

**Learning to Grieve: The Need for Childhood Grief Education and Developmentally-
Appropriate Lesson Plans**

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By

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Abstract

Grief is a universal yet often misunderstood developmental experience that significantly impacts children's emotional, cognitive, and social functioning. Despite its prevalence, formal education systems remain largely unprepared to support bereaved youth, leaving many children to navigate loss without adequate guidance or resources. This thesis examines the psychological effects of childhood grief, emphasizing the distinction between normative and prolonged grief trajectories, as well as developmental, familial, and environmental factors that shape bereavement outcomes. Drawing on a literature review, including increased vulnerability to depression, anxiety, academic decline, and social withdrawal.

The thesis further explores evidence-based interventions, particularly cognitive-behavioral approaches, and underscores the importance of adaptive coping mechanisms, emotional literacy, and supportive caregiving in fostering resilience. Special attention is given to the role of schools as critical sites for early identification and intervention, as grief frequently manifests in academic and social contexts. However, systemic gaps in educator training and institutional support limit schools' ability to respond effectively.

In response, this thesis argues for the integration of grief education into school curricula as a preventative, developmentally-informed framework. By normalizing grief, reducing stigma, and equipping students with coping strategies and empathetic skills, grief education can promote emotional resilience and improve long-term psychological outcomes. To support this argument, the thesis presents developmentally-appropriate lesson plans for elementary, middle, and high school students, translating theoretical and clinical insights into practical application. Ultimately, this work positions grief education as an essential component of children's development and a necessary reform within contemporary education systems.

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Understanding Grief: Definition, Scope, and Prevalence

Death is one of the few certainties of life, yet society remains remarkably uneducated about the processes and complexities of grief. Grief is not a single emotion but a multifaceted psychological, emotional, and physiological response to loss. It encompasses the broad range of reactions individuals experience when something or someone is taken away from them. While it is mostly associated with death, grief also extends to other major life transitions such as divorce, relocation, loss of health, or the end of meaningful relationships (Doughty Horn, Crews, & Harrawood, 2013); these experiences disrupt attachment systems, perceived stability, and expectations for the future, making grief both deeply personal and universally human.

Importantly, grief is neither inherently good nor bad. It is not a sign of weakness, nor is it a condition that must be eradicated. Rather, it is a natural and reasonable response to attachment disruption. Grief reflects the depth of connection and meaning attributed to what has been lost. Because attachment is universal, grief is likewise universal, emerging as a normative developmental experience across the lifespan.

Although grief is a universal experience, its impact is often overlooked. Research demonstrates that many people encounter significant losses in their early lives. According to the Society of Pediatric Psychology (n.d.), approximately 1 in 14 children in the United States will experience the death of a parent or sibling before reaching age 18, a figure that increases to more than 12.8 million bereaved youth by age 25. These figures underscore that grief is not an isolated or rare developmental event, but a normative experience that touches nearly every family system. Moreover, the psychological effects of grief are not confined to the immediate aftermath of loss. Grief often resurfaces across the lifespan, particularly during anniversaries or

major developmental transitions shaping identity, relationships, and coping strategies into adulthood. Understanding both the prevalence and enduring nature of grief is therefore essential to recognizing its significance in emotional development.

At the same time, it is critical to distinguish between normative grief and pathological grief. Grief itself is not a mental disorder; however, under certain conditions, it can become disordered. Prolonged Grief Disorder, recognized in the International Classification of Diseases 11th Revision, involves persistent and impairing separation distress that extends beyond culturally expected timeframes. While most children gradually integrate loss into their developmental trajectory, a subset experience chronic, intrusive, and functionally impairing grief reactions. These maladaptive trajectories are associated with increased risk for depression, anxiety, academic decline, and relational difficulties.

Pathologizing all grief risks medicalizing a universal human experience, yet failing to recognize when grief becomes impairing leaves vulnerable youth without support; this distinction underscores the need for preventative approaches that promote healthy coping before grief becomes complicated. Education centered around emotional literacy, adaptive coping strategies, and open communication about loss has the potential to lower the percentage of children who develop adverse grief outcomes. By normalizing grief while simultaneously teaching skills that support regulation and resilience, schools can reduce the likelihood that normative sadness evolves into prolonged dysfunction. Schools are in the unique position of having consistent access to children across developmental stages and are able to serve as sites of early intervention. This thesis accordingly shifts from framing grief as a developmental and

psychological phenomenon to outlining a structured, school-based grief education curriculum aimed at helping students understand and cope with loss.

Impacts of Grief in Childhood and Adolescence

Understanding how grief manifests during childhood and adolescence is crucial because a significant loss during these developmental periods is a profoundly disruptive event, which can carry a significant risk for long- and short-term psychological difficulties. Bereaved children and adolescents are often vulnerable to a variety of mental health-related problems; these problems include depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), prolonged grief disorder, and broader emotional and behavioral problems.

Boelen and colleagues (2021) emphasize that about 5 to 10 percent of bereaved youth develop prolonged grief disorder (PGD), which is characterized by persistent separation yearning, avoidance, distress, and having a difficult time moving on. This condition often co-occurs with depression and PTSD, compounding its impact on functioning, though it is distinct from these two comorbidities. Children experiencing PGD report symptoms that extend beyond normative mourning and significantly interfere with academic, social, and developmental functioning.

