

# Bereavement in the Primary Classroom: The Perspectives of Widowed Parents

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*In Loving Memory of Clive Hodgins and Alan Martin*

## **ABSTRACT**

This research explores the experiences of young widow and widower parents as they support their children through the primary school system in Ireland. It provides candid parental insights into how schools currently respond to, address and continue to educate children who are grieving the death of a parent. There is a paucity of empirically based research exploring widowed parent observations on the efficacy with which the needs of parentally bereaved children are facilitated at schools in Ireland. An estimated 4,384 primary school children experienced the death of a parent in 2011.

An ecologically based conceptual framework was constructed to assess the needs of bereaved children in primary education. This exploration is supported by a four-part framework based on theories of resilience, the use of psychology theory in Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE), the caring relationship in teaching and the link between schooling and social and emotional well-being (SEWB). A qualitative research design was selected to foster rapport and encourage the first-hand narratives of the widowed parent encounters. In this research two auxiliary sources – teacher and pupil voices – are documented to contextualise school ethos and ascertain the extent of curricular interventions for bereaved children in primary education.

Research findings from qualitative interviews with widowed parents reveal valuable insights into how pupils feel in the classroom as they cope with their loss and bereavement. They give a keen insight into the complex emotions facing pupils, and the often limited response of schools to these pupils' needs. The findings indicate the need to foster life skills and transformational coping through the integration of resilience-orientated or strength-based curricular provisions in primary classrooms. Challenges linked to the professional roles of teachers, assessment of high-risk situations, and the rise of therapeutic interventions in education were also identified. In response to these challenges, this research proposes the introduction of a loss, bereavement and change module in SPHE, including useful classroom strategies and approaches. Recommendations for schools are also advanced. These ideas aim to strengthen practitioner knowledge so that future pupils who encounter the death of a parent are better equipped to recognise, tackle and address grief as it unfolds in the evolving social world of the primary classroom.

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## **Abbreviations and Acronyms**

CPD	Continuous Professional Development
CSO	Central Statistics Office
CTG	Childhood Traumatic Grief
DABDA	Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression and Acceptance
DES	Department of Education and Skills
EI	Emotional Intelligence
ICBN	Irish Childhood Bereavement Network
INTO	Irish National Teachers' Organisation
NASP	National Association of School Psychologists
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NEPS	National Educational Psychological Service
PRECEDENT	Personality, Relationship, Experience, Culture, Environment, Development, Equilibrium, Nature and Transcendence
PSC	Primary School Curriculum
PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
REB	Research Ethics Board
SEWB	Social and Emotional Well-being
SPHE	Social, Personal and Health Education
4Ws	Want to – Willing to learn – Well informed – Welcomed

# INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Introduction

In this chapter I will outline the background to the research, focusing on the significance of the experience of widowed parents for educational practice in the context of primary education in Ireland. It highlights the lack of existing research documenting widowed parents' experiences on how the needs of their parentally bereaved children are supported in Irish primary schools. This research emerges from an understanding that connection between the schooling system and pupil welfare is significantly heightened during times of loss and grief. It acknowledges that death often remains a 'taboo' subject for teachers (Holland, 2008) creating consequent challenges for school practices, curriculum and processes. This chapter sets the scene for the study of this undocumented area by providing the context, key definitions and research questions. It concludes with an overview of the structure of the thesis.

## 1.2 Background to the Research

According to the Central Statistical Office (2013) there are an estimated 2,963 widowed families in the State with 4,384 primary school children aged four to twelve who experienced the death of a parent in 2011. There is a lack of empirical research documenting widowed parents' experiences on how the needs of their parentally bereaved children are supported at school in Ireland. International studies have found that parental bereavement during childhood has been identified as a potential risk factor to a child's social and emotional well-being (Cerel *et al.*, 2006; Potts, 2013; Schuurman, 2003). This research intends to redress this limitation by giving voice to parents' views about how the school responded to their children's loss and bereavement. Studies have also identified that schools can strengthen emotional and social supports for children following a family member's death (Heath & Cole, 2011; Holland, 2008; Potts, 2013). The connection between the schooling system and pupil welfare is significantly heightened during times of loss and grief. This research investigates the connection between school environments and the well-being of bereaved families, by recording and discussing widowers' and widows' interactions with the primary school system in

Ireland. By so doing, this research acknowledges that schools as well as the widowed parent can impact upon the social emotional well-being (SEWB) of grieving pupils.

Adults often like to think of childhood as a kingdom where nobody dies. Adults attempt then to protect children from death. In fact, adults are only protecting themselves from the exposure to the child's evident pain and loss. Try as they may, schools cannot try to close the castle moat – pretending that loss, death, and grief have no role beside reading, writing, and arithmetic. (Doka, as cited in Burns, 2010, p. ix)

For the purposes of this research the term *widowed parent families* is used to denote both the widower and widow parent's circumstance where a spousal death has occurred. The world of parental widowhood is characterised by an unexpected duality of experience – the person becomes both a widow or widower and a single parent simultaneously. An implicit aspect of spousal bereavement is the assignment of children and the remaining married parent to a newly formed (and often unexpected) single parent family or lone parent category in Ireland from that date on. As will be explored, this family transition is highly challenging and complicated for families suffering loss and bereavement. It can have a detrimental effect on the remaining parent – referred to in Irish research as the *widowhood effect*:

The finding of increased mortality among the widowed population, often referred to as the 'widowhood effect', is well established. It has been demonstrated in relation to all-cause mortality and suicide and even in relation to other external causes of death such as accidents. (Corcoran, 2009, p. 583)

### **1.3 The Widowhood Effect**

The age demographic is of specific importance to this research: “the widowhood effect has been found to be greater on . . . young or middle-aged adults than on the elderly” (Corcoran, 2009, p. 583). This research focuses exclusively on young widowed parents. When linked with international research (Abdelnoor & Hollins, 2004(b); Bennett & Morgan, 1992; Bennett & Soulsby, 2012; Black, 2002; Chadwick, 2012; Dettloff, 2012; Lowton & Higginson, 2003), the widowhood effect is found to be exacerbated by grief, increased isolation and financial hardships:

Younger widowed people often face additional challenges. For example, they may have children to care for and, therefore, have to manage their own grief alongside that of their children. There may be greater financial strain as one parent becomes both caregiver to children and breadwinner. Social circumstances also may change; younger widowed people caring for children may feel particularly isolated. (Bennett, 2003, p. 441)

As highlighted by Bennett, young widowed parents can become emotionally, physically, materially and socially isolated as they continue to the best of their ability to ensure that the “daily donkeywork of caring” (O’Brien, 2007, p. 160) for their bereaved child is maintained. The widowed parents’ ability to attend to the holistic needs of their grieving children alongside their own social and emotional well-being can be diminished temporarily whilst dealing with the aftermath of spousal death. Inevitably, spousal death affects parental involvement in schooling. The surviving parent is constrained through logistical, time, affective, social and material factors and is less enabled “in line with a moral imperative to care for their children, all mothers are compelled, regardless of their individual situations, to support their children’s education in labour intensive ways” (O’Brien, 2007, p. 173). Spousal death is a life-altering situation and as highlighted in literature on childhood bereavement (Burns, 210; Mallon, 2012), the grieving spouse although aware of the importance of routine and schooling for their child may find their involvement in their child’s education reduced. Parental involvement is diminished as the impact of spousal bereavement means that only one person is physically present to deal with the care, logistical, financial and material needs of the child - “widowhood alters and disrupts the configuration and functions of the family, potentially depriving the surviving spouse of sexual consortium, companionship, and assistance in household duties and financial affairs” (Tierney, 2002, p.1). All these are significant factors in the intricate phenomenon of young widowed parenthood.

When linked with research on the widowhood effect (Corcoran, 2009) these findings highlight the need to strengthen classroom support for bereaved families and their grieving children at school. This would necessitate a move beyond present norms: “in Ireland...McGovern & Barry (2000) found that death was a ‘taboo’ subject and teachers and parents were uncomfortable discussing it with children” (Holland, 2008, p. 253). Most poignantly from the widowed parent stance, the influence that the surviving parent can bring to bear on the well-being of children warrants considerable examination in this research:

Broader research on childhood trauma suggests that the quality of the relationships within the family influences a child’s recovery after trauma occurs. An important factor is whether the child feels safe and secure within a loving supportive family, with a surviving partner who is able to parent effectively. Even temporary changes in parental

capacity were found to be distressing for children. (Ellis, Dowrick & Lloyd-Williams, 2013, p. 65)

Ever-present in research is the connection between a child's future well-being and the ability of the surviving parent to support their child while contending with familial, social, economic, cultural and personal variables (Dowdney, 2000; Kwok et al., 2005; Lowton & Higginson, 2003; Worden, 1996). These findings are interlinked with Irish research wherein "being single, is certainly not presented as a norm in educational programmes" (Lodge & Lynch, 2004, p. 32), and they are of concern for young widowed parents being suddenly single and a lone parent in society. This tension is heightened in the Irish educational system, where this socio-educational prerequisite can compound the anxieties linked to lone parenting, as "schools can be seen to capitalize on the moral imperative to care, as they assume that 'parents', in reality that is mothers, will be available to do this work" (O'Brien, 2007, p. 173). The grieving spouse may simply no longer be available.

#### **1.4 Parentally Bereaved Children at School**

This research will discuss the impact that grief and loss can exercise over the holistic well-being of bereaved families. Although well-being, grief and loss are intricate and inherently difficult to decipher in educational discourse (Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009; Watson, Emery, Bayliss, Boushel & McInnes, 2012), unearthing their characteristics remains a pivotal focus of this research. This deductive investigation is key to capturing an inclusive, unabridged account of how schools interact with and support bereaved children and their families. A significant part of this investigation is to explore widowed parents' perspectives on how effectively their children's needs were attended to at school. Parents offer a unique insight based on their knowledge of what their children are experiencing in school. Their insight acts as a bridge between the worlds of home and school, especially in this context of grief, loss and bereavement. These insights are important, as literature on bereavement indicates that dealing with death at an early age "can put children at increased risk of poor social and educational health" (Bird & Gerlach, 2005, p. 44). Parents and schools play a vital role in supporting children through this difficult process.

A focus on the educational dimensions of this research, specifically in a primary school context, allows pedagogical issues to be addressed. This research explores whether primary teacher training enables practitioners to address and effectively integrate bereavement supports for children in the classroom (Devlin-Friend, 2009; Holland, 2009; Hunt 2006; Tracey & Holland, 2008). Such an exploration is imperative, both in terms of teacher's capacity to support pupils and in terms of the education system's responsiveness. The remit of the Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) curriculum professes to include the integration of issues such as bereavement, managing change and embracing family diversity in classrooms. To facilitate these endeavours SPHE became a mandatory primary school subject in 1999, intended to enable schools to better fulfil their obligations of empowering the holistic well-being of children at school:

SPHE aims to promote the personal development, health and well-being of the child . . . through provision of opportunities for children within a safe environment, to name and manage their own feelings and behaviour and to cope with various kinds of change thus facilitating children to be more in control of their own lives. (INTO, 2005, p. 9)

Irish educational inspection reports reveal, that “while all schools evaluated had a whole-school plan for SPHE, significant variation was found in both the quality of the plan and in the level of consultation engaged” (Inspectorate Evaluation Studies, 2009, p. 84). This is problematic, as research has indicated:

One of the main findings . . . relates to the damage and suffering experienced by individuals in adult life when appropriate levels of support are not provided. The Childhood Bereavement Network developed a set of guidelines to provide organizations and individual practitioners with a baseline ‘best practice’ framework for support of parents of bereaved children. These guidelines recognize the importance of supporting and affirming parents of bereaved children. . . . The findings suggest that it is crucial for such guidelines to be followed if the damage and suffering experienced by individuals in adult life is to be minimized. (Ellis, Dowrick & Lloyd-Williams, 2013, p. 67)

As a teacher, having experience in both the primary and secondary school fields, I can perceive a gap between the theoretical ideals of what SPHE education ought to embrace and the actual practice of SPHE by teachers in the classroom. I pondered whether schools continue to perpetuate a misleading image that can exclude many parents and children at school, aligned with the findings that “the traditional approach of teachers and school textbooks to the issue of family reinforces the prevailing stereotypes and creates an uneasy situation for those children that do not fit into the

norms on which traditional family policy is constructed” (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 5). Following this insight, I speculated that a broken link between theory and practice may exist in other primary schools, and I therefore set out to test the validity of my convictions.

## **1.5 The Primary Focus: My Research Question**

Research which focuses on identifying and discussing how the needs of bereaved children are met in the context of primary education has not been conducted in Ireland. As a teacher working in a national school, I am obliged to work within the Department of Education guidelines and 1999 curriculum framework. Therefore, from this insider perspective, I was interested in the overarching question of:

- From the widowed parent perspective how do primary schools support the loss and grief needs of bereaved pupils in the classroom?

To bring together these accounts of widowed parents, I choose a qualitative research design which included in-depth qualitative interviewing. These interviews were held nationwide. Following the interview process, the widowed participants were asked to write uncensored journals to further illustrate their experiences in the written word. The term uncensored journaling refers to the open manner in which the journals were written. It is explained extensively in the methodology chapter. Appropriate measures were taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity were maintained. These voluntary accounts detailed the widowed parent participants’ interactions with primary schools. Quotes from these journals contribute to the research findings. As a researcher, I recognised that documenting parental widowhood encounters with schools could generate perspectives on how effectively education addresses the needs of children and parents before, during and after loss and bereavement. These perspectives do capture a partial view of how schools are currently handling bereavement, loss and change.

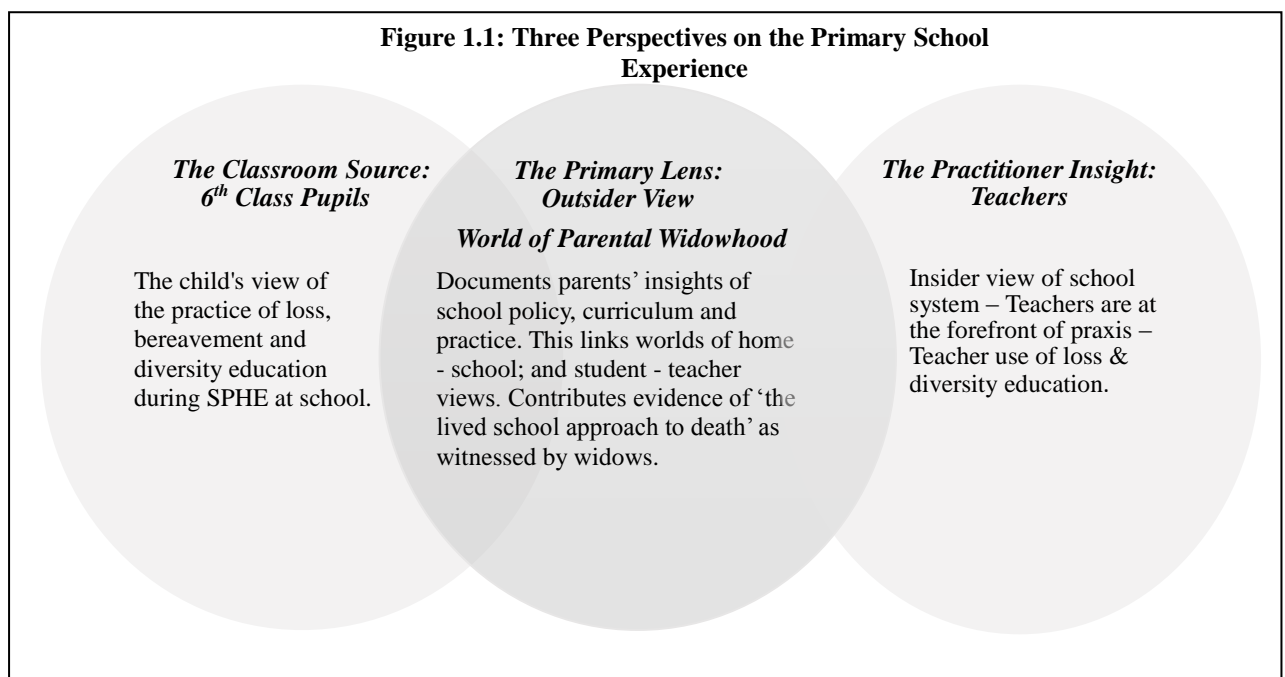
### *1.5.1 The Secondary Questions*

To help address my key research question, I was determined to source and ask those who are also directly affected by loss, bereavement and change whilst at school: the

pupils and teachers. I chose to use two sub-foci questions to help create a more accurate portrayal of how schools respond to parentally bereaved children:

- How does primary school policy and curriculum support the loss and grief needs of bereaved children?
- Do teachers feel pedagogically equipped to support pupils during times of grief?

I used the Mosaic approach (Clark & Moss, 2005) to gain pupil insight on the use of curricular materials and school discussions on coping with loss, bereavement and change. The Mosaic approach is designed to enable 6<sup>th</sup> class pupils to record their views using visual, written or aural mediums, in this case during SPHE class. As a teacher/researcher I choose to use “I think” thought bubbles with the pupils as the most suitable medium in which to gather their insights on the topic. A debating session on the issue of family and change was also recorded. Qualitative interviewing was used to record the teachers’ views on the suitability of the curriculum, policy and pedagogical tools needed to address the topic of bereavement at school. Alongside the widowed parent experiences, these secondary sources add to an informed and holistic portrayal of the extent of bereavement policy and curricular approaches currently in use in primary education. Figure 1.1 below shows how the three sources were incorporated to facilitate a comprehensive study into the world of parental widowhood.





## **1.6 The Researcher's Worldview – An Ontological Source**

The genesis of my interest in investigating the experience of widowed parents in the school context was located in my own experiences as a widowed parent and as a teacher. The uses of these vantage points are discussed further in the methodology chapter. These insights were reinforced by a sense that the recognition of family diversity as outlined in SPHE directives may not be practiced in the classroom which is discussed below.

These concerns were deepened during an oral language class. The objective of the lesson was to enhance debating skills among six class pupils. The topic for discussion was taken directly from an approved school text: "Families on T.V. are true to life." What followed was an intriguing onslaught on how schools were akin to media in promoting a one-fit happy mum, dad, brother, and sister family type for all. I realised the pupils' voice echoed my own personal and professional dissatisfaction with how education may empower different family types. These public reactions suggest a cultural norm exists which is not inclusive of diverse family types. This norm only serves to isolate bereaved children further. As a facilitator, I merely observed the pupils' animated reactions towards the topic of family. As a researcher, however, I was spurred onwards to address my topic by attempting to locate and develop Irish research on the issue.

## **1.7 Limitations of the Research**

As discussed in later chapters, this research is defined by the focus which is restricted to children in primary schooling aged four to twelve. Other groups in the education system lie outside the parameters of the present research, including pre-school children and teenage pupils. Likewise other school staff, such as administrative and support staff are excluded from this research; all of whom would give different perspectives on the support offered to pupils. The scale of research is also important as this study offers an in-depth qualitative study with a small number of participants. A nationwide and longitudinal study which collates input from teachers and pupils would generate a broader school sector's response to the integration of loss, bereavement and change curricula at school.

Widowed parents' perspectives on their children's' experience at primary school provides the prime focus of this investigation acting as a bridge between home and school. The insights of other family members, friends and others close to primary school children are not included but would offer valuable insights for future studies.

## 1.8 Navigating the Thesis

The thesis comprises of an introduction and five main sections, as follows:

Chapter Two, *A Conceptual Framework: An Ecological Understanding of Childhood Grief*, outlines the key theories that provide the structure of this research (Bronfenbrenner, 1989; Burns, 2004). Four lenses are identified and explored: The caring relation in teaching (Noddings 2010); the emergence and impact of resilience theory on bereavement studies (Bonanno, 2005; Eppler, 2008); social and emotional well-being and schooling (Watson et al., 2012), and the impact of bereavement psychology on primary curriculum and pedagogy (Furedi, 2004; Gardner, 1999; Glasser, 1998).

Chapter Three, includes a literature review that is divided into two sections. Section one explores *The World of Parental Widowhood*, encompassing an extensive search of widowhood and childhood bereavement theory. Section two explores *Loss, Bereavement and Change – The Irish Context*, which investigates how schools currently address the needs of bereaved children in Irish education. It explores the 1999 Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE) to provide information and insights into the practice, impact and potential of this curricular subject to strengthen supports for grieving children. It also reviews and critiques the Critical Incident Management Plan (2007) advanced by the Department of Education and Skills.

Chapter Four, describes the chosen research design and is entitled *Capturing Life Changes in Classroom*. It outlines the methodology applied to investigate this topic and explores the methods used, which include qualitative interviewing, uncensored journaling and the mosaic approach. Six phases in the data collection circle are identified and clarified. It describes the transcribing, manual coding, and thematic analysis processes, and it discusses the use of Maxqda software to assist in the graphic

representation of the newly acquired data. The research questions that helped to shape this research are presented, alongside ethical and validity considerations. The limitations of the research are also addressed.

Chapter Five, *Unfolding the Widowed Parent Story*, has two sections. Section one presents the findings of the widowed parent experience. The data emerged from the voices of participants during interviews with widowed parents and via direct quotes from their uncensored journaling. Contributions from other informants, such as principals, teachers and sixth class pupils, are also included. Section two, *Addressing Bereavement at School*, critiques the findings and advances a discussion that draws upon the empirical data and relevant literature. This discussion highlights the relevance of the findings for bereavement studies, in particular research concerned with pupil welfare and primary schooling.

Chapter Six, *Strengthening Supports for Parentally Bereaved Children in the Classroom*, outlines the main implications of the research for primary schools. This is discussed at three levels: policy, pedagogy and practice. This concluding chapter then offers recommendations for addressing the needs of grieving children at school.

## **1.9 Conclusion**

Whatever its cause, the death of a mother or father is a life-altering experience for children. Invariably it can inflict a high toll on the emotional, cognitive, social and even physical well-being of the bereaved child (Dyregrov & Dyregrov, 2008; Eppler, 2008; Gordon & Doka, 2010; Groskop, 2009; Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005; Lin et al., 2004; Neimeyer, 2005; Stroebe & Schut, 2005; Worden, 1996). Research on childhood bereavement argues that “the loss of a parent or significant other is felt at a deep, visceral level – in body, mind and spirit” (Di Ciacco, 2008, p. 104). In essence, this research strives to inspire reflection and encourage educational discussion on the impact of loss, parental bereavement and change at school. Its ultimate goal therefore is to “produce a research . . . that gives an accurate, clear, and articulate description of an experience. The reader . . . should come away with the feeling that I understand better what it is like for someone to experience that” (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 46). The next chapter presents a conceptual framework through which to explore the grief experience.

## **CHAPTER TWO: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK – AN ECOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING OF GRIEF**

### **2.1 Introduction**

In this chapter, I present a conceptual framework which I have developed by blending insights from four different sources, which assist us to understand the grief and loss needs of bereaved families at school. This framework is specifically constructed for school use. To create my framework I have drawn upon practitioner research and bereavement literature which have contributed greatly to our understanding of the grieving process. Each of these perspectives highlight various aspects of loss and grief (Aiken, 1994; Bonanno, 2004; 2005; Gilbert, 1996; Kastenbaum, 2001; McGoldrick & Walsh, 1991). I have selected particular theories to help create a conceptual framework which illuminates the potential of schools in strengthening supports for grieving families. To illustrate, using my teacher/researcher and widowed parent experience, I identified that an ecological perspective is central to my conceptual framework. The rationale for using an ecological construct is that it helps to illustrate the power of social systems, in particular schools, to strengthen resilience and diminish vulnerability for bereaved children in education. I hold that this particular construct enables the multidimensional impact of parental death on grieving families to be explored within this study of bereavement. Four key constructs will be considered as part of my ecologically based framework - the caring relation in teaching, the rise of psychology approaches in Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE), resilience theory and a PRECEDENT approach to grief. These approaches are presented and explored in the following sections in terms of their relevance for my research.

### **2.2 The Ecological Lens of My Conceptual Framework**

My rationale for making explicit the ecological lens that underpins my framework is twofold: the reader can better understand the researcher's intent of insight (Farrell, 2007) and can also engage a frame of reference by which to interpret the findings:

A theoretical framework has the ability to (1) focus a study, (2) reveal and conceal meaning and understanding, (3) situate the research in a scholarly conversation and provide a vernacular, and (4) reveal its strengths and weaknesses. (Anfara, 2006, p. 195)

Throughout the present research, the focus is on the interplay and impact of individual, situational and systemic factors as prime mediators in supporting or inhibiting the well-being of a bereaved child in primary school. Relationships and interconnectedness represent the keystones of this bereavement research. According to ecological theory “the connectedness and relationships among multiple social systems affect every aspect of the child’s development” (Burns, 2010, p. 28). Table 2.1 outlines Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (1989) which presents a framework of how children’s experiences and development could be viewed as products of social interactions, ranging from the immediate family to wider cultural aspects:

**Table 2.1: Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (1989)**

<b>System</b>	<b>Category</b>
(1) <b>Microsystem</b>	Immediate environment; family friends, teachers, classmates & others
(2) <b>Mesosystem</b>	Interaction of two or more Microsystems
(3) <b>Exosystem:</b>	Wider social setting: School, church, social services & others
(4) <b>Macrosystem</b>	Culture in which child lives: customs, values, traditions & behaviours that influence behaviour
(5) <b>Chronosystem</b>	Time/Changes: Consider how relationships of all systems affect child’s development throughout life

The advantage of an ecological theoretical perspective is that it systematically explores the role of multiple levels of the relational environment on human development (not just behaviour) whilst acknowledging that people are active participants in each context. These contexts are also dynamic, so although people can influence their environment, the environment is reciprocal and can influence the development of the individual. Akin to Vygotsky’s *Zone of Proximal Development* (1978), Bronfenbrenner (1989) implies that a dialectic relationship exists between the environment and the individual. Ecological theory highlights relationships, multiple environments, and the dynamism of holistic development of individuals. Such a paradigm enables the core assumptions of cognitive theory (Piaget, 1973) and social cultural theory (Vygotsky, 1962) which are integral elements of the revised Primary School Curriculum (1999) to be explored – at school the evolving pupil is placed in a dynamic relational context. Therefore, the observed development of a pupil is the result of the interaction of relationships and systems. This process is complex and unearths the messiness of real-life issues, as a growing pupil is affected not only by the individuals,

environments and systems they encounter but also by systems they may never directly impose change upon, such as culture, media and global economics.

Although Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1989) was not designed with bereavement as the prime focus, the implications of this theory however are highly relevant to the issue of bereavement. In the ecological framework the physical, psychological, social, material, emotional, and cultural environment are considered dynamic variables that affect the experience of the child and adult. Furthermore, the interaction of different settings, social contexts and relationships, including the child's own temperament, is now deemed highly influential in an individual's unfolding development and well-being. This relational process is key to this bereavement research which aims towards the building of an interpersonal model of bereavement. This is also significant with regards to the roles of schools and in how schools address loss and grief.

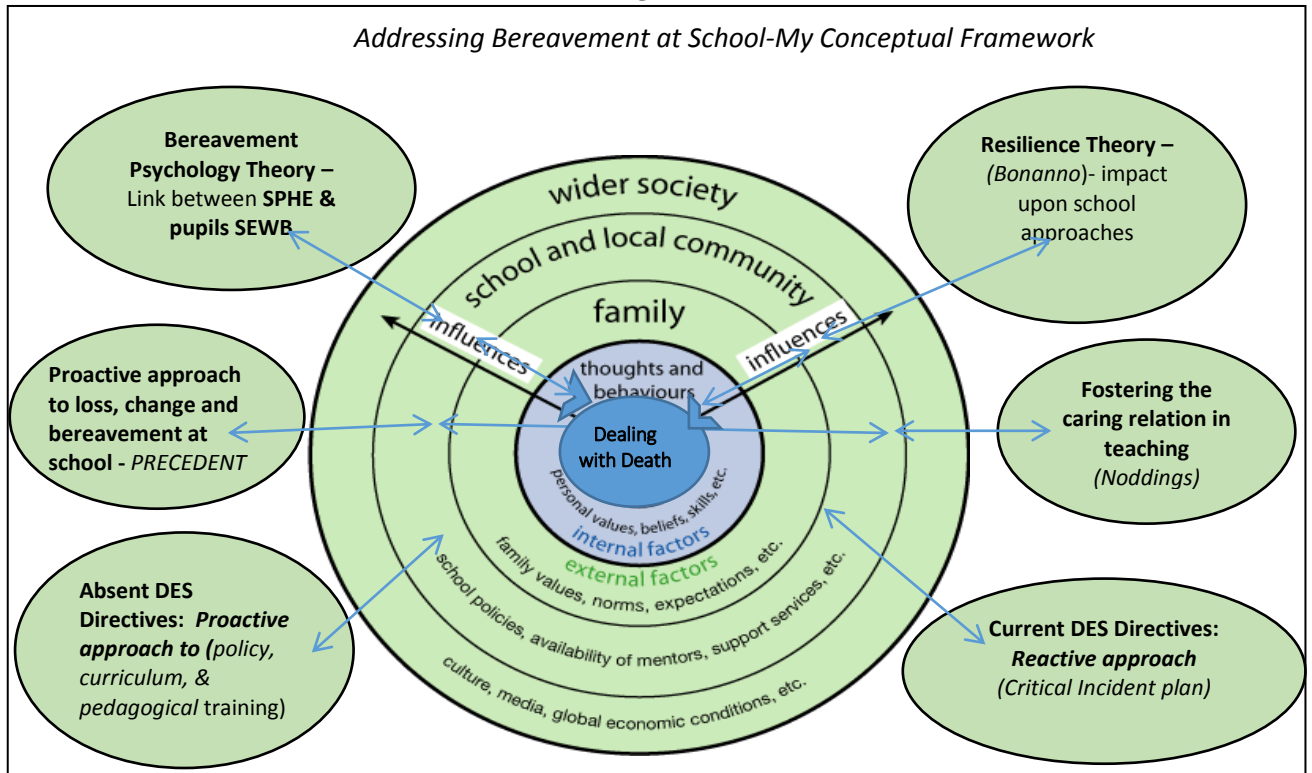
To illustrate, the interplay amongst and between systems highlights the importance of placing a holistic approach within education as a central methodology to facilitating the social and emotional well-being (SEWB) of school pupils. A holistic approach at school facilitates the affective domains of education alongside academic learning. The ecological lens of this research illuminates the advantageous of a holistic approach in education. This is illustrated in Figure 2.1 - My Conceptual Framework: Addressing Bereavement at School- Connectedness, Resilience and Caring.

### **2.3 My Bereavement at School Framework- Connectedness, Resilience and Caring**

Figure 2.1 highlights the link between schools approaches to bereavement and the social and emotional well-being (SEWB) of pupils in primary education. It outlines the theories that merge to create the constructs of my ecological framework. This framework makes space for the situational difficulties children encounter whilst embedded in the confines of the classroom. It considers how grieving children are required to learn in the midst of immense personal and family change. My model indicates that in order to spearhead change, discourse and intervention needs to occur on

and between as many different levels and systems as possible, to help ensure programmatic and policy innovations for bereaved children at school

**Figure 2.1 Conceptual Framework –Addressing Bereavement at School: Connectedness, Resilience and Caring.**



According to my framework the physical, psychological, social, material, emotional, and cultural environment are considered dynamic variables that affect the experience of both the grieving child and parent. The ecological basis of my proposed framework is evidently constructed upon relations. Relational caring in teaching represents the first pillar of my ecological conceptual framework.

#### 2.4 The Caring Relation in Teaching – The First Construct

Care ethics became an established approach in moral philosophy through the work of Gilligan (1982) and Noddings (1984). Although these works are often cited as feminist approaches to justice, I hold that the widowed parent experience dictates that the widower and widowed parent is enabled to take full responsibility for the caring aspects of child rearing, regardless of gender. Thus, the gendered imperative often attributed to

the female carer is eclipsed by the widower role as he too must supply practical and emotional support:

Within the sphere of parental involvement in education recent research as highlighted the gendered nature of parental involvement in terms of both the practical and educational work involved. However, very little consideration has been paid to the emotional involvement. (Reay, 2000, p. 157)

My framework is relational, and I hold that “we are influenced by others, and encounters with these others actually provide the building blocks of the self under construction” (Noddings, 2002, p. 112). We must therefore consider how the caring relation in teaching can affect approaches to bereavement at school. From the primary school perspective, my conceptual framework will address the relational and affective dimensions of life (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984) to consider how well-being is related to schooling:

It becomes clear then, that those of us called to be educators and sought for counsel in different communities need to have spent some time reflecting upon, and coming to some conclusions about, what might make for human flourishing and the good life. We also need to have developed a care about, and an ability to care for others. (Noddings, 2003b as cited in Smith & Smith, 2008, p. 59)

Bringing awareness to the significance of relational caring (Noddings, 2012) in teaching is a precursor to addressing bereavement at school. Noddings (2012) states that “in care ethics, relation is ontologically basic, and the caring relation is ethically (morally) basic. Every human life starts in relation, and it is through relations that a human individual emerges” (p. 771). This echoes the premise that “teaching is one of the foremost of personal relations” (Macmurray, 1964, p. 17). In her work, Noddings acknowledges that unequal relations such as teacher-pupil exist, yet she suggests:

Although these potentially caring relations are not equal, both parties contribute to the establishment and maintenance of caring . . . from the perspective of care ethics, the teacher as carer is interested in the expressed needs of the cared-for, not simply the needs assumed by the school as an institution and the curriculum as a prescribed course of study. (Noddings, 2012, p. 772)

What is significant for this bereavement research is the realisation that a distinction exists between pupils’ expressed needs (SEWB) and assumed needs (academic learning) and:



We can therefore anticipate a possible conflict that will have to be resolved by caring teachers: when should teachers put aside the assumed need to learn a specific aspect of subject matter and address the expressed need of the student for emotional support, moral direction, or shared human interest? (Noddings, 2012, p. 772)

I assert that the death of a parent is a prime example of when the *expressed needs* of a grieving child should take precedence over the *assumed needs* of the educational system. Furthermore these expressed needs should be acknowledged by teachers in the classroom. Teacher engagement is a crucial step in addressing bereavement with children. My claim is “not that every teacher cares, nor that every student responds to a teacher’s caring” (Webb & Blond, 1995, p. 624); rather, my intent is to highlight “the level of subjectivity that exists in the relationship between two persons (teacher and student) – a level of subjectivity and knowing which involves both bodies and minds” (Webb & Blond, 1995, p. 624). Bereavement is a multifaceted experience, and guidance is required for teachers to address pupils’ expressed needs. Although Noddings’s (2012) work on care ethics and Smith and Smith’s (2008) work on “The Art of Helping Others” are not exclusively linked to bereavement, they do make explicit key qualities that I contend are integral to addressing bereaved children in the classroom. The prerequisite “elements in establishing and maintaining relations of care and trust which involve listening, dialogue, critical thinking, reflective response, and making thoughtful connections among disciplines and to life itself” (Noddings, 2012, p. 771) are also the fundamental steps to strengthening supports for parentally bereaved children in primary school-

Helping is, at heart, a learning process – both for the helper and the helped. Done well it can be a space where people can come to know themselves and their situations better; to see possibilities and to believe that change is possible. (Smith & Smith, 2008, p. 15)

As a researcher-teacher I have gathered much empirical data over time and listened to colleagues’ concerns. I realise that the person of the teacher permeates the curriculum content and process, that “caring is part of teacher knowledge, and that this caring knowledge is central to teacher training, and that this caring knowledge is part of the practical knowledge of teaching” (Webb & Blond, 1995, p. 624). To address bereavement, loss and change at school, therefore, the elements implicit in the practical knowledge of teaching need to be discussed. Thus aspects that foster cultures of caring and helping in teaching can be illuminated. The primary school as an institution is

constructed as an instructional establishment in which “there is a clear overlap between care and education” (INTO, 2005, p. 9). This is strengthened through the *in loco parentis* civic duty of teachers which infuses every activity of learning they undertake in this learning community:

The Irish Primary Principals Network is mindful of the *in loco parentis* role that Principals and teachers fulfil on a daily basis. The trust that parents invest in schools to ensure their children are safe and well cannot be over-stated . . . ensuring that all teachers understand what it means to be, and are capable of being *in loco parentis*. (IPPN, 2012, p. 1)

On such occasions a mainstream teacher’s skill-based expertise plays only a minor role, whilst attending to the holistic needs of a growing child – rather the spirit in which help is undertaken – needs to be explored: “the real kernel of all our help, that which renders it effective is compassion” (Brandon, 1990, p. 6). Others have classified the heart of helping as caring (Noddings, 2002; 2005) which entails both passion and commitment (Kottler, 2000). I believe that the simple application of knowledge to academic-solution-based queries is not enough when dealing with the affective dimensions of education such as the death of a parent; rather, a particular type of knowing is required, that of “artistry” (Schön, 1983). This involves qualities such as being wise, being open to truth, developing the capacity to reflect, being knowledgeable and being discerning.

#### 2.4.1 *Interfering or Intervening? Becoming Wise to Bereavement in the Classroom*

As will be expanded upon in the next chapter, in order to address the holistic needs of a grieving child, any help or intervention needs to be first welcomed by that child and their parent. There is a danger of teachers “projecting things . . . we have to be in touch with who we are and at the same time, focus on the experiences, feelings and understandings of others” (Smith & Smith, 2008, p. 16). Furthermore, a teacher’s training ethos which leads them to fix or find solutions to technical puzzles could prompt them to “easily fall into the trap of categorizing people by the administrative frameworks we are often required to use, or by some experience in our own lives . . . their reality and understanding might be quite different” (Smith & Smith, 2008, p. 16). It is important that the practitioner contemplate whether in such instances help could be

more interfering than intervening. One way practitioners might enhance their capacity to help is to consider the distinction between having and being.

Fromm (1979) advanced two ways of viewing ourselves and the world we live in, having and being. *Having* is concerned with possessing, owning and controlling; we make ourselves and “everybody and everything” our property (Fromm, 1979, p. 33). This mode is founded on greed and aggression. In contrast, the *being* mode is concerned with a productive activity and shared experience. In this mode we engage in the world and do not seek to control or possess it as an object. This state is rooted in love, and while in this mode we do not impose ourselves on others or interfere unnecessarily in their lives. As educators we learn to place ourselves in situations, we are open to others, entertain ideas and experiences and allow them to touch us. As a result of such an encounter, a teacher and child transform, as “growth of a person, a group or a community – is possible if we engage without a façade or front” (Rogers, 1980, pp. ix and 115, as cited in Smith & Smith, 2008, p. 17). Listening to the experiences of pupils is not only important pedagogically, it also has affective dimensions. Receptive listening (Noddings, 2012) is a core element of creating a caring classroom environment:

Listening is important emotionally as well as intellectually . . . to respond as carer she must put aside, temporarily, the demands of the institution. She needs time to build a relation of care and trust. . . . Good teachers must be allowed to use their professional and moral judgement in responding to the needs of their students. They will not ignore assumed needs – the curriculum cannot be ignored – but they will attempt to address the more basic expressed needs. . . . Time spent on building a relation of care and trust is not time wasted. (Noddings, 2012, p. 774)

#### 2.4.2 *Responding to Expressed Needs of Bereaved Pupils*

As aptly articulated by Parker J. Palmer, “good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher” (1998, p. 10). The expressed needs of grieving pupils can be more appropriately addressed if teachers engage in receptive listening, which is “at the heart of caring for human others, but it is also central to hearing messages” (Noddings, 2012, p. 775). Receptive listening is a process which requires the following:

A carer is first of all attentive, and watches and listens. In her attitude, and sometimes explicitly, she asks. . . . It is the very foundation of the powerful method of overt thinking. . . . At first, it may be frightening, but when the students realise that their thinking will be respected, they enter the spirit of dialogue . . . believing can be a powerful strategy in learning, involving listening receptively, becoming absorbed, fascinated. (Noddings, 2012, pp. 773–775)

Power is a pivotal crux of classroom activity and is actualised “in the dynamic interplay between teachers and their students in school” (Devine, 2003, p. 16). This does not exclude teachers as helpers to children in need; rather, it accentuates the need for them to pause and reflect, to use receptive listening and return to Fromm’s mode of *being* to recall that teaching can be “based on being and presence. It flows from the ‘aliveness’ of the worker and their capacity to be themselves and part of conversations and encounters” (Smith & Smith, 2008, p. 17). I acknowledge that “the capacity to directly encounter and to help another is not easily developed” (Rogers, 1980, p. 142), especially in the confines of a primary school where the “highly contained nature of classroom life” is a “central aspect of the exercise of power in schools (Devine, 2003, p. 65). Having explored receptive listening, the next aspect of the caring relation to be discussed is collaborative dialogue.

#### 2.4.3 *Collaborative Dialogue – Talking about Death*

Research has consistently shown that conversations about death are lacking in educational discourse and are particularly sparse when dealing with children (Holland, 2008). This is a concern, as “the simple experience of someone being with them, listening to what they say and joining in conversation, can be affirming and healing” (Smith & Smith, 2008, p. 13). For a child facing monumental changes after the loss of a parent, it is imperative that they be given space, engaged and feel heard in the classroom to energise their potential to reinvent their assumptions and world views. Without conversation a child might not be enabled to “go beyond this . . . they need to go deeper; to explore experiences and situations, think about alternatives and possibilities, and consider how they might move forward” (Smith & Smith, 2008, p. 14). To harness this potential, educators could augment their own awareness and foster the ability to reflect, to engage in the much-needed conversations that remain muted for many bereaved children in many classrooms. An epistemological principle that inspires my entire research pursuit is that “the goal of the inquiry is not truth but increased understanding and legitimisation” (Roth, 2008, p. 311). Uncovering definitive answers is therefore not

the overriding aim here. Rather, akin to Roth (2008) I believe Palmer (1998) aptly encapsulates the definition of a truth I propose to follow – a truth which by its nature is transient and represents “an eternal conversation about things that matter, conducted with passion and discipline . . . it is not our knowledge of conclusions that keep us in the truth. It is our commitment to the conversation” (Palmer, 1998, p. 104). Palmer goes on to highlight: “to be in the truth, we must know how to observe and reflect and speak and listen, with passion and with discipline, in the circle gathered around a given subject” (p. 104). The influence teachers and pupils exert on the contextualisation of situations is affirmed in research: “good judgement requires a developed ability to reflect – to relive and to re-render” (Bolton, 2005, p. 9). Underpinning this construct is the capacity to reflect, to enable insights which help one to visualise and generate informed responses to a pupil’s expressed needs (Noddings, 2012).

#### 2.4.4 *The Bereavement Conversation- The Element of Risk*

In order to promote well-being for bereaved children in primary education, teachers should pause to develop an awareness of their own thoughts, feelings and limitations, as “knowing myself is as crucial to teaching as knowing my pupils and my subject . . . the more familiar we are with our inner terrain, the more surefooted our teaching – and living – becomes” (Palmer, 1998, pp. 2–5). Opening dialogue on bereavement contains elements of risk for teachers, as they are prompted to entertain feelings and emotions surrounding grief and loss leading to “surprise, puzzlement, or confusion in a situation which we find uncertain or unique” (Schön, 1983, p. 68). It is in this very moment however, that the practitioner begins to critically assess the use or practical limitations of *a priori* theoretical understanding in effectively tackling the unique social and emotional well-being (SEWB) needs of the bereaved child. In so doing, the situation is re-framed so the teacher and child together collaborate in “an experiment which serves to generate both a new understanding of the phenomenon and a change in the situation” (Schön, 1983, p. 68). The cogs of reflection-in-action are initiated. This capacity can be learned and nurtured in the teaching profession (Moon, 1999; Taylor, 2006). As Smith and Smith claim, “we can learn good habits and deepen our commitment to reflection. We can take what we learn in one situation to another. It can become a way of life” (2008, p. 62). Learning occurs as “the familiar situation functions as a precedent or a metaphor . . . for the unfamiliar one” (Schön, 1983, p.138). This pre-logical phase of

knowing has been equated to tacit knowledge: “we can know more than we call tell” (Polanyi, 1967, p. 4).

