

## **Manuscript Preparation – Draft 2**

### **Title: An insight into bereavement support provision: An exploratory study**

#### **Abstract**

In the UK, approximately 1 in 29 children have experienced the death of a parent or sibling and over 100 children are bereaved of a parent each day (Winston's Wish, 2019). There is a considerable gap in research exploring Bereavement Support Provision (BSP) in primary schools, yet many authors argue that schools are suitably positioned to provide support to bereaved children. This paper presents the qualitative phase of a mixed-methods study aimed to gain insight into BSP in primary schools across one London Local Authority. After completing an online questionnaire, 16 participants took part in semi-structured interviews. The findings of this study highlighted that BSP is characterised by social and emotional support and other indirect responses (e.g. a referral). Providing support to a bereaved child had a negative impact on the emotional well-being of staff and additional training and consultation support for staff is needed. This study explores how Educational Psychologists are well placed to provide whole school and targeted bereavement support to schools and school staff.

**Keywords:** child bereavement, grief, loss, primary school, mental health.

#### **Introduction**

The term bereavement refers to the state of having lost something or someone, whereas grief refers to the internalized reaction to a loss (Corr, Nabe, & Corr, 2006; Goldman, 2014). A critical incident is a "sudden and unexpected incident or sequence of events which causes trauma within a school community and which overwhelms the normal coping mechanism of that school" (DfE, 2018, para. 3.). A routine, or non-critical, bereavement is a loss that may not affect the school community, but is likely to have an impact on a child's emotional well-being, such as the loss of a close family member or friend. Bereavement Support Provision (BSP; James, 2015) in schools is an aspect of pastoral care provided to children who have been bereaved that is specifically related to their loss.

Child bereavement is associated with a range of negative psychological, academic and long-term outcomes (Parsons, 2011). The presence of a supportive environment, such as staff awareness of the loss and the presence of a bereavement policy, has been found to be a significant predictor contributing to positive coping skills following a bereavement (Wolchik, Cox, Tein, Sandler, & Ayers, 2009). Many researchers argue for the role of schools in

supporting children who have been bereaved (Adams, 2014; McGovern & Tracey, 2010), which is in line with the Government development of mental health provision in schools (DoH/DfE, 2017). Unfortunately, there is a remarkable lack of research on child bereavement in schools. Consequently, the provision of support for bereaved children in this context remains unclear. Some endeavours have been undertaken to address the significant gaps in the literature, but it is evident that this field of research remains very limited and further research is required.

### **Aims of the study**

This paper reports on qualitative phase of a mixed-methods study aimed to gain insight into BSP in primary schools across one London Local Authority. Using two theories derived from developmental and psychodynamic psychology, namely Bronfenbrenner's Bio-Ecological Theory of Human Development (BTHD; Bronfenbrenner, 2005) and Bion's (1985) container/contained theory, this paper serves to explore BSP in schools from the perspective of school staff. This exploration will provide insight into how Educational Psychologists (EPs) can support and empower schools in carrying out BSP for routinely bereaved children in their care.

### **Theoretical framework**

The BTHD positions the school as potentially significant in supporting pupils who have been bereaved due to its centrality in relation to the child's immediate environment and the reciprocal interactions that take place over time. It has been used in two previous studies exploring school responses to bereaved children in the UK (e.g. Holland & McLennan, 2015; Holland & Wilkinson, 2015). The BTHD suggests that a child's development is affected by both the interplay between a child and their environment and the active role a child plays in their own development (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Bronfenbrenner (2005) categorizes the child's wider environment into levels of external influence, which are labelled as the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem. Bronfenbrenner's (2005) theory gives prominence to person characteristics and proximal processes, which are interactions that occur regularly within the mesosystem. For example, bi-directional interactions between a child and their teacher.