Other than psychopathology directly, grief can undermine many facets of a child's life. Emotional outcomes consist of sadness, anxiety, guilt, and heightened vulnerability to stress. Cognitively, those affected may experience intrusive thoughts, rumination about death, and magical thinking in cases where communication about the death is withheld or distorted. Children and adolescents are also affected behaviorally. These effects include withdrawal from social situations and academic activities, high-risk conduct, or increased internalizing behaviors.

When surviving caregivers experience depression, emotional withdrawal, or communication difficulties, these child outcomes are often intensified, whereas warm, responsive parenting fosters resilience (Hung & Rabin, 2009).

Variability of Grief Trajectories and Risk Factors

Moving beyond the developmental stages, the variability of grief processes and the risks of prolonged grief are other important considerations. After a significant loss, grief is an expected and natural process, though not all children adapt in the same way. As mentioned before, variability in the trajectories of grief stems from the interplay between the developmental stage, family dynamics, and the context of death. For some, bereavement leads to adaptation and resilience, and for others, it can lead to complex forms of grief that persist over time (Hung & Rabin, 2009; Boelen, Lenferink, & Spuij, 2021).

In the case of sudden, violent, or stigmatized traumatic deaths, they often have a major influence on the grieving process of a child. Unlike anticipated deaths, a traumatic loss can uproot a child's assumptions about predictability and safety, which may lead to significant behavioral and emotional responses. Children who are bereaved by suicide, homicide, or accidents are more likely to experience post-traumatic stress symptoms, intrusive memories, and reenactment of the trauma in behavior or play, in addition to grief itself (Hung & Rabin, 2009). These children are also at risk of facing secrecy and stigma within the family and broader community; this can complicate communication and meaning-making. Environments such as these can prolong distress and hinder the natural integration of the loss into the child's worldview and identity (Hung & Rabin, 2009).

Among the different forms of traumatic loss, parental suicide is associated more with elevated risks for maladaptive grief and psychopathology. Hung and Rabin (2009) found evidence that children who lost a parent to suicide are at heightened risk for psychiatric disorders such as PTSD, major depression, anxiety, suicidal behaviors themselves, and even bipolar disorder later in life. Children who are bereaved as a result of suicide also often exhibit more anger, shame, and difficulties with acceptance compared to those whose parents died of other causes. The reasoning for this is in part due to stigma surrounding suicide and secrecy that, at times, accompanies it. When this blame and guilt are internalized, it is especially salient, with some children thinking that they are destined to repeat the actions of their parents or that they somehow could have prevented the death. “Negative legacies” such as these can cause a vulnerability to suicidal thoughts and behaviors in adolescence and even into adulthood.

Prolonged Grief Disorder (PGD), which is now recognized in the 11th Revision of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11), is characterized by persistent separation distress, including yearning and preoccupation with the deceased, as well as symptoms such as avoidance, anger, and difficulties re-engaging with life (Boelen, Lenferink, & Spuij, 2021). PGD is distinct from depression or PTSD, showing additional impairment in academic, social, and developmental functioning (Boelen et al., 2021). Between 5% and 10% of bereaved youth are estimated to experience PGD, particularly when protective factors such as open communication and stable caregiving are absent, as mentioned earlier. This risk is then heightened for children who are bereaved by violent or unexpected deaths, which highlights the role of context in shaping maladaptive grief responses (Boelen et al., 2021).

The variability of grief outcomes shows the ways in which bereavement in childhood is not uniform, but instead shaped by context and the developmental stage of the child. Early detection of risk factors, including the suddenness of loss, secrecy, stigma, and exposure to trauma, is needed to prevent maladaptive grief trajectories (Hung & Rabin, 2009). Interventions that are developmentally sensitive and sustained, such as cognitive-behavioral grief therapy, have shown promise in alleviating PGD and helping to reduce related symptoms of depression and PTSD (Boelen et al., 2021). Also, support for surviving family members and parents is vital because their capacity to provide stable caregiving and communicate openly strongly influences children's adjustment. These approaches can help mitigate risks for complicated grief, foster resilience, and help children continue their developmental pathways in healthier, more adaptive ways (Hung & Rabin, 2009; Boelen, Lenferink, & Spuij, 2021).

Because grief is both universal and developmentally-disruptive, and because unmanaged grief carries significant psychological and academic consequences, it becomes essential to examine how children are supported in navigating loss. While families serve as the primary context of adjustment, they often require additional systemic support.

Developmental Manifestations of Grief

It is important to note that childhood and adolescent grief is not a fixed process but one that is made up of dynamic interactions within different developmental stages. A child's grief response changes as they develop, altering their emotional, cognitive, and social capacities. A loss experienced early in a child's life may be revisited multiple times across different developmental stages, a phenomenon that is known to be "regrieving" (Hung & Rabin, 2009).

Thus, for children, grief is not a single event but instead an ongoing developmental challenge that intersects with new phases of growth and development.

Infancy and Toddlers

In infancy and toddler-aged children, grief is typically expressed through behaviors that are attachment-related. An infant is unable to comprehend the permanence of death; however, they do respond to the absence of their primary caregiver with distress signals. These signals include crying, changes in sleep or eating patterns, and irritability (Schonfeld et al., 2024).

Toddlers who are just beginning to develop object permanence can show heightened signs of separation anxiety when other caregivers leave. This occurrence explains their limited ability to regulate stress independently. These responses to death underline how early grief is relational and embodied in shaping how patterns of attachment are necessary for social and emotional development (Schonfeld et al., 2024).

