answered. The researcher is aware that although the data reflects the perspectives of some practicing teachers it does not involve every teachers’ opinion or thoughts on grief and loss. Although the findings are a fair reflection of the data collected, limitations were encountered that undoubtably impact the rigour of this study. These will be discussed in greater detail in the following section.

**Limitations**

As with any small-scale research, limitations were encountered. The main challenge surrounded time limitations placed on the researcher to collect data during the two-week school-based activity block. As a result of this restriction the researcher is confined to collecting data from only one sample school, with six participants only. Factors such as the location and background of the school, school ethos and teachers own experiences with grief and loss may limit the study significantly. If more time was allocated to the data collection process then it may have allowed the researcher to travel to contrasting schools, these schools may have different responses, strategies and resources in place to deal with grief and loss and therefore the results and analysis would differ significantly and would provide a more comparable study between schools. Thus, the data may have been richer and more conclusive when analysing if the sample size was larger. Aligning with this, the thesis had a limit of 10,000 words therefore in-depth analysis and discussion of the data generated will be significantly restricted.

**Data Analysis**

Following the data collection process, the researcher then began to analysis the findings. To begin, the audio files were transcribed verbatim; codes were applied to identify
key words and a thematic analysis was carried out on the completed transcriptions. This proved a very time-consuming process but did afford the researcher the opportunity to really engage with the data. To begin the data analysis the researcher applied symbolic, summative, and salient phrases to each paragraph (Saldana, 2009). These codes were then grouped into concepts which resulted in the emergence of several keys themes. Braun & Clarke (2006) acknowledge that qualitative research is exceptionally diverse and complex and thus suggest that a thematic analysis should be viewed as a foundational method for qualitative analysis. Thematic analysis enables the researcher to display any differences, experiences and unities which arise through the coding process (Cohen et al., 2011). According to Dawson (2009) thematic analysis is highly inductive, meaning that the themes develop from the data and are not influenced by the researcher, this was discussed in detail under the reliability and validity subheading in this chapter. Furthermore, Dawson (2009) discusses how literature plays a central role in the data collection process, particularly if it can work to explain a developing theme. In line with Dawson’s theory, the findings were divided into themes whilst the literature review discussed previously in this dissertation help to provide the readers with some context from which these findings are based. Therefore, the themes that emerge provide us with a deeper insight into the experiences and perceptions of teachers working with children who have experienced grief and loss in the classroom.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter the rationale for selecting the research methodology has been discussed. In addition, the researcher has detailed the chosen methodology, discussed the limitations associated with this study, considered all ethical issues and addressed the researcher’s positionality. The findings pertaining from the data collected will be analysed and discussed in chapter four of this dissertation.
Chapter 4: Analysis & Discussions

Introduction

This chapter will analyse and discuss the findings that emerged through the data collection process. The literature together with the findings works to answer a number of questions relating to teachers’ perceptions of working with children who have experienced grief and loss, due to a bereavement, separation or divorce. Emerging from the literature and data were four main themes, namely, teacher’s experiences of grief and loss at ITE, teacher’s own experiences and comfort communicating with children regarding these issues, the school and curricular responses and lastly how teacher’s conceptualize grief and loss.

Initial Teacher Training College

Training at ITE, specifically with regard to grief and loss, was deemed as unsatisfactory by the vast majority of the respondents. The general consensus pertaining from the findings suggested that teachers left ITE feeling ill prepared to specifically deal with grief and loss issues in the classroom:

(P1) “You are told you will come across sensitive issues. The main thing you are taught in college is about confidentiality and those issues. But you don’t really focus on grief and loss [in college], so you do feel unprepared in that aspect”

Such a reflection is reminiscent of a number of international and national studies in which it was highlighted how many teachers left ITE feeling unprepared to cope with grief and loss issues and this consequently impacted on their confidence to communicate with the children in regards to these topics (Dreygrove & Isode, 2013; Lynam et al., 2018; Reid & Dixon, 1999). Interestingly, interviewee 3 acknowledged that there was no explicit training made available at
ITE however she discussed the importance of innate attributes and qualities, such as compassion and kindness, to adequately help a teacher deal with these sensitive issues:

(P3) “No, as far as I remember. I suppose we are prepared because we are taught how to deal with children, with empathy, with love and with kindness and with those things. I suppose once we are there for the children that is the most important thing and I am sure all teachers are. Again, we are not taught explicitly how to deal with these situations but just, I suppose, from experience and just being a caring person or being a compassionate teacher, that helps with dealing with it but no, there isn’t any explicit training”.