Bion's (1985) container/contained theory provides an interesting, additional perspective in which to view the proximal processes within the BTHD, despite the different origins of the two theories. Bion's (1985) theory describes an active experience of emotional connection, where the mother holds and processes the child's emotional anxiety and distress and conveys these feelings back to the child in a more understandable form. In relation to the current study, the

'containing' function of school staff involves a level of emotional attentiveness that involves holding and reflecting on a child's projections, providing a modified response that supports the child to self-regulate (Kalu, 2002). However, containing the feelings and anxieties of both the child and oneself can result in compassion fatigue, whereby close interpersonal contact with a suffering person results in stress and emotional exhaustion (Showalter, 2010). The national drive for academic attainment, alongside the lack of provision of emotional support for school staff, has highlighted the need to establish emotional containment at a systemic level in schools (Jackson, 2002; Reid, 2002; Weare, 2015).

Joe's comment: I would spend more time explaining Bion which they are likely less familiar and set up what you think connecting Bion to BB adds to the field – ie expand the well written para below a bit along these lines – connection to BB and addition to the field

You could refer to my 2014 book re this if it might be helpful. I think I will need some further guidance on this, Joe. Let's prioritise as a point for discussion.

## **Literature review**

### ***Children and Grief***

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

### ***School Support***

As aforementioned, the presence of a supportive environment has been found to be a considerable protective factor for bereaved children (Akerman & Statham, 2014; Wolchik et al., 2009). Many authors have noted that while parents are grieving the loss of a child or spouse, they can experience a range of grief reactions that hinder their ability to provide

support to a bereaved child at home (Dopp & Cain, 2012; Saldinger, Porterfield & Cain, 2004). Preliminary qualitative studies with bereaved children have found a significant gap between the expressed need for support and the support provided by schools within the mesosystem (Cranwell, 2007; Dyregrov, 2009; Forward & Garlie, 2003). Some studies have considered the approaches adopted by different schools. For example, Holland (2008; 2016) categorized school responses to bereaved children into two key approaches: proactive and reactive. Proactive approaches involve upskilling staff with bereavement training and are informed by bereavement policies with carefully considered procedures for school staff to follow. In contrast, reactive approaches describe support that responds after the bereavement has occurred and is often characterised by the referral of a child to external agencies and indicate a lack of staff training in this area (Holland, 2016; James, 2015). However, Holland and Wilkinson (2015) compared BSP in primary, secondary and special schools in North Suffolk and Hull and found that schools in these regions tend to adopt reactive rather than proactive approaches. In fact, Holland (2016) reported that there is a significant training gap in bereavement and loss in schools.

A small number of studies have explored practices in schools for supporting bereaved children. Research in this area has tended to focus on attitudes to grief and bereavement (e.g. Potts, 2013; Reid & Dixon, 1999) or whole school responses to bereavement, such as the presence of policies or training (e.g. Holland & McLennan, 2015; Holland & Wilkinson, 2015). To date, only two studies have explored the response of teachers to grieving children in the UK. Lowton and Higginson (2003) aimed to address this gap in the research by carrying out 13 interviews with primary and secondary school teachers in London. They found a variety of societal influences impacted on teachers' management of bereaved children and that time and curriculum pressures were considerable obstacles to dealing with grief in the classroom. However, participants in this small scale study supported bereaved children that ranged from 3 to 19 years old, with very little reference made to the differing responses of teachers depending on the age of the child, the type of bereavement and the context of the primary and secondary settings. A more recent study by Lane, Rowland and Beinart (2014) built on this research by focusing on one developmental age range. Using a grounded theory design, the authors interviewed 12 secondary school teachers who had supported a parentally bereaved adolescent. Six central processes were identified, including flexibility, openness, support, emotionality, sharing and communication. Participants in this study identified the emotional stress of dealing with grief in the classroom. Participants felt 'an obligation to stay strong, address the bereavement, and provide support even if distressed themselves' (Lane et al., 2014, p.7).

## Method

### *Research Design*

This study employed a mixed methods design. Phase 1 consisted of 260 participants across 14 primary schools in one Local Authority (LA) who completed an online questionnaire. Phase 2 consisted of 16 participants across 10 primary schools who participated in semi-structured interviews. As mentioned previously, this paper will focus on the qualitative data that arose from Phase 2.