Preschool Age

As cognitive understanding expands slightly, children who are preschool-aged often struggle with the finality of death. The thinking of this age group tends to be egocentric and is often characterized by magical beliefs. A child of this age may think that death is reversible or temporary. They can also believe that the death is a result of their own thoughts or actions, resulting in guilt or shame (Schonfeld et al., 2024). Their grief may manifest through regression behaviors such as bedwetting, thumb-sucking, clinging, or repetitive questioning or grief-themed play. These behaviors are the consequence of facing the death of a loved one with limited cognitive and coping capabilities. The toll of this emotionally in this age group lies in sadness,

confusion, and self-blame, which can cause issues with the development of trust and security (Schonfeld et al., 2024).

School Age

By middle childhood, most children have developed a better understanding of death as a permanent, universal, and biological process. Because of this expanded cognition, children are able to more accurately conceptualize death; however, it creates new sources of worry. Children who are school-aged are subject to worry about whether other loved ones will die, if they are at risk for death, and who will care for them (Schonfeld et al., 2024). School-aged children are also subject to social manifestations including withdrawal from peers who cannot relate to their experiences and acting out in frustration. Academically, a child may struggle to concentrate or experience a decline in performance. Misunderstandings of cultural or religious explanations may also contribute to anxiety. An example of this would be that children hear that a loved one has “gone to sleep,” and the child could, as a result, develop fears of sleeping themselves (Schonfeld et al., 2024).

Adolescence

Adolescence introduces new and unique complexities to grief as this age group possesses the abstract reasoning skills to grapple with existential questions of life and death. This age group reflects on the secondary consequences of death such as altered family roles, questions about fairness and meaning, and future milestones without parental guidance in addition to the reality of their loss (Schonfeld et al., 2024). Sadness, anger, or guilt are often included emotional responses for adolescents; many times, they mask these feelings to help preserve a sense of independence or to avoid burdening others. Socially, adolescents may turn to peers for support,

though peers may lack the capacity to respond effectively, which leads to compounding feelings of alienation or isolation (Schonfeld et al., 2024).

Adolescents in particular are also more vulnerable to maladaptive coping strategies. Boelen et al. (2021) indicated that five to ten percent of bereaved youth develop Prolonged Grief Disorder (PGD), which is distinct from depression or PTSD because it involves difficulty adapting to loss and persistent separation distress. Substance use, risk-taking, and withdrawal from family and/or academics are ways in which behavioral manifestations commonly show. The developmental tasks of identity formation and autonomy are directly related to and shaped by the process of grieving, making adolescence a sensitive time for intervention (Schonfeld et al., 2024; Boelen et al., 2021).

Developmental Implications Overall

Taken together, developmental manifestations of grief underscore the influences of loss on a child's emotional, cognitive, and social growth throughout childhood. Grief destabilizes security and attachment in early childhood, in middle childhood it complicates cognitive understanding and peer relationships, and in adolescence it challenges identity formation and autonomy. These disruptions in development show the importance of sustained and age-appropriate support, since grief does not resolve itself neatly but instead evolves as the child grows up.

Family and Environmental Factors

While the section mentioned before in the paper identifies key risk factors that shape grief trajectories, these outcomes do not occur in isolation. They are enacted and sustained within children's immediate environments, particularly family systems, which function as the primary

mechanisms through which risk is either amplified or mitigated. Continuing this exploration of environmental influences, family and environmental contexts play a major role in shaping how children experience and process grief following the loss of a parent. Children's grief responses are able to be understood through distinct trajectories that reflect varying patterns of adaptation, persistence of distress, and emotional integration over time (Sandler et al., 2024). Using data from 244 parentally bereaved youth over the span of six years, the Sandler et. al (2024) study identified the four primary trajectories of grief. Those trajectories included high chronic grief, moderate chronic grief, grief recovery, and grief resilience. Family factors such as parental depression, quality of parenting, emotional expression within the household, and the cause of death were strong predictors of these trajectories. Youth who are exposed to trauma or violence are more likely to follow chronic or prolonged grief pathways (Sandler et al., 2024).

Youth in the high chronic grief trajectory of Sandler et al's. study exhibited persistent and elevated levels of intrusive grief thoughts from early bereaved through the six-year follow-up, indicating sustained difficulty processing the loss. Those in the moderate chronic grief trajectory demonstrated consistently moderate but enduring intrusive grief, which suggests partial adaptation that failed to resolve over time. Conversely, the grief recovery trajectory was characterized by initially high intrusive grief that steadily declined across development, reflecting gradual emotional processing and adjustment. Ultimately, the grief resilience trajectory included youth who displayed consistently low levels of intrusive grief from the outset, indicating adaptive coping and emotional regulation despite loss (Sandler et al., 2024). The trajectories addressed above highlight that the intense grief reactions in the early period

following parental death do not necessarily indicate long-term pathology, as the majority of youth who initially reported high grief demonstrated recovery over time (Sandler et al., 2024).

As previously mentioned, family factors were strong predictors of the trajectory of childhood grieving. Higher levels of caregiver psychological distress, active inhibition of emotional expression within the family, and traumatic causes of death such as homicide or suicide increased the likelihood of children following chronic grief pathways. In contrast, youth embedded in families characterized by supportive parenting, open emotional communication, and lower caregiver depression were more likely to exhibit grief recovery or resilience trajectories (Sandler et al., 2024).

