



# SCoTENS

THE STANDING CONFERENCE ON  
TEACHER EDUCATION, NORTH AND SOUTH



# BeSAD

(Bereavement, Separation, and Divorce):  
The Response of Pre-service Teachers to Pupil Well-being

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## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	5
List of Acronyms .....	6
Glossary .....	7
Executive Summary .....	8
1.0 Introduction .....	11
1.1 RoI Statistics: Bereavement .....	13
1.2 NI Statistics: Bereavement .....	14
1.3 RoI Statistics: Separation and Divorce .....	14
1.4 NI Statistics: Separation and Divorce .....	15
1.5 Theoretical Foundations of Grief.....	15
1.6 Policy and Curricula Relating to BeSAD in the RoI .....	19
1.7 Policy and Curricula Relating to BeSAD in NI .....	21
1.8 The Impact of BeSAD .....	22
1.8.1 Bereavement Reactions .....	23
1.8.2 Family Separation Reactions .....	26
1.9 Unproven Assumptions Relating to BeSAD .....	29
1.10 The Role of the School .....	30
1.11 Conclusion .....	32
2.0 Methodology .....	33
2.1 Phase One: Survey with Pre-Service Teachers .....	33
2.2 Phase Two: The Interview .....	34
2.3 Data Analysis .....	34
2.4 Ethical Considerations .....	35
3.0 Findings: Quantitative Research .....	36
3.1 Survey Participants .....	36





3.2 Survey Results Relating to Bereavement ..... 36

3.4 Survey Results Relating to Separation and Divorce ..... 40

3.5 Summary of Quantitative Results ..... 43

4.0 Findings: Qualitative Research ..... 44

    4.1 Theme One: Knowledge and Understanding..... 45

    4.2 Theme Two: Language and Communication ..... 47

    4.3 Theme Three: Advocacy and Community Support ..... 48

    4.4 Theme Four: Fear and Consequences ..... 52

    4.5 Summary of Qualitative Interviews ..... 54

5.0 Discussion ..... 55

6.0 Conclusion ..... 58

    6.1 Recommendations for ITE..... 59

    6.2 Key Recommendations for Policymakers..... 60

References ..... 63

Appendix 1: Online Survey with Pre-Service Teachers..... 71





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## Abstract

The current research explored the frequency in which pre-service teachers encountered pupils during their placement (e.g. teaching practice) experiencing loss as a result of bereavement, separation and divorce (BeSAD). The research examined how they responded to BeSAD and the training they received at Initial Teacher Education (ITE). The report describes the findings of a mixed-method research programme involving a survey with pre-service teachers (N=354), and semi-structured interviews with experts (N=6) in the area of BeSAD. Centres for ITE provided a sample for the survey from Northern Ireland (NI) and the Republic of Ireland (RoI). The quantitative component of the research indicated that nearly half of pre-service teachers had encountered pupils who had experienced some form of BeSAD. Respondents lacked confidence when supporting pupils experiencing BeSAD, particularly in relation to separation and divorce. Personal intuition was reported as the main way in which respondents support pupils experiencing bereavement and this was closely linked to their own personal experience of death. Nearly one quarter of respondents said that inability to concentrate in the classroom was the biggest impact on pupils. A decline in attendance was also noticed along with physical and emotional responses including withdrawn behaviour, fear of coming to school, and anxiety. Nearly half of respondents did not answer the question which could mean that no reaction was evidenced by these respondents. The majority of respondents were unaware if policy existed relating to BeSAD and stated that they had either not received training or if they had, it was "briefly". The interviews conducted with experts from NI and the RoI (N=6) identified a range of roles and responsibilities for teachers in supporting pupils who have experienced BeSAD. They identified the core role that teachers play as advocates for children and supporting families who have experienced BeSAD. They identified key challenges within the current education system for both jurisdictions and drew attention to core training needs required during ITE and through Continuous Professional Development (CPD).





## List of Acronyms

BeSAD	Bereavement, separation and divorce
CCEA	Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (Northern Ireland)
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
CSO	Central Statistics Office (Republic of Ireland)
DENI	Department of Education (Northern Ireland)
DES	Department of Education and Skills (Republic of Ireland)
ESRI	The Economic and Social Research Institute
GUI	Growing Up in Ireland study (ESRI)
ICBN	Irish Childhood Bereavement Network
ITE	Initial Teacher Education
NCB	National Children's Bureau (Northern Ireland)
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (Republic of Ireland)
NEPS	National Educational Psychological Service (Republic of Ireland)
NI	Northern Ireland
NISRA	Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency
PEHAW	Pupils' Emotional Health and Wellbeing
PSE	Personal and Social Education
RoI	Republic of Ireland
SPHE	Social, Personal, and Health Education



## Glossary

Bereavement	The loss of a significant human relationship through death
Coping	Cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands, including active responses such as advice-seeking and passive responses such as self-blame
Grief	Denotes the complex amalgam of painful effects following a loss, which can include feelings of sadness, anger, helplessness, guilt and despair
Internalising	Involves directing problematic energy inwards toward the self—this behaviour involves harm of the self, as opposed to lashing out at others
Mental health	One's state of mental well-being, which encompasses both positive and negative aspects of psychological health
Normative bereavement	Death through "normative" or "normal" circumstances (for example, death as a result of illness, sudden death or old age)
Pupils	Refers to learners attending either primary or post-primary education
Pre-service teachers	Student teachers who are currently completing an ITE programme
Well-being	The absence of negative conditions and prevalence of positive attributes







## Executive Summary

Bereavement, separation and divorce (BeSAD) issues are traditionally considered to be "at home" experiences that impact on the family system. However, research has indicated that the impact of BeSAD (i.e. grief) may permeate the classroom and impact on, for example, concentration, academic performance, behaviour and social interaction. Previous research has explored the experiences of qualified teachers so as to ascertain how they approach BeSAD issues in their classroom. However, we have not found any research that has examined the number of incidents in which pre-service teachers (i.e. students engaged in ITE) have encountered pupils experiencing BeSAD issues while on placement and how they acknowledge or approach this issue.

This report describes the findings of a mixed-method research project exploring pre-service teachers' experience of BeSAD among pupils while on placement (e.g. teaching practice). Pre-service teachers (N=354) from Hibernia College, Stranmillis University College Belfast, St Mary's University Belfast, Queen's University Belfast and Trinity College Dublin took part in a survey. Participants in Northern Ireland (NI) were completing the following ITE programmes: (a) Bachelor of Arts in Early Childhood Studies, (b) Bachelor of Education in Primary Education, (c) Postgraduate Certificate in Education and (d) Bachelor of Education in Post-Primary Education. The participants taking part in the research from the Republic of Ireland (RoI) were completing the following ITE programmes: (a) Professional Masters of Education in Primary Education and (b) Professional Masters of Education in Post-Primary Education. Stage two of the data collection process involved semi-structured interviews with six experts who specialise in the area and/or work in ITE.

The quantitative component of the research (N=354) indicated that nearly half of pre-service teachers had encountered pupils who had experienced some form of BeSAD issues. The majority of pre-service teachers believed that they



had a role in supporting pupils who were experiencing emotional issues as a result of BeSAD. While pre-service teachers rate the area of BeSAD as an area of importance for their practice, many were not confident or were unsure of whether they were confident in supporting pupils experiencing such issues. Respondents indicated that they were more confident supporting pupils who had experienced bereavement, than pupils coping with separation or divorce. Personal intuition was reported as the main way in which respondents would support pupils experiencing bereavement and this was closely linked to their own personal experience of death. Respondents noticed that while on placement, some pupils who had experienced separation or divorce had exhibited nervous and anxious behaviour such as forgetting items in school and appearing disorganised. Overall, respondents felt that more training within ITE was needed to cover areas of BeSAD so that pre-service teachers could feel empowered to tackle well-being issues in the classroom.

The interviews conducted with experts from NI and the RoI (N=6) identified a range of roles and responsibilities for teachers in supporting children who have experienced BeSAD. The experts identified the significant role that teachers play as an advocate for children and supporting families who have experienced BeSAD. They identified key challenges within the current education system for both NI and the RoI and drew attention to core training needs required during ITE (e.g. further training, clarification of the teacher's role, the role of the community, developing communication between teachers and parents).

This report has highlighted the need for enhancing communication in order to remove the fear around the topic of BeSAD for pre-service teachers. The use of appropriate language regarding BeSAD issues and the need for this to be included in ITE training were also identified. This report makes a number of recommendations in relation to the development and dissemination of training and resources for ITE institutions in both jurisdictions but concludes with an





urgent call on the government to provide the guidelines and policy framework that will guide school leaders, teachers and staff in relation to the boundaries of their role and towards effective responses to BeSAD in schools throughout NI and the RoI.





## 1.0 Introduction

This study sought to explore how pre-service teachers (i.e. students enrolled in ITE) cope with BeSAD issues in NI and the RoI. The bio-ecological perspective of Bronfenbrenner (1979) provides a very useful and practical theoretical lens for the research in that it provides a holistic approach that allows for an exploration of the needs of the pupil in school as a result of what is happening in the home environment and at different systemic levels beyond home or school.

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.

Parkes (1988) introduced the theoretical conceptualisation of the "Assumptive World" in which he notes that we all live in a world where we "assume" life will carry on as it always has, with its common first-order changes. However, the assumptive world can be shattered when a second-order change occurs. BeSAD may be, arguably, the most significant second-order change that children may face during their school years. While the family is rightly





acknowledged as the primary care provider, school staff and peers also become important sources of support (Rowling & Holland, 2000). Furthermore, schools are places where children and young people spend a large part of their lives and can be often viewed by the pupil as a secure second family (Coggan, Patterson & Fill, 1997; Holland, 1993). Thus, as well as the family and home environment, the school may represent an extension to the microsystem of a pupil's life and present a context in which grief may manifest itself. It is unsurprising then that teachers may regularly encounter pupils who have experienced second-order changes such as BeSAD, and they can be seen as a "safe harbour" akin to parents and immediate family members.

Throughout the school-age years (approximately 4 to 18 years of age), children are faced with various "normative" developmental crises (Erikson, 1968) that can significantly affect development and normative task fulfilment; BeSAD are examples of such crises. Physical and psychosocial crises intensify throughout the developmental process and present complex concerns for educators. The present research explores the evidential gap of knowledge regarding whether pre-service teachers encounter BeSAD issues on placement and the confidence and training they receive—thus, furthering previous work that has added knowledge about such issues (see Purdy & Mc Guckin, 2014).

In terms of the prevalence of young people of school age who experience bereavement, there are internationally varying and often non-existent statistics. 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). Some studies have suggested that, for example, (a) 3.5% of young people (approximately 2.5 million) in the US have experienced the death of a parent (Christ, Siegel & Christ, 2002); (b) 1 out of 7 pupils will experience the death of a parent before the age of 10 (Webb, 2002); (c) 5% of young people will face the death of a parent before





the age of 16 (Mahon, 1993); (d) 1 in 20 pupils will lose a parent by the time they graduate from high school (Nadworny, 2015); (e) 3% of 5 to 15 year olds have been bereaved of a parent or sibling and 6% have experienced the death of a friend (Meltzer, Gatward, Goodman & Ford, 2000); and (f) an estimated 40 pupils per day are bereaved through the death of a parent in the UK (Wells, 1988). It is clear that bereavement can affect a significant number of children and young people and this, in turn, can lead to grief manifesting in the classroom setting. Research by Nadworny (2015) suggests that 7 out of 10 teachers currently have a pupil in their classroom who may be grieving.