This research taps into the lived experiences of widowed parents, into their tacit knowledge of schooling systems – a system they witnessed in action. The newly acquired data can be translated and used to enlighten and empower practitioners, as “many bits of tacit knowledge can be brought together to help form a new model or theory” (Mitchell, 2006, as cited in Smith & Smith, 2008, p. 65). Death and one’s relationship to it is one of the abiding existential questions of philosophy. Many young children must address it at a very young age. From a social perspective the identity of a bereaved family is in a state of flux, as the spouse is renamed a widowed parent in society and their children become part of a one-parent household. The classroom, the school and the people who constitute the learning community are all interwoven and participate in the bereaved child’s social world for 35 hours a week.

Bereavement is about connection, and so pedagogically teachers need not be experts but should be aware of how the grieving child is connecting with the experience. They can achieve this by creating a climate of caring in the classroom. Such a climate can be developed through the effective integration of Social and Personal Health Education (SPHE) in the primary classroom. SPHE is concerned with the social and emotional well-being (SEWB) of children. Therefore it is important to consider how the rise on psychological approaches within SPHE can impact upon the learning and SEWB of parentally bereaved children.

## **2.5 SPHE and Psychology: How Theory Affects Schooling - Second Construct**

The second construct of my ecological conceptual framework investigates how curricular and pedagogical values of education respond to bereavement, grief and loss. It highlights the influence of psychology on curriculum, policy and pedagogy at school. Many critics have noted the pervasive influence of psychology and therapeutic interventions in education (Furedi, 2004). Undoubtedly SPHE content and policy have been shaped by the psychological work of Gardner (1999) and Goleman (1998). Self-esteem theory is directly reflected in the Stay Safe and Walk Tall programmes (Department of Education and Science, 1999) used in primary education nationwide-

“Self-esteem is a core theme and all programmes aim to develop the child’s self-esteem” (Walk Tall Programme, 1999, pg.16). The content of these SPHE programmes are founded on empowering children through self-realisation and self-esteem; units covered include friendships, bullying, substance abuse and conflict.

For many educators psychology also infiltrates the realm of education through Maslow’s conception of the hierarchy of needs (1943), which highlights the imperative to meet the basic needs of safety, security, belonging, respect and self-esteem to enable humans to grow towards self-actualisation. The needs linked to developing one’s self-actualisation include “talents, capacities, creative tendencies, constitutional potentialities” (Maslow, 1968, p. 26), and those moments of “peak-experiences . . . moments of highest happiness and fulfilment” (Maslow, 1968, p. 73). For the teacher dealing with a parentally bereaved child, moments of self-actualisation may be challenging to nurture in the routine classroom, as during times of loss and bereavement a child’s base hierarchal needs of identity, self-esteem, security and safety are in an unpredictable state of flux. Maslow noted the criticisms that such a theory of becoming was self-focused, but he refuted this, saying it was “an empirical fact that self-actualized people are altruistic, dedicated, self-transcending, social, etc.” (Maslow, 1968, p. vi).

One theorist who demonstrates how educators might transfer theoretical understanding into practical classroom programmes is William Glasser. In his work *A New Psychology of Personal Freedom* (1998), Glasser advances the ideology of choice theory. He posits that relationships are generally the “source of our happiness or misery, and that the past should not be dwelt on to solve the problems of the present” (Glasser, 1998, pp. 332). Glasser lists survival, love and belonging, power, freedom and fun as the basic “genetic needs” (p. 335) of developing individuals. The significance he attributes to relationships and “the circle-up . . . the basic mechanism for all communication, concerns and solving problems” (Glasser, 2000, p. 61) underscores the importance of relational ethics and of integrating the *facilitator/teacher role* in the daily remit of a pupil’s learning. Empowering a bereaved child through a resilience-focused approach (Bonanno, 2004) is therefore recommended. This approach represents the third construct of my conceptual framework, and will now be discussed.

## 2.6 A Resilience Route for Schools: The Third Construct

We imagine Grief as a relentless shadow that can lock onto us and follow us everywhere. Grief, as we imagine it turns light into dark, and stills the joy out of everything it touches. It is overwhelming and unremitting. Grief is undeniably difficult but is it always overwhelming? (Bonanno, 2010, p. 2)

The concept of resilience in bereavement literature, affirms resilience as the most common and natural reaction of trauma or loss. George Bonanno's *The Other Side of Sadness: What the New Science of Bereavement Tells Us About Life After Loss* (2010) provides an alternative lens by which to explore bereavement. It advances four trajectories of grief: resilience, recovery, delayed and chronic grief. Of prime interest to the present study is his research on widowhood, which indicates that 58% of widowed participants displayed a resilience reaction to spousal death. He finds that although these persons were "exposed to a potentially highly disruptive event, such as the death of a close relation or a violent or life-threatening situation", they were enabled to "maintain relatively stable, healthy levels of psychological and physical functioning as well as the capacity for generative experiences and positive emotions (Bonanno, 2005, p. 3).

This view differs from the deficit modes of bereavement which underscore the need to focus supports on counteracting the negative emotive reactions of grief – such as DABDA (denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance). The key message is not to universalise the widowed parent's experience in a category of resilience, but to highlight that the deficit model is still very much at the forefront of educational interventions and programmes in society. Integrating a resilience mode of thinking into my ecological conceptual framework instigates a shift in educational practice. This new construct refocuses teacher and educational supports towards a "survive and thrive" (Eppler; 2012; Potts 2013) model of support.

This approach to bereavement stresses the importance of reinforcing transformational coping skills (Gaffney, 2010) at school to enable children to become active participants in dealing with their own grief. The rationale for integrating the resilience construct into my conceptual framework is that I concur that "these children, with their full range of emotions and with helpful support systems, do not seem adequately described by a deficit-based model that focuses only on grief's sadness, anger, fear and isolation" (Eppler, 2008, p. 196). The school environment, as we will see, is fundamentally



important to instilling resilience in children who face the death of a parent: “resilience is a mesh, not a substance. We are forced to knit ourselves together using the people and things we meet in our emotional and social environments” (Groskop, 2009, p. 9). This articulates the interplay of affective domains of education and school environment as pivotal to a child’s ability to knit together forms of resilience, and this inevitably impacts upon the roles of teachers in the classroom. People have different levels of resilience to commonplace challenges in life, such as loss, bereavement and change (Eppler, 2008; Potts, 2013; Ungar, 2008). They also employ different coping mechanisms. Research indicates that resilience is best developed in early childhood (Morrison & Kirby, 2010). These skills help people cope more effectively when presented with adversity in adult life. As such, many researchers recommend that resilience promotion programmes be integrated into primary schools (Dettloff, 2012; Eppler, 2008):

Happiness and confidence were described as important and necessary, life skills, and dispositions, to . . . deal with uncertainties and challenges in life. Responses noted the need for children to be resilient and for primary education to develop children’s capacity to understand and to respond to challenges. (NCCA, 2012, p. 30)

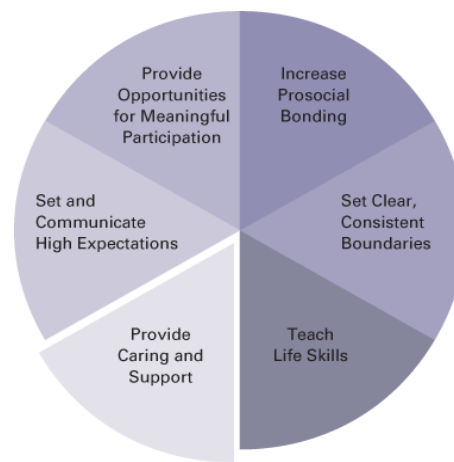
Resilience is a form of resourcefulness that often becomes manifest in times of dramatic change. For this research, the life-altering state of losing a parent in early childhood nurtures a form of transformational coping (Gaffney, 2010). At times these skills result from a coerced response to a tragic situation: the bereaved spouse, through necessity, learns to tap into environmental and social systems to construct a mesh of resilience to access the supports needed for their bereaved child. However, resilience can be acquired at schools in normal circumstances and nurtured by tapping into and making visible the positive elements that co-exist alongside risk:

It would take time, but with the advent of research on resilience, we came to understand that people’s physical and social ecologies were also responsible for their capacity to overcome the same adversity that predisposed them to breakdown and disorder. (Ungar, 2008, p. 2)

A study by Wolchik *et al.* (2008) identified aspects of post-traumatic growth in bereaved children that are central to this research. Most notably they highlighted that passage of time since bereavement does not influence resilience, and that an active coping style, support from the surviving parent and internalising problems were

significant predictors of post-traumatic growth in bereaved children. I would concur with Dettloff (2012) that interpersonal and intrapersonal competences and resources, rather than the healing power of time, account for the positive growth of a child tackling the impact of bereavement. Work by Henderson and Milstein (2003) concerned with fostering resilience at schools identified six requisite steps towards its promotion. What is significant to this research is the applicability of these six steps in dealing with the parentally bereaved child at school. These elements are shown in Figure 2.2:

**Figure 2.2 Resiliency in Schools**



Source: Henderson and Milstein, *Resiliency in Schools*. Corwin Press, 2003.

At the core of this cyclical process are care and support. However, consistent boundaries, expectations and school rules are also necessary components in fostering resilience. Teachers need to be conscious that:

Maladaptive behaviours that might be observed and misunderstood in the classroom can include anger, withdrawal, inattention, impulsivity, disorganisation, 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; Kirwan & Harmin, 2005; Schoen, Burgoyne, & Schoen, 2004). (Dettloff, 2012, p. 14)

Social connectedness, open communication, setting clear routines, fostering coping skills, and energising children to re-engage and participate in their own restorative behaviour are all reliant on integration of proactive school policy and curricula in the school community. These steps are reminiscent of findings from the Harvard Child Bereavement Study by Worden and Silverman (1996). Bereaved children need:

- To *know* they are cared for.
- To know they did not cause the death out of anger or shortcomings.
- Clear information on the cause and circumstances of the death.
- To feel involved in processes, and important.
- Continued routine.
- Someone to listen to their questions and concerns.
- To find ways to remember the deceased.

Facilitation of these fundamental needs for bereaved children requires a systematic approach to be implemented in educational institutions. Use of the six steps towards fostering resilience in schools (Henderson & Milstein, 2003) could mark a pre-emptive response to dealing effectively with bereaved children at school. A culture of care and resilience can be nurtured in primary education. Other studies have reiterated the importance of fostering climates of resilience to increase children’s ability to handle the complexities and impact of grief as it manifests in their developing years. The key points are highlighted in Table 2.2.

**Table 2.2: Resilience Research**

Resilience research	Implication of findings
Heath & Cole (2011) Jaycox et al. (2009) Reid & Dixon (1999)	To foster cultures of resilience, schools must place increased effort on intervening with bereaved children and strengthening ongoing social support. Taking advantage of daily teaching opportunities, teachers can model adaptive coping strategies, offer opportunities to memorialise the deceased and share stories. By implementing these strategies teachers encourage emotional expression and strengthen social connectedness, reducing isolation. Classroom-based interventions strengthen pro-social skills of classmates who compassionately support the grieving child.
Ellis, Dowrick, Williams (2013)	To minimise the disruptive effect of bereavement on children’s social worlds, it is essential that bereavement support consists of more than counselling. Key elements are: (i) Continuity – support that enables a child to remain at the same school with the same friends and care giver; (ii) Instrumental Social Support – care giver given practical support but social networks must be directed at the child to avoid exclusion; (iii) Communication – open, honest, at child’s level of life experience and understanding – discuss complexities of talking and keeping silent at a familial level.
Black (2002)	Bereaved children who maintain psychological connections to the deceased parent are more likely to make better long-term adjustments.
Pynoos (1992)	A changing mental relationship with the deceased is key to resilience. As the child matures the idealised concept of the deceased makes room for a more realistic portrayal of the deceased, which is challenging but necessary to fostering a resilient and realistic conception of the deceased parent.
Eppler (2008)	Individual attributes, emotional ties in the family and external support systems foster the ability to cope and thrive in adverse circumstances.

Horowitz et al. (1984)	A balance between reminiscence and avoidance of the deceased is healthy. Children hop from grief-orientated and restorative-orientated behaviours, which are vital episodic reactions to dealing with the pervasive and all-encompassing aspect of grief. Excess time spent in either behaviour is not conducive to healthy development or developing resilience to cope effectively with the reality of the bereaved circumstance.
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## 2.7 The PRECEDENT Approach- The Final Construct

The PRECEDENT approach presents a practical attempt to apply a resilience mode of thinking into this researchers’ ecological conceptual framework. The PRECEDENT approach reflects work by Aiken (1994); Bronfenbrenner, (1989); Gilbert (1996) and Kastenbaum (2001). This particular approach emerged from practice itself within the area of grief and counselling psychology. Its origins although derived from Bronfenbrenners’ existing systems theory (1989) were further developed by an educational psychologist Burns (2010), with an emphasis is on child and adolescent development, diversity, and issues in grief and loss within educational contexts. The PRECEDENT approach explores how social, cognitive, affective and environmental elements enhance the holistic wellbeing of children and adults living with grief - “this holistic approach considers the physical, psycho-logical, social, emotional, cultural, and environmental issues that invariably affect each griever and draws from multiple perspectives” (Burns, 2010 p. 18). Table 2.3 indicates the pertinent elements that need to be considered by schools in addressing the grief and loss needs of bereaved families-

**Table 2.3: PRECEDENT Approach**

<i>Applying the <b>PRECEDENT</b> Approach to Addressing Loss, Bereavement and Change in Irish Classrooms</i>
<b>Personality:</b> Traits, temperament and characteristics play a role in how bereavement is responded to and perceived.
<b>Relationship:</b> The relationship the child has with the bereaved affects the response.
<b>Experience:</b> Irrelevant of age, past experiences of dealing with bereavements or loss will have an effect on the grief response.
<b>Culture:</b> Customs, traditions, beliefs and values of the child’s given culture will influence expressions of grief.
<b>Environment:</b> Family and social support, socio-economic status, schools and communities, all affect grief reactions.

<b>Development:</b> Cognitive, social and emotional dimensions affect how bereavement is grieved and perceived.
<b>Equilibrium:</b> The ability to maintain a balance between forces of grieving loss whilst investing in or continuing on meaningfully with life.
<b>Nature:</b> Is the bereavement Finite/Non-Finite, Anticipated or Unanticipated this impacts the child's grief.
<b>Transcendence:</b> The ability or raise above ones sorrow, following the loss experience implicit in bereavement.

*Source (Burns 2004)*

The benefit of such an approach is encapsulated in the intent with which it was created:

The PRECEDENT conceptual framework was developed to provide school and counselling psychologists, educators, and social workers with a succinct, yet comprehensive template to enhance awareness of and appreciation for the responses unique to each griever (Burns, 2010, p.18).

At the practical level, crucial concepts regarding bereavement issues are easily recorded through this informative mnemonic. This facilitates a teacher friendly framework by which to address not only bereavement but unifies key areas of loss and change with all pupils into one model and augments the transferability of this approach for use in classrooms. The PRECEDENT approach represents the final pillar of my ecologically based framework.

I contend all four constructs unite help to raise not only awareness but more specifically school understanding of the impact of bereavement on both the pupil and widowed parent. These approaches (resilience theory, the caring relation in teaching and the rise of psychology models in SPHE alongside the proactive PRECEDENT approach) impact educational policy, practice and pedagogy. These perspectives aim to better inform educational approaches within the classroom and amongst the larger school community.

## **2.8 Conclusion**

The ideas of key theorists were examined to inform the conceptual basis of my research. Considerable thought was required to create an inclusive framework that could

facilitate research accommodating the key concepts of the caring relation in teaching (Nodding, 2012), the rise of psychology theories (Goleman, 1998; Maslow, 1968; Glasser, 1998) in the SPHE curricula, resilience theory (Bonanno, 2005), and a PRECEDENT approach to grief and loss (Burns, 2010) at school. At a pedagogical level the theory of Multiple Intelligence (Gardner, 1985), which highlights the diversity of learning in the school community, needed to be recognised. My proposed framework also encapsulates the social constructivist learning approaches of Piaget (1976) and Vygotsky (1962), which have strongly influenced the SPHE (1999) curriculum in primary education. I concur with the claim that:

Developing a conceptual framework forces you to be explicit about what you think you are doing. It also helps you to be selective; to decide which are the important features; which relationships are likely to be of importance or meaning; and hence, what data you are going to collect and analyse. (Robson, 1993, pp. 150–151)

Consequently, I chose an ecological based conceptualisation for addressing bereavement in the classroom. The theories used for this research reflect my professional teaching experience and knowledge acquired through qualifications in Montessori, primary and secondary teacher education. I identified that an ecologically based conceptual framework would contribute most significantly to this investigation. The next chapter explores the language of bereavement. It explores the theoretical literature most linked to early-years widowhood and childhood bereavement.

## CHAPTER THREE: LITERATURE REVIEW – THE WORLD OF PARENTAL WIDOWHOOD

### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews the world of parental widowhood and school responses. The first section of this chapter outlines the theoretical literature linked to early-years widowhood and childhood bereavement research. Key terms and concepts are defined and discussed in relation to how they inform my research. Section two turns to the schooling response to loss, bereavement and change in the Irish primary school context. As becomes evident, there is a disjuncture between the complex understanding suggested by theories of loss, grief and bereavement and the limited responses of the school system in the shape of Critical Incident Management plans and the Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) curriculum. Before beginning this review, it is important that readers become familiar with and attuned to the concepts that punctuate the world of widowhood and childhood bereavement. From the outset it is useful to distinguish between bereavement and widowhood.

#### 3.1.1 *The World of Parental Widowhood – The Rhetoric of Bereavement*

*Widowhood* relates to a long-term state wherein a spousal death has occurred. It is primarily identified as a continuous marital and prolonged state which has social and personal implications and consequences for the widow or widower affected by the death. The impact of widowhood is far reaching: “The loss of a spouse affects almost every domain of life, and as a consequence has a significant impact on wellbeing: psychological, social, physical, practical and economic” (Bennett & Soulsby, 2012, p. 322). It is important to highlight that *parental widowhood* is concerned exclusively with the *familial* rather than marital status of the widowed person. It does not affect everyone who encounters widowhood. This is reflected in the latest Social Welfare figures which show there are approximately 116,751 recipients of the Widow’s, Widower’s or Surviving Civil Partner’s Contributory Pension (Department of Social Protection, 2013 p. 30) in the state. On examining this significant figure, we find that only 53,221 people with the marital status of widow or widower are denoted as having children. This figure represents the parental widowhood category which is the explicit focus of this research.

This number is very significant for this research, because coping with the dual world of parental widowhood (wherein widowhood and lone parenting must be managed simultaneously) is exacerbated by the realisation that “for younger widowed people, bereavement is a non-normative event and, therefore, its effects are less familiar. At younger ages widowhood is associated with a greater decline in physical and psychological health” (Bennett & Soulsby, 2012, p. 328). This insight is reinforced by previous findings in widowhood research (Bennett, 2010; Corcoran, 2009; Prigerson, Maciejewski & Rosenheck, 1999; Stroebe & Stroebe, 1987; Wilcox et al., 2003).

### *3.1.2 Social and Emotional Well-Being: An Overview*

Holistic well-being is comprised of a myriad of dimensions. It can encompass psychology, education, health, finance, and so on. There is little consensus on a basic definition of holistic well-being. This leads to many interpretations of what it means to people and whether it has a place in education at all (Craig, 2009; Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009; Watson & Emery, 2010). As articulated in research, “it is indeed a fuzzy and intangible concept. Current policy and academic literature uses such terms as soft skills, emotional intelligence and emotional resilience interchangeably” (Watson et al., 2012, p. 177). Unpacking the concept requires a comprehensive overview that would lie outside the parameters of this widowed-focused research. This thesis uses a version of well-being known as Social and Emotional Well-Being (SEWB), “used in reference to mental health . . . to refer to children’s competence, social skills – something that is slightly separate from mental health. It is also used . . . with social and emotional learning . . . literacy . . . and emotional intelligence” (Watson et al., 2012, p. 169).

### *3.1.3 Social and Emotional Well-Being and Holistic Education*

Holistic education is an umbrella term which merges many diverse spheres. It is a

Methodology which focuses on preparing students to meet challenges they may face in life and in their academic career. The most important theories behind holistic education are learning about oneself, developing health relationships and positive social behaviours, social and emotional development and resilience. (Teach-nology, 2014, p. i)

I posit that in the theory of bereavement this evolving definition of education best articulates the multidimensional influence that grieving and loss can have on the SEWB of children and widowed parents. Developing a conceptual framework based upon an



appreciation for the interplay of these elements is key to locating a holistic approach at school that “considers the physical, psychological, social, emotional, cultural and environmental issues that variably affect the griever and draws on multiple perspectives” (Burns, 2010, p. 18). Holistic education acknowledges that pupils need to develop academically and need to be able to meet challenges presented to them in the future and contribute to the world in which they live. In accordance with bereavement literature, this type of learning is said to begin during childhood. Dealing with bereavement in early childhood is an immediate life challenge that impacts upon the SEWB of pupils, schools and parents. The benefits of using a holistic approach at primary school centres on the promotion of resilience based learning, where the importance of socio-educational relationships are fundamental to effectively addressing grief and loss in education-

Holistic education teaches children about their immediate relationships with their friends and family as well as social development, health, and intellectual development. The idea of resilience is a learned quality, not one which is inherent and thus children must be taught to face difficulties in life and overcome them. (Teach-nology, 2014, p.i)

#### 3.1.4 *The Concept of Bereavement: An Overview*

Returning to the language of bereavement, it is important that the terminology used in this research be clearly articulated from the outset, to help advance learning and insight on the topic. *Bereavement* most typically relates to a shorter-term state of having suffered the loss of a primary carer or becoming deprived of something. Usually in theoretical terms it is not seen as an indefinite, long-term state. Most research focuses on the first two years after a death has occurred: “In terms of the time-scale of effects for bereavement, 2 years is often seen as an appropriate cut-off for the effects of bereavement” (Bennett & Soulsby, 2012, p. 322). Typically it includes episodic periods of mourning, loss and grief.

#### 3.1.5 *Grief – Unanticipated and Anticipatory Grief*

*Grief* is a complicated concept, but in this research it is understood to manifest as responses to particular types of loss. Grief reactions are diverse and may manifest only according to the unique type of loss which the individual has to endure. For example, *anticipatory grief* is often used to describe the feelings or pre-grief episodes families go

through whilst caring for a terminally ill family member. *Unanticipated grief* is often linked to complicated grief reactions related to a loss that occurs because of a traumatic or unexpected death, articulated in research as CTG (Childhood Traumatic Grief), akin in nature to an adult form of PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder).

### 3.1.6 *Mourning and Grief: A Societal View*

Grief reactions are often seen as the outward or empirical display of emotion, as they can manifest physically, behaviourally, emotionally, socially as well as spiritually. Whilst *mourning* is equated with both private and public expressions of grief, often people refer to a *period* of mourning; in the past, mourning (wearing black) was the public representation that symbolised you were in a grieving period. Worden defines mourning as the “process that occurs after a loss” and grief as the “personal experience of the loss” (2009, p. 37). As shown by the range of abbreviations used in reference to grief, it is not a static concept. Consider the magnitude of findings that maintain:

To a large extent, the way we deal with loss defines our health. We know our thoughts affect our nervous system. . . . Mental health difficulties may be precipitated by bereavement in childhood (Black 2002; Meltzer et al., 2000) . . . bereavement may impact negatively on self-esteem. (Mallon, 2011, pp. 14–15)

Thus, the impact of grief appears to manifest in both physical and emotional responses. Categories linked to cognitive and behavioural responses are also widespread in research. “The experience of bereavement can have long-term effects on academic performance” (Abdelnoor & Hollins, 2004a; Davou & Widdershoven-Zervakis, 2004). This is further explored in studies that assert, “regressive behaviour following bereavement often reflects feelings of insecurity . . . by acting in a challenging manner the young person is communicating his desire to exert control over a situation in which he feels powerless” (Mallon, 2011, p. 15). Such a decrease in the social competence of bereaved children may be attributed in part to feelings of guilt (Crehan, 2004). Thus, grief can invade the physical, emotional, cognitive and behavioural world of children dealing with parental death.

### 3.1.7 *The Context and Nature of Loss*

*Loss* is an embedded term in bereavement studies. For this investigation it equates to the *context* and *nature* by which the death or loss has occurred. The dimensions of the

loss involved directly affect the grieving process and reactions: “Response to loss is affected by such factors as the type of loss and whether the loss was anticipated or unanticipated” (Burns, 2010, p. 9). I contend that two major categories of loss that directly affect grief reactions need to be considered here: Finite/Non-finite Loss (Bruce & Schultz, 2001; Doka, 2002; Trozzi, 1999) and Traumatic Loss (Cohen & Mannarino, 2004; Sheras, 2000). Although these terms have been adapted in the contemporary sense to reflect current thinking in bereavement studies, most definitions have been forged by past theorists.

*Finite Loss or Death* from the biological perspective is the irreversible cessation of life. I contend that *Non-finite Loss*, alongside finite loss, is rooted in the widowed parent experience. Bruce and Schultz (2001) describe such a loss as an enduring and persistent entity that is a life-altering event other than death. This includes loss of health, financial loss, loss of goals and dreams. These latter aspects are implicit challenges that many widowed parents face alongside the finite loss. From a childhood perspective, I look to Doka (2002), whose work on *Disenfranchised Grief* aptly illustrates the plight many children encounter at school in the immediate wake of a parental death, where the death is not straightforward: “Grievers who are often unacknowledged are young children . . . *circumstances* that exemplify disenfranchised grief are often those that are . . . socially stigmatized . . . homicide, suicide, and substance abuse-related death” (Burns, 2010, p. 12).

### 3.1.8 *The Assumptive World of Children*

It is important to recall that the target group for this research is young widowed parents with primary school children; therefore natural deaths, although present, were not reflective of the entire group. The unanticipated circumstances of a *traumatic loss* can leave children highly vulnerable and questioning their *Assumptive World* (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Murray-Parkes, 1996). This ‘assumptive world’ is likened to a child’s belief in a benevolent world, one in which they are safe, and how they perceive that the world ought to operate. As we will see, this world is fragile and easily devastated for the bereaved child. Therefore, schools need to be very aware that “children and adolescents experiencing losses or traumatic events have difficulties in school as a consequence of such disruptive events” (Burns, 2010, p. 13).

These sweeping descriptions are succinct, and a more in-depth examination of how such rhetoric became infused with educational theory on bereavement needs to be considered. Theories on bereavement help allow deductive comparisons to be made between ideologies. Surveying the field of bereavement studies permits us to deliberate on the source of our own frames of reference, to consider how thought paradigms may have influenced our chosen approaches, even attitudes towards tackling issues of death, loss and life changes at a professional level. The expansive nature of childhood loss and bereavement is heightened by the complexity of the grieving process, which necessitates an insightful yet practical enquiry. A systematic approach does not attempt to undermine the gravity of the experience suffered by the bereaved child. It merely permits educators and those dealing daily with children to build a comprehensive and informed understanding of bereavement, leading them to instil supports based on appropriate approaches and resources. In this research many theories and strategies will be discussed, mindful of the uniqueness of each bereavement:

Each person expresses their feelings in their own way and, while we will look at bereavement theories and strategies to help the bereaved child, we need to bear in mind the unique journey of grief that the child or young person travels. (Mallon, 2011, p. vii)

Along this journey I posit the following thoughts: “learn your theories well, but lay them aside when you touch the reality of the living soul” (Schuurman, 2008, p. 2), and: “Nobody comes to an understanding of life without coming to some kind of understanding of death, and this process begins earlier than most of us have imagined” (Kastenbaum, 2000, p. 6).

### **3.2 The World of Childhood Bereavement**

Fluctuating perceptions of our comprehension of grief and loss can lend a sense of ambiguity to the topic of bereavement. This uncertainty can foster attitudes that inadvertently influence the particular approaches adopted by teachers and those working with children. And so the lives of children are affected by the chosen strategy used to address bereavement in childhood settings:

Grieving children don't need to be fixed. Grief is not an illness that needs to be cured. It is not a task with definable, sequential steps. It is not a bridge to cross, a burden to bear, or an experience to 'recover' from. It is a normal, healthy and predictable response to

loss. We [teachers] can get caught up in fixing and instructing when the skills of evoking and listening better suit the need. (Schuurman, 2002, p. 9)

The challenge for this literature review section is to open up this discourse and explore why particular approaches became implicit components of childhood bereavement practices. The first step is to foster a broad appreciation of what constitutes childhood bereavement by accessing the vault of learning that has accumulated over time. This exploration generates insight into how contemporary thinking on the theory of bereavement has itself evolved. By reflecting on this, we can achieve a more comprehensive look into our contemporary *resilience-orientated* or *strength-based* approaches towards childhood bereavement (Bonanno, 2005; Eppler, 2008; Hurd, 2004; Luthar et al; 2000; Schuurman, 2003; Steward, 2008).

To assist this exploration, the multidimensional nature of bereavement needs to be fully considered. Reference is therefore made to the seminal works of Sigmund Freud's *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917), to the work of John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth on 'Attachment Theory' (1980), and to Elizabeth Kübler-Ross's identification of five stages of grief as outlined in *Death and Dying* (1969). In addition, the formidable influence of William Worden's 'Task Model Theory' (1996) and Colin Murray Parkes's work on exploring the 'Assumptive World' (1996) are addressed. These forerunners influenced the more recent work concerned with strengthening social network supports, as articulated by Atle and Kari Dyregrov (2008). This is further expanded in Eppler's 'Survive and Thrive' (2009) work with young children. Much of our current thinking on the theory of bereavement has been defined by these initial models.

The current constructivist approach marks a decisive turn in the theoretical understanding of what constitutes and influences grief and loss in childhood bereavement. Proponents of this field of thought assert that recent research advocates "the use of a *strength-based* approach to supporting children in school as opposed to the deficit-based approach which is prominent in literature on parental loss in childhood" (Mallon, 2012, p. 9). In contemporary society, the strength-based approach is considered to be more applicable to children facing adversity. Conversely, theories can shape attitudes and thus affect practice, so it is wise to continue to challenge the soundness of prevailing authorities in the field of bereavement. Two issues consistently

emerge when entering into discussions on childhood bereavement: Why is childhood bereavement studied in isolation from adults' grief and loss? And what constitutes a deficit approach as distinct from a strength-based approach? Many adults question whether the impact of death is affected by the child's *developmental age* and *social factors* when the death occurs. These are worthwhile queries, as the answers would affect how adults tackle the issue of death with children. In fact, both developmental age and social trajectory are contentious matters which have propelled childhood bereavement into an area of study apart from adult grief research. These aspects predominate discussions and have become a common theme in bereavement research to date:

All of those involved in the area of childhood bereavement would agree that the ability to grieve develops as the child matures and is able to comprehend the finality of death. However, there has been a lengthy debate as to when a child develops this ability. (Harmey, 2008, p. 8)

Therefore, the interplay of a child's developmental age and social influences needs to be examined, especially in education. Educators have long acknowledged the role of Cognitive Developmental Theory (Piaget, 1986). Features of Piaget's theory permit adults a glimpse into the world of how children process learning and thinking. Piaget's framework systematically connects specific periods (ages) of a child's life to predictable stages of cognitive development (learning). These stages are further influenced by interaction in social environments, such as with teachers at school. (Appendix A has an overview of Piaget's Four Stages of Cognitive Development.) This staged approach is a pivotal force that continues to guide schools' stances on children's learning. It has also extended its scope, as will be shown, into the world of childhood bereavement. This influence is detectable when one sees that identifying how and when a child develops the ability to understand death is also governed by a developmental stage theory approach to the bereavement.

The question to be asked throughout this exploration is whether one particular stage theory can account for the many developmental contexts and social influences bereaved children encounter in life. To determine this issue, a brief overview is required.

### 3.3 Bereavement and Stage Development Theory

The purpose of stage development theory is to offer those caring or working within childhood bereavement an overview of emotional states bereaved children might encounter, with reference to their mental age. More specifically, these models attempt to identify a child's cognitive ability to comprehend the abstract concept of death by corresponding to the child's age of development. There are various models which attempt to articulate the unique aspects of bereavement- the grieving process itself is often the empirical evidence by which many childhood bereavement theories are informed. Although Piaget's (1896-1980) work which is regarded as a cornerstone in childhood cognitive development it does not specifically relate to bereavement. Maria Nagy (1948) offers one of the earliest models concerned solely with children's conceptions of death. These insights were based on interviews and artistic drawings of 378 Hungarian children aged three to ten. The resulting data illustrates the staged approach that influenced childhood bereavement theory for many years. Nagy identified three distinct stages of children's understanding of death – from age three to five, the bereaved is seen as being moved somewhere else. By the second stage, children aged five to nine, the finality and causality of death are still not comprehended, as children believe death may be outwitted. By the third stage, age nine to ten, Nagy claims that children recognise and understand that death is both inevitable and universal. These three stages, which Nagy said young children encounter whilst coming to terms with bereavement, are illustrated in Table 3.1. As is evident from the framework, Nagy links the child's grief reactions to their ability to conceptualise the abstract notion of death itself.

**Table 3.1: Children's Conceptions of Death (Maria Nagy)**

Stage	Age Range	Conceptualisation
1	3–5 years	Death is not permanent. A dead person could come back to life. A dead person is less alive than a living person.
2	5–9 years	Death is something that happens to old people. Only bad people or people who have accidents die. Non-moving things are viewed as dead and Moving as alive. Death is irreversible and not inevitable.
3	10 years plus	A more realistic adult-like conceptualisation of death emerges. Death is acknowledged as inevitable and irreversible. Death applies to everyone.

Source: Burns, 2010, p. 25, based on Corr, Nabe & Corr, 2000; Kastenbaum, 2000.

More recent research by Speece and Brent (1996) extended Nagy's work but proposed that children under seven had acquired a more mature comprehension of death: "most children understand each of the bio-scientific components – Universality, Irreversibility, Non-functionality, and Causality" (Speece & Brent, 1996, p. 43).

Age therefore appears to be a fluctuating variable depending on the theory advanced. Alternatively, Wolfenstein (1996) asserts that it is only in adolescence, when the differentiation between thoughts, feelings and emotions is conceptualised, that grief is understood. In contrast to Nagy's stance on bereavement, John Bowlby (1969) affirms that children as young as six months old have the potential to experience grief. Bowlby and Parkes (1970) went on to define four main stages of the grieving process:

**Table 3.2: Four Stages of the Grieving Process (Bowlby & Parkes)**

<b>Stage</b>	<b>Features</b>
1. Numbness, Shock & Denial	Bereaved may feel sense of unreality
2. Yearning & Protest	Grief may manifest in waves of crying, sighing, anxiety, & the child may sense the presence of the deceased.
3. Disorganisation	Low moods & hopelessness
4. Re-organisation	Letting go of the attachment & investing in the future.

Given the aforementioned array of opinion on children's understanding of death, perhaps other elements should be used to inform the readiness and aptness of supports for bereaved children. It is prudent practice that professionals working with children look to the children, regardless of age, and ascertain their real needs. These needs should be the prime factors for supports. According to Nuala Harmey, a bereavement co-ordinator at Temple Street Hospital:

It appears to me, from my observations of children who have been affected by death, that the ability to be hurt by the pain of separation indicates that children grieve the loss of a loved one. *Regardless of age*, this is the factor which I feel should mobilise help for the bereaved child, even if the child has no real concept of death. (Harmey, 2008, p. 8)

This is reiterated in the findings that:

Contemporary society often seems to want to protect children from the emotional aspects of death, possibly because of the belief that death has no real meaning for children and hence they cannot understand it or deal with it emotionally. (Schoen, Burgoyne & Schoen, 2004).



Such perspectives may not prove to be of benefit to children or indeed adults who are bereaved” (Holland, 2008, p. 421). Moving beyond a developmental age model, new thinking on childhood bereavement was advanced and attention turned to the tasks implicit in the process of grieving. One of the most accessible theories to have infiltrated societal norms is the five stages advanced by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. Her work with terminally ill patients became widely known as DABDA (denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance) as a consequence of media coverage in the hit American series *The Simpsons*. Kübler-Ross in 1982 identified stages of grief, stressing that children and adults move cyclically between stages until ultimately they reach acceptance. Grief reactions displayed by bereaved children may include: shock and denial, disorganisation, anger, guilt and bargaining, physical and emotional distress, depression, loss and loneliness, withdrawal, reaching out, and acceptance.

### **3.4 The Deficit Model at School: The Implications**

As a term, *deficit-model theory* is indicative of frameworks that accentuate the adverse emotions ignited by grief during bereavement. This model compels bereaved persons to conquer DABDA stages in order to come to terms with their grief. Such an approach highlights some of the emotional aspects implicit in death, but one needs to consider whether such a model could lead to many disenfranchised grievers. Many bereaved children may feel excluded, as they simply do not reach a level of acceptance or may flit between emotions and alternate between different stages. Therefore, for those concerned with the welfare of children, it is paramount to consider approaches that can aptly support that child’s experience so that “opportunities to make the loss real and opportunities to develop emotional coping skills” (Bereavement Support Service for Schools, 2010, p. 9) can enable the child to live a changed but full life after bereavement. This shift towards nurturing emotional coping skills in tandem with dealing with loss is beginning to change the landscape of childhood bereavement.

#### *3.4.1 Grief Work*

William Worden’s book *Children and Grief: When a Parent Dies* (1996) forged the path for future childhood research on bereavement. According to Worden’s work, just as the grief work will be done, so too must the ‘Four Tasks’ be tackled. These tasks endeavour to bring the child to an acceptance of the reality of the loss. Furthermore, the

child must be enabled to experience the emotional and painful aspects inherent in their loss. Throughout the loss experience, the child is building towards an adjustment to their current and unfamiliar environment without the deceased. Lastly, the child or adult endeavours to emotionally relocate the deceased and move on with life. Given the brevity and importance of this remit, it is apparent that:

Dealing with emotions of bereavement and loss requires a safe place . . . it is important . . . that the young person's understanding of the experience (whatever it may be) is validated and the process is led by the young person at a pace which feels safe for them. (O'Dwyer, 2008, p. 17)

Such a statement implies that the bereaved child has regained a locus of control and a drive to confront a new future. It also indicates a presumption that breaking the bonds of the past is a prerequisite step to reconnecting or re-investing in life. As we will see, Worden's work was an innovative stance on the value of past attachments. Rather than expelling bonds with the deceased, as promoted in established paradigms, Worden explored the benefit of memories in helping bereaved children and adults on the path to rejuvenation. Even though Worden's model, akin to those of Bowlby and Parkes, Nagy, and Kübler-Ross, appears to be founded upon a staged process or deficit model which describes how the child works sequentially through stages, his work sparked powerful debate. The resulting insights ignited research into the importance of *Continuing Bonds* (Hedtke, 2001; Hogan, 2006; Hospice, 2010; Riches & Dawson, 2000; Valentine, 2009) – in contrast with previous deficit models that stressed the need to pass through conflicting emotions, and by so doing release the bonds of the past. Remembering the bereaved is now perceived as a constructive force, as “the dead are an active, positive resource to be drawn on by the living” (Riches & Dawson, 2000, p. 37).

### **3.5 Moving Beyond a Deficit Model of Grief – Continuing Bonds**

Continuing bonds can bring solace for children, as “for the child the ‘voice’ of the deceased continues to influence present day choices and actions” (Hedtke, 2001, p. 5). In the theory of Continuing Bonds, moving on, moving beyond, or letting go of the past are not necessarily envisioned as appropriate for all who experience bereavement. Rather, a healthy attachment to the deceased may actually help bereaved children to reconstruct another version of their assumptive world: “This model encompasses what many feel is the reality of grief; that is, it is not something to be worked through or

resolved because in reality grief is not so easily resolved . . . they incorporate the lost loved one in their ongoing life” (Mallon, 2011, p. 5). Likewise, the Oscillation or Dual process model creates a space that allows Loss and Restorative behaviour together to foster strategies for coping with bereavement. Loss behaviour manifests when bereaved people focus on the past, or permit intrusive grief to enter their day. But this is juxtaposed with periods of Restorative-orientated behaviour such as focusing on the future, making space to deal with life changes, and permitting oneself to gain respite from grief. The difference rests in acknowledging that bereaved children and adults alternate between both behaviours, based on their particular life experiences and needs:

Children shift back and forth between grief and engagement – a dual process of “loss orientated” dealing with and processing various aspects of the loss experience, and “restorative orientation” of adapting to the demanding changes triggered by the loss while trying to cope with the many activities of daily life. (Stroebe & Schut, 1999, p. 216)

Another theoretical view on the latent power of attachment as an influence on children’s life experiences sparked concurrent research interest. Resilience (Bonanno, 2011) became an instrumental approach towards dealing with grief. Cubis writes that “resilience in children and adolescents is considered the capacity to resist negative psychosocial consequences resulting from adverse events. It is . . . an active process which maintains personal stability in difficult circumstances over time” (2007, p. 1). Resilience is founded on positive attachments and is significant to this research.

### **3.6 The Road to Resilience – A New Path to Addressing Pupil Loss**

Psychiatrist John Bowlby is renowned for a theory which stresses the significance of the mother-child attachment to the development (well-being) of children. His work has proven highly influential in the field of bereavement: “no serious student of bereavement or child development can afford to ignore this major work, whose influence continues today” (Parkes, 2001, p. 37). This major work is commonly known as Attachment Theory. It asserts that children construct an emotional safe base for development, based on the existence of an attachment to the primary caregiver. As a primary caregiver may die or the surviving caregiver be emotionally unavailable for a time for their bereaved children, this theory holds contentious aspects for many young widowed parents. With regard to bereavement, the possibility remains that pre-existing

and existing attachment styles are significant and do “play a part in subsequent reactions to loss” (Parkes, 2001, p. 39). Bowlby’s work with Mary Ainsworth (1973) resulted from an empirical study with babies aged ten to twenty-four months. Their reactions to the absence and return of a mother or a stranger were observed. This study became known as the ‘Strange Situation’ (Bretherton, 1992). What remained was an idea that different styles of attachment denoting the quality of the mother-child bond could be labelled. Three styles were identified. *Secure* attachment was denoted as such because the baby reacted happily when the mother returned. *Insecure-avoidant* attachment was marked by the baby’s lack of need to go to the mother on her return, or avoiding the mother altogether on her return. *Insecure-resistant* attachment was observed as the babies appeared ambivalent, not able to achieve comfort from the returning mother. Whether or not one concurs with such findings, what is relevant for this research on parental bereavement is the fact that early childhood attachment could influence how children cope with absence, death and loss.

Ainsworth and Bowlby’s work advanced the notion that if we are to comprehend children’s behaviour we need to understand the environment that may have shaped it. Worden’s four tasks, the relevance of the original attachment theory for this particular research, rests less in the actual content it presents than in the significant field of thought it generates. Resilience, which underpins constructivist approaches to bereavement, is founded on secure attachments, with a lens on how children “survive and thrive in spite of stressful circumstances” (Eppler et al., 2009, p. 2).

As theorists considered the impact of attachment, a movement beyond attachment towards fostering resilience skills in childhood bereavement began. A focus on building a theory of resilience in bereavement, rather than a reliance on linear tasks, began to flourish. Theorists started to recognise the relevance and power of social systems in facilitating bereaved children and adults. From an ecological perspective on bereavement, the ripple effect an immediate family member or member of the wider public can bring to bear on traumatic situations is considerable.

