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Bereavement support provision in primary schools: an exploratory study

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ABSTRACT

In the UK, approximately 1 in 29 children have experienced the death of a parent or sibling. It is argued that schools are suitably positioned to provide support to bereaved children. However, there is a gap in research exploring bereavement support provision (BSP) in primary schools. This paper presents the qualitative phase of a mixed-methods study which aimed to gain insight into BSP in primary schools in one UK Local Authority. After completing an online questionnaire, 16 school staff took part in semi-structured interviews. The findings of this study highlighted that BSP is characterised by emotional support and other indirect responses. A key finding is that providing emotional support to a bereaved child has a negative impact on the emotional well-being of staff. This study discusses how educational psychologists (EPs) are well placed to provide whole school and targeted bereavement support to children and school staff.

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Child bereavement; grief; loss; primary school; emotional well-being

Introduction

Child bereavement is associated with a range of negative psychological, academic and other long-term outcomes (Parsons, 2011). The presence of a supportive environment, such as an acknowledgement of a loss by a teacher, has been found to be a significant predictor contributing to positive coping skills in bereaved children (Wolchik et al., 2009). Many authors argue for the crucial role of schools in supporting children who have been bereaved (Abdelnoor & Hollins, 2004; Adams, 2014; Balk et al., 2011; Dyregrov et al., 2015; Holland, 2008, 2016; McGovern & Tracey, 2010), which is reflected in the development of mental health provision in schools in England (Department of Health [DoH]/Department for Education [DfE], 2017). The green paper, “Transforming Children and Young People’s Mental Health Provision”, specifically identifies bereaved children as a population who may require additional emotional support in schools (DoH/DfE, 2017). There is currently a lack of research on child bereavement in schools, despite the known prevalence of one child in 29 experiencing the loss of a parent (Winstons Wish, 2019). Consequently, there is no clear picture of the provision of support for bereaved children in the UK. Some endeavours have been undertaken to address the significant gaps in the literature, but it is evident that this field of research remains very limited and further research is required.

A range of terms is used in the literature in this field. The term bereavement is used to describe the state of having lost something or someone, whereas the term grief refers to the internalised reaction to that loss (Corr et al., 2006; Goldman, 2014). A critical incident is characterised by a sudden or unexpected traumatic incident which impairs the normal functioning of a school, such as a death of a staff member by suicide (DfE, 2018). A routine, or non-critical, bereavement is a loss that may not deeply affect the school community, but is likely to have an impact on a bereaved child's well-being, such as the loss of a close family member. Bereavement support provision (BSP) (James, 2015) in schools is an aspect of pastoral care provided to children who have been bereaved that is specifically related to their loss.

Aims of the study

The current paper reports on the qualitative phase of a mixed-methods study aimed to gain insight into BSP in primary schools across one English Local Authority (LA). Using Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological theory of human development (BTHD; Bronfenbrenner, 2005) as a theoretical framework, this paper serves to explore BSP in primary schools from the perspective of primary school staff who have been involved with supporting bereaved children. This exploration will provide insight into how EPs may be able to aid and empower schools to support bereaved children in their care.

Theoretical framework

Bronfenbrenner's (2005) BTHD framework positions the school as potentially significant in supporting pupils who have been bereaved, due to its centrality in relation to the child's immediate environment and the reciprocal interactions that take place between the school and the bereaved child over time. The BTHD has been used in two previous studies exploring school responses to bereaved children in the UK (Holland & McLennan, 2015; Holland & Wilkinson, 2015). The BTHD suggests that a child's development and relationships are affected by both the interplay between a child and their environment and the active role a child plays in their own development (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). The layers of influence within the BTHD, namely the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and their application to school-family systems, as well as the later addition of the chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1986), are well known in the field.

The microsystem is the most proximal system, comprised of the child, family and prominent social structures, such as the school and the community. The mesosystem refers to the interactions that take place between the different components of the microsystem, such as the interactions between the child's family and their school. The exosystem encompasses influences the child is not directly involved with, but affect the context of microsystem and mesosystem, such as professionals that work in consultation with school staff. The macrosystem consists of the institutional systems and ideologies of a culture or subculture, such as Government policies. Bronfenbrenner (1986) added the dimension of time to account for the impact of changes that may occur due to events or experiences across an individual's lifetime, known as the chronosystem. The most recent version of the model (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), which is applied in this study, gives particular attention to personal characteristics and proximal processes. Proximal processes are

the interactions that occur regularly within the mesosystem, for example, the bi-directional interactions between a child and their teacher.