### **1.1 RoI Statistics: Bereavement**

There are no centralised figures in the RoI regarding the number of young people who have been bereaved. However, we do know the number of deaths that occur each year. In 2016, 30,390 people died in Ireland (15,499 males, 14,891 females (Central Statistics Office [CSO], 2016). If one looks beyond these statistics to consider the number of children and young people that could be potentially bereft, we can get an appreciation of the issue confronting teachers in schools. It was estimated that, in 2011, 3,360 of Irish 16 year olds had experienced the death of one or both parents, and a similar number had experienced the death of a sibling (Irish Hospice Foundation, 2012). In an attempt to estimate the number of grieving young people in Ireland, McLoughlin (2012) extrapolated UK statistics and estimated that between 36,000 and 60,000 young people in RoI have experienced bereavement. Data from the national longitudinal Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) study is helping to further inform us of the extent of the issue. Their first publication in 2009, detailing experience of a cohort of nine year olds showed that a total of 43% of 9 year olds had experienced the death of someone important to them (e.g. parent, sibling, grandparent, close friend (Williams et al., 2009).





## **1.2 NI Statistics: Bereavement**

A similar picture exists in Northern Ireland; no centralised figures are available as to the number of young people who have been bereaved. However, we do know the number of deaths that occur each year. In 2016, 15,430 people died; 7,430 were males and 8,000 were female (NISRA, 2015). Given that the majority of deaths are for older adults, a large number of children may be affected by the death of a grandparent or close relative. The Millennium Cohort Study (a study similar to the GUI study) estimated that more than a quarter of the NI children sampled experienced absence of a parent by the age of 7. Lacey et al. (2016) estimate 1.8 % (N=8,657) of this absence is due to the death of a parent.

## **1.3 RoI Statistics: Separation and Divorce**

Separation and divorce are considered to be unplanned events that set off changes to the family structure and unfold over a period of time (Buchanan et al., 2009). In Ireland, the CSO reported that in 2016, there were 94,924 men and 127,149 women separated or divorced (CSO, 2016). The number of persons either divorced or separated living in childless households increased by 11.5% between 2011 and 2016 (CSO, 2016). There were 87,704 separated or divorced persons living in households with children, an increase of 5.1% on 2011 (CSO, 2016). Parental separation and divorce is a common issue permeating schools as educators try to support pupils during this transition. Overall, the national average for marital breakdown in Ireland is estimated to be at 12%, and this rate increases to almost 21% in larger cities such as Dublin and Limerick (Iona Institute, 2013). The GUI study found that 15% of nine-year-olds had experienced the divorce or separation of parents, and 12% had experienced conflict between parents (Williams et al., 2009).



## **1.4 NI Statistics: Separation and Divorce**

Similar statistics are echoed in Northern Ireland with data from the 2011 census (NISRA, 2015) showing that the province has the largest number of single parent families in the UK. The NISRA (2015) noted that in 2016, 2,572 divorces were registered. 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. This is an underestimation of what this research is exploring as this does not include families who have separated or who were cohabiting and, therefore, not registered as divorced. Recent policy developments both North and South have highlighted the importance of supporting the overall well-being of pupils in the classroom who are affected by such issues (Department of Education Northern Ireland [DENI], 2015). Therefore, it is timely that research explores the current confidence and competence among pre-service teachers who will be soon qualified and supporting young people within the classroom.

## **1.5 Theoretical Foundations of Grief**

There are various theories that hypothesise the potential reaction of an individual to bereavement; however, the current section has selected seven models that theorise grief. These seven models were chosen due to their seminal importance within the bereavement literature as well as the approach to understanding how young people may respond to bereavement in a school environment. While many of the models that are discussed in this section were developed to understand the way in which adults grieve, they also provide an insight into the way in which young people may respond to bereavement. Indeed, as teachers may also be experiencing grief in their own life, we include those for readers to further understand how their own experiences may be explained by these theorists. The theories included in Table 1 are (a) mourning as detachment (Freud, 1917; Lindemann, 1944), (b) attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969), (c) stage models of grief (Kübler-Ross, 1969) and (d) task models of grief (Worden, 1982).







**Table 1. Models of Grieving: Pre-1990**

Model	Theorist(s)	Focus	Relevance
Mourning as Detachment	Freud, 1917 Lindemann, 1944	Involves eradicating the remaining relationship with the deceased	Model not applied to young people. Detachment provides debate as to whether or not grief work is applicable to young people who are bereaved.
Attachment Theory	Bowlby, 1969	Involves understanding the attachment of bereaved individual to the deceased	Based on young people's experience of separation from a caregiver (e.g. important person in their lives). No direct emphasis on coping with bereavement but acknowledges importance of relationship to deceased.
Stage Models of Grief	Kübler-Ross, 1969	Stages that people go through when bereaved; problems related to failure to progress through stages	Not developed for young people but may reflect experiences of young people separated from parents or guardians. Does not provide a "guide" as to how to cope with bereavement.
Task Models of Grief	Worden, 1982	Task-focused approach which must be completed in order to cope with bereavement	Not developed for young people but recognises that grief tasks may apply to young people, but are based on their cognitive, emotional and social development.

The influential contributions of theorists, such as Freud and Kübler-Ross, have paved the way for subsequent theoretical and research developments regarding the experience and effects of loss through death. As such, their theories permeated the scientific study of grief in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and still continue to do so with great influence. However, some proponents have emphasised the interweaving of phases. There has been the tendency for them to be interpreted as linear, normative prescriptions of how bereaved people are expected to react. However, "grief is not a linear process with concrete boundaries but, rather, a composite of overlapping, fluid phases that vary from





person to person" (Shuchter & Zisook, 1993, p.23). This long-standing Freudian view of grieving, as a process of decathexis of emotional energy from a lost loved one, is under assault by critics within the psychodynamic tradition (Hagman, 1995). Researchers (Stroebe & Schut, 1999; Klass, Silverman & Nickman, 1996) are realising that the "decathexis" response does not accurately or adequately reflect the grieving experience. In fact, the prevailing models of grief appear inaccurate, incomplete and even biased. The primary problem is that the earlier models are unable to account for individual variability among grievers, even when they had experienced similar types of bereavement. Thus, individual variability was labelled "pathological" as this was the only explanation provided for those who could not reach the final stage or task.

In the late 1980s, many researchers began questioning the value of the earlier models. Thus, newer theories of grief were being developed, which include the Dual Process model (Stroebe & Schut, 1999), the Narrative and Meaning Making Approach (Neimeyer, 2005) and the Continuing Bonds model (Klass, Silverman & Nickman, 1996). While death is universal, the grief response is not universal; different people grieve in different ways. These new theories allow for the individuality of the grieving process and acknowledge that prolonged grief is not necessarily pathological. Thus, severing the bond is not obligatory for healthy grief and, in fact, maintaining the bond may be a healthy response to grief. The newer theories will now be outlined in the Table 2 and include (a) the dual process model (Stroebe & Schut, 2010), (b) meaning making (Neimeyer, 2001) and (c) continuing bonds (Klass, Silverman & Nickman, 1996).



**Table 2. Models of Grieving: Post-1990**

Model	Theorist(s)	Focus	Relevance
Dual Process Model	Stroebe & Schut, 1999	Integrative model of coping with bereavement	Not developed for young people but provides an understanding of the social context of grief and the way in which individuals oscillate between active grieving and denial of grief.
Meaning Making	Neimeyer, 2001	Meaning that people make of their loss; personal, narrative construction of their relationship	Not developed for young people. This model highlights the wider context of meaning making, with reference to continuing bonds. Potential for understanding grief with young people in schools through the creation of narratives.
Continuing Bonds	Klass, Silverman & Nickman, 1996	Maintaining a continuing bond, an internal representation of our ongoing connection with the deceased individual	Not developed for young people but recognises that a "final" stage of acceptance may not be necessary and that a continuing bond with deceased may be a more realistic view of grief.

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 (a) how their family reacts, (b) external social pressure and (c) their inner psychic conflicts (Harrington & Harrison, 1999; Howarth, 2011). Volkan (1985) argues that as Freud did not focus on young people and the grieving process in his theory, it can be surmised that a young person does not mourn like an adult. Howarth (2011) supports the view that the grieving process will be different for young people. Thus, when we are presented with a pupil grieving in our class, we must remember that many other developmental and emotional factors will influence their response.



## **1.6 Policy and Curricula Relating to BeSAD in the RoI**

The type of bereavement explored in the current research is death under "normative" circumstances (death through illness, sudden death). The research did not include bereavement that is defined as a "critical incident" in the school environment. A critical incident can be defined as "any incident or sequence of events which overwhelms the normal coping mechanisms of the school" (Department of Education and Skills, 2016, p.12). This research explored "normative" bereavement whereby the death does not "overwhelm" the normal coping mechanisms of the school but may, nevertheless, have an impact on the pupil and their learning in the classroom.

A critical incident policy is compulsory for all Irish schools and supports (e.g. psychologists) are available to schools who experience such an event. For example, when a critical incident occurs, the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) response generally involves four areas, which are planning, information and advice, support and screening. This involves helping school management to assess the significance and impact of the event, draw up a plan, mobilise school resources and access other support systems. NEPS are also available to work with school staff to help them identify pupils who are most in need of supplementary support. Policies for such an event are mandatory in schools across countries with a similar socioeconomic structure to Ireland (e.g. Australia and England; Rowling & Holland, 2000).

In 2011, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) conducted a public consultation to discover the key priorities for primary education in Ireland. The resulting report (NCCA, 2012) identified six priorities, which included well-being as a key area. In 2015, Well-Being in Primary Schools (DES, 2015) was launched. Bereavement is mentioned on two occasions in this important document. The first indicates how topics such as bereavement should not "be treated in isolation, but rather in the context of the overall SPHE [Social, Personal and Health Education] curriculum" (DES, 2015, p.43).





The second mention of bereavement states that a small intervention support group should be put in place for pupils who are bereaved. While these guidelines are an indication that the DES is further acknowledging the role of the educator in the overall well-being of pupils, consistent training at ITE and CPD are needed for effective implementation of these recommendations.

SPHE is an area that covers pupil well-being, and BeSAD are subjects covered at both primary and post-primary level. Daly, Halbert and Ó Cadhain (2017) report that when the NCCA published proposals in 2015 in relation to new *Education About Religions and Beliefs*, a key finding that emerged was the emphasis that teachers placed on SPHE and the need for more time to be given to this subject area. In 2016, the NCCA published proposals in which they began the process of redeveloping the whole primary school curriculum in Ireland (Daly et al., 2017), which will have implications for SPHE and the area of BeSAD.

