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Grieving Students: School Social Workers' Perspectives

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Grieving Students: School Social Workers' Perspectives

by

Kaitlin J. Salscheider, B.A.

MSW Clinical Research Paper

Presented to the Faculty of the
School of Social Work
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Master of Social Work

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The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present the findings of the study. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

Abstract

Children and adolescents often experience a wide variety of loss and disruptive change throughout their lives. School is where children and adolescents are expected to perform at their best intellectual, emotional, social, and behavioral capacity; however, the reaction after a loss can impact a student's academic performance and include regressive behavior. Schools are a fundamental place for the development of children, and school social workers in particular work with students who have experienced a wide variety of stressful incidents and are critical in improving the social-emotional well-being in students. The purpose of this study was to explore school social workers' experiences working with grieving students. Using a qualitative design, 10 school social workers currently working in Minnesota elementary schools, middle schools, and high schools were interviewed regarding their experiences working with grieving students. The findings indicated a high prevalence of loss among students, leading school social workers to work with grieving students on a frequent basis. Additionally, students often experience wide-ranging types of losses, including both death and non-death losses. Findings also indicated various barriers that school social workers face in providing services to grieving students and the lack of grief and loss training for school social workers and teachers. These findings highlight the critical, multifaceted role of the school social worker in working with grieving students.

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Grieving Students: School Social Workers' Perspectives

Grief and loss occurs in many forms, in a variety of situations, and is not immune to any age group (Pomeroy & Garcia, 2011). Grief and the pain of loss are linked together because they are “universal human experiences that every person repeatedly encounters” (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006, p. 2). Loss is produced by an event that is perceived to be negative and results in changes to social situations, relationships, and patterns of emotion. The grief that loss produces may come as a result of the death of loved one, parental divorce or separation, or other disruptive life changes. All types of losses can trigger grief in children (Dyregrov, 2008). The topic of child and adolescent grief and loss is important because it affects many children and families. Although adults and parents hope to protect children from life’s hardships, all children will face the challenge of coping with loss (Heath, Leavy, Hansen, Ryan, Lawrence, & Sonntag, 2008). The consensus for many years concerning bereavement was that children do not experience grief; however, we know now that anyone who is old enough to love is old enough to grieve (Wolfelt, 2004).

Children and adolescents often experience a wide variety of losses and disruptive change throughout their lives. According to Goldman (1994), 1 in 20 children will have experienced the death of a parent by age 18. With the divorce rate more than quadrupling in the past 20 years, approximately one-third of American children are being raised in single parent homes (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006). According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 568,000 children were removed from their biological families to live in foster care in 1999 alone (cited in Walsh-Burke, 2006). Children also experience grief as a result of abandonment, domestic violence, natural disaster, or other crisis event (Pomeroy & Garcia, 2011). Grieving children often experience some initial depression and anxiety (Quinn-Lee, 2014). Although this is normal,

these feelings can linger and become challenging. Additionally, grief can lead to more serious mental health issues.

Life is a continuous change, and change in itself, whether positive or negative, always contains loss (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006). Even perceived normal changes, such as a change of schools, the loss of a pet, or a friend's move can include loss. People grieve because they have lost someone or something to which they were closely attached. Grief is defined as the physical, psychological, and social reaction to the loss of something or someone important to an individual (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006; Worden, 1996). Grief is also defined as the "conflicting feelings caused by a change or an end in a familiar pattern of behavior" (James, Friedman, & Matthews, 2001, p. 7). Although we typically view death as representative of all loss events, children experience many other losses (Favazza & Munson, 2010). In fact, there are more than 40 life experiences that can produce conflicting feelings aligned with grief and loss (James et al., 2001). These experiences and how children react to them can be the source of much physical and emotional damage. Children may not always express their grief as sadness, and it is important to understand a range of potential grief reactions that may change depending on their age and development (Massat, Moses, & Ornstein, 2008). Children have more difficulty expressing their feelings than adults and may demonstrate behaviors that show regression and confusion because they have no words to articulate their sense of loss. Ultimately, a child or adolescent's grief experience reflects different levels of cognitive ability, emotional maturity, and the dependence on adults for care and support (Pomeroy & Garcia, 2011). As they enter new developmental stages, the grief process continues in a cycle, and children and adolescents re-experience loss in new ways (Massat et al., 2008).

Schools are in a unique position to help grieving children (Holland, 2008). According to

the National Center for Education Statistics (n.d.), approximately 50.1 million students in the United States attended public elementary and secondary schools in fall 2015. Students often approach school staff with difficult issues more readily than they would even their own parents or friends (Schlozman, 2003). A child's reactions after a loss may include a decline in academic performance, difficulty mastering new material, and regressive behavior (Quinn-Lee, 2014; Schlozman, 2003). Adolescents in particular may cope with death in negative ways, such as becoming involved in substance abuse, promiscuity, or in minor criminal activity (Holland, 2001), as well as problems with eating, depression, self-injurious behaviors, loss of interest in school and friends (Massat et al., 2008). These behaviors may begin by rejecting school, leading them to be truant and becoming involved in negative behaviors as they socialize with other truants (Holland, 2001). Retaining students at school during times of loss or disruptive change is crucial in helping them in order for the student to experience the consistency and structure that the school environment provides.

School social workers in particular encounter students who have experienced a wide variety of stressful incidents (Quinn-Lee, 2014) and are critical in improving both the psychological and physiological well-being in children (Huxtable & Blyth, 2002). Because the role of the school social worker is multifaceted, a unique skill set is required (Constable, 2002). The tasks of a school social worker range from the assessment of students, consultation with the school team, direct work with students individually and in groups, classroom work, and services to the whole school. School social workers are often the ones to whom an entire school turns to for help and guidance when anyone in the school community is in pain (Massat et al., 2008). This calls for a unique repertoire of sophisticated skills, including managing one's own grief, the skill and knowledge in helping others manage their grief, and the ability to teach others who

work with grieving. According to Brener, Martindale, and Weist (2001), school-based mental health services made a transition from a focus on students in special education to providing interventions and resources to all students. As a result, school social workers' responsibilities have shifted from providing specific services to an established group of students to providing support for an entire student body in times of difficulty and crisis. A sensitive practitioner who is able to acknowledge the needs of the student and help them through the mourning process is critical in helping children adjust to a loss or death (Holland, 2008). The support of a school social worker is invaluable in assisting grieving children and school staff (Openshaw, 2008).

Current research shows that children and adolescents unquestionably do grieve and often experience a significant amount of stress in response to a loss (Hope & Hodge, 2006). Studies from a variety of disciplines have extensively researched child grief and loss; however, there is little research on how to help grieving children in a school setting. Much of the literature about schools, students, and school social work does not mention grieving children (Quinn-Lee, 2014). Additionally, Quinn-Lee (2014) discovered that school social workers identify and define grief as a variety of losses, leading to the current study's exploration of school social workers' experiences with child and adolescent grief related to both death and non-death reactions.

Losses can be symbolic or physical; physical loss is something tangible that becomes unavailable, such as death and symbolic loss refers to a change in one's psychological experience, such as parental divorce (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006). The grief that follows loss is a natural reaction, necessary and a natural part of existence (Viorst, 1986). For the purposes of this study, grief and loss will be used interchangeably to emphasize both the loss that a child or adolescent experiences and the grief response that follows the loss. The current study seeks to understand school social workers' experiences working with grieving children and adolescents.

Literature Review

Loss and disruptive change is a process that resonates throughout a child and adolescent's world and transforms much of what was familiar in their life. Developmental considerations and the range of children's grief responses are identified. Grief in schools, including the relationship between school and loss, teachers and grieving students, the impact on school performance, the role of school social workers, school-based interventions, and school social workers' experiences with grief and loss are reviewed.