### *Participants (Phase 2)*

All participants in Phase 2 had experience of supporting a child bereaved of a parent, sibling or peer in the past five years. Participants included eight teachers, three Emotional Literacy Support Assistants (ELSAs), two Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators (SENCOs), two Assistant Headteachers and a Pastoral Lead (see Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Summary of participants in Phase 2*

Role	Participant ID	School ID
Teacher ( <i>n</i> = 8, 50%)	Teacher-A	School 1
	Teacher-B	School 3
	Teacher-C	School 4
	Teacher-D	School 4
	Teacher-E	School 5
	Teacher-F	School 6
	Teacher-G	School 7
	Teacher-H	School 8
Emotional Literacy Support Assistant ( <i>n</i> = 3, 18.8%)	ELSA-A	School 2
	ELSA-B	School 4
	ELSA-C	School 6
Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator ( <i>n</i> = 2, 12.5%)	SENCO-A	School 3
	SENCO-B	School 9
Pastoral Lead ( <i>n</i> = 1, 6.25%)	Pastoral-A	School 10
Assistant Headteacher ( <i>n</i> = 2, 12.5%)	AssistantHead-A	School 2
	AssistantHead-B	School 4

Frances comment: It would be helpful to get Joe's view on this as we are only focussing on the qualitative aspect or could we summarise briefly the quantitative strand but focus and highlight on the qualitative strand? Point for discussion.

### ***Procedure***

The researcher contacted the Headteachers of all 44 primary schools within the LA to outline the purpose of the research and invite their school to participate. 260 participants across 14 primary schools took part in the online questionnaire in Phase 1 of this research and those with experience of supporting a bereaved child in the past five years were provided with an opportunity to express interest in participating in Phase 2. 38 participants expressed interest and 16 participants took part in the interview. Interviews were conducted at a time and place that were convenient for the participant. Participants were provided with an information sheet and signed a consent form. Participants were debriefed at the end of the interview, which included appropriate signposts given the nature of the topic. The interviews lasted between 38 and 64 minutes, with an average length of 49 minutes. A digital recorder was used to record the discussions that took place during the interviews. The audio files were transferred to an encrypted folder on a computer. All recorded data were transcribed verbatim. The current study was carried out in line with the ethical considerations outlined by the British Psychological Society Code of Human Research Ethics and the British Psychological Society Code of Ethics and Conduct.

### ***Data analysis***

An inductive and iterative thematic analysis was conducted on the qualitative data. The thematic analysis followed the six stages outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). One of the criticisms of Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to thematic analysis is that it can lead to a descriptive analysis rather than a reflexive analysis that transparently draws out intentions, interactions and psychological theory. That is, the researcher systematically attended to the effect of the researcher on knowledge construction at each step of the research process. This was achieved through the use of memos and a reflective journal to explore personal bias and the deductive elements of the analysis, such as the psychological theory within the literature review, research questions and theoretical framework. For example, after successive waves of iterative coding, the researcher mapped the superior codes on to the BTHD during stage three of the analysis, searching for themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A number of additional steps were taken to ensure the integrity and rigour of the analysis, including a pilot study, iterative coding, participant checking and intra and inter coding checking. For example, 5% of

the interview transcripts were peer checked, which resulted in a high level of consistency (approximately 85%).

### **Findings**

331 codes emerged through the thematic analysis, which grouped into 56 superior codes. These codes formed 11 subthemes and four themes. These themes were named: Understanding Children's Grief, Bereavement Support Provision, Factors Influencing Proximal Processes in BSP and Emotional Impact of BSP on School Staff. Table 1 provides a summary of the themes, subthemes and frequency analysis across the data set. Following this, the findings will be presented under each of the four themes.

