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BeSAD ... "it was truly an awful experience": an exploration of pre-service teachers' experiences and training needs to support pupils experiencing issues of bereavement, separation and divorce

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ABSTRACT

Research exploring the well-being and pastoral care of pupils attending primary and post-primary schools has become an issue of increased discourse and growing national and international concern in recent years. Society often expects that teachers can support or facilitate pupils experiencing such issues; however, there is little research that explores whether pre-service teachers encounter these issues on school placement and how they approach such concerns if they do. This paper reports on a study of pre-service teachers (N = 354) from the Republic of Ireland (RoI) and Northern Ireland (NI) and the frequency with which they encountered issues relating to bereavement, separation and divorce (BeSAD). To address the training needs, six semi-structured interviews with experts in the area of BeSAD and Initial Teacher Education (ITE) are also included. The quantitative component of the research indicated that nearly half of the pre-service teachers had encountered pupils who had experienced some form of BeSAD whilst on school placement. Respondents lacked confidence when supporting pupils experiencing BeSAD, particularly in relation to separation and divorce. The interviews conducted with experts from NI and the RoI (N = 6) identified the core role that teachers play as advocates for pupils who have experienced BeSAD.

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Introduction

The lives of families are commonly characterised by a constant movement of change and evolution that includes responding to the developmental and emotional needs of its members. Most changes are expected (e.g. growing up, transitioning from primary to post-primary school); through socialisation effects, we all know how to feel, think and behave when they appear. When they occur, most individuals develop adaptation processes, gradually rediscovering the balance that is essential to positive mental health. These are referred to as first-order changes (e.g. birth of a new baby). Nevertheless, many families may also

encounter unexpected changes, known as second-order changes (e.g. the death of a family member, separation or divorce of parents). Second-order changes can be traumatic as they may be unforeseen and very different from the normal expectations of life. Abruptly, the life of the family requires reassessment and adjustment; its internal dynamics and its relationship with the outside world need to be reconsidered in order to recover balance in the family. During schooling, many children may experience a second-order change which can result in a form of loss to the student and may cause them to grieve. Although grief is primarily associated with the death of a loved one (Boss, 2006), other forms of loss such as parental divorce, separation or incarceration can disrupt a student's life (Malone, 2011). These other forms of loss, if unexpected, can be referred to as ambiguous loss (Boss, 2006) and can be just as traumatic as a death. Many studies have focused on loss and grief in childhood and the impact in the school setting. Abdelnoor and Hollins (2004) and Dyregrov (2004), Dyregrov (2009) report a drop in academic performance (underachievement) and difficulties with memory and concentration among grieving children. Other studies report a range of physical, cognitive, emotional, interpersonal and behavioural difficulties which manifest among grieving children (Balk, 2009; Dyregrov & Dyregrov, 2005; Worden, 1982; Worden & Silverman, 1996). Christ, Siegel, & Christ (2002) found that bereaved children experience a disruption in school functioning and anxiety that they will never return to their previous levels of functioning and Berg, Rostila, Saarela, and Hjern (2014) found that in some cases the impact of parental death in childhood is even associated with reduced educational attainment as an adult.

Schools are clearly places where pupils spend a large part of their lives, and therefore, they can be often viewed by the pupil as a secure second family (Coggan, Patterson, & Fill, 1997; Holland, 1993). While the family is rightly acknowledged as the primary care provider, school staff and peers also become important sources of support, particularly to children who are experiencing loss or grief (Holland & McLennan, 2015; Rowling & Holland, 2000). Dyregrov (1991) suggests that schools are best placed to offer bereavement support as they tend to have an in-depth knowledge of children and their families. A teacher may be the only 'one good adult' in a young person's life and are often expected to take on a supportive role for pupils (Rowling, 1995). Society often has expectations of teachers beyond academic achievement (Rowling & Holland, 2000) and this expectation can add an increased burden for teachers who may have received limited or no training in the area of bereavement, separation and divorce (BeSAD). Dyregrov, Idsøe, and Dyregrov (2015) acknowledge that there is limited known about teacher's perceptions of how they can help children who have experienced BeSAD issues. Quinn-Lee (2012) notes that although school staff are aware of their need to support students who are experiencing BeSAD issues, they are mindful that many are unsure of how they can support them effectively. Often staff report being unskilled and lack the knowledge and training to support classroom grief (Reid & Dixon, 1999; Rowling & Holland, 2000).