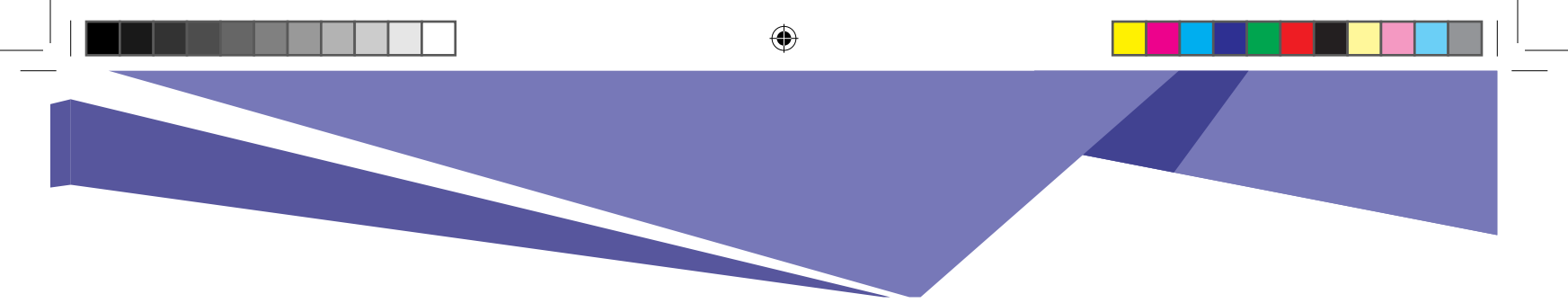
It is also important to note that in post-primary schools, some students may have access to a chaplain, guidance counsellor or pastoral care team who may offer support. However, a lack of consistency in the employment of these roles means that not all students can avail of this. With such an emphasis and the increased discourse around the area of well-being, it is both timely and necessary to put forward a strong argument for why BeSAD support is required in schools to aid educators in their support of pupils who may be experiencing loss.



## 1.7 Policy and Curricula Relating to BeSAD in NI

Similar to the RoI, the Department of Education in NI (DENI) offers support and guidance to schools on issues related to BeSAD. This work is mainly focused under the area of supporting pupils' health and well-being, and the review aimed to focus on improving pupils' emotional health. The *Pupils' Emotional Health and Wellbeing* (PEHAW, 2008/2009) review was commissioned to review the current work and identify models of good practice, identify training and support needs for teachers, and map available resources and develop audit tools. The programme aimed to build on the good practice currently taking place and become a vehicle for key statutory, voluntary and community partnerships to work together more effectively. It was intended to integrate policies, services and all non-academic and curriculum activities affecting pupils such as counselling, pastoral care systems, suicide prevention and critical incident strategies.

As part of the PEHAW programme, an update to current guidance for schools on a regional approach to the management of critical incidents was developed. DENI (2014) defines a critical incident as "any sudden and unexpected incident or sequence of events which causes trauma within a school community and which overwhelms the normal coping mechanisms of that school". The Education Authority in NI has a critical incident response team who can be contacted to provide support to schools, if required. They also work alongside other agencies, for example, the Independent Counselling Service in Schools (ICSS), which can provide counselling to pupils in both the primary or post-primary sector in response to a critical incident. Schools are advised to have a critical incident policy in place, and advice to schools is provided in the *Guide to Managing Critical Incidents in Schools* (DENI, 2014). This guidance complements a suite of support provided under the iMatter programme. The PEHAW programme is now called the iMatter programme and it is intended to support the entire school community to be engaged in promoting resilient emotional health for all pupils. Under this programme, a suite of homework



diary inserts, leaflets and posters on topics of concern to young people were produced. Several of these are specific to BeSAD issues such as "Dealing with family problems" and "What to do when someone I care about dies". The resources are designed for young people and provide hints and tips on coping with emotional issues; however, they are more focused at post-primary age. To complement the advice and support provided to schools, the National Children's Bureau (NCB, 2015) issued guidance to schools in relation to what works in promoting social and emotional well-being and responding to mental health problems in schools. Again, although not specific to BeSAD issues, it stressed the need to support expected and unexpected changes and transitions, including separation and divorce. The NCB (2015) guidelines stress the need to support the wider community of the child, including the parents.

In addition to the iMatters work within schools, Personal Development and Mutual Understanding (Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment [CCEA], 2007) is the curricular area that explores BeSAD at both primary and post-primary level in the curriculum. Teachers have the freedom to develop particular aspects of the programme, and many planned curricular activities and lessons on BeSAD issues could fit within this planned curricular area. The challenge to teachers is to tackle these issues sensitively, and many may shy away and stick to more "safe" topics. Clearly, with such an interest in the issues of pupil well-being, it is timely and necessary to support educators to address issues around BeSAD.

### **1.8 The Impact of BeSAD**

The forthcoming sections provide an insight into pupil reactions in the school environment towards BeSAD. Understanding how children and young people function in the classroom environment following BeSAD is essential to the current research in order to know the kind of support that pre-service teachers should recognise and support.



### 1.8.1 Bereavement Reactions

Several studies suggest that bereaved young people make up a vulnerable population who are at an increased risk of psychological and social difficulties that can last from childhood to later life (Ayyash-Abdo, 2001; Black & Young, 1995; Dowdney, 1999; Elizur & Kaffman, 1983; Van Eerdewegh, Clayton & Van Eerdewegh, 1985; Weller, Weller, Fristad & Bowes, 1991). 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 (Christ et al., 2002; Harrington & Harrison, 1999; McLoughlin, 2012).

Literature suggests that young people express common reactions following bereavement, which are generally considered to be normal in the first two years after a death (Kaplow, et al., 2012). Young people can be at an increased risk of impaired academic attainment (Abdelnoor & Hollins, 2004; Capewell, 1999; Dowdney, 1999; Mallon, 2011; Rowling, 2003) combined with physical (Lloyd-Williams, Wilkinson & Lloyd-Williams, 1998; Worden & Silverman, 1996), psychological (Dowdney, 1999), social and behavioural issues (Dowdney, 1999; Kaplow et al., 2012; Mallon, 2011), elevated levels of depression (Melhem, Walker, Moritz & Brent, 2008; Worden & Silverman, 1996), generalised anxiety (Kranzler et al., 1990), separation anxiety (Kaplow et al., 2012), post-traumatic stress (Melhem et al., 2008) and significant adverse consequences for psychosocial development, especially the onset of mood disorders in late adolescence and young adulthood (Breier et al., 1988; Tennant, 1988; Kendler, Neale, Kessler, Heath & Eaves, 1992; Kessler & Magee, 1993). Stroebe et al. (2001) characterise the responses of grief into four categories: (a) affective responses (e.g. depression, despair, and anxiety), (b) behavioural response (e.g. crying, fatigue, and social withdrawal), (c) cognitive responses (e.g. problems with concentration) and (d) physiological and somatic responses (e.g. loss of appetite, sleeping problems, susceptibility to illness). Common reactions to childhood bereavement, as observed by







Capewell (1999), which may subsequently affect a bereaved pupil in the classroom environment, include acting rebellious, substance abuse, psychosomatic complaints, changes in behaviour, performance decline, eating problems, specific fears triggered by reminders of the trauma, overwhelming emotions and a foreshortened future. Pupils who are bereaved may experience a lack of concentration (Dowdney, 1999), poor school attendance (Black, 1978) and distress when memories of their dead parent are evoked in school (Silverman & Worden, 1992). Silverman and Worden (1992) suggest that young people with greater levels of affective distress outside the school are more likely to have poorer performance in school. In a recent study, 51.6% of primary school principals said that they would like counselling services to support pupils who have been bereaved (McElvaney, Judge, & Gordon, 2017). General family issues were identified as the most prominent issues, and parental conflict, separation and divorce also ranked high (McElvaney et al., 2017).

In the immediate aftermath of a bereavement, young people experience increased stress levels that may raise susceptibility to disease and illness (Marks, Jun & Song, 2007; Perkins & Harris, 1990). The stress response to bereavement can affect the sympathetic nervous system, the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis, the neuroendocrine systems and the immune system (Li, Precht & Mortensen, 2003; McEwen, 1998). Therefore, the illness or death of a loved one may influence the health of a person to whom they are connected (Berkman & Syme, 1979; Christakis, 2004; Rostila, 2007). Symptoms in children are often delayed and may be due to the consequences of the death (e.g. financial problems, unemployment and depression) rather than to the death itself.

Academic achievement is an important determinant for quality of life, future income and personal success that cumulatively provide an indirect measure of well-being over time (Abdelnoor & Hollins, 2004). A survey was conducted





across England during the period of 1993–1995 where participating parents received a questionnaire pack including a family history questionnaire, an examination results questionnaire and a feelings questionnaire. The sample was self-selected. Participants and controls (approximate age 15–16 years) were matched for school, age, gender and ethnicity. This study found that there was a significant difference between the GCSE average scores of parentally bereaved children and controls and sibling bereaved girls and controls. Parentally bereaved children scored, on average, half a grade below their controls—a difference that was slightly more marked for boys than girls. Sibling bereaved girls scored nearly a full grade below the controls. Silverman and Worden (1992) reported that one year following bereavement, some participants felt that their school work had improved whereas others believed that it had deteriorated, thus suggesting that the reaction to school and academic development may not be a simple one. Children bereaved at the age of 12 scored an average of 1.3 grades below their controls. Employment of the surviving parent was a significant factor. When the surviving parent was not working, there was an average deficit of 1.8 grade points when compared to those whose surviving parent was employed (Abdelnoor & Hollins, 2004). Academic achievement rates are multi-dimensional and one factor is how parents support children (e.g. homework) (Banks & Finlayson, 1973). Research indicates that the academic effects of bereavement may be prolonged and that intermittent support could be necessary throughout the school years and perhaps even in tertiary education (Abdelnoor & Hollins, 2004). A criticism of the assessment of the impact of bereavement on academic performance has been presented by Dowdney (1999), who reminded us that few studies use standardised instruments to measure academic performance and instead use measures that are less reliable.

Silverman and Worden (1992) conducted bereavement research with surviving children in families where parents were living together at the time of death. Their sample consisted of 70 families, with 125 children (65 boys, 60 girls;





aged 6–17 years) who were attending between the first grade and the twelfth grade. Seventy-four percent of pupils had been bereaved of a father and 26% had been bereaved of a mother. Through their research, they found that when a mother died after a long illness, children were more likely to be sent back to school the day after the funeral. Twenty-two percent of the children thought that their school performance had declined since the death, with 18% believing that their work had improved. Silverman and Worden (1992) noted that the inability to function in school was one area in which the impact of the death could be seen concretely; however, most of the children (71%; n=89) sample reported that they retained the ability to deal effectively with school. Silverman and Worden (1992) noted that while some of the young people were sad and somewhat confused, most were carrying on by going to school and maintaining relationships with friends and family.