**Table 1**

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

Theme	Subtheme	Number of participants and codes*	Summary of subtheme
<b>1. Understanding children's grief</b>	<i>Children's expression of grief</i>	16 (191)	This subtheme relates to participant perceptions of how children express their grief, such as grief being viewed as a unique process expressed through external, internal and intermittent behaviours.
	<i>Systemic influences on children's grief</i>	16 (108)	This subtheme relates to mesosystemic, exosystemic and macrosystemic influences on children's grief, such as poor parental mental health, being excluded and death as a 'taboo' subject.
<b>2) Bereavement Support Provision (BSP)</b>	<i>Perspectives on role of school in BSP</i>	14 (83)	This subtheme relates to participants' beliefs that schools have a role in supporting bereaved children and that maintaining normality for the bereaved child is a key aspect of that role.
	<i>Identifying bereaved children</i>	16 (152)	This subtheme relates to how bereaved children are identified in primary schools. Bereaved children were identified in a variety of ways, through relatives, staff, the media or the child.
	<i>BSP in practice</i>	16 (233)	This subtheme relates to the support provided to bereaved children, explained in terms of direct (e.g. reassurance and nurture) and indirect support (e.g. making a referral).
<b>3. Factors influencing proximal processes in BSP</b>	<i>Child's developmental needs</i>	16 (186)	This subtheme relates to the influence of the child's developmental needs, such as age or specific circumstance, on the proximal processes in BSP.
	<i>Attuned relationships</i>	16 (126)	This subtheme relates to the positive influence of attuned relationships on proximal processes in BSP. Several life experiences (e.g. being a parent or being bereaved) and person characteristics (e.g. communication) were believed to contribute to attuned relationships.
	<i>Cultural and systemic factors</i>	16 (115)	This subtheme relates to the cultural and systemic factors that have an impact on the proximal processes that occur in the mesosystem when supporting bereaved children, such as communication within and external to the school and support from external agencies.
	<i>Containing and compassion fatigue</i>	15 (138)	This subtheme relates to the stress and emotional exhaustion felt by participants when containing a child's grief in the school context. Aspects of BSP were perceived



<b>4. Emotional impact of BSP on school staff</b>			as especially difficult, including the child's grief acting as a trigger for the participants' feelings to grief related to a previous loss.
	<i>Lack of containment for staff</i>	16 (114)	This subtheme relates to feeling unsupported when carrying out BSP. A small number of participants felt supported due to factors like access to external agencies.
	<i>Staff support and training</i>	16 (149)	This subtheme relates to the support and training required for school staff to support bereaved children, such as training and support from senior management.

\*Note: a(b); a = number of participants, b = frequency of codes

Joe's comment: I think this works quite well but don't we also need a table setting out the participants? Joe, do you mean the table that I have included in the methods section or are you referring to something different?

## **1. Understanding Children's Grief**

This theme captures how children's grief is understood by participants. Participants understood children's grief to be a unique process, characterised by external, internal and intermittent behaviours. Pastoral-A discusses this:

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

Participants discussed environmental triggers and developmental triggers for grief, including the difficulties in linking behaviour to grief when it resurfaces over time (e.g. during life transitions). Participants also discussed negative influences on children's grief within the interrelated systems of the BTHD, such as financial difficulties and relocation following a loss and death being a 'taboo' subject in society.

## **2. Bereavement Support Provision (BSP)**

This theme captures how bereaved children are identified and supported in primary schools. Participants believed that schools play a significant role in supporting children's grief, viewing direct and indirect support to bereaved children as an aspect of pastoral care. The provision of social and emotional support was a key direct response. This could be considered as an example of proximal processes that were adapted to ensure an empathetic response to the bereaved child, such as *"taking the time to listen, to talk to children, to reassure them"* (Teacher-E), *"a lot of nurture and extra cuddles"* (SENCO-B) and *"we planted some seeds and wrote her notes together"* (Teacher-C). Participants who had additional training in social and emotional support (e.g. ELSA, Pastoral Lead) discussed the types of approaches they used, such as play-based and art-based approaches, talking therapy, therapeutic stories and psycho-education. Indirect support included researching child bereavement, making a referral and making other staff members aware of the child's loss. Bereaved children were identified in a variety of ways; through relatives, staff, the media or the child. The negative consequences for unidentified bereavements were acknowledged. For example, ELSA-A explains the difficulties that adults may have in understanding the function of a behaviour:

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

## **3. Factors Influencing Proximal Processes in BSP**

**Joe's comment:** I think it would be good to set out in a section clearly what you think P P are and what are examples of them eg you could have a table, drawing instances from the data and categorise them in to different types of P-P. When you say different types of proximal processes, I am not entirely sure what you mean. My understanding is that they are interactions... so do you mean make a table of examples of interactions between the child and a teacher or the child and other children, or...?