Literature review

Children and grief

There is general agreement in the literature that children as young as six months old can experience grief (Webb, 2010). However, children's understanding of the core concepts of death typically matures between the developmental ages of 7 and 10 years (Speece & Brent, 1984). Grief is a natural response to a loss that is experienced in unique ways (Bain, 2003). The Harvard Child Bereavement Study found that most children who are bereaved of a parent experience some negative impact on their psychological well-being, which may continue to intensify for at least two years (Worden, 1996). The manifestation of grief in children is thought to be impacted by their cognitive understanding of death; for example, Wiseman (2013) argues that because children in Piaget's (1954) preoperational stage of cognitive development (two to seven-years-old) believe that death is reversible, they often grieve intermittently, and quickly resume activities after experiencing overwhelming pockets of grief. Limited verbal language in young children means that they often express their grief through play, drawings and bodily expressions, rather than verbal language (Bugge et al., 2013; Christ, 2000).

School support

The presence of a supportive environment has been found to be a considerable protective factor for bereaved children (Akerman & Statham, 2014; Wolchik et al., 2009). Authors have noted that while parents are grieving the loss of a child or spouse, they can experience a range of grief reactions that hinder their ability to provide support to a bereaved child at home (Dopp & Cain, 2012; Saldinger et al., 2004). Preliminary qualitative studies with bereaved children have found a significant gap between the expressed need for support and the support provided by schools within the mesosystem (Cranwell, 2007; Dyregrov, 2009; Forward & Garlie, 2003). Some studies have considered the approaches adopted by different schools; for example, Holland (2008, 2016)) categorised school responses to bereaved children into two key approaches: proactive and reactive. Proactive approaches involve upskilling staff with bereavement training and are informed by bereavement policies with carefully considered procedures for school staff to follow. In contrast, reactive approaches describe support that responds after the bereavement has occurred and is often characterised by the referral of a child to external agencies and indicate a lack of staff training in this area (Holland, 2016; James, 2015). Holland and Wilkinson (2015) compared BSP in primary, secondary and special schools and found that most schools tend to adopt reactive rather than proactive approaches. A significant training gap in bereavement and loss in schools has consistently been reported (Holland, 2016).

A small number of studies have explored practices in schools for supporting bereaved children. Research in this area has tended to focus on attitudes to grief and bereavement (for example, Potts, 2013; Reid & Dixon, 1999) or whole school responses to bereavement, such as the presence of policies or training (for example,

Holland & McLennan, 2015; Holland & Wilkinson, 2015). To date, only two studies have explored the responses of teachers to grieving children in the UK. Lowton and Higginson (2003) carried out 13 interviews with primary and secondary school teachers in London. They found a variety of societal influences impacted on teachers' management of bereaved children and that time, and curriculum pressures, were considerable obstacles to dealing with grief in the classroom. However, participants in this small scale study supported bereaved children ranging from 3 to 19 years old, with very little reference made to the differing responses of teachers depending on the age of the child, the nature of the bereavement, and the context of the primary and secondary settings. A more recent study by Lane et al. (2014) built on this research by focusing on one developmental age range. Using a grounded theory design, the authors interviewed 12 secondary school teachers who had supported a parentally bereaved adolescent. Six central processes were identified, including flexibility, openness, support, emotionality, sharing and communication. Participants in this study identified the emotional stress of dealing with grief in the classroom. Participants felt "an obligation to stay strong, address the bereavement, and provide support even if distressed themselves" (Lane et al., 2014, p. 7).

Ribbens-McCarthy and Jessop (2005) carried out a review of the literature on child bereavement and the authors concluded that there is a significant gap in research, particularly relating to community-based samples within a social context. An extensive literature search across PsychInfo, PsychArticles and ERIC revealed that there have been approximately 10 peer-reviewed publications exploring child bereavement in schools in the UK since the 2005 review. These studies shed more light on attitudes held by school staff around BSP in schools (Potts, 2013), responses of school staff to bereaved children in a secondary context (Lane et al., 2014), using picture books to teach children about death (Wiseman, 2013), non-empirical discussions around issues in this area (Adams, 2014; Aynsley-Green et al., 2012; Bennett & Dyehouse, 2005; Holland, 2008) and surface level understandings of bereavement practices in schools, such as the existence of school policy, the provision of staff training and the prevalence of bereaved children in schools (Holland & McLennan, 2015; Holland & Wilkinson, 2015; McGovern & Tracey, 2010). There is a notable lack of research in primary schools and the focus has been specifically on teachers, rather than other important school staff; for example, emotional literacy support assistants (ELSAs) who have additional training in bereavement and loss and offer a pastoral service to bereaved children in primary schools.

