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Abstract
Bereavement is an inevitable occurrence in every school and can be a difficult experience that children cannot be shielded from. Although the subject of death and bereavement is often a 'taboo' subject, the nature and incidence of bereavement, critically explored in this article, suggests that it is not an issue that practitioners can shy away from. Bereavement has the potential to impact children in a number of harmful ways. In light of the detrimental impact which the experience of bereavement may have upon a child, this article critically considers the potential proactive and reactive strategies that can be employed by schools in order to address such a complex and sensitive issue.

Introduction
Bereavement is one of the most distressing events that a young child can experience, and it presents many unique challenges for primary schools as they seek to respond effectively (Chadwick, 2012; Grollman, 1990). Experiencing childhood bereavement is sadly not uncommon (Jones *et al*., 2015). In fact, the likelihood of experiencing bereavement during school years has been highlighted in a recent study carried out among teachers in Norway who expressed that bereavement 'will always be a recurring phenomenon in every school' (Dyregrov *et al*., 2015, p.296). Although death has been referred to as a taboo subject in society (Holland, 2008), Morgan and Roberts (2010) suggest that it is almost impossible to shield children from bereavement. Therefore, teachers should be adequately equipped to deal with bereavement both proactively and reactively.

The nature and incidence of bereavement
Bereavement is a complex and difficult phenomenon (Lappin, 2013) that is simply defined by Wolfelt (2002, cited in Heath and Cole, 2011, p.245) as, 'experiencing a loved one's death'. However, Thompson (2012) provides a much more intense description illustrating bereavement as being robbed of something or someone. This depiction of bereavement may exemplify the literal feelings of someone after experiencing a significant loss (Thompson, 2012). In comparison to other forms of loss, for example loss through divorce or emigration, death is distinctive in that it is an irreversible, unavoidable and universally experienced aspect of life (Lappin, 2013). The loss may be of a pet, family member or friend where the death could be expected, sudden or tragic. Despite its commonplace nature, discussing death with children is however usually avoided (Chadwick, 2012; Smith, 1999), especially in western society where there is often a natural inclination to shelter children from death (Dyregrov, 2008). However, when children are not involved in the bereavement of a loved one, this may only prohibit them from developing an understanding of death.

The Childhood Bereavement Network (CBN, 2015) states that it is unknown exactly how many children are bereaved annually as such data are not recorded. The most recent findings in the United Kingdom (UK) suggest that 3.5% of 5-16 year olds were bereaved of a parent or sibling and 6.3% were bereaved of a friend (Fauth *et al.*, 2009). However, these figures do not include Northern Ireland and are based on quite dated findings from 2004. Consequently, the CBN (2015) estimate that in 2014, 40,000 children in the UK were bereaved of a parent, while on a local level, in Belfast alone it is estimated that around 300 children under 17 are bereaved of a parent every year (CBN, 2015). Additionally, Cruse Bereavement Care (2015) claim that in Northern Ireland, approximately 1 in 29 children have experienced the death of a parent or sibling. Despite the relatively high estimated prevalence of bereaved children, it is important to consider that such statistics are only estimates and therefore cannot accurately reflect the true extent of the problem.

When a person experiences bereavement, they enter into a process of grieving. Grief is described as the emotional and cognitive reaction that surfaces when one is bereaved (Lappin, 2013; Smith, 1999). However, it may not only be an emotional and cognitive reaction that is expressed. Thompson's (2012) holistic definition describes grief as a biopsychosocial and spiritual response. Over the past century a number of significant theories related to the grieving process have emerged (Mallon, 2011). The most familiar theory was outlined by Kübler-Ross in 1969 (Jeffreys, 2005) and suggests that when one is grieving, there is a clear pattern of stages which the bereaved will move through (Thompson, 2012). These five stages are denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Kübler-Ross, 2009). Although this theory provides a foundation for understanding aspects of loss, this reductionist concept of grief (Lappin, 2013) has been the subject of considerable recent criticism. The Kübler-Ross model suggests that those who are grieving will follow a linear and predictable pattern of stages (Lappin, 2013) and suggests that there is no room for fluidity or variation within the grieving process (Mallon, 2011). To suggest a standardised staged response to grief ignores the reality that grief is unique to each person (Lappin, 2013). Not every bereaved person will experience each stage of grief or move through each stage of grief in a set pattern within a set time.

Alternatively, Worden (1996) outlines a model of four tasks that the bereaved work through. These four tasks are, accepting the death, dealing with the pain, adapting to life without the deceased, and emotional relocation of the deceased and moving on. Unlike the linear theory of Kübler-Ross, this theory appreciates the unpredictable nature of grief and does not require a systematic movement between tasks (Lappin, 2013). Instead, it allows flexibility for the bereaved to move between different tasks concurrently or individually (Heath and Cole, 2011). However, Heath and Cole (2011) recognise that grief will often reoccur because of occasions that prompt memories of the deceased, for example, birthdays or Christmas. That is why the Continuing Bonds Theory, proposed by Klass *et al*. (1996), is significant as it appreciates one's continued connection with the deceased. This model does not see grief as a process which one will ever complete and which leads to acceptance (Mallon, 2011). Instead, Rosenblatt (1996) contends that the grief process will never completely end.