As aforementioned, proximal processes are interactions that occur regularly in the system. An example of this within the data is both verbal and non-verbal indications of support from the teacher to the bereaved child and the child's response to these. Theme Four captures the perceived factors that influence the proximal processes within the school system. These factors include the child's developmental needs, attuned relationships and cultural and systemic factors. Support was based on the child's preferences and the needs that they presented with. ELSA-C illuminates this in her advice to other staff supporting bereaved children:

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

An attuned, trusting relationship was viewed as highly influential to interacting with and supporting a bereaved child. Participants discussed aspects of themselves that contributed to attuned relationships, such as prior experience of supporting a bereaved child, being a parent or personal experience of loss.

The culture and ethos of the school regarding communication, both internally and externally, was considered to be influential on proximal processes. The Senior Management Team were viewed as influential in ensuring positive proximal processes through guidance and regular contact with staff and parents. Some participants valued and appreciated external agency support (e.g. bereavement charities, EPs), whereas other participants felt that external agency support was limited.

#### **4. Emotional Impact of BSP on School Staff**

This theme captures the emotional impact of BSP and the support that is needed for staff members. Stress and emotional exhaustion was felt by participants when containing a child's grief (e.g. *It was an incredibly stressful time, both emotionally and mentally - Teacher E*). To

be an effective container for the child, participants felt that they needed to stay strong, as illustrated in the following examples:

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

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

Participants described a range of emotional reactions when supporting the bereaved child, such as guilt, worry and sadness. Participants discussed finding it difficult to support bereaved child due to the emotional impact it had on them personally.

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

Participants related the children's losses to their own, which heightened the emotional difficulties that the participants experienced supporting bereaved children. Many participants discussed feeling unsupported, which led to worry and uncertainty about doing the wrong thing when supporting a bereaved child.

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

Feelings of worry and uncertainty were most evident when participants were supporting a child following a violent or traumatic loss. Feelings of support and ease were most evident in a small number of participants who had direct involvement from the SMT, experienced staff members or external agencies, such as EPs. Unsurprisingly, these factors also emerged as perceived supports that are needed for school staff. The need for training was common across the data set, which was viewed as a proactive response to supporting bereaved children in schools.

Leaving this in for now as unsure about including the quantitative data also?

## Discussion

This study aimed to explore BSP in primary schools and how children's grief is understood in this context. The findings highlighted that participants had a well-informed understanding of children's grief. Bereaved children were identified in a variety of ways in the school context and emotional support was provided to these children. A variety of factors had an impact on the support provided, including the child's developmental needs, attuned relationships and cultural and systemic factors. Providing support to a bereaved child had a considerable impact on the emotional well-being of school staff and support.

The finding that most school staff provide social and emotional support to bereaved children within this Local Authority differs from previous studies that suggest there is a significant absence of support for bereaved children in schools (e.g. Cranwell, 2007; Dyregrov, 2009). However, in contrast to this study, it is of note that these studies elicited the perspectives of bereaved children. Therefore, there may be a discrepancy between the type of social and emotional support that is provided to bereaved children and how this is perceived by the children themselves. That being said, the context of social, emotional mental health provision in schools has shifted markedly since these studies took place. In line with the government's agenda of transforming children and young people's mental health provision (DFE, 2017), it may be that school staff have adapted and expanded their role to provide emotional support to bereaved children. In fact, a more recent study exploring BSP in secondary schools found that teachers engaged with bereaved students with a level of openness and support (Lane et al., 2014). Alternatively, it may be that the approaches used to support bereaved children are not *perceived to be effective by the children and young people*. Whilst the data is limited in the current study in relation to assessing the effectiveness of the approaches used, some of the support described by the participants in this study have been found to be effective in promoting social and emotional well-being in schools. For example, Weare's (2015) framework of effective approaches to mental health suggests using specialist staff for therapeutic work, providing clear referral pathways, ensuring structure and routine, and developing supporting classroom environments that build an acceptance of emotion and relationships. As such, this study highlighted that a considerable amount of school staff provided social and emotional support to bereaved children, but it also raises questions around how these proximal processes are perceived by bereaved children and whether they are effective against bereavement outcomes.