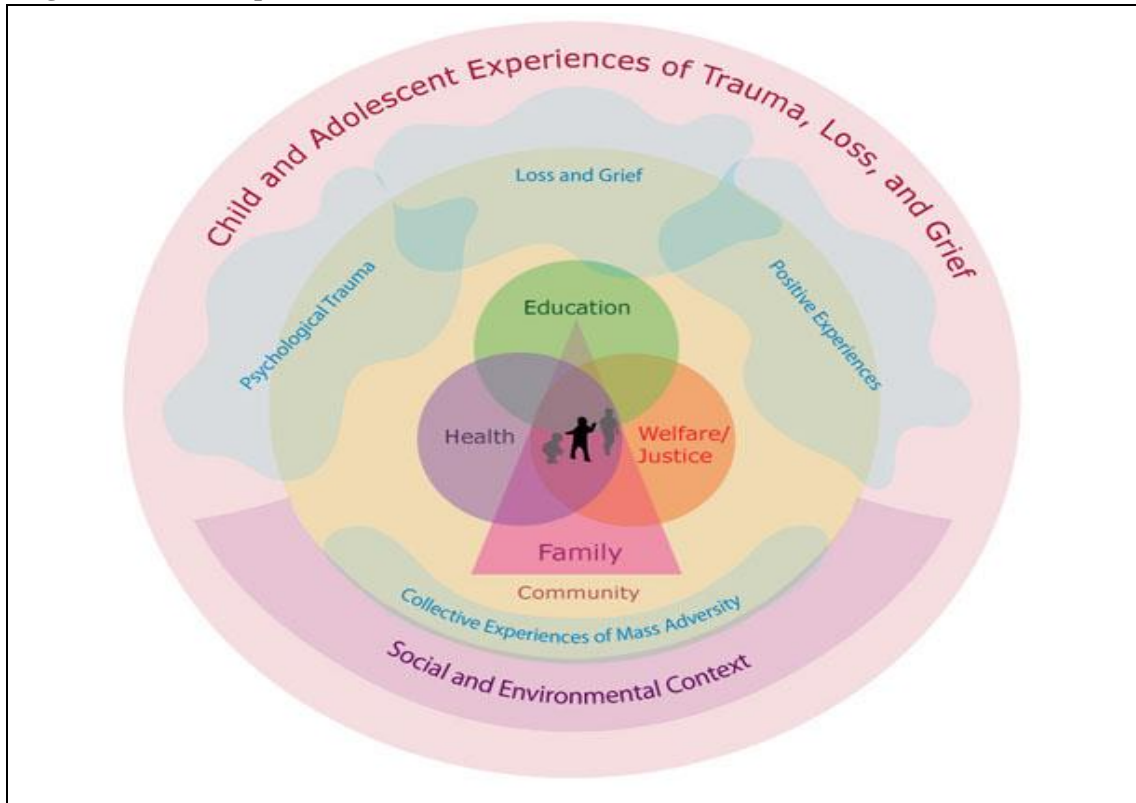
### *3.6.1 An Ecological Perspective in Action*

The Australian Child and Adolescent Trauma, Loss and Grief Network have modified this ecological perspective to encapsulate a construct that considers how social theory can enlighten thinking on the effects of, and influences on, childhood bereavement and adversity. Such an ecological outlook is now widely accepted as a way of understanding children's health and well-being. It shows how ecological frameworks can be used whilst dealing with intense grief and trauma. From inception, it is apparent that individuals and systems working on the outer social periphery can create a widespread, symbiotic ripple effect that enables the promotion of well-being for bereaved children.

This model illustrates the inherent negativity of trauma, loss and grief on children, but it depicts these factors not as overriding inhibitors but as a component of the wider collective bereavement experience. In fact, positive life experiences and sharing skills are depicted as equally influential in fostering holistic well-being in adverse circumstances. The role of education is crucial in enacting a positive, strength-based approach to bereavement for children. The applicability of a system model approach is strengthened by what Shapiro (2001) terms the "building of an interpersonal model of bereavement". This acknowledges that although cognitive or developmental paths in children may be loosely categorised, a child's unique life experiences prior to and during bereavement are less easily catalogued.

Traumatic experiences can create a reserve of social intelligence, a reserve that is generated in times of adversity as the child navigates through a changed life story, by seizing essential resources from the immediate and wider environment to bolster their capabilities to deal with change. This acquired learning could prove highly instrumental in how effectively children react to loss. The interconnectedness of a child's world and external spheres of influence are shown in the ecological diagram of trauma, loss and grief, below:

**Figure 3.1: Child Experiences of Trauma, Loss & Grief**



Source: [www.earlytraumagrief.anu.edu.au/research/bereavement-review](http://www.earlytraumagrief.anu.edu.au/research/bereavement-review) 2013

Keeping such a construct in mind, working with bereaved children can enlighten our thinking about how roles (be it teacher or policy maker) have an impact on a growing child's life. Thus, accountability for the mental health of bereaved children may not rest exclusively with the family (the Microsystem level) but could be positively facilitated at other levels, such as the wider school community (Exosystem), allowing for the child's beliefs and traditions (Macrosystem). Colin Murray Parkes' insights on the 'Assumptive World' are highly relevant to addressing childhood bereavement. His work brings necessary attention to the stark reality that "children assume they will live with their family, go to school, do their homework and have friends; however, this assumptive world may be shattered when a parent dies" (Mallon, 2011, p. 5).

### 3.6.2 *Reinventing the Assumptive World – A Constructivist Approach*

A Constructivist approach to bereavement compares the grieving process to a reconstruction process, which demands a psychosocial transition. The child must learn to negotiate their new world whilst acknowledging that their identity is linked to their family world before the death occurred. This is a constructive, evolving process which

requires reconstructing meaning (Neimeyer, 2005). It requires a social response with awareness of the power of ecological systems. This reconstruction of a child's world is a central premise of constructivist approaches to bereavement. The wider influence of social factors, such as family, schools and community networks, is called upon to help nurture the child's energy towards reconstructing the meaning of their lives, to regain a locus of control. Key tenets of this approach include the use of story and biographies by which children can acknowledge change and open up discourses. Hedkte (2001) highlights how "the 'voice' of the deceased continues" (p. 5) and is no longer perceived as an unwanted intrusion, as it can empower the child to actively address the life-altering challenges and new experiences that bereavement brings. In short, the constructivist approach explores the challenging experiences by modelling themes of on-going connections, resilience, strength, and hopefulness within the foundations of the bereaved child's own constructive life story. These concepts can be revisited by the child, to help mediate their fluctuating states of grieving:

Listening to the voices of grieving children, it is important to see their complete pictures by observing their positive moments, happy times, and resilience while attending to their emotions such as sadness and fear. (Eppler, 2008, p. 6)

### **3.7 The Role of the Teacher**

This research is set against the backdrop of primary school. Research has identified that the teacher is aptly placed to deal sensitively with pupils' concerns and well-being:

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)

This statement assumes that teachers are enabled emotionally and professionally to engage in conversations. There is an additional assumption that educators are enabled to participate in such contexts whilst being vigilant of the social, cognitive and cultural backgrounds of families: "talking to children about death must be geared to their developmental level, respectful of their cultural norms, and sensitive to their capacity to understand the situation" (NASP, 2003, p. 1). Teachers, the school system and those working with bereaved children are not infallible. In fact, death, which is both an inevitable and universal aspect of life, appears to be a reality that most teachers feel ill-

equipped to handle, as often “Our first thought is ‘Help!’ and we don’t know what to say, fearing we will ‘make it worse!’” (Winston Wish Charity, 2009, p. 10). This resonates with the Irish context, wherein “teachers were ‘wary of causing an upset’ and wanted to support bereaved pupils but were unsure as to how to help” (Tracey & Holland, 2008, p. 254). Teachers’ busy role restricts the support they can give to bereaved children. They need to be aware that:

When working in a school environment, it is easy to let the carer in us take over. . . . Do take a caring and supportive approach but one that recognises your professional role. No matter how well meant or strong the desire to take the pain away . . . be realistic with the amount of support . . . providing a listening ear once a week, and sticking to it, is more meaningful than the offer of help anytime when inevitably that cannot be achieved. (Butler, 2013, p. 2)

To help illuminate a possible path to address such concerns, the next section explores loss, bereavement and change in the context of teachers and the current curriculum in Ireland. The value of this investigation is that teachers can use the theory behind childhood bereavement to better inform the practical strategies they choose to integrate into the classroom. An insightful passage in a book by educational psychologist Donna Burns might prove useful in such instances. Prior to any interventions, teachers may find it useful to deliberate on “The Four Ws” (4Ws), which could serve as a starting point for discussion:

**Figure 3.2: Teacher Starting Points: Should I intervene?**

The Four Ws

If you *want* to help kids navigate through their grief, are *well-informed* about the ways kids grieve, are *willing to learn*—not only from professionals, but from the grievers themselves—and importantly, the griever *welcomes* your support, then you can trust in your ability to comfort and guide him or her during emotionally challenging times. (Burns, 210, p. 53)

### **3.8 A Pedagogical Approach to Address Classroom Bereavement: 4Ws**

Attending to the *want* element of the above passage, from the outset educators must be aware that “talking about bereavement and loss with children is emotionally draining” (Butler, 2013, p. 1). Therefore, acknowledging that educators may hold a cautious regard for dealing with children who are bereaved is both an informative and important step, as “adults often feel uncertain in offering support and appropriate intervention to such children. Thankfully the former trend of excluding children from death and the rituals surrounding it are decreasing but still exists in some forms” (Harmey, 2008, p.



7). Challenging this trend rests in the awareness among those working with bereaved children that often “parents are suffering at the same time and may find it difficult to support their children as well” (Hynes, 2008, p. 21). Consideration of how past experiences of bereavement may affect viewpoints and attitudes is essential; “we all have losses. This project may catch you unawares by stirring up emotions and feelings associated with previous losses . . . if it feels too close to home, do not be afraid to say so” (Butler, 2013, p. 1).

*Becoming well-informed* compels teachers to acquire insight into the impact of grief and loss on a pupil’s life. They acknowledge that many bereaved children endure a diminished locus of control (Schuurman, 2003) as their assumptive worlds (Murray Parkes, 1988; Neimeyer, 2005) become undermined by the death of a parent. Most people can empathise with the plight of a bereaved child, understanding that “the death of the mother or father, this shocking loss of the familiar in the child’s young world destroys her sense of normalcy. Life as it was had ended, and the child feels completely at life’s mercy” (Di Ciacco, 2008, p. 240). Therefore, having tapped into knowledge of childhood bereavement, teachers are now nurturing mental health for children, as by:

Understanding children’s thoughts, feelings, and behaviours following death of a family member . . . teachers and classmates can say and do things that strengthen emotional support and ease painful feelings associated with grief. (Cohen & Mannarino, 2011; Jerome, 2011; Openshaw, 2011) (Heath & Cole, 2011, p. 251)

Thus theory affects classroom practice. The *willing to learn* aspect of the 4Ws requires collaborative work between teacher and pupil. When dealing with bereavement as opposed to the academic subjects on the curriculum, transferring knowledge into a practical classroom strategy requires significant teacher–pupil rapport. Teachers are not infallible. Kübler-Ross once remarked: “There are thousands of children who know death far beyond the knowledge adults have . . . those little children [are] the wisest of teachers” (Rogers, 2007, p. 31). Therefore, as Grollman writes, “it is important to remember that even children of the same age may differ widely in their comprehension and behaviour” (2000, p. 101). So take time, be vigilant, listen, and ask children how they would like to address their situation with you, and their peers. This is a deeply personal situation, and some children can articulate their emotions whilst others dislike intense focus or feel that “bereavement was a ‘label’ worn with reluctance” (Abdelnoor & Hollins, 2004b, p. 88). This label is understandable, given the sense of loss of control

over their lives which many children encounter whilst dealing with the grief of parental death. Schuurman addresses this well:

The key at-risk factor bereaved children demonstrate in greater proportion than their non-bereaved peers is an *external locus of control*. Resilient children have a strong belief that they can control their fates by their own actions; bereaved children show a higher evidence of externalising control, believing that their fate is in someone else's hands. No wonder they display higher levels of anxiety, depression, health problems, pessimism, underperformance and lower self-esteem. (Schuurman, 2003, pp. 130–131)

Haines *et al.* (2008) agree and recommend sharing this acquired knowledge with the bereaved child. Perhaps a collaborative discussion might dispel common childhood misperceptions about death, whilst educating the child that grief does have an impact. Also, the child is not left isolated as they uncover ways to express their feelings, worries, and anxieties, thus reducing the elements of mystery that often surround death-related issues. Moving to the last of the 4Ws, the prerequisite and mutual understanding that the child in question *welcomes* this support and attention is central to any response by a teacher or professional. Once acknowledged, this teacher has awakened in the child an understanding that the wider community does exist, that staff are aware, and that the school understands that difficult life changes and family transitions lie ahead for that child. What matters is that the school personnel acknowledged that this dramatic change may have rocked the child's assumptive world, as explored in the literature review. As professionals concerned with education, they can draw on the reserves of the school system: SPHE circle-time, psychological departments and the National Educational Psychological Services (NEPS), bereavement services, Barnardos charity, and Rainbow intervention programmes. At the same time they give the child a place of routine, peer support, and educational resources, aware that "school staff can provide care, continuity and compassion in the security of a place that the young person knows well . . . they can make a significant difference to the child's sense of security as they experience the turbulence of emotions surrounding grief" (Mallon, 2011, pp. 49–50).

### 3.8.1 *Transferring Theory to the Classroom - Pedagogy*

To holistically portray the experience of parental widowhood, it is necessary to move the aforementioned theory of bereavement into the practical realm of the primary school classroom. On the premise that the concerned teacher has assessed the 4Ws and is prepared to address the issues of loss, bereavement and change with the child in their

care, I propose that practical measures need to be applied. Dyregrovs assert a very basic principle, but one that teachers need to be aware of: “Everything you do is communication” (2008, p. 11). How teachers model their behaviour, exhibit coping skills, tackle issues, and use gestures – all are readily absorbed by the thirty or so pupils seated in the classroom. Equally, if issues are ignored or shut down in oral literacy time, children equate such silence with negativity or lack of adult consent in exploring these issues.

### *3.8.2 The Pebble Technique*

With this insight, educators might consider the possibility that sometimes a bereaved child may be just seeking your secure presence, a reassuring smile, a listening ear or a silence shared. The Pebble technique (Van Gulden & Bartels-Rabb, 2000) is often used with adoptive parents, but I contend it is equally applicable when working with bereaved children. This approach could be used by teachers, as it encourages subtle ways into the topic of death: “pebbles are one-liners, not conversations, that raise an issue and then are allowed to ripple until the child is ready to pick up on it” (Di Ciacco, 2008, p. 905). It reminds those working with children that those suffering bereavement are often not seeking definitive answers, large gestures or hands-on interventions. Research into mirror neurons (Ekman & Rosenberg, 2005) claims that “regardless of culture, race or class, facial expressions are universal: sadness, disgust, happiness, fear and surprise show in faces all over the world” (Mallon, 2011, p. 32). When pupils look at their teacher, they grasp their intentions. This realisation is vast for educators, especially considering that “by observing teachers’ and peers’ emotional expressions, children learn how to express and manage grief” (Heath & Cole, 2011, p. 251).

### *3.8.3 Active Listening and Empathy*

A constructive factor in handling bereavement in the classroom may involve the teacher modelling strategies for coping with dramatic changes and loss. This involves the teacher’s whole attention as they bring the skills of active listening and empathy into play in the classroom (Dyregrov & Dyregrov, 2008; Graves, 2008). Table 3.3 below outlines some suggestions which teachers may find useful:

**Table 3.3: Active Listening for Teachers**

<b>Guidelines</b>	<b>Pitfalls</b>
Do keep an open mind	Don't interrupt
Do listen to <i>how</i> things are said	Don't react emotionally to personal 'red flag' words
Do observe non-verbal communication	Don't think about what you are going to say next whilst the other person is talking
Do ensure that your verbal contributions are clear and relevant	Don't make assumptions about what people are going to say
Do ask for clarification if you haven't understood	Don't finish people's sentences for them – you could be wrong
Do be honest when feeding back feelings Do be prepared to work hard at listening	Don't prematurely evaluate the situation.

Source: Brenda Mallon, 2011, p. 32

It is worth noting an additional benefit of active listening for both the teacher dealing with bereavement in the classroom and the child tackling grief: “it is through the experience of being helped to listen more carefully to what is going on inside themselves that teachers, in turn, develop the capacity to listen to their pupils with confidence, care and insight” (Jackson, 2005, p. 17).

#### 3.8.4 *Transformational Coping Skills*

Drawing on aspects of active listening and empathy, the teacher is more enabled to help the bereaved child as they try to cope with the impact loss and grief have inflicted on their assumptive world. This reconstruction requires the learning and enacting of coping skills. These skills are cornerstones that enable the bereaved child to flit between restorative- and loss-orientated behaviours in order to vitalise their minds, body and spirit, and so regain a sense of control, self-identity, future curiosity and understanding of the resilience of family. This premise is echoed in research that claims:

Out of all this accumulating psychological research comes a central and hopeful message: while we all long for ease and security in our lives, overcoming challenge . . . is at the heart of flourishing . . . we all have some part of us that is potentially equal to meeting the *hard challenges* of life, as well as embracing its *bright promise*. (Gaffney, 2011, p. xi).

This may appear overly optimistic, but for those who have dealt with death, these coping mechanisms occur. Perhaps this is due to the life lessons learnt during the initial bereavement which engage a particular way of coping with intense adversity. This process enables a child to “digest their loss at their own cognitive level . . . rebuilding a gradual absorption of all the loss essentials . . . he will be able to tolerate intense feelings that occasionally arise and to practice coping skills” (Di Ciacco, 2008, p. 1218).

Such a skill-set could be called transformational coping. It presents itself in adverse circumstances, as “this capacity to transform a potentially deadly setback into an opportunity to grow, to reach a higher level of functioning than before the crisis is what we now know as ‘post-traumatic growth’ or ‘transformational coping’” (Gaffney, 2011, p. xi). The key, according to research by Abdelnoor and Hollins (2004a), is that:

Schools do have a key role in ensuring that educational progress is maintained and [teachers] may find that their role could include encouraging a restorative orientation at appropriate times, and doing what they can to ensure that the loss can be expressed, in safe and supported surroundings. (As cited in Mallon, 2011, p. 52)

### **3.9 Conclusion - Section One**

This section looked at some of the significant theories that have shaped childhood bereavement research. The exploration showed a progression from a resolute emphasis on the inner psychic world of the bereft individual, by navigating through *stepped* or *staged approaches*, to a more inclusive understanding of how bereavement is mediated and influenced by external relationships and environmental factors. The interrelated factors of environment, connectedness, family and social structures are now deemed to significantly affect well-being in childhood and adult bereavement. Thus, this section explored the movement beyond linear tasks and stages towards the importance of *Continuing Bonds* as advanced by Klass, Silverman & Nickman (1996) and the *Dual Process* of Stroebe and Schut (1999). Coping with change and strengthening resilience are now pivotal characteristics which define the constructivist paradigm in childhood bereavement theory. By unravelling theories of bereavement, this research strives to empower those working with bereaved children to become more informed and so better equipped to address change, loss and bereavement as it arises in the lives of children. The impact of classroom practice on the lives of bereaved children is profound, aiming ultimately to “instil hope and move grieving students from a *passive victim role* to an *active survivor role*” (Heath & Cole, 2011, p. 333). We now turn to how Irish primary schools respond to the complex impact of change, loss and bereavement on children’s lives.

### **3.10 SECTION TWO: LOSS, BEREAVEMENT AND CHANGE – THE IRISH CONTEXT**

This review of Irish schooling responses has to be placed within the broader context of changes in Irish society. Ireland of 2014 has recently undergone fundamental political, financial and social upheaval that has undoubtedly affected the very fabric of Irish society. Consider the turbulent economic property crash of 2008, which incurred European interventions. This in turn directly affected (and still influences) Ireland's budgetary sovereignty, in the form of the European Economic Monetary Fund.

Ireland's banking crisis was described by the IMF in early 2009 as matching 'episodes of the most severe economic distress in post-World War II history. . . . Hailed for over a decade as the 'Celtic Tiger', Ireland's economy collapsed in 2008 as falling property prices exposed huge liabilities in its banking system [leading to the] acceptance of an EU/ECB/IMF rescue package in November 2010. (Kirby, 2010)

This curtails State spending, particularly in the public sector, of which education is a major part. Social disparity has increased, fuelled by inflated emigration as many parents seek employment abroad, redefining family structures at home: "The 21<sup>st</sup> century family is clearly not a static universal structure. Increasing numbers of families are experiencing changes to their composition and consequently a rising number of young people are faced with familial transformations" (Rigg & Pryor, 2006, p. 17). Indeed, the changing social landscape of Irish classrooms is clearly shown by the extent of familial diversity seen in the Central Statistics Office (CSO) Census 2011, which recorded 215,000 single-parent families. That constitutes 25.8 percent of all families with children. In other words, one in four children in Ireland now live in one-parent homes.

This section explores how schools currently respond to loss, bereavement and change. The use of the current Critical Incident Management plans advanced by the Department of Education and Skills (2007) will be discussed, with the knowledge that "although it is obviously not possible to plan for every contingency as each bereavement is itself unique, it is possible to plan some general strategies" (Holland, 1997, p. 80). This section will also investigate if the wealth of family diversity seen in the CSO figures is reflected in SPHE practices. This is important, as SPHE was introduced as the most appropriate subject base by which teachers could foster mental and emotional well-being for all family types at school. Simply put, "schools have an

enormously important role in supporting children and equipping them for later life as adults in a fast changing world” (Tacade, 2010, p. 5).

### **3.11 Responding to Critical Incidents at School**

Many educators may ask whether a whole-class proactive approach to loss, bereavement and change which would involve curricular lesson plans is necessary, as currently schools have a *reactive* approach to bereavement. Before exploring a proactive approach to the topic, therefore, it is important to gain an insight into the processes and procedures which schools are using in response to bereavement. At present, Irish school policy support revolves around a reactive, Critical Incident Manual developed by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) in 2007. This is applied after the bereavement or tragedy strikes. These reactive guidelines resulted from lessons learnt from the tragic Omagh bombing of 15 August 1998 and the Loreto bus crash in 2005 in which children were killed. This devastated families and communities throughout the country. What arose was a determination that other Irish schools would gain knowledge and take on the responsibility to ensure that school policy integrated the creation of practical Critical Incident Management plans (2007).

In tandem with this policy initiative, the remit of the National Educational Psychological Services (NEPS) was broadened to enable schools to access NEPS personnel, to help intervene when tragedies arose. The routine role of NEPS is to facilitate the personal, social and educational development of all children attending primary education. NEPS attends to the development of identified children through the application of psychological theory and practice in education. This service is a vital and highly informative source of support for schools:

The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) provides assistance to all schools that experience critical incidents, regardless of whether or not they have a NEPS psychologist assigned to them. The incidents themselves generally arise due to the death through illness, road accident or sometimes suicide of a pupil. In the event of a critical incident within a school, NEPS will await a request from school authorities before offering support. (Department of Education and Skills, 2013)

NEPS is based on school contact, so there are often restraints between contact and intervention. The service is applied as a reaction to an event that has already occurred, as outlined in this statement from the Department of Education and Skills, 2013:

NEPS during 2008 provided all schools with updated advisory material to assist them to organise for and cope with the different challenges presented in this context. In the event of a school experiencing a critical incident, school authorities wishing the support of a NEPS psychologist in its aftermath should contact the local NEPS office to make their request. (Department of Education and Skills, 2013)

These critical-instance strategies are imperative, and have a positive place and purpose in primary education. Indeed, the aforementioned ‘Responding to Critical Incidents at School: Resource Material for Schools’ offers frameworks and suggestions for teachers, principals and parents when dealing with the aftermath of accidental, sudden and violent death at school. This manual systematically describes the procedures that the principal and the critical incident team should adopt in these extreme circumstances. It includes sample resource (R) letters which can be sent to parents and given to pupils. It also has guidance templates on how to deal with the media.

A synopsis of these formats is included below, to offer insight into how schools are currently handling such matters. The first resource (R3) permits schools to contact NEPS once parental consent has been authorised; this is phrased as follows:

**Figure 3.3: Seeking Parental Consent (Resource for schools: R3)**

Dear Parent

(Name of school) has developed a plan for responding when a tragedy occurs. When such an event happens, schools are offered support by psychologists from the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), an agency of the Department of Education and Science. If we feel it is necessary, we would like to be in a position to have your child seen by the psychologist who can offer advice and support. Before any child is seen by a NEPS psychologist parental consent is usually required. We will make every effort to obtain this. However, in the unlikely event of being unable to contact you, we are writing to seek your consent to your child being seen by a member of NEPS as part of our school’s immediate response. This is to allow us to support your child in the best way possible. Your child may be seen individually, in a small group or as part of a class group. If you wish to discuss this, please contact me at your convenience.

Yours sincerely                      Principal name

Source: Department of Education and Skills, ‘Responding to Critical Incidents’, 2007, p. 5

This resource pack is an invaluable tool for all teaching professionals, as not only does it outline children’s understanding of and reaction to death according to age, it also highlights stages of grief for educators, and guides teachers by offering scripts on how a teacher might conduct a classroom session following news of a critical incident:



I have something very sad I want to share with you. The factual information agreed upon by the staff e.g. (Name of student) . . . I am feeling very sad about what's happened. Let's spend some time together now helping each other to talk about how we feel about what has happened. (Department of Education and Skills, 2008, p. 10)

NEPS suggests two sample templates to help school personnel deal effectively with a sudden, violent or accidental death, with the wider school community, and with media intrusions that might follow traumatic deaths. The follow figures illustrate the suggested school responses.

**Figure 3.4: Template for Sudden and Accidental Death: R6**

Dear Parents,

The school has experienced (the sudden death, accidental injury, etc.) of Name of student(s). We are deeply saddened by the deaths/events. (Brief details of the incident, and in the event of a death, perhaps some positive remembrances of the person lost.) Our thoughts are with (Family name). We have support structures in place to help your child cope with this tragedy. (Elaborate). It is possible that your child may have some feelings and questions that he/she may like to discuss with you. It is important to give factual information that is appropriate to their age. You can help your child by taking time to listen and by encouraging them to express their feelings. All children are different and will express their feelings in different ways. It is not uncommon for children to have difficulty concentrating or to be fearful, anxious, or irritable. They may become withdrawn, cry, and complain of physical aches and pains, have difficulty sleeping or have nightmares. Some may not want to eat.

These are generally short term reactions. Over the course of the days to come, please keep an eye on your child and allow him/her to express their feelings without criticism. Although classes will continue as usual, I anticipate that the next few days will be difficult for everyone. (Optional) An information night for parents is planned for (date, time and place). At that time, further information about how to help children in grief will be given. We have enclosed some information which you may find useful in helping your child through this difficult time.

Sincerely (Principal)

**Figure 3.5: Template for Violent/Student Death: R5**

Dear Parents

I need to inform you about a very sad event that has happened. (Give accurate information about the incident, but avoid using the word murder as this will not be established until the court case is completed).

*A child/young person from the neighbourhood, who is the brother of \_\_, a student here at school, was killed as a result of (a violent attack, violent incident in the street etc.) earlier this week. We are all profoundly saddened by his death.*

We have shared this information and have had discussions with all of our students so that they know what has happened. School staff members have been available for students on an on-going basis today. Other support personnel (including psychologists etc, according to actual arrangements) are available to advise staff and, where necessary, to talk to students. This support will continue to be available for (if appropriate insert how long). The death of any young person is tragic, but a violent death is even more difficult. It is hard to have to teach our children about the violence in our world and to accept that sometimes we do not have the power to prevent it. This death may cause a variety of reactions in your child. Some children/young people may be afraid for their own life and for the lives of those they love. Take time to listen to their fears and reassure them that what has happened is rare. The media are in the vicinity of the school and may approach you or your children. You need not respond to their questions if you are approached. We will not allow the media to interview your child at school and our general advice is that you should not let your children be interviewed. They are not mature enough to judge what to say and may say something they will regret later. (If planned) A support meeting for parents is planned for (date, time and place). At that time we can talk further about how to help ourselves and our children. Our thoughts are with (family name) and with each of you.

Sincerely (Principal)

Source: Department of Education and Skills, "Responding to Critical Incidents", 2007, p. 7

As is evident from the title of the plans and content of the resource letters, these procedures are directed at pupil deaths and unpredicted tragic events. The plans are effective and informative, and display a keen sense of responsibility by educational policy makers to tackle pupil tragedies. It was envisioned that these thorough critical incident plans would constitute one part of a broader curricular response and school strategy dedicated to addressing the impact of bereavement at school.

As far back as 1998, the promotion of proactive classroom practice alongside a critical incident response was recommended, acknowledging the need to instil coping skills through learning for children, to empower them to deal more effectively with life challenges and adverse situations, as research maintained that:

Children will benefit from the *development of the curriculum* which will build their capacity to cope with small and large crises which they will face in their lives. Above all, *teachers will not be afraid to deal with distressing issues* (When Tragedy Strikes, INTO; UTU, 1998, p. 420).

It is therefore apparent that school ethos is encouraged not only to be conducive to crisis management but also to promote deeper pupil understanding through a holistic curricular approach to loss, bereavement and change. Such curricular content would include bereavement in all its forms, including parental death. How schools have embraced this ideology will be investigated in Chapters Five and Six. The next section turns to the curricular responses, investigating the present role of social, emotional and health education, to help illuminate how such content might be applied to SPHE at school.

### **3.12 The Role of SPHE at School – A Holistic Approach**

Schools can play an important role in the promotion of positive mental health, building up resilience and in identifying and supporting students who may be vulnerable or at risk. . . . Education about mental well-being should become an integral part of the school curriculum, starting in primary school. (National Strategy for Action on Suicide Youth Prevention, 2005–2014, p. 21)

This premise for fostering holistic education is founded on using the existing SPHE platform that is part of primary education. The National Strategy for Action on Suicide Youth Prevention in Ireland declares that “SPHE is a core part of the primary

curriculum . . . the importance of SPHE in promoting positive mental health” (p. 22) is imperative. The aim is to foster holistic well-being for all children, as:

Links between the education and health sectors have been further strengthened through the development of the Health Promoting Schools Network . . . [who will] expand SPHE in primary and secondary schools, with a focus on age-appropriate mental and emotional health issues” (Reach out, 2005–2014, p. 22).

Given that thirty minutes a week is the limited time set aside for SPHE integration, teachers are under incalculable pressure to meet such targets. The aforementioned integration of bereavement supports through use of the existing social, personal and health education (SPHE) curriculum is complicated by the low status and limited timetabling which SPHE currently holds in the mainstream education system:

The historically low status of the “softer subjects” such as Religion, SPHE and CSPE and their minimal allocation of class time (Jeffers, 2008) coupled with the pervasive lack of comfort with ‘active methodologies’ (Clarke *et al.* 2010, Cosgrove *et al.* 2011) all conspire against full realization of the educational potential of values-based subjects currently hold in the education system. (Rickett, Grummell & Doggett, 2013, p. 10)

Teachers are prepared to tackle issues, but before considering “the ongoing development of the Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) module” (Reach out, 2005–2014), this research needs to assess how prevalent and effective is current SPHE education on loss, bereavement and change in the classroom.

It was envisioned that SPHE would support diversity in the classroom as “the phenomenon that young people are experiencing is explored and they can gain a greater insight into the dynamics of addictions, of bereavement and of conflict” (Farrell, 2007, p. 8). Schools’ responsibility to facilitate and promote SPHE best practice in the classroom was visibly bolstered throughout *Circular 0022/2010*, which was delivered to primary school Boards of Management and principals nationwide. Seven approaches were pioneered; see Figure 3.6:

**Figure 3.6: SPHE Methodologies**

- Integration of specific themes focusing on Relationship and Sexuality, Substance Misuse, *Bereavement*, Racism and Child Abuse Prevention be treated *not in isolation* but in a *holistic SPHE curriculum*
- A whole school approach
- Accountability of the classroom teacher
- The capacity of the teacher to empower and use existing student rapport
- The developmental aspects of SPHE to foster social and personal skills in a holistic manner
- Key skills promotion
- Active learning

Theoretically, this *holistic* approach to sensitive issues such as loss and bereavement in schools heralds an appreciation by policy makers (the Department of Education and Skills) that children’s emotional intelligence as well as academic abilities be fostered throughout their schooling career. According to research, however, such classroom practice appears less prevalent or authenticated: “while all schools evaluated had a whole-school plan for SPHE . . . there was obvious potential for ad hoc, uncoordinated delivery of themes to occur at each class level” (Inspectorate Evaluation Studies, 2007, p. 84). Therefore, it would appear that the aspirations of SPHE are not transported to the classroom, due to lack of policy and training. Consider recent research that revealed: “we are aware that it is not only necessary but also healthy to be open about death, but taboos about this subject persist, particularly in western society” (Devlin-Friend, 2009, p. 31). So the impetus to address loss, bereavement and change does exist markedly in schools, as “clearly, death and parental separation are regarded as high priority in schools” (McGovern & Tracey, 2010, p. 248).

Given the high priority attached to these issues, the question remains of what is impeding classroom progress. That leads to findings that claim: “the textual data included evidence that some schools on one hand were *not* dealing with the issue, preferring to ‘*wait and see*’ when it happens, while others were concerned that youngsters might ‘*slip through the net*’” (McGovern & Tracey, 2010, p. 248). This ad hoc, ‘wait and see’ approach to educational policy and praxis is not constructive. It fails to acknowledge the imperative SPHE protocol of ensuring a holistic and integrative

approach to topics such as bereavement at school. It also fails to tap into the transformative potential of education itself, given that “Schools seem to be in a unique position to help grieving children . . . children spend most of their waking term time days in school so that has the potential to be a safe haven and even a secure (Lowton & Higginson, 2003) ‘second home’” (Holland, 2008, p. 415).

### **3.13 Loss at School: Irish Research**

Although there appears to be a scarcity of Irish research with a primary focus on the young widowed parent experience and the expectation of schooling for their bereaved child, there are insightful studies into loss at schools. In 2000, an invaluable study by McGovern and Barry was published entitled ‘Death Education: Knowledge, Attitudes, and Perspectives of Irish Parents and Teachers’. Two major factors emerged which are of particular interest to this research: “although the *justification* for death education in schools is strong, death education programs remain *beyond* the boundaries of traditional *Irish school curricula*” (McGovern & Barry, 2000, p. 333). This research emphasised the need to address this omission: “it is clear that both teachers and parents are dealing with children’s loss and grief on a regular basis” (McGovern & Barry, 2000, p. 331), without policy direction or classroom supports. In a more recent 2010 study, McGovern joined with Tracey to compare schools’ responses to bereavement and the associated needs of the school community in Galway, West of Ireland, and Derry, Northern Ireland. It would appear that progress is gradual given how recent findings echo aspects of the previous study:

Schools have indicated that bereavement and parental separation are of high priority, but to put the necessary foundation in place (i.e. training in knowledge and skills; bereavement policies and procedures) urgent attention needs to be given to schools’ requests for help. (Mc Govern & Tracey, 2010, p. 249).

This research was built on previous comparative work, ‘Child Bereavement and Loss Responses and Needs of Schools in Hull, Yorkshire and Derry/Londonderry, Northern Ireland’. Interestingly, Holland and Tracey highlighted that “Perhaps finding additional ways of integrating loss into the curriculum will also help to shift the ‘taboo’ and to raise awareness of the issue at all levels” (Tracey & Holland, 2008, p. 264).

This research differs, as it focuses on encouraging a particular approach, in the form of generating a *proactive school response* not researched to date in Irish studies. This perspective proposes that a whole-class approach be adopted towards loss and bereavement throughout the existing primary curriculum.

### **3.14 Towards a Proactive School Approach**

This investigation hopes to answer some of the remarks made by researchers that “[t]he time may now be opportune to harness the informality and include Bereavement Policies and Procedures in all educational establishments, especially in the primary sector” (McGovern & Tracey, 2010, p. 249). Adopting a *proactive approach* to loss, bereavement and change is relevant, because most teachers would be confronted with pupils who have witnessed loss in one of its many forms at some stage of their teaching career, and “given that schools have an integral part to play in the development of the life of the child and that children spend up to six hours a day in the classroom, it is essential that schools feel equipped and able to deal with significant life events such as bereavement” (McGovern & Tracey, 2010, p. 237).

A proactive curricular approach might better enable teachers to engage pupils in discussions about life changes, including loss, bereavement and change. Shared classroom exploration would better equip pupils, empower teacher awareness and create an open school environment, as inevitably death touches the lives of many school-going children (Donnelly & Connon, 2003; McGovern & Barry, 2000; Smyth et al., 2004; Tracey, 2006). In her more recent research ‘Perpetual loss and pervasive grief’, Tracey reiterates the significant positive role schools can play for children in times of distress: “Schools can help by acknowledging the loss, and by including bereavement in the teaching curriculum so that all children will have a better understanding of loss and grief” (Tracey, 2011, p. 23). Teachers’ pivotal role in fostering such understanding is repeated in Irish governmental research:

It has been found that teachers are the best people to support students in school in times of distress because they need to be with people they know and trust. Accordingly, all teachers and other staff members are encouraged to help the students at these times (Department of Education and Skills, 2007, p. 29).

### **3.15 Conclusion: Section Two**

Educators are unequivocally concerned with the holistic welfare of their pupils, acknowledging in particular that coping with a parent's death is one of the most painful experiences for children (Brent et al., 2009; Haines et al., 2008; Worden, 1996). Teachers are also aware that "Death cannot be kept outside the walls of our primary [school]. . . . Death is a fact of life; a fact that school personnel and school systems cannot afford to deny" (Servaty-Seib et al., 2003, p. 170). As far back as 2000, teachers reported "relatively high rates of classroom experiences of death"; "some 35% of teachers reported dealing with the death of a child's parent, 23% with the death of a pupil, and 86% with the death of someone close to the child" (McGovern & Barry, 2000, p. 328). Schools' concern for the welfare of pupils is evident in data. Often, lack of a definitive policy framework appears to hinder in-service teacher training, which affects classroom integration of loss, bereavement and change. This gap between bereavement policy, pedagogical approaches to grief, loss and change, and curricular content is heightened by research: "often teachers' failure to respond to bereaved children was most likely to be due to a lack of training" (Devlin-Friend, 2009, p. 6). This is a particularly precarious position for dedicated teachers to be resigned to, given their professional care of duty:

Awareness of bereavement issues among staff is particularly important since referrals of young people to agencies are usually the school's responsibility, a system which relies on the teacher to recognise the need for support and know whom to contact. (Devlin-Friend, 2009, p. 7)

The next chapter explores and documents the methodology used to investigate the widowed parents' and other perspectives of the welfare of parentally bereaved children in the primary classroom.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH DESIGN – CAPTURING LIFE CHANGES IN THE CLASSROOM**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter details the qualitative research design employed in the thesis. The researcher draws upon elements of phenomenology (Van Manen, 1990) to shape the overall qualitative approach of this research. The methodology used for this exploration includes qualitative interviewing, uncensored journaling activities and use of the mosaic approach (Clark, 2005). Three distinct samples are represented in the investigation—young widowed parents, teachers and sixth class pupils. The size, use of purposeful sampling and procedures needed to locate and select the participants is discussed. The data collection circle which comprises six phases is also described. The data analysis techniques used to collate and interpret the findings of each of the three groupings are demonstrated. In exploring the validity and reliability of this research, triangulation of sources, theories and methods (Creswell, 2007) are all described. The ethical guidelines adhered to and protocols used to conduct this investigation are outlined. The limitations of the chosen research approach are also explored.

### **4.2 Research Design**

A qualitative design is central to this research. The qualitative approach enables an exploration of how widowed parents give meaning to their experience of bereavement within the context of primary school system. It allows for a multifaceted exploration of how experience is created and given meaning to be explored:

Qualitative research is interpretivist rather than positivist in nature, allowing explanatory concepts and theories to emerge inductively from the data rather than deductively from testing an a priori hypothesis. The paramount objective . . . is to explore and understand the meanings that participants construct about their world and their experiences and to understand and explain why participants behave as they do in a particular situation. (Arnold & Lane, 2011, p. 688)

Most significantly, this researcher selected qualitative design for a very basic and human reason:



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)

Underpinning this approach is the rationale that the widowed participants are themselves the experts in the area of parental bereavement and the most relevant people to decipher how schools addressed the loss and grief needs of their bereaved child. These newly disclosed experiences, alongside the theoretical literature reviewed for this research, will be combined to generate a more holistic overview of the widowed parent phenomenon.

#### 4.2.1 *Qualitative Research- The Researcher's Core Assumptions*

To capture the essence of a good qualitative study, I visualise such a study as comprised of three interconnected circles . . . these circles include the approach of inquiry, research design procedures, and philosophical and theoretical frameworks and assumptions. The interplay of these three factors contributes to a complex, rigorous study (Creswell, 2007, p. 223).

To highlight the rationale for employing a qualitative research design to conduct this investigation, the researchers' core assumptions must be explored. This requires an explanation of the researchers' worldviews and how these paradigms have influenced the approach of this particular research inquiry. This researcher chose a constructivist paradigm as the most appropriate fit for exploring the world of parental widowhood. In accordance with these constructivist world views, this research aspires to create a window into "the world of human existence" (Cohen & Manion, 1994, p. 36), by making explicit the "participants' views of the situation being studied (Creswell, 2003, p. 8) whilst acknowledging that "reality is socially constructed" (Mertens, 2005, p. 12). In this study the researcher reflects on widowed parent interviews to construct the themes which analyse parents' perspectives of how children are supported in primary school.

Research design procedures are the second of the circles to which Creswell refers in the quotation above. A qualitative research design was selected which directly informed the chosen methodology - qualitative interviewing was used to gather widowed and teacher insights. The Mosaic approach (Clark & Moss, 2004) was employed to draw out

pupil perspectives on the topic of family and bereavement. The researcher encouraged the use of uncensored journaling to enable widowed parents to articulate in visual form their reflective thoughts of their school experiences.

The last of Creswell's circles refers to philosophical views and assumptions. Identifying one's epistemological and ontological ideas and contemplating how they influence the chosen methodology is a complex and challenging task. However, a brief insight into the mind-set of the researcher is warranted. This is echoed in research that states:

The process of designing a qualitative study begins not with the methods . . . but instead with the broad based assumptions central to qualitative inquiry, a worldview consistent with it, and in many cases, a theoretical lens that shapes the study. (Creswell, 2007, p. 40)

It is important to consider how the researcher's practice, values and understandings, shape the overall approach to the inquiry. This thesis arises from a "passionate desire to know, a devotion and commitment to pursue a question that is strongly connected with one's own identity and selfhood" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 40). This researcher strives to present and describe the reality of experiences seen and voiced by the participants (young widowed parents) through the use of direct quotes, and to link themes in their words with evidence from secondary sources (pupils and teachers) on the topic. As highlighted the researchers' philosophical view gravitates from a constructivist awareness towards a transformative paradigm:

The transformative ontological assumption recognizes that there are many versions of what is considered to be real and is cognizant of the constructivists' discussion of the social construction of multiple realities. Yet it diverges from this belief in that it holds that there is one reality about which there are multiple opinions. And here, it leads to epistemological implications. (Mertens, 2000, p. 470)

Regarding epistemology, the researcher's view of knowledge is significantly shaped by the position that "the goal of enquiry is not [ultimately] truth but increased understanding and legitimisation" (Roth, 2009, p. 685). Although qualitative methodologies vary, the most common can be identified, notably "phenomenology, grounded theory, case study, and ethnography" (Arnold and Lane, 2011, p. 688). In this research, this particular researcher chose to take ingredients from each, to essentially

build a toolkit of heuristics to construct my data collection circle and to generate the data.