Given the complexity of experiences involved in BeSAD issues, it would be interesting to understand the prevalence of these issues within the classroom. It has been surmised that before young people reach adulthood, almost all of them will have experienced the death of someone important to them (Schonfeld & Quackenbush, 2010). There are no centralised figures in the RoI or NI regarding the number of young people who have been bereaved, or experienced parents who separated or divorced. A recent study of school referrals to a counselling service in Ireland by McElvaney, Judge, and Gordon (2017), noted that 51.6% of school principals said that they would like counselling services to support pupils who have been bereaved due to death of a loved one, with general family issues such as parental conflict, separation and divorce also ranking high. Data from the national longitudinal Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) found that among a cohort of nine-year-olds, a total of 43% of respondents had experienced the death of someone important to them (e.g. parent, sibling, grandparent, close friend; Williams et al., 2009). Similarly, in NI, the Millennium Cohort Study estimated that more than a quarter of the children sampled experienced absence of a parent by the age of 7. Lacey, Zilanawala, Webb, Abell, and Bell (2016) estimate 1.8% (N = 8,657) of this absence is due to the death of a parent.

In relation to separation and divorce in Ireland, the Central Statistics Organisation (CSO) reported that in 2016, the number of persons either divorced or separated living in childless households increased by 11.5% between 2011 and 2016 (Central Statistics Office (CSO), 2016). Similar statistics are echoed in NI with data from the 2011 census reported by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA, 2015) in which they estimate that 4,584 children and step-children were affected by divorce in 2016, of which 1,992 were under the age of 16. Prevalence rates of BeSAD issues are always difficult to estimate as the official statistics do not take account of families who have separated or who were cohabiting and therefore not registered as divorced. In addition to loss due to bereavement and divorce, ambiguous loss as defined by Pataky and Parent (2018) would indicate that loss can be experienced due to a number of hidden reasons and the prevalence of this loss can go undetected.

Impact of BeSAD

There are various theories that hypothesise the potential reaction and impact of bereavement and loss. Influential contributions of theorists such as Freud (1917), Bowlby (1969), and Kubler-Ross (1969) have paved the way for subsequent theoretical and research developments. Critique of these models identifies the inaccuracies and biases of the model, as the early models fail to take account of the individual variability among grievers, even when they have experienced similar types of bereavement. Harrington and Harrison (1999) suggest that the developmental stage will be an important factor in our understanding of how

pupils respond to grief. Further factors that may indicate how a pupil will respond to grief include how the family reacts and the social support available to them. Howarth (2011) supports the view that the grieving process will be different for each young person, thus when presented with a pupil who is experiencing a loss in the classroom, teachers must remember that many other social, developmental and emotional factors may also be impacting on their response.

Many researchers have found that there are intrinsic differences between separated and intact families (Block, Block, & Gjerde, 1986; Painter & Levine, 2000) and that the response of pupils to separation and divorce will depend on their circumstances, age, the level of conflict in the family (Amato, 2010) and financial implications as a result of lower annual incomes (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Research has found that pupils from separated families have more emotional problems, negative feelings and poorer psychological well-being than pupils from intact families (Amato, 2010). Similarly, Mooney, Knox, and Schacht (2013) found that pupils from separated families were more likely to suffer from depression than pupils from intact families. McCullough (2009) reports that pupils often respond to family separation with (a) insecurity, (b) loss of self-esteem, and (c) repressed feelings of anger and loss, which are manifested as aggressive or withdrawn behaviour. This concurs with research by Faber and Wittenborn (2010) which found that some pupils might blame themselves for the separation and appear aggressive, depressed and withdrawn. An Irish study of 30 young people revealed their feelings of sadness and loneliness following a separation (Hogan, Halpenny, & Greene, 2003). Much of the evidence indicates that the negative impact of separation and divorce on pupils is not from the separation itself but from the lead-up to the separation, which typically involved a great deal of conflict in the home (Emery, 1999; Peris & Emery, 2004; Shaw, Winslow, & Flanagan, 1999; White, 1990). Pierret (2001) argues that, in some cases, a separation can benefit children as it puts an end to conflict or an abusive relationship with a parent. Some research has identified that pupils of divorced parents may exhibit more behavioural problems than pupils from intact families (Martinez & Forgatch, 2002; Wood, Repetti, & Roesch, 2004) and this may be a factor that would impact on the classroom environment. This is supported by research from Aughinbaugh, Pierret, and Rothstein (2005), who found that pupils experiencing a family separation displayed poorer behaviour and lower test scores in comparison to their peers, and these differences did not subside over time.