In light of this critical reading of the contrasting grief theories, it is evident that a person may move through different phases of grief, however, the individual, unpredictable and potentially recurring nature of grief must be recognised. Therefore, such theories should not be assumed as standardised reactions to bereavement, but instead should be considered as theoretical attempts to provide coherence and structure to the vast array of highly individual grief responses.

A child's understanding
In an American study, Christ and Christ (2006) found that children will respond differently to death depending on their developmental age. This is because a child's understanding of death will progress correspondingly with their cognitive growth (Dyregrov, 2008) and therefore their responses will differ. For example, younger children, usually below the age of five, often lack understanding of the biology (Dyregrov, 2008) and permanency of death (Christ and Christ, 2006). Piaget and Inhelder (2008) claim that children at this age have "magical" thinking as they have insufficient understanding between cause and effect. Due to their egocentric nature, magical thinking may cause the child to believe that their wishes can change circumstances (Dyregrov, 2008) and that the deceased can be restored (Holland, 2008).

Around the age of seven, children commonly develop an understanding that death is inevitable (Dyregrov, 2008) and permanent (Chadwick, 2012). Children at this age usually mature into the preoperational stage of thinking as they have a mixture of both magical and logical thoughts (Christ and Christ, 2006). By this stage they usually have a firmer understanding of cause and effect (Dyregrov, 2008) and have a more concrete understanding of why someone has died. Although researchers have recognised common traits in understanding, it is relative to the child's own experiences and circumstances. Therefore, not every child may have the same understanding of death at the same age.

The impact of bereavement
When a child is bereaved, there are a number of ways in which they are impacted. For example, they may experience a range of physical pain (Dyregrov, 2008), such as headaches, stomach aches and appetite problems as well as being impacted cognitively. For example, they may struggle to remember information and display delayed reactions (Thompson, 2012), which may in turn impact on their academic performance (Christ and Christ, 2006). However, for some children, immersion in education may be their escape route from the pain of bereavement.

When children are bereaved, there are a variety of emotional impacts that they may endure, for example, shock, sadness and worry (Karakartal, 2012). A common emotion for young children is fear, the fear of losing someone else (Bugge *et al*., 2014) or becoming separated from others (Christ and Christ, 2006). Additionally, children may express feelings of guilt, as though they are responsible for the death (Heath and Cole, 2011; Webb, 2011). Holland (2008) highlights that guilt is caused by inadequate support during the bereavement, and suggests that the child may have received insufficient information and therefore lack complete understanding of the death which therefore causes feelings of guilt.

Such emotional and cognitive impacts are often manifested through behaviour (Potts, 2013; Thompson, 2012). Children may display overt behaviour as a result of their emotional response (Holland, 2008), for example, temper outbursts. Furthermore, they may express somatic behaviour such as sleeping difficulties and nightmares (Bugge *et al*., 2014) as well as regressive behaviour such as thumb sucking, bed-wetting and clinginess (Dyregrov, 2008). Although bereavement may have a detrimental impact on the individual, Cohen and Mannarino (2011) believe that most children cope effectively with bereavement and can escape from an extensive impact. Furthermore, there are a number of factors that will determine the severity of the impact, for example, the child's relationship with the deceased, the level of support received or how the person has died. Thus, the impact of bereavement will be specific to each individual depending on such factors and circumstances surrounding the bereavement.

Proactive responses
As a child spends a significant amount of time at school, it is essential that schools are adequately prepared for bereavement (McGovern and Tracey, 2010). GTCNI (2011) competence 6 advocates that teachers have a duty to provide for the holistic development of the child and not just their academic development. This is important as bereavement may impact many dimensions of the child. However, the most recent Education and Training Inspectorate for Northern Ireland (ETINI, 2014, p.17) Chief Inspector's report states that, 'good quality pastoral care supports learners' social, physical, emotional and cognitive needs.' Therefore, by practising commendable pastoral care through the implementation of effective strategies, this can help to buffer the impact of bereavement.

Bereavement cannot be avoided, therefore teachers must implement proactive strategies that will prepare themselves and the pupils to respond and cope effectively when bereavement does happen. For example, by creating and implementing a bereavement policy, the school can be equipped with a standardised plan to provide an effective and prompt response to bereavement. A bereavement policy should take a whole-school approach and could include, for example, details regarding contact with the bereaved family, the roles and responsibilities of different school personnel and how other pupils and parents should be informed. However, such policy should allow flexibility so that teachers can use their initiative in unique circumstances surrounding a bereavement rather than being obliged to rigidly adhere to policy (Dyregrov *et al*., 2015). Dyrgrov *et al*. (2015) also recognise that responding to grief cannot be manualised as no standardised template will fit every situation. However, for many teachers to put such a policy into practice, there may be a need for additional training in bereavement. Dyregrov *et al*. (2015) found that over 90% of teachers felt inadequate in supporting a bereaved pupil. However, this study was only researched among 23 school personnel and therefore may not represent an accurate depiction of teachers' competence in dealing with bereavement.