### **1.8.2 Family Separation Reactions**

This section explores the impact that family separation (i.e. separation or divorce) may have on pupils in the classroom environment. In modern times, it is common for young people to live in sole-parent families, step families, blended families or a combination of family forms (Beausang, Farrell, & Walsh, 2012). There is an increasing number of young people experiencing family separation and the risk of problems in their adjustment following these family transitions is substantially increasing (Dunn Cheng, O'Connor, & Bridges, 2004). 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). Furthermore, the educational background of the family may impact on the pupil response to separation. Research indicates that pupils whose mothers are educated experience a lesser negative impact because the mothers are better equipped to offer a more stable home

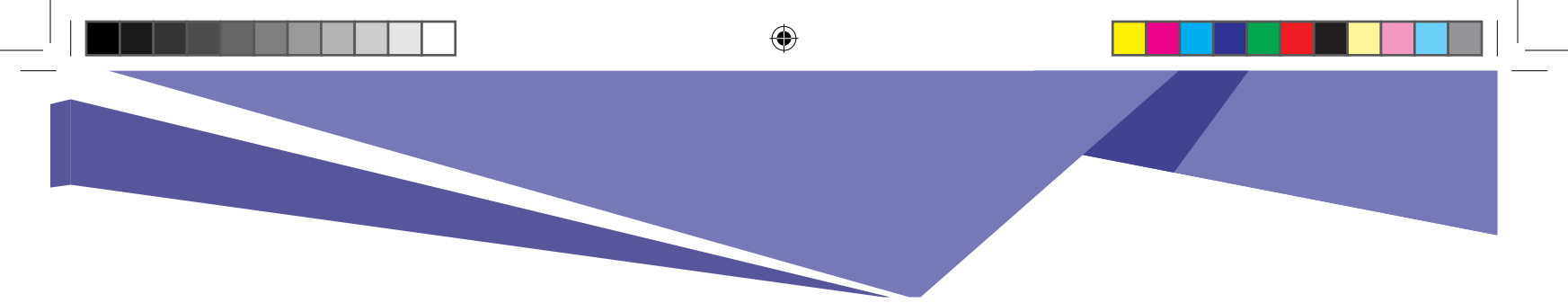




environment (Mandemakers & Kalmijn, 2011). Separation and divorce cause uncertainty for children and can have the potential to impact on their ability to learn (Mehana & Reynolds, 2004), leading to implications for the education of pre-service teachers.

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. Yuk Yee Luk-Fong (2011) explored teachers' perceptions of the





experiences of pupils in changing family situations among a sample of 30 teachers and found that pupils who experienced family separation suffered from higher emotional distress and had difficulties in maintaining concentration and motivation for school. Teachers in this study indicated that the academic, social and moral development of pupils were affected following family separation (Yuk Yee Luk-Fong, 2011). Other research identifies that pupils whose families have separated may drop out of school (Evans, Kelley & Wanner, 2001), have conflicts with teachers (Aro & Palosaari, 1992) and earn poor mathematics and reading scores (Potter, 2010).

One area that educators need to be aware of in the classroom is the lead-up to a separation or divorce; research indicates that the unobserved factors (such as arguments in the family home) that determine the breakdown of a marriage may affect pupils' outcomes (Haveman & Wolfe, 1995). Research from a dataset of longitudinal surveys found that two to four years before a separation, pupils (aged 7–14 years) exhibited behavioural problems and reading scores decreased (Arkes, 2015). Hogan et al. (2003) indicated that some pupils (aged 8–17 years [N=60]) experienced both academic and social difficulties as a result of their preoccupation with their home situation. Frequently, teachers were not aware of a family separation (Hogan et al., 2003) and, thus, were unable to provide appropriate support. Dunn et al. (2004) found that young people (aged 10–11 years [N=238]) were not fully informed about the issues surrounding their parents' separation or were not encouraged to ask questions about it. The lack of communication and openness surrounding separation and divorce may result in a lack of understanding regarding behaviour or concentration changes in the classroom. Furthermore, research indicates that pupils in the same family may differ considerably in their experiences of parental separation (Hogan et al., 2003), highlighting that a "one size fits all" approach cannot be taken when providing support to pupils in school.

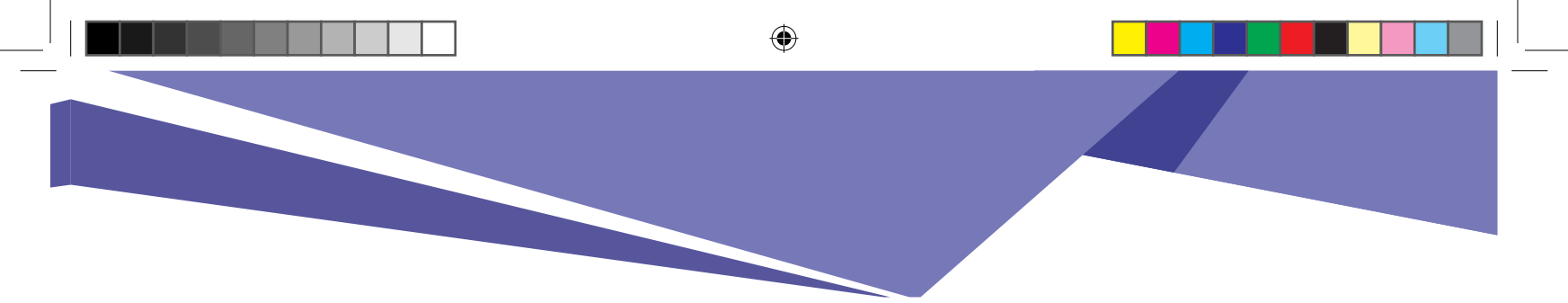


## **1.9 Unproven Assumptions Relating to BeSAD**

The literature indicates negative issues relating to BeSAD experiences among children, as previously referenced (see, for example, Abdelnoor & Hollins, 2004; Capewell, 1999; Dowdney, 1999; Mallon, 2011; Rowling, 2003). However, Harrington and Harrison (1999) question how much evidence exists to support the assumption that bereavement has a negative impact on well-being of young people and assert that little systematic research has been conducted among young people who experienced bereavement. The same can be said for separation and divorce. Harrington and Harrison (1999) state that many of the current assumptions about the impact of bereavement on young people are not proven and argue that existing data suggests that it is not a major risk factor for mental and behavioural disorders in either adolescence or adulthood. Furthermore, Silverman and Worden (1992) note that while bereavement is a significant event, most children cope surprisingly well with this trauma and do not show serious symptoms or dysfunctional behaviour. From an epidemiological perspective, bereavement does not appear to be a major risk factor for mental disorders in children (Harrington & Harrison, 1999), with data suggesting that sadness, crying and withdrawal occur in less than 50% of cases (Gersten, Beals & Kallgren, 1991; Van Eerdewegh et al., 1985). Earlier research is considered to have methodological flaws and researchers have suggested that the inconsistencies in the bereavement literature is 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).

The conventional wisdom is that divorce has a severe negative impact on children (Rappaport, 2013). However, it is important to remember that while there are many negative outcomes associated with family separations, there is also a growing body of literature that explores the development of coping skills





and resiliency of children. 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).

Similarly, with bereavement, 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 et al., 2007; Goldstein & Brooks, 2005; Luthans et al., 2006; Mathews & Servaty-Seib, 2007; Ribbens-McCarthy, 2006; Stokes, 2007).

### **1.10 The Role of the School**

School is just one aspect of young people's lives, albeit a crucial one. This section considers into the role of the school when a pupil experiences BeSAD. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bioecological theory demonstrates that a young person's settings are important aspects of their development. While the family is seen as the primary care provider, school staff and peers also become important sources of support (Rowling & Holland, 2000). Schools are places where young people spend a large part of their lives and can often be viewed by the pupil as a secure second "family" (Coggan et al., 1997; Holland, 1993). The school community can play an important role in providing support to pupils experiencing BeSAD. Yuk Yee Luk-Fong (2011) asserts that the two worlds of home and school are held together and what is happening in one constantly impacts the other. Furthermore, schools often neglect the emotional factors that affect pupils' capacities for learning and focus on the cognitive development and academic performance of the pupils (Yuk Yee Luk-Fong, 2011). The school represents the meso-system of a young person's life and provides a context in which grief from bereavement or family separation may manifest. Therefore, it is important to understand how a young person reacts to loss within the school environment.

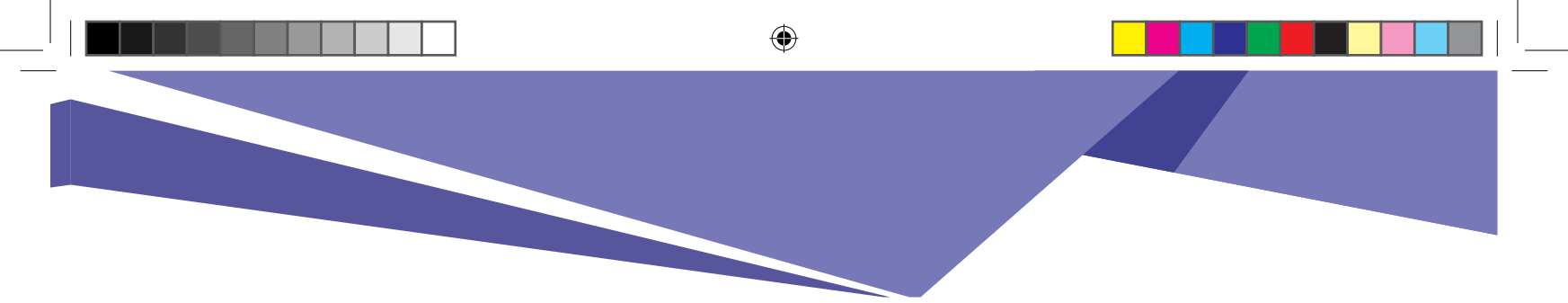


A study of youth mental health (Dooley & Fitzgerald, 2012) among 14,306 Irish adolescents and young adults (aged 12-25 years) found that "one good adult" is important in maintaining the mental well-being of young people. A teacher may be the only "one good adult" in a young person's life and are often expected to take on a supportive role for pupils (Rowling, 1995). Society has expectations of teachers beyond academic achievement (Rowling & Holland, 2000) and research conducted by Holland (2008) indicated that 84% of schools in his study rated the area of bereavement as "important" or "very important". While bereavement is a family issue, it may affect children and young people when they are at school (Holland, 2008) and, therefore, schools and teachers seem to be in a unique position to help grieving pupils. Schools can have a positive role to play by challenging the potentially negative and destructive understandings surrounding death by developing important life skills in young people that will improve and strengthen school communities (Rowling, 2003). However, research has noted that there is a significant absence of bereavement support from school staff (Hogan & DeSantis, 1994; Patterson & Ranganathan, 2010).

According to Parke and Clarke-Stewart (2001), communication is one of the most important aids in minimising negative effects of family separation. Teachers can play an important role in facilitating communication with pupils in their class. Pupils who have the opportunity to communicate and express their emotions can make sense of, and validate their feelings towards, their experience of the separation (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2001). However, it is important for teachers to be aware that most pupils who have experienced family separation may not trust adults due to the inconsistency of attachments (Fahlberg, 1991). Therefore, the importance of the teacher's role in establishing a trusting relationship with pupils cannot be underestimated. It has been reported by Parke and Clarke-Stewart (2001) that pupils experiencing separation are best supported in an environment that honours their need to stay connected to both parents. Teachers can play an important







role in supporting such connections between parents and pupils. This is supported by researchers (Allers, 1982; Dowling & Gorell-Barnes, 2000; Hetherington, 1988; Yuk Yee Luk-Fong, 2011) who have recognised that school is an environment that is sensitive to the needs of pupils and family situations, with regular routines and disciplines. The teacher's role in strengthening pupils' connections with both parents can only begin with the teacher being aware of the circumstances of the pupil's family.

### **1.11 Conclusion**

The research literature indicates 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 and resources to support pupils in relation to various public issues (e.g. obesity, cyberbullying, grief). There are inconsistencies in the type of support provided both nationally and internationally and, thus, the role of the teacher and the boundaries of such a role are important. Pre-service teachers are required to spend varying amounts of time in the classroom on placement and are in a position to meet pupils who have experienced BeSAD. There is no previous research that explores the response of pre-service teachers to issues of well-being in the classroom as a result of BeSAD; much of the research is based on the experiences of qualified teachers. As pre-service teachers spend a significant amount of time (e.g. 24 weeks in the RoI) in schools during ITE, it is important to establish whether they encounter pupils who have experienced BeSAD, how they support them and what training they have received in relation to this at ITE.