Unproven assumptions

While it seems obvious that the death of a loved one should have a substantial impact on the psychological development of young people, research remains sparse and relatively inconclusive. Earlier research is considered to have methodological flaws and researchers have suggested that the inconsistencies in the bereavement literature are due to the heterogeneity of bereavement experience

and methodological variation (Coffino, 2009). There are few studies that report empirical evidence of long-term outcomes or outcomes for bereaved pupils compared with those for non-bereaved pupils from similar backgrounds and circumstances (Akerman & Statham, 2014). Similarly, for separation and divorce, the conventional wisdom is that divorce has a severe negative impact on children (Rappaport, 2013). While some young people are negatively impacted by parental divorce, the majority of studies indicate that most pupils will continue to do well and there is no evidence of pathology (Kelly & Emery, 2003). BeSAD research has investigated the role of hope and finding meaning (Michael & Snyder, 2005; Romanoff & Thompson, 2006) as well as post-traumatic growth (Linley & Joseph, 2004). Both of these concepts can be subsumed under the broader notion of resilience, a theoretical construct that has gained increasing attention in recent years (Boss, 2006; Brown, Sandler, Tein, Liu, & Haine, 2007; Goldstein & Brooks, 2005; Mathews & Servaty-Seib, 2007; Ribbens-McCarthy, 2006; Stokes, Wyer, & Crossley, 1997).

In conclusion, this literature suggests that pupils who experience BeSAD are at an increased risk of experiencing a negative impact on their learning which may manifest in the school environment. Society expects teachers to have a variety of roles including supporting students, acting as an emotional support. However, as previously stated, we have little knowledge about teachers' perceptions of how they can help within their own competencies and within the constraints. There are inconsistencies in the type of support provided both nationally and internationally and thus the role of the teacher is often unclear. To understand what teachers, in general, can do to help support students experiencing BeSAD issues, it is of interest to learn about their views on the issue. To our knowledge, a few studies have addressed this issue, but no studies have looked at pre-service teachers' views. During training, pre-service teachers are required to spend varying amounts of time in the classroom on placement. Therefore, taking into account the unproven assumptions, this article aims to explore pre-service teachers' encounters with pupils who have experienced BeSAD and ascertain how they support them during placement. In addition, the study aims to identify what training and support pre-service teachers need during Initial Teacher Education.

Method

The mixed-method approach for this research project was planned *a priori* and involved an over-arching, evidence-informed approach towards the two inter-related research studies. In the absence of an appropriate research instrument, an 'audit style' questionnaire (based on O'Brien & Mc Guckin, 2013) was developed for the study. A staged approach began with the quantitative analysis of an online survey providing an overview of the knowledge, attitudes and experiences of pre-service teachers in NI and ROI relating to BeSAD in school. The survey consisted of a range of question types, including questions based on Likert rating scales and

multiple choice. The survey was administered using Survey Monkey and was sent to all final year students in six ITE programmes from both jurisdictions in Ireland. Survey data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics using Statistical Package Social Science (SPSS). The second phase of the study involved semi-structured interviews with six experts in the area of BeSAD or ITE across both jurisdictions. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. To identify training needs and support for pre-service teachers, transcribed data were analysed using thematic analysis in order to identify emerging themes. Thematic analysis was conducted in a manner that was consistent with the six guideline phases described by Braun and Clarke (2006). The study was guided by the BERA (2011) Ethical Guidelines, and prior to commencing data collection, ethical permission was granted by the ethics committee of Hibernia College, in Dublin.

Findings

Survey participants

Pre-service teachers from NI and the RoI took part in the survey, which was administered to 1,136 participants and produced a return rate of 31.1% (N = 354; NI [N = 82]; RoI [N = 270]). Respondents indicated how they had between a minimum of 3 weeks and in excess of 24 weeks' experience on placement in an educational setting during their training. Table 1 provides an overview of those taking part in the survey, the programme they were enrolled on and their location.