#### 4.2.2 *Phenomenology: The Lived Experience*

Phenomenology as an approach to research uncovers the “lived experience” (Van Manen, 1990) of participants, as a means of generating a broad understanding in society of a phenomenon which before then was little recognised. This research has many of the attributes of the conceptual framework of hermeneutic phenomenology in education as advanced by Van Manen (2002). This is evidenced by this particular researcher’s own declaration that an “abiding concern” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 31) significantly motivated this research on the world of parental widowhood. This topic is of great interest to the researcher both personally as a single widowed parent, and professionally as an educator and researcher striving to facilitate holistic education that caters to the diverse needs of the schoolchildren in my care. This research into the lived experience of widowed parents will be founded on inductive and descriptive narratives. However, the participants resoundingly voiced the aspiration that this research should not only reveal the widowed parent phenomenon but illuminate existing school practices on integrating loss, bereavement and change education for bereaved families. This research therefore goes beyond a purely phenomenological investigation, acknowledging that:

With raising consciousness comes providing understandings that lead to social change. Such methods have been called transformative (Carr, 1995; Giroux, 1988), in that they require dialogue between researchers and participants that can lead to social change that transform the lives of the participants in a positive way (Hatch, 2002, p. 17).

Given how apt this quote is to the widowed participants’ perspectives, the researcher looks to the work of J. Amos Hatch to help create an informed, systematic yet open qualitative approach. Hatch (2002) lists ten possible characteristics of an authentic qualitative study: natural settings, participant perspectives, researcher as data-gathering instrument, extended first-hand engagement, centrality of meaning, wholeness and complexity, subjectivity, emergent design, inductive analysis, and reflexivity. These are also integral components of this research journey.

#### 4.2.3 *Bracketing Life Experience – Is it Possible?*

From a value perspective: visible, voiced, and valued are fundamental elements of this research. This researcher believes these are key components for improving understanding in education. The researcher's views on what the role of values are therefore extremely important in this research. By 'positioning myself' in this research, this researcher acknowledges that the data presented is value laden and an interpretation. I as the researcher am ever-present in the data. Yet the researcher's own widowed parent experience is not directly used to inform the Findings chapter of this research.

I am not directly included in the interviewing process. As a researcher, I made this deliberate decision on two premises. Firstly, I hold that as an experienced teacher and widowed parent I am too involved in the very educational system under investigation. My data could sway the findings through the use of insider input on how the educational system should rather than does function. Secondly, as will be explained, I did not fit my own strict criterion. When I was widowed, my child was 11 months old and had not entered the primary school system. Therefore I did not meet the protocol guidelines I had myself designed as imperative requirements for inclusion in this current thesis. As a result, I "set aside [my] experience as much as possible, to take a fresh perspective towards the phenomenon under examination" (Creswell, 2007, p. 59). This exploration is an ethically challenging topic as discussing the welfare of bereaved children can prove highly emotive for widowed families. Therefore, throughout the Findings and Discussion chapter, this researcher will clearly articulate my own interpretations, in conjunction with those of my participants, and openly discuss the values that may have shaped the data presented. This researcher acknowledges that inquiry "is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of interpretative, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3). The inherent characteristic of a qualitative design greatly appealed, as it "does not privilege a single methodology over the other . . . nor does it have a distinct set of methods that are entirely its own" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 3). Accordingly, as the researcher I am enabled to adapt, modify and investigate the topic in ways that are meaningful and appropriate:

We use qualitative research to develop theories when partial or inadequate theories exist for certain populations and samples or existing theories do not adequately capture the complexity of the problem we are examining. We also use qualitative research because quantitative measures and the statistical analysis simply do not *fit* the problem. (Creswell, 2007, p. 40)

Having explored the researcher's paradigms, it is time to illustrate how the pupil, teacher and widowed parent voices are interconnected within this research. Figure 4.1 depicts the research model used in this investigation-

**Figure 4.1: The Research Model – Six Phases**

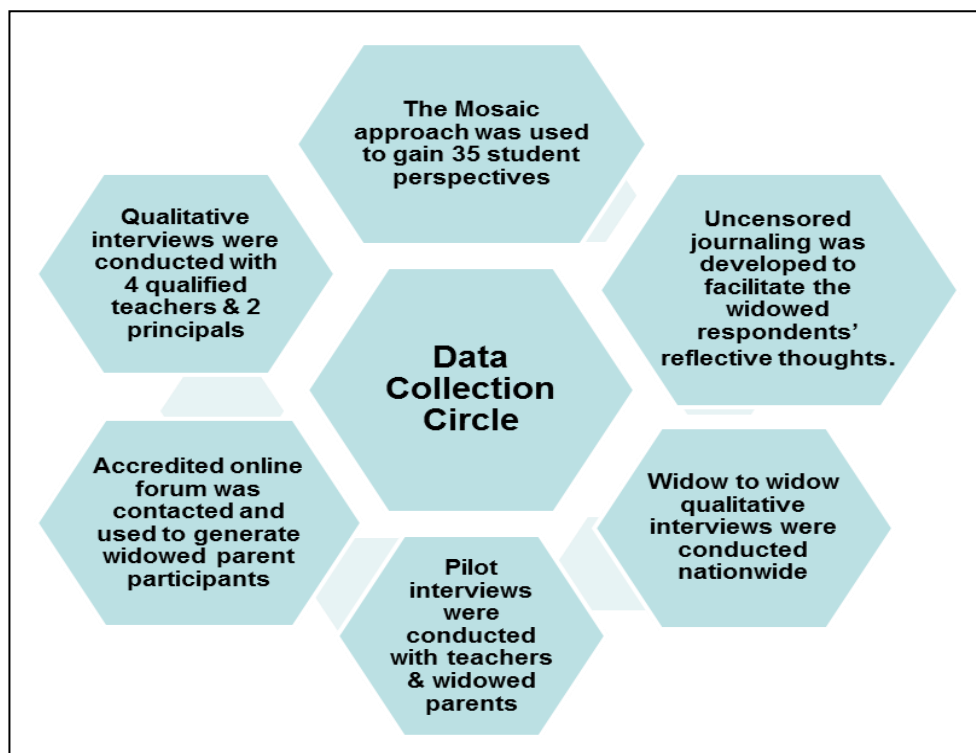


Figure 4.1 illustrates how the relationship between these three perspectives acts as a catalyst to creating an overview of the school response to children grieving the death of a parent.

### **4.3 Data Collection Circle**

The data collection circle is based on six phases as indicated in figure 4.1. At this juncture it is important to consider the sampling techniques and various methods the researcher used in creating the data collection circle of this thesis:

#### 4.3.1 Sampling- An Overview

Sampling in research is concerned with who or what will be used to inform the investigation. It requires an investigation into the sampling strategies that will be employed. Strategies range from *chain or snowball sampling* that denotes a process wherein the participants whom have experienced a particular shared phenomena guide the researcher to similar individuals who have witnessed similar experiences to *maximum variation sampling* wherein the purpose is to document diverse variations and identify significant common patterns in the population. It is the concept of using a *purposeful sampling strategy* within qualitative research that best exemplifies the sampling technique used to generate the data of this investigation:

The concept of purposeful sampling is used in qualitative research. This means that the inquirer selects individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study. (Creswell, 2008, p. 125)

This particular investigation does not seek to use data to make statistical inferences about target populations. The size of the sample is closely related to the chosen sampling strategy that shapes the data collection circle. For this research it was essential that all three participant groupings (58 in total - 17 widowed parents, 35 sixth class pupils and 6 practitioners) had a shared experience of a particular educational site – the primary school context. From the shared phenomena perspective, it was imperative that all 17 widowed participants shared the experience of dealing with spousal death alongside rearing bereaved children whom were attending primary school. This is a homogeneous sample as all participants are young widowed parents. In effect this is a form of criterion sampling. Criterion sampling is often used in phenomenological study as it aims to study individuals who have experienced a particular phenomenon. Likewise with the other participants in this research, all six of the teacher participants had to have practitioner knowledge of the SPHE curriculum and have encountered working with pupils whom had suffered, loss, bereavement or change issues whilst at school. Whilst all 35 of the pupil participants must have been in sixth class and have completed the SPHE myself and my family component of the SPHE curriculum.

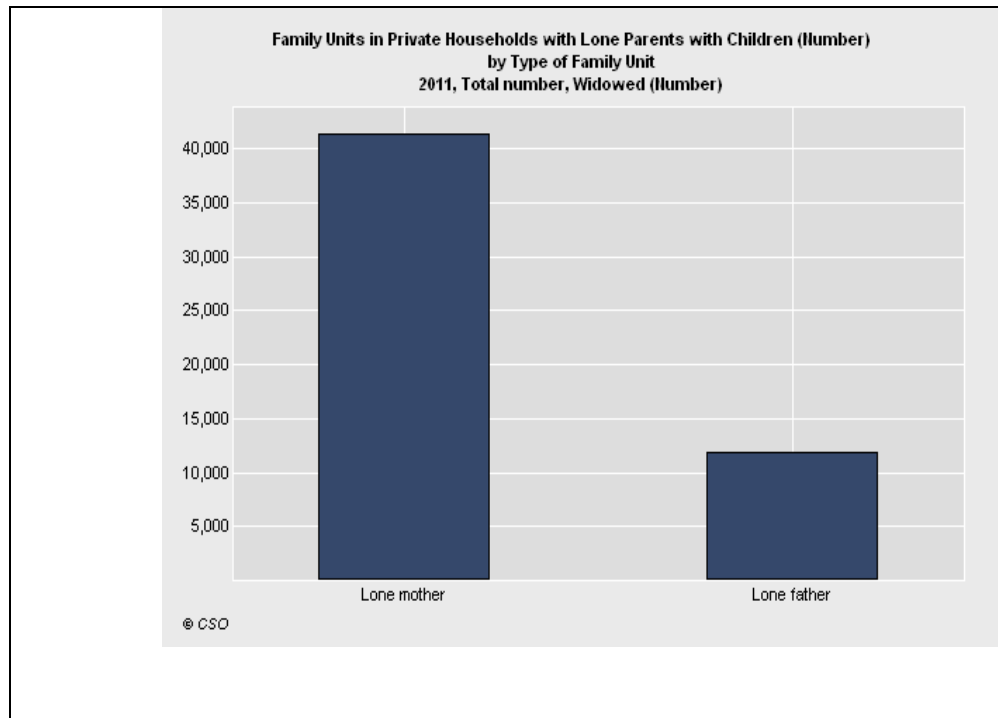
This researcher had to select specific participants and the specific site because both these elements can purposefully inform an understanding of the thesis research problem and central phenomena in this study.

#### 4.3.2 Accessing a Minority - Widow.ie Online Forum:

Entering parental widowhood in your early twenties, thirties and forties is a non-normative event. According to the latest CSO statistics there are 215,315 lone parents in Ireland. However, this number is misleading. As we have seen, widowed parents are amalgamated into the lone parent category in Ireland, so in statistical terms there are only 53,221 widowed parents. This is a minority group and therefore locating participants who could illuminate the widowed parent experience would be challenging. At the start of this doctoral programme, I met with the creator of the Widow.ie website, to discuss my research intentions and gain permission to invite members to participate in this voluntary research. Figure 4.2 highlights the actual number of widow and widower parents with a detailed number of children:

**Figure 4.2 (A): Widowed Parent Statistics and Figure 4.2 (b): Widowed Parent Graph**

<b>Widowed</b>	
<b>Lone mother</b>	
Total number	41,412
1	28,637
2	8,840
3	2,774
4 or more	1,161
<b>Lone father</b>	
Total number	11,809
1	7,678
2	2,806
3	950
4 or more	375



Source: CSO 2013

After an informative meeting, and having fully explained my rationale and research intentions, I was invited to upload a forum discussion on Widow.ie. I introduced myself on the information thread, giving details of my background and widowed status. (Please see Appendix C.) I clearly defined the research and invited interested widowed parents to make contact in confidence to a purpose-made email. I imposed a strict criterion for participation in this research:

- Participants must be bereaved at *least three years or more*, with primary-school-going children.

Guided by Streubert-Speizle and Carpenter’s (2003) ethical principles of “autonomy, beneficence and justice”, I believed it ethically responsible to only allow parents widowed at least three years to take part. I believe this time lapse better enables widows to focus beyond bereavement towards the practical challenges of school. Although grief is cyclical and does not follow systematic stages, I believe that prior to three years bereaved individuals are highly vulnerable, as the loss predominates in the early stages of widowhood. After establishing the interest level, I contacted the respondents and explained that only those who were three years bereaved could take part. I then filtered the overall sample in accordance with my strict criteria and created a purposeful sample of 17 widow and widower parents, at least three years bereaved and



with primary-school-going children. Demographic detail Table 4.1 is provided to broaden appreciation of variables that can affect findings such as school type, nature of bereavement, and number and age of children at the time of parental death.

**Table 4.1: Demographics of Respondents and Schools**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>Age when widowed</b>	<b>Cause of death</b>	<b>Number of children</b>	<b>Age of children at the time of spousal death</b>	<b>School type N(National) P(Private) U(Urban) R(Rural)</b>
<b>1. Pip</b>	Wicklow	M	39	Cancer	3 (2 boys, 1 girl)	9, 13 and 15	N/R
<b>2. Grace</b>	Clare	F	38	Road Accident	4 (2 girls, 2 boys)	2, 5, 6 and 8	N/R
<b>3. Jonathan</b>	Dublin	M	42	Cancer	1 girl	5	N/U
<b>4. Andrew</b>	Kildare	M	36	Cancer	1 boy	5	N/R
<b>5. Edward</b>	Meath	M	35	Illness	2 girls	4 and 6	N/R
<b>6. Sharon</b>	Dublin	F	42	Accidental death	2 (1 boy, 1 girl)	4, and pregnant at time	P/U
<b>7. Elise</b>	Kildare	F	37	Suicide	3 girls	1, 7 and 8	N/R
<b>8. Doris</b>	Clare	F	35	Accidental drowning	2 boys	1 and 6	N/R
<b>9. Annette</b>	Wexford	F	32	Road accident	5 (3 boys, 2 girls)	13, 12, 10, 7 and 5	N/R
<b>10. Annie</b>	Cork	F	38	Illness	3 girls	5, 2 years, 9 month old	N/U
<b>11. Jane</b>	Laois/ Carlow	F	35	Sudden death	3 (2 girls, 1 boy)	5, 8, and 10	N/R
<b>12. Gia</b>	Wicklow	F	33	Road accident	1 boy	4	N/R
<b>13. Mary</b>	Sligo	F	36	Sudden death	1 boy	4	N/R
<b>14. Helena</b>	Cork	F	35	Illness	3 (2 boys, 1 girl)	5, 8 and 12	N/U
<b>15. Nora</b>	Meath	F	40	Sudden Death- Heart attack	3 (2 boys, 1 girl)	10, 8 and 5	N/R
<b>16. Allyce</b>	Dublin	F	46	Cancer	2 girls	8 and 10	P/R
<b>17. Ciara</b>	Dublin	F	34	Illness	2 (1 girl, 1 boy)	3 and 5	N/R

I am aware that widow and widower participants would be categorised as an at-risk group in social research. In preparation for this research, I reviewed the guidelines for the professional code of ethics governing research in this area (BERA, 2011). Following a preliminary National University of Ireland Maynooth (NUIM) ethics submission, this researcher was requested to resubmit documentation as the “the purpose of this review process is to draw attention to the ethical dimensions of research and to inspire and

assist researchers to design their research in the most ethically appropriate way” (NUIM ethics, 2012, p.1). The issues raised were concerned with the possible risks to research participants that the research and the techniques involved might cause, such as: physical stress or threats to their safety; psychological or emotional distress; risk of repercussions beyond the research context and protocols used when working with vulnerable persons. In relation to the widowed participants, the researcher reiterated strict adherence to the ‘three years and over’ bereaved timeline in order to participate in this research, with added guidelines for the interview candidates on what sites exist to assist widowed parents’ concerns such as: [www.iwa.ie/www.widow.ie/](http://www.iwa.ie/www.widow.ie/) and [www.widowedyoung.ie](http://www.widowedyoung.ie). I emphasised that each widowed parent would receive a pseudonym to increase confidentiality. Details on cause of death and location would also be changed to increase confidentiality. Of the 17 participants, four are widower parents and 13 are widow parents. They live nationwide. Interviews were held in Leinster, Munster and Connaught. For this research it was important that an overview of the respondents be formulated. The systematic table of variables Table 4.1 does not desensitise the widowed parent experience. Throughout this investigation I acknowledge that each bereavement is unique and context-bound to respondents’ specific situation. Most significantly, factors that may affect parental involvement in school need to be explored in this research.

#### *4.3.3 The Pupil Sample – Accessing the School Context*

I acknowledge that approval was restricted due to the ethical implications that could arise given my teacher/researcher position alongside my role as an insider researcher (Brannick & Coughlan, 2007) who is embedded in the school system under investigation in this research. I bring awareness however to the benefits of insider research with the argument that:

The contributions from qualified, skilled ‘insiders’ working within organisations who have insights into the way an organisation operates, the people who run it and work in it, is invaluable. They believe that the benefits to the wider community from conducting insider research are grounds to pursue ethics approval for research despite the complications. (Galea, 2009, p.9)

After revised applications, I received ethical approval from the school Board of Management and the National University of Ireland, Maynooth (NUIM) to undertake

audio-taped research with 35 sixth class pupils in my school of employment only. The ethical issues raised by the NUIM research ethics subcommittee were threefold. More detail was required on: The procedures used to obtain informed consent; how does the researcher address the possible risks to research participants that the research and the techniques involved might cause, and lastly what protocols are used when working with vulnerable persons.

The concerns raised centred on the 6<sup>th</sup> class pupil sample and so responding to the first issue of informed consent, the researcher illustrated that full written parental consent will be sought for 6<sup>th</sup> class involvement in this research. In addition pupil written consent will be sought to determine whether they themselves as pupils wish to engage in responding to the family component of the SPHE curriculum for researcher purposes. Written consent will also be sought from the Board of Management and Principal. The element of risk for pupils which was also raised by the NUIM ethics committee was countered as the researcher/practitioner highlighted that for school purposes and as part of the current primary curriculum protocols, guardians of pupils must sign letters of consent annually for Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) relating to the “Relationship & Sexuality Education” of which “My Family” is an already an existing component. This research therefore would be increasing awareness of existing SPHE practices which highlights the context and limited supports by which teachers are often required to facilitate such materials with pupils. I believe it necessary to record these incidences.

This researcher also outlined that this information will add the pupil’s voice to this research as it is they that are at the practical delivery level of such a curriculum. Parental consent will be gained prior to any inclusion of comments, in addition to the curriculum required yearly RSE (Relationship & Sexuality/SPHE) Letter of consent. If at any stage however, a pupil appears to be uncomfortable participating in this research, the material will be immediately withdrawn for research purposes, parents will be informed of the pupil’s reaction, as will the Principal and Board of Management. To supplement this, Rainbows Ireland which is a national children’s voluntary service with an average of 6,000 children and young people coming into the service every year throughout Ireland, will be offered as a readily available on site service for the pupil. This is made possible as Rainbow Ireland are an ongoing yearly addition to our school

community. Outside of school hours, the Rainbows programme supports children and young people affected by loss because of bereavement, separation or divorce. The school under investigation for this research is a developing, co-educational, Catholic-ethos rural primary school. It caters to 305 pupils in the Leinster area in the lower- to middle-class social demographic. Due to the economic recession, a significant number of parents are unemployed. The school has lost pupils through parents relocating abroad to gain better employment opportunities.

Once ethical approval was granted, I commenced the data collection cycle and focussed on 6<sup>th</sup> class pupil responses. One pupil had experienced the death of a parent five years prior to this investigation. This pupil wished to partake in the study, and as I was the pupils' sixth class teacher, and had developed a strong sense of rapport with all pupils I was given permission to discuss the SPHE *Myself and My Family* components of the curriculum. Sixth class pupils were sourced in particular as this body of pupils could relate their experiences from junior infants to sixth class of SPHE in the classroom.

While ethically I could only work with pupils in the school in which I was employed, I also needed to discover whether skills relating to loss, bereavement and change which should be taught under the SPHE remit were routinely practised in the classroom. Given my proximity to teaching colleagues, I asked them through collegial networks. I conducted six formal qualitative interviews to ascertain their professional experience of using SPHE and dealing with bereaved children.

#### *4.3.4 The Practitioner Sample*

Participant teachers were sourced through collegial networks and word of mouth in the Leinster area. Only six candidates responded, and all worked in the state-run national co-educational school sector. They were aware of the bereavement topic and my widowed parent status. Future researchers could ensure a more even distribution of respondents nationwide, sourcing practitioners from both private and Educate Together models of schooling. Interviews took place at a site and time of participants' choosing. All interviews were audio-taped. All respondents were given codenames, and their backgrounds are summarised in Table 4.2 below. They were anxious that their school

names would not be identifiable – hence, school type refers to the type of schooling institution under investigation:

**Table 4.2: Teacher and School Demographic**

<i>Codename</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>Years Teaching</i>	<i>School Type</i>	<i>Bereavement Training</i>	<i>Ever dealt with death in class</i>
Serena	Principal	25	Co-Ed National System	None	Yes – Pupil death/parental/past pupil
Sandra	Mainstream	8	Co-Ed National System	None	Yes – Sibling –stillborn birth
Alex	Resource	10	Co-Ed National System	None	Yes – pupil sudden death occurred at school
Rose	Mainstream	12	Co-Ed National System	None	Yes – Own spouse/past pupil
Aisling	Principal	15	Co-Ed National System	None	Yes – Sudden teacher death
Lisa	Mainstream	16	Co-Ed National System	None	Yes – Parental Suicide

#### 4.3.5 *Methods – Semi Structured Interviews*

A semi structured interview technique was employed to generate rich data. As a method I believe the advantage of using semi structured interviewing is that it enables the researcher to advance “questions which involve the understanding of people’s subjectivities in the context of events which they bring to mind and convey, in the intersubjective context of the interview, using their own expressions” (Holloway & Jefferson, 2008, p.314). The primary source of data is 17 in-depth, one-to-one, audio-recorded, semi-structured interviews with widowed parents. As the researcher is a widowed parent and had sourced the participants through [www.widow.ie](http://www.widow.ie) which outlined the researcher shared background with potential interviewees- I entitled this semi-structured interview technique as *widow to widow* interviews. A pilot interview with a young widowed parent was undertaken. This pilot interview highlighted the need to develop a two tiered approach. This phased approach, although lengthy, helped to establish mutual rapport between the participants and researcher and allowed raw and rich data to emerge. To illustrate the phased approach emerged as each widowed parent was invited to share their unique family-life story through a dual process of qualitative widow-to-widow interviewing and then through voluntary uncensored journal writing which were later posted to the researcher. The first tier widow to widow interviewing is now to be discussed.

#### 4.3.6 *Widow to Widow Interviewing*

To conduct the widow-to-widow interviews, I used a loosely based shared-understanding model. Each in-depth interview lasted approximately one hour, depending on the participants' wishes. A semi-structured style was adopted, with open-ended questions as recommended by Holloway and Jefferson (2000) used to encourage the 17 widowers' and widows' opinions. (See Appendixes D, E and F for semi-structured interview schedule and consent forms.) These insights were sourced and collected over a one-year to fourteen-month period. I held discussions and interviews at a time and place of the participants' choosing. Consequently I travelled extensively and gained insights from three provinces: Leinster, Munster and Connaught.

#### 4.3.7 *Uncensored Journaling*

I realised as the widow-to-widow interviews progressed that the participants were at first unfamiliar with the idea of discussing the link between their own widowed parent experience and the primary school system. They were more used to queries based on sharing loss and grief stories or coping skills. This realisation, uncovered during the pilot interview, prompted me to facilitate an additional route to unearthing the widowed school experience: As the widow to widow interviews came to a close, I enquired whether the participants would like to write down any further thoughts on the issues discussed. I received numerous written accounts, which certain candidates entitled *Personal Reflections* or *Uncensored Journaling*. As a researcher I appreciated the rich data that unfolded throughout the journaling activity, I realised that in its various forms journaling is “a means for recording personal thoughts, daily experiences, and evolving insights” (Hiemstra, 2001, p. 20). The uncensored journaling aspect of the activity is so called as the participants wrote down over a month any thoughts that later sprung to mind following their widow to widow interview sessions with the researcher. From this point on, I refer to these written accounts as *Uncensored Journaling*. This reflective process sprang directly from participants' own desires to articulate in written form rather than oral interviews their candid descriptions of their experiences. I concluded these insights added an additional perspective on the school experiences of widowed parents. Uncensored journaling became an integral method of my research as:

Honouring the past in our own words with our own uncensored reflections, we document our memories before they are lost. The process often evokes conversations with self, another person, or even an imagined other person. The advantage available in most journaling formats of being able to review or reread earlier reflections and a progressive clarification of insights is possible. (Panjey, 2013, p.75)

The benefits of journaling for this research are that it enables one to “analyse, re-consider and question experiences within a given context through individual and collective reflection” (Panjey, 2013, p.76). These contained frank and uncensored retellings of powerful incidents which had affected both their children and their own lives at school. All idioms were sincerely considered as symbolic descriptions of the reality that widowed young parents had experienced. These journal responses will be intermingled with the interview statements throughout the Findings and Discussion chapter.

#### 4.3.8 *Sixth Class Pupils-My Family*

Pupils are required to discuss ‘My Family’, of which loss and change are components, as part of the primary school ‘Relationship & Sexuality Education’ SPHE curriculum. Letters of consent are signed yearly by fifth and sixth class guardians for school purposes. To highlight the frequency and effectiveness with which teachers facilitate such material with children, I believed it necessary to record the children’s experience. This recorded information will add the pupils’ voices to this research, as it is they who are at the practical delivery level of the SPHE curriculum. To gain deeper insight into widowed parent research, I obtained NUIM ethical approval and Board of Management, principal and parental consent to use the pupils’ Mosaic responses to the ‘My Family’ module as it is currently practised in the classroom. This approach will now be briefly considered.

The Mosaic approach provides a way of facilitating exchanges . . . . Starting from the viewpoint of young children as competent meaning makers and explorers of their environment, the Mosaic approach brings together a range of methods for listening to young children about their lives. (Clark, 2005, p. 205)

#### 4.3.9 *The Mosaic Approach*

I choose the *Mosaic approach* (Clark, 2005) as the most suitable design to highlight the pupils’ perspectives in education. The complexity of building documentary evidence of children’s insights is a potential inhibitory factor in attaining their perspectives on

shifting family dynamics and loss. I agree that “the challenge for researchers who are passionate about eliciting children’s perspectives lies in the choice of methodology” (MacDonald, 2009, p. 41). To address this, the Mosaic approach pioneered by Alison Clark and Peter Moss (2004) proved highly beneficial to my research, given that “the focus of this approach is the employment of methodologies which play to the strengths of young children, rather than their weakness” (MacDonald, 2009, p. 41). I adapted my research design to include children’s insights by ensuring my research was “a process open to the many creative ways in which young children express their views and experiences, combining the visual with the verbal” (MacDonald, 2009, p. 41). I combined these elements in the form of ‘Thought Bubbles’. Fundamentally, I concur with how the Mosaic approach acknowledges how:

Children are skilled in different mediums of communication, such as drawings, stories and written work, this encourages us as researchers, to make use of these different abilities . . . allow[ing] children to engage more productively with our research questions using the talents which they, as children possess. (James, 1995, p. 15)

My final rationale for choosing the Mosaic approach with pupils is the empowerment children can gain through realising that their opinions were actually sought for this research. In publication they witness how their views become visible, voiced and valued, comparable with the adult perspective. Although the widowed perspectives play a primary role in this particular research, each candidate group – child, teacher and widow – is integral to illuminating the school experience.

#### *4.3.10 Thought Bubbles – I Think...*

I secured the pupils’ perspective by audio-taping their debating sessions and by encouraging them to reflect on their remarks and, when ready, to insert their views into Thought Bubble templates - Please see Appendix B. These Thought Bubble responses occurred directly after their participation in the current SPHE Walk Tall curriculum in the daily remit of my sixth class pupils. I have successfully used the Thought Bubbles in past research with children: I undertook a study to promote cultures of reflection in primary schools (Martin-Hodgins, 2010). The pupils’ Thought Bubble responses will be explored alongside the widowed parent experiences in the next chapter.



#### 4.3.11 *Teacher to Teacher Interviews*

This researcher used the same qualitative interviewing techniques applied to the widow to widow interviews to gain teacher insights into the issue of loss, bereavement and change at school. As an employed primary school teacher, this researcher listened to and recorded practitioners' experiences at school. The researcher also asked the participants whether they wished to engage in uncensored journaling activities to further consider how schools address the topic. All of the participants felt the interview process was detailed enough and had fulfilled their need to articulate their views on how schools are currently and have addressed bereavement. Each interview lasted 45 minutes to an hour and took place at a location and time of the participants choosing.

### **4.4 Analysis of the Data**

The data analysis of this qualitative research consisted of preparing and organizing the text data of the widow to widow interview transcripts and the uncensored journaling activities alongside the teacher to teacher interviews and thought bubble remarks. The researcher reduced these data into themes through a process of coding. These codes were then condensed into key categories which are finally represented in visual graph format throughout the findings chapter of this research.

To help with the coded analysis of the widowed parent interviews, a qualitative data analysis computer software package known as Maxqda was used. This software allowed the researcher to use a systematic approach to conduct the content analysis of widowed parent qualitative interviews. These themes could then be presented in visual format to help interpret the findings. This software program enabled me to reliably code and more significantly retrieve pertinent data systematically and reliably. The uncensored journals were also included in this content analysis process using Maxqda.

#### 4.4.1 *Widowed Parent Content Analysis: MAXQDA*

Maxqda neither does the coding nor influences interpretation of the data. It merely offers an interface into which the researcher uploads codes and sets. This researcher choose to generate themes inductively through constant comparison of these data sets,

as there is “little knowledge about the phenomenon being studied” (Rintala *et al.*, 2014, p.14), and “a new perspective of phenomena is required” (Strauss and Corbin 1998, Corbin and Strauss 2008). Once all transcripts are uploaded, the benefit of the Maxqda software becomes apparent as the researcher initiates the coding structure. It permits one to pause and visually connect the data on the screen. This offers another colourful dimension to the data. Following the widow-to-widow interviews, I uploaded the 17 transcribed interviews. The same procedure was undertaken for the uncensored journaling activities. Using a constant comparative method, I colour-coded repeated themes as they emerged. This process highlighted 38 categories which all widowed parents had identified as pertinent. From these categories, key words helped establish prominent and prevalent themes which were shared by all participants. Four major themes emerged from the data analysis cycle:

- The Widow Warrior: The practical realities of parental widowhood.
- Magic Moments and Empty Promises: The school response to loss, bereavement and change.
- Death Education, we’ll rule that out! Is it appropriate to discuss loss, bereavement and change with children at primary schools?
- It’s a tough topic but there are ways in, normalise it! Practical suggestions empowering proactive teachers in the classroom.

Each theme title is directly derived from the words of widowers and widows as spoken at interview. In accordance with Lichtman (2006) and Morrow (2005), I strove to safeguard the validity and trustworthiness of this investigation by ensuring the data was allowed to unfold in the participants’ own words. I also immersed myself in the data (Fetterman, 1998; Myles & Huberman, 1994) by personally transcribing each of the 17 widow-to-widow interviews verbatim to sharpen my understanding of the pivotal aspects that affect the widowed parent experience. To allow the participants’ stories to unfold, I quoted directly from their voices. The emerging themes were then inductively sourced from the participants’ own discourse. These themes will be comprehensively explored in Chapters Five.

As highlighted, this researcher acquired an insight into the world of parental widowhood by using multiple sources in the form of pupil and teacher accounts. The same

analysis constant comparative procedure was used for the six teacher interviews and sixth class Thought Bubble remarks. An overview of the data analysis processes involved in the representation of these secondary sources needs to be addressed.

#### *4.4.2 Content Analysis: Teacher Interviews*

The researcher chose to manually prepare and organize the data from the teacher to teacher qualitative interviews. This sample set was limited with six participants contributing to the qualitative teacher to teacher interviews. As with the widowed parent data set, the researcher transcribed the interview transcripts verbatim and manually coded the data. Coding the data was a central step in the analysis process. The researcher reduced the original interview data into meaningful segments and then assigned names to these segments. The researcher then combined these codes into broader themes. Comparisons between the widowed participant data and teacher interviews were identified. The researcher used a constant comparative method to identify and classify the connections between both data sets.

#### *4.4.3 Content Analysis: Sixth Pupil Thought Bubbles*

As outlined in the introductory chapter, the widowed parent lens only becomes illuminated in tandem with the holistic school experience voiced by children's and teachers' insights. My research rotates on the understanding that adults and children alike can access and share this research journey. This aspiration drove my methodology, one that "is illuminated through careful descriptions, illustrations, metaphors, poetry, dialogue and other creative renderings rather than by measurements, ratings or scores" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 42). The pupil data set included 35 sixth class pupils. Previously, the researcher outlined how a constant comparative technique was employed to identify commonalities between two distinct data sets – teachers and widowed parents. Unlike the previous widowed parent and teacher data sets, the researcher only used the constant comparative technique to identify similarities amongst the pupil dataset itself. In accordance with ethical protocol, the researcher was only permitted to collate the pupils thought bubble responses to the "Myself and Family" strand of the Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) curriculum. Bereavement although present in the SPHE programme does not predominate the curriculum. However pupil insight into how

effectively diverse family types are represented through curriculum at school are central to obtain a holistic portrayal of the school response to the widowed family structure.

#### 4.4.4 *Widow to Widow Perspective-An Interpretation*

All participants share a widowed parent experience, but I agree with Tierney (2000, p. 1) that “[d]espite the universality of widowhood, its impact on the individual woman [sic] and her ability to cope with it depend on variables that make the experience different for different women”. Whilst interpreting the data we must be aware of societal roles and expectations, gender, personal and economic resources, social class and familial circumstances. These factors can vastly influence a person’s response to a bereavement. This in turn will affect the widowed parent’s relationship with the school system. As participants were sourced through Widow.ie, obviously they were already accessing online information. All had accessed forums to gain insight and deeper understanding of the impact of the widowed experience. Participants were concerned primarily with the welfare of their bereaved children. By inference, they felt education was central to bringing their bereaved child successfully through the grieving process.

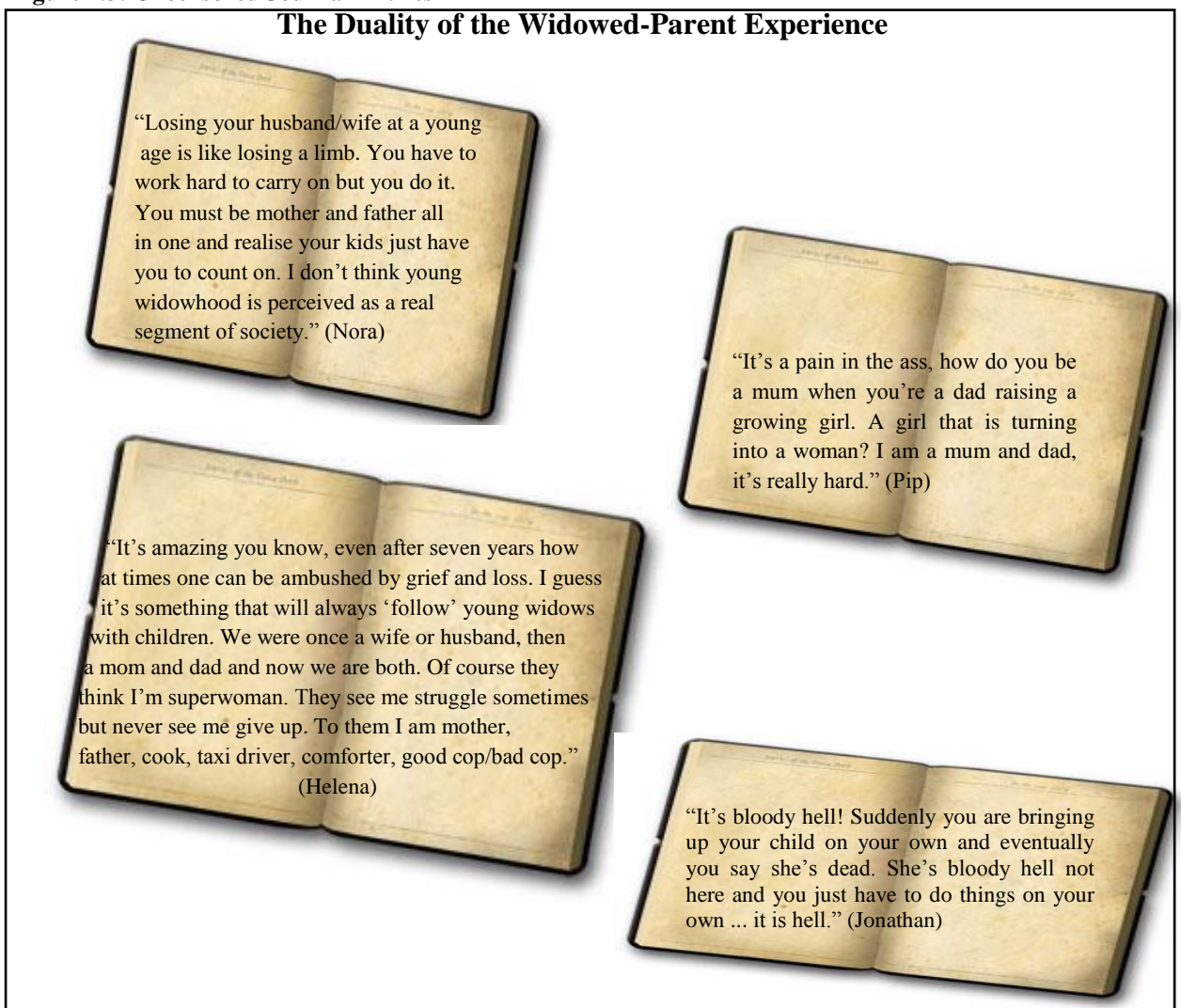
The participants represent the middle-to upper class demographic. An overview of factors that affect parental involvement in schooling is essential to this research. To contextualise the respondents’ backgrounds, their data is shown in Table 2.1. First, it is worth considering how the following factors might relate to respondents’ experiences of schools:

These include (1) the *society itself*, which incorporates social class and cultural proscriptions and practices that influence both appropriate behaviour for widows . . . ; (2) *sex and age ratios* of the population, which affect opportunities for remarriage; (3) *the community* in which the widow lives, which determines the availability of support networks and economic opportunities, either through savings, pensions, government programs, or paid employment; (4) *family* and *the law*, which affect the nature of marriage and selection of mates, inheritance, and the rights of women to property; (5) *personal resources*, which include friends and neighbours, parents, children and kin, church and social groups, and fellow workers; and (6) the widow’s own skills and psyche. (Tierney, 2000, p. 2)

In essence, my life experiences along with my work enable me to delve into my topic with a sense of shared sincerity with my widowed parent candidates and teaching colleagues. This collaborative rapport encouraged forthright responses in the informal

interviews and enabled sensitive issues to be examined fruitfully and respectfully. Key to fostering such an ethos is the assurance that as a researcher my aim and focus are transparent and earnest. All respondents were made aware that this research would centre on school-based encounters with parents, bringing together pupil voices, teacher remarks and widowed perspectives. Therefore, when analysing my data I will be using both the transcribed first thoughts of the audio recordings and the uncensored journaling to foster an insightful and candid understanding of the complexities inherent in the widowed school experience. An illustration follows below, in Figure 4.3.

**Figure 4.3: Uncensored Journal Entries**



#### 4.4.5 Data Analysis – The Pupil Voice Perspective

As indicated in the opening chapter, sixth class pupil insight was the stimulus that inspired this researcher to explore the world of parental widowhood. The research was

initiated by pupils' assertions following a debate entitled 'Families on T.V. are true to life'. The pupils believed schools, as with larger society, perpetuate a Mum, Dad, Brother and Sister stereotype. Their opinions of school surprised this teacher, as like many others working in the field, I had assumed the school curriculum had grown to be reflective of the diversity of family in Irish society:

The shape of families in Ireland continues to undergo considerable change which is clearly reflected in the fact that the traditional two parent-married families' structure now constitutes only two thirds of families in Ireland. To understand this . . . it is important that we have incisive research . . . to inform and influence debate about how best to provide support for families. (Cousins, 2006, p. 5)

#### *4.4.6 Data Analysis- Teacher Perspective*

Following the pupils' accounts, I looked for Irish research into how effectively the SPHE curriculum which was launched in 1999 had benefited families, in particular widowed children in education. I was unable to find relevant research. This dearth of data seemed out of kilter with ESRI (2010) research which acknowledges that: "the likelihood of an adult in Ireland becoming a lone parent has doubled over the decade studied" (p.1). As will be discussed, teachers and schools are very aware of the wealth of family diversity that constitutes the contemporary classroom and that many social issues can influence the well-being of pupils. Practitioners also feel ill-prepared to tackle familial issues, never mind addressing loss, bereavement and change in the classroom. At interview, teachers said they were hesitant to disclose working practices in relation to the actual praxis of SPHE, in particular the mention of family and change. The Findings chapter will explore the rationale behind such statements. Now we enter the third phase of the data collection circle.