An unexpected finding within the current research was the significant impact supporting a bereaved child had on the emotional well-being of participants, which is comparable to the secondary school teachers in Lane et al.'s (2014) who felt the need to "stay strong... even if

distressed themselves” (p. 7). The findings of the current research also revealed a pronounced level of stress and emotional exhaustion in participants as a result of supporting a bereaved child. Arguably, this may be due to the distinct dissimilarities between the roles of primary and secondary school staff, such as the frequency and duration of proximal processes with the bereaved child. Like research that has highlighted that caring professions, such as Nurses, are vulnerable to compassion fatigue (e.g. Boyle, 2011), this study indicates that primary school staff are also at risk of emotional stress. The analysis also indicates that Bion’s (1985) theory of containment can be applied to both children and staff within the school system and builds upon arguments in the literature around the need for personal support for staff in schools (Jackson, 2002; Reid, 2002). Interestingly, the current research included ELSAs, who receive additional supervision and training in bereavement. Like other school staff, ELSAs discussed the emotional impact of supporting a bereaved child. Previous research examining the inter-professional supervision arrangements between ELSAs and EPs found that group supervision enabled ELSAs to feel more confident in supporting children with emotional needs (Osbourne & Burton, 2014). However, this study employed a closed item questionnaire to explore ELSA views. As such, it may be that the nature of the data collected did not reflect the complexities of the emotional support provided by ELSAs. ELSA (2017) suggests that EP supervision incorporates an assessment of the suitability of further ELSA intervention and suggests referrals to other services where appropriate. Consequently, when providing supervision or support to ELSAs or other staff members, it may be necessary for EPs to remain cognisant of the emotional impact of supporting a bereaved child and provide appropriate signposts where necessary.

### **Relevance to Educational Psychology Practice**

The findings of this study have many implications for EP practice. Due to the lack of research in bereavement in schools, there is an unsurprising absence of a coherent assimilation of knowledge that is accessible for practitioners. However, this research has demonstrated that the BTHD provides a useful conceptual framework to understand BSP in primary schools, particularly when applied with the additional lens of psychoanalytic theory. It seems logical to suggest that the implications of the current study could be integrated within the context of the BTHD to provide insight and guidance for how EPS’ can systematically support schools in carrying out BSP, with consideration of Bion’s (1985) containment theory at each level of the model. In fact, due to the dominant emphasis on individual competencies and behavioural management as part of the well-being agenda (Hoffman, 2009), researchers have recognised a need for a systemic approach to the promotion of social and emotional well-being that incorporates the needs of both children and adults within the school system (Weare, 2015).

Considering this, the following sections presented a suggested outline of the role of EPs in enhancing BSP in primary schools, as summarised in Figure 1.