Child and Adolescent Grief

A family death, parental divorce or separation, or any other disruptive change is not a single event, stress, or trauma for a child (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006). Rather, it is a loss that is felt throughout the entire family. By changing much of what a child's life consisted of before, it can impact the basic trust and sense of predictability inherent in children. While some children seem to have the capacity to work through their grief, many children do not have the resources or experiences to incorporate loss into their world (Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2005) and commonly try to mask their pain through normal, everyday behavior (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006). The manner in which children process death and other losses depends on their age and developmental phase (Emswiler & Emswiler, 2000; Himebauch, Arnold, & May, 2008; Hooyman & Kramer, 2006; Pomeroy & Garcia, 2011; Walsh-Burke, 2006). A child's cognitive, social, and emotional capacity has an impact on the extent that the child fully internalizes concepts related to loss, which influences the reaction to death and loss. Children may not outwardly display emotions to evidence their grief, leaving adults to interpret this behavior to mean that the child doesn't understand or has not gotten over the death or disruptive change (Walsh-Burke, 2006).

The grief reactions of children and adolescents experiencing non-death related losses are

similar to those who are mourning a death (Pomeroy & Garcia, 2011; Walsh-Burke, 2006).

While some losses may be quite tangible, others may be abstract and more difficult for children to comprehend. Losses may also occur that are sudden and traumatic. A parental divorce may be experienced similarly to the death of a family member, even though the family member is still living. This type of ambiguous loss can complicate the grieving process and make adjustment to the child or adolescent's new life difficult. Non-death losses often go unacknowledged by others; resulting in an individual receiving less support than those grieving a death may receive (Walsh-Burke, 2006).

Grieving children experience many of the same thoughts and emotions as adults; however, children lack the adult skills of understanding, coping, and expressing what they are experiencing (Emswiler & Emswiler, 2000). Children grieve in waves and can regrieve at new developmental stages as their understanding of death changes (Himebauch et al., 2008). Grief reactions among children and adolescents vary widely, but their responses center around what they feel and how they express their feelings. Because children do not have the same acquisition of language as adults, feelings are often expressed through behaviors rather than words (Walsh-Burke, 2006).

Developmental considerations. Children grieve differently depending on their developmental stage (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006). Children at different stages of development will understand loss and express their grief differently and in a variety of ways (Walsh-Burke, 2006). The chronological age markers for each developmental stage vary across studies. Cognitive and language ability, communication styles, developmental tasks, and emotional maturity are more important during childhood and adolescence than any other age group, which affects how children and adolescents begin to understand loss (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006).

Early and middle childhood. Very young children do not have the capacity to understand the universality or the permanence of losses such as death or divorce (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006). As children enter kindergarten around age five, children tend to view loss as a temporary situation that is reversible (Pomeroy & Garcia, 2011). A child's inability to grasp the permanence of loss can lead to hopes and expectations that the loss will be reversed. Additionally, children in this stage tend to believe that they are somehow responsible for the death or change in family due to the egocentrism inherent in children at this age.

Children at five through seven or eight years old begin moving from magical thinking towards more concrete thinking and the ability to understand relationships (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006). Children in this stage directly state and act on their feelings. They have strong emotions and are typically unable to distract themselves or keep their emotions hidden. The finality of death and loss is understood, which includes curiosity and fear about their own death or death of loved ones (Pomeroy & Garcia, 2011). Children's curiosity and questions indicate their efforts to understand loss and change fully (Walsh-Burke, 2006).

Relationships with peers and adults are important in children ages five to seven or eight, so children may be reluctant to separate from their parents due to feelings of insecurity and helplessness (Pomeroy & Garcia, 2011; Walsh-Burke, 2006). While striving for mastery, children may attribute responsibility of loss or disruptive change to themselves or others in their attempt to make sense of loss or change (Walsh-Burke, 2006). Grieving children at this developmental stage can become afraid to go to school, have difficulty concentrating, may behave aggressively, become overly concerned about their own health as well as others, or withdraw from others. With information and support, most children are able to carry on daily living with confidence and assurance; however, children at this age may regress emotionally.

Elementary-aged children thrive in their ability to solve problems and when they are able to use their intelligence and creativity to master new situations and tasks (Pomeroy & Garcia, 2011). Providing opportunities for children to ask questions and express feelings openly allows children to articulate their curiosity (Walsh-Burke, 2006). These opportunities build on a child's strengths and allow them to actively participate in the adjustment following a loss and regulate the emotional changes that accompany grief (Pomeroy & Garcia, 2011; Walsh-Burke, 2006).

Late childhood. Children age eight or nine to eleven are in a stage of intense exploration in mastery of physical, cognitive, social, emotional, and spiritual development (Walsh-Burke, 2006). A child in this stage typically does not have the overwhelming sense of helplessness of younger children and are usually able to move ahead after the first few months following a major loss (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006). This process is largely due to more sophisticated concrete logical-operational thinking and problem-focused coping skills. Children at this age are also more capable of articulating their feelings, verbalizing their needs, seeking support, and beginning to make meaning of the loss.

Children at this age also understand the finality of death and that it is out of their control (Pomeroy & Garcia, 2011). Death is known to be unavoidable and is no longer seen as a punishment (Walsh-Burke, 2006). Their reactions to death and change often reflect what they have learned from parents or other adults around them (Walsh-Burke, 2006), leading them to understand how loss affects their family's functioning (Pomeroy & Garcia, 2011). Fears surrounding death and change are exacerbated by the physical and hormonal changes experienced in puberty. These changes can bring about a sense of vulnerability, creating feelings of isolation, loneliness, fear, confusion, and guilt. This sense of self-consciousness is amplified following a major loss.

Adolescence. Adolescence in itself is a stage of life filled with loss and change (Emswiler & Emswiler, 2000). It is generally thought of as a time of intense change in development: biologically, psychologically, and socially (Walsh-Burke, 2006). Teenagers struggle with parents, teachers, authority figures, and even peers in an effort to gain a sense of individuality and independence (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006). Given teenagers' paradoxical developmental tasks, it is not surprising that their grieving process is also complex.

Adolescents up to the age of 18 shift from concrete operational thinking to formal operational and logical thinking. Early in adolescence, they learn how to think reflectively and abstractly from concrete experiences. At the same time, they are struggling with the onset of biological sexuality, the physical growth of their bodies, and several psychosocial and emotional tasks. This age is characterized by unpredictable behaviors in an effort to pull away from family in an effort in order to forge their own identity. Adolescence is a time of questioning, arguing, and debating with peers, family, and other authority figures (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006).

Developmental challenges in adolescence become even more difficult when adolescents are confronted with loss. Adolescent grief typically manifests as confusion, crying, feelings of emptiness, loneliness, sleep and eating interruptions, and exhaustion. Because of their egocentrism, adolescents are likely to feel that their grief is incomprehensible to both themselves and others. As a result, they may express their grief in short outbursts or they may try to suppress their feelings because they do not want to be perceived negatively by others. Adolescents' grieving process typically mirrors that of a child rather than an adult (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006).

The combination of various internal and external factors that adolescents experience may lead to feelings of isolation from those who do not seem to understand (Walsh-Burke, 2006).

Adolescents may disguise their grief in high-risk behaviors such as substance use, staying out late, defying authority, skipping school, and sexual promiscuity (Pomeroy & Garcia, 2011; Holland, 2001). Grieving adolescents may present a protective barrier of anger and withdrawal that can be difficult for support systems to overcome (Pomeroy & Garcia, 2011). Adolescents may also be consumed with guilt as a result of the tendency to be self-centered while developing their own identity at this stage of development. They may feel closely connected to the loss and their inability to prevent it.