This finding reflects the ICBN (2014) suggestion that children do not need a “bereavement expert” but instead need someone who can care and empathize with a child. Similarly, the DES (2010) argue that the teacher is the best placed professional to work sensitively with pupil’s and impact positively on their wellbeing. It is salient to note that the same participant (interviewee 3) is the only respondent who identified as a parent and made reference to the teacher’s role as being somewhat similar to that of a mother’s “You are nearly like a mother figure to them..”. In addition, this participant experienced a significant bereavement herself at a young age. This could imply that having lived through this experience herself and now as an adult and a mother, she resonates with the children’s pain and understands the importance of kindness and compassion in the healing process. This coincides with Niemeyer (as cited on Cullihan, 1990) who states that only if teachers have consciously been touched by death in their lives, living fully through it, can they successfully aid the child. Nevertheless, interviewee 3 was asked whether they would welcome more training at ITE, in which they stated:

(P3): “Definitely. I always thought it would be a great idea to get Rainbows into the colleges and people do the training”
The same question was also posed to the remainder of the participants in this study, all of whom agreed that training at ITE should be more explicit with regards to bereavement, separation and divorce. This led the researcher to question whether formal training at ITE would improve an individual’s willingness and confidence communicating with children regarding such sensitive issues or whether it depends on individual personalities and personal experiences. Participant 5 noted that:

(P5): “Even if some people did participate in training at CPD and ITE surrounding death and divorce issues they may still not feel comfortable talking to kids about it”

Another participant shared similar views stating that until you are faced with grief issues in the classroom, you don’t realise how difficult it will be.

(P3): “I think until you are actually faced with it you don’t realise how difficult it will be”

Worthy of note is that neither of these participants had engaged in any CPD with regards to grief and loss and did report later in the interview that they had never experienced any personal loss in their lives. However, after analysing the respondents comments it would appear that although training at ITE and CPD would be greatly welcomed there was an overriding worry which suggested that no matter how well educated you are nothing can really prepare you for the complexity of dealing with grief and loss. This reflects the findings of Hare and Cunningham (1987) study which found that despite teacher’s receiving formal grief training, in which their knowledge was significant increased, it did not improve their ability to communicate effectively. Moreover, the comments made by the participants correlate with Stylianou & Zembylas (2018) theory that some educators may simply find it pedagogically challenging to discuss issues of death and loss in the classroom.
Teacher’s responses to grief and loss in the classroom

Owing largely to age, years of teaching experience, personalities and different teaching styles, participants responses to bereavement, separation and divorce in the classroom varied. Two participants discussed at length about their encounters:

(P2) “On the very first day of school he brought in a teddy bear that was made out of all his Dad’s clothes”

(P3) “He wanted to talk about his uncle all the time … the children sat around in a circle and we lit a candle and we all said a prayer for his uncle. Once children feel heard, they mightn’t fully understand death or separation, but we listen to them when they come to try to talk about things”

A prevailing theme amongst these two participants was ‘acknowledgement’ as both highlighted that the children in their class were very vocal and open about their bereavements thus suggesting that the children were actively seeking acknowledgement of their losses. The two respondents commented that simply acknowledging their loss through a simple prayer or kind gesture helped the children feel that they were being “heard” and that seemed to significantly help the child in question. This concurs with the findings of Hollands (2008) “Iceberg” study in which he highlighted how many teacher’s felt unsure about how to broach the topic of loss, yet many of the children involved in this study expressed how all they wanted was a kind word or acknowledgement from their teacher and “there would have been no need for further intervention”. The participants themselves appeared to be quite happy and comfortable acknowledging the children’s grief in this manner and did not express any discomfort, this could suggest that teacher’s feel more comfortable when a child broaches a sensitive topic with
them as are then aware that the child is willing and comfortable to talk. Interviewee 2 further enforced this point by stating:

\[(P2): \text{``I think I wouldn’t be very comfortable broaching the subject with him. I just wouldn’t know what the right way would be to bring it up or address it''}\]