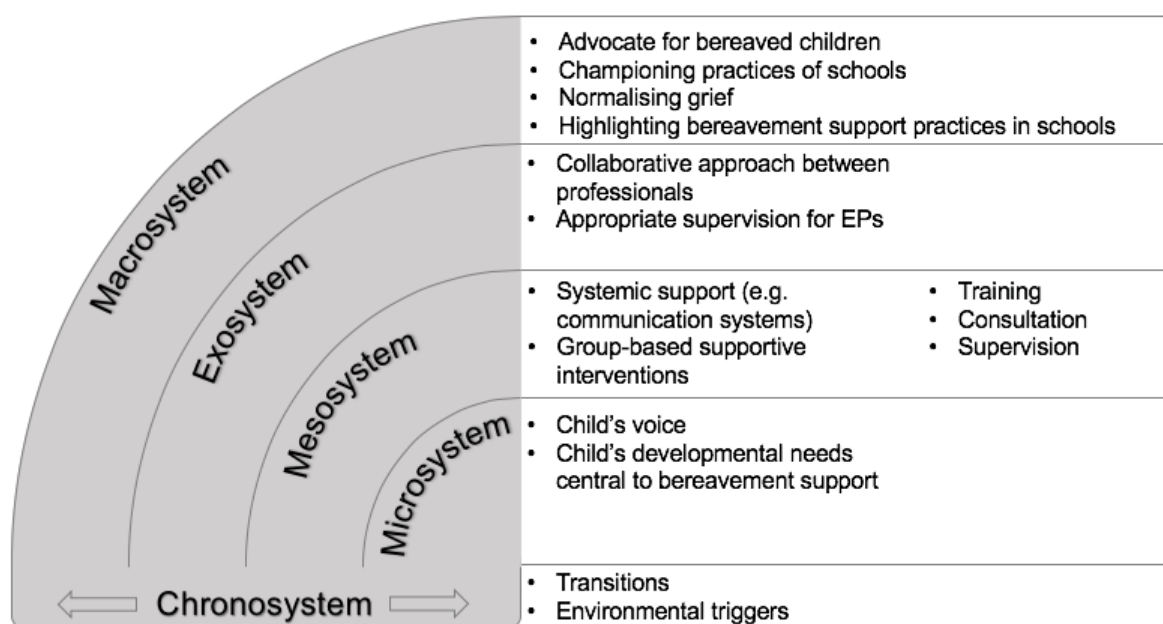


Figure 1 Implications for EP practice across the BTHD

The findings of this study that relate to the microsystem include the centrality of the child's preferences and their presenting needs to support them in feeling contained as part of BSP. Within the mesosystem, this research has confirmed the training gap in bereavement and loss in schools and found an expressed need for training from school staff. Currently, many EPs are already providing training to schools within their respective LAs in relation to children's mental health needs (Boorn, Hopkins-Dunn, & Page, 2010). EPs are well-placed to deliver training in this area given their in-depth understanding of psychological theory applicable to *separation, loss and trauma* and children's emotional and behavioural needs (Holland & Wilkinson, 2015).

This is not the first study to unearth the salient need for support systems for school staff. However, the stress and emotional exhaustion experienced by participants in this study certainly strengthen the arguments present in existing literature (Jackson, 2002; Reid, 2002; Weare, 2015). As discussed, ELSAs receive additional supervision from EPs on a half-termly basis and this has a positive impact on ELSAs perceived ability to support children with emotional and behavioural needs (Osbourne & Burton, 2014). Existing research has already acknowledged the evolving role of the EP in relation to inter-disciplinary supervision for other professionals within the LA, such as support workers for vulnerable adolescents (Maxwell,

2012). EPs, who have pre-existing relationships with schools, could extend their role to provide supervision to those who are supporting bereaved children. It is of note that ELSAs in this research experienced similar emotional stress to their colleagues. As such, incorporating the notion of “containing the containers” through a psychodynamic approach to supervision may be useful in this instance, such as through Work Discussion Groups which have been successfully applied in educational settings in the past (Hulusi & Maggs, 2015; Jackson, 2002). This model of supervision facilitates group reflection on the psychodynamic aspects of the problem situation, rather than exclusively searching for a solution (Hulusi & Maggs, 2015). This is relevant to the parallel processes and mirroring that emerged in participants’ responses in the current study, whereby they related the child’s experiences to their own experience of bereavement. Alternative group-based supportive interventions that may be useful for school staff include Solution Circles and Circle of Adults, which have been found to support school staff to understand a problem situation, generate positive strategies and demonstrate greater empathy towards a child (Grahamslaw & Henson, 2015). As professionals with training in the delivery of these interventions, EPs are uniquely placed to provide this type of support in schools.

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

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



## **Conclusions and Limitations**

Bereavement and loss is a challenging area to research due to the sensitive nature of the issues discussed, the individualised nature of grief and access to only small participant samples (Akerman & Statham, 2014). Consequently, this study was exploratory in nature and subject to several limitations.

Participants in this study were recruited using purposive sampling and were limited to school staff within one outer London LA, making inferences about the broader population of school staff difficult. As this study did not seek detailed demographic information of participants, this also limits the potential for generalisability. The sampling procedures may be subject to biases, such as response bias and social desirability bias (Krumpal, 2013).

The retrospective nature of the questions posed across the research tools employed in both phases of the current study represent a potential limitation. Although some questions were related to current experiences and feelings, many questions required participants to reflect on and recall experiences and feelings from several years previously. At this later time point, it is possible that the intensity of feelings may have been undervalued or the details of experiences forgotten by school staff. Therefore, the data reported should be considered within this context.

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

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