The primary concern of adolescents is to be accepted by their peer group (Pomeroy & Garcia, 2011). As a result, they may be resistant to openly expressing their grief in the presence of close friends and family out of fear of appearing weak and lacking control. They may also view a death in the family or disruptive change as making them different than their peers (Walsh-Burke, 2006). As adolescents become more aware of others' reactions, they are often aware of others' discomfort in talking about grief and loss and control their reactions as a result.

Grief in Schools

The family and the school are the fundamental places for the development of children (Constable, 2002). It is a top public priority that children develop well and that schools function soundly. In the school setting, school staff will encounter students experiencing a variety of losses, including loss of friendships; death of a family member, peer, or animal companion; parental divorce or separation; relocation from a different school or community; and tragic community events (Pomeroy & Garcia, 2011). Harrison and Harrington's (2001) survey of adolescents found that over 77% of students had experienced the death of a close friend or relative. Children experiencing loss react and adjust to the school environment in a variety of ways.

Relationship between school and loss. Loss and the grieving process usually interfere with a child's ability to perform well in school (Openshaw, 2008). Worden (1996) found that school age children who had lost a parent had more social difficulties, lower levels of self-confidence, were more anxious, and were more likely to socially withdraw than their non-bereaved peers. As a result, it is essential that practitioners give attention to the effects of bereavement in the school setting, as it is the child's and adolescent's primary "workplace." School is where children and adolescents are expected to perform at their best intellectual, emotional, social, and behavioral capacity. The circumstances of a loss and nature of the school community may influence the degree to which the school environment is life-enhancing and/or life-depleting for the child or adolescent.

Children and adolescents may experience a wide variety of losses from the time they enter kindergarten until the time they graduate from high school and can range from predictable developmental changes and life transitions to traumatic, unexpected events (Pomeroy & Garcia, 2011; Goldman, 2006). Grieving children may be preoccupied with thoughts related to a loss and have trouble concentrating and completing academic assignments (Pomeroy & Garcia, 2011). Children may exhibit exaggerated responses to seemingly minor changes due to the increased number of stressors that families face. Such strong reactions are prevalent among children who have experienced multiple changes or loss. They may resist attending school, or potentially dedicate more time to school and become preoccupied with academic assignments. According to Goldman (2006), a grieving student may display a wide variety of reactions to loss. The student might imitate the behavior of the deceased, want to appear normal, want to tell his or her story over and over, enjoy wearing or holding something of the loved one, speak of the loved one in the present, tend to worry excessively about their health or the health of loved ones, become the

class bully or class clown, display developmental regressions, exhibit somatic symptoms, have an inability to concentrate, appear hyperactive or impulsive, begin to abuse substances or become sexually promiscuous, and show a change in grades and a lack of interest in school.

Teachers and grieving students. Although teachers reported being highly concerned regarding bereavement, many are untrained in bereavement issues or are cautious discussing the subject with a child (Holland, 1993). Teachers often do not know how to adequately work with a grieving student, resulting in negative school performance and satisfaction. In one study, over 70% of teachers agreed that grieving students are overlooked in schools (Dyregrov, Dyregrov, & Idsoe, 2013). Results also reported that over half of the teacher participants thought it was not the teacher's job to care for grieving children, explaining that they know too little about how best to support a student who is grieving. According to Papadatou, Metallinou, Hatzichristou, and Pavlidi's (2002) study, teachers acknowledged their role as significant in supporting grieving students, but also stated that they felt inadequately prepared in knowledge and skills needed to best support students experiencing loss. Additionally, Reid and Dixon's (1999) survey of elementary, middle, and high school teachers found that 51% of teachers felt unprepared to handle discussing grief with their students.

Impact on school performance. Children and adolescents spend many of their waking hours in school, and there is a reciprocal relationship between school performance and exposure to loss (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006). The grief associated with childhood losses is often minimized or not acknowledged by adults. The return to school, in particular, is a key event for grieving children. Holland (2001) discovered that a grieving child's return to school after a loss was often challenging. Students felt that schools offered them little help or understanding upon their return to school following loss. Children reported feeling ignored, isolated, embarrassed,

uncertain, and different. Results from Karakartal's (2012) study reported that grieving students' educational experiences were also negatively affected, citing lack of motivation and focus, lower grades, and interruption of study habits. Other students noted lack of motivation to attend school completely.

For some children, grief responses are manifested as behavior problems inside and outside the classroom (Pomeroy & Garcia, 2011). A cycle of frustration and difficulty follows a child whose difficulties go unaddressed. The mix of behaviors a child may exhibit may give a hint to some problems that may arise in grieving children and adolescents (Dudley, 1995). Difficulties reported by adults who were bereaved as students in Holland's (2001) study included truancy, substance abuse and involvement in criminal behavior. Grieving students may lose interest in school and drop out as a result of academic difficulties and frustration (Pomeroy & Garcia, 2011).

School can represent a safe harbor that fosters a child's feelings of safety and stability (Pomeroy & Garcia, 2011). School may, on the other hand, trigger grief reactions as children compare themselves with peers who have not experienced loss similar to theirs. One student may exhibit several behaviors at once, other students may be more consistent in their behavior patterns, and others may not outwardly show any signs of grieving (Dudley, 1995). During disruptive change and crisis, students need and rely on structure. The security of familiarity is welcomed. When structure is taken away, they often feel their lives are out of control and they are unsafe. For children who have preexisting social or academic difficulties, additional stress brought on by grief can exacerbate the problems at school. The return to school may leave school staff with critical roles in helping to facilitate the student's grief (Massat et al., 2008). Because children's functioning in school is one of the areas affected after loss, school personnel are often

in a unique position to assist students in their grief process (Samide & Stockton, 2002).

School Social Work

Role of school social worker. In the last century, schools have expanded their mission and scope toward greater inclusion and respect for individual differences of all children (Constable, 2002). As a result, social work and education have come to share similar values. School social workers are often viewed as the experts in understanding human behavior, mental health concerns, relationships, and interventions (Josefowicz, Allen-Mears, Piro-Lupinacci, & Fisher, 2002).

A school social worker's role is multidimensional (Constable, 2002). They work with young people and with their school and family environments to assist them with their learning and development. The goal of the school social worker is to enable students to function and learn in the school environment (Openshaw, 2008). The focus of the school social worker must be able to relate to and work with all aspects of a student's situation (Constable, 2002). Building on assessment, a systematic way of understanding and communicating a student's situation, the social worker develops a plan to assist the student's various systems- teachers, classmates, family, and others- to work together to support the child.

School social workers can help teachers in particular understand the child's grief process. Because students often experience academic difficulties following a loss, students' reactions and potential difficulties can be communicated to teachers by the school social worker. Due to the student's stress, academic demands may become overwhelming, in which the school social worker can work with the student and teachers to negotiate deadlines and workloads. Collaborating with the student and teachers allows the student to remain at the center of discussions and provides experiences of self-efficacy, opportunities to learn important social

skills, and the potential to develop deeper connections with supportive adults (Pomeroy & Garcia, 2011).

School social workers help students and families cope with a wide variety of stressors: family issues; grief and loss; medical and mental health concerns; parent education; physical and educational neglect; physical, sexual, and emotional abuse; pregnancy; relationship concerns; school-related concerns; sexuality issues; and substance abuse concerns (School Social Work Association of America [SSWAA], 2012). School social workers are in a unique position to work with students with a variety of different needs and concerns. Because students in schools cope with many types of losses and stressors, school social workers play a critical role in assisting these students.