### **4.5 The Validity and Reliability of the Research**

In triangulation, researchers make use of multiple and different sources, methods, investigators, and theories to provide corroborating evidence . . . . Typically, this process involves corroborating evidence from different sources to shed light on a theme or perspective. (Creswell, 2007 p. 208)

For this research many strategies for validation were observed. I employed different data collection methods to triangulate findings, such as the Mosaic approach, debating and Thought Bubble strategies, qualitative interviewing, and uncensored journaling. I

also used an external peer as someone who would “keep the researcher honest; asks hard questions about methods, meanings, and interpretations” (Creswell, 2001, p. 208). Furthermore, a dedicated supervisor helped ensure all ethical procedures were followed throughout this research. To lessen potential researcher bias I declared my widowed and teacher status, to ensure the reader had insight into my background and thus gain a frame of reference when reviewing the data; therefore, “in this clarification, the researcher comments on past experiences, biases, prejudices, and orientations that have likely shaped the interpretation and approach of the study (Creswell, 2007, p. 208). This process of making explicit the researcher’s intentions is reiterated in the assertion that:

Qualitative research methodologists acknowledge the potential for an agenda in their work, aiming to establish validity, and truthfulness in their reporting of data (Lichtman, 2006; Morrow, 2005). This approach suggests that getting a rich description from the participants’ points of view is a greater concern than traditional validity standards. (Eppler, 2008, p. 3)

In accordance with Lichtman and Morrow, I assert that the validity of this research is manifest, as I identified and reported the findings directly from the spoken words of all the participants. As outlined earlier, I used triangulation by engaging multiple sources: widows, teachers and pupils, and by reviewing pertinent theories to help create a balanced account of the opinions expressed and to establish a more accurate portrayal of the phenomenon under investigation; “working with people day in and day out, for long periods of time is what gives ethnographic research its validation and vitality” (Fetterman, 1998, p. 46). Although this is not an ethnographic study, I assert that its vitality and validity were achieved partly through my continued work as a primary school teacher and my links with widowed forums. Therefore in accord with Fetterman, prolonged engagement in the field was ensured as this researcher was consistently working in the school system before and during the research. As such, the validity of findings was suitably captured by all the concerned participants:

Prolonged engagement and persistent observation in the field include building trust with participants, learning the culture, and checking for misinformation that stems from distortions introduced by the researcher. (Creswell, 2007, p. 209)

#### *4.5.1 Reliability of the Research*

To help ensure reliability, each interview was recorded using a high-quality Dragon digital recorder. Pauses and utterances were noted and coded systematically. I

transcribed each interview verbatim and coded the transcripts by hand before using the Maxqda software. I compared my manual coded transcripts and the software codes to help correlate the final themes discussed in this research. Such activities help affirm the reliability of the findings, in adherence with the view that:

Reliability can be addressed in qualitative research in several ways. Reliability can be enhanced if the researcher obtains detailed field notes by employing a good-quality tape for recording and by transcribing the tape. Also the tape needs to be transcribed to indicate the trivial, but often crucial, pauses, and overlaps. (Creswell, 2007, p. 207)

#### **4.6 Ethical Guidelines and Protocols**

As discussed in the candidate selection paragraph, I reviewed BERA's 2011 guidelines for the professional code of ethics governing research in this area. Board of School Management, Parent Association and full parental consent for all pupil participants involved in this research was sought and permission to undertake this research was granted. Full ethical approval from the NUI Maynooth Social Science Research Ethics Subcommittee was received following a revised application which addressed in detail, issues related to working with venerable and at risk persons and protocols used to obtain informed consent with both widowed participants and 6<sup>th</sup> class pupils. I obtained signed consent from all participants before publication of this thesis. To uphold confidentiality for candidates, identifiable data relating to their involvement in this research will be destroyed on completion of the thesis process. I ensured that all widowed participants adhered to the strict timeline of having being bereaved at least three years in order to participate in this research. Having personally undergone this experience, I appreciate that "there are numerous ethical issues to consider when conducting research on bereavement" (Beck & Konnert, 2007, p. 783). I would ensure all participants were made aware of supports such as [www.widow.ie](http://www.widow.ie), and whether they would like to avail of more personal services groups such as the Bethany Group, which offer face-to-face meetings. As a widowed researcher, and having successfully completed Counselling Psychology as part of a master's degree in education, I would be acutely aware of potential ethical problems; if a participant appeared to be suffering emotional stress, I would suggest that they consider taking a longer time before becoming involved in this type of research. Having adhered to the BERA guidelines, I concur with Beck and Konnert's findings:



While the concerns of REBs [Research Ethics Board] should not be discounted outright, this research suggests that many bereaved individuals value bereavement research and even appreciate the opportunity to participate in a bereavement study. Moreover, research conducted with victims of trauma suggests that although research participation may upset participants through remembering, it very rarely results in a re-traumatization of participants. (Beck and Konnert, 2007, pp. 791–792).

#### **4.7 Limitations of the Research:**

The widowed parent perspective predominates in this thesis. The rationale for tapping primarily into the widowed parent lens (whilst using teacher and pupil insight as secondary sources) rests in illuminating educational practice through empirical based research that to date has remained unrecorded. In addition, due to cost and time restrictions, I was unable to gather a more evenly distributed sample of teacher/principal participants. Furthermore, this researcher was only given approval to discuss the topic of family and change with her own sixth class. It is important that future research attempts to gain additional teacher and pupil accounts to more thoroughly explore the primary school response to bereaved families. The site under investigation for this research was focused on the primary school years only. The secondary school experience needs to be explored to better gain an understanding of how the two systems might support the transfer of grieving primary pupils into the secondary school sector.

#### **4.8 Conclusion**

The rationale that guided my qualitative approach pivots on my need to address this topic with sensitivity, practically and sincerely. I am very aware of the sensitive nature of the topic of bereavement and the school context. I am also alert to the vulnerability of both widowed participants and sixth class pupils and to teachers' apprehension in revealing disquiet with current school praxis. These issues were noticeably reflected in the ethical structures required for this research. The sincere and practical nature of this research is voiced from the outset, as mutual awareness exists between all participants that a concrete, educational outcome would be sought, above merely describing the widowed parent experience. I have extensive experience in the given contextual field (school classroom), which increased connectedness and established rapport with all participants. Techniques used throughout data collection and analysis were ensured to be transparent for all.

The next chapter will generate an inclusive synthesis of perspectives (widowed parent, teacher and pupil). The previously muted parental widowed perspective on education now becomes visible and voiced in research. The value and primacy of the widowed voice is underscored as we explore the efficacy of primary school responses to bereaved children. This discussion creates a platform for educational discourse on bereavement. Increasing awareness of the impact of parental death on a child's well-being at school is central to the Findings chapter. I use practitioners' and children's insights to enrich this final synthesis of data.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: THE FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **UNFOLDING THE WIDOWED PARENT STORY**

#### **5.1 Introduction**

This chapter is in two sections. The first describes the participants' experiences of how the primary education system in Ireland addresses the needs of parentally bereaved children at school. A thematic approach to the empirical data is presented. These findings represent the four significant themes of this research attempts to provide some answers to the primary research question of parents' perceptions of how primary schools support parentally bereaved children in the classroom, as well as the secondary questions which focus on how primary school policy and curriculum, and teachers support the loss and grief needs of bereaved children. The second section of this chapter critiques this empirical data. A discussion follows that highlights the relevance of the findings for research linked to childhood bereavement and schooling.

##### *5.1.1 Unfolding the Themes of Parental Widowhood*

This research into the world of parental widowhood was possible owing to time freely given and the openness and candour of each of the 17 participants. All contributed readily to this research, commenting on the merit of disclosing their unique experience of the school system to begin discourse on bereavement, loss and change in educational settings. Many spoke of the sense of empowerment they felt by voicing their previously muted perspective in order to broaden societal understanding of the widowed parent experience. This chapter primarily articulates widowed parents' experience of the school system under the four themes which emerged through the data analysis process described in the previous chapter.

#### **5.2 Behind the Widowed Parent Phenomena**

The interview process and uncensored journaling generated rich data which allowed the lived experience of parental widowhood to unfold. The participants told their unique life story as it was lived, disclosing how the schools which catered for their grieving children had handled their families' transitions during the death of a spouse and parent.

As noted, I as a researcher needed to be aware of the dangers of universalising identities, and that:

the role assumed by either marital partner upon the death of a spouse, affects all societies where marriage exists, creating individual and social problems that cut across national and cultural boundaries . . . include age at marriage and at widowhood; circumstances surrounding the husband's death; economic status; the rights and duties of wives and widows in relation to kin and family; and historical context. . . . Frequently, it reduces the economic and social status of women and their families and often strains the societal fabric, which may be unable or unwilling to care for dependent, elderly widowed women or widows incapable of supporting themselves and minor children. (Tierney, 2000, p. 2)

As we saw in Table 4.1 in the Research Design chapter, the participants are diverse. Their ages range from 32 to 42. The number of children they had when bereaved varied from one to five. They represent the middle- to high-level social demographic. The time span since spousal bereavement is 3–9 years. At the time of parental death, the age range of children is 0–15 years. Illness and cancer account for over half of all early spousal deaths. Sudden death in the form of road accidents is the next largest cause. Fifteen of the participants are Irish, one is Australian and another is English. Most (15) had children attending state-run national primary schools. Two had children in private primary schools in and around Dublin.

### **5.3 Exploring the Research Question**

To establish how parentally bereaved children are supported in the Irish school setting, I advanced an overarching research question:

- From the widowed parent perspective how do primary schools support the loss and grief needs of bereaved pupils in the classroom?

I also incorporated two secondary questions to help guide the research process:

- How does primary school policy and curriculum support the loss and grief needs of bereaved children?
- Do teachers feel pedagogically equipped to support pupils during times of grief?

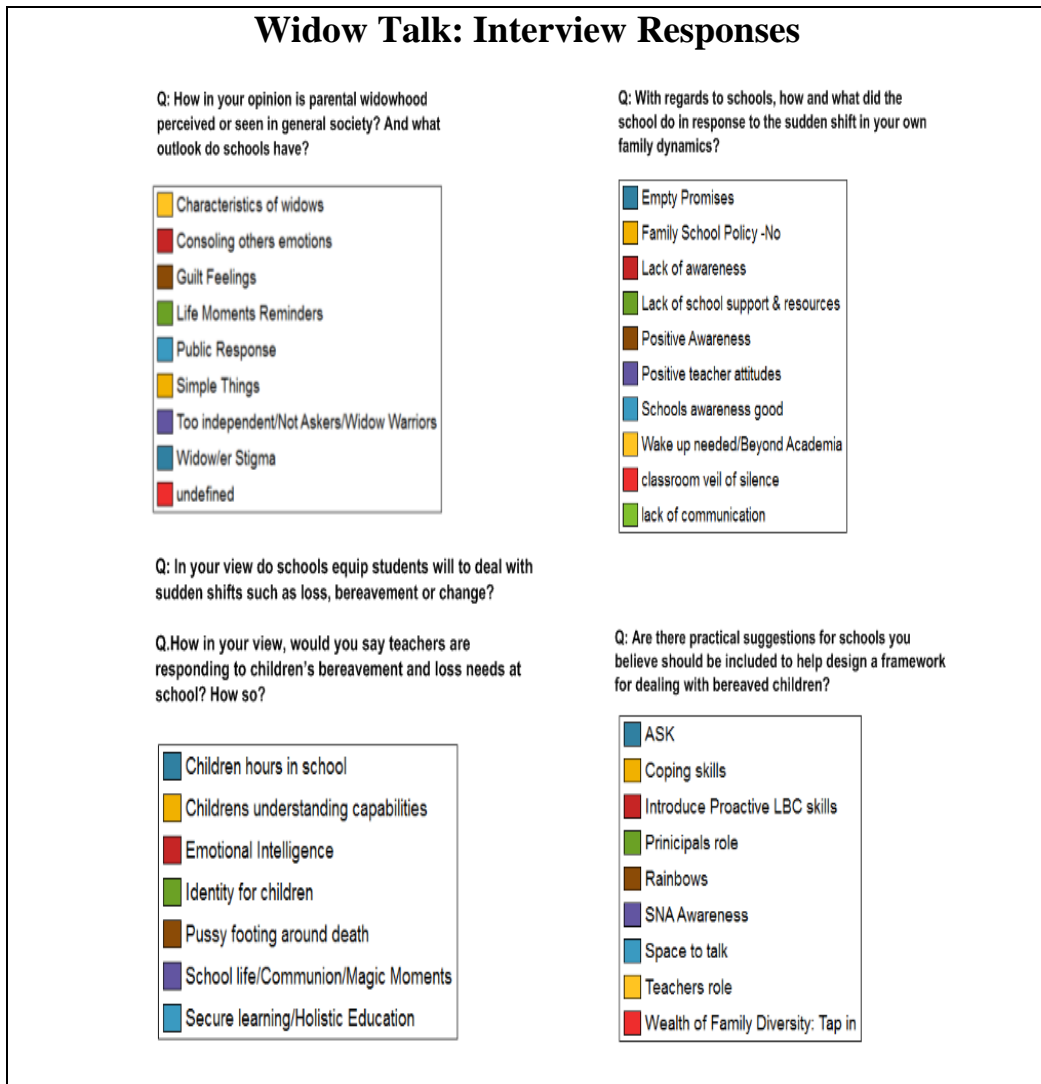
These secondary questions explore the power of the educative environment in the bereavement experience. They bring the school and widowed experience together. The

immediate challenge is to explicate insights and responses within the conversational tone of the upcoming interviews. Generic open-ended questions proved most useful in eliciting thoughtful replies, targeted at illuminating the school response without delving into personal grief narratives. The interviews generated data which indicates whether and to what extent there is a bereavement policy at school and whether widowed parents were aware of any curricular integration of bereavement topics made by the teacher at school. The responses were transcribed verbatim by this researcher. Comparative analysis of the data generated 35 categories that underpinned the widowed parents' communications with schools. The interview schedule is presented below:

- How in your opinion is parental widowhood perceived or seen in general society? And what outlook do schools have?
- What did the school do in response to the sudden shift in your own family dynamics?
- In your view, do schools equip pupils well to deal with sudden shifts such as loss, bereavement or change? If so, could you tell me more; if not, could you suggest ways of improvement?
- Are there practical suggestions for schools you believe should be included to help design a framework for dealing with bereaved children?
- How, in your view, would you say teachers are responding to children's bereavement and loss needs at school? How so?

To accommodate such an extensive exploration, I propose to examine the 35 categories (see Figure 5.1) that helped to forge each of the significant four themes. These sub-elements are vital, as they constitute the "lived rich data" that in part helped to inform and invigorate this research. Each of the themes with its particular categories offers a glimpse into the pivotal issues that have influenced the widowed parents' lived experiences. Merging these four themes with the literature will help construct a more defined portrayal of the experience of parental widowhood. The questions that produced these categories and the results of this analysis are presented in Figure 5.1.

**Figure 5.1: Four Themes of Parental Widowhood**



#### **5.4 The Four Themes**

The 35 categories were further analysed. The data was reviewed to account for differences and similarities in the emerging themes. This led to identification of four significant themes which recount the young widowed parents' experiences of navigating their children through primary school. The themes are investigated at length throughout this chapter. All theme titles are derived directly from the words of the respondents:

- *The Widow Warrior*: The practical realities of young parental widowhood.
- *Magic Moments and Veils of Silence*: The school response to loss, bereavement and change.
- *Death Education, we'll rule that out!* Should schools discuss loss, bereavement and change with children in primary education?
- *Train it Forward*: Practical suggestions to inform teachers in the classroom.

## 5.5 Theme One: Widow Warrior – Societal Stereotype

The collective voices of young widower and widow parents articulated a desire to speak openly about the practical challenges they encountered whilst transitioning from a married parenting couple to a single widowed parent. The scenario below shows a typical lead-in to such a discussion:

Grace: Do you mind me asking why you're doing this?

Researcher: No problem. I just got fed up with looking abroad for any indication of practical research on widowhood here in Ireland. I just want to get a clear picture about the widowed experience or whether there are many young widowed parents out there. Do you mind telling me a little about your situation?

Grace: He was killed...in a freak accident...it's that simple and it's not what you signed up to.

Researcher: That is challenging...your family situation changed dramatically and without warning. How is your family now?

Grace: Well, I have two girls and two boys...they're absolutely brilliant gifts, thank god for them...it's funny to meet, contact somebody who has a shared story...it's funny.

Researcher: Well, I hope to bring a better insight into what it is like for young widowed parents and most particularly how schools respond...it's more the practical elements I hope to highlight...

Grace: (Laughs) That's the thing...you have to be practical. The kids call me the *Widow Warrior*, yeah every woman is expected to get on with it. And men are minded...widowers are more mollycoddled whereas widows just got to get on with it.

Researcher: Interesting title! Could you give me a better understanding of the reality of that title?

Grace: Do you want the nice quote or do you want the realism?

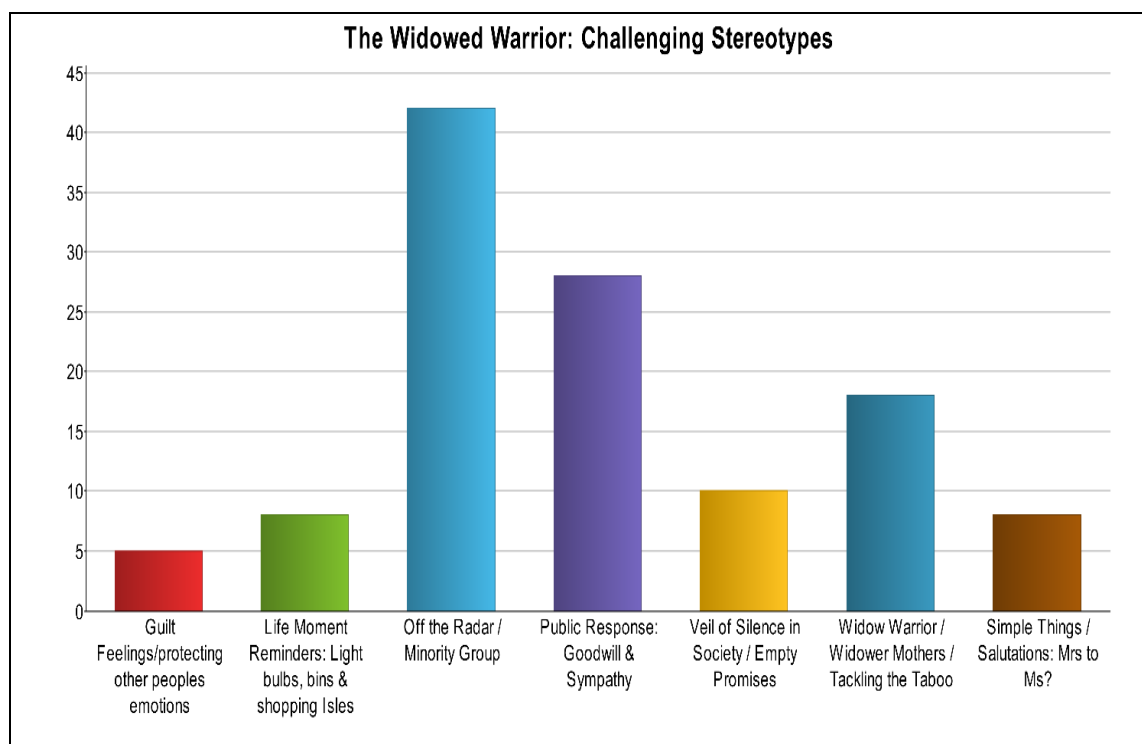
Researcher: The realism...you know, being a widowed parent.

Grace: People ignore it...they ignore it (raised voice) pardon...but they ignore it, people can't handle it, they don't know what to do with you, you don't fit in any box, so you're ignored...you're on your own. I am very sorry but you are. Mind yourself, breathe, make no decisions, take your time and have a good look at what's going on

around you. It's life. And don't have any expectation about people's promises...empty.

All widowed participants animatedly recount the public response to their newly found widowed parent status. The first thematic component of the four major themes shown in Figure 5.1 is enlarged in Figure 5.2 to facilitate an in-depth exploration of the sub-themes which punctuate the Widow Warrior theme. During the data analysis process, the researcher identified 7 significant categories. These 7 categories are represented on the X axis of this graph. The Y axis of indicates the number of participants that mentioned these particular topics during the interview process:

**Figure 5.2: The Widowed Warrior Graph**



The *Widowed Warrior – Challenging Stereotypes* category evolved from the participants' reflections on how societal attitudes and interactions influenced their widowed young experiences. As can be seen in Figure 5.2, many of the categories are interrelated and directly influence the outcome of other areas. In this instance challenging stigma, denoted by the *Veil of Silence in Society* variable, is of concern to the respondents. At the same time this variable is affected by the prevalence of the *Off the Radar* and *Simple Things / Salutations* categories. The interconnectivity of variables is apparent. Participants candidly discuss societal perceptions in the public domain that



affected their lives as young widowed parents. These commonalities can now be examined.

### 5.5.1 *Just off the Radar – Social Isolation*

As seen in the data represented in Figure 5.2, many features were identified as salient factors that underpin the lived experience of being categorised as widows or widowers in society:

Edward: I find in Ireland you're not actually even categorised at all. *You're totally off the radar*. Because we seem to be a minority group or we have this perception that most widows are 65 or 70 and that's it. It's kind of blinkered, that there's no widows out there in their twenties or thirties (pause) and we're just off the radar.

Andrew: It's perceived as being for older people...and generally speaking and in terms of widowerhood in younger people, people just don't get it. They aren't aware of the extent of it at all.

This notion of a widowed young parent category unrepresented in society was articulated by all interviewees:

Ciara: I think there's a lack of understanding, a positive lack of understanding. I think (pause) people don't talk about it, there's no openness about it. It's just a thing, it's just almost like a *stigma*; "That's what happened to you...oh, you know we're very sorry", and they move on. There's no (long pause) there's no, it's so lonely for me 'cause you really can't talk about it.

Edward: You don't know what category you fit into.

Andrew: Oh that's a good one. In general, I think people don't recognise it. People haven't a clue to be honest.

Many participants spoke of being *off the radar* as a good description of how the widowed experience is exacerbated by political agendas. There was a feeling that government departments had a selective and limited recognition of the true diversity of family types in Ireland. A case in point was described whereby widowed parents, single, divorced, separated and deserted wives and husbands are all assimilated together under the single-parent banner for taxation purposes. This caused upset for most of the interviewees:

- Sharon: I think as far as government and policy makers go, they lump us all in together. No, no, it's not good. Not good at all...It doesn't make sense to me. They are not the same (emphatically) as she gets to hug and touch and see, be around her dad, even if they're separated. And that bit...that massive bit...that's what we are all missing.
- Elise: I think single people are totally separate to what a widowed parent is... (Raised voiced) And they, the government don't represent that... it's unfair, it's unfair.
- Annette: I am widowed. (Emphatically) I am a W.I.D.O.W. (spelt aloud) I'd be very annoyed with the government because...we are all under the one umbrella, yeah and I don't like that one bit...it's unfair.

Research findings echo these concerns of the widowed parent:

The grouping together of unmarried, separated and widowed lone parents under a common "lone parent" label reflects current practice in social welfare which has unified welfare payments to lone parents into a single One-Parent Family Payment. However, it has drawbacks from an analytical point of view. (FSA, 2003, pp. 66–67)

Researchers have further stated that statistics and collated facts can often be skewed by the researcher's terminology:

Defining lone parents can be problematic. There is no consensus on the proper terminology for lone parent in society. It is not a homogenous group. *Definitions and statistics may vary according to who is perceived as lone parent . . .* such diverse characteristics can include . . . ages, gender, marital status such as divorced, widowed, separated following marriage or cohabiting with or without dependent children of different ages (Culleton et al., 2005, p. 1).

For many participants, the purpose of exploring the social perception of widowhood appears to be connected to the shedding of stereotypes:

- Doris: People don't know what to do with you. If you're a single mother for twenty years they know what to do with you...but if you're suddenly single because you're bereaved (pause) I honestly think society doesn't know what to do with you.
- Annie: Stereotype, I sense. I'd say they never think of younger women as being widowed...yeah that's physical and mental pain that goes with it...pain.
- Jane: Oh well, I think it's looked upon as, number one, it has to be the elderly, and number two, it has to be morbid...you know, you just

seem to have to be perceived that you're sad all the time...  
mourning.

This subtle social inaction and political exclusion was paramount in all interviews. Participants were hurt and bewildered by the sense of public unease in broaching the topic and by governmental ambivalence towards acknowledging widow status as an identity in its own right. The consequence is an ambiguity and reluctance to address the realities of the young widowed parent predicament. All participants articulated a profound sense of exclusion that attached a sense of taboo to their situation. This in turn leads to further isolation for the widow or widower parent in society:

Ciara: Yeah there's a bit of stigma, people are very wary, 'cause not everyone understands. As well it's not as if it's a common thing, so there is definitely a little bit of stigma attached to it. People tend to keep away, there's a bit of "Oh, I don't know about that." So distance, yeah distance.

Grace: They ignore it, they ignore it...they ignore it. People can't handle it. They don't know what to do with you. You don't fit anywhere... so it's ignored.

Gia: I often bring up my husband...people can't handle it. (Laugh followed by pause) They kind of huff, find it so depressing talking about it (pause). But you just want to discuss it or voice it but nobody ever says anything back to me. There's no conversation... which is desperate really, it's very difficult, they do feel sorry but you don't want that, you want a bit of understanding. Never mind saying "poor you". No, you want something practical.

### 5.5.2 *Tackling the Taboo – Loneliness and Societal Exclusion*

According to the participants, this sense of *distancing* and *ignoring* the reality of young widowhood leads to one overall effect. It heightens negative societal responses in general, as the practical reality of the young widow is unacknowledged. So misguided reactions to the situation continue to flourish:

Sharon: There's silence...silence.

Ciara: You know it's almost like our own segregation, completely like our own proof...Yeah, loneliness...'cause you can't really talk about it.

Sharon: I would say it's lonely, that would be the standard. I think if you could talk about it, even for our children to be able to talk too, talk about it. It would help.

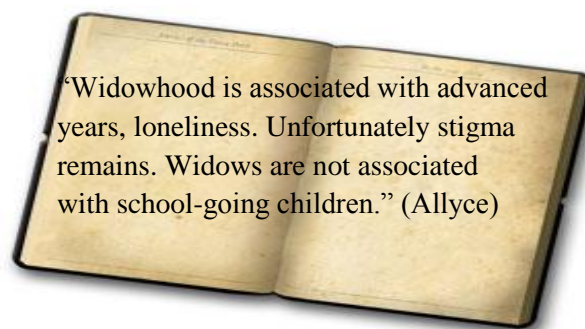
### 5.5.3 *Tapping into the Goodwill in Society: Practical Supports*

Looking at the variables in Figure 5.2 it is clear that goodwill and public support exist in abundance, according to the respondents' experiences. Many articulated the need for a directional shift for this public goodwill and sympathy: a re-adjustment to make the most of this positive community spirit, wherein sympathy would embody a sense of empathy, and the goodwill with its well-intended yet empty promises would be reinforced by practical actions:

- Annette: I think one of the biggest things I learnt, you know as a person, is that the good will of people is like amazing. And there's, I don't know (pause)...there just, I know its intangible whatever but it's there. Like when something devastating happens in a community *you're almost carried.*
- Grace: It's a very strange thing that happens when you become a widow or widower and I have seen it happen to others, it's where people kind of, kind of move in, as if you're going to be saved, with all kinds of weird and wonderful ideals but with no understanding of where you are.
- Pip: People are very sympathetic towards you, maybe too much so in a way... 'cause a month later everybody is gone.
- Annette: I think people have a huge amount of pity and they, they really do want to help but they just don't know what to do.

As candidly expressed by the participants, the ultimate reality is that widowhood is tragic but the life of a parent is a practical one. This practical aspect of child-rearing requires routine and action. Many participants believed schools have an important function in facilitating the widowed parent for a brief time, to ensure this role is maintained:

- Edward: It's tricky and stressful but you have no choice. And you just have to get into the routine and that's the reality of it. And you are responsible for a little human child. You don't want them to be disadvantaged over it. Or you don't want it to be a traumatic experience for them so you keep things routine and balanced.



## 5.6 Theme Two: The School Response – Veils of Silence and Magic Moments

As with the *Widow Warrior* theme, the researcher used participants' descriptions as titles for the emerging themes. It is important the reader is given an insight into how *Magic Moments* and *Veils of Silence* (which describes the school response to the bereaved situation) came about:

Researcher: Along the lines of school, how did they respond?

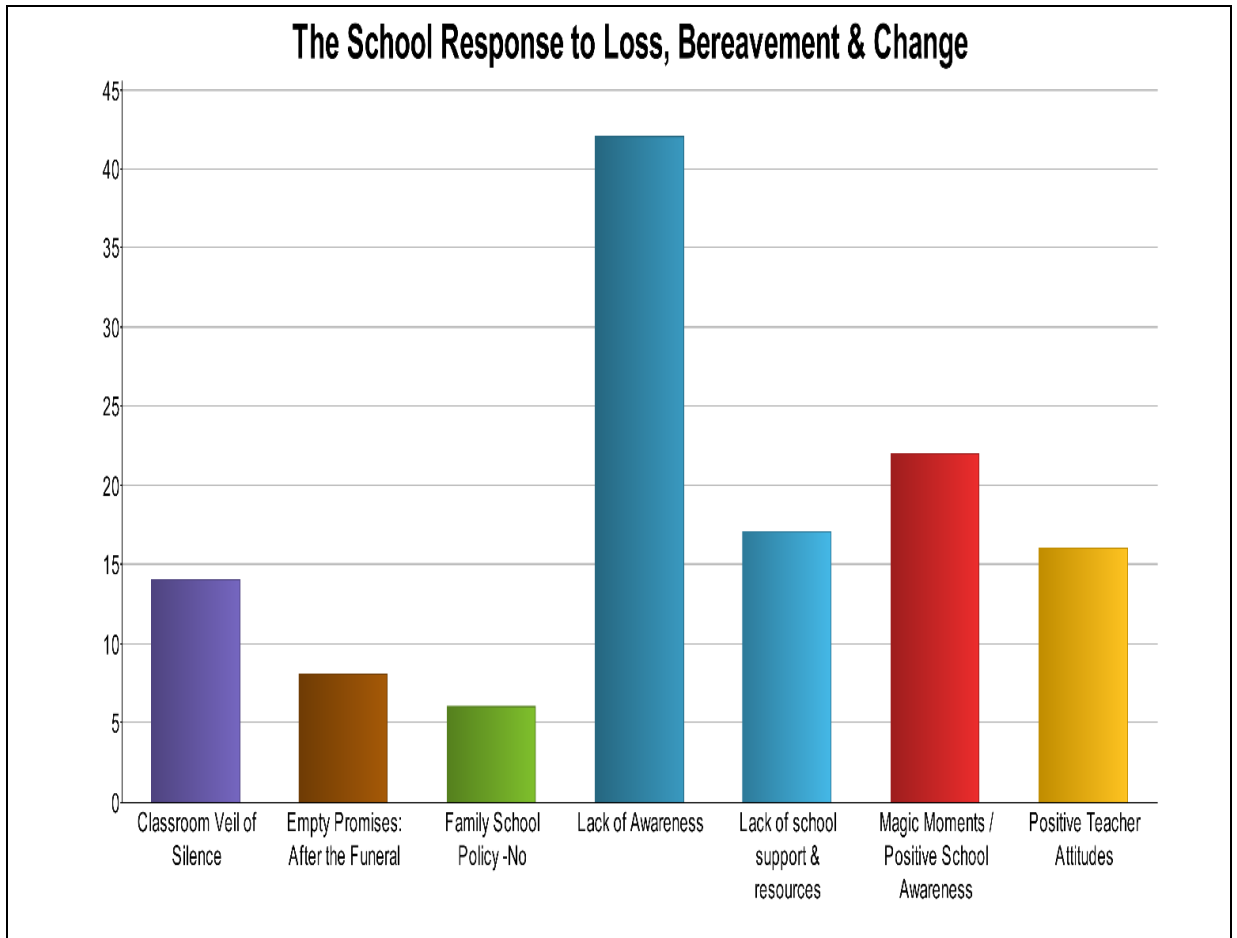
Grace: They're not, and they did not...just like *reactive*, they shut it down before it comes into the school grounds. Even told the other kids in the different classes not to mention it, that way everybody can move on. A total *veil of silence*. I think schools are great at going to funerals, the public stuff, but it's empty. When it comes down to your kids, it's a totally different ball game.

Researcher: Can you tell me a little more about that?

Grace: Yeah, schools, they're not responding in real ways, allowing children to talk honestly, give them a little space...homework! Think how bloody hard Communion time is...the empty pew. You know, I am a huge believer in *magic moments*. Give them, the children, those moments and then they have at least that for life. After all, there's sadly a million things that daddy won't be there for.

As we can see, once again the widowed voices constructed the chosen title that describes school reactions and filters through to all the participants' responses. Figure 5.3 below highlights the many categories that merged to create the overall second theme.

**Figure 5.3: The School Response**



The Y axis indicates the percentage of participants that mentioned these particular topics at interview

This figure shows the responses to the question: “What did the school do in response to your sudden shift in family dynamics?” A disharmony between school intent and classroom reality is evident. The data shows high levels of positive school awareness and teacher attitudes. Yet, as indicated by the remaining five bars, this constructive foundation is not translated into actual classroom practice. Participants spoke of empty promises, lack of school policy, inaction to the situation, and lack of communication:

Mary: I don’t want anybody feeling they have to tread on eggshells, but I did feel very let down by the school. The principal never approached me.

Grace: Now the school did the wonderful thing of coming to the funeral, to sing in the choir, lovely, lovely (pause) public things. But when it boiled down to the support my children needed...No (long pause), which was to have it said, acknowledged in the classroom that there had been a change and...and that we are all together going to help...as opposed to telling the other kids in the class, you are not going to talk about it or bring it up or say anything.

- Jane: At the end of the day, I used to be or...I was happy in the knowledge that my kids were being cared for, thinking that I was sending my children to school for five or six of freedom, free from sadness (Long pause)...But in matter of fact I was sending them in, to be even more, more sad! (Voice breaking)
- Annie: I was really surprised, it's a small school and I really had assumed that the holistic care of children would be paramount. But no.
- Grace: Very angry, very, very angry with school, as it left me with an awful lot of work to do. It made things much harder, it made it so much harder to be trying to support three children and trying to get the system to wake up...even just a small bit.
- Annette: I felt the school really let me down. So disappointing.
- Grace: I had three children in primary school, I felt oh my God, the biggest thing in the world has just happened... (long pause) their dad had died but nobody would even acknowledge it.

These perspectives indicate huge dissatisfaction with how schools handled the death of a parent. This is insightful data when considered alongside recent research that identifies:

how discontinuity (or continuity that does not meet the child's needs), a lack of appropriate social support for both the child and surviving parent and a failure to provide clear and honest information at appropriate time points relevant to the child's level of understanding was perceived to have a negative impact in adulthood with regards to trust, relationships, self-esteem, feeling of self-worth loneliness and isolation and the ability to express feelings. (Ellis, Dowrick., & Lloyd-Williams, 2013, p. 65)

### 5.6.1 *Lack of School Response: The Veil of Silence at School*

It appears that according to the widowed parent participants, when educators are faced with the mire of uncertainty which inevitably surrounds loss, bereavement and change, the default mode is to disconnect. Yet disregarding these issues heightens the tension between parent and school and in turn can damage the relationship between parent and grieving child. Many participants spoke of a *classroom veil of silence*. They spoke of how the school system had failed them by ignoring or failing to acknowledge the child's trauma of losing a parent. This confused the bereaved child, and participants also felt that other children in the class became equally baffled, as schools indicated that discussion on the topic was not welcome.

- Gia: Yes, they did absolutely nothing and worse than nothing. Generally that's the way schools handle it, yeah they do and don't do anything till it's brought up. It's very much if it's not broken...No problem here. Just like that.
- Grace: Not at all, I found the reaction of the school to be very old-fashioned. We won't talk about it and tell the other kids in the different classes not to mention it...that way everybody can move on. What a joke.
- Helena: No, I don't think so. I couldn't say the school they were supportive, you know, but I wouldn't say they weren't supportive either but there was nothing there, you know. Nothing, nothing! Total lack, I don't know, I suppose it's me personally, if I was a teacher and there was a child, you know, in school or in the class, I would definitely, even if it's only to Google it...but you know, find lots of supports for that child.

Many participants voiced major concerns linked to deterioration of the child's close classroom friendships, and an increased sense of isolation and confusion over bereavement and loss for the child. Participants believe, above all, that the loss of a child's own sense of identity is tangled up with the reaction by schools. It all depends on whether schools react positively, acknowledging that the parent's death does impact the daily routine of their bereaved child, or whether schools respond ambivalently, showing inertia to tackle the issue both verbally with the child and parent and visually in classroom situations, such as through memory boards. Unfortunately, many negative experiences were identified which were linked to the child's sense of confusion:

- Grace: You know what the school can tick them over or balance them. At the moment they're only just ticking them over. There was a death recently in the school of a mum and it all started again...Where Andrea came home from school and she said, "Mummy, we've been told again not to mention it to Sarah." And I'm afraid Jim went into school, to the teacher and went: "Do you know what you are doing? You are erasing the importance of her mother" (long pause, voice breaking). You have to acknowledge it, you just have to! (Voice uneven) Be it a prayer or something, the child just can't come, come back to school...without her mum as if nothing happened. (Strained voice).
- Nora: She felt very isolated, very kind of neglected that it all wasn't dealt with properly at all and that there was no support for her.
- Grace: You know there was a lot of resentment with their friends, anger and, you know, my children, two daughters especially felt very



abandoned by their friends...because their friends wouldn't even acknowledge the fact that dad was dead and yet...they were just trying to follow the school rules.

Jane: The week after Ned died, they got counselling into the school. But for the other children! (Pause) Who were fearful that their own parents were going to die (strained pause)...And nothing...nothing for my own children...Nothing.

Helena: I think people and schools genuinely think time heals. (Pause) They simply don't say anything.

Jenny: He [principal] was totally academic-orientated, focusing on academics every day, five days a week. My son would cry, "Please don't send me in." I asked the principal, "What's Alan doing wrong?" "His attention is very bad." So I asked him, "Why are you looking out the window?" "I see my father in the clouds," he said. His little heart is broken.

Annie: I think our education is all wrong. It's leaning way too much towards academic and unable to cope with the real world.

The inflexibility of some schools "to cope with the real world" is complex. How schools react to the sensitive and precarious situation that a bereaved child is forced into is highly influential on how effectively children (and in turn their parents) regain perspective on their traumatic but surmountable situation, teaching children how to deal with the present and look to the future – in short, to cope with the real world. Some of the reasons why schools might not be able to instil such a positive perspective were revealed by the participants themselves during the interviews:

Andrew: In my school it was dealt with in an informal manner and a lot of it's down to the actual teacher. And they *haven't any guidelines*, it's just they go on instinct...haven't any *policies* that they have shared with me. They may have it on their books somewhere but I don't believe that they have got a policy around it...I know other principals and teachers that I have come across in a different life and if you put them in this situation they wouldn't be able to handle it as well as this particular guy [principal].

In this one quote many concerns are identified: (i) the lack of communication with parents; (ii) the lack of policy; (iii) the perception that a policy may exist but as parents they are not privy to it; and (iv) recognition that teachers are left without adequate training yet expected to deal with monumental changes in children's lives using only their own inklings and makeshift devices in the classroom. Participants explain:

Annette: I think schools don't touch it. They don't know what to do or have the training for it.

Jonathan: Schools are supposed to have the knowledge but I believe a lot [of teachers] aren't aware of what they're walking into.

Annie: *Coping skills*, they, the school don't do the basics. One of my biggest things was first of all: to *keep communication* open with my children and then to teach them from my own point of view coping at school, so they can cope as things develop. I mean I don't think the school deal with it at all. It goes under the carpet. Oh yeah, I did the coping bit myself with the children, but it starts in primary school. Our *social development* for children is very poor altogether. They might be able to cope academically but I think on all the other levels it is sadly lacking.

Jonathan: *Interpersonal emotional intelligence skills* are more important than know-how, but that has never changed since golden times.

As highlighted in the Research Design chapter, teachers had also voiced concern about discussing SPHE practice in classrooms. Mainly this was linked to their perceived lack of efficacy and pedagogical preparedness to handle family and bereavement issues. This appears to be lacking from all teaching training courses:

Sandra (teacher): I think as an educator that there's a lot of counselling in your role nowadays. The days of a child coming in and learning regardless are gone. A child can't learn when their mind is on something else, not even bringing loss into it. That child needs to be given space, it's crucial. But now I think, there are no real materials, resources...I suppose, I'd just be going with my gut feeling and I now I think about it, I am really surprised that's the way it is.

Lisa (teacher): I really don't know much about dealing with bereavement; I never covered it in college.

Practitioners went on to highlight the realities of teaching in the contemporary classroom:

Lisa (teacher): Honestly, I wonder are schools the right place. I know we can't ignore it, but it is all fine having it in policy – this and that is to be covered – but they aren't the ones delivering the content, never mind trying to keep 30-odd children engaged.

The overriding consensus is that the educational system is failing to meet the needs of both teachers and pupils through restrictions on appropriate life skills training, supports and resources:

Alex (resource): It is so important but I just don't feel trained enough.

The issue of time allotted to SPHE at primary school proved a major area of concern:

Rose (principal): A half an hour, 30 minutes is all they give us; it's impossible.

One teacher described the reality of trying to deal with sudden death at school. She felt unsure disclosing the powerlessness she encountered, but stressed the importance of highlighting the reality that sudden deaths do occur at school. Strengthening supports and encouraging action to meet these changes proved central to her decision to relate her unique school experience:

Alex (resource): After our sports day last year, a poor little girl just dropped dead...the sudden adult death syndrome. It was horrific, and the truth is I didn't know how to handle it. I was in a state of shock. I couldn't imagine what I should say to the family. So outsiders came in. Now that I think about it, I still don't think I could handle it. I was not at those meetings.

This participant added:

Alex (resource): Her little brother was in our school too. We all tried but the truth is we never had even mentioned death before this and it just didn't seem to fit. That's why we need it on the everyday curriculum.

As a principal commented, teachers are willing to engage in the issue of loss, bereavement and change, as they understand parental death will affect the future well-being of pupils at school, yet a problem remains:

Serena (principal): Teachers and school would be very aware of family diversity and are very open to it. Open to how family changes, and of course bereavement is a significant risk factor to the health of a child. The problem is not motivation; it's the how we do it that really needs to be addressed.

Many widowed participants voiced sympathy for the plight of overstretched schools. They acknowledge the many intricacies highlighted by the practitioners' comments. They acknowledge the importance of empowering teachers, central to which is aligning educational policy with a proactive classroom practice:

Jonathan: Schools seem to be getting more and more stretched all the time. Times have changed and yet we haven't really changed. I feel like just get this, *get this diversity thing* because we need to move in that direction. I hear from the kids the *inspectors are coming in and kids sit as still as mice! They don't check the reality.*

Elise: No, I'd say we have a good bit of learning here. We got a long way to go in primary sector, like building awareness. Okay, I know we don't need to crack kids out of their shell, but for schools to at least be more aware...to talk.

Jane: It's wrong it should be a part of the school programme...it [loss, bereavement and change] affects every aspect. I mean it will affect their [students'] academia totally. I just feel schools need to be *more active.*

Sharon: I would think it should be part of school; they have to approach the topic and I think that because of shyness and because of awkwardness they tend to kind of leave it. I think they leave it but if they could approach it in a general sense it would be great.

Although many of the participants seemed unhappy with how schools had responded to their children, they still appeared to place enormous trust in this particular system. As becomes apparent in the interviews, this trust is fostered through a mutual belief that teachers are enabled, empowered and trained to embrace the incumbent duty implicit in the *in loco parentis* ideology:

Helena: I would hope the primary school would be able to deal, and teachers are trained and stuff...as they [children] spend the majority of the day out of your care with the teachers...so you hope that they are getting the best of care. They should be...you know, they [children and teachers] need to know it's okay to talk about it, we can talk...all talk.

Even though the National Parent Council was developed in the mid 1980s, none of the respondents spoke of inclusion in a Parent Association community or of having approached the Board of Management (BOM) about representation. Nor did they

mention joining a committee team to develop an inclusive school policy on loss, bereavement and change.

### 5.6.2 Positive School Response: Magic Moments at School

Returning to Figure 5.3, it is apparent from the participants that certain schools are tackling issues of bereavement and loss successfully. The participants wished to stress the positive school work and approaches that they had encountered. Many desired to see schools create concrete strategies based on teacher practices that had actually worked with their children whilst they were in the throes of bereavement. These positive school experiences encountered by many of the participants are discussed below:

- Allyce: Certainly they didn't have any great experience of it, but honestly they were *absolutely fantastic* in terms of, you know, *doing* as much as they could to support us, you know, *a lot of talk*...From the girls' point of view they were careful of them, sensitive. So my experience would have been, particularly with the principal at the time, I was absolutely blessed.
- Doris: Actually they did do a garden for a little boy...*he was visible*, yeah, he was part of it, you know, the school.
- Edward: I felt confident, yeah I felt confident 'cause through the two years I had *good communication* with the school and that sort of thing.
- Elise: And the kids came home talking and they were all fascinated with it, *empowered...brilliantly...being able to talk about her daddy*.
- Jonathan: It was dealt with well, as they [the school] tried to *acknowledge the change*, she wasn't around anymore, you know, a little memorial up.
- Edward: I felt the school was a good school and sensitive to her situation. It kind of all happened naturally and there was a *supportive environment*.