Current study

The present study aimed to explore how bereaved children are supported in primary schools and how children's grief is understood by school staff. The research questions in this study are described as follows:

- (1) How are bereaved children responded to in primary schools?
- (2) How are primary school staff supported in responding to bereaved children?
- (3) How is children's grief understood by primary school staff?

Method

Research design

This current paper reports on the second phase of a two-phase study. The initial phase consisted of 260 participants across 14 primary schools in one London LA who completed an online questionnaire. The second phase involved 16 participants from the initial phase across 10 of the 14 primary schools who participated in semi-structured interviews. The initial phase was used to elicit key themes that primary school staff reported about their knowledge and experiences of BSP, which were then used to inform the development of the semi-structured interview schedules. The scope of this paper is to report on the data from the second phase, and it is intended that the data from the first phase will be reported on in future publications.

Participants

All participants had experience of supporting a child bereaved of a parent, sibling or peer in the past five years. Participants included eight teachers, three ELSAs, two special educational needs co-ordinators (SENCOs), two assistant headteachers, and a pastoral lead, across 10 different primary schools within one LA (see [Table 1](#)). Participants ranged in years of experience working in schools from one year to 12 years (mean = 5.75 years). The majority of participants were female ($n = 15$) and white British ($n = 12$).

Procedure

The researchers contacted the headteachers of all 44 primary schools within the LA to outline the purpose of the research and invite their school to participate. 260 participants across 14 primary schools took part in an online questionnaire in the initial phase, and those with experience of supporting a bereaved child in the past five years were provided with an opportunity to express interest in participating in semi-structured interviews. 38 participants expressed interest and 16 participants were purposefully selected to take part in the semi-structured interviews. Interviews were conducted at a time and place that

Table 1. Summary of participants.

| Role | Participant | School |
|---|-----------------|-----------|
| Teacher ($n = 8$) | Teacher-A | School 1 |
| | Teacher-B | School 3 |
| | Teacher-C | School 4 |
| | Teacher-D | School 4 |
| | Teacher-E | School 5 |
| | Teacher-F | School 6 |
| | Teacher-G | School 7 |
| | Teacher-H | School 8 |
| Emotional Literacy Support Assistant ($n = 3$) | ELSA-A | School 2 |
| | ELSA-B | School 4 |
| | ELSA-C | School 6 |
| Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator ($n = 2$) | SENCO-A | School 3 |
| | SENCO-B | School 9 |
| Pastoral Lead ($n = 1$) | Pastoral-A | School 10 |
| Assistant Headteacher ($n = 2$) | AssistantHead-A | School 2 |
| | AssistantHead-B | School 4 |

were convenient for the participant. Participants were provided with an information sheet and signed a consent form. Participants were debriefed at the end of the interview, which included appropriate signposts, given the nature of the topic. The interviews lasted between 41 and 64 minutes, with an average length of 51 minutes. All recorded data were transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis

An inductive and iterative thematic analysis was conducted on the qualitative data. The thematic analysis followed the six stages outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Although the analysis aimed to be data-driven in nature, it is acknowledged that the researcher's epistemology and positioning in relation to the topic being studied will have impacted on the process. The use of a reflective journal and memos, which were shared with other members of the research team for review, helped to make the process of interpretation more transparent (Willig, 2013). After successive waves of iterative coding, the researcher mapped the superior codes on to the BTHD during stage three of the analysis, searching for themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A number of additional steps were taken to ensure the integrity and rigour of the analysis, including a pilot study, iterative coding, participant checking and intra and inter coding checking. Five per cent of the interview transcripts were peer checked using a coding comparison, which resulted in a high level of consistency (approximately 85%).

Findings

331 codes emerged through the thematic analysis, which were grouped into 56 superior codes. These codes formed 11 subthemes and four overarching themes. These themes were: Understanding Children's Grief; Bereavement Support Provision; Factors Influencing Proximal Processes in BSP; and Emotional Impact of BSP on School Staff. Table 2 provides a summary of the themes, subthemes and frequency analysis across the data set.