Role of school social worker with grieving students. Because there are so many ways to grieve and so many types of responses to loss in children, it is necessary for school social workers to understand the importance of the behaviors manifested by a grieving child. It is crucial for school social workers to understand the various aspects of child grief. School social workers can help children deal with loss before it overwhelms them (Openshaw, 2008).

School social workers work with students experiencing mental health problems, which are present at all grade levels in the school system (Openshaw, 2008). Grief can lead to more serious mental health issues, and grieving children are likely to experience some initial depression and anxiety (Quinn-Lee, 2014). Although this is normal, these feelings can linger and become challenging. Depression, low self-esteem, and behavioral concerns are mental health issues that school social workers consistently encounter. If school social workers are able to work with grieving children and adolescents, they can help decrease symptoms of depression and anxiety, improve student's academic functioning, and help them feel better emotionally.

Children may distract themselves with friends and school following a loss, which may later surface in detrimental ways (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006). Grieving children naturally benefit from the compassion of involved adults in their social support systems, including parents, teachers, and coaches. School social workers in particular play a pivotal role in helping bereaved students (Massat et al., 2008). Access to a school social worker is convenient for many students and families because it is accessible during school hours and supersedes insurance, monetary, and transportation limitations (Pomeroy & Garcia, 2011). Working with a school social worker is a safe place at school that can be accessed whenever a student feels the need for support.

School-based interventions for grieving students. Appropriate interventions for grieving children include both natural support systems for children, as well as more specialized interventions with professionals for children with more complicated and traumatic grief (Pomeroy & Garcia, 2011). It is important to distinguish between a student who is experiencing emotional and behavioral difficulties and children who are coping normally following a loss (Worden, 1996). School social workers who are clinically trained can recognize signs to distinguish between normal and problematic grief.

Various models of intervention with grieving children include peer support groups, individual and family counseling (Worden, 1996), crisis intervention, and resource referral (Pomeroy & Garcia, 2011). Interventions with students may also include helping teachers understand the child's grief process. Students often experience academic difficulties following a loss, which can be communicated to teachers by the school social worker. Due to the student's stress, academic demands may become overwhelming, in which the school social worker can work with the student and teachers to negotiate deadlines and workloads. A sensitive teacher or practitioner who is able to acknowledge the needs of the student and help them through the

mourning process is crucial in helping children adjust to a loss or death (Holland, 2008). Collaborating with the student and teachers allows the student to remain at the center of discussions and provides experiences of self-efficacy, opportunities to learn important social skills, and the potential to develop deeper connections with supportive adults (Pomeroy & Garcia, 2011). Students can then feel empowered to approach teachers with concerns in the future.

Intervention activities aim to help grieving students by facilitating the various tasks of mourning by providing children with acceptable, healthy outlets for their feelings, addressing their fears and concerns, helping children get answers to their questions, and helping counter children's misunderstandings about loss (Worden, 1996). Activities for intervention include art activities, writing activities, memory book making, storytelling activities, and games. Art creation, bibliotherapy, and play are also effective group activities for grief (Pomeroy & Garcia, 2011).

Because children only cope as well as the adults around them (Anewalt, 2010), the best way to support grieving children is to work collaboratively with the adults closest to them. Effective interventions involve the student's parents or caregivers, as it is often the school social worker who alerts parents or caregivers to their child's emotional pain and helps parents to attend to their child's needs and access additional services (Pomeroy & Garcia, 2011). A school social worker may also assist parents in understanding how their child is experiencing the loss, communicating about the loss appropriately with their child, and promoting healthy functioning of family members while under stress.

School social workers' experiences with grieving students. While much is known about the way in which children and adolescents grieve, the types of losses that they experience,

the impact on school performance, and effective interventions by school social workers, less is known about the experiences of school social workers in working with grieving students. Quinn-Lee's (2014) exploratory study aimed to discover school social work practice related to grief and loss through qualitative interviews. Participants reported providing services to grieving students through individual, group and family counseling, referrals, psychoeducation, bibliotherapy, play therapy, art therapy, and advocacy. Results also showed that school social workers identified experiences related to four main themes: various barriers to helping grieving students, variations on how grief is defined, social workers' preparation for working with grief and loss issues, and referring grieving students to outside resources. The current study will build on this new area of research by exploring other school social workers' experiences working with grieving students.

This qualitative study will attempt to answer the following question: What are school social workers' experiences working with grieving children and adolescents?

Conceptual Framework

Since the 1900s, school social workers have been attempting to decide what is effective practice (Clancy, 1995). Concerned about their identity, school social workers sought a more specialized role, one that would connect their efforts more closely to serving as the link between the school and the home (Allen-Meares, Washington, & Welsh, 2000). With the expansion of school responsibilities in the late 1960s, social workers have increased the range of services offered. School social workers must have a working knowledge of the environments forming the child's ecosystem (school, community, and family). Subsequently, ecological theory has become a unifying theoretical perspective for school social workers (Clancy, 1995). Bronfenbrenner's (1994) ecological theory suggests that a child's development occurs within the context of a complex system of relationships that comprise a child's environment, including the primary

context of the family and the linkage of that family system with the school system.

Literature recommends the adoption of the ecological perspective as the most useful for school social workers because it allows social workers to accomplish social work goals and direct their practice (Allen-Meares et al., 2000). This perspective focuses attention on intervening and working with a child's whole system, which differs from the previous approach centering on problems of individual students (Allen-Meares et al., 2000; Clancy, 1995). The ecological framework is a helpful lens for school social workers, as this perspective provides a way to understand human diversity and clarifies the relationship between humans, their environment, and the transactions that exist between them (Winters & Easton, 1983).

Through the ecological perspective, school social workers shift from an emphasis on dysfunction of students and families to the quality of interactions and transactions between individuals and groups in the school and between the school and others in the community (Allen-Meares et al., 2000; Winters & Easton, 1983). Administrators, teachers, support staff, students, and families are all part of a system that makes up the context of the school, which school social workers must understand in order to direct practice and attain goals. As a result, school social workers are not only concerned with crisis resolution and identifying problematic situations, but also with facilitating opportunities for positive interactions between all systems. The ecological perspective is most appropriate for social work practice in schools in that it directs attention to a student's whole system, complex transactions and interactions, and locating the target of the intervention (Allen-Meares et al., 2000).

The ecological perspective offers a comprehensive view of students, school, community, and parents, and the transactions and interactions among them that can affect student performance (Allen-Meares et al., 2000). According to Germain (2002, p. 27), "the school social

worker stands at the interface not only to the child and school, but family and school, and community and school. Thus, they are in a position to help child, parents, and community develop social competence and, at the same time, to help the school's responsiveness to the needs and aspirations of children, parents, and community." The school social worker recognizes that the quality of a student's transaction and interaction with the environment outside of the school and within the school system has much to do with the students' academic performance and healthy development (Allen-Meares et al., 2000).

The ecological perspective provides school social workers a framework to broaden their view and understanding of students' problems. Instead of seeing problems inherent in the child, problems are understood as occurring between the child and his or her environment. Since school social workers are both student-focused and system-focused, the ecological perspective is a good fit in order to build on students' strengths, create interventions, and provide school social workers to be preventive and proactive (Dupper, 2002).

Ecological systems such as school, neighborhoods, and the larger community impact a child's mourning responses and adjustment in school (Zambelli & Clark, 1994). According to Mollar, children's grief and subsequent academic issues must be viewed in context with the family and the larger social setting (cited in Zambelli & Clark, 1994). School maladjustment is often the first significant indicator that a child is experiencing emotional difficulty. School social workers see the home, school, and community as active participants in the educational process (Chavkin, 1993). As a result, the school social worker must implement intervention strategies that include all relevant systems and relationships in the child's life (Zambelli & Clark, 1994). For example, since concentration and lack of motivation are common responses for bereaved children, special academic planning with regard to the child's schoolwork may occur. The

child's role in each ecological system, such as family, school, and community, must be explored in relation to the child's grief.