### 5.6.3 Positive Teacher Attitudes: Communication and Engagement

Many of the participants spoke of positive teacher awareness, as shown in Figure 5.3. It is interesting that the positive attitudes referred to in the data were routinely connected to the teacher: (i) becoming well-informed about grief indicators, (ii) keeping lines of communication open, (iii) asking parents how they would like them to treat their bereaved child in class; and (iv) all delivered with the understanding that school

rules and regulation must be followed, but (v) a little intervention in the form of a sideward glance or smile from a teacher might make the return to a disciplined way of life a little easier for children, following the devastation of their assumptive world. These elements are discussed below:

Andrew: She's just one of those good teachers that knew how to *engage*. So I felt comfortable with her and the way she handled it *in the daily classroom*. And she did address it, *she did ask...she did address bereavement*.

Allyce: I think teachers in school, they are not giving them platitudes and they are doing and continuing to do a great job. They [the two children] have gone from sad faces, head down (pause) where they were suffering from their own grief and depression to, well now... now, it's all gone now. (Laugh)

Nora: You see teachers...they know what works with kids.

Ciara: So exactly, the school never hid away from it, if that makes sense... there'd be questions of course. But they'd always *talk to me afterwards*. Naturally some of the other kids would ask loads of questions too.

Grace: It's only about *little things*...Just teacher taking a little sideway glance and going and saying how your mum or dad might be in heaven, let's make a card to go wherever you want...the little things...at least letting the child know you have the dream with them.

Nora: And the teachers would kind of *keep an eye* on them and would say to me that they are not showing any signs, not grieving but *they had a number of things* they would watch for.

Allyce: But the *openness was extraordinarily useful* for my children.

Jonathan: School-wise they were very well looked after. I would have had *regular meetings* with school principal.

Elise: I see a difference now between the old and the new school. If they do anything at all, to do with parents or whatever, the teacher will always let me know. Even ask, what do you think? They are so different.

Drawing from these responses, we may infer that *visible, active and open communication* plays a pivotal role in how successfully a school is perceived to have dealt with a bereaved parent and child. *Confidence in the ability of teachers* is a crucial

element for bereaved parents. These parents have to temporarily rely more on the school, to offset the sudden and enforced shift in their family dynamics.

Allyce: I was very grateful for the routine of going to school. It was the breaks that were terrible, just terrible.

### **5.7 Theme Three: The Role of Schools – Death Education, We’ll Rule that Out!**

From the outset of this research, I established its educational intent with the participants. Having developed a rapport, I candidly asked three probing questions which addressed the possibility of an agenda or self-interest shaping their perspectives:

**Table 5.1: Self-Interest or Agenda**

- As parents of school-going children, did they really deem it advisable to broach the subject of death or loss with all young primary students?
- I also put forward the possibility that as this issue affects a minority of primary school children, all from diverse belief systems and traditions, was it therefore not best to leave this part of education to the remaining parent or religious community?
- Thirdly, I wondered whether they had any suggestion of a particular title for the potential curriculum at school, one that would clearly portray the instructional intent for children.

As with the previous themes, I chose this third title directly from an interview session:

Researcher: Why is it important to touch on bereavement at school?

Andrew: I am a firm believer that if a child is old enough to ask questions, he’s old enough to get the answer, in a way that isn’t making it scary, but be honest as you can. Death is the most common part of life and it could hit any child in his class. So schools can be honest, transparent, no use of euphuisms.

Researcher: But is it of benefit to all the other children in the class?

Andrew: I would imagine that other kids in the class, and others who have interacted with Adam, have learnt about death and the impact it has and how you can actually get on with things through experiencing some of what Adam’s gone through in class. Seeing he is a normal

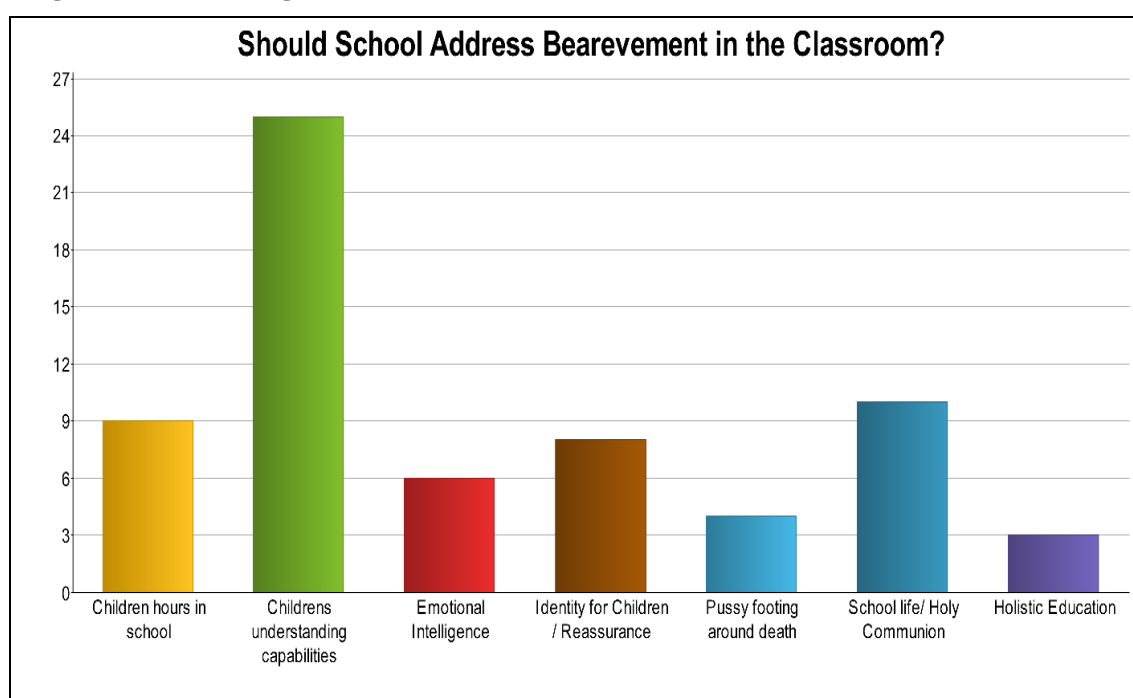
happy kid, and while it's important, it has an impact, but it is just part, not all of your life.

Researcher: So what would you call this subject then?

Andrew: *Certainly not just Death Education, we'll rule that out!* There is a wider agenda at play here.

Figure 5.4 shows the main comments of the responses that illustrate participants' opinions on the applicability of dealing with bereavement in the primary school setting.

**Figure 5.4: Addressing Bereavement at School**



The Y axis indicates the percentage of participants that mentioned these particular topics at interview

As we see from the seven categories, all concerned stated that addressing loss, bereavement and change in the classroom is not only advisable; it is a progressive approach by schools to mirror the current range of family types that constitute modern classrooms. Although bereavement is central to widowed parents' concerns, they stated that a larger agenda beyond tackling the issue of death, such as loss and life changes, could be facilitated by integrating programmes at school. Many highlighted the possibility that even as a small minority, the widowed group lens helps to expose other family types that constitute the wider school community. Below are discussions that followed the first inquiry:



- Researcher: As parents of school-going children, did they really deem it advisable to broach the subject of death or loss with all young primary students?
- Elise: Oh yes, I think kids will be well able for it...the impact death might have...Of course.
- Helena: I would say so...I would because every child is going to go through some kind of loss. I am sure separated people have the same issues and feelings of loss and their kids are also very confused by the sudden change. It does have an effect and *reflects on that child's learning at that school*.
- Doris: I would think children appreciate as much honesty as they can...just talk...I suppose if parents are taken away, you have to explain something and so do schools.
- Nora: You [student] feel odd, you feel odd when it's not talked about, you know, acknowledged; I mean there are other kids that are separated or there isn't a dad or whatever, and so I think it is so important that it's highlighted, I mean dealt with from very early on.
- Allyce: I think it would be appropriate; widowhood, separated parents, in my mind...it's my belief...that children are probably suffering...in silence an awful lot.
- Nora: I do yeah, I do, but it's for all kids. They all need to know, they all need to know this is a fact of life and it's something that happens, you know? That they can't prepare everything for it...but that it's normal. This is life. I didn't and schools...shouldn't want any mysteries surrounding it.
- Gia: Change kind of covers everything. Loss would cover "life things", you know, as well as bereavement. I mean yes, there's a lot of separated people, but also people working abroad too now. There's so many different types of it. No, people do forget and they...they don't see us...it.
- Jane: All we are trying to do is to show...it's just a massive new life you're in. All life shifts...all life. It's just teaching the base things for all.
- Grace: Oh yeah, you know, I think schools need to explain it to children better...you know (pause) it's a very, no parent wants their child told about life and death, but it's not fair on a child that loses a parent that it's completely ignored, just so it makes it easier on others. Think...because what happens then is friendships fall apart, children get angry...you get...they just hide other issues and it just builds and builds...

### 5.7.1 *Diverse Belief Systems: Talking about Bereavement with Children*

Attending to the second question in Table 5.2, which explores whether vested interests amongst participants were central to their support for integrating bereavement issues in the classroom, the participants replied:

Researcher: As we all hail from diverse belief systems and traditions, do you not think it best to leave this part of education to the parent?

Allyce: I think for kids, honesty is so important and winding it up into something else, or pretending...irrespective of your own belief... kids just want to hear the truth. Certainly my kids didn't and certainly at the early stages there was a little bit of cushioning events, but at the same time I can tell you that my kids didn't want to be lied to. Didn't want it in different language but wanted to know Donal was dead now.

Andrew: Both...but definitely schools should be *proactive* in this.

Allyce: I think it should be part of a school programme, absolutely, because kids are a lot more *clued in* than we ever give them credit for, and they see a lot and they understand a lot more than we think. It's a completely different world...certainly I think a programme that would incorporate some of the issues of loss, bereavement and change would be appropriate and is needed.

### 5.7.2 *Programmes Applicable to the Primary School Setting*

Dealing with the last question in Table 5.2, I felt it pertinent to offer the participants a choice of potential programmes based on published research. All participants were also encouraged to propose their own titles that they felt would best describe a school programme intended to help children deal with loss, bereavement and change. The research-based suggestions included:

- Death Education (Devlin-Friend, 2000)
- Loss Education (Holland, 2010)
- Loss, Bereavement & Change Education (Martin-Hodgins, 2013)
- Family Diversity (SPHE, 1999)
- Life Change Skills (Tacade, 2010)

All participants found the first suggestion unsuitable. Paradoxically, although the theme of this research focuses on bereavement, the widowed participants felt that death is not the overriding aspect that should headline a potential syllabus for children:

Edward: The first one is wicked...*Death Education*, wicked...That would turn anybody off!

Jonathan: No, probably not *Death Curriculum* – it's a bit harsh!

Nora: The first one with death in the title would put anyone off! This is a “new life”, a “new departure”. And we have to make the most of it. I believe that. And, you know, schools like me, have to focus on that positive.

Andrew: Certainly not just *Death Education*, we'll rule that one out! I think because there is a *wider agenda* at play here. So maybe as part of the whole diversity thing...yeah, if it formed part of that curriculum.

Of prime importance to all the participants is the opportunity to use their shared school experience to enrich teacher awareness and best practice for all children in primary education. The ramifications of this wider agenda are based on widows' acknowledgment that bereavement is a trauma only a few children might have to endure whilst at school. Yet irrespective of age, many children's lives will be touched by aspects of loss and change. Acknowledging this with proactive and open classroom practice could enliven discussion on hitherto taboo subjects at school, helping to remove misunderstandings on issues whilst equipping children with coping and life skills in the safety of the classroom.

Jonathan: I think *Family Diversity* actually, 'cause it's including the loss and change and yet it's including the country we live in at the moment, which is a very diverse society, not at all dominated by the Catholic Church, thank god.

Andrew: I like *Diversity and Change*, but having *Loss, Bereavement and Change* being a prominent part of that, because you would have... I'm sure families who are separated; dad goes, mother goes... they're gone, so there's a bereavement of sorts, I'd imagine. So off the top of my head I like the idea of an overall agenda, but certainly a prominent and open part of that curriculum should be *Loss, Bereavement and Change*.

Although some participants felt that the subject of bereavement and loss could be integrated into an overall family diversity module under the remit of SPHE, others remained less convinced:

- Gia: Probably *Loss, Bereavement and Change*, definitely not *Death Education*, definitely not. And then the second one might be a little confusing for primary school children; the word “diversity”, possibly they might say they’re “different”, you know, “diverse”.
- Annette: I think the *Loss, Bereavement and Change* is the best one, the most honest.
- Allyce: *Loss, Bereavement and Change*, to me, is kind of more honest. Because, you know, even though I do like the *Family Diversity...* but it’s almost like being too politically correct. Almost hiding from the fact in a way that it is “loss” and they are gone. And for me “grief” is all about, it’s all about addressing it or coping with it while addressing the fact that they are gone today, they are gone tomorrow and they are going to be gone...
- Grace: *Loss, Bereavement and Change Education* more than *Family Diversity...* Yeah, and I will tell you why. Yes, I am widowed but my children are seeing other children’s parents split up and they don’t know what all this means. They have a very unstable world, my kids; in their heads their world was rocked. Well it was rocked, oh my god. But their classmates that go through changes, none of them, none of them have a clue what’s going on. So *Loss, Bereavement and Change (L.B.C.)*, yeah that’s the one.

### 5.7.3 *Loss, Bereavement and Change Curriculum – Become Widow-Wise*

Death is an immediate physical, emotional and personal reality, but most often it is the “forever more” impact of loss for children, interwoven with changes that require shrewd and practical actions by teachers and educators. For this reason, becoming *widow-wise* at school does require teachers to skill up. Only when teachers have the training and backup can they feel empowered to tackle shifting family dynamics, strengthen coping skills, and empower and support all children by addressing the impact of loss and change in a whole class framework. The overwhelming consensus was that in the routine of the school day, a whole class approach should be adopted to integrate a loss, bereavement and change curriculum:

- Annie: I think the *Loss, Bereavement and Change*; so you can deal with any sort of loss – sibling or parent – and also when you look at all the other losses in life, not just loss of a person, I think that is the

most important. Yeah, it's important because it grows "*coping skills*", and coping skills is pivotal...definitely.

Elise: I think "change" is one of the biggest things that happens. Why? Well, to lose a father figure, it's huge. It's not like you can just hand them over to somebody else and no matter where I go, they are with me all the time; "Here comes the gang, changed but still the gang!"

#### 5.7.4 *Disenfranchised Grievors: The Forgotten Child in the Classroom*

Many participants said schools underestimated children's capacity to understand death and deal with grief. The impact for suddenly bereaved children is visible and immediate, as the physical absence of that parent is unavoidable. A child's sense of identity is vulnerable, and if the consequence of change goes unacknowledged at school it can manifest in feelings of disempowerment and confusion:

Nora: I mean Jack just blames himself, just think about that. Just blames himself...it was his soccer...he thinks, if he hadn't been there... (Pause) he'd still be alive.

Grace: I have to say my children were very angry. My son just went into first year, coming to that age where he is telling me everything... stuff just blurts out. And one of the things he remembers was nobody ever said anything to him. He began to wonder, was it real or not? Was I hiding something from him? And maybe if they don't say anything at school, daddy is bound to come back. Totally confused, oh the confusion, confusion is the word.

These statements are provocative but do serve as a cautionary reminder to policy makers: Never underestimate the power of classroom teacher and parent "as insiders to a system" that may empower and inform theoretical policy. Although *diversity* is a key idea in policy documents from both the Department of Education and Skills (DES) and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), in recent years the focus has been on cultural and ethnic inclusion and diversity. Familial diversity has not featured prominently in the association's agendas. By fostering emotional intelligence alongside academic potential in the holistic remit of education, we best serve the children that are entrusted into our care. Many participants pointed out that omission of a loss, bereavement and change curricula within educational policy could disempower teachers and children:

- Andrew: In my school it was dealt with informally, in an informal manner. A lot of it is down to the actual teacher. They haven't any guidelines. It's just their instinct. Haven't any policy...it may be in their books somewhere, but I don't believe they have any policy around it.
- Helen: The teacher, it all depends on the teacher; realistically the old-school type teachers just kind of pussyfoot around it, even now.
- Gia: 'Cause children feel like they're the only one. But even if you look at the Stay Safe programme, it's not covered. And most teachers are told do this or that, and that's what they'll do; talk about drugs, water, sexuality, but there isn't anything for them...isn't any training. Training would be nice 'cause people [teachers] are awkward about it (laugh).

To summarise, all the participants concurred that schools have a rare opportunity and at times unrecognised power to help bereaved families navigate their children successfully through academic and life lessons. They also expressed a wish to forward suggestions which they found worked well with their children. They believe that these ideas might serve as a starter conversation for those educators concerned with fulfilling the holistic education of children. Therefore the last theme to emerge from the qualitative interviews explores practical suggestions for schools. The participants wished to empower educators and encourage a proactive approach to loss, bereavement and change at school, by adding a new voice to the issue of bereavement. People working with bereaved children could reflect upon and take stock of the parental views expressed to gain insight into practical procedures that have benefited bereaved children.

## **5.8 Theme Four: A Proactive Approach – The Train it Forward Principle**

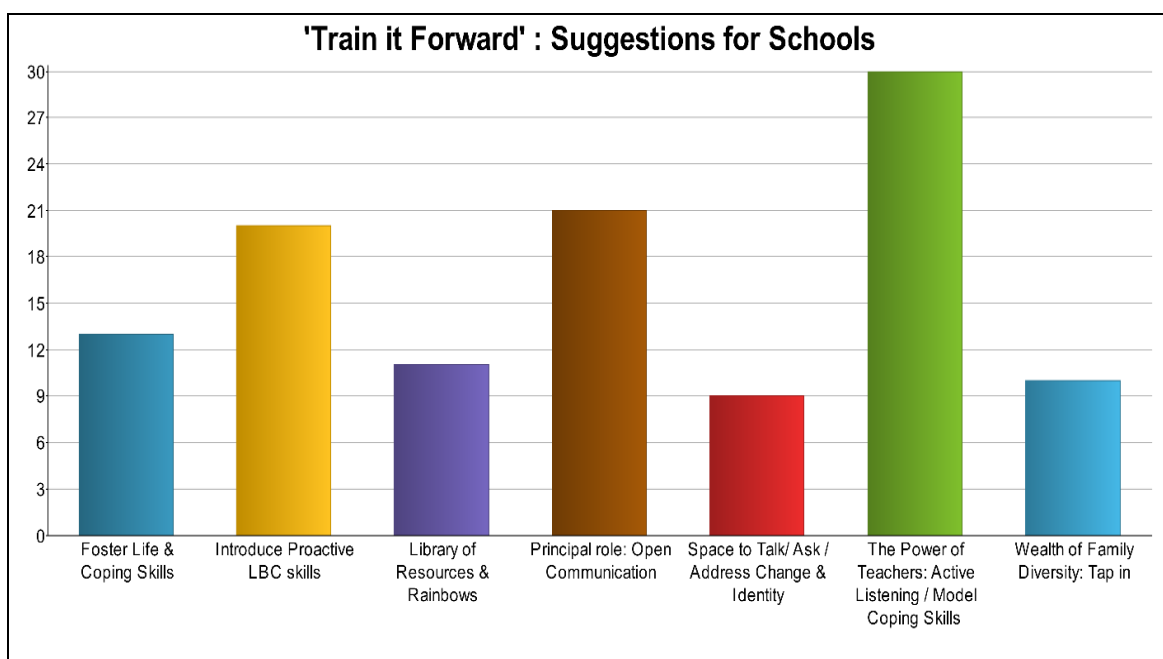
Both the positive encounters parents had with schools and the shortfalls identified by the respondents will now be discussed. As with previous themes, the title was constructed from the words of participants. One widower spoke of trying to share teacher skills in a forum so that other schools could benefit from their practical knowledge of dealing with bereaved children:

- Andrew: What do you engage, what do you not engage and how do you engage with kids? *Normalise it...* You know what, I've absolutely no complaints, so if you could take the practice...what the teachers

and my principal did and *train it on or play it forward*, whatever you want to call it, it definitely would bring the proactive approach to schools.

*Train it Forward* represents the last theme in the widowed parent interviews, and is shown in Figure 5.5 below. This graph represents the significant categories and percentage of responses which resulted from the content analysis:

**Figure 5.5: Suggestions for Schools: Train it Forward Principle**



According to participants' views, seven factors which are highlighted in Figure 5.5 were decisive in the successful handling of their bereaved child's state at school. Open communication, the role of teachers, the visibility of family diversity at school, use of apt rhetoric, fostering coping skills in the classroom, the integration of a loss, bereavement and change curriculum for all pupils and ease of access to resources were clearly articulated as useful components to tackling parental bereavement at school as follows:

Ciara: It should be something that's quite open, visible without making them feel different.

Helena: I don't think you can ever really say the wrong thing...no, (softly) so I just kind of feel it just needs to be done in a class so, you know, rather than singling kids out and doing individual stuff with them. Yeah, as a whole class, that's it.

Sharon: To make any kid, of any class or family, feel they're not the only one because I think primary children hate, hate, hate being the only one, so not singling out, so that means a whole class chat on change and loss in general terms.

Many educators may ask whether a whole class approach to issues of loss, bereavement and change would demean the personal element of the tragedy. Many participants queried whether relying on reactive responses to bereavement is advisable. This is where the *proactive rather than reactive school responses* to education can better facilitate the ongoing needs of children living with grief, loss or change. Schools dealing with sudden, unexpected or traumatic death might be put into a state of shock. This is compounded by a reactive approach, as teachers may never have previously discussed pertinent issues relating to bereavement, such as how to deal with loss or cope with change. Many participants wondered whether teachers struggling to instruct routine classes in such circumstance would be enabled to deliver any apt intervention to address the needs of the bereaved children. According to the interviewees, the sincerity, sensitivity and practicality they wish to infuse into any discussions of loss, bereavement and change cannot exist in these instances. As alluded to by the widowed participants, reactionary service wherein a bereaved child is singled out and removed from the classroom often proved obtrusive and disconcerted the child. Their child, who already feels insecure by the physical loss of a parent, now becomes isolated, limited to one-to-one discussion, removed from their peers, and disconnected from the rapport they built with their teacher. Consider the following remarks:

Jane: The week after James died they got counsellors into the school for the other children who were fearful that their own parents were going to die. And then nothing, nothing for my own children!

Grace: When April came home from school after the big talk and said, "Mummy, we've been told not to mention it to Justin." I am afraid Justin's parent went to the school and teacher and asked, "Do you know what you are doing, you are erasing the importance of her mother, and you have to acknowledge it."

Jane: This was the principal's way of dealing with it; in class he said, "Put up your hands if you have somebody that's dead", and then he told me that my children were not dealing with it, as when he asked the class they would not call out their father's name! Never thinking, Hey, I'm putting high focus on these kids in front of all the others.



### 5.8.1 *The Benefits of a Proactive Approach*

Participants stated that the benefit of approaching the topic of loss, bereavement and change in a proactive, whole-class manner was invaluable to their bereaved child:

Nora: Normalise it! It's for all kids, they all need to know...know that this is a part of life and it's something that happens, you can't totally prepare, but that's normal too and it's life. No mysteries around it... just part of the school day.

Allyce: It should be part of a programme, absolutely. It can't be avoided in reality, as everybody is going to die and incur loss at some stage, and teachers need to be prepared; having something ongoing in the curriculum rather than something thrown out there suddenly. You just can't roll it out suddenly. This is very much a reality and a routine thing.

Andrew: I like the idea of proactive...action at school.

### 5.8.2 *A Whole Class Curriculum – The Pitfalls of Singling Out*

According to the interviewees, an overriding benefit of teachers proactively introducing the topic in a whole class setting rests in the removal of pretence. Lessons learnt regarding over-formal, high-focus approaches with children during therapy sessions could be used to inform practice and what to avoid:

Allyce: It was very detached, it was empty...it made no sense at all, it was joyless in the extreme and it was contrived.

Sharon: Now she didn't like it. She didn't like it because it singled her out and she didn't want to be different, she wanted to be the same.

In these cases, the teachers had placed too high a focus on individual interventions rather than using a whole class approach, to discuss the topic in a general, informative manner addressing all children, and inviting children to discuss issues that might be of concern to them. Many participants asserted that key to a proactive approach is the knowledge that teachers are not attempting to "fix" anything. They merely let the child know they are present and that there is space to talk if the child wishes for it. According to participants, a small gesture from the teacher can be all the child is seeking:

Edward: Just ask, how would they like to do it? Communication is good and it just has to be little things. It doesn't have to be big dramatic gestures, just subtle things can make the difference.

Grace; Just taking a little side glance and going and saying, let's make this X-day card go to wherever you want it to go to. Just letting them know you share that dream with them.

### 5.8.3 *Death -It's Not a Secret – Let's Talk about Life Changes at School*

Participants identify the power of classroom discussions in helping to dispel many misgivings children may hold but have not articulated about death. Most importantly, the child can start to explore pertinent life issues with their own peers. Haine et al. (2008) “emphasized the importance of educating children about the grief process, understanding common childhood misconceptions regarding death, and assisting children in expressing feelings, worries, and anxieties associated with their grief” (Heath and Cole, 2012, p. 249). The advantage of whole class discussion is the art of using a think–pair–share model that nurtures mutual respect, rapport and empathy through circle work or oral literacy time. Respondents explained that such activity created reassurance for their bereaved children, removed the “pussyfooting” around the topic of bereavement, and moved towards openly discussing how bereavement is part of the life cycle, not something to be afraid of or shied away from:

Annie: All I want them to know is that there is always help out there...that they are not adrift. Not adrift.

Pip: It's useful...children are in front of you [as a teacher] all day and go through their little dramas, and you need people who are understanding and are aware of these little dramas – who care.

Nora: So a lot of reassurance with children has to go on...I mean Jack just blames himself...So no, a lot of reassurance with children has to happen, so let's talk.

Jane: I just feel if the school had talked about it...even now...had talked about life changes, had given support, it would've been different... children appreciate honesty, looking at pictures of him, talking about him. So make it visible...because children want to know these things...are all right.

Annie: I feel myself I would be fierce aware of not just academic development, like I would be much more geared up that they learn coping skills.

Mary: It was lovely of the principal to send me home this book. He went on line and ordered it and thought it might be helpful...but they

kind of could have dealt with it better...probably read it to the whole class, I mean they all need to be aware of lots of different aspects at school.

Ciara: Definitely needs to be tackled...I guess, I think there's a very big part when you're around 5 or 6 asking; they want to know about it; they want to understand, to understand our family now, who's part of our family now. I think it's very important for children to talk at school about these things.

Nora: Teachers are so important in a *child's development*, and you know I don't know do teachers themselves realise they are like gods or goddesses...I mean anything teacher says in my house, you know the kids, the kids just lap it up...so much power and to focus that power on "*the reassurance thing*"...my little girl just hangs on every word.

The "reassurance thing" referred to by Nora is a common theme to all the widowed parents. As the next chapter discusses, imbuing reassurance is a balancing act that does not require empty platitudes or constant affirmation of all the child's behaviour whilst at school. Rather, for this section it is important to consider what emotions led all participants to identify reassurance at school as an integral part of how their child worked through their grief. As an interviewer, I needed to establish parents' observations on their children's expression of loss reactions and outward expressions of grief. I put the question as follows: How (if at all) did your child/children initially react or display their loss and bereavement? The many responses were stark and reveal a rationale for why reassurance was so highly discussed at interviews. In the paragraph box below, I have brought together the respondents' thoughts on how they believed their children remained disenfranchised grievers at school. This paragraph describes the respondents overall thoughts:

#### Disenfranchised Grief – The Forgotten Child in the Classroom

Alone, their world was rocked; they were rocked; just thrown apart, even at a young age there's a little hurt there; a bereavement, heartbroken, quiet, fearful, cried a lot, missing him, anger as grew older, picked upon, sad, withdrawn, introverted, lonely, heads down, constant questioning, refusal to leave my side, crying out for him at night, afraid of upsetting me, Big man Syndrome: while for it to sink in, symbolic, blames himself, they do suffer, dropped out socially, lost friendships, isolated, No sports; just nothingness.

Unmistakably, these sincere responses underpin the all-encompassing, intricate impact that loss can impose on children aged 4 to 12 at primary school. The key message

for educators is that grief is an evolving process, or as Worden (1996) insightfully states that “the Grief work must be done” regardless of the age of the bereaved individual. Death is not ageist, and neither is the exclusivity of heartfelt grief limited to adults. Parents and educators are reminded of this by research that advises us to “remember that grieving is a process. It is wrong to assume that just because a child is young he or she will ‘get over’ the loss” (Willis, 2002, p. 225). Lack of commitment to such statements could have influenced the ad hoc school praxis linked to addressing the impact of grief in the classroom, which resulted in comments such as:

Helen: I really think teacher and schools genuinely think time heals, especially when you’re young and, well they don’t say or do anything!

#### 5.8.4 Pupil Insights: School and Classroom

As discussed in the research design chapter discussions would be supplemented with data provided by pupils. The pupil data set comprised of 35 sixth class pupils. All pupils had experienced the: “Myself and My Family” strand unit of the SPHE curriculum. The content of this curriculum is spiral in nature and is delivered from junior infants up to sixth class. The pupils’ thought bubble activities contain rich data which supplements the widowed parent and teachers’ discussion on the roles of schools in addressing loss, bereavement and change:

**Table 5.2: Sixth Class Insights**

Questions	Sixth Class Pupils Insights
Q.1 Can you think of times when teachers might have discussed different family types, or how to cope if a death happens, how to deal with the loss and changes that many families might go through?	“No. I do not ever remember any teacher talking to us.” “Only one and that’s now in sixth class.” “Very few and not very often.”
Q.2 How did or does it make you feel?	“I feel much better now about my family. I was allowed talk about my family.” “I think it makes me feel annoyed that they don’t ever discuss death or family.” “Sad and scared, like what’s wrong with it?”
Q.3 What kinds of family do you see most often in your school books?	“Perfect families, they have everything.” “A Ma, Da, son and daughter. Happy families.”
Q.4 Do you think teachers discuss topics about family and loss in the right way? Can you give your reasons?	“I just think teachers need to get over themselves (and the books also) and realise that these topics hugely affect on us too. Here’s a picture of me and my extended family.” “Sometimes, but teachers really, really have to listen more.” “They are just too embarrassed.”
Q.5 Can you suggest other ways the topic could be approached at school?	“Circle time, let people talk for themselves.” “It’s great just to talk about it so use English books, novels, you know.”

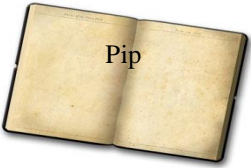


	<p>“Talk time – teachers should be more interested in this stuff than getting us just to read books.”  “Do more SPHE.”</p>
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When the teacher and widowed parent findings are studied alongside sixth class pupil insights, we begin to appreciate that staff training may play a pivotal role in inhibiting or promoting discussions of diversity and loss in the classroom. In addition, the importance of tapping into the wealth of family diversity that exists within the school community is clearly articulated by pupils, teachers and the widowed participants. Curricular materials, resources, text books and classroom discussion need to be representative of the family diversity. This representation is significant as widowed parents described how proactive approaches helped their children to face the monumental changes following the death of a parent.

Deepening societal familiarity and bringing public attention to the world of young parental widowhood was echoed by all the respondents. As discussed in the Research Design chapter, the uncensored journals were incorporated in the generation of the themes. These journals demonstrated the benefits of translating rhetoric into curricular action. This position is firmly reiterated in recent international research that concludes: “In order to improve social adjustment, schools must place an increased effort on intervening with bereaved students” (Heath & Cole, 2011, p. 254). The uncensored journals clearly support these findings.

Respondents remark on the lack of educational directives from the Department of Education and Skills on parentally bereavement children at school. Many parents felt that no whole school policy existed around support for these pupils. These widowed parents had all come into contact with primary schools over the last three years and felt that there exists a lack of systematic policy that would guide classroom supports and teacher practice. This does not bode well for children currently dealing with parental death in primary school. Consider the following widowed parent journal entries.

**Figure 5.6: From Policy Rhetoric to Curricular Action**

 <p>Pip</p>	<p>“In my case, there has never been talk of any policy, or reference made to it. Maybe that’s just my school but I think it’s just left down to the gut feeling of the teacher. I’ve been lucky but I know other parents that are very upset with how they were treated and lack of appropriate responses.”</p>
 <p>Helena</p>	<p>“My eldest daughter Kate, now almost 16, gave me her views looking back at her primary school days. She doesn’t ever remember anyone in school being supportive to her in losing her dad. Teachers never asked if ‘we’ were doing OK. So definitely a whole school approach is needed. A hidden policy is not enough, you can’t just look at the teachers’ practice, it’s real policy, parents, the whole system needs to be addressed and act now.”</p>
 <p>Nora</p>	<p>“The response depends on the school. Some schools are wonderful. Others are dreadful. There is no set policy. It’s too ad hoc. Really there should be a set programme for use in the classroom.”</p>

## 5.9 Conclusion

The participants’ voices generated insight that produced four significant themes: *Widow Warrior- Challenging Societal Stereotypes; Magic Moments and Veils of Silence- School Responses to Bereavement; Death Education: We’ll Rule That Out!-The Role of Schools; and Normalise it...Train it Forward-The Importance of Teachers to the Bereaved Child*. All four interconnected to create a holistic picture of the widowed parent experience of schools. The data highlights how an effective school response to bereavement could help to mitigate levels of grieving for children. As the following discussion section of this chapter will explore, the aim of this framework is to strengthen teacher understanding by illustrating methodologies that respondents said enabled teachers to deal effectively with grieving families at school. Such a platform is imperative to ensure a move beyond what educational research has disclosed:

Despite some changes in attitudes . . . death still seems to be a taboo subject, which is perhaps remarkable as it is the one sure certainty! . . . People generally seem to find it difficult to know how to respond to the bereaved, and as a result they may do nothing and thereby add to the negative emotional impact on the person. (Holland, 2008, p. 414)

## Section Two: Addressing Bereavement at School

### 5.10 Introduction

The second part of this chapter critically examines the significance of these research findings. An extensive discussion follows which draw on the conceptual framework and literature outlined in earlier chapters to examine how the four significant themes of this research impact upon and affect teaching pedagogy, curricular practice and policy in primary education. This discussion is shaped by these four central themes outlined in the findings:

- Widow Warrior- Challenging Societal Stereotypes.
- Magic Moments and Veils of Silence- School Responses to Bereavement.
- Death Education: We'll Rule That Out!-The Role of Schools.
- Normalise it...Train it Forward-The Importance of Teachers to the Bereaved Child.

#### 5.11. *Theme One: Challenging Societal Stereotypes*

The link between how society responds to the widowed parent and in turn how the widowed parent identity is influenced by societal perception is explored through the first theme- *The Widow Warrior Challenging Societal Stereotypes*. According to the key findings, respondents have experienced a sense of social isolation and exclusion, alongside loneliness and a loss of identity that springs from societal stereotyping of what constitutes widowhood. These stereotypes predominately revolve around the needs of older aged widows and widowers. The respondents felt these stereotypes excluded the social and emotional realities of dealing with children and widowhood at a young age. The empirical data also reveals how practical social supports could potentially improve the widowed family circumstance. These revolve around talking openly about death in Irish society – communication opens networks, creates greater awareness of the young widowed parent experience which in turn strengthens social supports for diverse family types and gives the widowed parent a sense of inclusion and identity in society. This theme introduced the socio-educational aspect of this research. This lens highlights the connection between well-being at schooling for bereaved children and the widowed parent experience of the primary education systems in Irish society. This is documented

in Figure 5.2. Figure 5.7 highlights the pertinent findings which bring together the widowed parent, pupil and teacher accounts, and which underpin the prime elements needed to successfully respond to parental death at school:

Figure 5.7: Shining a Light on School Praxis: Teacher, Pupil and Parent:





### *5.11.1 The Implications-A Platform Addressing Bereavement at School*

As Figure 5.7 shows, practitioners voiced many concerns about training and lack of confidence in tackling sensitive issues. Lack of policy and direction was also cited. This left many teachers disempowered and unsure of legality, confidentiality issues and how to broach the subject in the classroom. Pupils expressed similar experiences, being curious about how schools avoided discussion of family. Some voiced genuine surprise that the topic would cause teachers any form of discomfort, and said the school yard was already discussing the issues that failed to reach the classroom (see Appendix C). This lack of communication is not congruent with the principles of holistic education. This is best exemplified by the erroneous belief that silence on topics of bereavement equates to non-compliance by teachers to openly discuss real-life issues in the classroom. The reality remains that:

The movement from rhetoric to action appears to be regrettably slow . . . the key messages from this work include the need to integrate bereavement issues into the mainstream services such as schools. . . . It is time for the rhetoric to be translated into action: policy to actually impact practice. (Potts, 2013, p. 104)

The challenge is to communicate these elements, to make them visible, voiced and valued in educational policy and practice. In putting forward my position, I will draw upon the empirical data gathered in the previous section whilst making explicit the theoretical literature which connects the lived experiences of the participants to the practical school environment. “Let’s get the bereavement conversation started” appears to be the consensus connecting the widowed parent, teacher and pupil statements. I hold firmly to the view that encouraging dialogue and creating opportunities for training is vital to advancing proactive bereavement responses in education:

Perhaps the way forward might include creating a platform on which to encourage educators to meet together to discuss: aspects of coping with bereavement in the classroom; providing courses in bereavement that are designed to raise awareness of children’s bereavement behaviours, normal and abnormal; children’s perceptions of death; and personal attitudes to death (McGovern & Tracey, 2010, p. 248).

To get the conversation started at school, respondents’ views on the role of education in promoting bereaved pupils’ welfare is explored through the creation of a guiding framework for teachers. Drawing upon the empirical data, this framework documents how educators have tactfully and meaningfully engaged widowed parents’ children and

their classmates in topics of loss, bereavement and change. It highlights the advantages of using proactive teaching strategies when dealing with bereavement at school. Drawing on respondents' experiences with schools, I present some initial suggestions for a platform for addressing bereavement at school- Table 5.3. These measures are descriptive and not prescriptive. I wish to open dialogue and create a platform through which educators can discuss the integration of a whole school policy towards addressing the needs of parentally bereaved children in the classroom.

**Table 5.3: A Platform Addressing Bereavement at School**

<p><b>Policy Suggestions – Widowed Parent Insights</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● “Keep all communication open. Contact is the key to progress.” (Sharon)</li> <li>● “It should be open, visible without making kids feel they’re different. A whole class approach.” (Ciara)</li> <li>● “The main thing is good contact, a chat, an informal chat, if they want it...I mean that’s the initial groundwork, how the child’s doing, and then if the child needs extra support, we can then go with that.” (Pip)</li> <li>● “We can ask children more, in a subtle way. Schools just don’t do consultation!” (Gia)</li> </ul> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Curricular Suggestions – Widowed Parent Insights</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● “Teach coping skills through SPHE and change discussions so bereaved children can cope as things unfold.” (Annie)</li> <li>● “Look more carefully at the school books: Dad shows us how to use our bike, look at our language; I mean, how do I fill in that blank? Absolutely teachers need to be more alert of the implications of the sweeping language they use.” (Sharon)</li> <li>● “A way that’s un-scary, so that means truthful, honest and transparent. Don’t use euphuisms like ‘he’s/she’s gone to sleep’! Or ‘they are watching over you’!”(Andrew)</li> <li>● “Proactive...an overall classroom agenda with a prominent and open part of that curriculum being loss, bereavement and change. Teachers need to be prepared; having something ongoing in the curriculum rather than something thrown out there suddenly. You just can’t roll it out suddenly. This is very much a reality and a routine thing.” (Pip)</li> <li>● “Parents focus on the positives and schools need to do that too; No ‘Oh you poor thing’ – practical things help, like acknowledging feelings. It’s OK to be sad, it’s OK to be normal, to feel a little unsure or to cry or not. When people die, we can all get sad or angry at funny times, maybe not even straight away but you know it’s OK to talk about it always and to talk about people after they die.” (Jane)</li> <li>● “Death is painted negatively but if we could take that away. Use nature, scientific element – the cycle right from the very start of school. Then children would be better informed, empowered and able to handle traumatic changes.” (Helena)</li> </ul> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Pedagogical Suggestions –Widowed Parent Insights</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● “Gentleness, understanding, listening and empathy are involved; he depends on the teacher being subtle, not over-formal, because if it’s over-formal it can become insensitive.” (Edwards)</li> <li>● “Teachers shouldn’t do a blanket conversation; this thing of going down the road and saying everyone’s mum and dad...Avoid hurting them, making someone feel like everybody else has a mum and dad and I am the only one or Daddy will teach you to ride your bike, make this and that and so on.” (Sharon)</li> <li>● “Be honest – it’s OK to say ‘I am not sure what to say or do but I am here’.” (Pip)</li> <li>● “Become informed – Google it, I mean teachers need to know this stuff.” (Jane)</li> </ul>
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This preliminary platform is a first step in offering guidance for teachers dealing with bereaved children. The responses show how a proactive school approach helps mitigate the impact of bereavement for children. Many of the suggestions are articulated in research that illuminates the influential role of primary education and teachers:

Taking advantage of daily teaching opportunities, teachers can model adaptive coping strategies... encourage students' emotional expression and strengthen social connectedness, reducing isolation. Additional classroom-based intervention strengthens pro-social skills of bereaved child and classmates. (Heath & Cole, 2011, p. 254)

### 5.11.2 Theory of Bereavement and the Widow Warrior Experience

Many of the lived moments articulated by the widowed parents in Table 4.3 resonate with the literature on bereavement. Butler in her 2013 book *Helping Children Think about Bereavement* outlines elements offering guidance to teachers are essential skills in addressing bereavement. Seven key elements highlight the pivotal and influential role schools can play in the course of a child's bereavement. I have aligned the widowed parent insights alongside these seven elements from Butler (2010), in order to highlight how practical measures at school can augment support for the grieving child in the classroom.

**Table 5.4: Fusing Theory and Life Experience**

<b>Suggestions from Butler, 2013</b>	<b>Widowed statements</b>
<p><b>Normality:</b> Schools signify a place of security and continuity for bereaved children.</p>	<p>“The girls were very grateful for the routine of going to school; it was the breaks that were terrible. The routine was fantastic.” (Allyce)</p>
<p><b>Relief from grief:</b> Children “may feel overwhelmed by a grieving family. There may be a constant stream of visitors expressing their own grief. Children and young children can find this difficult to deal with.” (p. 130)</p>	<p>“There were so many people, people coming up all times, so there was a total disruption to family life, in fact our family life just ceased to be...for a while...It was a completely different life than we'd ever led before and very disruptive for the girls.” (Aine)</p> <p>“The visitors had almost stopped. I had all the tea and sympathy I could take. Of course they might mean well but sometimes when people cannot think of what to do or say they put the kettle on. It acts an emotional punctuation mark. I then realised how dependent he [son] was on me.” (Helena)</p>
<p><b>An outlet for grief:</b> “Children and young people can try to spare their surviving parent by hiding their own grief and appearing to be OK. School is often seen</p>	<p>“It was later, when the school contacted me and told me she cried and needed to just cry but she only did it in school. I feel bad, I know she didn't want to upset me at home.”</p>

as somewhere safe to express this grief.” (p. 130)	(Annette)
<b>A listening ear:</b> Children can become the forgotten mourners, overlooked by family members trying to cope with their own loss and grief. School can offer a space for the child to express their emotions.	“Total difference in the new school, they discuss family openly. She feels okay now talking about it” (Elise)  “Feelings are OK, to be sad sometimes. It’s okay, it’s normal, to cry not to cry, it’s OK to talk about people who have died.” (Grace)
<b>The opportunity to be a child:</b> This is of fundamental importance as children ‘puddle hop’ through grief, so they need to be able to vent, laugh, find distractions, learn and play.	“The SNA just talked to her, had a bit of fun at school and got her out of herself. I don’t think she talked directly about dad, she never tried to counsel her, just gave her space.” (Annie)
<b>General support:</b> If the child displays altered behaviours, usually the teacher is the first to observe a decline in motivation and alert to whether professional interventions may be required.	“Teachers can always be very caring and understanding and watch out for children’s different behaviours and emotions. Children can change an awful lot...knowing they keep an eye for that stuff is good.” (Jonathan)
<b>Resources:</b> Schools should have literature at hand with contact details of support groups to alleviate some of the stress issues families’ encounter in trying to locate the right type of supports for their particular situation.	“Schools should have a bank of literature on this, class library would have little books targeted for kids. It just makes sense to have the resources in school.” (Ciara)  “Don’t burden the kids...if I was a teacher I’d Google it; bereavement can hit all of us.” (Annie)

I recommend that these seven elements should be integrated into a formalised whole school bereavement policy. This framework shows how the respondents’ assertions, which are based on life experiences, mirror current theoretical opinion on how to address childhood bereavement at school.