The data relating to the two components of BeSAD are outlined separately so as to explore similarities and differences in relation to these two distinct areas of loss (bereavement, separation and divorce).

Survey results: bereavement

The survey found that just over half (51% [NI: 42; RoI: 139]) of respondents had encountered pupils who had been bereaved while they were on school placement. One pre-service teacher reported that: 'I experienced the death of a student whilst on placement and it was truly an awful experience' (respondent 52, RoI) while another reported that: 'From my own experiences whilst on placement, I encountered three separate pupils who were recently affected by bereavement

Table 1. Survey responses by jurisdiction.

			Primary/early childhood	Post- primary	Combined total
Location	Republic of Ireland	<i>Count</i>	231	40	271
		<i>% within location</i>	85.2%	14.8%	100.0%
	Northern Ireland	<i>Count</i>	47	36	83
		<i>% within location</i>	56.6%	43.4%	100.0%
Overall total		<i>Count</i>	278	76	354
		<i>% within location</i>	78.5%	21.5%	100.0%

and separation' (respondent 71, Rol). The majority of respondents (92% [NI = 81; Rol = 242]) agreed that bereavement is not simply an 'at home' issue and that the school should also provide support to pupils in their care.

When asked about their confidence, nearly half of respondents (48% [NI = 40; Rol = 130]) reported that they did not feel confident or were unsure of how they felt in relation to supporting pupils who were bereaved. In contrast to this, 52% of the respondents did feel confident when supporting pupils who were bereaved. When asked how they would support pupils, 77% (NI = 101; Rol = 271) reported that they would rely on personal intuition. One respondent stated that: 'I am a mother of three and would deal intuitively with most issues as/ when they arise' (respondent 292, Rol). Personal intuition appeared to be closely linked to participants' personal experience of grief. Eighty-one per-cent (NI = 68; Rol = 285) of respondents had experienced the bereavement of a significant person in their lives. Consequently, 80% (NI = 60; Rol = 259) who had experienced bereavement believed that they could engage with a bereaved pupil in a more positive way due to their own personal experience.

In terms of the impact of bereavement in the classroom, 24% (NI = 22; Rol = 64) of those who had a pupil in their care who had been bereaved said that inability to concentrate was the biggest impact on the pupils, followed by emotional issues (19% [NI = 15; Rol = 52]). One respondent reported that 'Attendance due to disrupted home life' (respondent 160, Rol) had an impact while another stated that a pupil '... became more withdrawn, quieter' (respondent 176, Rol). Another respondent mentioned that one pupil experienced 'fear' in relation to coming to school: 'Fear of coming into school and how other children would talk about it. Becoming upset about being away from home and other parent' (respondent 67, Rol). Nearly half of all respondents (47%: NI = 40; Rol = 126) did not answer this question – which could be interpreted that no negative impact relating to bereavement was witnessed by participants in the classroom. One respondent did not see any impact from BeSAD in the classroom: '... child adapted admirably in class and with peers. There were no outward behavioural signs and his school-work did not suffer. He had great support from his family who appear to be very closely knit' (respondent 29, NI).

Survey results: separation and divorce

Forty-one per-cent (NI = 38; Rol = 105) of respondents reported that while they were on placement, they had encountered pupils in their care who had experienced the separation or divorce of their parents. One participant stated:

I think from placement experience the amount of children currently dealing with separation and living in single family homes is huge. I think sometimes naivety can play a part in the role as teacher. I found myself sometimes not knowing every child's background over the course of placements and subbing days and literally putting my foot in a situation where Dad or Mom were not present in the home. (respondent 180, Rol)

Twenty-one per-cent (NI = 17; Rol = 58) of respondents stated that they were confident in supporting a pupil who had experienced separation or divorce. In relation to the impact that separation and divorce can have on a pupil, 58% (NI = 45; Rol = 157) did not answer this question – perhaps interpretable that no reaction was evidenced by these respondents. Similar to bereavement symptoms in the classroom, 20% (NI = 18; Rol = 53) of respondents stated that pupils tended to have difficulties concentrating, while a further 19% (NI = 15; Rol = 52) stated that they witnessed pupils with emotional issues following a separation or divorce. Some respondents provided examples of individual cases that they had experienced on placement, such as one pupil in the junior end of the school in the Rol who ‘... developed anxiety and became very nervous – started urinating himself frequently’ (respondent 60, Rol) and another pupil who ‘... developed a twitch in her eye’ (respondent 99, Rol). One respondent stated that ‘Children who divided their time in more than one household tended to be less well organised. Forgetting items for the day, etc.’ (respondent 125, Rol) while another concurred and said ‘Confusion as to who is collecting him/her. Homework done really well with father and not so well with mother or [vice versa]’ (respondent 48, NI). However, 57% (NI = 45; Rol = 157) of respondents did not answer this question – perhaps indicative of the fact that, for many, they may not have witnessed any negative impact on the pupil in the classroom.