The ecological theory was chosen as the conceptual framework for this study due to its alignment with school social work and understanding student problems from a comprehensive view that includes the student's family, school, and community. According to Zambelli and Clark (1994), students' ecological systems such as school, neighborhoods, and the larger community impact their mourning responses and school adjustment.

Methodology

Research Purpose and Design

The purpose of this study was to explore school social workers' experiences working with grieving children and adolescents. An exploratory qualitative study was conducted to gain insight from school social workers who work with grieving children and adolescents and why it is important. According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), qualitative methods can be used to explore areas about which little is known. Since little is known about school social workers' experiences with grieving children and adolescents, a qualitative design for this study was chosen to add personal experience narratives to aid in better understanding school social work with grieving children and adolescents.

Sampling Method

This research study used a non-probability, purposive sampling method to recruit participants who best serve the purposes of this study (Monette, Sullivan, & DeJong, 2011). Qualitative interviews were conducted with school social workers. The sample consisted of school social workers in Minnesota. This group sampling was obtained through the Minnesota School Social Workers Association (MSSWA).

Sample

The sample for this study consisted of 10 school social workers. Five participants currently work with elementary-aged students, one participant currently works with middle school students, and four participants currently work with high school students. Ten different school districts were represented. Eight participants currently work in public schools and two participants work in charter schools. Participant experience as school social workers ranged from three years to 26 years. There were eight female participants and two male participants. Of the 10 participants, four participants work in urban school settings, four participants work in suburban school settings, and two participants work in rural school settings. All participants were licensed school social workers.

Data Collection

Potential participants were contacted by email once approval from the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board (IRB) was obtained (Appendix A). Potential participants contacted this researcher directly by email to express interest in participating in the study. Prior to the interview, participants were given a consent form approved by the University of St. Thomas IRB (Appendix B). The consent form provided participants with background information about the study, procedural information, risks and benefits, and a confirmation of confidentiality. To obtain data for this study, in-person interviews were conducted and audio recorded on an iPhone. The interviews were approximately 30 minutes and took place in a location most convenient for the participant. After the interview, this researcher transcribed each recording.

Measurement

Participants were asked 10 questions in a semi-structured interview (Appendix C)

(adapted from Quinn-Lee, 2009). The general themes of the questions covered demographic information, the types of losses that students are grieving, and how the school social worker intervenes with the student, the student's family, school staff, and community resources.

Data Analysis

To analyze data following the transcriptions, the researcher used qualitative content analysis. Content analysis is a form of coding as a way of transforming data, such as words, from a qualitative form into a quantitative, systematic form (Monette et al., 2011). To understand the data, this researcher used grounded theory methodology to identify themes, as it is based in the data to allow meaning, concepts, and theories emerge from the raw data rather than being imposed by the researcher. To identify themes, open coding was used, which involves unrestricted coding to produce concepts that fit the data well, which can then be developed into themes.

Protection of Human Subjects

Confidentiality. Before potential participants were contacted, approval of the research was obtained from the University of St. Thomas IRB. To ensure confidentiality, participant names never appear in the data, nor does the name of the agency of which the participants work. Only this researcher had access to the data and records. Participants were given one copy of the consent form (Appendix B) and signed a second copy to confirm he or she consented to the interview and to be a participant in the study. To maintain confidentiality, the participants were notified that the transcript and recording of the interview will be destroyed by May 16, 2016. The signed consent form will be retained for at least three years following May 16, 2016. Potential participants were informed that whether they decided to participate does not influence their relationship with the University of St. Thomas or St. Catherine University.

Risks and benefits of being in the study. The nature of this study did not present any risks or direct benefits to participants. Participants were informed that they may end the interview at any point without repercussions and may skip any questions asked.

Findings

This research study aimed to explore school social workers' experiences working with grieving children. Ten school social workers responded and participated in qualitative interviews. The following themes were extracted from participant interviews: prevalence of grief and loss, types of losses, barriers to providing services, and lack of grief and loss training for school social workers and teachers.

Themes

Prevalence of grief and loss. This theme was identified as a result of this researcher asking participants to describe how often they work with students who are grieving. Each participant commented that they work with grieving students on a frequent and regular basis. Most participants mentioned that they work with grieving students "daily," "always," "often" or "typically." For example, one participant commented how prevalent loss is in working with students: "Almost every time I meet with a student that I work with there's usually some loss in a lot of their lives." One participant also commented that although working with students experiencing grief and loss is a frequent role of a school social worker, it is likely underreported:

My guess is it's really underreported and that information is not accessible in a lot of the cases like...it's part of life, so people don't often report it and don't really always acknowledge it publicly as an obstacle or a challenge.

Types of losses. Several types of losses were identified from each participant when asked what types of losses students are grieving. Participants mentioned a variety of losses that

students are grieving, leading to two subthemes: death and non-death losses.

Death. When asked what types of losses students are grieving, most participants first identified losses related to death, including: parental, sibling, extended family, and friend. One participant commented specifically on the unanticipated number of students who have grieved a death: "It's a surprising number of kids who have had a death of someone very close."

Most participants mentioned specific types of death-related loss and how common that can be: "Parent loss, unfortunately, in our building we have quite a bit of. We unfortunately have also experienced a lot of student death as well."

Non-death losses. Each participant also described several non-death losses that students grieve including: loss of pets and friendships; loss of a parent or family member due to incarceration, military, foster care, adoption, and divorce; loss of normalcy when having a sibling or a parent with a chronic illness; and loss of neighborhood and community due to housing moves or loss of housing. When asked about the number of and the variety of non-death related losses, one participant especially referenced the range of possible losses experienced by students: "You name it, right?" Another participant commented on the wide ranging types of losses that school social workers encounter when working with grieving students: "I guess as a social worker we sort of think of losses on a big spectrum."

Barriers to providing services. Participants identified several barriers to providing services to students who are grieving. Three subthemes emerged from the interviews: school as a non-therapeutic environment, misidentified/unidentified grieving students, and time.

School as a non-therapeutic environment. The most common barrier mentioned by participants was the limitations provided by merely being part of a school setting in a host fashion. Most participants identified the school setting itself as a barrier to providing services to

grieving students. School social workers are guests in a host environment whose priority is to teach students and help them gain academic achievement. Speaking to the school environment and the role of social work, one participant explained:

We're a public school. This is overall not a therapeutic environment; it's not a therapeutic milieu. I have very little control over this school. They're asked to be here to learn and to be a learner. That means not having all of your emotions being flooded with emotion all day.

Another participant described the school setting as a place for students to learn, not to grieve:

Schools are unique in that you see kids everyday; however, they're there for academics. You have to be in school and you can miss only so many days, and how many days is it okay to miss for the death of a loved one or a loss of something, how much is that and who says it is?

As a result of participants identifying the school as a barrier to providing services, many students are referred to outside resources after experiencing loss. When asked at what point students are referred to outside community resources, most participants identified the difficulties of providing services within a school environment and needing to refer to other resources as a result of the students' grief responses impacting their ability to learn. One participant commented:

When we see the emotions spilling over and affecting their ability to be a learner...when that's increasing or we're not able to help slow that down...because we see they're really missing a lot of education and need just much more than we can give.

Misidentified/unidentified grieving students. Participants described how students who are grieving are often not referred to the school social worker for grief and loss specifically.