In relation to the participants comfort level when communicating about grief and loss it was noted that some participants felt more comfortable than others and in general there was mixed comments. Therefore, this would contest the DES (2010) theory that teachers are the best placed professionals to deal with sensitive issues as it fails to consider teacher’s own fears and personal experiences with death and separation. Although the participants were not asked explicitly if they have every experienced grief and loss some respondents mentioned that they had not been touched by death, separation and divorce in their lives and they worried that this has or could impact on their ability to respond in the right manor:

\[(P4): \text{``I think grief and loss is so huge really, well it’s not that I want to not deal with it but I wonder about you know about going there ..... I haven’t experienced it myself''}\]

This was identified as a key concern amongst the participants and thus this somewhat reflects Cullihan’s (1990) theory that teachers are more capable of helping children in the grieving process if they themselves have experienced grief and have dealt with their own personal scars. This was prevalent earlier in the findings with interviewee 3. Similarly, one participant noted that they worried about saying the wrong thing (Interviewee 6): \text{``I do worry about saying the wrong thing, big time''}, this mirrored Holland’s (2008) theory which suggested that due to a lack of training some teacher’s avoid grief issues as they are ‘wary of causing upset’ for the child.
Contrary to Holland’s theory and in line with Cullihan (1990) the one participant who did experience a significant loss themselves (P3) reported higher levels of confidence and competency in engaging in dialogue regarding grief and loss in general. It is imperative to note that the participant in question never referred to this being as a result of her own bereavement but instead praised Rainbow’s Ireland in helping to boost her communication skills in this area:

(P3): “I am lucky that I have the Rainbows training, so I have a little bit of a start of how to communicate about the things. I worry that I won’t do enough”

Although the theme of language did not surface universally, some participants drew attention to their experience and comfort of using age appropriate language when communicating with children about these sensitive issues:

(P2): “You have to be so careful about what way you word it. Even though that is apparently what they recommend is to use really concrete words. Don’t fluff it, just say what has happened”

However, the participant in question did comment that the children in the class would often ask the child questions about his father as he is so vocal about his death. This participant expressed how concerned she was about this use of language at the beginning of the school year yet soon realised that it did not affect the bereaved child:

(P2): “X, is your Dad dead?’ It didn’t upset him, he just said, ‘yeah’. Kids are just so matter of fact”

This reflects the findings of Willis’s (2002) study as he states that children between the ages of 2-7 are often egocentric and inclined to engage in magical thinking. Willis continued to explain how children often use the word “dead” but do not necessarily understand its meaning; therefore, teachers should use concrete language when explaining death or divorce. Interestingly, Stylianou & Zemblyas (2018) believe that children are interested in death and
loss as they are extricable aspects of their lives, either as a result of personal experiences or frequent reference to death and loss in cartoons and films, perhaps this could explain why the child in (P2) classroom was so accepting and somewhat removed from his father’s death. In terms of language (P2) was under the impression that you should use concrete language when communicating with children about grief and loss, although she did express concern about doing so. Worthy of note is that this participant was newly qualified and had expressed on different occasions in the interview that she was fearful of parental disapproval especially when children opened up to her about their parents separating. “Like I was concerned sometimes when that little boy spoke to me about it that he was revealing to me things that his parents didn’t want me to know.”