Theme 1. Understanding children's grief

This theme captures how children's grief was understood by participants who described children's grief as a unique process, characterised by external, internal and intermittent behaviours. Pastoral-A discusses this:

Children's grief manifests in a variety of ways. There are the children who don't mention it at all and they are really quiet in class. Some children's behaviour changes completely. They might be disruptive. Some children are visibly upset or crying, the more traditional grief (Pastoral-A).

Participants identified environmental and developmental triggers for grief, which can result in difficulties in linking behaviours to a child's grief when it resurfaces over time (for example, during life transitions). Participants also discussed negative influences on children's grief within the interrelated systems of the BTHD, such as financial difficulties and death being a "taboo" subject in society.

Table 2. Summary of themes, subthemes and frequency analysis across the data set.

| Theme | Subtheme | Number of references and participants | Summary of subtheme |
|---|---|---------------------------------------|---|
| Understanding children's grief | Children's expression of grief | 191 (16) | Participant perceptions of how children express their grief, such as grief being viewed as a unique process expressed through external, internal and intermittent behaviours |
| | Systemic influences on children's grief | 108 (16) | Mesosystemic, exosystemic and macrosystemic influences on children's grief, such as poor parental mental health, being excluded and death as a "taboo" subject in UK culture |
| Bereavement Support Provision (BSP) | Perspectives on role of school in BSP | 83 (14) | Participants' beliefs that schools have a role in supporting bereaved children and that maintaining normality for the bereaved child is a key aspect of that role |
| | Identifying bereaved children | 152 (16) | How bereaved children are identified in primary schools; through relatives, staff, the media or the child |
| | BSP in practice | 233 (16) | Support provided to bereaved children, explained in terms of direct support (e.g., reassurance, intervention) and indirect support (e.g., a referral to an external agency) |
| Factors Influencing Proximal Processes in BSP | Child's developmental needs | 186 (16) | The influence of the child's developmental needs, such as age, on the proximal processes in BSP |
| | Attuned relationships | 126 (16) | The positive influence of attuned relationships on proximal processes in BSP. Several life experiences (e.g., being a parent or being bereaved) and person characteristics (e.g., being a good communicator) were believed to contribute to attuned relationships |
| | Cultural and systemic factors | 115 (16) | The cultural and systemic factors that have an impact on the proximal processes that occur in the mesosystem when supporting bereaved children, such as communication systems and support from external agencies |
| Emotional Impact of BSP on School Staff | Containing and compassion fatigue | 138 (15) | The stress and emotional exhaustion felt by participants when containing a child's grief in the school context. Aspects of BSP were perceived as particularly difficult, including the child's grief acting as a trigger for the participants' feelings of grief related to a previous loss |
| | Lack of containment for staff | 114 (16) | Participants feeling unsupported when carrying out BSP. A small number of participants felt supported due to factors like access to external agencies |
| | Staff support and training | 149 (16) | The support and training required for school staff to support bereaved children |

a (b); a = number of references, b = number of participants

Theme 2. Bereavement support provision (BSP)

This theme captures how bereaved children are identified and supported in primary schools. Participants believed that schools play a significant role in supporting children's grief, viewing direct and indirect support to bereaved children as a crucial aspect of pastoral care. The provision of emotional support was a key direct response, carried out by all participants. Participants adapted their interactions with the bereaved child to ensure an empathetic and emotionally supportive response. Some examples include:

Taking the time to listen, to talk to children, to reassure them (Teacher-E).

A lot of nurture and extra cuddles (SENCO-B).

We planted some seeds and wrote her notes together (Teacher-C).

Participants who provided specific and targeted interventions with bereaved children (for example, ELSAs and the Pastoral Lead) discussed specific approaches to emotional support that were employed, such as play and art based approaches, talking therapy, therapeutic stories and psycho-education. For example:

He had ongoing weekly therapy, probably about 6 months of work. We made a memory book. He found it really difficult to access his emotions at first, so we spent a long time doing art, games and play-based approaches around feelings and emotions ... Then I did a bit of psycho-education around what cancer is because he had a lot of questions (Pastoral-A).

Indirect support included researching child bereavement, making an onward referral and ensuring appropriate awareness of the child's loss within the school community.

I informed the rest of the staff so they were aware and put up his picture so they knew to tread a bit carefully and give him a little bit of TLC if he needed it (Teacher-I).