A further proactive strategy in responding to bereavement is through learning about loss within the curriculum. Educating children about loss can provide them with the opportunity to develop their understanding of death and help prepare them to cope effectively when they are faced with bereavement (McGovern and Tracey, 2010; Potts, 2013). Although the Northern Ireland Curriculum (CCEA, 2007) makes no specific reference to bereavement as a statutory component, there are opportunities to introduce the concept of loss and death in a less intrusive manner. For example, when teaching about the lifecycle of different creatures, teachers should not avoid the topic of death, but should take this opportunity to sensitively address the issue when it arises in the classroom. However, teaching children about bereavement and loss can be problematic in that children may report distorted information to their parents regarding what they have been learning (Holland, 2008). Furthermore, death can also be a sensitive issue due to the religious or cultural beliefs which may be involved.

Reactive responses
When a child is bereaved, communication between staff is crucial in order to provide an effective response. Thorough communication ensures that information regarding the bereavement is relayed carefully to all staff. Furthermore, Holland (2008) advocates that effective liaison with the family of the bereaved pupil is also important to understand how the child is coping and how they can be supported.

Following a bereavement, it is important for the school to appropriately express condolences to the bereaved child and family. It is also important to consider if and how other pupils within the school should be informed. By informing other children, this provides an opportunity for them to meaningfully express their sympathy by for example, writing cards and messages for the bereaved.

For many bereaved children, their home may become a difficult and unpredictable environment. Therefore, upon their return to school, it is important to ensure normalisation (Potts, 2013). Packman *et al*. (2006) claim that providing children with consistent routine can be influential in helping them deal with grief. However, teachers should not ignore the bereavement completely, but must ensure a balance between empathy and normalisation (Holland, 2008).

There are a number of simple yet effective responses that can be implemented to support a bereaved child when they return to school. Holland (2008) discusses how a teacher can prepare a bereaved child's peer group to help to bring comfort to their grieving friend. For example, having a few friends meet the bereaved child at the school gates so they are not alone when they come into school. Furthermore, the school could also provide a safe and staffed area where the bereaved child can go to when they feel they need time out or a special person they can go to when they want to talk (Holland, 2008). Additionally, when a child is bereaved this provides an opportunity for pupils to build on their understanding of death. This could be achieved through the use of story, for example, 'Badger's Parting Gifts' (Varley, 2013), through circle time, or by engaging in creative activities such as making a memory tree or jar to help them capture fond memories of their loved one.

Underlying any response to bereavement is the teacher's role. Teachers must recognise the needs of the grieving child, respond sensitively (Holland, 2008), be available and ensure that the bereaved child feels safe in expressing their emotions (Heath and Cole, 2011). A further basic principle for teachers in supporting the bereaved is through secure and open communication with the child (Dyregrov *et al*., 2015). Communication is essential in helping them to make sense of the death, however it is vital that teachers provide children with accurate and concrete information. Using vague responses or euphemisms may cause great confusion for younger children and thus should be avoided. Although accurate information is essential, Bugge *et al*. (2014) claim that it is important not to overwhelm the child with an abundance of unnecessary details. Children should receive adequate information to help them understand the death, however needless or distressing information should be filtered. The reality for some teachers is that approaching the topic of death is difficult and unfortunately this may cause them to ignore the bereaved child (Holland, 2008) for fear of saying the wrong thing.

Although there a number of effective strategies that schools can implement in order to support bereaved children, the Department of Education for Northern Ireland (DENI, 2009) recognise within their 'Every School a Good School' policy programme that a school's support can only stretch so far. Consequently, DENI (2009) state that they will strive to ensure children receive adequate support in order to help them overcome the challenges that may cause a barrier to their learning, in this case the challenge being bereavement. Such support may be through counselling or external agencies, for example, Cruse Bereavement Care. When necessary, teachers should avail of such additional provision.

Conclusion
Bereavement is a complex issue to deal with due to the unique nature of death. Unlike other pastoral issues, Servaty-Seib *et al*., (2003) claim that it is almost impossible to prevent bereavement from entering the school. Although no proactive strategy can be implemented to prevent bereavement itself, there are a number of proactive and reactive strategies that can be implemented in order to prepare children for bereavement and to support them through this period of loss and adjustment. However, the difficulty in addressing bereavement is that many children will grieve, be impacted by death and understand death differently. Furthermore, many teachers express that there is a limit to their

capabilities (Dyregrov *et al.*, 2013) or may feel anxious in addressing bereavement. Nevertheless teachers have a duty of care for the holistic development of the child and therefore should strive to adequately and effectively support them in their bereavement.

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