### 5.12 Theme Two: The School Response

The second theme that is explored in this research focuses on school responses to bereaved families. A variety of experiences were outlined by the respondents. Positive accounts of how schools facilitate the grief and loss needs of the respondents’ children are outlined under the *Magic Moments* category of the second theme. The findings show that five components merge to create a positive school approach to bereavement. These include:

- Teachers becoming well informed about grief indicators.
- Keeping lines of communication between the child, teacher, principal and parents open informally and in formal correspondence.

- Asking the parent how they would like the teacher to treat their grieving child.
- Parental, teacher and pupil understanding that for a period of time, loss and grief does impact the child's homework and class participation. After the agreed time, adherence to school routine, regulations and rules are essential to building the child's coping skills.
- Respondents indicate that teachers do not need to be grief experts but to know that it is the little intervention, eye contact or smile that can help foster the social and emotional well-being (SEWB) of the grieving pupil.

Negative school responses to the widowed family situation are described under the *Veils of Silence* category. Respondents highlighted aspects such as; lack of communication with parents; lack of any policy relating to bereavement; a perception that if any policy exists parents are not privy to its details; and a recognition that teachers are trained inadequately by current academic training programmes. These aspects impact directly upon the SEWB of the grieving pupil. For adults to lend support and encouragement in a professional capacity, they must have the skills to respond effectively to the bereaved child and parent. As Tracey articulates:

Schools can help by acknowledging the loss, and by including bereavement in the teaching curriculum so that all children will have a better understanding of loss and grief. This might help them prepare themselves for future losses and be more aware of the effects of loss. Schools should also review lessons plans so that bereaved children are not made to feel uncomfortable, singled out or excluded. (Tracey, 2011, p. 23)

#### 5.12.1 *Implications: The Training Challenge*

All respondents articulated the need to implement professional training supports for teachers. They were deeply concerned, above all other elements, about teachers' apparent lack of counselling, capacity-building and life change training alongside their academic expertise. They were dissatisfied that professional training for loss, bereavement and change was not already integral to teacher education:

Jonathan: Primary school especially, I would like the teachers to be aware of what bereavement is. Of the psychology, the impact of loss and more. I think they possibly should be trained a bit more in the initial training, because it is happening more and more in schools now.

- Ciara: Training for teachers; like not only for bereavement I guess for all sorts of things, like psychology but the counselling bits...there's always something to crop up, especially in the classroom.
- Annette: Teachers need to be trained, more aware of the stages that children go through, showing kids how to cope. It's about building professional awareness.

The daily work of teachers centres on educating young minds whilst endeavouring to nurture the holistic potential of children throughout their primary school years. Therefore, teachers should be trained in skills that would permit them to accomplish the task they are employed to perform: “The training of teachers could and should include an understanding of the impact of bereavement upon children, and a modicum of preparation for the inevitable appearance of bereaved children within a school population” (Potts, 2012, p. 105). As suggested in the widowed parent observations, it appears that teachers are not trained in how to respond to grief: “within Ireland . . . attention to staff training and policy development on grief and bereavement is worthy of further consideration” (Dodd et al., 2005, p. 242). As with prior research (Devlin-Friend, 2006; Dodd et al., 2004; Holland, 2001, 2003, 2007; McGovern & Tracey, 2010; Tracey, 2009, 2011), the widowed parent comments reinforce the need to train teachers with the realisation that:

Ultimately what determines how children survive trauma, physically, emotionally, or psychologically, is whether the people around them – particularly the adults they should be able to trust and rely upon – stand by them with love, support and encouragement. (Perry & Szalavitz, 2006, p.5)

### 5.12.2 *Pedagogical Tools – A Matter of Precedent*

Previously I suggested that the PRECEDENT approach (Burns, 2004) could be used to encourage emotional connectedness (Clay, 2010) that not only unites the classroom and teacher with the bereaved child, but also encourages open and active communications between families and schools. In accordance with Cohen and Mannarion (2011), Jerome (2011) and Openshaw (2011), I believe that teachers and classmates can say and do things that strengthen emotional support and ease pain associated with grief in the natural remit of the classroom. The caring relation in teaching can better empower teachers' skills at the pedagogical level. Table 5.4 describes a summary of the strategies

that on the basis of this research could be used to strengthen teachers' responses to the needs of grieving pupils. A fuller account is given in Appendix M:

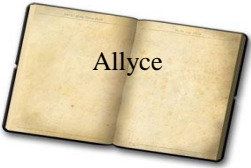

**Table 5.5: Pedagogy in the Irish Classroom**

<b>PRECEDENT</b>	<b>Possible Teacher Pedagogy</b>
<i>Personality</i> Organic factors of child's personality	Start with the 4Ws. Use Pebble technique. Existing teacher-pupil rapport can foster empathy, learning and resilience. Use of Active Listening – Children voiced the need to depict selves as resilient.
<i>Relationship</i> to the deceased and close family members	Use of narrative story approach (Neimeyer, 2005) in the classroom – this accentuates positives of relationships rather than reliance on a deficit model of grief, as the child at their own pace relates and shares their unique and changed life story – oral, written or artistically. NEPS support schools – professional intervention for children who require specialist support.
<i>Experience</i> Regardless of age, past experiences of loss and death will affect grief response.	Use of SPHE strand – Myself and My Family. No high-focus or singling out – whole class approach adopted. Circle-time to share others' stories. CSO records/deaths and births register. Novels and poetry/SESE – Life cycle – scientific explanation of life processes.
<i>Culture</i> Customs, beliefs and values of the child's culture will influence expressions of grief.	SPHE – Strand myself and others – Diversity. Be aware of Ripple Effect. Written and clear oral communication with parents on religious intent and cultural ritual to be observed.
<i>Environment</i> , Family, social support, socio-economic status, schools communities all affect grief reactions	Be aware of the double jeopardy situation for children. Use resilience-building techniques (Gaffney, 2010). The natural school grounds – planting, memory boards, and memory stones – visible reference made to life changes as natural part of a cycle.
<i>Development</i> Cognitive, social and emotional dimensions affect how bereavement is grieved and perceived.	Introduction of proactive loss, bereavement and change curricular approach imperative – as children become better equipped to tolerate change through an ongoing universal curriculum approach to bereavement. Whole class participation – universal policy and programmes akin to the Relationship and Sexuality programmes currently in force throughout primary schools nationwide. Use of Walk Tall Manuals. Age-appropriate material will scaffold the learning of resilience and coping skills.
<i>Equilibrium</i> The ability to maintain a balance between forces of grieving loss whilst investing in or continuing on meaningfully with life.	Use loss and restorative-orientated tasks to encourage the child – teacher awareness of child's need for space and time. Also agree with child a signed routine of work agenda – articulating the importance of routine and abiding by class rules. Balanced approach to time needed to adjust and academic learning. Narrative approach can be revisited to build up coping mechanisms and face the adverse times. Be there, listen and give space – use Butler's 7 key structures (Figure 26).
<i>Nature</i> Finite/Non-Finite, Anticipated or Unanticipated impacts the child's grief.	Open communication is imperative (Tables 9 and 10). Use of PRECEDENT framework in the classroom.
<i>Transcendence</i> The ability to rise above one's sorrow, following the loss experience implicit in bereavement.	Educators can foster resilience through a narrative approach to bereavement. Be aware that Communion, Confirmation and birthday times may cause upset throughout the child's schooling years. Be honest and let the child guide conversations: "I am not sure what to say or if there is a correct thing to say, but I just want you to know that I am aware that this may be a difficult time for you." Let the child broach the subject. Children like to be perceived as resilient, and remember if they have come through this monumental change they are wiser and can often impart insightful observations. Do not offer to help outside the remit of your professional capacity as a teacher.

To strengthen supports for bereaved children it is vital that teachers can access CPD training to facilitate these interventions. A benefit of this approach is the attention that is

donated to cultural, transcendence and equilibrium aspects of the grieving child. These areas pose pedagogical and curriculum-implementation challenges, as they are closely tied to family belief systems. As respondents candidly expressed in uncensored journaling:

**Figure 5.8: Diverse Belief Systems – Uncensored Journaling**

	<p>“It occurs to me that many schools and teachers may not be equipped to deal with widowed parents. It is particularly difficult for schools in a growing secular society where death, loss and grief are intermingled with religion and rituals. Schools and teachers may feel very uncomfortable going down that direction, knowing what to say. In fact teachers may be reluctant to voice their own beliefs or experiences because of awareness of religions or family diversity.”</p>
	<p>“The school chaplain should leave it to the parent to explain to their child about where their man is now and not force their Catholic opinions upon children. My girls used to find November (All Souls’ Day) very upsetting at school. I approached the school about this to no avail. I think it is wrong that a priest should give the idea their mam is in purgatory and leave the girls asking me was I telling lies about where their mam is.”</p>

The findings of this research illustrate that schools have a wealth of familial, cultural, and religious diversity which shapes its ethos and extracurricular activities. At a pedagogical level, I would recommend that as practitioners:

You will need to address cultural and spiritual issues together. Some children are caught in a cross-cultural situation. They have been born in this country and have an understanding of the common social conventions when someone dies. Their parents, on the other hand, may have strong links with a culture that the child knows little about. Death brings cultural roots to the surface. . . . Be careful to take account of different religious practices. (Chadwick, 2012, pp. 64–65)

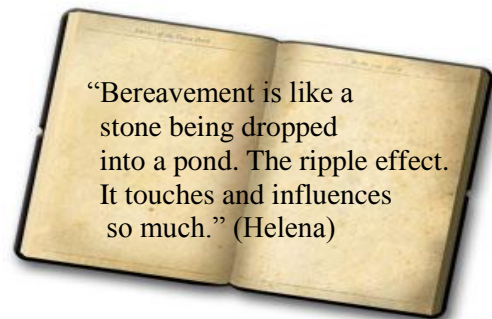
As highlighted by Chadwick and the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), “talking to children about death must be . . . respectful of their cultural norms” (Burns, 2010, p. 76). Many teachers are hesitant to address bereavement given all the ripples from religious and cultural norms; more precisely, “death brings cultural roots to the surface” (Chadwick, 2012, p. 64). A way to address bereavement is to look more at the transient or spiritual rather than religious elements, to include the many belief systems that make up contemporary school communities. I would argue that spirituality is not dependent on one particular religious affiliation, rather it is a more inclusive concept; “spirituality exists in all people and is not dependent on religious beliefs. It is



concerned with feeling meaningfully connected to others and the meaning and purpose of life (Batten & Oltjenbruns, 1999; Bellous, 2008; Leighton, 2008)” (as cited in Burns, 2011, p. 107). This perspective on spirituality facilitates an integrated, holistic approach to dealing with bereavement in education. It allows teachers to respond effectively by helping bereaved children reconstruct their assumptive world (Murray-Parkes). As discussed extensively in the literature review, this reconstruction of the child’s assumptive world is highly relevant to the classroom situation:

When bereavement occurs it challenges people’s assumptions about existence and the meaning of it. Bereavement can provide an opportunity for spiritual exploration and development as the bereaved reflect on what has happened to transform their life. (Burns, 2011, p. 108)

### 5.12.3 *The Ripple Effect at School*



As demonstrated by this research, a child’s opportunity to address adversity can be strengthened by interconnecting ecosystems and external networks, which cultivate support structures necessary to alleviate the child’s grief. The “ripple effect” (Yalom, 2008) depicts the constant interplay of internal and external social, cultural, affective and spiritual forces as implicit elements of the bereavement process. As identified by Helena in the uncensored journaling: “rippling tempers the pain of transiency by reminding us that something of us persists even though it may be unknown or imperceptible to us” (Yalom, 2008, p. 10). For teachers the significance rests in acknowledging that rippling affects a child’s relationships, environment and personality, touching all the variables identified in the PRECEDENT approach. In accordance with this, the key message from UTU and INTO for teachers and those working in the school community remains:

The impact is like a pebble thrown into a pond. It sends waves through the whole community. Some can surf the waves, others are overwhelmed, some just get washed up on the shore, forgotten and ignored. (When Tragedy Strikes, 2000, p. 34)

An encouraging outcome of this research is that it reveals teachers' willingness to engage in training if available, and to give children dealing with bereavement the necessary resources in school. This marks a transformation in attitudes which is continuing to gain support from teachers and those concerned with the well-being of children:

It is encouraging to believe that teachers of this current decade are more attuned to the emotional and psychological needs of their charges. . . . This in itself constitutes an enormous leap forward in attitude and implies fertile ground into which the seeds of guidance might be sown. (Potts, 2013, p. 104)

Rippling illuminates the influential role of teachers, "leaving behind something of your life experience; some trait; some piece of wisdom, guidance, virtue, comfort that passes on to others, known or unknown" (Yalom, 2008, p. 9). As we saw in the findings, the traits, wisdom, guidance, virtue and comfort which respondents referred to may be as fundamental as ensuring the child is aware of the social connectedness that exists in schools. Communication is imperative during times of trauma. The respondents acknowledge that school presence, teacher rapport and communication were instrumental in how effectively the child coped with bereavement. This research highlights that communication is intricate and that dialogue needs to address the family system; this system has many layers that need to be identified to ensure that constructive supports are relevant, welcomed and useful to the family:

Communication is dialectic, dialogic and dynamic in nature. Therefore, rather than unilaterally promoting open communication . . . it is essential that those working with bereaved families discuss the complexities of communication with the family members and explore the different meanings associated with sharing grief experiences with each other. This supports the family as a unit to integrate experience and adapt to changes with few attempts to control thoughts and feelings. (Ellis, Dowrick and Lloyd-Williams, 2013, p. 65)

#### *5.12.4 Connecting Pedagogy, Practice and Policy*

In primary education children are highly susceptible to teachers' use of modelling: "in fact, for primary grade children, adult's reactions will play an especially important role in shaping their perceptions of the situation" (Burns, 2010, p. 76). This can prove advantageous, as teachers equipped with relevant resources can model problem-solving techniques and coping strategies and inform children of available supports through whole class integration of the curricula. The intent rests in the future tools it imparts to

children, as “the impact insight has on their capacity to cope. Being able to name the components of what it is they are experiencing greatly increases their capacity to do something about their situation” (Farrell, 2007, p. 9). Modelling constructive behaviour and skills reminds practitioners and pupil alike that:

We need to keep reminding ourselves of our *extraordinary capacity to adapt* to change. Because we don’t generally like change, we underestimate how often it happens and we smooth it out of our life narratives, which gives us the *illusion of stability*. So when we are confronted by change again, we are *jolted*. (Gaffney, 2011, p. 414)

Teachers also need be aware that they should avoid disregarding the topic modelled by inaction in the classroom, or presenting only the deficit model of grief without reference to the positive forces that are also present in traumatic circumstances:

Most importantly adults need to remember to model healthy emotional behaviour for children. Allow them to laugh, cry, and talk about the deceased person. Just like adults, children of all ages need time and understanding in order to process the concept of death and dying. (Butler, 2013, p. 130)

### **5.13 Theme Three: The Role of Teachers**

Widowed parents’ encounters with the school system resulted in their calls for a definitive policy document and guidelines for teachers. A “Platform for Addressing Bereavement at School” (Table 5.3) is a starting point to addressing parental death for grieving children in primary education. Educators can draw constructively on past lived experience to guide and inform their classroom approaches. The main finding of theme three reinforces the need for schools to tap into the parental widowed experience. As respondents articulate this experience can inform and enrich school approaches to grieving pupils based on verified accounts of how schools to date have interacted with grieving families. As a result the findings indicate the necessity of introducing a Loss, Bereavement and Change curriculum for all pupils. The rationale for such curricula integration is to ensure grieving pupils do not remain disenfranchised grievers. Ultimately this theme underlines the respondents’ wishes to empower teachers and schools by adding a new voice to the issue of bereavement.

### 5.13.1 *Implications - The Disconnect at School*

The respondents voiced confusion over how schools and teachers seemed better equipped to respond to large-scale critical incidents than to the death of a parent. They indicated clearly that when dealing with singular death scenarios the school response was often lacking. Their observations here are insightful. Government initiatives to date have focused exclusively on large-scale critical incidents of bereavement. As a result, concise policy documents have been constructed to respond effectively to critical incidents. Systematic policy development has included teacher guidelines which have proven invaluable to educators when dealing with pupil deaths. However, the direction of bereavement policy needs to be readdressed to include bereavements which regularly affect well-being at school, such as children living with the death of a parent.

### 5.13.2 *Critical Incidents Plan – A Reactive Approach to Death*

In 1998, following the Omagh bombing, two teachers' unions – the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) and the Ulster Teachers' Union (UTU) – combined their professional expertise to create a manual that could help schools respond effectively to large-scale critical incidents. *When Tragedy Strikes* was published in 2000. Its foreword contained the following passage:

Two things struck us forcefully. Firstly, that teachers and school staffs are poorly prepared to deal with deaths within the school community, especially among the pupils. Secondly, that whereas Omagh was a tragedy of unprecedented proportions, many schools each year have to cope with similar, though thankfully, smaller tragedies. (When Tragedy Strikes, 2000, p. i)

Two issues were highlighted by the INTO and UTU, which the researcher contends remain unaddressed in primary education. The data in this research reaffirms that many schools are struggling to address parental bereavement effectively both at a curricular classroom level and in school policy. As established in this chapter, interviews with teachers also disclosed an unease and lack of pedagogical preparation for integrating bereavement discussions into normative classroom practice. The omission of teacher guidelines to deal with parentally bereaved children is compounded by the realisation that:

For the most part what is known about or planned for in the field of Irish education regarding bereavement and grief has a distinct focus on “critical incidents” as opposed to more “normative” bereavement and ensuing grief responses that are more typical (e.g., DES, 2007). (O’Brien & McGuckin, 2013, p. 10)

The Department of Education and Skills published *Responding to Critical Incidents: Guidelines for Schools* in 2007, prompted by the Loreto Bus Crash of 2005. This updated publication arose from the National Educational Psychological Service’s (NEPS) 2003 resource packs for schools dealing with pupil deaths. As with *When Tragedy Strikes*, the focus of this publication was on pupil tragedy and death. The introduction of the Critical Incident Plan in 2007 was a welcome resource for all schools. As noted in the literature review of this research, the strategies outlined in the manual are effective and easily accessible to teachers. The welfare of children is clearly uppermost in the decisive and immediate action taken by the school as directed by the Department of Education and Skills manual. No guidelines with the efficacy of the 2007 manual have surfaced from the DES on a proactive whole school response to singular bereavements such as parental death.

There is a dearth of teacher guidelines on how to address the topic of loss, bereavement and change in the classroom, with only a fleeting consideration of how this could be incorporated effectively into the formal SPHE curriculum. This research would concur with previous research that asserts:

There is however, a paucity of material that addresses both a proactive whole school approach to loss and change in children’s lives (teaching about life experiences of loss and change) and a reactive approach that gives guidance on how best to help children when sad things happen (Tacade, 2010, p. 4).

In Ireland, bereavement support for children is provided by a combination of voluntary, statutory and private agencies. At the school level most bereavement material is sourced by concerned teachers through contacts with established charities following the death of a parent. I recommend that a formal, proactive approach to the topic of bereavement in school curricula needs to be supported by specific life skills training for teachers to better meet their pedagogical needs. Life skills training as a mandatory element of teacher education would strengthen supports for bereaved children, as the qualified teachers are better enabled to respond in a timely and non-intrusive manner in the safe learning environment of their classroom.

## **5.14 Theme Four - A Proactive Approach**

The empirical based findings thus far help open discourse on parental death. However, in order for the respondents' suggestions to effect change in pedagogy, policy and curricula, it is important to consider the implications of introducing these measures in primary education. Transferring the empirical data into a guiding framework applicable for school use is challenging. It entails making explicit the significance of caring relations in the teaching profession. To help shape a working framework I will draw on relevant bereavement theory alongside the empirical data of this research, and also make use of my own extensive experience in pre-school, primary and secondary education.

### *5.14.1 Train-it-Forward Principle – Impact on Policy*

Schools should revisit existing bereavement policy to ensure the Critical Incident Plan and reactive deficit-based responses to death and loss do not predominate or constitute the whole school policy. Rather, school policy needs to reflect both reactive and proactive responses to cater to the ongoing needs of pupils, staff and families. This requires a proactive policy approach. Whole class discussion, learning and teaching on life change throughout the school year helps to bring a sense of normality to change and lessen a child's sense of alienation when tragedy occurs. Use of an Action Chart (Appendix I) will aid schools in constructing an inclusive and collaborative policy which reflects the needs of the community. To highlight the rationale for increasing parent, peer and bereaved pupil consultation on how to address bereavement, the researcher recommends that the key findings of the literature review be observed. In particular, it is important to include children in discussion, as reiterated by the Harvard Child Bereavement Study (1996), to increase pupils' SEWB at school.

The potential of the SPHE curriculum to be used as a platform to address bereavement must be documented in policy. Issues such as increased timetabling, updated content, resources and training for teachers need to be prioritised. Though the training challenge is significant, the data of this research indicates the need to implement mandatory bereavement training as an integral part of initial teacher training. In the age of virtual and instant communication, it is advantageous to make use of

sanctioned educational forums online. From an information and communications technology (ICT) perspective, and to increase accessibility for younger users, the updated bereavement policy should be online as well as in hard copy format. To be fit for purpose this policy should not only outline school procedures but offer resources and literature. It should give an inclusive overview of childhood grief and loss reactions; an example is presented in Appendix K.

Teacher and school accountability is a challenging matter. Therefore the policy document should outline the teacher and school role in the face of tragedy, and also highlight that as “professional educators” there are limitations. If specialised help is required for social, mental or emotional reasons, the NEPS (who are a dedicated service and have personnel equipped to deal with these heightened concerns) will be contacted to meet those needs.

#### *5.14.2 Train-it-Forward Principle – Impact on Curricular Practice*

Resources, rhetoric and educational material, including libraries, must be updated to reflect current family structures. Scientific explanation of death, not euphemisms, are recommended when discussing grief and coping. This is essential, as the physical absence of a parent as well as the emotional impact is evident to the grieving child and needs to be articulated. See Appendix K for recommended literature. Introduction of a Proactive Life Skills Curriculum is proposed, drawing on data and theory and serving as a universal initiative delivered to all pupils throughout school years via the SPHE platform. Resilience-based coping skills are appropriate learning outcomes of potential curricular material and content. A Constructivist approach is advised to help rebuild a child’s assumptive world (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Murray-Parkes, 1996). This helps the child relate to a changed life story at their own pace through creative outputs (art, music, written, aural). Cross-curricular oral language opportunities should therefore be used: history (war, famine); maths (CSO – census); SPHE (family and diversity); drama (role play, a safe lens to explore emotions and cope with transition); literacy (novels and poetry); SESE (life cycle, growth) and the Visual Arts (clay, memory stones, boxes, seasonal changes).

### *5.14.3 Train-it-Forward Principle – Impact on Pedagogy*

As discussed in the earlier literature chapter, the caring relation in teaching (Noddings, 2012) is central to addressing the role of education in responding to grief. This educational ethos infers that a teacher's skill in addressing affective domains of education – alongside academic learning – has vast implications on the welfare of children at school. Ultimately, a caring relation in education highlights the significance of advancing pedagogies that include the affective dimensions of learning. These include- making thoughtful connections, active and receptive listening, inviting dialogue, and reflective and critical thinking. Use of pedagogical methods such as the pebble technique (Bartles-Rabb & Van Gulden, 2000) which is outlined in the literature review section are also useful pedagogical tools for in-class support and discussion. Routine is imperative, as the child's locus of control and assumptive world are forcibly shaken by parental death. Set agreed guidelines with bereaved children. It is important to sign the discussion document as a visual reminder that time and space will be allotted, but routine is essential so limitations are necessary. Please refer to Table 2.2.

Teachers need to be aware of their own SEWB (Appendix L). If prior experiences impede their confidence to address these issues, it is important that they speak with colleagues – other staff members or external intervention can be sourced. It is also important that all those working with bereaved children are well acquainted with, and understand, how schools can help children think about bereavement- Table 5.5. As highlighted throughout the empirical data and literature review, CPD and initial teacher training in loss, bereavement and change education is imperative. Training helps professionals gain the necessary skills to engage in bereavement issues; it also increases confidence through college teaching practice, which is needed to empower classroom pedagogy. These pedagogical, policy and practice implications are underscored by the acknowledgment that “bereavement is not only painful to experience but also painful to witness” (Bowlby, 1980).

### *5.14.4 Implications of Theme Four - Connecting Pupils, School and Parents.*

The Train-it-Forward principle has shown the implications of transferring the data documented in the Addressing Bereavement at School (Table 5.2) into the school



environment. This process increases awareness of parental death. More pointedly, it illustrates how a child's well-being can be nurtured through networks and social connectedness. The more powerful the connections between school and family, the greater the child's resilience and ability to cope will be fostered. I would suggest that the school, peers and teachers are central factors to supporting the bereaved child in a healthy and affirming manner. Key to the Train-it Forward principle is the awareness that the school community *can* facilitate the grieving child by strengthening the positive forces that also exist in times of adversity – The physical school environment can offer a safe place, silence at times, space and routine. This resonates with the research that “schools can give relief from an emotionally charged atmosphere at home” (Butler, 2013, p. 130). School personnel can also tap into the intellectual environment: a sense of shared experiences wherein the bereaved child does not feel alone but part of a school community, a community that has resilience in reserve to address the challenging times ahead.

Making visible and articulating the existence of this caring relation in teaching gives the child emotional space, because “even when deeply sad, children still need to be children. . . . School offers the chance to play, laugh, sing and generally just be a child without feeling guilty” (Butler, 2013, p. 130). The child spends much of his formative years in the care of a teacher. Integrating the *Train it Forward principle*, which strengthens social networks to better support a bereaved child is paramount in light of research that claims:

The ‘double jeopardy’ whereby the child not only suffers the loss of a parent but the symbolic or temporary loss of other parent. . . . Even temporary changes in parental capacity were found to be distressing for children . . . where these changes are longer term the distress experienced is compounded and there may be significant impact in adult life in terms of loss of self-esteem and self-worth. (Ellis, Dowrick & Lloyd-Williams, 2013, p. 65)

The “double jeopardy” phenomenon was discussed by many of the respondents. They were frustrated by how the duality of parental widowhood – losing a spouse and becoming a single parent – had affected their ability to react comprehensively to their child's grief as they tackled life issues and their own loss. The duality intrinsic to parental widowhood is therefore often transported to the realm of childhood bereavement. In such instances the *Train it Forward Principle* encourages teachers to

consider that familial grief has many layers that directly affect children's well-being. These inevitably affect the child's learning at school. In the absence of support at home, the school can create a space where the child learns to tolerate change, nurture resilience and develop coping mechanisms which empower the child to navigate through grief and continue living a meaningful life.

### **5.15 Rise in Therapeutic Education - Social and Emotional Well-Being**

It is important to address the critical claims that a "therapeutic culture" (Furedi, 2003) is creeping into schools. These are valid concerns which highlight the risks of "creating a hollowed-out curriculum as an instrument for 'delivering' a plethora of attributes, skills, values and dispositions" (Ecclestone and Hayes, 2009, p. 385). The empirical data of this present research shows that a balanced approach to the social and emotional well-being of bereaved children is required. The resilience-based approach advanced here is not generated through platitudes or incessant teacher affirmation. A school ethos "of emotional well-being and engagement [reveals] a pessimistic tone which privileges damage, vulnerability and fragility" (Ecclestone, 2007, p. 464) is not indicative of or consistent with the findings of this research. As a researcher/teacher I can attest that school rules are openly discussed, agreed to and signed at the start of every new school year. Therefore such views articulate the need to address the impact of bereavement with children by promoting resilience and transformational coping skills while acknowledging that responsibility, although elevated for a time during the initial grieving process, remains with the child.

Packman et al. aptly stated that, "school and continuing with normal activities can be powerful tools that help children cope by modulating their grief" (2006, p. 832). The data in this research does not imply that teachers become "surrogate psychologist or mental health workers" (Craig, 2009, p. 6). On the contrary, children must learn and do the grief work for themselves. The teacher acts as an informed facilitator equipped with appropriate resources and materials:

Most grieving pupils do not need a 'bereavement expert'. They need people who care. Schools just by carrying on with their usual day-to-day activities can do a huge amount to support a grieving child. (Butler, 2013, p. 129)

## **5.15 Conclusion**

This discussion explored how the empirical data in the “A Platform to Address Bereavement at School” (Table 5.2) could be used to increase educational awareness of the needs of paternally bereaved children at school. To encourage teachers to tackle sensitive issues such as loss, bereavement and change in the classroom, the perspectives of widowed parents, teachers and pupils were discussed alongside current theoretical understanding on bereavement. In making my claims I drew on my empirical data and on theory to explore the potential impact of the data on three fundamental levels: school policy, teacher pedagogy and classroom practice. The closing chapter aims to communicate the implications of transferring these measures effectively into the primary classroom. The recommendations aim to energise educational discourse on bereavement and to strengthen supports for children dealing with parental death whilst at school.

## **CHAPTER SIX: STRENGTHENING SUPPORTS FOR PARENTALLY BEREAVED CHILDREN IN THE CLASSROOM**

### **6.1 Introduction**

This thesis has highlighted the lack of empirical knowledge about the grief and loss needs of primary school children in Ireland. The aim of this research was to contribute an educationally focused investigation of the effect and impact the death of a parent has upon young children at school and so add to contemporary understanding on childhood bereavement. This final chapter therefore connects the findings data of this research to the school setting at the pedagogical, curricular and policy level. It ascertains whether the research objectives and questions which guided this investigation were addressed. The advantage of using an ecologically based conceptual framework to understand grief and bereavement at school is illustrated. The benefits of using a qualitative methodology by which to explore the widowed parent experience of schools alongside teacher and pupil insights on how bereavement is understood and experienced in the classroom setting is also highlighted. The main implications and directions for future research are presented and discussed.

### **6.2 Key Findings**

This research set out to investigate: widowed parents perspectives on how primary schools support parentally bereaved children in the classroom? The findings were organised into four broad themes which emerged from the systematic analysis of the qualitative interviews with widowed parents and teachers as well as research with 6<sup>th</sup> class pupils.

#### *6.2.1 Societal Responses – Goodwill, Social Exclusion, Isolation and Loneliness*

Key themes emerging from this analysis, included societal stereotypical responses to widows. The thematic category *The Widow Warrior – Societal Stereotypes* captures the social isolation and taboos of widows' and their families' experiences of loss, change and bereavement, as well as positive experiences of goodwill and practical community

support that they experience. The voices of parents give a powerful and previously unheard insight into the family experiences of pupils affected by change, loss and bereavement. This research highlights that even in this contemporary era of virtual communication a sense of “there’s silence...just silence. I would say it’s lonely, that would be the standard” (Sharon) still prevails. The absence of communicative action culminates in a heightened awareness of the social exclusion, social isolation and loneliness many young widowed parents experience as “it’s almost like our own segregation” (Sharon). This echoes widowed research that concludes “loneliness was the most common element” (Smith, 2007, p.128). The familial impact of the widowed parent experience is exemplified in the practical statement that “it’s tricky and stressful but you have no choice...you are responsible for a little human child. You don’t want them to be disadvantaged over it. Or you don’t want it to be a traumatic experience for them so you keep things routine and balanced” (Edward).

Overall, the key findings of this research illustrate that it is more important to the widowed parents that their children’s needs be taken care of above their own. The research indicates that goodwill, sympathy and community support exists as “in a community you’re almost carried” (Annie). As articulated by Allyce what is lacking are practical supports and communication as “people kind of move in, as if you’re going to be saved, with all kinds of weird and wonderful ideals but with no understanding of where you are” the key data further illustrates “there’s no conversation, they do feel sorry but you don’t want that, you want a bit of understanding. No, you want something practical.” The first step is to create increased awareness regarding the importance of conversation which both engages and includes widowed parents as “you just want to discuss it but nobody ever says anything back...so they ignore it.” Ultimately, teachers and those working with the parentally bereaved family need to “gain knowledge of the diverse needs of widowed parents in assisting their children through the grieving process, and be equipped with the tools in order to offer them direct, focused and valuable guidance and assistance” (Smith, 2007, p.132).

### 6.2.2 *The School Response –Attitude, Caring, Communication and Consultation*

The second theme expresses the school responses to this grief and bereavement in the section on *The School Response – Veils of Silence and Magic Moments*. This gives a

keen sense of the limited capacity of schools to respond in the drawing of a veil of silence that stifles the expressions of loss and bereavement. The key findings highlight the negative impact of both school inaction and lack of classroom discussion as - “schools shut it down before it comes into the school grounds” which caused “resentment with their friends, anger as they felt abandoned because their friends wouldn’t even acknowledge the fact that their dad was dead and yet the pupils were just trying to follow the rules of the school” (Sharon). The lack of attention to strengthening the social development needs of children at school leads to confusion as “school can tick them over or balance them. At the moment they’re only ticking them over! There was a death recently in the school of a mum and it all started again...we’ve been told not to mention it. I’m afraid Jim went into school to the teacher and went ‘do you know what you are doing? You are erasing the importance of her mother!’” (Grace). This insight is very significant, given the gap between Departmental and curricular policies versus the lived reality of the primary school classroom for pupils, teachers and families. This raises the issue that inadequate school responses could be connected to lack of teacher training which is echoed in the quote that “I think schools don’t touch it. They don’t know what to do or have the training for it” (Annette). Training which highlights the importance of caring relation in teaching (Noddings, 2010) and the need to address Social and Emotional Well- Being (SEWB) of pupils during times of loss and grief would better empower and pedagogically equip teachers with the necessary skills to proactively address loss, bereavement and diversity at school. Indeed positive examples can be found in the relational responses of individual schools and teachers as captured through the sections on *Positive School Response: Magic Moments at School* and *Positive Teacher Attitudes: Communication and Engagement*.

This data indicates that “it was dealt with well...the school never hid away from it...the school tried to acknowledge the change” (Jonathan). Positive teacher attitudes were linked to open communication, asking and consulting parents and engaging pupils, offering little gestures to reassure the pupil that the school are aware of the changes and becoming well informed about the processes and impact of grief on a pupil’s holistic development - “the way she handled it in the daily classroom...she did address it, she did ask, she did address bereavement” (Andrew). Teachers becoming well informed about the indicators of grief instilled participant confidence in the educational system - “the teachers would kind of keep an eye on them and would say to me that they are not

showing any signs...they had a number of things they would watch for” (Gia). These findings highlight how responses tend to be embedded in the practical efforts of individual schools or teachers rather than being an integral part of the culture and structures of the primary system. This places an enormous strain on these individuals and absolves the school system of responsibility to respond to these pupils’ needs.

### 6.2.3 *The Role of Schools – Connectedness and Diverse Belief Systems*

Theme Three *Role of Schools – Death Education, We’ll Rule That Out*: explores teachers’ experiences and beliefs about the role of schools in supporting pupils’ experiences of change, loss and bereavement. Most notable are the findings that indicate “as an educator there’s a lot of counselling in your role nowadays...There are no real materials, resources. I suppose I’d just be going on gut instinct!” Findings with teachers highlight the diverse belief systems existing in our society and how they impact on talking about bereavement with children which needs to be expressed also within schools. It reviews the programmes applicable to the primary school setting and looks at the potential of integrating a Loss, Bereavement and Change component into the SPHE curriculum. It concludes by revealing the disenfranchised griever as the needs of individual pupils are neglected. As outlined in the introductory and conceptual chapters, this thesis intended to present the experiences of bereaved parents to their children’s schooling and to explore practical responses by schools. Clear limitations are evident in these earlier findings sections of schools’ limited capacity to respond to the complex needs of children experiencing change, loss and bereavement. The implications of Theme Three *Role of School: Death Education, We’ll Rule That Out*: documents the disconnect at school level and how school-based responses such as Critical Incidents Plans are a reactive approach. Instead a more proactive approach is suggested in Theme Four in terms of *Train It Forward Principle*.

### 6.2.4 *Train it Forward Principle: Benefits of Integrating a Proactive Approach*

This final theme explores the impact of the findings on policy, curricular practice and pedagogy. It highlights the rise in therapeutic education through the emphasis on Social and Emotional Well-Being of pupils. Theme Four explores perspectives of the practical pedagogical responses by schools as they integrate a proactive approach in the section

on *Train it Forward Principle: Integrating a Proactive Approach* as Helena states “a whole school approach is needed. A hidden policy is not enough, you just can’t look at the teachers’ practice. It’s real policy, parents, the whole system needs to be addressed and act now.” Findings discussed by parents, teachers and pupils included the benefits of a proactive approach, the pitfalls of singling out pupils and the need for a whole class curriculum; The need to demystify discussion of life changes such as death and bereavement at school.

Section two of the findings addresses the implications of these four themes for bereavement policy and practices at school. It highlights the need for schools to provide a clear platform for addressing bereavement at school in response to *Theme One-Widow Warrior Challenging Societal Stereotypes*. Theories on bereavement such as Bonanno’s (2002, 2004) four trajectories of grief illuminates that in the context of the widowed experience *resilience* and *recovery* (and not chronic dysfunction or delayed trauma) are the most common reactions to spousal bereavement. This gives important insights about the widowed-young parent experience and how schools can assist through fostering *resilience based approaches* to addressing pupils’ own grief and loss needs within educational contexts. Bonanno highlights how resilience enables people to “maintain relatively stable, healthy levels of psychological and physical functioning as well as the capacity for generative experiences and positive emotions” (2005, p. 3). Schools can play an important role in supporting the development of such resilience amongst students.

In response to this, a series of practical training, pedagogical and school level responses are outlined in section 5.12 - *The School Response: Veils of Silence and Magic Moments*, including; *The Training Challenge-Life Skills*, *Pedagogical Tools-A Matter of PRECEDENT*, *The Ripple Effect at School*, and the need to connect pedagogy, practice and policy. As discussed in chapter three and section 5.12, these approaches offer practical guides for schools to respond to the needs of pupils. This research gives voice to perspectives rarely heard, to shine a light on an often stereotyped and taboo subject, exploring the practical responses which schools can take to support pupils. An ecological understanding of bereavement highlights how important different social networks are in addressing loss and grief. As Burns highlights “the connectedness and relationships among multiple social systems affect every aspect of the child’s



development” (2010, p. 28). Schools which are part of these social networks should be encouraged to strengthen supports for families during times of loss and grief responding to research that reiterates the need for collaborative school action as “death neither obeys the school timetable nor appears on it...it enters the classroom without knocking” ([www.winstonswish.org.uk/schools-information-pdf-page/13](http://www.winstonswish.org.uk/schools-information-pdf-page/13)).

### **6.3 Beyond the Findings-Inclusion of Bereaved Children: Universal School Initiatives**

The empirical data of this research has indicated that connectedness is key to increasing a grieving pupil’s social and emotional well-being. In the context of this research this means that an inclusive whole school programme should be developed. This programme would promote a proactive universal approach to loss, bereavement and change in the classroom involving routine discussion and activities which diminish stigma for bereaved pupils. An inclusive programme which runs throughout the academic year would better equip pupils to deal with grief, whether it be a peer or their own. An open and inclusive curriculum approach to death would also help to instil a sense of collaborative support and to strengthen rapport among school staff. This research has demonstrated the potential of the Social, Personal Health Education (SPHE) curriculum to facilitate a whole school programme targeted at increasing supports for pupils dealing with loss, bereavement and change. The status and position of SPHE is important in this context. As discussed in section 3.12, recognition of the important contribution of this subject in school curriculum and a holistic school life is key. In addition, the data of this research has indicated that external agency interventions are rarely required as Sharon suggests –“it’s only about the little things, just teacher taking a little side way glance ... at least letting the child know you are with them.” Schools can provide routine and a sense of normalcy for grieving children. Therefore it is important that school policy and resources reflect the social reality of different family structures in the classroom. Potts (2013) argued that:

The provision of a familiar routine can be a support in itself. Education, around the topic of death and grief, which is accessible and age-appropriate, is a powerful tool that could equip young children, and their teachers, with a repertoire of survival skills when facing some of the traumas life will inevitably generate. (Potts, 2013, p. 103)

Recent findings on childhood bereavement highlight that “stigma encourages intolerance and prejudice against those seen as different, which can lead to social exclusion and isolation” (Burns, 2011, pp. 20–21). As we have seen (CSO, 2013) 4,384 children experienced a parental death whilst attending primary school. For those children social exclusion could be mitigated through a commitment to implementing a proactive bereavement policy.

#### **6.4 Policy Implications of the Data - Making Connections**

The guiding question of this thesis set out to investigate:

- From the widowed parent perspective how do primary schools support the loss and grief needs of bereaved pupils in the classroom?

This research has indicated that the lack of clear bereavement policy directives and teacher guidelines impede the schools’ capability to respond effectively to the specific needs of parentally bereaved children. This finding is echoed in a statement from the Irish Childhood Bereavement Network, that “the needs of bereaved individuals and their families are not being met. There is a lack of emphasis on childhood bereavement in government policy documents” (Irish Childhood Bereavement Network, 2012, p. 2). National attention needs to be focused on the issue of bereavement at school. This focus can be achieved through Department of Education and Skills directives that promote continuous professional development (CPD) courses and initial teacher induction programmes centred on providing grief and loss training for teachers. From a school policy perspective this research has highlighted the importance of consulting and communicating with practitioners, parents, peers and bereaved pupils, and of committed action in addressing parental death. Communication is fostered through both formal and informal conversations between parents, pupils and staff. Consultation is imperative to ensure policy remains updated, with procedures in place that reflect the needs of the school community. In addition, classroom library facilities should include literature on change and bereavement, and texts on positive approaches to mental health and coping skills. As evidenced in the “Train-it-Forward Principle” it is important to include accessible information on the impact of grief and the many types of reactions it can produce. The school library or resource room should have relevant materials and

suggested online resources to enable people to remain informed and equipped to address issues that arise at school. In this age of virtual connectivity and information, the bereavement policy and all auxiliary documents must be made accessible and openly available to all educational stakeholders. This practice needs to be reinforced through open access to a bereavement policy alongside the existing critical incident policy document. A key implication of this research is the great potential of schools to strengthen supports for parentally bereaved children:

For a child or young person whose life has been turned upside down, the routines of school life can give a sense of normality. Everything else may have fallen apart but school and the people within it are still there, offering a sense of security and continuity. . . . For a child who wishes to, school-staff can provide an opportunity to talk about what has happened with a familiar and trusted adult in relative peace and calm. (Butler, 2013, pp. 129–130)

The “Train-it-Forward” principle also highlighted the SPHE curriculum as an appropriate platform with which to address classroom bereavement.