There was no clear pathway of identifying bereaved children. Participants were made aware of a bereavement through relatives, other staff, the media or the child themselves. A number of participants expressed concerns around the negative consequences of an unidentified bereavement. For example, ELSA-A explains the difficulties that adults may have in understanding the function of a behaviour:

It will have a detrimental effect because they'll start playing up and if the school don't know why, the consequences could be harsher (ELSA-A).

Theme 3. Factors influencing proximal processes in BSP

A number of proximal processes, or bi-directional interactions, that influenced the support that was provided to bereaved children emerged within the data. For example, participants discussed both verbal and non-verbal forms of interactions that were intended to be supportive in nature and the child's response to these. Teacher-D illustrates this:

He didn't seem to like when I asked him questions about how he was feeling, so we agreed a secret signal that I used to let him know that I was thinking of him. He seemed to like this as he often smiled and made the signal back to me (Teacher-D).

This theme captures the perceived factors that influenced proximal processes within the school system. These included the child's developmental needs, the presence of attuned relationships and cultural and systemic factors. Support was based on the child's preferences and presenting needs. ELSA-C illuminates this in her advice to other staff supporting bereaved children:

Go where the child leads you. Don't go in with a fixed idea of what activity you will do, because you don't know how they're going to walk through the door. They may have had a nightmare that night and that's what they're coming into school with. Be flexible (ELSA-C).

An attuned, trusting relationship was viewed as highly influential to interactions in BSP. Participants identified aspects of themselves that contributed positively to this attunement, such as prior experience of supporting a bereaved child, being a parent or being bereaved in the past.

The culture and ethos of the school community, both internally and externally, was considered to be influential. Participants in teaching roles appreciated guidance and regular contact from Senior Management, whilst those in managerial roles discussed the importance of such communication. Some participants valued and appreciated external agency support, such as from charities or Educational Psychology. Other participants felt that this support was limited. Some examples of quotes are outlined below:

It was really lovely to have an outsider to talk to (Teacher-E).

Some staff found them helpful, I didn't. I did try speaking to them, but found it hard. They were helpful I suppose in guiding us in how to support the children (AssistantHead-B).

Theme 4. Emotional impact of BSP on school staff

This theme captures the emotional impact of BSP on participants and the support that is needed in schools for staff in this role. A range of emotional reactions emerged in participants when supporting the bereaved child, such as worry, guilt and sadness, stress, emotional upset and feeling the need to remain strong for the child participants, as illustrated by the following examples:

It was an incredibly stressful time, both emotionally and mentally (Teacher-B).

It's hard; really, really hard. I don't think you can imagine how much it hits you emotionally (Pastoral-A).

I can remember breaking down and wanting to cry, but being very conscious of not wanting to upset him, so not being able to cry (Assistant Head-A).

I had to come straight back into class and obviously you could see that my eyes were like golf balls from crying. I think I just said they were a bit itchy or something – four-year-olds believe anything! But I think higher up in the school, it can be a lot harder to hide those sorts of things (Teacher-G).

Participants related the children's losses to their own, which appeared to heighten their emotional difficulties when supporting a bereaved child. Many participants discussed a lack of guidance and support in this area, which resulted in fears and worries about doing the wrong thing. Teacher-D illustrates this:

I don't think there is enough support or guidance for teachers in this area. It can be an uncomfortable thing to deal with and if you don't get it right, it could be quite bad. I know that I was worried about doing the wrong thing at the time (Teacher-D).

Participants who felt supported mentioned receiving direct help from senior management, experienced staff members and external agencies. Unsurprisingly, this type of direct help emerged as a support that is needed for school staff. In addition, all participants discussed the need for training for staff members in the area of bereavement and loss.

Discussion, limitations and implications for educational psychology (EP) practice

This study explored how bereaved children are responded to, how their grief is understood and how school staff are supported in their response to bereaved children. The findings highlighted that participants understood children's grief to be a unique process, characterised by internal, external and intermittent behaviours. Providing emotional support was an important response to bereaved children and the study highlights how this had a considerable impact on the emotional well-being of participants. The findings of this study indicate, therefore, that support and training for primary school staff is needed in this area.