Training and further support

Pre-service teachers were then asked a range of questions in relation to training and support for bereavement, separation and divorce. The majority of respondents (84% [NI = 55; Rol = 241]) reported that pupil well-being in relation to separation and divorce had either not been covered – or they were unsure if it had been covered – in their initial teacher education. Similarly, 81% (NI = 47; Rol = 230) reported that pupil well-being in relation to bereavement had either not been covered – or they were unsure if it had been covered – in their training. Of those that reported that these areas had been covered, the general response was ‘briefly’. When asked if they would be more confident speaking to parents or children in relation to BeSAD issues, 46% (NI = 51; Rol = 110) reported that they would feel more confident speaking with pupils. However, one participant felt that speaking to pupils (without parental consent) or parents might be overstepping their role as a teacher: ‘I would be hesitant to engage with this, I feel that it would be overstepping my role as a teacher, and would be invasive, unless the parent decided they wished to discuss it with me’ (respondent 254, Rol). One participant felt that teachers lack support to help pupils who are bereaved:

I feel that there is truly a lack of support and training for teachers in dealing with these situations. From my own experiences while on teaching placement, the class teacher told me that she was thankful that I was there to teach the rest of the class as it allowed her the

time to make contact with the Educational Psychologist and other staff members as this would have been a struggle on a regular school day. (respondent 67, RoI)

Whereas several pre-service teachers felt that an individual, more suitably qualified to deal with issues relating to BeSAD should be available in a school:

I think there should be in all schools a designated person who has been suitably trained to deal with issues like these so that when a child is in crisis, there is some support available to them in school as very often the support network at home is shattered by a tragedy and children return to school in particular bereavement and are expected to continue in class as before – it can be a real struggle. (respondent 16, NI)

An important point made by one pre-service teacher was that BeSAD is just one aspect of pupil well-being and that more needs to be done to educate and support teachers. This respondent noted the need for personal care and noted that teachers needed to be better at self-care in order to be emotionally available to support their children:

This is just one small aspect of well-being. I think teacher well-being needs to be focused on. If a teacher knows how to support themselves, they are better able to point a child in the right direction . . . Teaching is about connecting with young people every day; we are an influence in their lives. If children's well-being is so important, then what is [being] done to create teachers who can be supportive? (respondent 163, RoI)

In conclusion, it was evident from the survey that more than half of pre-service teachers encountered pupils who had experienced BeSAD issues. Most of the respondents felt they had a role to support pupils who were experiencing emotional difficulties, but the pre-service teachers felt reluctant, unqualified and untrained to support pupils during placement. They felt that the issue had not adequately been covered during initial training, and if they did feel able to support a child, they tended to rely on intuition or personal experience rather than on informed practice. The pre-service teachers noted a reluctance to communicate with parents around these issues and many noted the need to access outside support from other agencies who would be more qualified in these areas. Although a number of pre-service teachers felt personal experience of BeSAD to be beneficial as it helped them empathise with pupils, others noted the need for self-care in order to be emotionally available for children.

Having identified the experience, confidence and competence of pre-service teachers to support children who have experience BeSAD issues, the next phase of the study aimed to ascertain from the experts what pre-service teachers need to know and identify training needs for ITE providers.

Expert interview findings

Semi-structured interviews were held with six key experts from NI (N = 3) and RoI (N = 3). The experts were from a range of voluntary, academic and statutory

providers who had expertise in BeSAD issues. Thematic analysis identified a range of themes that recognised the deficit in practice and also acknowledged the need for training, support and policy developments. Four superordinate themes were identified including 1) Knowledge and Understanding, 2) Language and Communication, 3) Advocacy and Communicate Support and a final theme of 4) Fear and Consequences addressed the challenges faced by pre-service teachers.