Grieving students often present with a variety of new and different behaviors that are noticed by parents or school staff. As a result, students are often not referred for support as much as they are identified as having behavior and/or academic concerns. Several participants mentioned that many students are often not identified as grieving students, but are identified rather as students who are raising concerns due to behavioral, academic, and/or social challenges. One participant commented: "I guess we don't talk as much specifically about grief and loss but we do identify kids who are struggling behaviorally, socially or emotionally." When students are referred to the school social worker, it is often due to concerns related to a noticeable change in behaviors and/or academic performance. One participant explained: "We don't often identify 'oh this student is dealing with grief and loss' as opposed to 'this student has really been struggling socially, like all of a sudden they're getting into conflicts at recess.'"

Because students are often not identified specifically as grieving, the relationship with students and parents is extremely important in learning that the student has experienced loss. One participant commented specifically on the importance of building rapport with students and families in order for a student to be identified as grieving:

Sometime down the line I find out that this student has lost an uncle, they saw this kind of violence, they had a house fire, there's some kind of major loss... building rapport with the families and building trust with them is crucial.

One participant also commented on the role that stigma plays in not knowing that a student is grieving:

Some of the loss there is a lot of stigma around- if it's incarceration, if it's a death related to drug or alcohol abuse or some kind of violent- a lot of times, I think it's for whatever reasons choose to not share it so I think some of it is just a choice not to share the

information because of intense feelings around that information for the families.

Time. Most participants also identified lack of time as a barrier to providing services in a school setting. Because schools are set up for academic achievement first, students experience extended breaks and days off. As a result, schools are not set up to provide support to students who are grieving. One participant commented: “We’re not a 24/7, 7 day a week kind of place and sometimes grief doesn’t always wait.”

Participants also described the difficulty in finding time to implement interventions for students who are grieving. One participant described wanting to start a grief and loss group for students who have experienced any type of grief and loss, but that there isn’t enough time allotted in the school social work role to thoughtfully put together an identified group of students or to design a curriculum: “It’s just time. Not enough time. I would like to do a specific grief and loss group...but yeah it’s kind of just one of those things that we would like to do but time.”

Lack of grief and loss training for school social workers and teachers. Many participants described learning about grief and loss through experience as a school social worker as opposed to any formal training in order to provide services to grieving students. Participants also described the importance of teachers’ understanding of grief and loss due to the amount of time spent with students and the important role teachers play in a school setting. Two subthemes emerged from the interviews: formal training for school social workers and teacher education.

Formal training for school social workers. Participants described being one of few resources that grieving students have access to in a school setting and emphasized the need for more formal training as a result of being a main support for grieving students. As a result of asking participants how prepared they feel to provide services to grieving students, most participants commented that they feel prepared through experience, not as a result of formal

training or education. One participant described feeling prepared over time: "Unfortunately over time, I feel very well equipped." Another participant commented on the amount of time and experience it has taken to feel prepared due to lack of focus on grief and loss during schooling:

I would say prepared now, but I've been doing this for 19 years. When I look back on my schooling, I will say that there was absolutely zero information, course, etc. just specifically for grief and loss. One can make the argument that general counseling skills should prepare you enough but it doesn't.

Participants also commented on lack of training on grief and loss while employed as a school social worker. One participant described having no training through employment as a school social worker: "I find myself refreshing myself and so I feel prepared but I think there's always lots of room for more learning. I haven't had any specific training just around grief and loss."

Teacher education. Most participants described the importance of teachers' understanding of grief and loss, as well as education in providing support for students who are grieving. While many participants identified staff as key referral sources, participants also described how staff should be provided more training and education in order to accurately identify and best support students who are grieving, particularly because students' reactions to grief can change depending on the student's developmental stage. Because students in schools are learners first, one participant described the importance of staff education about grief and understanding when a student is grieving:

Just the understanding that grief- some people might move on in a month, some people might not move on after two years, and we don't get to say that it's okay or not okay- having more education about that and understanding.

Another participant described a lack of understanding among teachers in how grief expresses itself differently based on a student's development: "I think there's a lack of understanding of it and how it expresses itself in kids because at different developmental stages it's going to express itself very differently."

One participant described specific ways that teachers could be trained in identifying and supporting students who are grieving:

I think maybe if there were more workshops- grief and loss, trauma- provided to teachers for staff development that would be maybe increase their comfort level... oftentimes what I do is provide the teachers with information so I think that helps them.

Participants also described how important teachers are in supporting students who are grieving, which is why more teacher workshops and education could lead to better support for students who are grieving. One participant commented on students needing staff support: "Then they're not carrying the load themselves- they've got someone else to hold it for them."

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore school social workers' experiences working with grieving children and adolescents. The findings from this study reveal several areas of overlap with previous literature on this topic. All four themes identified in this study support and expand upon existing literature, including prevalence of grief and loss, types of losses, barriers to providing services, and lack of grief and loss training for school social workers and teachers.

Prevalence of Grief and Loss

Participants in this study were asked how often they work with students who are grieving. Each participant commented that they work with grieving students on a frequent and regular basis, which supports existing literature regarding the frequency of grief and loss among

students. According to Harrison and Harrington's (2001) survey, over 77% of students had experienced the death of a close friend or relative. Pomeroy and Garcia (2011) also found that in a school setting, school staff typically encounter students who have experienced a significant loss or disruptive change in their life. As a main support for students' well-being in a school setting, school social workers are spending a significant amount of time working with students who are grieving.

The participants' discussion of the prevalence of grief and loss among students expands on previous research supporting the amount of loss that children and adolescents experience throughout their school lives; however, there is little research on how often school social workers report working with grieving students specifically. Quinn-Lee's (2014) online survey found that 56 out of 59 school social work participants identified providing services to grieving children, which aligns with this study's findings related to the prevalence of loss among students and the broader scope of students experiencing a loss or disruptive change in their life.

Although school social workers are noticing frequent loss in students' lives, the amount of loss experienced by students is likely even higher given the challenge in identifying and learning about students who have experienced loss or disruptive change. The school social worker must have knowledge of the environments that make up a child's life, including school, community, and family (Allen-Meares et al, 2000). The frequency of loss experienced by students combined with the challenge of identifying students who have experienced loss or disruptive change highlights the importance of a school social worker's role in understanding various systems within a student's environment and working with students within the context of school, community, and family.

Types of Losses

Each participant was asked about the types of losses that students grieve. All ten participants discussed losses related to both death and non-death experiences for students. Most participants first mentioned losses related to death, particularly the death of a student's parent or extended family member. Participants then discussed the amount of non-death losses, which are often overlooked in a school setting because they are often not considered as serious as a death-related loss. Although some losses may be overlooked because they are not considered as serious, all types of losses can trigger significant grief reactions in children (Dyregrov, 2008).

Participants' discussion of grief and loss reactions to both death and non-related death experiences for students is supported by previous research regarding the wide-ranging types of losses that students experience. Goldman (1994) found that 1 in 20 students will have experienced the death of a parent before age 18, highlighting the significance of grief related to death. Grief reactions related to non-death loss were identified by participants as extensive and often overlooked, although such reactions are similar to those mourning a death, which aligns with previous research (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006; Walsh-Burke, 2006; Pomeroy & Garcia, 2011). Quinn-Lee (2014) also found that there are variations to how grief is defined in a school setting, emphasizing the need to keep an open mind regarding how grief and loss is defined. The variations on how grief is defined, especially the inclusion of non-death related loss, supports participants' emphasis and discussion of the many types of losses that children and adolescents experience. Because students can display a wide variety of reactions to many types of loss (Goldman, 2006), being open to students' grief processes is critical in acknowledging a student's experience and addressing such difficulty. This acknowledgement supports students' grief experiences and can help them retain the structure and supportive environment that the school environment creates.