Families who had more supportive environments encouraged open emotional communication and active coping were associated with more adaptive grief trajectories which included grief recovery or resilience. On the other hand, environments that are marked by emotional suppression, caregiver's psychological distress, or limited communication were more likely to foster intrusive and persistent grief thoughts. These intrusive cognitions which are defined as distressing, involuntary thought related to death were found to interfere with meaning-making and emotional integration of loss into their developing sense of self (Sandler et al., 2024). Over time, these intrusive grief patterns were able to predict increased internalizing problems, such as depression and anxiety, and negative self-views in adolescence and young adulthood (Sandler et al., 2024).

By the fifteen-year follow-up, individuals who had experienced chronic intrusive grief in childhood continued to report higher levels of disordered grief and self-concept disturbances, compared to peers in recovery or resilience trajectories (Sandler et al., 2024). This long-term

association underscores how unresolved grief, especially those compounded by environmental risk factors, may contribute to enduring vulnerabilities in emotional health. The findings of this study underscore the importance of family-based grief interventions that focus on improving communication, reducing caregiver distress, and supporting children's coping processes early after loss.

Family involvement plays a crucial role in shaping how children process and recover from grief. Cipriano, Barry, and Cipriano (2021) demonstrated that the surviving parent's engagement in grief programming significantly influences children's adjustment outcomes. The multivariate model showed that when parents are actively involved in grief intervention, their children show greater engagement themselves and develop a greater internal locus of control, which is associated with fewer symptoms of grief. These findings highlight the systemic nature of bereavement, putting an emphasis on how resilience develops within the family context.

Parental engagement encompasses attitudinal, behavioral, and participatory dimensions such as attending sessions, demonstrating investment in the process, and maintaining positive expectations for the benefit of the program (Cipriano et al., 2021). Parents who model openness and emotional participation implicitly communicate to their children that grief is manageable and worthy of shared attention. This attunement seemingly fosters a sense of agency and predictability in the child which helps with mitigating the feelings of helplessness that typically accompany loss. On the other hand, when parents are emotionally disengaged or struggling with their mental health, the child tends to exhibit higher distress, diminished internal control beliefs, and weaker coping mechanisms (Cipriano et al., 2021).

Parental participation in structured grief programming serves as both a stabilizing force and a conduit for resilience. This family-based engagement allows children to witness adaptive coping in action, by doing this their emotional regulation is strengthened and fostering a secure relational environment that supports long-term recovery (Cipriano et al., 2021).

Management of Grief: Evidence-Based Interventions for Grieving Youth

Research on childhood grief shows how young people benefit significantly from structured therapeutic interventions which help them process the reality of the death, regulate overwhelming emotions, challenge maladaptive beliefs, as well as re-engaging with meaningful activities. Studies in this area challenged earlier assumptions that children naturally recover from loss without specialized support, which is not true. Evidence-based interventions provide children with the tools needed to help them understand and manage grief in ways that lower the risk of long-term mental health risks (Boelen et al., 2021). Cognitive-behavioral approaches have been found to be especially effective because they specifically target the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral patterns that manage grief-related distress. Patterns such as these often appear in school in the following ways: emotional withdrawal, irritability, reduced motivation, or difficulty concentrating. This reinforces the importance of integrating intervention strategies into educational environments where these issues most unfold (Boelen et al., 2021).

Positive Coping Mechanisms in Childhood Bereavement

While the previous section examined how family systems shape grief trajectories, the present section focuses on the specific coping processes that enable children to adapt following loss. Between the influence of family systems and the implementation of structured cognitive-behavioral interventions lies a critical developmental process: the cultivation of positive coping

mechanisms. While family environments shape the emotional climate in which grief unfolds, and clinical interventions target maladaptive cognitions and behaviors, children's day-to-day coping strategies ultimately mediate how grief is integrated into their developing sense of self. Adaptive coping does not eliminate distress and instead, facilitates emotional processing, meaning-making, and restoration of normative functioning over time.

A key aspect to understanding adaptive bereavement coping is the Dual Process Model that is proposed by Stroebe and Schut (1999). This model conceptualizes healthy grieving as an oscillation between loss-oriented and restoration-oriented processes. Loss-oriented coping involves the direct confrontation of the emotional pain of the death, engaging in remembrance, and acknowledging feelings of anger, sadness, or longing. Whereas, restoration-oriented coping focuses on adjusting to life changes, reemerging in activities, and developing new roles or competencies. Adaptive coping is characterized by flexible movement between these domains, rather than remaining fixed in either confrontation or avoidance (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). For children, this oscillation can manifest as periods of visible distress interspersed with play, peer engagement, or apparent normalcy, patterns that are developmentally appropriate and should not be misinterpreted as denial.

Developmental context further shapes how coping mechanisms emerge. Children's grief expression varies in accordance with their cognitive maturity, emotional regulation capacity, and attachment security (Alvis et al., 2022). Younger children may rely more heavily on behavioral expression, symbolic play, and repetitive questioning, and adolescence may engage in abstract meaning-making and identity reflection. Across the different developmental stages, caregiver responsiveness remains central to coping. Caregivers who are supportive and can validate

emotions, provide accurate information about death, and encourage their child's expression, foster adaptive coping mechanisms including emotional articulation and cognitive integration of the loss (Alvis et al., 2022). In contrast, environments that discourage emotional discussion may inadvertently promote suppression or avoidance, increasing vulnerability to prolonged distress.