## 2.0 Methodology

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. The research design was influenced by the conceptual framework for designing and assessing the quality of mixed methodological research developed by Creswell, Fetters, and Ivankova (2004). The research set out to answer the following research questions:

- Is grief, as a result of BeSAD, an issue that pre-service teachers encounter during placement?
- How confident and competent do pre-service teachers feel about effectively supporting pupils who experience BeSAD in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland?
- Do pre-service teachers feel that they have received adequate training at ITE to support pupils who have experienced BeSAD?

### 2.1 Phase One: Survey with Pre-Service Teachers

A staged approach began with quantitative analysis of online surveys providing a descriptive overview of knowledge, attitudes, and experiences of pre-service teachers in NI and RoI relating to BeSAD in the school.

In the absence of an appropriate research instrument, an "audit style" questionnaire (based on O'Brien & Mc Guckin, 2013) was developed for the study. The content of the instrument was then derived from a review of the literature and incorporated the views of education experts and practitioners. To explore issues relating to validity (e.g. content, construct), two pilot studies were conducted. No significant alterations to the questionnaire were required. Information collection during the pilot survey was not included in the final data set of the study. The survey (see Appendix 1) consisted of a range of question types, including questions based on Likert rating scales, multiple-choice

questions and open-ended questions. The survey was sent to 1,136 pre-service teachers across both jurisdictions across six programmes, which are outlined in Table 3.

**Table 3. Survey: Overview of Programme of Study**

<b>Degree Programme</b>	<b>NI</b>	<b>RoI</b>	<b>Grand Total</b>
BA in Early Childhood Studies	23		23
B.Ed. in Primary Education	25		25
Postgraduate Certificate in Education	28		28
Professional Masters of Education in Post-Primary Education		40	40
Professional Masters of Education in Primary Education		231	231
BEd in Post-Primary	7		7
<b>Total</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>271</b>	<b>354</b>

## 2.2 Phase Two: The Interview

The second phase of data collection involved semi-structured interviews with six experts in the area of BeSAD or ITE in NI (N=3) and RoI (N=3). Details pertaining to participants' locations, their role and the length of the semi-structured interviews are available in the qualitative findings section later in the report.

## 2.3 Data Analysis

Both phases of data collection were analysed using thematic analysis in order to identify and analyse emerging themes. Thematic analysis was conducted in a manner that was consistent with the six guideline phases described by Braun and Clarke (2006).



## **2.4 Ethical Considerations**

The current research was guided by the BERA (2011) guidelines and ethical approval was granted by the Ethics Committee of Hibernia College. All individuals taking part in the research were informed that they would not be identified individually and that all data collected would be aggregated for the purpose of analysis and reporting. Interview participants were asked to sign a consent form before the interview by which they accepted that they had been fully informed of the purpose of the research. The interviews were recorded and the data was stored securely. Participants were informed of their anonymity and that the findings would be used solely for the purposes of the research project. Participants were aware that their input to the project was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any stage without adverse consequences.

### 3.0 Findings: Quantitative Research

This section explores the findings derived from the two-phase mixed-method data collection in NI and RoI that involved a first phase survey (N=354) with pre-service teachers. The second phase included qualitative semi-structured interviews (N=6) with experts in the area of ITE and child well-being.

#### 3.1 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]). Table 4 below provides an overview of those taking part in the survey, the programme they were enrolled on and their location.

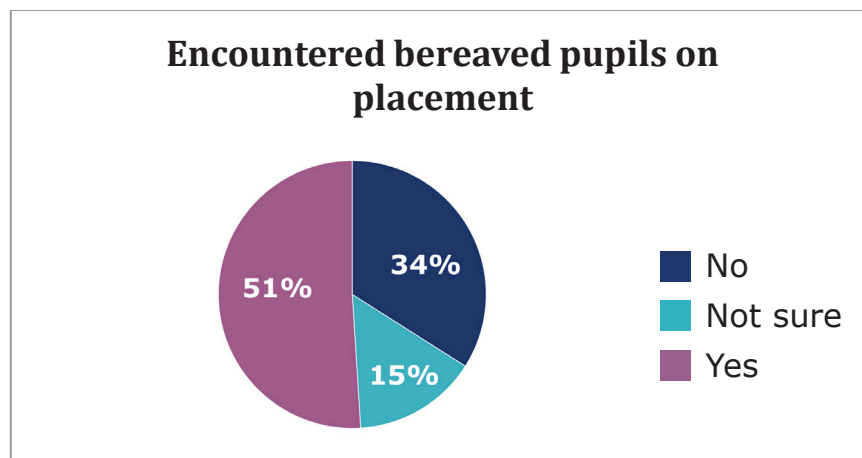
**Table 4. Survey Responses by Jurisdiction**

Location			Primary/ Early Childhood	Post- Primary	Combined Total
Republic of Ireland	Count		231	40	271
	% within location		85.2%	14.8%	100.0%
Northern Ireland	Count		47	36	83
	% within location		56.6%	43.4%	100.0%
<b>Overall Total</b>		Count	278	76	354
		% within location	78.5%	21.5%	100.0%

#### 3.2 Survey Results Relating to Bereavement

The data analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. The results of these analyses are presented in the next section. 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). Respondents had between 10 and in

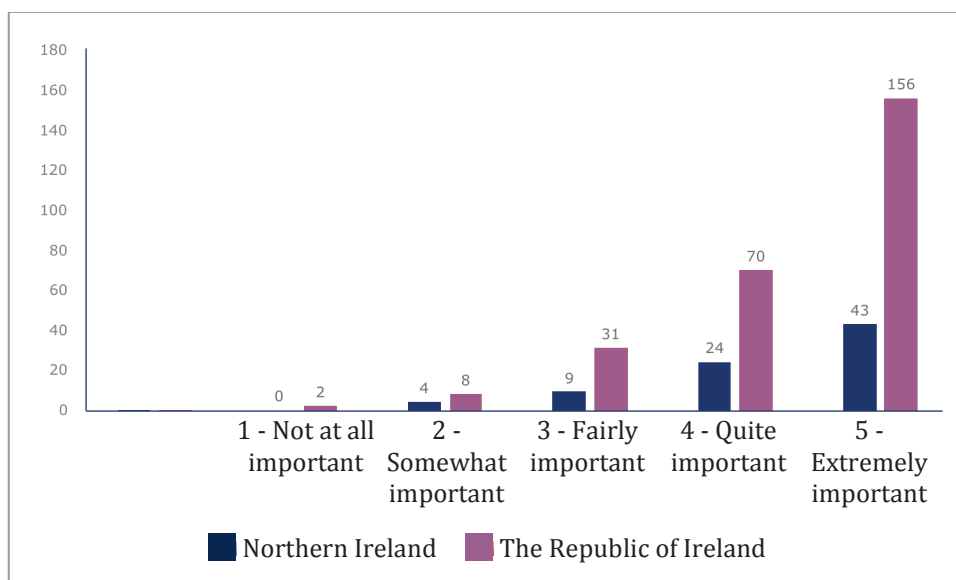
excess of 24 weeks experience on placement in an educational setting with pupils. The survey found that just over half (51% [NI: 42; RoI: 139]) of respondents had encountered pupils who had been bereaved while they were on placement (see Figure 1 below):



**Figure 1. Incidence of Encountered Bereaved Pupils on 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 and separation"* (respondent 71, RoI).

One respondent reported that while on placement, the parent of a pupil in her class was diagnosed with a terminal illness: *"I have had the experience of a child's parent being diagnosed with a serious illness and was not sure how to deal with this exactly"* (respondent 247, RoI). On a Likert scale of 1 to 5 (1 = not at all important; 5 = extremely important) in terms of bereavement being an area of importance in their practice, 83% (N=293 [NI = 67; RoI = 226]) rated the area of bereavement support as either "quite important" or "extremely important" (see Figure 2 below).



**Figure 2. Importance of Bereavement in Practice for Pre-Service Teachers**

The majority of respondents (92% [NI = 81; RoI = 242]) agreed that bereavement is not simply an "at home" issue and that the school should also provide support to pupils in their care. One respondent reported:

*"I personally feel these issues should be dealt with at school as well as home. I had nothing to rely on except my own experience to help the child in question. I would really like information and training in this area for the future as this is an event that everyone will go through in life and should be a vital part of teacher training"* (respondent 34, RoI).

In relation to policy that could provide direction as to the role of the teacher, most respondents (92% [NI = 72; RoI = 253]) were unaware or "not sure" as to whether there was a policy available for teachers on how to support a bereaved pupil in their class.

When asked about their confidence, nearly half of respondents (48% [NI = 40; RoI = 130]) reported that they did not feel confident or were unsure of how they felt in relation to supporting pupils who were bereaved. The corollary of this was that 52% of respondents did feel confident when supporting pupils who



were bereaved. When asked how they would support pupils, 77% (NI = 101; RoI = 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, RoI). Personal intuition appeared to be closely linked to participants' personal experience of grief. Eighty-one per-cent (NI = 68; RoI = 285) of respondents had experienced the bereavement of a significant person in their lives. Consequently, 80% (NI = 60; RoI = 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; RoI = 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; RoI = 52]). One respondent reported that *"Attendance due to disrupted home life"* (respondent 160, RoI) had an impact while another stated that a pupil *". . . became more withdrawn, quieter"* (respondent 176, RoI). 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, RoI).

Nearly half of all respondents (47%: NI=40; RoI= 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 schoolwork did not suffer. He had great support from his family who appear to be very closely knit"* (respondent 29, RoI).







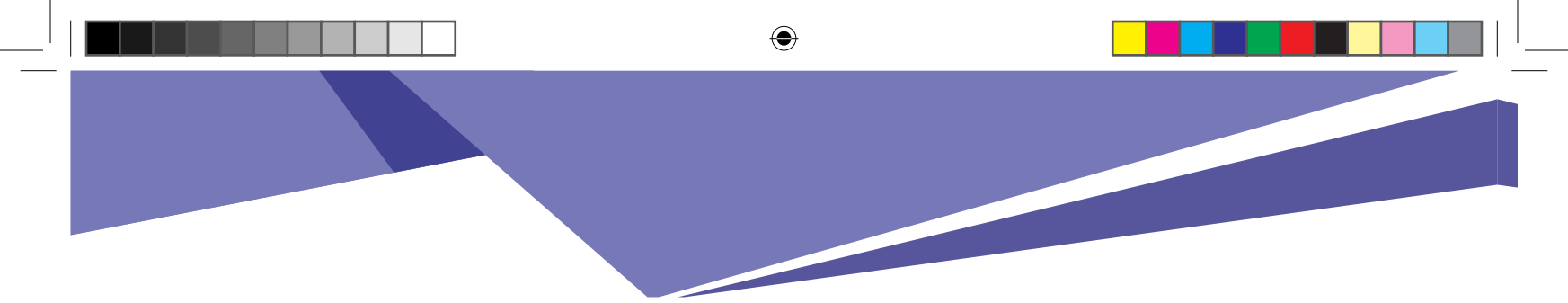
### 3.4 Survey Results Relating to Separation and Divorce

This section outlines the data from respondents pertaining to separation and divorce in the classroom. Forty-one per-cent (NI = 38; RoI = 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, RoI).*

Twenty-one per-cent (NI = 17; RoI = 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; RoI = 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; RoI = 53) of respondents stated that pupils tended to have difficulties concentrating, while a further 19% (NI = 15; RoI = 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 RoI who ". . . developed anxiety and became very nervous – started urinating himself frequently" (respondent 60, RoI) and another pupil who ". . . developed a twitch in her eye" (respondent 99, RoI). 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, RoI) 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 125, RoI). However, 57% (NI = 45; RoI=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.