School and curriculum response to bereavement, separation, and divorce

Data disclosed by the GUI (2009) stated that just over three quarters of children involved in their study had experienced a stressful event in their lives. The findings pertaining from the interviews further supported these statistics as five out of the six participants (Interviewees 1, 2, 3, 5 & 6) had experience dealing with both a significant bereavement and separation/divorce over the course of their teaching experience. One participant stated:

(P5): “I would say that there’s not one class in this school who don’t have a child whose parents are separated/divorce”

Furthermore, research regarding Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory demonstrates the power of schools and teachers in responding to the needs of children at school as a result of what is happening at home (Cranwell, 2007; Hayes et al., 2017; Lynam et al., 2018). With this in mind, the respondents were asked how beneficial they viewed the school and the curriculum in helping them to respond to grief and loss.
Two programmes were available in the sample school: Rainbow’s Ireland (RI) and Zippy’s Friends programme (ZF), however both had limited places. Two of the participants, interviewees 1 & 3, had engaged in formal training with RI and one participant, interviewee 4, had partook in a training day for ZF’s programme. When asked about their training and confidence in delivering the RI programme both participants offered positive feedback:

(P3): “We did three weekends, three Saturdays and Sundays… [Training]. They are great in Rainbows. They are always available to answer phone calls. Anything you need they help you with on the day; they are there for you”

‘Support for teachers’ was identified by this respondent as being one central benefit of RI. In addition, one participant discussed the advantages of children addressing their loss in small, peer related groups in RI:

(P1): “One of the biggest things is that a child would say is they thought they were the only one. They didn’t know anybody else and now they came to Rainbows and three people in my class are here. So, now it is normal”

This reflects one of the suggestions made by the DES (2015) to address loss in small peer related groups, this technique was viewed as very beneficial by the participant in question as she believed it ‘normalized’ grief and loss for the children. A prevailing theme evolving from the reflections of the interviewees 1 & 3 surrounds the importance of having an appropriate environment for teachers and children when addressing sensitive issues. Throughout the data collection process both interviewees who engaged in RI training appeared much more knowledgeable, understanding and comfortable communicating and answering questions about children’s grief, thus further implying that RI is a beneficial tool for schools and teachers alike.

Although Zippy Friends (Partnership for children, 2002) does not deal exclusively with grief and loss one module is entitled dealing with change and loss, the participant who partook
in this programme argued that the training was unsatisfactory considering the enormity and sensitivity of these issues for the child:

(P4): “I just don’t think that five hours was enough really to give... I do think there should be more specific training for grief and loss”

This left the participant apprehensive to deliver this module of the programme, in line with this she also expressed concern about delivering this module as a whole class stating that it could be detrimental for some children’s wellbeing. The theme of “environment” surfaced once more:

(P4): “I just wonder if you're dealing with grief and loss and one child has a very grave loss, how – when the session is over then and it's all back to normal work, if that child feels supported enough or feels, is the child too vulnerable then? Is it too raw? Is it — are they vulnerable to other children saying things that they mightn’t be prepared to hear”

Interestingly, this participant also spoke about the importance of self-care for teachers as she stated that grief and loss could be a trigger for some teacher’s:

(P4): “– it may be a very difficult subject for one of the adults involved”

These finding are a stark contrast to the recounts of the RI facilitators as evidence would suggest that adequate training and supporting teachers are paramount to the RI programme. Although not mentioned unambiguously by the ZF facilitator, the findings would imply that the participant felt somewhat unsupported and unprepared following training and consequently highlighted the importance of self-care for teachers. This, once more, contradicts research undertaken by the DES (2010) which maintain that teachers are the best placed professionals to address sensitive issues. Instead Rowling (1995) succinctly summates that teachers are often wrongly identified as emotionally detached adults who can offer support and guidance to grieving children. These concerns are in keeping with research by O’Sullivan (2019) who
implies that it is difficult for teachers to promote emotional and social wellbeing if they themselves feel uncared and unsupported.

Discussing the SPHE curriculum as a resource for dealing with grief and loss the majority of participants, interviewees 2, 5, 6, did not rank it highly:

(P6): “No, I don’t find SPHE that beneficial... I find books helpful; you know like normalizing the idea of one parent families or two mammies or loss”

Interestingly, one participant who was Rainbow’s Ireland trained stated that:

(P1): “SPHE is good as well but it was only when I did Rainbows that I saw the link between loss and SPHE. You know the feelings side and coping mechanisms. That is the only time I ever saw the link. When I was studying SPHE in college I didn’t see the link”

This implies that while all teacher’s engaged in a SPHE module at ITE, in which they learn to explore feelings and emotions with children, there are not enough direct links made between these feelings and the feelings that children will experience following bereavement, separation and divorce. One participant completely disregarded the SPHE curriculum as a beneficial tool in favour of books. This concurs with Branch and Brinson (2002) theory that books are an invaluable resource for teachers when children are dealing with strong emotions caused by bereavement and family changes.