Meaning-making and open communication represent particularly salient coping processes. Bereaved children frequently seek concrete explanations about death and reassurance regarding permanence, personal responsibility, and causality. When adults respond honestly and developmentally appropriately, children demonstrate improved emotional regulation and reduced confusion, or reflection on the deceased's legacy, allows children to integrate the loss into their evolving identity rather than compartmentalizing it as a traumatic disruption (Joy, 2024). This integration process aligns with resilience trajectories described by Sandler et al. (2024), incorporated into autobiographical memory without overwhelming functioning.

Expressive interventions also provide structured avenues for adaptive coping. Heath et al. (2008) outline practical strategies for assisting grieving children in educational settings, including journaling, art activities, memory projects, and guided discussions. These interventions encourage emotional expression while normalizing grief responses among peers. Similarly, "legacy interventions" in classroom contexts, such as memory books or symbolic rituals, promote continuing bonds with the deceased while fostering communal support (Lawrence et al., 2022). When integrated adaptively, continuing bonds allow children to maintain an internalized connection to the deceased without impairing developmental progression. These expressive modalities function as restorative coping strategies, offering children tangible tools to externalize and organize complex emotions.

Interprofessional collaboration within schools further enhances coping outcomes. Edwards et al. (2023) highlight the role of school nurses and educators in monitoring behavioral changes, facilitating referrals, and promoting health-supportive coping practices such as maintaining routines, encouraging peer connection, and reinforcing emotional literacy. The preservation of daily routine and structure serves as a stabilizing force, particularly in the aftermath of parental loss, when predictability may feel disrupted. Routine supports restoration-oriented coping by reinforcing continuity and competence in other life domains.

Positive coping does not imply the absence of grief intensity. Rather, adaptive coping is reflected in flexibility, emotional expression, supportive relational contexts, and gradual reengagement with developmental tasks. Children who are provided with opportunities for expression, accurate information, peer support, and structured meaning-making demonstrate lower levels of internalizing distress and more integrated grief responses over time (Alvis et al., 2022; Heath et al., 2008; Joy, 2024). These coping mechanisms act as protective factors that may buffer against the chronic intrusive grief trajectories identified by Sandler et al. (2024).

Understanding these naturally occurring and supported coping processes provides a conceptual bridge to clinical intervention. While family systems establish the emotional foundation and schools offer environmental scaffolding, structured therapeutic models such as cognitive-behavioral therapy refine and strengthen these coping capacities. The following section will examine how CBT operationalizes and systematically enhances adaptive coping skills in youth experiencing prolonged or complicated grief.

CBT for Prolonged Grief: Clinical Evidence and Prevention Potential

The preventative potential of clinical interventions was strongly supported by a randomized controlled trial conducted by Boelen et al. (2021), which studied the effects of a cognitive-behavioral program known as CBT Grief-Help for children and adolescents with prolonged grief symptoms. CBT Grief-Help led to significantly greater reductions in prolonged grief symptoms at post-treatment and at three-, six-, and twelve-month follow-up assessments as compared to supportive counseling (Boelen et al., 2021). The study also examined cognitive-behavioral treatment which was found to have produced broader improvements in depression, posttraumatic stress symptoms, and internalizing behaviors for grieving youth. These results show the ways in which CBT not only lessens immediate distress but how it also prevents the development of chronic impairment in the future. Many of the symptoms targeted in CBT, such as avoidance, self-blame, and negative predictions about the future, are influencing a student's capacity to engage academically and socially directly. By implementing CBT-informed support within schools it can serve as an impactful preventative measure.

An important thing to note is that CBT Grief-Help requires the inclusion of structured parental sessions as well. This element strengthens the caregiving environment by helping parents identify unhelpful grief-related cognitions, and then reinforce coping skills at home, which improve communication with their children about the loss. Also, parental involvement enhanced the overall effectiveness of the intervention by using both home and therapeutic support (Boelen et al., 2021). Schools cannot independently provide family-level guidance, however, the results of this study emphasize the need for coordinated action between educators and clinical professionals. When such collaboration between home and schools occurs,

preventative outcomes become more likely to succeed, and children receive consistent support across the environments that help shape their normal daily functioning.

Everyday Expressions of Grief: Grief in Play Behavior and School Settings

While much of the discussion so far has centered on internal experiences, the grief of children is not confined to moments of overt mourning; often it appears subtly through their everyday interactions, such as behaviors and play. Quiñones et al. (2022) argued that grief and grieving are “present in social situations where loneliness and withdrawal are experienced by children” (p. 1786). Children also make sense of loss in a cultural-historical perspective through participation in familiar social and institutional contexts, such as school and home. It is in these everyday settings that emotional pain can be expressed as frustration, disconnection, or isolation from peers rather than as verbalized sadness.

As mentioned earlier, in play, grief can surface through patterns of exclusion, withdrawal, or solitary activity, reflecting the internal struggle of the child to regain stability and belonging. In a case study presented by Quiñones et al. (2022), the five-year-old Mayra’s withdrawal from a classroom game after being hurt symbolized a broader experience of loneliness and loss. The authors note that her “grief and grieving was an accumulation of motives not met ... and complexity of emotions” (p. 1795), as she moved from excitement to distress and disengagement. The shift that was viewed here demonstrates the ways in which grief can unfold through play as a living process of negotiation between social reintegration and emotional pain.