### **3.5 BeSAD: Training and Further Support**

The majority of respondents (84% [NI = 55; RoI = 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; RoI = 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 - 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; RoI = 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 over-stepping my role as a teacher, and would be invasive, unless the parent decided they wished to discuss it with me"* (respondent 254, RoI). 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 NEPS and other staff members as this would have been a struggle on a regular school day"* (respondent 67, RoI).

Whereas another pre-service teacher 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 169, RoI).*

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 who can then be supportive in connecting with pupils on a daily basis on various emotional issues:

*"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).*

One respondent shared their experience of the death of a pupil in the school:

*". . . I shared a story in the staff room that a friend who lost a child was advised to use the word dead with her very young child to explain it and ensure there was no confusion . . . Interestingly, some of the teachers realised they had not explained the girl's passing using the word death." (respondent 201, RoI).*

One issue that was mentioned during the survey was in relation to culture and language barriers, with one pre-service teacher reporting that: *"Language was an obstacle as the bereaved family had very little English and so communication had to be through a friend" (respondent 197, RoI).*





### 3.5 Summary of Quantitative Results

In summary, the quantitative research (N=354) indicated that more than half of the pre-service teachers who participated in the research had encountered pupils who had experienced some form of BeSAD issues. The majority of respondents believed that they had a role in supporting pupils who were experiencing emotional issues as a result of BeSAD. While respondents rated the area of BeSAD as an area of importance in their practice, many were not confident or were unsure of whether they were confident in supporting pupils experiencing such issues. Personal intuition was the main way in which respondents reported supporting pupils experiencing bereavement, and this was closely linked to the respondents' own personal experience of bereavement. Respondents noticed that while on placement, some pupils who had experienced separation or divorce had exhibited nervous and anxious behaviour as well as forgetting items in school and appearing unorganised. Overall, respondents felt that more training at ITE was needed to cover areas of BeSAD so that pre-service teachers would feel empowered to tackle well-being issues in the classroom.

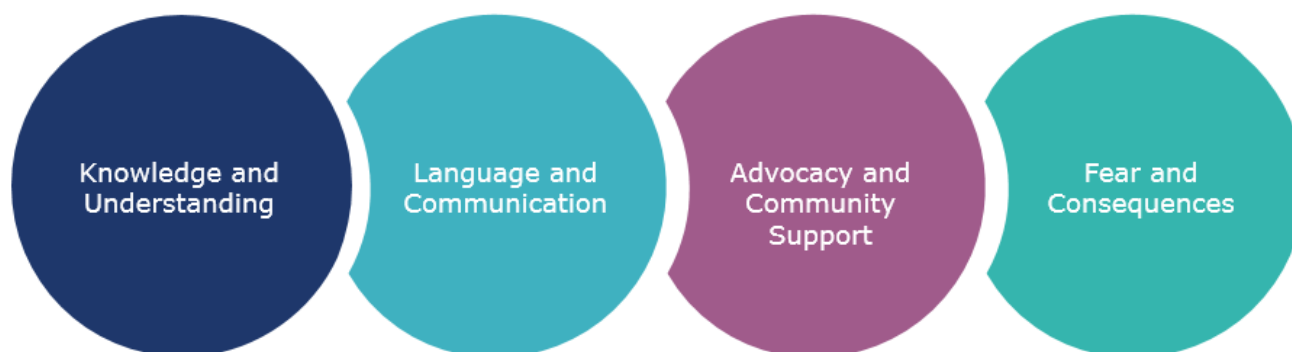
#### 4.0 Findings: Qualitative

Semi-structured interviews were held with six key informants from NI (N=3) and RoI (N=6). The experts were: (a) an independent school counselling service (NI), (b) BeSAD Charity Representative (NI), (c) a consultant childhood bereavement therapist (ROI), (d) BeSAD Charity Representative (RoI) and, (e) two academics responsible for teaching PSE (Personal and Social Education in NI) or SPHE (in RoI) material to pre-service teachers. Table 5 below provides an overview of the information relating to the qualitative aspect of the research.

**Table 5. Overview of Participants for Qualitative Research**

Location	Role	Length of Interview
Republic of Ireland	Bereavement Consultant	43.17 minutes
	ITE Lecturer	24.42 minutes
	BeSAD Charity Representative	32.03 minutes
Northern Ireland	Bereavement Consultant	38.08 minutes
	ITE Lecturer	38.04 minutes
	BeSAD Charity Representative	56.14 minutes

Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, with thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) conducted on final transcripts. Four superordinate themes were identified (see figure 3 on the next page). The following section explores the four themes in detail, providing direct quotations from the experts that support the issues raised in relation to BeSAD. The section concludes with suggestions and key recommendations for ITE providers and policymakers.



**Figure 3. Themes identified in qualitative research with experts (N=6)**

The following section explores the four themes in detail, providing direct quotations from the experts from both jurisdictions to support the points raised in relation to BeSAD. The section will end by looking at key recommendations for ITE and policymakers.

#### **4.1 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. 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:

*"Teachers need the knowledge to challenge their view and help them look and see what the child is experiencing at that point developmentally appropriate . . . It is interesting for us the number of inappropriate referrals which are made. This reflects teachers' lack of understanding of what is normal in the grieving process."* (participant 4, NI).

*"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, RoI).



It is clear that during ITE, pre-service teachers need to know what is appropriate for the age and stage of pupils that they are working with. It is important that they have a basic introduction to the effects of BeSAD and the potential impact it may have on learning (e.g. attentional difficulties, behavioural problems, social and emotional difficulties, academic difficulties). Thus, pre-service teachers need information to feel empowered to identify grief when it manifests in the classroom:

*". . . 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).

BeSAD issues can have a long-term impact and can be exacerbated at different stages (e.g. milestones such as birthdays, graduation, or on days such as Mother's Day and Father's Day). It is important that sensitive information is passed on appropriately to the next teacher so they can monitor the impact of grief, if any, at a later stage. Communication amongst teachers is essential for the empowerment of educators in tackling this sensitive area.

The experts discussed how schools should develop effective policies that facilitate support and communication. While schools may have a Critical Incident Policy (i.e. a policy that deals with traumatic grief, such as the death of a pupil or an incident involving a number of pupils in the school), the experts were referring to a normative bereavement policy:

*"Very few schools that I am aware of actually have policies that deal with these issues. I think it is important that they have these policies so teachers know what to do . . . It's important that information moves with the child, so with the policy in place it gives teachers somewhere to go for information. Policies need to be flexible in order to accommodate all children's needs."* (participant 5, NI).





## 4.2 Theme Two: Language and Communication

Another key issue identified was 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 take sides, but it's difficult if children don't have family members turning up for school concerts and they are hurt and upset about this . . . 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 for teachers."* (participant 3, RoI).

This leads to the final aspect of this theme, which is communication with parents. The experts discussed at length about the need for open and honest dialogue with parents around BeSAD issues. They discussed the role that policies play in helping facilitate this communication and the challenges of







working with acrimonious separations. 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 partnership with parents are vital from the outset and enables teachers to discuss issues with parents as they arise. It is essential that during ITE and throughout their CPD, teachers are supported and provided with information on how to work collaboratively with parents:

*". . . 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).

### **4.3 Theme Three: Advocacy and Community Support**

The theme of advocacy and community support incorporates not only knowledge of a range of voluntary and community support services, but also the specific role that teachers play, given their unique relationship with the pupils in their care. 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. An ITE lecturer mentioned that they themselves had identified a need for providing information to pre-service teachers in relation to BeSAD, but did not believe that pre-service teachers have recognised the need for this information yet:

*". . . we have identified a need ourselves. Knowing that these students are going into classrooms where children have experienced bereavement or loss of some form or other, so we have built it into our courses, but I can't honestly tell you that the students recognise [the need for BeSAD training]."* (participant 2, RoI).





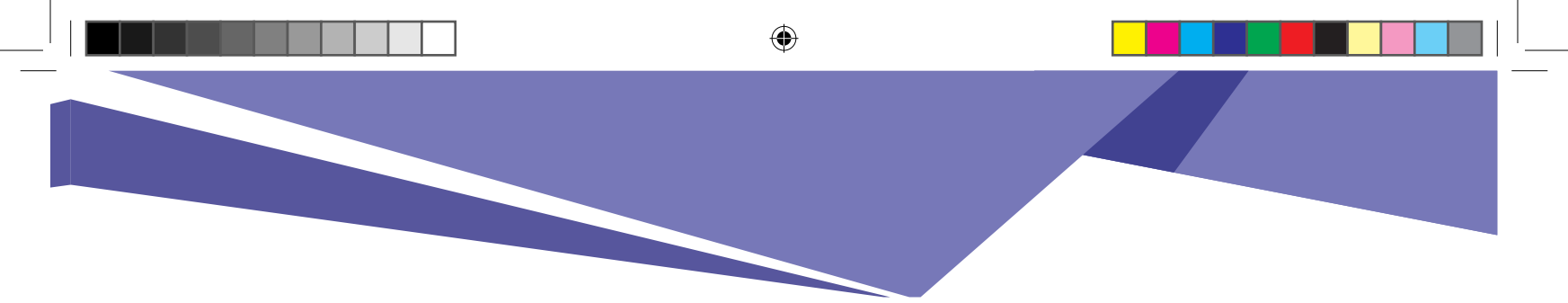
Pre-service teachers need to be empowered at ITE to understand that emotional well-being and academic learning should be equal in their priorities as this is an inevitable role they will have to play: *"You have to do it whether it is your role or not because it happens in your classroom. Whether you acknowledge it or not, if you ignore it, then you're not really fulfilling your academic responsibilities to that child"* (participant 4, NI). It can be debated as to whether these skills can be taught or whether it comes down to the recruitment and selection of pre-service teachers at ITE. The community also has a responsibility to support pupils who are experiencing BeSAD. This can be done by empowering pre-service teachers at ITE to recognise what the expected reaction to BeSAD should be and when to refer to an outside agency:

*"The role of the teacher is to advocate for the role of the child . . . Teachers need to know when to refer on to experts, but they need to appreciate that they are the expert for the child and in doing so are best placed often to support the child through the grieving process."*  
(participant 4, NI).