**Conceptualizing grief and loss**

The research, as previously discussed in this dissertation suggests that there is no one workable definition of grief and loss. What is apparent however is that grief is a complicated concept that manifests itself due to different types of loss, caused by difficult life events (Fiorini & Mullen, 2006; Goldman, 2000; Wood, 2008). During the data collection process, the
participants were asked what they believed encompasses grief and loss. There was a universal understanding that grief and loss is not only confined to death but that children do experience a sense of grief following a parental separation or divorce. Yet one participant spoke about the finality that accompanies death and how this may not be present when a family breakdown occurs:

(P6): “I think that when a child loses someone who they are really close to the pain is unmeasurable compared to a separation or divorce because the mam and dad are still there but when someone dies there not coming back”

Only one participant (Rainbow Ireland facilitator) spoke passionately about the correlation between bereavement and family breakdown and classified grief and loss caused by a family breakdown as similar to the grief experienced following a significant bereavement:

(P1): “I have had children before in other years since I have been teaching that have gone through their parents being separated or divorced. You can see similar behaviours [to a bereavement]...So, they are grieving the end of what was their family unit and it is the change that they need to go through”

This finding concurs with Branch & Brinson (2007) who state that for some children the stress that accompanies separation and divorce is similar to that of a parental death. Aligning with this, many studies discussed loss and theorised that it can be divided into ‘death’ and ‘non-death’ losses which are applicable to many circumstances where children experience the loss of ‘stability’ and a ‘future’ (Monique, 2018; Rogers, 2010).

Interestingly, interviewee 4 (Zippy Friends Facilitator) was the only respondent to recognize that children can experience grief and loss due a pet’s death or a father moving abroad to work. This coincides with a number of studies which argue that grief is not restricted to a bereavement but instead it can occur due to a number of life changes such as losing a pet, imprisonment, moving school or home or illness (Holland, 2016; O’Brien & Mc Guckin, 2013).
This might suggest that the Zippy Friends programme is successful in recognizing and normalizing different types of loses for children, or that the respondent may have experienced one of these losses herself and therefore holds a certain position on the matter.

(P4): “There are other elements of separation that you know maybe your parents are working abroad or something that that could be an issue that might have to be worked on as well”

Conclusion

The data collection process has offered the researcher a significant insight into the perceptions and experiences of teachers’ who have worked with children experiencing grief and loss in the classroom. These findings have helped the researcher to explore what training teachers’ received at ITE, how comfortable they feel communicating with children about grief and loss, how beneficial the school is in responding to sensitive issues and lastly how teachers conceptualize grief and loss. While the findings of this chapter echo much of literature provided in chapter two some gaps were identified and will be discussed in the recommendation section. It is salient to note that the researcher was aware of the importance of avoiding bias and remaining truthful when analysing and presenting the data. Reliability and validity were discussed in detail in chapter 3 of this paper.
Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

Summary of findings

This study set out to explore teachers’ perspectives of coping with grief and loss in the classroom, due to bereavement, separation and divorce. The researcher gained significant insights into teacher training at ITE with regards to grief and loss, teachers’ experiences of working with children coping with these issues, how the school and curriculum responds to these children and how teachers conceptualize grief and loss personally. On analysing the data, the most pertinent findings that emerged are as follows:

I. The general consensus pertaining from the findings suggested that teachers did not feel adequately prepared leaving their training colleges to address issues of grief and loss in the classroom. All participants expressed a desire for more training in this regard thus exposing a significant gap in initial teacher training programmes. This finding coincides with a body of literature which indicates that teachers feel ill prepared to address sensitive issues in the classroom following initial teacher training.

II. Participants broadly expressed mixed views with regards to their comfort levels of discussing bereavement, separation and divorce, some discussed feeling more comfortable than others thus this concurs with literature which states that personal experiences or fears of death, divorce and separation can impact on an individual’s willingness to respond to these issues.