## **6.5 Curriculum Implications- Tapping into the Potential of SPHE**

The SPHE framework is pivotal to the successful integration of a loss, bereavement and change curriculum at school. One element of this research was to investigate the extent to which the SPHE curriculum is integrated into the classroom to address issues of loss, bereavement and change with pupils at primary school. The rationale for appraising the SPHE curriculum is founded upon using the unique pedagogical and curricular frameworks that exist in SPHE policy documents. The SPHE curriculum “provides particular opportunities to foster the personal development and well-being of the child and to help him/her to create and maintain supportive relationships” (SPHE Teacher Guidelines, 1999, p. 2). The SPHE curricular aims and the objectives of this thesis are to increase children’s resilience (Bonanno, 2005; Eppler, 2012) and transformational coping skills (Gaffney, 2011). While SPHE is seen as pedagogically well placed to meet the needs of bereaved children, its potential is highly restricted by the half-hour weekly allotment and the low status of values-based subjects (Jeffers, 2008). This research has pinpointed the need for increased recognition, timetabling and updated content. Challenges in implementing SPHE are acknowledged by researchers (Clarke et al., 2010; Power et al., 2008) who claim that following a 2003 review of the implementation of SPHE, the discomfort with active methodologies and lack of teacher

training were noted as a hindrance to its effective use. This research echoes these findings and highlights the need to implement life skills training as a core component of initial teacher education and ongoing CPD. The significance of the caring relation in teaching as an educational approach that proactively encourages teachers to attend to the ‘expressed needs’ of pupils (in particular those pupils needing loss and grief support) alongside the ‘assumed needs’ of the curriculum should be acknowledged. The caring relation in teaching illustrates an educational approach that recognises and uses pedagogical tools such as receptive listening, critical thinking and making pedagogical connections alongside responding to both a pupil’s assumed and expressed needs as fundamental elements in responding to and increasing a pupil’s social and emotional SEWB at school. The caring relation in teaching therefore should be a key component of a potential loss, bereavement and change programme and be implemented at initial teacher training and through continuing professional development courses CPD.

## **6.6 Pedagogical Implications- Connectedness, Resilience and Caring**

The caring relation as identified by Noddings (2012) is central to addressing grief at school. Practitioners are encouraged to make relational connections, invite dialogue, use critical thinking and be reflective in their responses and approaches to class discussions. This research indicates that a holistic approach should be the fundamental drive in education and needs to be more prevalent in primary schools.

### *6.6.1 Caring in the Classroom – A Holistic Approach*

Holistic education is a keystone of Irish primary education which acknowledges that an “Integrated Holistic Model is a better way of providing services to children and families. The model pulls together different threads that have existed in many services in Ireland” (Walls & O’Connor, 2004, p. 402). This research has demonstrated the appropriateness and applicability of integrating a proactive approach to address the needs of grieving children in Irish classrooms. Attention to affective dimensions of learning will help teachers use a resilience-based approach to loss, bereavement and change by embracing academic progress alongside the social and emotional well-being of all children. The multifaceted holistic development of the child’s social, emotional, spiritual and cognitive learning is therefore addressed:

Holistic teachers pride in developing new methods that reflect . . . new views of what a child is . . . research with individual leaning styles, co-operative, critical thinking, cross disciplinary curricula and multiple intelligence theory that inspired many new initiatives. (Forbes, 1996, p. 8)

### 6.6.2 *Connectedness in the Classroom-Communication*

Pedagogical methods that would help practitioners integrate this framework into the school system are all concerned with collaboration, consultation and communication. Open, direct and legitimate factual communication in the classroom at school and in the school community are primary factors that help to mitigate the impact and extent of grief on parentally bereaved children. Appendix N has a complete table outlining the connection between communication and the suggested pedagogical approaches which also link theoretical views to the accounts of pupils, widows and teachers.

### 6.6.3 *Resilience: The Child's Voice in Grief*

An ecological understanding of grief emphasises the relationship between individuals and social systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1989). Of particular importance to this research is the connection between schooling and pupils' SEWB. The data presented demonstrates the impact of emotion on a child's capacity to learn in school. From a child's perspective, the findings of this research reinforces that a resilience-based approach to dealing with bereavement and loss is needed. This marks an important step in responding to the expressed needs (Noddings 2010) not just the assumed needs of parentally bereaved children. In this research, parents highlighted the resilience of their bereaved children as illustrated in this quote by Elise "the kids came home talking and they were all fascinated with it. Empowered by it brilliantly, by being able to talk about their daddy." This remark echoes research that noted children: "saw themselves as able to survive and thrive during grief, and they requested that others see their resilience, strength, and normalcy" (Eppler, 2008, p. 3). From the findings of this research it is apparent that consulting and communicating with children is vital. At times parents may be unavailable, dealing with their own grief; this is why a proactive and positive response to life-altering experiences of death through a visible loss, bereavement and change curriculum in SPHE in the classroom is imperative.

## 6.7 Key Recommendations

This research has demonstrated the immediate need to integrate bereavement policy into the classroom, transferring the rhetoric into pedagogical action. I recognise that addressing loss, bereavement and change in primary education involves collective leadership, participation from all stakeholders, funding, timetabling and professional development training. The “Train-it-Forward” principle taps into the lessons learned by widows, widowers, teachers and pupils, many of whom had directly encountered bereavement, to create an initial framework of practice that can inform primary approaches to school bereavement. By integrating this platform via existing SPHE content and curriculum, the initial steps to addressing parental bereavement in Irish primary schools are taken. This platform will affect pedagogy, policy and curricular practice. The recommendations that follow are presented to better equip practitioners, address diverse family types and strengthen needed supports for bereaved children in primary education.

### 6.7.1 *Policy Recommendations*

- Policy and Directives from the Department of Education and Skills must be revised to include guidelines for dealing with bereavement at school as distinct from the existing Critical Incidents Policy (2007). This should emphasise a proactive capability building approach of resilience rather than reactive response of crisis.
- Policy development and future planning should be driven by a concept of recognition and be sensitive to the holistic needs of pupils as embedded in the wider school community.
- Widowed parents as stakeholders in primary education should be included in the policy process to help inform and broaden understanding of salient issues that affect the education of parentally bereaved children in primary education.

### 6.7.2 *Curricular and Pedagogical Recommendations*

- An appraisal of the Social, Personal and Health Education curriculum (1999) has indicated the need to update and formally address the lack of continuity between policy intent and practice, to enable the application of bereavement modules in the classroom.

- Use of a “Platform Addressing Bereavement at School” (Table 5.2) helps to initiate discussion and better empower practitioners in the classroom. It brings together approaches and pedagogies that have proved effective in the classroom and have been documented by this research for future use in schools.
- At a pedagogical level the caring relation in teaching needs to be supported through CPD and embedded Initial Teacher Training programmes nationwide. Life skills training which emphasises social and emotional well-being (SEWB) of pupils is imperative alongside academic expertise in teacher education.

### 6.7.3 *Whole School Practice Recommendations*

- This research has indicated that an ecological, resilience-based approach to loss, bereavement and change is the most applicable school-based response and teacher methodology for use in the classroom. This emphasises the interconnected and holistic nature of the school as a community and environment.
- The integration of the Train it Forward Principle should be translated into school policy documents and implemented into classroom practice to address the needs of parentally bereaved children in primary education.

## 6.8 **Future Research: Bereavement at School**

Parental widowed perspectives have helped to bridge the gap between theoretical literature on childhood bereavement and existing SPHE vision statements that envision the integration of a holistic approach at school. This approach addresses both the educational and social and emotional well-being (SEWB) needs of bereaved children. The empirical data of this research may raise awareness and enable practitioners and readers to become better acquainted with the practical and schooling realities of parental widowhood. Further research might include a national survey of all stakeholders. Nationwide research could open discourse on the topic of loss and change alongside bereavement. This exploration would deepen professional expertise, encouraging a holistic perspective on how schools may better address the needs of grieving pupils.

With the fusion of theory, perspectives and proposed frameworks presented in this research, practitioners working with bereaved children can reflect on what appropriate

measures they should adopt to meet the needs of bereaved children. By so doing, they can help to ensure that children living with parental loss can participate in primary schooling days that are both educational and life-affirming. These aspirations were powered by the lived practical experiences of the widowed parents' encounters with primary schools throughout Ireland. They, along with educational professionals, share a common aspiration that diverse family types become visible, voiced and valued in the primary schools their children attend. Schools as educators of children for the future must take note of this dynamic interplay of forces:

All families must understand the schools their children attend. All schools must understand the families that they serve. And, all schools and families must understand how they can influence each other to benefit the children that they share. (Epstein, 2003, p. 123)

## **6.9 And Finally**

A unique feature of this qualitative research was its exploration of the duality of parental widowhood, whereby the surviving spouse becomes a single parent and widow or widower simultaneously. This research gave voice to 17 young widowed parent experiences. Whilst each life story was distinctive to the individual and context bound, common themes arose that united all these life-altering experiences and allowed a window into the world of parental widowhood to be systematically explored. Schools can strengthen supports for bereaved children through proactive policy, classroom pedagogies, and resilience-based practices. These were all pivotal factors in mitigating the extent to which children and parents were affected by bereavement. It is time to translate rhetoric on bereavement policy into action on loss, bereavement and change curricula, as the findings of this research have demonstrated that:

Bereaved young people want staff to recognise that they have been bereaved – they do not want the loss ignored. Schools do have a key role . . . staff can provide care, continuity and compassion in the security of a place that the young person knows well. Bereavement is a natural part of life; it is not a medical condition, it is not a pathology, it is not a mental illness and it needs to be acknowledged by the school. (Mallon, 2011, pp. 49–52)



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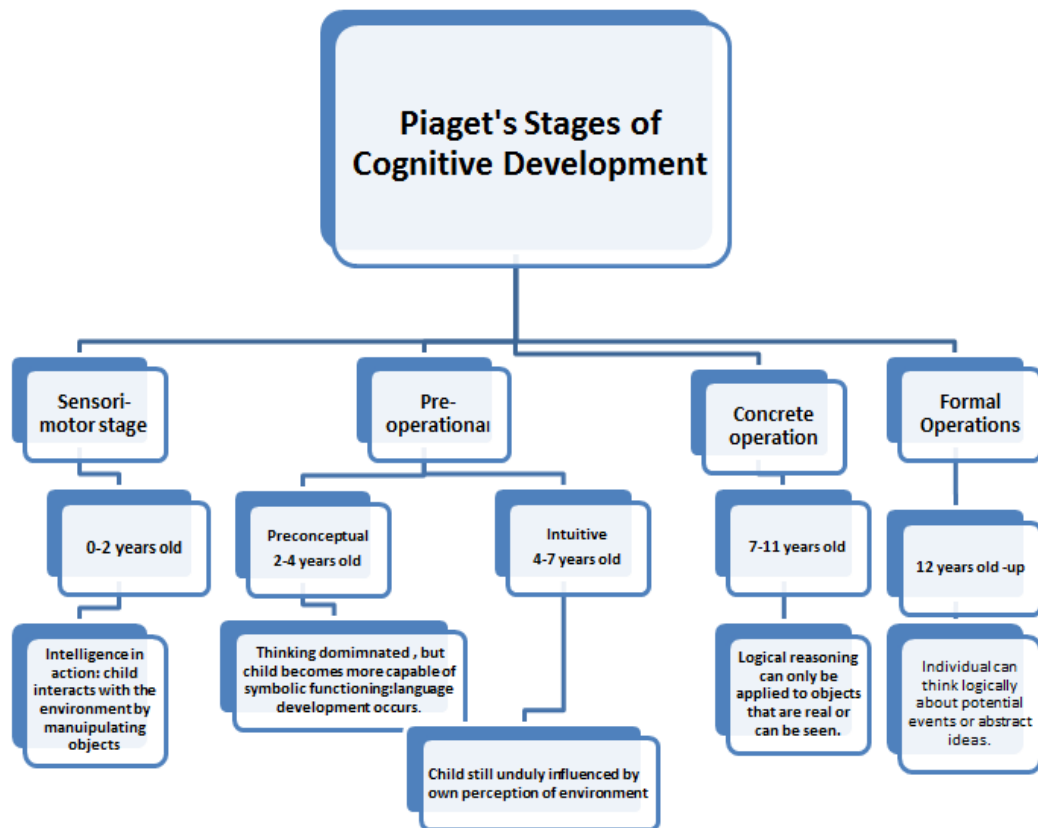
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## Appendix A: Piaget's Stage Development Theory



Age Range	Stage	Features
0–2	Sensorimotor	*Understanding occurs through sensory impressions and motor activities *Development of Object Permanence *Development of symbolic thought.
2–7	Preoperational	Two sub-stages: *(2–4 years) indicates immature or incomplete use of concepts; & * (4–7 years) Intuitive thought: reasoning is egocentric, perception-dominated and intuitive.
7–11	Concrete Operations	*Transition from pre-logical thinking to thinking governed by rules of logic *Thinking is concrete *Understands concept of conversation- reversibility & classification.
12 +	Formal Operations	*Characterized by an increased ability to use logical thought processes *Development of abstract thinking *Development of hypothetical deductive reasoning.

Source: Burns, 2010 p. 24

## Appendix B: Thought Bubble Responses of 35 Sixth-Class Students Attending a Mixed National School

Now you are on your way to secondary school, so well done, but before you go, you have lots of information I would love you to share. After all, you have been in school since you were four or five. That's seven or eight years, so can I ask you some questions about school?

**Q.1 Can you think of times when teachers might have discussed different family types, or how to cope if a death happens, how to deal with the loss and changes that many families might go through?**

Very few and not very often.

Only one and that's now in sixth class.

No. I do not ever remember any teacher talking to us.

Not any. Never. Only this year.

**Q.2 How did or does it make you feel?**

Stupid. It is silly to think that some teachers feel just so weird about speaking about something that most people share.

I feel much better now about my family. I was allowed talk about my family.

Strange; I don't know why family just never comes up in school.

**Q.2 (Continued)**

Our generation has been brought up to think that it's bad to be in a different family because teachers don't talk about it, especially not about death. You know I think it's important to be different.

Happy because it's nice to talk about it.

I think it makes me feel annoyed that they don't ever discuss death or family.

Sad in some ways. I lost my dad and then [my mother] got divorced and no one said anything.

Sad and scared, like what's wrong with it.

It makes me feel as though it's bad to talk about it because I think the teachers are so embarrassed about it.

**Q.3 What kinds of family do you see most often in your school books?**

Perfect families, they have everything.

A ma, da, son and daughter. Happy families.

Always the normal family – mum, dad, brother and sister.

I just think teachers need to get over themselves (and the books also) and realise that these topics hugely affect on us too. Here's a picture of me and my extended family.

**Q.4 Do you think teachers discuss topics about family and loss in the right way?  
Can you give your reasons?**

No way and I don't know why.

Sometimes but teachers really, really have to listen.

Really, they don't discuss what a family really is and how to deal with family things, like problems.

**Q.5 Can you suggest other ways the topic could be approached at school?**

Circle time, let people talk for themselves.

Drama, books and apps on my iPhone and DS.

Talk more about it, just normal like English, you know.

Just do it. Do it More often.

Talk about the different types of families in discussion time.

Drama time and SPHE.

Do more SPHE.

Use any of the subjects, like history has war and death and family.

Talk time – teachers should be more interested in this stuff than getting us just to read books.

Have a day when the children pretend to be like a real family, all the different types of families like role play.

It's great just to talk about it so use English books, novels you know.

## Appendix C: The Widow.ie Forum Introduction Template

### *Widow/er/hood and the School Years*

Hello,

My name is Nicola Martin-Hodgins. I am a young widowed parent, teacher and researcher. I have been widowed for eight years now but have a wonderful daughter to keep me busy. I am hoping to publish a voluntary doctoral research with NUIM (Maynooth University) which will be available for all, entitled- “The School Response to Bereaved Children in Primary Education: The Widowed Parent Experience”.

My main aim is to bring awareness to the issues that surround becoming a widower or widow at a very young age.

To do this I want to hear your story and capture your experiences about what it is to be a young widowed parent with school-going children.

Interviews would be very informal in nature and audio-taped only.

I am seeking widows or widowers with Primary School children, who have been bereaved at least three years or more, to help with this study.

If you think you might like to help, please contact me at 0..... (after work hours) or email me at,,,,,,,,,,,,, anytime.

Thank you for reading and I hope to meet with some of you soon.

Nicola Martin-Hodgins.



## **Appendix D: Interview Schedule for Teaching Professionals**

### **Guiding Questions for semi-structured interview: Teachers and Principals**

- How, in your opinion, is Lone Parenthood perceived in the educational field?
- What descriptions would you use to further explore the term Lone Parenthood?
- How do you believe schools respond to sudden changes in family structures for the children in their immediate school environment?
- Could you describe any support materials or guidelines teacher can access to assist children with this transition to a single parent family?
- Would you be aware of an existing Family School Policy in your school? If so, could you describe some of the key suggestions?
- Are there any suggestions for educational policymakers you feel should be further forwarded to assist teachers on the ground to cater for changing family structures in the classroom?
- Would you feel Family Diversity is an important aspect of education today; if so, could you describe why? If not, could you explain why?
- Is there anything else you would like to add to give me an understanding of your experience as a teacher at the coal face of teaching, working with children whose family structures have changed dramatically?

## **Appendix E: Interview Schedule for Widowed Participants**

### **Guiding Questions for semi-structured interview: Widowed Participants**

- How, in your opinion, is widowhood perceived in the public domain?
- What descriptions would you use to further explore the term widowhood?
- Could you describe a particular moment in which widowhood became a reality for you? As an individual? As a widowed single parent?
- How would you describe your adjustment to single parenthood?
- Could you describe any supports you may have found helpful or unhelpful in your transition to single parenthood?
- How did the school respond to your child's transition to a single parent family?
- Would you be aware of an existing Family School Policy in your child's school? If so, could you describe some of the key suggestions?
- Are there any additional suggestions for schools or educational policymakers you feel should be further considered?
- Are you aware of any reference to the study of Family Diversity in your child's classroom or school?
- If so, could you mention some aspects your child may have discussed with you throughout their primary school years?
- If not, do you believe it would be an instructive measure to school life?
- Is there anything else you would like to add to better give me an understanding of your experience as a young widowed parent dealing with education and schools in general?

## **Appendix F: Consent Form for Widowed, Principal and Teacher Candidates**

**Title of Study:** *The School Response to Bereaved Children in Primary Education: The Widowed Parent Experience.*

**Researcher:** Nicola Martin-Hodgins,  
Doctor in Education Student  
NUIM Ireland, Department of Adult and Community Education,  
Maynooth, Co. Kildare.

**Telephone:** 353 (0).....

**Supervisor:** Professor Anne Ryan  
Department of Adult and Community Education  
NUIM Ireland,  
Maynooth, Co. Kildare.

**Telephone:** 353(0).....

I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to participate in a research thesis entitled: *The School Response to Bereaved Children in Primary Education: The Widowed Parent Experience*, conducted by Nicola Martin-Hodgins. This Researcher is a National School Primary Teacher and Doctor in Education student in the Department of Adult and Community Education at the National University of Ireland.

This research will involve participating in one to two interviews lasting forty minutes to an hour. I am aware that the interviews will be tape recorded and transcribed. The transcribed documents will be made available to me on request so that I will have the opportunity to read and change the transcription to ensure it accurately reflects what I have said. I understand that this information will be used for a doctoral thesis and that direct quotations from the interview information I provide may be used in future reports and presentations.

However, I will be identified only by a code name or pseudonym. My name will be known only to the researcher and will never appear on any written or presented material. I am aware that I may not benefit directly from this study, and that there are no known foreseen risks to participating in this study. I understand that the information I disclose will be of a sensitive and personal nature. I understand that the data obtained pertaining to this research study shall be kept in a secure location accessible only to Nicola Martin-Hodgins, to ensure confidentiality.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the study at any time. I understand that withdrawal from the study will result in deletion and destruction of data pertaining to myself. I understand that if I have questions about my participation in this study, I can contact Nicola Martin Hodgins directly at (.....), or Professor Anne Ryan (.....), at any time. Upon my request I may receive a copy of summary findings of the research and/or meet with the researcher to discuss such findings. I understand that this research will be published.

I have had the opportunity to discuss the study purpose and my participation with the researcher and to ask questions and receive answers regarding my involvement in the study. I have read and understand this consent form and received a copy for my personal records.

Participant's Name (Please print)

Participant's signature

Date

Researcher Name

Date

*\*If during your participation in this study you feel the information and guidelines that you were given have been neglected or disregarded in any way, or if you are unhappy about process, please contact the Secretary of the National University of Ireland Maynooth, The Ethics Committee at [research.ethics@nuim.ie](mailto:research.ethics@nuim.ie) or +353 (0)1 708 6019. Please be assured that your concerns will be dealt with in a sensitive manner.*

## Appendix G: Guardians of Pupils Permission Slip and Consent Form

**Title of Study:** *The School Response to Bereaved Children in Primary Education: Widowed Parent Perspectives.*

**Researcher:** Nicola Martin-Hodgins,  
Doctor in Education Student  
NUIM Ireland, Department of Adult and Community Education,  
Maynooth, Co. Kildare.

**Telephone:** 353 (0).....

**Supervisor:** Professor Anne Ryan  
Department of Adult and Community Education  
NUIM Ireland,  
Maynooth, Co. Kildare.

**Telephone:** 353(0).....

As described in the information letter forwarded to you, the above study aims to address family diversity at schools, by exploring the prevalence of existing educational policy which aptly reflects current social realities of family structures in Ireland. A motivating factor behind this research rests in gathering and publishing insights and perspectives received from diverse family types, in particular single-parent widowed families, educational professionals and pupils, to help provide a framework for a potential Change & Family curriculum, which is currently lacking under Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE) in Primary Schools.

Such research is based on gaining the viewpoints of three main sectors of society: Parents, Educators and Pupils, who themselves are at the forefront of curriculum delivery in the form of the existing SPHE (Social Personal and Health Education) curriculum.

Although widowed perspectives gained through interviews will aid in reviewing the aptness of school responses to familial changes, and an investigation into whether a praxis deficit exists at the practical classroom level of daily teaching, will be established by evaluating teachers' and principals' experiences of how effectively teacher training empowers their knowledge and skills, towards grappling with family diversity, the voice of the pupil is not yet represented. This I believe is an omission in research to date.

It is imperative to represent pupils in research, as it is they that receive prescribe curricula; therefore to gain deeper insight into the awareness of educational professionals towards curriculum materials/textbooks representation of family types, pupil responses based on their reflections of their participation with the SPHE, current family syllabus, will be voiced to help gauge the aptness of the existent curriculum resource.

The pupil focus is not on bereavement (widowed families are in the minority and only part of the single parent spectrum) but on diverse family structures. Pupils' comments will focus purely on family diversity as delivered by the SPHE curriculum. Parental consent for any pupil involvement in the research is essential. Pupil involvement will be based purely on pupils' own written comments in response to the "Family" aspect of the current SPHE curriculum, which is covered in the daily remit of the classroom. Written comments will focus on whether pupils would like to forward suggestions or modifications, to the current SPHE curriculum. This information will be gathered to inform educators on how effectively the current school system is

in responding to family diversity in Ireland. The research will be published in a Doctoral thesis. It is important that you discuss this information with your child, to ensure they feel comfortable in participating with this research. Lastly participants will only be identified by a code name or pseudonym. Identities will be known only to the researcher and will never appear on any written or presented material.

All candidates who wish to participate in this research will be required to complete and sign a consent form. This is imperative as it ensures that candidates, pupils and parents are made aware that participation is purely voluntary and that one can withdraw from the study at any time. Withdrawal from the study will result in immediate deletion and destruction of data pertaining to the pupil. In addition, if there are any questions about the research or participation, Nicola Martin Hodgins, the researcher, is available at (0.....), or Professor Anne Ryan (.....), at any time to discuss any queries. Therefore if you give permission for your child's participation in this research please sign, date and return the permission slip below, and return it to Ms. Nicola Martin-Hodgins' classroom.

Thank-you for taking the time to read this information.

PERMISSION SLIP

I, \_\_\_\_\_, parent/guardian of \_\_\_\_\_ in X National School, agree that my child \_\_\_\_\_ may participate in a research thesis entitled *The School Response to Bereaved Children in Primary Education: Widowed Parent Perspectives*, conducted by Nicola Martin- Hodgins, a National School Primary Teacher and Doctor in Education student in the Department of Adult and Community Education at the National University of Ireland.  
Dated \_\_\_\_\_.

## Appendix H: Background Information Sheet

*Demographic Information:*

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Female: \_\_\_\_\_ Male: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone: \_\_\_\_\_

Current Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Age when widowed: \_\_\_\_\_

Length of time widowed (in years): \_\_\_\_\_

Current marital status: \_\_\_\_\_

How many children do you have? \_\_\_\_\_

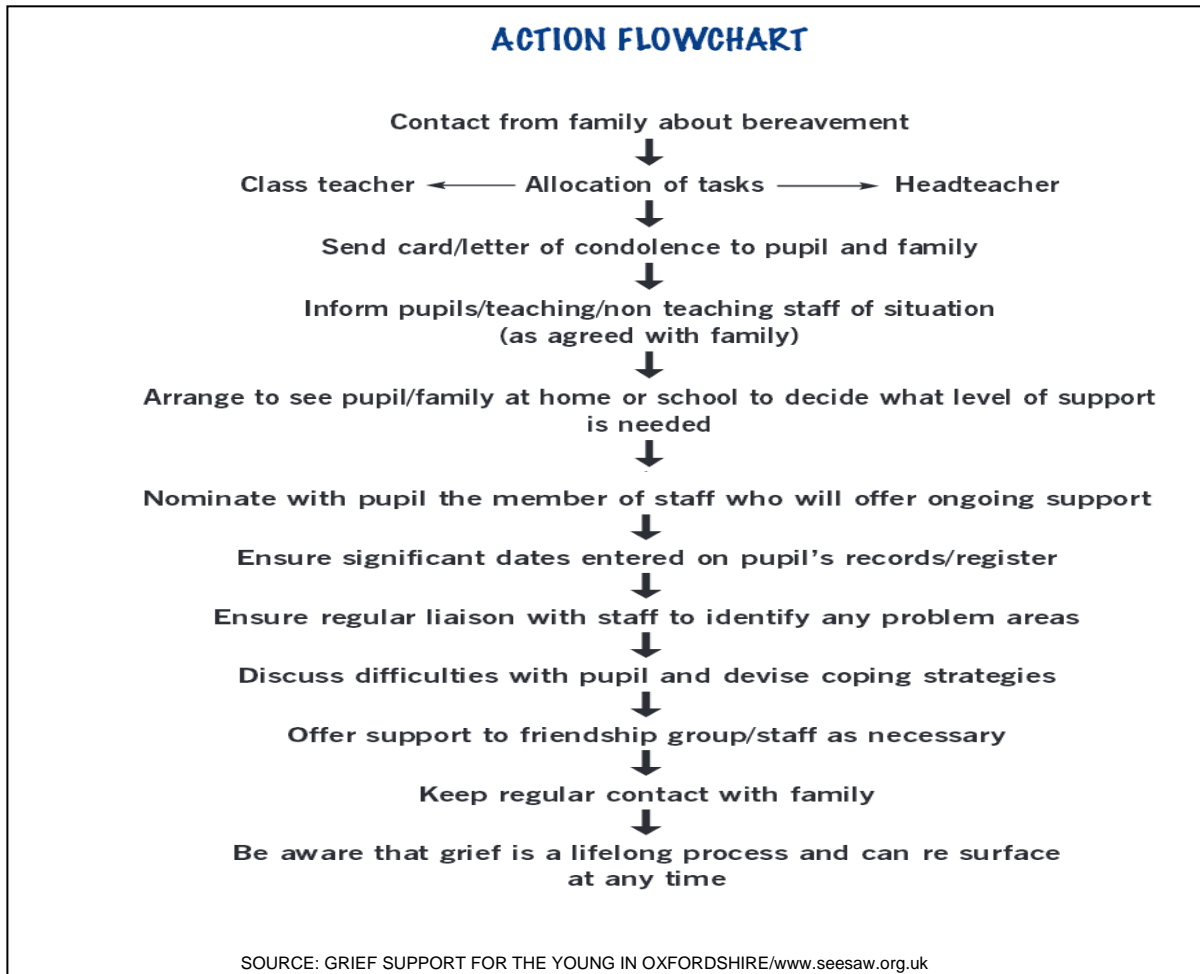
Ages of children at the time of your partner's death? \_\_\_\_\_

Ages of children currently attending Primary School: \_\_\_\_\_

Are you currently or have you ever been involved in a grief/loss support group? \_\_\_\_\_

Thank-you.

## Appendix I: Action Flowchart





## Appendix J: Framework – School Bereavement Policy

### FRAMEWORK FOR DEVELOPING A SCHOOL BEREAVEMENT POLICY

#### **Introduction**

- Should explain why it is important to devise a bereavement policy, and how this policy fits into the overall approach adopted by school towards the care of its staff and pupils.
- It should include the date when the policy came into operation, the review date and by whom it will be reviewed. You should also cross reference this policy with any other associated policies provided by the DES/ NEPS - Critical Incident Plan.

#### **Aims of policy**

This should identify:

1. Who is involved and the roles adopted.
2. Acknowledge the potential of School to offer opportunities to express feelings in a safe and supportive environment.
3. The development of an action plan to support staff and pupils.
4. Inform that schools can gain access to specialist help if necessary (NEPS) and that a note will be kept of any personnel or organisations contacted.
5. Offer lists of resources and information on grief, and trauma.
6. Procedure – This should include steps to be taken and by whom from the moment staff are informed of a death.
7. Use flow chart (Appendix J).
8. Training – This might include a statement about providing opportunities for bereavement training

#### **Evaluation, review and publication of Policy**

- Explanation of how the policy will be evaluated, e.g. feedback from bereaved pupils, parent and staff, how often and by whom the policy will be reviewed, and where the policy can be found.

- SOURCE: GRIEF SUPPORT FOR THE YOUNG IN OXFORDSHIRE/[www.seesaw.org.uk](http://www.seesaw.org.uk)

## Appendix K Suggested Literature for Primary School Children

- *Badger's Parting Gifts* -Susan Varley

(When badger dies his friends ease their sadness by remembering the special "gifts" he gave them)

- *I Miss You – a first look at death – Pat Thomas*

(Simple factual and sensitive exploration of death which includes interactive questions)

- *Always and Forever – Alan Durant*

(The animals talk and laugh about their memories of their friend Fox following his death)

- *Beginnings and Endings with Lifetimes In Between – Mellonie and Ingpen*

(Beginning with small creatures and ending with humans, the cycle of life and death is told factually)

- *Scrumpy – Dale and Joos*

(Tells the story of how a young boy reacts and copes when his much loved dog dies)

- *The Huge Bag of Worries – Virginia Ironside*

(Jenny's worries build up and get out of control. She just can't get rid of them, until she meets an old lady who helps her sort them out. A lovely story with fun illustrations encourages children to talk about their worries)

- *The Sad Book – Michael Rosen*

(Book about Michael Rosen's sadness at losing his son – reaches out to adults and children alike)

- SOURCE: GRIEF SUPPORT FOR THE YOUNG IN OXFORDSHIRE/[www.seesaw.org.uk](http://www.seesaw.org.uk)

## Appendix L: Social and Emotional Well-Being of Teachers


*“Bereavement is “not only painful to experience, but also painful to witness” (Bowlby, 1980)*

1. Supporting a bereaved child in your class can be very stressful. It is made more difficult because the support may have to continue over a long period of time and there is no “quick fix” solution to the child’s pain and distress. Sometimes the circumstances of the death may have resonances for you too, or you may have a personal connection to the person who has died. Whatever the situation, it may help to remember the following:
2. Being alongside a child or young person’s pain and distress is very stressful, but you are not responsible for the child’s grief and you cannot carry it for them. What you can do is offer them support on their journey.
3. It sometimes helps to remember that grief cannot be “sorted” but it can be supported, and your job is to find the words and the way to share the journey.
4. Offering support is made easier if you understand how children and young people may react to bereavement and if you have strategies in your mind to help them cope in school. So read up about grief and bereavement or seek advice from other professionals. Being prepared gives you more confidence and reduces stress levels.
5. Sometimes, witnessing another person’s grief can re-awaken losses from our own past. Be prepared to acknowledge your own grief should it re-emerge.
6. It is both helpful and necessary when working with a bereaved pupil, or experiencing your own feelings of grief, to know where you can go for support for yourself – be this via your management structure or trusted colleagues. After all, you ensure pupils know where to go for support, so you need to know where yours will come from too! Knowing how to access your support network lightens the load and enables clearer thinking about ways forward.
7. It is helpful to know your limitations, so do not offer more than you can deliver. Best to offer something small but be able to be constant in its delivery, than to go for the grand but unsustainable gestures! This will help keep things more manageable for you.
8. At the end of a difficult day, take time for yourself – do something you enjoy and don’t feel guilty about it! You will be better able to face tomorrow if you are kind to yourself today.

\*SOURCE: GRIEF SUPPORT FOR THE YOUNG IN OXFORDSHIRE/[www.seesaw.org.uk](http://www.seesaw.org.uk)\*

## Appendix M: Integrating PRECEDENT in Irish Classrooms – Theory, Perspectives and Action

### PRECEDENT IN IRISH CLASSROOMS – RESEARCHER SUGGESTIONS

	<i>Theoretical Views</i>	<i>Widows' school encounters</i>	<i>Teacher Concerns</i>	<i>Student Insight</i>	<i>Possible Action</i>
<p><b>Personality</b></p> <p>Organic factors of child's personality</p>	<p>"Children rely on the help and support of families, friends and teachers. Some children need no more than this and a caring school response may reduce the need for others to seek specialist help." (<i>When Tragedy Strikes</i>, 2000, p. 19)</p>	<p>"The teacher is God to them, they say read a book it's done... so they ignore this and <i>that opportunity to talk to another adult vanishes</i>... I know my child needed another outlet...she was worried I'd get upset. (tearful pause) ... Teachers are just brilliant at that kind of thing." (Grace)</p>	<p>"Being a teacher and a widow I was shocked at how depressing other teachers found it! I think that's because there just isn't training." "<i>It would be nice as we know our students yet we feel awkward, you know you want to discuss it, to voice it for them but there's no conversation.</i>"</p>	<p>"I lost my dad and then [my mother] got divorced and no one ever said anything to me... I just had to handle it myself."</p> <p>"I am brave, the real type of brave."</p>	<p>Start with the 4Ws</p> <p>Use Pebble technique</p> <p>Existing teacher/pupil rapport can foster empathy, learning and resilience</p> <p>Use of Active Listening Children voiced need to depict selves as resilient</p>
<p><b>Relationship to the deceased and close family members</b></p>	<p>"Teachers know the children well and are in a powerful position to offer strategic and specific support to children and their families in a familiar setting." (<i>When Tragedy Strikes</i>, 2000, p. 19)</p>	<p>"There was <i>no talk</i> at school and my son just <i>blames himself</i>, (pause) if he hadn't have made his dad go to soccer practice. He blames himself and it's horrible." (Annie)</p> <p>"The new were great, I know the teacher <i>let her tell her story</i>, write it down and share it when she wanted to with her peers and you know she was so comfortable telling it, <i>she was so articulate.</i>" (Eve)</p>	<p>"I don't want to cause upset but sometimes you don't know the full story, and there needs to be a policy around bereavement so teachers know what to do." (Jane)</p>	<p>"It was so nice to talk about him and paint the stones for the water fountain."</p> <p>"It's okay to remember him now."</p>	<p>Use of Narrative story approach (Neimeyer, 2005) accentuates positives of relationships rather than reliance on a 'Deficit Model' of grief.</p> <p>NEPS support schools – professional intervention for children who require specialist support.</p>
<p><b>Experience</b></p> <p>Regardless of age, past experiences of loss and death will have an effect on the grief response.</p>	<p>Research suggests use of proactive whole-class strength-based approach (Bonanno, 2004; Stokes, 2004).</p> <p>Students become informed about the nature and impact of grief.</p> <p>Social connectedness (Clay, 2004) can be strengthened through resilience narratives (Neimeyer, 2005) in the classroom.</p>	<p>"It's interesting to have the teacher side and the parent side. . . we have the experience of it! <i>Schools pretend but don't really do consultation</i>... ask the child more too – what they think, how they feel, how they'd like to talk about it." (Grace)</p> <p>"He seem to understand all things, he was fully involved. He had acclimatised to it." (Des)</p>	<p>"I think the students today are more attuned to realities, to diversity and deal with change in family situations all the time... sometimes curriculum is failing to catch up. I'd like better guidelines." (Anne)</p>	<p>"Teachers need to listen and let us speak for ourselves"</p> <p>"I find it hard doing homework all the time, I just get tired. I got into trouble all the time for stupid stuff."</p>	<p>Use of SPHE strand – Myself and My Family</p> <p>No high focus/singling out – whole class approach adopted.</p> <p>Circle-time to share others' stories/ CSO records/ novels and poetry/SESE – Life cycle</p>

<p><b>Culture</b> Customs, traditions, beliefs and values of the child's given culture will influence expressions of grief.</p>	<p>SPHE Content and School Ethos can tap into diversity at school and promote understanding.</p>	<p>"Certainly my school had no great experience of it, but honestly they were absolutely fabulous – subtly but you know your girls and you were supported. <i>Just the ethos I guess, communication was always open, always just there.</i>" (Annie)</p>	<p>"Diversity is such a part of education. We have SPHE but please, 30 minutes a week is going to cover nothing at all." (Anne)</p>	<p>"Just talk more – do more SPHE."</p>	<p>SPHE – Strand Myself &amp; others – Diversity</p> <p>Be aware of Ripple Effect</p> <p>Written &amp; clear oral communication (religious intent, etc.)</p>
<p><b>Environment</b> Family and social support, socio-economic status, schools and communities, all affect grief reactions</p>	<p>"If teachers, children and parents receive information and support, they can become important agents of recovery, dispelling rumour and encouraging coping throughout the community" (<i>When Tragedy Strikes</i>, 2000, p. 19).</p> <p>"Death also frequently precipitates a host of changes within the family and daily routines." (Heath &amp; Cole, 2011, p. 245).</p>	<p>Schools seem to be getting more and more stretched all the time, but times have changed and schools haven't really...they are <i>only now catching up with the Diversity thing. Get organised, have literature, make space, get resources contacts at hand.</i> It's no mystery people die, it's going to happen for some children, so if you really want to educate start with yourself – teachers."</p>	<p>"I never received any training in the area of loss or change in college, so it's hard to deal with it when you have no theory, you just go on gut instinct." (Gia)</p>	<p>"Use any of the subjects, like history has real stuff like war and death and it's about families." (Alex)</p>	<p>Be aware of the Double jeopardy situation for children</p> <p>Use resilience-building techniques</p> <p>The natural school grounds</p>
<p><b>Development</b> Cognitive, social and emotional dimensions affect how bereavement is grieved and perceived.</p>	<p>There is a great deal teachers can do as teachers using educational methods" (<i>When Tragedy Strikes</i>, 2000, p. 19).</p> <p>"The normal curriculum provides for the teaching of personal and physical safety, life skills and opportunities for pupils to express their feelings, fears and reactions through class/individual activities such as art, music, drama and writing. Schools also have existing systems which can be adapted to support and inform people, such as pastoral care systems and newsletters." (<i>When Tragedy Strikes</i>, 2000, p. 19)</p>	<p>Yes, I know kids don't need to be popped out of their protective shells but schools need to make them more aware...talk about stages of grief... words can be frightening you know, but sometimes by explaining them you take the mystery away...teachers have ways in, that parents just don't." (Elaine)</p> <p>They know far more than you think...I heard X say they're rolling it out again today the bullying talk or the inspectors in ... you can't treat death like that a prescribed once off talk. The kids are already talking about it." (Jane)</p>	<p>"I'd say we have a good bit of learning to do in the Primary sector... building awareness of the reality of the classroom... we all know a teacher that has dealt with it, so the children have to get this information." (Ava)</p>	<p>"They think because we're young we don't know this stuff".</p> <p>"I think, our generation has been brought up to think that it's bad to be in a different family... teachers don't talk about it, especially not about death. You know I already know it's good to be different."</p>	<p>Introduction of proactive loss, bereavement and change curricular approach</p> <p>Whole class participation – universal policy &amp; programmes like the Relationship &amp; Sexuality integration</p> <p>Age-appropriate material will scaffold the learning of resilience and coping skills</p>

<p><b>Equilibrium</b></p> <p>The ability to maintain a balance between forces of grieving loss whilst investing in or continuing on meaningfully with life.</p>	<p>This approach can “include encouraging a restorative orientation at appropriate times, and doing what they can to ensure that the loss can be expressed, in safe and supported surroundings” (Abdelnoor &amp; Hollins, 2004 as cited in Mallon, 2011, p. 52).  “Teachers help by providing continuity, security, coping skills and supportive responses; their work complements and supports that of health and other professionals.” (<i>When Tragedy Strikes</i>, 2000, p. 19)</p>	<p>“The teacher would <i>keep an eye</i> on them and would say they’re not showing any signs, you know they had a <i>number of things to watch out for</i>. It made me <i>feel really heard</i>, they knew what they were at...I knew that let me know and <i>together we could handle it</i>.” (Nora)</p> <p>“The SNA was just fantastic, she just made space for her, had fun. She didn’t directly talk about it but was there if she wanted to talk about it.” (Annie)</p>	<p>“Academics are part of schooling and although I understand there will be differences made for the child, I still think routine is good as it can focus the child and give them a break from the sadness.” (Gia)</p>	<p>I feel much better now about my family. I was allowed talk about my family.</p>	<p>Use loss &amp; restorative orientated tasks to help encourage the child.</p> <p>Narrative approach can be revisited to build up coping mechanisms and face the adverse times.</p> <p>Be there, listen and give space.</p> <p>Use of Butler’s key structures.</p>
<p><b>Nature</b></p> <p>Finite/Non-Finite, Anticipated or Unanticipated affects the child’s grief.</p>	<p>Multiple ecological factors influence the grief process. The type of bereavement, surviving family members, a potential support system for the grieving child, experience altered functioning as they attempt to reorder and adjust to life without the deceased parent (Horwitz, 1997). The bereaved child often expresses his or her sense of loss at school (McGlaulin, 1998).</p>	<p>“The school knew and were supportive as it was a long-term illness. They kept contact flowing, did the public funeral display but also had that informal chat or need in the morning.” (Dave)</p> <p>“They were so understanding re appointments and missed days” (Annie)</p> <p>“They gave the children space, time but kept a watchful eye, it was subtle but you knew the school were prepared.” (Eve)</p>	<p>Training about the stages of grief, the right words to use, it’s not about content as much knowing how to use it without causing harm.</p>	<p>“It is silly to think that some teachers feel just so weird about speaking about something that most people share.” (Mark)</p>	<p>Open communication imperative.</p> <p>Use of PRECEDENT framework in the classroom.</p>
<p><b>Transcendence</b></p> <p>The ability to rise above one’s sorrow, following the loss experience implicit in bereavement.</p>	<p>“Teachers have many skills which promote coping such as building self-esteem” (<i>When Tragedy Strikes</i>, 2000, p. 19)</p>	<p>“Now the girls are heads high again...I see them an awful lot wiser older...she has been through different experiences than the others but she has developed through it.” (Annie)</p>	<p>“As a teacher, I think all the others in [X]’s class see how he is a happy boy, he laughs and has worked through this, all children have learned.”</p>	<p>“I’m happy now because it’s nice to talk about it.”</p>	<p>Educators can foster resilience through a Narrative approach to bereavement.</p>

*PRECEDENT in the Irish Classroom*