Within ITE, community support and toolkits can be introduced to pre-service teachers as well as directing pre-service teachers to resources so that they know where to turn to when they experience BeSAD issues in their own classroom. Support from the statutory and voluntary sectors can be important and this would be an area that schools could include in a BeSAD policy (i.e. community support available to children in their area). These resources and support services are often available at a community level and are available for children and families. Pre-service teachers need to be able to direct people to this support and instilling this "signposting" role early in their career will help to empower and support teachers:

*". . . we as a community have to get round those individuals who are in our midst and who are hurting. We need to sort out and accept whether we feel comfortable or not, but it is part of our role of teaching because*





*teaching is more holistic than just delivery of the curriculum" (participant 4, NI).*

*"I think the people recovering from bereavement is a community response and 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 services." (participant 4, NI).*

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 the 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).*

BeSAD policies (other than a Critical Incident Policy) are required to support teachers, and Departments of Education from both jurisdictions should consider the provision of policy templates, training and pastoral support for



schools to deal effectively with these issues. Other professionals who work in schools (e.g. psychologists) have a role to play, but the wider sector needs to value this as part of their professional role. Curriculum bodies have a role to ensure that PSE and SPHE are seen as valued subjects within the curriculum. An ITE lecturer stated that more support is needed regarding the SPHE curriculum in order for the subject to be seen as valuable:

*"What you need is, I think direction from a higher level than me, which says that 'this is important stuff' and I'm not clear that that's going to happen even in the latest iteration of the curriculum. But giving something that you consider very important half an hour a week is a nonsense . . . I would hazard a guess that even if you gave SPHE an hour a week, teachers might still leave out the more problematic part of the curriculum, like sexuality education, like loss and bereavement education." (participant 2, RoI).*

It is vital that difficult subjects such as BeSAD are addressed in order to develop coping skills: ". . . some SPHE work with them [pupils] where they would develop, they would realise they would have coping strategies. They would realise that this is . . . a normal part of being human" (participant 2, RoI). Reviews of curricula for ITE are required to ensure that pre-service teachers are given the opportunity - and empowered to develop confidence and competence - when supporting pupils who have experienced BeSAD:

*"What should be compulsory is some knowledge and understanding of children's social and emotional development and a range of adverse conditions that teachers will meet in the classroom. All teachers have a child who has experienced some form of loss whether it be through bereavement, separation or divorce. I would put it on a par with safeguarding training." (participant 6, NI).*



#### 4.4 Theme Four: Fear and Consequences

A prominent theme throughout the interviews was "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"* (participant 6, NI). This was especially prominent when discussing the challenges of separation and divorce the fear that it might make things difficult for the child. 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 that there is fear amongst parents to involve the school, particularly when it is a difficult or contested separation. However, all experts noted that enhancing communication with parents was essential, as what happens at home may have an impact on pupils' behaviour and academic performance at school. Effective communication between parents and teachers when BeSAD occurs needs to happen so that schools are informed of anything that may affect pupils' learning:

*"Look at something at home that the school doesn't know about; they don't need to know the detail of what's going on, but they just need an alert that something is going on for the child. It is so the social and emotional needs of the child can be met with understanding rather than [being misjudged] or ignored or in the worst case, making the situation worse for the child."* (participant 3, RoI).



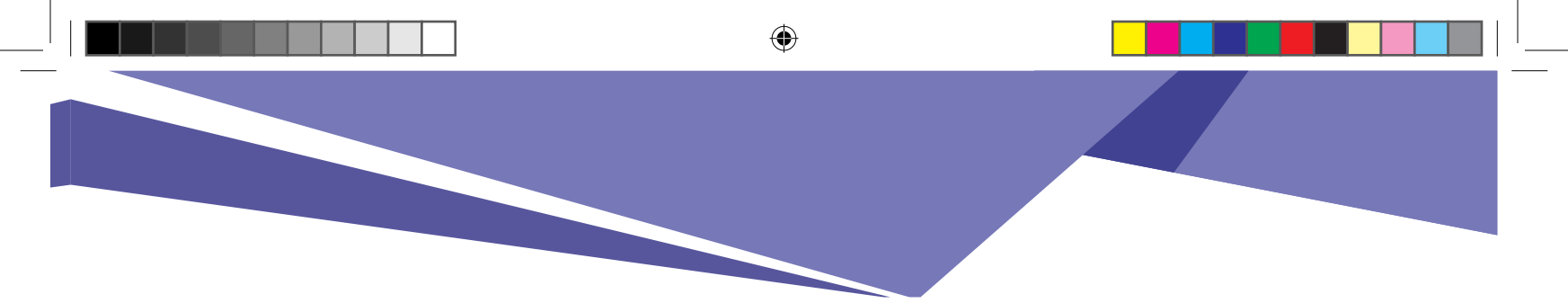
Also prominent across interviews was the fear among teachers of dealing with their own personal experiences of BeSAD. The professionals stated that they "fear" that if teachers have not dealt with their own personal experiences of grief, they are not in a place to support pupils in their care. The experts noted that many teachers fear they will become emotional in front of a pupil and that this may have a negative impact on the pupil: *"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, NI). Many of the experts acknowledged the importance of recognising the role of the teacher and having clear boundaries for teachers as to where their professional responsibility ends. They reported that there is a fear that without clear guidelines, some teachers may try to do too much (e.g. overstep their boundaries into a more therapeutic role) whereas others may avoid the topic for fear of making things worse:

*"I think teachers do shy away because they don't know what to say or do. Actually, a lot of teachers are afraid of making things worse. Some teachers think it is their role and responsibility, but at the end of the day, we need to empower teachers to not be afraid to say to the child...Are you okay, can I help in any way? The child needs to recognise that there is somebody here for them in school."* (participant 4, NI).

*"Teachers need to be made aware of the boundaries around their role; they are teachers, that's their primary function and of course their understanding and reaching out to children is vital, but they are not therapists and they don't need to be totally concerned with doing things for children. They need to understand how to react and respond to a child and to appreciate the impact of grief on the children in their classroom."* (participant 1, RoI).

One particular group who are vulnerable are pupils with special educational needs and / or disabilities who may experience a variety of losses. Teachers





working in this sector are exposed to pupils experiencing traumatic life experiences more often. This can lead to vicarious trauma and teachers may worry about how to respond appropriately to such pupils. Therefore, specific groups of teachers may require more knowledge, understanding and support:

*"There is a lot of vicarious trauma in teachers because, over a career, you might cope with multiple bereavements, particularly in special needs schools. Teachers who are working with this sector require additional training and lots more pastoral support in schools."* (participant 4, NI).

#### **4.5 Summary of Qualitative Interviews**

In summary, the qualitative interviews carried out with the experts identified a range of roles and responsibilities for 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 families who have experienced bereavement, separation and divorce. They identified key challenges within the current system and drew attention to core training required during ITE.

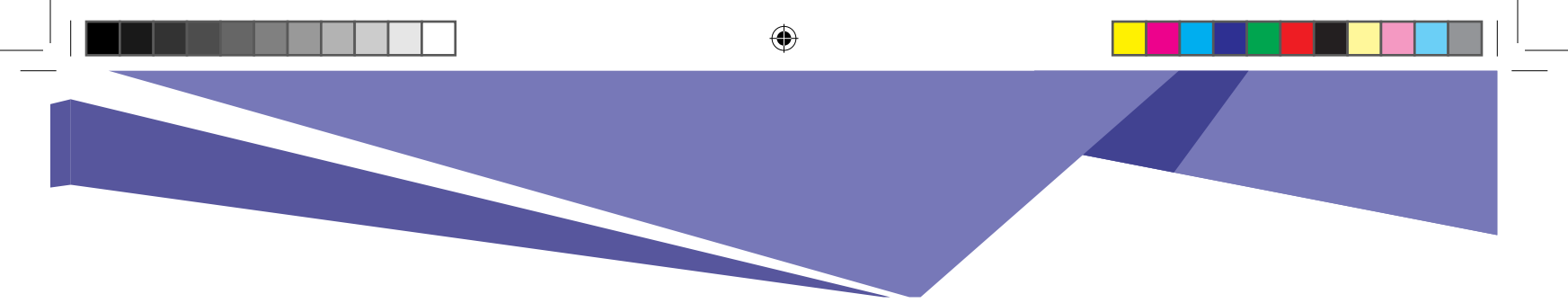


## 5.0 Discussion

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, Winokuer & Thornton, 2011). This is the case for NI and the RoI but also internationally. While the family is seen as the primary care provider, school staff and peers also become important sources of support (Rowling & Holland, 2000). Both the experts and the pre-service teachers believed that they had a role to play in the support of pupils experiencing BeSAD, whatever that role may be. This coincides with research by McGovern and Tracey (2010) in which the schools sampled regarded the issue of grief as a high priority (McGovern & Tracey, 2010). Communication has been noted by the experts in the qualitative research as one of the most helpful ways to support young people through BeSAD. Relationships between a pre-service and qualified teacher and their pupil are different from their relationships with family and friends. Thus, teachers are in a unique position to help pupils understand more about death and have the potential to play an essential role in supporting pupils who are experiencing a loss. 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 and Taylor, 1999; Atkins, Frazier, Adil & Talbott, 2003; Waxman et al., 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 et al., 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.

First and foremost, 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. 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. While the ITE expert in the RoI stated that, in her college, BeSAD issues are covered by some pre-service teachers in an elective module, perhaps it is timely for all ITEs to examine the approach taken to issues of BeSAD. 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, 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 coincides with what the experts mentioned in relation to how teachers process their own experiences of loss. 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).

The bio-ecological perspective of Bronfenbrenner (1979) offers a theoretical lens for the current research in the holistic approach for exploring the needs of the pupil in school as a result of what is happening in the home environment. The experts in the qualitative data indicated that a strong community approach (exosystem) is required to empower teachers to make appropriate referrals for pupils who may be struggling following BeSAD. However, in line with research by Harrington and Harrison (1999), we must continue to question how much evidence exists to support the assumption that BeSAD always has a negative impact on pupils as it is important that we do not pathologise grief, and instead view it as a "normal" response to loss.



## 6.0 Conclusion

"I am only one, but I am one. I cannot do everything, but I can do something. I must not fail to do the something that I can do" (Everett Hale, 1902, p.172). This quote encapsulates the underpinning rationale behind the current research. Schools are known to have a significant influence on the behaviour and development of children (Rutter, Maughan & Mortimore, 1979; Wolff, 1993). Therefore, educators have an unequalled privilege to play a critical role in the lives of their pupils. Thus, it is not surprising that both parents and pupils look to their teachers as trusted authorities and caring professionals who can provide support and guidance. The current research set out to explore three central research questions and Table 6 below provides an overview of the key areas that were explored:

**Table 6. Overview of Research Outcomes**

Research Questions	Outcomes
Is grief as a result of BeSAD an issue that pre-service teachers encounter during placement?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Approximately half of pre-service teachers sampled had encountered issues relating to bereavement (51%) and separation and divorce (41%) while on placement.</li></ul>
How confident and competent do pre-service teachers feel about effective supporting pupils who experience BeSAD across NI and the RoI?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 48% (NI = 40; RoI = 130) of pre-service teachers stated that they did not feel confident or were unsure of how they felt in relation to supporting pupils who were bereaved.</li><li>• 21% (NI = 17; RoI = 58) of pre-service teachers stated that they were confident in supporting a pupil who had experienced separation or divorce.</li><li>• 46% (NI = 51; RoI = 110) stated that they would feel more confident speaking with children about BeSAD.</li><li>• Personal intuition was the main way in which pre-service teachers support pupils experiencing bereavement and this was closely linked to the pre-service teachers' own personal experience of death.</li></ul>
Do pre-service teachers feel that they have received adequate training in supporting pupils who have experienced BeSAD?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 81% (NI = 47; RoI = 230) of pre-service teachers stated 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.</li></ul>



- 84% (NI = 55; RoI = 241) of pre-service teachers stated 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 training.
- ITE lecturers mentioned that BeSAD support is generally part of an elective module and not all pre-service teachers would receive training on these specific areas.
- Pre-service teachers stated that training relating to BeSAD had either not been covered, or if it had, it was "briefly".