III. A large proportion of the participants disregarded the SPHE curriculum as a beneficial tool in responding to childhood grief and loss. Instead, additional training with the Rainbow’s Ireland programme appeared to have invaluable benefits for those participants who did engage in the programme, this was very prominent throughout the data collection process. Thus, this reveals a significant shortcoming with how schools
and curricula respond to issues of grief and loss as this is not a compulsory programme and only limited places were made available for Rainbows Ireland in the sample school.

IV. Most of the participants agreed that grief and loss is not only confined to bereavement but is applicable to separation and divorce. Yet, when they were asked to talk about one of those experiences nearly all of the respondents focused on bereavement. This would imply that although they agree that children do experience aspects of grief and loss following a family breakdown, they would more commonly associate grief and loss with death. Similarly, in this regard, there was a shortage of literature that explored grief and loss caused by separation or divorce.

Recommendations

The purpose of the section is to discuss the researcher’s recommendations for future research:

I. Teachers expressed their discontent with initial teacher training in directly addressing issues of grief and loss in any one give module during teacher training. Participants noted that due to limited education and training on bereavement, separation and divorce it hindered their confidence of responding to these sensitive issues at times. Therefore, it is recommended that in order to fill this gap teachers receive a structured programme on grief and loss at ITE and are equipped with practical hands on strategies and resources.

II. Particularly salient to the findings were school and curriculum responses to grief and loss as research indicated that schools are a place where grief and loss are likely to manifest itself. More resources are needed to assist teachers, such as increased library books that normalize and reduce the stigma attached to different families and sensitive topics such as death. In addition to this, increased places in Rainbow Ireland might
help some teachers to address grief and loss. Further research might also be conducted in different sample schools, who have different strategies and interventions in place.

III. There appears to be a lack of support for teachers and their general wellbeing. As documented, dealing with such sensitive issues can be difficult for some teachers. Further consideration should be taken to promote self-care and wellbeing for teachers who are often faced with challenging situations while at times facing their own battles with grief and loss.

IV. The limitations of this study show’s opportunities for future research regarding difficult life changes that children experience and the implications that these changes have on their wellbeing. Further research in an Irish context might provide teachers with more awareness of these life changes and work to conceptualize grief and loss for them.

V. This study does not include children’s experiences at school following a bereavement or family breakdown. Therefore, further research would need to be conducted to investigate what schools and teachers can do to further help children through challenging times.
Reference List


Appendices:

Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. How are you? How has your day been?

2. How long have you worked as a teacher?

3. Have you ever worked with a child who has experienced loss due to a bereavement, separation or divorce? Can you tell me about this?

4. Did you feel confident dealing with these sensitive topics regarding death/ separation and divorce in the classroom when you were presented with them?

5. How was the child acting in the class? How did you deal with this?

6. Do you view grief and loss experienced by separation and divorce the same as grief and loss experienced by a bereavement?

7. Did you think that the SPHE curriculum was a beneficial tool when dealing with issues regarding loss and grief in the classroom?

8. Have you ever used SPHE resources or other curriculum subjects to teach children about death, separation or divorce? i.e. Zippy friends or other?

9. Are you aware of the Rainbows Ireland programme that the school runs? Do you think this programme helps children?

10. What training was involved as part of the Rainbows Ireland programme?

11. How do you support children experiencing grief and loss through the Rainbow programme?

12. Have you used any other helpful resources?

13. Did you feel Initial Teacher Education adequately prepared you to deal with issues of loss and grief in the classroom? Or for any loss or grief that may occur still in your classroom?
14. Do you think more training should be included at ITE or CPD on these issues? Would you welcome training?

15. Following participation in ITE or CPD that presents best practices in support of grieving children due to bereavement, separation and divorce, what do you view as potentially limiting constraints to employing those best practices?

16. Have you sought any training/information/resources from any external resources when working with a child who has experienced grief and loss? What were the resources?

17. Personally, do you feel comfortable discussing death, separation and divorce with students who are/have experienced grief and loss?

18. Do you think that partaking in formal grief and loss training would increase your confidence and awareness of how to cope with sensitive issues in your classroom?