Bereavement and loss is a challenging area to research due to the sensitive nature of the topic and limited studies completed to date. This study was exploratory in nature and there was a relatively small sample size that was selected using opportunistic sampling, which may have introduced bias. Additionally, the study took place within one LA, which may limit generalisability. However, the findings do give insight into the experiences of primary school staff within one LA who have supported bereaved children, with a number of distinct commonalities across the data set.

Whilst the data are limited in the current study in relation to assessing the effectiveness of the approaches used, some of the support described by participants has been found to be effective in promoting emotional well-being in schools. For example, Weare's (2015) framework of effective approaches to mental health suggests using specialist staff for therapeutic work, providing clear referral pathways, ensuring structure and routine, and developing supportive classroom environments that build on acceptance of emotion and relationships. This study highlighted the considerable amount of emotional support being provided to bereaved children, but it also raises questions around how this support is perceived by bereaved children and whether it is effective against bereavement outcomes.

A key finding within this research was the significant impact supporting a bereaved child had on the emotional well-being of participants. Participants described a pronounced level of stress and emotional exhaustion, which is comparable to research highlighting the vulnerability of caring professions to compassion fatigue (for example, Boyle, 2011). It appears that this study indicates that primary school staff supporting bereaved children are also at risk of emotional stress.

This study suggests that the BTHD is a useful framework to understand BSP within the school system. However, the use of an additional lens based on the psychodynamic model of containment (Bion, 1983) could highlight the emotional experience of both bereaved children and the staff providing support, notwithstanding the different origins of the two theories. Bion's (1983) theory describes an active experience of emotional connection, where the mother holds and processes the child's emotional anxiety and distress and conveys these feelings back to the child in a more understandable form. The potential utility of Bion's (1983) model of containment in school contexts has been demonstrated by other researchers in the field (for example, Mintz, 2014). In relation to the current study, there is both a "containing" function of school staff, that involves holding and reflecting on the bereaved child's projections and responding in a modified way to support self-regulation, but also the need for containment within the social system of the school as a whole (Kalu, 2002); for example, participants in the current study described modifying

supports depending on the child's response and their own distress at the lack of support for themselves.

The findings of this study have implications for educational psychology (EP) practice. The integration of systemic and psychodynamic theory appears useful in this context to provide insight and guidance for how EPs can aid schools in supporting bereaved children. In fact, due to the historical emphasis on individual competencies and behaviour management in well-being promotion in schools (Hoffman, 2009), researchers recognise the need for a systemic approach to the promotion of emotional well-being that incorporates the needs of both children and adults within the school system (Weare, 2015). As such, the implications of the current study have been mapped on to the interrelated systems of the BTHD (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), with consideration of Bion's (1983) containment theory at each level of the model (see Figure 1).

The environmental and developmental triggers that occur periodically within the school context, such as during times of transition, were identified within this study. EPs can develop the awareness of schools in this regard and establish systems for information sharing over time; for example, some guidance documents for schools suggest the use of a "Bereavement Passport" that fulfils a variety of functions, such as acknowledging the child's loss, supporting the liaison between home and school and outlining difficult dates (Osmond & Stacey, 2011). EPs could adapt this resource to include environmental triggers and support schools to use and refer to this resource to contextualise behavioural changes that may occur. Under those circumstances, school staff may be more able to understand and respond to behavioural changes in an empathetic and containing way, a task which has been found to cause difficulty for school staff in the past (Cohen & Mannarino, 2011).

The findings of this study that relate to the microsystem include the unique nature of grief and how it can be expressed internally, externally and intermittently. This information, alongside the centrality of the child's preferences and their presenting needs, should be used to guide intervention and containing support.