This report has highlighted the need to eradicate the fear around the topic of BeSAD for pre-service teachers. It makes a number of recommendations in relation to the development and dissemination of training and resources for ITE institutions in both jurisdictions but concludes with an urgent call on government to provide the guidelines and policy framework that will guide school leaders, teachers and staff in relation to the boundaries of their role and toward effective responses to BeSAD in schools throughout NI and the RoI. The following sections present recommendations for both ITE and policymakers in both jurisdictions.

## 6.1 Recommendations for ITE

- Knowledge:** Appropriate and consistent instruction at ITE is needed to ensure all teachers have evidence-informed knowledge about the impact of BeSAD. ITE providers could analyse their programmes and content in order to explore how to develop their support of pre-service teachers in coping with issues of BeSAD while on placement, and in their careers. Experts interviewed for this report highlighted the fact that inappropriate referrals were often made by schools. It is important to further develop and empower pre-service teachers' advocacy role for children in order to enable them to make appropriate referrals, when necessary. This requires the need to understand the "normal" responses to BeSAD. Knowledge of grief theory, developmental response to loss, and the boundary of their role is required

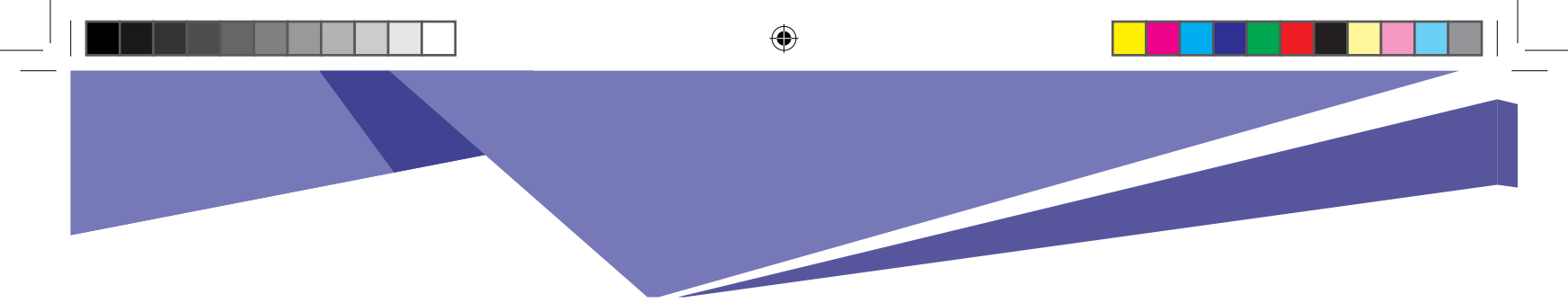


in order for appropriate support to be provided to avoid students relying on "personal intuition".

- b. **Self-Care:** ITE providers should continue to facilitate the growth of teachers as individuals and professionals which reflects the holistic role of the teacher, alongside academic instruction and mastery. Allowing pre-service teachers to recognise their own personal experience of grief and how this impacts on them and the support they provide to pupils is important in eradicating over-reliance on personal intuition. Furthermore, it is important to emphasise and promote self-care amongst pre-service teachers who are often faced with challenging situations whilst on placement
- c. **Signposting:** ITE's could identify policy and the available resources to pre-service teachers in order to raise awareness of community support. In NI, Cruse offer community bereavement support services and in RoI the Irish Childhood Bereavement Network (ICBN) continue to be active in increasing the discourse and developing resources for educators in this area. Further development of guidance regarding the legal and emotional aspects of separation and divorce is required to enhance knowledge and understanding for schools.

## 6.2 Key Recommendations for Policymakers

- a. **Whole-school Approach and Policy:** A whole school approach to BeSAD issues are required in schools. The guidelines for well-being in RoI identify that all members of the school community have a role to play in supporting pupil well-being. Specific, evidence-informed direction from Departments of Education as to the correct approach to BeSAD issues would aid members of the school community in their role. Some form of guidance or template regarding the development of a school policy to support pupils experiencing BeSAD issues would be helpful.
- b. **Review of Curricula:** The subjects of PSE, SPHE, and Well-being at Junior Cycle (in RoI) are areas that naturally align themselves to BeSAD. Any



review of curricula within both jurisdictions may wish to consider approaching experts in these areas to understand how BeSAD affects the learning capacity of pupils in the classroom. In addition, it would be useful if evidence-informed approaches to support the development of coping skills and empathy were used to inform lesson plan development and resources.

- c. **Review of ITE and CPD Training:** A formal review of ITE and CPD training is required in order to assess the needs of pre-service teachers and qualified teachers. Consistency is needed in terms of support that all teachers receive with regard to BeSAD support at school level.

The Teaching Councils' in their role as professional regulator should continue to reflect and highlight the issues of modernity and holistic development of pupils through development of the citizens of the future. It is important that teachers do not feel that what is being recommended here is yet another burden when their natural inclination as a professional is to provide as much pastoral support as is needed to the pupils in their care. Support services within schools including independent school counselling services (e.g., art therapy, play therapy) and other voluntary and community support (e.g., Cruse, ICBN) play a vital role for children and families. Community support needs adequate funding to take up the challenge of training for pre-service and CPD of teachers.

Teachers are professionals who seek to encourage and facilitate learning and personal development. BeSAD can be a very common experience for children and whilst some educational issues can be provided for in discrete curricular areas, the essence of human experience cannot always be seen in this structure. Whilst we encourage teachers to be creative and imaginative with the curriculum, unfortunately, some issues need more definitive input (e.g. BeSAD). If we wish for teachers to be mentally and emotionally available in a classroom to impart knowledge to pupils, we must ensure that these professionals have the supports necessary to deal with these extra issues – either in school from professional colleagues, the family, or community.



If not, we may see the care burden on teachers continually increased with no real attention to the need for self-care for these front-line professionals. We need to continue to enhance the development of self-care practice amongst our teachers to ensure that they are being supported and empowered in their caring role. Future research should identify the best way in which support can be provided to pupils in Ireland and explore a range of reactive, proactive and curriculum-based models that are most effective for coping with BeSAD in the classroom. This would then inform the type of training received by pre-service teachers at ITE and qualified teachers for CPD.

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. One respondent in this report stated that while on placement, the parent of a pupil in her class was diagnosed with a terminal illness: “I have had the experience of a child's parent being diagnosed with a serious illness and was not sure how to deal with this exactly” (respondent 247, RoI). 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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## Appendix 1: Online Survey with Pre-Service Teachers

### 1. What jurisdiction are you receiving your training in?

- a) Northern Ireland
- b) Republic of Ireland
- c) Other [please specify]

### 2. What type of training are you undertaking?

- a) Professional Master of Education in Primary Education
- b) Professional Master of Education in Post-Primary Education
- c) BEd in Primary Education
- d) BA in Early Childhood Studies
- e) PGCE
- f) Other [please specify]

### 3. How many weeks' experience have you had in a school setting (approximately)?

- a) 3 weeks
- b) 6 weeks
- c) 14 weeks
- d) More than 24 weeks
- e) Other [please specify]

### 4. During any of your placement(s) (e.g. in a school), have you encountered a child(s) who experienced the bereavement of a significant person?

- a) Yes
- b) No
- c) Not sure
- d) Other [please specify]

### 5. If yes, how did the experience of bereavement impact on the child?

- a) Ability to concentrate
- b) Socialising with peers
- c) Academic achievement
- d) Emotional issues
- e) Behavioural issues
- f) Physical issues
- g) No reaction
- h) other [please specify]

### 6. During any of your placement(s) (e.g. in a school), have you encountered a child(s) who experienced the separation or divorce of their parents while in your care?

- a) Yes
- b) No
- c) Not sure
- d) Other [please specify]

### 7. If yes, how did the experience of separation or divorce impact on the child?

- a) Ability to concentrate
- b) Socialising with peers
- c) Academic achievement



- d) Emotional issues
- e) Behavioural issues
- f) Physical issues
- g) No reaction
- h) Other [please specify]

**8. On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is 'Not at all important' and 5 is 'Very important', how do you rate the area of bereavement in terms of priorities of importance for your practice?**

- 1 - Not at all important
- 2 - Somewhat important
- 3 - Fairly important
- 4 - Quite important
- 5 - Extremely important

**9. On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is 'Not at all important' and 5 is 'Very important', how do you rate the area of separation and divorce in terms of priorities of importance for your practice?**

- 1 - Not at all important
- 2 - Somewhat important
- 3 - Fairly important
- 4 - Quite important
- 5 - Extremely important

**10. To date, has the issue of child well-being with regard to bereavement been addressed in your training?**

- a) Yes
- b) No
- c) Not sure
- d) Other

**11. If yes, in what subject area? \_\_\_\_\_**

**12. To date, has the issue of child well-being with regard to separation and divorce been addressed in your training?**

- a) Yes
- b) No
- c) Not sure
- d) Other [please specify]

**13. If yes, in what subject area? \_\_\_\_\_**

**14. Do you feel confident in supporting a child who has experienced bereavement?**

- a) Yes
- b) No
- c) Not sure
- d) Other [please specify]

**15. Do you feel confident in supporting a child who has experienced separation and divorce?**

- a) Yes
- b) No



- c) Not sure
- d) Other [please specify]

**16. What best describes your approach to the support of a child experiencing bereavement or separation and divorce?**

- a) Personal intuition
- b) Ask a peer for help
- c) Ask a staff member in the school for help
- d) Search the Internet for guidance
- e) Other [please specify]

**17. If you have experience of providing some form of support to a child who has experienced bereavement, separation or divorce, can you briefly outline the support that you offered? \_\_\_\_\_**

**18. Do you know of any policy documents or directives from the Department of Education that provide support for bereavement, separation and divorce?**

- a) Yes
- b) No
- c) Not sure
- d) Other [please specify]

**19. Do you feel that you need further training in order to support children who may be experiencing bereavement, separation or divorce?**

- a) Yes
- b) No
- c) Not sure
- d) Other [please specify]

**20. Do you feel that bereavement is an 'at home' issue that should be dealt with by the family (not the school)?**

- a) Yes
- b) No
- c) Not sure
- d) Other [please specify]

**21. Have you ever experienced the bereavement of a significant person?**

- a) Yes
- b) No
- c) Not sure
- d) Other [please specify]

**22. If yes, do you believe that your experience would influence the way you engage with a child, in a positive way?**

- a) Yes, I believe that I would be able to engage with a child in a positive way.
- b) No, I believe I would not be able to engage with a child in a positive way.
- c) Not sure
- d) Other [please specify]

**23. Would you feel more competent speaking to parents or children about issues relating to bereavement, separation or divorce? Please tick one box.**





- a) More competent speaking to parents
- b) More competent speaking to children
- c) Not competent speaking to either parents or children
- d) Other [please specify]

**24. Would the religious ethos of the setting (e.g. school) that you are in play a part in the type of support that you would provide to a child?**

- a) Yes
- b) No
- c) Not sure
- d) Other [please specify]

**25. Were there any questions that we did not ask, or experiences that you had, that you would like to tell us about?** \_\_\_\_\_







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