In the case of behavior, children may manifest grief through changes in irritability, attention, aggression, or regression to an earlier developmental stage. Hung and Rabin (2009) explain that these expressions can mirror feelings of guilt, abandonment, or helplessness tied to

loss. An example of this behavior would be a bereaved child appearing withdrawn from classes or defiant, not for the sake of disobedience but as a response to disrupted emotional security due to grief. Oftentimes, teachers and caregivers who interpret such behaviors as misbehavior risk overlooking grief as the underlying cause.

The setting of school plays a critical role in how expressions of grief are recognized and supported. As Quiñones et al. (2022) emphasize, compassionate responses from educators can mitigate the intensity of a child's grief. In the case study of Quiñones et al. (2022), Mayra is in an observed preschool setting, where the teachers' "comforting embrace" and patient dialogue helped in soothing her distress (p. 1795); this helped model empathy and emotional safety for Mayra. This also aligns with Hung and Rabin's (2009) finding that consistent, supportive caregiving fosters resilience and helps children integrate loss in their own development of self. Educators who create spaces for emotional expression through open conversation, reflective play, or peer inclusion enable children to process grief within a stable social framework.

Manifestations of grief in everyday life underscore how bereavement affects developmental domains that extend beyond emotions. It is common for children to experience difficulties with concentration, reduced academic performance, and strained peer relationships (Boelen, Lenferink, & Spuij, 2021). Children such as Mayra who experience exclusion or withdrawal in peer interactions may internalize these feelings of being "different" or disconnected, which may contribute to prolonged distress when left unaddressed. If these signs are recognized as natural expressions of grief, rather than behavioral problems, adults can respond with sensitivity rather than punishment.

These findings highlight the need for educators, clinicians, and community systems to adopt long-term, context-aware approaches to childhood bereavement. This being so, the grief of a child is a dynamic and embodied process that extends into play, relationships, and learning environments. Everyday expressions such as loneliness, crying, withdrawal, or disrupted play serve as ways of an internal effort to restore meaning and connection. As Quiñones et al. (2022) concluded, grief is manifested by the human body in actions such as crying, loss, suffering, and frustration. Expressions such as these call for compassionate, developmentally-attuned responses that help understand the child's lived experiences of loss while supporting the return to emotional equilibrium and social participation.

Addressing the Current Gaps in Childhood Grief Management: Limitations in Schools

When grief is unrecognized or unsupported, its effects extend far beyond emotional distress, impacting children's psychological development, including issues surrounding cognitive functioning and academic performance. Despite this prevalence of childhood grief, school environments are often unprepared to identify, understand, and support grieving students. Children spend so much of their time in educational settings, making it inevitable for them to become the backdrop of where grief manifests: behaviorally, socially, and academically. These institutions are rarely structured or trained to respond effectively (Linder et al., 2022). Without targeted interventions, these emotional difficulties often manifest in the classroom as concentration difficulties, irritability, or disengagement. Over time, the cumulative effect of unresolved grief can hinder learning, identity formation, resilience, and interpersonal relationships (Linder et al., 2022).

Children experiencing grief often internalize feelings of guilt, confusion, or isolation, specifically when adults around them avoid or are uncomfortable discussing death. In the absence of clearly supporting these children, they may misinterpret their emotional reaction as signs of weakness or difference, which further perpetuates shame and silence. This emotional suppression can develop into maladaptive coping strategies such as avoidance, aggression, or withdrawal from social interaction (Linder et al., 2022). When schools fail to provide a safe space for children to process their losses, grief becomes a private burden for children to carry alone.

Academically, the effects of grief are equally pervasive as feelings of confusion or isolation. It has been found that grieving students experience a decrease in motivation, academic persistence, and executive function (Linder et al., 2022). Issues around attendance are also common; students may skip classes to avoid emotional triggers or because caretakers are similarly struggling to maintain daily routines. Linder et al. (2022) emphasized that these disruptions can create a compounding cycle, in that academic decline heightens stress, while lack of understanding from teachers reinforces feelings of alienation. In the long term, unsupported grief can contribute to lower graduation rates, reduced postsecondary enrollment, and diminished life satisfaction.

The emotional and educational consequences of neglected grief are therefore systemic, not situational. Schools are not simply passive contexts where grief happens; they are active environments that can either exacerbate distress or serve as a space critical for healing. Yet, as demonstrated previously, most schools remain ill-equipped to fulfill this role. This gap highlights the need for a paradigm shift: rather than treating grief as an occasional or private matter,

education systems must recognize it as a developmental and pedagogical concern that is central to the well-being of students.

The Pandemic as a Case Study of Systemic Neglect

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed how there is widespread systemic neglect in addressing childhood grief, showing how schools, communities, and even healthcare systems are poorly equipped to support bereaved youth. Harrop et al. (2022) conducted a mixed-methods study examining parents' experiences of supporting children who had a significant loss during the pandemic and found that most parents felt abandoned by institutional structures that traditionally provide educational or emotional assistance. Many felt that schools, mental health services, and community organizations lacked both the training and resources to find and respond to children's grief needs. The absence of coordinated care has left families to navigate bereavement in isolation, which intensified children's distress and parents' sense of helplessness (Harrop et al, 2022).