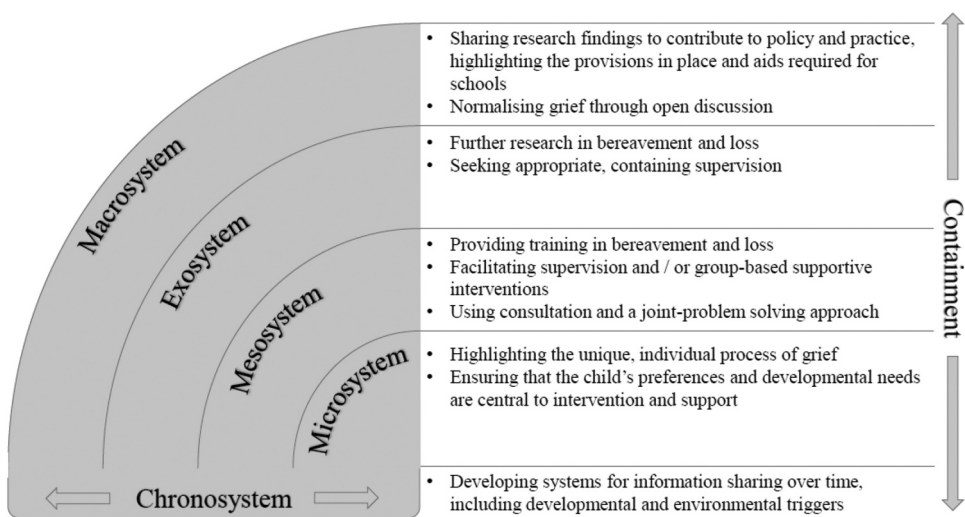


Figure 1. Implications for EP practice.

Within the mesosystem, this research has reiterated the training gap in bereavement and loss in schools. EPs are already providing training to schools within their respective LAs in relation to children's mental health needs (Boorn et al., 2010), and EPs are well-placed to deliver training in this area given their in-depth understanding of psychological theory applicable to separation, loss and trauma (Holland & Wilkinson, 2015).

This is not the first study to unearth the salient need for support systems for school staff (for example, Jackson, 2002; Lee, 2016; Reid, 2002). However, the emotional stress experienced by participants in this study certainly strengthens the argument for systemic support systems to be implemented. Existing research has already acknowledged the evolving role of EPs in relation to inter-disciplinary supervision for other professionals, such as support workers for vulnerable adolescents (Maxwell, 2012). EPs, who have pre-existing relationships with schools, could extend their role to provide supervision to those who are supporting bereaved children. Currently, ELSAs receive supervision on a half-termly basis and this has been found to have a positive impact on their perceived ability to support children with emotional and behavioural needs (Osbourne & Burton, 2014).

It is of note that ELSAs in this study experienced similar emotional stress to their colleagues. As such, incorporating the notion of "containing the containers" through a psychodynamic approach to supervision may be useful in this instance; for example, Work Discussion Groups have been successfully applied in educational settings in the past (Hulusi & Maggs, 2015; Jackson, 2002). This model of supervision facilitates group reflection on the psychodynamic aspects of the problem situation, rather than exclusively searching for a solution (Hulusi & Maggs, 2015). This is relevant to the parallel processes and mirroring that emerged in this study, whereby participants' emotional responses reflected the children's experiences of grief. Alternative group-based supportive interventions include Solution Circles and Circle of Adults, which have been found to support staff to understand a problem situation, generate positive strategies and demonstrate greater empathy towards a child (Grahamslaw & Henson, 2015). As professionals with training in the delivery of group-based interventions, EPs are distinctly placed to provide this type of support in schools. Additionally at this level, consultation is a useful tool that has a dual function of supporting and containing school staff, whilst also empowering and enabling others to meet a child's needs more efficiently and sensitively (Macleod et al., 2007).

It is important to note that EPs, who are frequently engaged in emotionally demanding work, are professionally contained through frequent supervision, as stipulated by the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) regulations at a macrosystemic level (Health and Care Professions Council, 2009). However, many authors have acknowledged the stress reaction of EPs when carrying out critical incident interventions and have promoted a model of supervision that focuses on the emotional aspects of this work (Beeke, 2011; Hayes & Frederickson, 2008). Considering the significant emotional impact experienced by participants in the current study, it is also important for EPs to monitor their emotional well-being when supporting schools with non-critical bereavements and access appropriate and containing supervision.

With advanced research skills and a wide-reaching positionality within the LA, EPs are well-placed to carry out, critically review and disseminate findings of research around bereavement and loss in schools. Avenues for future research have been identified as part of this exploratory study, such as an evaluation of the effectiveness of the emotional support currently in place and the need for the perspective of bereaved children in this regard.

At a macrosystemic level, psychoanalytic perspectives highlight the education system as an influential containing environment that provides a safe and secure space for children to process difficult experiences and feelings (Hyman, 2012). Perhaps these perspectives, alongside Government policies, need to recognise the need for the school system and community to be contained and develop provision accordingly. EPs can contribute to policy and practice in this area through engaging in discussions and debates around bereaved children's needs in schools or how data on bereaved children should be collected and used. In particular, EPs can give recognition to the significant amount of support being provided by schools to bereaved children and the need for containment for school staff.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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