Theme one: knowledge and understanding

A very strong and representative theme emerged around the requirement for pre-service teachers to have knowledge and understanding of the developmental stages and age response of pupils to grief and loss. It is important that training and support be provided at ITE level to help student teachers recognise the impact of BeSAD on learning and behaviour in the classroom. All experts discussed the need to normalise the grieving process so that teachers can make a professional judgement as to whether a child is grieving as expected, or whether they require additional support through a referral to an outside agency:

You need to start with pre-service teachers so they have knowledge of child appropriate reactions to death. I think this is essential. They need the theoretical knowledge first. (participant 1, Rol)

Thus, pre-service teachers need information to feel empowered to identify grief when it manifests in the classroom. They need to understand the long-term impact and how grief can be exacerbated at different stages eg. Birthdays. The experts talked at length about the impact of grief and loss on behaviour and how teachers need upskilled in recognising the signs:

... an understanding that they cannot teach the curriculum if children are in a constant state of anxiety ... The trauma experienced as a result of separation loss can impact to the point that the child cannot learn because they are in a constant state of stress. (participant 5, NI)

Theme two: language and communication

Another key theme identified was language and communication. Experts discussed how to communicate effectively with children and parents around the issue of BeSAD. The experts noted that the language of loss needs to be concrete for children and that many of the current euphemisms (e.g. passed away, gone to sleep) are not appropriate terms to use to comfort children:

“... to know how [to] answer the questions [about death] and be confident in that, and related to that it is important that there is some basic training for teachers on the kind of language we use. It would be dangerous for children to perpetuate any kind of euphemism.” (participant 6, NI)

Language around separation and divorce, particularly in contested separations where there may be an absent parent, was also seen as an area of importance. Comments or lessons asking about ‘mummy’ or ‘daddy’ may be hurtful and upsetting for pupils. Thus, the importance of language needs to be prioritised as it can have a huge impact on children:

I think that teachers, both trainee teachers and qualified teachers, feel very disempowered when these issues are presented in the classroom. Because what is the correct language around separation and divorce? Obviously you can’t take sides ... actually being really careful about what you say about condemning either parent is a huge thing and I think the whole thing of language and recognising how each situation is different is a challenge. (participant 3, RoI)

A number of examples were given, such as where families were involved in court proceedings over contact arrangements. The challenges of communication are understandably difficult, yet it is essential that parents understand the benefit for the child of communicating with teachers and sharing information. Parental partnership can be difficult, but a partnership with parents is vital from the outset and enables teachers to discuss issues with parents as they arise. Experts discussed the need for open and honest dialogue with parents. They discussed the role that policies within settings can play to help facilitate effective communication within the school and with the home.

... how to support parents through the whole process because it is difficult for them ...
We need policies which focus on children and how to negotiate relationships with parents. (participant 4, NI)

Theme three: advocacy and community support

The third theme of advocacy and community support incorporates not only knowledge of a range of voluntary and community support services available to children and families, but also the specific role that the teacher plays as an ‘advocate’ for the child. Pre-service teachers need to be able to direct children, families, other staff and themselves to the available support of experts in the community. Instilling this signposting role early in their career will empower and support them.

I think the people recovering from bereavement is a community response, not just a family response. People recovering from a loss due to separation and divorce is exactly the same. Teachers can help signpost families to community support. (participant 2, ROI)

Teachers are aware that supporting children’s emotional well-being is an important aspect of their role in the classroom; however, limited training is provided in this area at ITE and CPD level, with much more emphasis being placed on academic learning. Pre-service teachers need to be empowered at ITE to

understand that emotional well-being and academic learning should be equal in priority. Experts discussed that the training needs to be mandatory and of equal importance:

you have to do it whether it is your role or not because it happens in your classroom. Whether you acknowledge it or not, if you ignore it, then you are not really fulfilling your academic responsibilities for that child. (participant 4, NI)

Community support goes beyond the voluntary sector: support is needed from within the Education system. Guidance and direction are needed from the Departments of Education in both jurisdictions to prioritise pupils' emotional well-being and offer training and support to teachers:

So I'm not sure at the Department of Education level whether this was forthcoming. Schools need some sort of guidance or parameters ... The Department should have clear guidelines on what teachers must meet during initial teacher training. (participant 3, RoI)