Parents reported that pandemic restrictions amplified children's loneliness and disrupted typical mourning rituals, including funerals, social gatherings, and peer support (Harrop et al., 2022). Parents took notice that the absence of these shared experiences prevented children from making sense of their loss, leading to prolonged sadness, anxiety, and even behavioral regressions. Many parents also struggled to balance their own grief with the emotional demands of supporting their children; however, they had little professional guidance on how to facilitate healthy coping at home. Parents' concerns were compounded by the closure of schools and remote learning; this removed one of the few environments where grief could have been identified and addressed through caring adult relationships (Harrop et al., 2022).

This widespread neglect during the pandemic highlighted the need for systematic, school-based grief education and intervention. Educators who were trained to recognize and respond to signs of grief in schools could serve as a much-needed safety net rather than an overlooked space of disengagement. The emotional needs of bereaved children are often minimized or simply overlooked in moments of crisis, which is a pattern that could be lessened through policies mandating grief literacy for teachers and curriculum-based programs that normalize conversations about loss (Harrop et al., 2022). This acknowledgement of the pandemic as a case study in systemic failure can help us better understand the necessity of proactive, rather than reactive, grief education in schools.

While family engagement is foundational to healthy adjustment, families cannot serve as the sole mechanism of grief support. Because children spend the majority of their developmental hours within educational institutions, schools represent the most consistent and equitable setting for structured grief intervention.

Why Grief Education Should Be Mandated in Schools: The Need for Curricular Inclusion

Grief is a universal human experience, yet it remains conspicuously absent from formal educational curricula. Schools are responsible for preparing students to navigate academic, social, and professional challenges; however, they rarely provide adequate instruction or guidance on coping with emotional loss, a reality that all people inevitably face. Dawson et al. (2021) assert that grief is “the one thing guaranteed in life,” which underscores the paradoxical absence of grief education in schools despite its inevitability. The omission of curricular inclusion leaves children ill-equipped to recognize, understand, and manage grief, not only in their own lives but also in supporting their peers. Incorporating grief education into the

curriculum, therefore, is not only beneficial but essential for fostering emotionally resilient, empathetic, and socially competent individuals.

Although the integration of grief education into school curricula offers numerous developmental and preventative benefits, some scholars raise some serious concerns about the role schools should play in addressing grief. One of the most common critiques is that schools are educational institutions rather than mental health providers, and for that reason, grief support may fall outside the professional expertise of educators (Dyregrov, Dyregrov, & Idsoe, 2014). Teachers are primarily trained in academic instruction rather than bereavement counseling, and some educators even reported feeling unprepared to navigate emotionally intense conversations surrounding death (Dyregrov, Dyregrov, & Idsoe, 2014). From this perspective, grief intervention may be more appropriately addressed by clinicians, counselors, or family systems rather than through being mandated in school systems.

Although this concern highlights reasons for legitimate limitations, it does not negate the value of grief education within schools. Importantly, grief education as proposed in this thesis does not position teachers as therapists or require them to provide clinical intervention. The function is instead a preventative emotional literacy framework that equips students with language, awareness, and coping strategies related to loss. Similar to other social-emotional learning initiatives that are already implemented in schools, grief education focuses on normalization, communication, and empathy rather than psychological treatment. Clinical care still remains the responsibility of trained mental health professionals, while schools serve as an integral point of recognition and support for students experiencing loss. Hence, grief education complements rather than replaces professional mental health services.

Inevitable Experience of Grief and Its Absence from Education

The inevitability of grief highlights the necessity for its inclusion in school curricula. Children and adolescents inevitably encounter loss, whether through the death of a loved one, the separation of parents, or the illness of a close friend or family member. Though schools rarely provide structured opportunities to understand or process these experiences. This gap in education results in a lack of preparedness, leaving students to navigate grief largely on their own (Doughty et al., 2016). Without guided support, children are subject to developing maladaptive coping strategies, experience social isolation, or struggle academically and emotionally. Mandating grief education ensures that students are exposed to structured learning about grief and loss, normalizing the emotional responses associated with it, and providing the proper tools to manage them effectively.

Evidence of Effectiveness and Benefits of Grief Education

Grief education provides students with critical coping strategies and emotional knowledge that extend far beyond the classroom. Learning about the processes and manifestations of grief, students gain awareness of the wide variability in how individuals experience loss, including differences in emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses (Dawson et al., 2021). This awareness helps to normalize grief as a natural part of life, reducing confusion or self-blame for feelings of anger, sadness, or anxiety that may accompany loss. In addition, grief education allows students to develop practical coping mechanisms, such as emotional regulation techniques, self-reflection, and adaptive problem-solving skills, which can be a buffer against prolonged emotional distress (Doughty Horn et al., 2016).

Another meaningful benefit is the enhancement of emotional literacy. Grief education teaches students the language to describe complex feelings, which in turn facilitates communication with peers, family members, and supportive professionals (Dawson et al., 2021). Understanding grief also fosters critical thinking about social and cultural attitudes toward loss, enabling students to recognize and challenge misconceptions or unhelpful norms. Moreover, grief education is a preventative measure: students who are prepared for experiences of loss are less likely to struggle with prolonged grief reactions or develop maladaptive coping strategies, such as emotional withdrawal or substance abuse (Doughty Horn et al., 2016). Overall, these benefits highlight the importance of the inclusion of grief as a structured component of school curricula.