19. Do you think that there should be a designated person within each school to deal with such issues?

20. Do you think that your role as a teacher has evolved in recent years? Social worker/teacher.
Appendix B: Information Letter-Principal

Information Letter: Principal

Dear Principal,

My name is Amy Gannon and I am currently a student on the Professional Master of Education in Marino Institute of Education, Griffith Avenue Dublin. At present I am in my final year of the course and I am required to complete a research dissertation on a chosen topic of interest. I am writing to ask for your help with this study as it investigates teachers’ perspectives of coping with grief and loss in the classroom. The research project involves learning more about childhood grief in the classroom mainly as a result of bereavement, separation and divorce. I hope that the findings of the study will inform teachers about how to deal with such sensitive issues and consequently improve student’s wellbeing.

In order to carry out this research I will need to recruit participants. I am writing to you in order to gain permission to access these participants within your school. I will be conducting this research through a series of one to one interviews, each interview will take between 30 to 45 minutes and will be executed outside of class time, ensuring not to cause any disruption to the class teachers. For the purpose of data collection, I will be required to audio record the interviews using a recording device. These recordings will be stored safely on my laptop which is locked and secured using a personal identification code. Once the data has been transcribed the audio recordings will be destroyed. When carrying out this research I will always do so with the upmost professionalism and ensure teacher confidentiality. In order to do so I will use pseudonyms and/or false names when transcribing in order to protect every participant. The same confidentiality will occur with regards to the school, no leading information will be disclosed.

I would also like to inform you that if I gain permission to carry out this research project in your school, any participants will have the right to cease participation at any stage of the process. On doing so their recorded interviews will be destroyed and removed from the research data.

I would greatly appreciate if you could grant me permission to carry out this research project within your school. If you require any additional information with regards to the motivation, aims and goals of the project please do not hesitate to contact me. Similarly, if you require any more information with regards to the data collection process please contact me at any time.

Mobile: [Redacted]  Email: [Redacted]

Yours sincerely,

Amy Gannon
Appendix C: Information Letter - Participants

Information Letter:

Dear Participant,

My name is Amy Gannon and I am currently a student on the Professional Master of Education in Marino Institute of Education, Griffith Avenue Dublin. At present I am in my final year of the course and I am required to complete a research dissertation on a chosen topic of interest. I am writing to ask for your help with this study as it investigates teachers’ perspectives of coping with grief and loss in the classroom. The research project involves learning more about childhood grief and loss mainly as a result of bereavement, separation and divorce. I hope that the findings of the study will inform teachers about how to deal with such sensitive issues and consequently improve student’s wellbeing.

I will be conducting this research through a series of one to one interview, each interview will take approximately 30 minutes and will take place outside of class time, ensuring not to cause any disruption to your class schedule or any extra curriculum activities. Your participation will remain strictly confidential. Your name will not be attached to any of the data you provide. For the purpose of data collection, I will be required to audio record the interviews using a recording device. Once the data has been transcribed the audio recordings will be destroyed. When carrying out this research I will always do so with the upmost professionalism and ensure your confidentiality. In order to do so I will use pseudonyms and/or false names when transcribing in order to protect every participant. The same confidentiality will occur with regards to the school, no leading information will be disclosed.

I hope you will be willing to participate because your responses are a valued part of my study and I would greatly appreciate your help. You are welcome to discontinue participation in the study at any time, should you wish to do so. You will be asked to sign forms (below) indicating agreement to participate in the different parts of the study.

If you agree to participate, please contact me in one of the following ways:

Mobile: 0852283820 Email: agannonpme18@momail.mie.ie

Yours faithfully,

Amy Gannon

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.
Appendix D: Consent form

Consent form

Name of participant: ______________________

- I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet provided.
- I understand that I can ask any questions I may have about the study at any time.
- I understand that information I voluntarily provide will be used in a confidential manner.
- I agree to participate in an interview and have this interview audio recorded.
- I understand that I may withdraw my participation at any time including after the information has been collected.
- I agree to the anonymous quotations in any thesis or publication that comes from this study.

Signature: ______________________

Date: ______________________