ITE needs to ensure that all pre-service teachers are provided with adequate knowledge and are given opportunities to develop their skills to deal with these sensitive issues through mandatory training. Community and voluntary agencies must appreciate the role they play in supporting ITE and training. During their early career development, pastoral support in schools for newly qualified teachers is essential:

It's not really an add-on ... I think it should be a core part of learning about pastoral care. I appreciate you can't cover everything in initial teacher education but this is as core an issue as diversity and inclusion, and teachers need to understand the barriers to inclusion for children. Experiencing loss is a barrier to education. (participant 6, NI)

Theme four: fear and consequences

The final theme that emerged throughout the interviews was reflective of the challenges faced by pre-service teachers. All participants talked about the 'fear' of making things worse for pupils. Many of the experts acknowledged that teachers tend to avoid work around BeSAD for fear that they might make things harder for the pupils in their class:

I think teachers feel worried about doing the right thing ... Often teachers shy away from these things because they are afraid of offending people or afraid of [what] the parents will think. Actually, a lot of teachers are afraid of making things worse. (participant 6, NI)

This 'fear' was especially prominent when discussing the challenges of separation and divorce. Experts discussed the fear that it might make things difficult for the child is they talked about family life. An ITE lecturer also mentioned the fear amongst pre-service teachers in tackling BeSAD issues:

I've had students in session who have children themselves ... there was a ... reluctance to deal with this [students saying] I don't want my child to be made sad and so on ... there's a protectionism there I think ... that's only one incidence but I suspect that there are others who might feel the same. (participant 2, RoI)

Experts also identified the fear amongst parents to involve the school, particularly when it comes to separation and divorce. This linked to the communication theme, but parents fear the stigma and consequences of involving school and teachers fear contacting or communicating with parents or raising the issues with the parent for fear of upsetting the parent also. However, all experts agreed that the consequences of not communicating were worse.

I know parents don't want to approach the school ... they need to know that something is going on for the child at home. It is the social and emotional needs of the child and these needs can be met with understanding rather than being misjudged or ignored or in the worse case, making things worse for the child. (participant 3, ROI)

Also prominent across interviews was the fear among teachers of dealing with their own personal experiences of BeSAD. The professionals stated that they 'fear' that if teachers have not dealt with their own personal experiences of grief, they are not in a place to support pupils in their care (NI).

Student teachers need to be taught during training the impact of bereavement on their own lives. Really you cannot deal with bereavement in children until you address your own grief issues or loss issues. (participant 5)

In summary, the qualitative interviews carried out with the experts identified a range of roles and responsibilities for pre-service and newly qualified teachers in supporting children who have experienced BeSAD. The experts identified the core role that teachers play as being an advocate for children and supporting children and families who have experienced BeSAD issues. They identified the key challenges of working within the system and drew attention to core training needed in ITE. Interesting was the similarity between the fears and challenges identified by the pre-service teachers during the survey and those aspects identified by the experts, e.g. working with parents, dealing with their own BeSAD issues, accessing expert support.

Discussion

School is just one aspect of young people's lives, albeit a crucial one. To make changes in BeSAD support for pupils, important work is needed to bridge the gap between research and practice (Neimeyer, Harris, Winokaur, & Thornton, 2011). This is the case for NI and the RoI but also internationally. The sample of pre-service teachers (N = 342) indicated that approximately half of them had encountered issues relating to bereavement (51%) and separation and divorce

(41%) while on placement. Emotional and behavioural health problems can pose significant barriers to learning following BeSAD (Adelman & Taylor, 1999; Atkins, Frazier, Adil, & Talbott, 2003; Waxman, Weist, & Benson, 1999; Weist, 1997). The findings from the research indicate that some pre-service teachers noticed pupils who were experiencing some difficulties in school following BeSAD. This concurs with research (Abdelnoor & Hollins, 2004; Ayyash-Abdo, 2001; Black & Young, 1995; Dowdney, 1999; Weller, Weller, Fristad, & Bowes, 1991; Wood et al., 2004) that found that pupils may be at risk of impaired academic, psychological or social difficulties following loss.