Barriers to Providing Services

Participants were asked if any barriers existed that prevent school social workers, in their experience, from providing services to grieving students. While there is little research specifically on school social workers' experiences related to providing grief and loss services to students, all participants identified several barriers that they felt hinder them from providing effective services to students who are grieving, which expands on previous research on the topic of grief in schools. Participants discussed several barriers, leading to three subthemes: school setting as a non-therapeutic environment, misidentified or unidentified grieving students, and time.

Most participants described the school setting itself as not being conducive to providing services to students who are grieving, which was not specifically identified in previous research. Participants discussed the primary purpose of school as a learning environment for students. As a result, schools are not designed to be a therapeutic setting. For example, participants identified the difficult balance they face between providing services to grieving students, while also recognizing that students are to be in school to learn. Participants discussed that although students are in school to learn, school social workers in particular recognize how grief and loss impacts a student's ability to perform well in school (Openshaw, 2008). While participants reported that students' academic achievement tends to decline while grieving, so does students' social-emotional well-being (Worden, 1996). Although the role of the school social worker is to enable students to function and learn in the school environment (Openshaw, 2008), participants identified difficulties in supporting students' social-emotional well-being because students are to be learners first, which can take away from providing social-emotional services to students who are grieving.

School social workers face a significant discord in that their primary role is to enable students to function in the school environment, while the primary role of school setting is to ensure that students are learners first. Because the school setting is not considered a therapeutic environment, supporting students' social-emotional well-being in the school environment means that students must often be out of class as the school social worker assists them with their grief and loss reactions. As a result, school social workers often navigate the difficult balance between their primary role of helping students to function in their school environment with the school's primary role of educating students first. Such competing roles put school social workers in a difficult position in maintaining students' social-emotional well-being while recognizing the importance of students as learners first in a school setting.

Expanding on previous research, as a result of the non-therapeutic school environment, participants also identified the need to refer students to outside community resources. Most participants described being unable to provide extensive individual counseling to students who are grieving, and as a result, often refer them to outside community resources, which corresponds with Quinn-Lee's (2014) study. Although wanting to provide more in-depth services, participants described providing interventions and support to students and families through education and individual check-ins. Intervening at more extensive levels when students' grief becomes more complicated is often too difficult to implement in the school setting. Because school social workers must continue to navigate the balance between helping students to function in the school environment and processing their grief and loss while also ensuring their presence in the classroom as learners, school social workers must often refer students to other community resources in order to best meet their social-emotional well-being.

Many participants described how students are often misidentified or even not identified at

all as a barrier to providing services to students who are grieving. Consistent with previous research regarding how students react to grief and loss in different ways, participants discussed polarizing grief reactions, including abnormal signs of grief or no signs at all. Many grieving students also exhibit behavior problems (Pomeroy & Garcia, 2011), with a variety of new behaviors hinting that students may be grieving (Dudley, 1995). Participants acknowledged student behavior as a potential barrier to learning about students' grief. Each student can present so differently and are often referred to the school social worker because of academic and/or behavior concerns, not grief and loss. Previous research emphasizes the importance of school social workers learning the source of a student's grief because it can later surface in detrimental ways (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006) and school social workers in particular play an important role in helping grieving students, especially before the loss overwhelms them (Massat et al., 2008; Openshaw, 2008).

Because school social workers may not always know that a student is grieving, participants emphasized the importance of the relationship with a student and their family in order to learn of a student's grief and loss and to intervene. This discussion expands on previous research regarding the importance of natural support systems for students and working collaboratively with adults closest to them (Pomeroy & Garcia, 2011; Anewalt, 2010). School social workers can work collaboratively with parents and caregivers to better identify and provide services to students, which is consistent with the role of a school social worker practicing within a context of a student's school, community, and family system (Allen-Meares et al, 2000).

Most participants identified time as barrier to providing services to grieving students. The multifaceted role of a school social worker (Constable, 2002), combined with the limitations of a

school setting, can hinder the time available to work specifically with students who are grieving. Although previous research on experiences of school social workers with grieving students is limited, participants' identification of time as a barrier to providing services to grieving students corresponds with Quinn-Lee's (2014) study. Participants in Quinn-Lee's (2014) study also identified time as a significant barrier to school social workers' services to grieving students due to the emphasis on prioritizing students' academic success. As a result, the emphasis on student's presence in the classroom and academic success often supersedes grief and loss services. Participants in this study described providing grief and loss services as secondary to helping students' academic achievement, limiting the time available to tend to grief reactions, which aligns with previous research on the same topic.

School social workers face daily challenges in providing services to students in an environment that does not always prioritize students' social-emotional well-being. Additionally, school social workers often do not learn of grieving students because they are identified as having behavior issues and/or academic concerns rather than grief concerns. When school social workers do learn that a student is grieving, school social workers are limited in their ability to provide effective services due to restricted time and the emphasis on students as learners first. The time constraint, paired with the emphasis on students' academic success as the priority, prevents school social workers from supporting students to best function in the school setting, even though students' academic success is often dependent upon their social-emotional well-being. The grieving process can interfere with a student's ability to perform well in school (Openshaw, 2008), which can result in other difficulties that impact a student's social-emotional well-being, as well as their academic success.

Lack of Grief and Loss Training for School Social Workers and Teachers

Most participants described various implications for school social workers and teachers as part of their experiences in working with grieving students. As a result, two subthemes emerged from participant interviews related to working in a school setting: formal training for school social workers and teacher education.

Participants discussed lack of formal grief and loss training for school social workers. Participants in this study were asked how prepared they felt in providing support services to grieving students. Previous research describes school social workers' expertise in understanding all facets of behavior, mental health, and interventions (Josefowicz et al., 2002); however, participants in this study described feeling unprepared initially in working with grieving students and have learned through experience rather than training. Most participants described feeling prepared but only as a result of on-the-job experience, which aligns with Quinn-Lee's (2014) study reporting that school social workers also learned how to deal with student grief through on-the-job experience and without focused education or training. School social workers are not afforded the preparation or training needed to provide services to grieving students and have had to acquire and rely on trial-and-error experience in order to work with grieving students.

Participants also described the importance of teachers throughout the interviews. Teachers were cited as frequent sources of information for school social workers in learning about students who are grieving, as well as a pathway in rapport-building if the school social worker does not already have a relationship with a grieving student. The significant role that teachers play in acknowledging student grief and referring them to school social workers aligns with previous research. According to Papdatou et al. (2002), teachers acknowledge that their role in working with grieving students is significant due to the amount of time spent with students and close relationships. Previous research also aligns with participants' discussion of the need to

better educate teachers so that they can best understand grief reactions and support grieving students. In previous studies, teachers reported feeling cautious untrained in bereavement issues (Holland, 1993), agreed that grieving students are overlooked in schools (Dyregrov et al., 2013), and feeling unprepared for handling or discussing grief with students (Reid & Dixon, 1999). Participants in this study echoed the difficulty that teachers experience in initially identifying students who are grieving and often do not know how to best support grieving students. In Minnesota, there is not a specific requirement related to grief and loss training for teacher licensure (Minnesota Department of Education, n.d.). Given the prevalence of loss in this study and in previous research, emphasis on grief and loss training for teachers is critical in better helping teachers feel more prepared discussing grief with students and feel more comfortable in acknowledging and support students who are grieving.

Implications for Social Work

Given the amount of students who attend schools in the United States and the amount of students who experience grief during their school years, the role that a school social worker plays in helping students grieve is critical. Most students will experience loss at some point during their school years and often experience a significant amount of stress in response to that loss (Hope & Hodge, 2006). School social workers are often the ones to whom an entire school turns to help and guidance when anyone in the school community is in pain (Massat et al., 2008). These results align with existing literature to suggest the likelihood that school social workers will encounter grieving students is high. Given the wide range of types of losses that students will experience, school social workers play a crucial role in guiding students through loss. As a result, it is important to understand school social workers' experiences working with grieving children and the expanding, vital role that school social workers play in managing students'

social-emotional well-being with their school functioning and academic success.