There was a correlation between the pre-service teachers and the experts in relation to 'fear'. Participants from both data sets mentioned the fear that they felt (and teachers felt) in relation to making things worse for the pupil if they addressed the area of BeSAD. One of the reasons why adults (e.g. parents, teachers) may not realise the commonality of grief experiences among young people is their fear of having conversations about death (Schonfeld & Quackenbush, 2010). This has implications for practice in relation to the type of guidance pre-service teachers receive at ITE. The research indicates that there is a need for the role of the teacher to be defined in order to allow for policy development relating to BeSAD in all schools on the island of Ireland. This may involve a review of teacher competencies to give a greater emphasis on the pastoral role. It is important for pre-service teachers at ITE to be made aware of the boundaries within which they should provide support so that they are aware of what their role is, but also what their role is not. The experts and students concur that teaching around the knowledge and practice of theory of loss and grief should be compulsory. Perhaps it is timely for all ITEs to examine the approach taken to issues of BeSAD and how this is delivered during initial training. Given the prevalence rates and the experience of the students on placements, the majority of pre-service teachers will encounter pupils in their schools who are experiencing BeSAD issues. It was clear that the respondents from the survey lacked guidance in terms of the correct approach to BeSAD support, and the majority of them relied on personal intuition when responding. Similarly, in England, Holland (2008) found a 'training gap' in the area of bereavement training amongst teachers, with it being rated highly in importance, but schools lacked the skills necessary to support their pupils, and more than half of schools reported that more training was needed in the area. It is important that all pre-service teachers are exposed to BeSAD training and are encouraged to use the correct language – words like 'death' and 'died' rather than 'gone asleep' should be used to avoid ambiguity (Mahon, 1994). Training for teachers, pupils, and parents could help to develop a deeper understanding of the effects that grief can have on young people so that responses may be timely and appropriate (Tracey & Holland, 2008). While a pre-service teacher may not meet BeSAD issues on school placement, it is likely that they will encounter it on a number of occasions throughout their careers. A consistent

way of creating discourse and open communication will eradicate the fear and empower pre-service teachers so that they feel equipped and knowledgeable in supporting pupils experiencing BeSAD.

Self-care was referred to by one pre-service teacher in the survey as they identified that the well-being of teachers is essential to supporting pupils experiencing BeSAD. This was reiterated by the experts who discussed how teachers need to process their own experiences of loss in order to be available to support pupils without the fear of their own reactions. Boss (2006) suggested that professionals, including teachers, who are working to support pupils through BeSAD issues must start by looking at their own experiences of loss in order to provide effective support. Providing appropriate and consistent information to pre-service teachers will eradicate an over-reliance on personal intuition. However, it is important to note that the best approach to providing support in the school environment has not been determined and could include proactive elements applied to whole schools as well as provision for individual pupils (Akerman & Statham, 2014). This support could include mentoring or counselling for the teachers who are supporting the pupils. Boss (2006) recommends finding a trusted individual with whom to share their own experiences of loss, but a more formal supervision model could be adopted. All experts discussed the expertise within the community/voluntary sector and schools and Departments of Education need to work to formalise more evidence-informed guidance and policy.

Conclusion

'I am only one, but I am one. I cannot do everything, but I can do something. I must not fail to do something that I can do.' (Everett Hale, 1902, p. 172) This quotation encapsulates the essence of this research and highlights the need to eradicate the fear around the topic of BeSAD for pre-service teachers. In order to provide the best support possible to pupils experiencing BeSAD, we must recognise that the teacher is the 'best resource' in the classroom environment and that ITEs are in a unique position to empower pre-service teachers through BeSAD training. The study recommends that ITEs in both jurisdictions consider mandatory training on BeSAD issues. The content of this training should be based on research evidence and advice from a stakeholder group (including the experts and researchers involved in this study), Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), both Department of Education and Curriculum development boards. In addition to training, it is important to continue to research the impact of this training on newly qualified teachers' competency and confidence in supporting children who are experiencing BeSAD issues. We must ensure that our pre-service teachers are empowered to have as much knowledge and understanding as possible in order to respond appropriately and confidently to a pupil experiencing BeSAD, and

to other pupils in the class who may be affected by this. Knowing exactly how to respond to such an important event in the life of a child may be incredibly significant in their lives. Dooley and Fitzgerald (2012) highlighted the importance of 'one good adult' in the mental well-being of young people and we must equip our pre-service teachers to feel that they have the knowledge and skills to approach BeSAD issues as and when they arise.

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