Implications for Policy

As suggested by the participants in this study, it is important for school social workers and teachers to recognize students who are grieving and educate those who work directly with grieving students in order to best help them. Previous literature suggests the important role that teachers play in acknowledging and supporting grieving students; however, teachers typically do not realize the impact of a student's development on how students grieve. This impacts how grieving students are identified and referred for services. Teachers have also identified feeling unprepared and uncomfortable having discussions related to grief with students. As a result of being unprepared to handle students who are grieving combined with the prevalence of grief and loss among students, educators should be provided appropriate training around child and adolescent grief, which could be emphasized through educational policy.

Given the challenge that school social workers face in providing social-emotional services to students who are in school to be learners first, more emphasis must be placed on students' social-emotional well-being as part of their role as a learner rather than only being a learner first. Educational policy has the ability to recognize the importance of student well-being as a necessary component of a student's academic success, which can prioritize a school culture shift that stresses the importance of a student's social-emotional health along with their role as a learner.

Implications for Future Research

Further research is needed in several areas of grief and loss among children and adolescents in a school setting. School social workers from other states should be interviewed regarding their experiences in working with grieving students. Teachers should also be

interviewed regarding their experiences working with grieving children and how that may or may not differ from school social workers' experiences. It would also be helpful to research social work graduate programs across the country to better understand how social workers are trained in grief and loss.

Strengths and Limitations

This researcher gained valuable information on the topic of school social workers' experiences working with grieving children and adolescents. This research has contributed to the understanding of the prevalence of loss among students, types of losses that students experience, barriers to school social workers providing services to grieving students, and how school social workers and teachers are involved in working with grieving students. Although there is a significant amount of previous research related to how children and adolescents grieve, there is little research regarding school social workers' experiences working with grieving children. This study, although small, will help to contribute to this topic of research.

The small sample size is a limitation in this study. The demographics of this study also provide a limitation because the participants all have experience in geographic areas outside of Minneapolis and Saint Paul, Minnesota. In addition, other states may require school social workers to have formal grief and loss training; however, school social workers in Minnesota are not required to take such training, which would potentially impact school social workers' experiences working with grieving students.

Conclusion

Students often experience incredible loss that can alter the way they function at home, in their community, and at school. Each of those students will experience grief and loss differently, which can significantly impact how they function in the school environment. The role of a school

social worker emphasizes working within the context of a student's various environments, including home, community, and school. School social workers play a critical role in helping students who have experienced loss or disruptive change. Ultimately, these findings emphasize the need for more awareness and acknowledgement of students' grief experiences in the school setting and the critical role that school social workers play in a student's grief experience.

Although students are in school as learners first, students cannot meet their full academic potential if their social-emotional well-being is not acknowledged and prioritized. As a result, school social workers are limited in their capacity to help students with their grief and loss because of the very emphasis on academic success over social-emotional well-being. The findings further highlight the prevalence of loss that students experience, as well as the many types of losses, including both death and non-death losses, that students experience and are often overlooked in the school setting. Because of the amount of students who experience grief and loss, it is important to understand the experiences of those who help them in order to further develop the best possible interventions to ensure students' social-emotional well-being and academic success.

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Appendix A

Recruitment Email

Dear Potential Participant,

My name is Kaitlin Salscheider and I am a Master's of Social Work student at the University of St. Thomas/St. Catherine University School of Social Work in St. Paul. I am conducting research under the supervision of Dr. Melissa Lundquist, a professor in the program. I am looking to interview school social workers who work with children and adolescents who are known to be grieving a loss or disruptive change. Although death is typically viewed as representative of all loss events, children experience many other losses, including but not limited to: parental divorce, family move, school change, placement in foster care, or other disruptive change. My research will assess school social workers' experiences working with grieving children and adolescents.

I obtained your information through the Minnesota School Social Workers Association (MSSWA). To my knowledge, you are a licensed school social worker and work as a school social worker. I would like to speak with you about your experiences working with grieving children and adolescents.

Interview information:

- 30- 45 minute audio recorded interview
- Interview will be scheduled at a location and time convenient to participant
- Participation in this interview is voluntary and there are no known risks involved. After you provide consent, you can stop the interview process at any time and withdraw.
- All information you provide will be confidential and secure.

If you wish to participate in this study, please email me at sals9567@stthomas.edu by February 20, 2016. If you have questions or concerns, you can call me at 651-428-6276 or call my supervising chair, Dr. Melissa Lundquist at 651-962-5813.

Thank you for your consideration,

Kaitlin J. Salscheider, B.A.
Master of Social Work Student
University of St. Thomas/St. Catherine University

Appendix B

University of St. Thomas

Consent Form

Grieving Students: School Social Workers' Perspectives

I am conducting a study exploring school social workers' experiences working with grieving children and adolescents. I invite you to participate in this research. You were selected as a potential participant in this research because you have been identified as a member of the Minnesota School Social Workers Association (MSSWA), are a licensed school social worker, and work as a school social worker in Minnesota. Please read this form and ask any questions before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by: Kaitlin Salscheider, a Master of Social Work student at the University of St. Thomas/St. Catherine School of Social Work, under the supervision of Dr. Melissa Lundquist, faculty member at the University of St. Thomas.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to explore school social workers' experiences working with grieving children and adolescents. An exploratory qualitative study will be conducted to gain important insight about the experiences of school social workers who work with grieving children and adolescents.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things: participate in one 30-45 minute interview at a location and time convenient for you. The interview will be audio recorded on an iPhone and later transcribed in order to assist me in the data analysis process.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:

There are no known risks to participating in this study.

There are no direct benefits to participating in this study.

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept confidential. In any sort of report I publish, I will not include information that will make it possible to identify you in any way. The types of records I will create include: a transcript of our conversation and an audio recording, both of which will be kept on a password-protected laptop. Audio recordings will be stored briefly on a password-protected iPhone and will be transferred to a computer within 12 hours of the interview. At that time, all audio recordings will be deleted from the phone. The transcript and audio recording will be destroyed in May of 2016. Consent forms will be kept in a locked and secure file cabinet at the researcher's home and will remain there for three years, at which time they will be shredded

and discarded.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the agency you work for or St. Catherine University or the University of St. Thomas. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time. Should you decide to withdraw data collected about you, I will respect your decision and remove your data. You are also free to skip any questions I may ask.

Contacts and Questions:

My name is Kaitlin Salscheider. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have any questions later, you may contact me at 651-428-6276. You may contact my advisor, Dr. Melissa Lundquist at 651-962-5813. You may also contact the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board at 651-962-6035 with any questions or concerns.

You may keep a copy of this form for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent to participate in the study. I am at least 18 years of age. I understand that this interview will be audio recorded and transcribed for data analysis.

Print Name of Study Participant

Signature of Study Participant

Date

Signature of Researcher

Date

Appendix C

Interview Questions:

1. How many years have you worked as a school social worker in a Minnesota school?
2. What age group(s)/grade level(s) do you provide services in your school setting?
3. How are grieving students in your school identified and referred?
4. What types of losses are students grieving?
5. What support systems are in place in the school for grieving students?
6. How often do you work with grieving students?
7. How prepared do you feel to provide services to grieving students?
8. What barriers exist, if any, that prevent you from providing services to grieving students?
If yes, what are they and what would you like to see done differently?
9. How do you involve or not involve a grieving student's family?
10. At what point and why might you refer grieving students to outside community resources?