One critique of grief education is that there is so much cultural variability in mourning practices. Anthropological and psychological research demonstrates that beliefs about death, acceptable emotional expression, and mourning rituals differ widely across cultures and religious traditions (Rosenblatt, 2008). Some communities emphasize private grieving or spiritual interpretations of death, while others rely on communal rituals or extended mourning periods. Critics, therefore, caution that standardized grief curricula may unintentionally impose Western psychological frameworks that do not fully reflect the diversity of cultural beliefs surrounding death and bereavement (Rosenblatt, 2008).

However, this limitation does not undermine the value of grief education when programs are designed with cultural sensitivity in mind. Rather than prescribing a single model of grieving, effective grief curricula emphasize the variability of mourning practices and encourage students to explore how different cultures understand loss. By acknowledging diverse traditions and

beliefs about death, grief education can actually help cultural awareness and respect among students with different beliefs. When implemented thoughtfully, these programs provide space for multiple perspectives, rather than imposing a universal approach to grief.

One of the most transformative effects of curricular grief education is its potential to reduce societal and cultural stigma around grieving. Students often internalize messages from peers, media, and adults that grief is a shameful, private, or even abnormal experience (Doughty Horn et al., 2016). By addressing grief within the classroom, schools can challenge these perceptions and foster an environment where emotional expressions are accepted and normalized (Dawson et al., 2021). Reducing stigma encourages students to seek help when needed, as well as helps peers and educators respond more appropriately to others' grief. Creating a culture that normalizes grief allows students to feel validated in their experiences and empowers them to engage in open, supportive conversations around loss, which can be helpful in mitigating the isolation that often accompanies bereavement (Doughty Horn et al., 2016).

Grief education also equips students to provide effective support to peers who are experiencing loss. Adolescents are specifically influenced by peer relationships, and research indicates that social support is a critical factor in healthy grief adjustment (Dawson et al., 2021). Through education, students can learn how to identify signs of grief in others and offer appropriate emotional support, whether by listening, validating feelings, or assisting peers in seeking professional help when necessary (Doughty Horn et al., 2016). Teaching students how to support one another not only aids the grieving individual but also strengthens social cohesion within the schools, fostering empathy, understanding, and mutual responsibility. These skills

extend past grief itself, cultivating prosocial behaviors that can improve overall school climate and student well-being (Dawson et al., 2021).

A main focus of grief education is to foster resilience in children. Resilience involves the ability to adapt positively to adversity, recover from setbacks, and maintain emotional well-being despite challenges. By providing students with knowledge of grief and structured coping strategies, schools help them develop these essential skills (Doughty Horn et al., 2016). For example, understanding the stages and variability of grief helps students to anticipate emotional challenges, recognize their own needs, and implement adaptive coping mechanisms rather than avoiding or suppressing emotions (Dawson et al., 2021). Also, resilience gained through grief education is transferable to other areas of life, such as students who are comfortable navigating emotional difficulties are better prepared to manage stress, interpersonal conflict, and other forms of adversity in adulthood (Doughty Horn et al., 2016). Grief education serves as an intervention for loss and also as a broader developmental tool that promotes emotional competence, self-efficacy, and long-term psychological well-being.

Conclusion

Integrating grief education into school curricula is a vital and practical response to an experience that is both universal and profoundly impactful. Addressing grief explicitly, schools are able to provide students with emotional knowledge, coping strategies, and the ability to support others, while also reducing stigma and fostering resilience. Curricular inclusion of grief better equips students to navigate loss constructively, enhances social cohesion, and promotes lifelong emotional competence (Dawson et al., 2021; Doughty Horn et al., 2016). Grief education ensures that young people are not left to face loss unprepared, but are instead

empowered with the skills, understanding, and empathy necessary to thrive both personally and within their communities.

Clinical Preventative Benefits of School-based Grief Support

There is a growing acknowledgement that early developmentally informed grief supports these issues that do not remain isolated within the home environment; they manifest in classrooms and peer interactions where students spend the majority of their days. Integrating approaches into school that are clinically grounded becomes a necessary component strategy in preventing the escalation of challenges related to the child's grief. Schools are in the unique position to notice early changes in behavior and functioning; their ability to intervene in a way that is effective depends on collaboration with mental health professionals who understand the complexities of childhood bereavement (Boelen et al., 2021).

A further concern that is raised by some scholars is that increased attention to grief within educational settings could unintentionally pathologize normal emotional responses to loss. Resilience research demonstrates that the majority of bereaved individuals gradually adapt to loss without formal psychological interventions (Bonanno, 2004; Bonanno, Westphal, and Mancini, 2011). From this perspective, framing grief primarily within diagnostic language or emphasizing conditions such as PGD may risk portraying natural sadness, longing, or temporary withdrawal as symptoms of pathology rather than expected reactions to attachment disruption. Scholars have cautioned that excessive focus on clinical frameworks may contribute to the medicalization of a universal human experience, potentially leading individuals to interpret normal fluctuations in grief as signs of dysfunction (Stroebe, Schut, & Boerner, 2017; Wakefield, 2012).

Despite this valid concern, the purpose of grief education is not to medicalize normal mourning but to be able to differentiate between normative grief and situations in which additional support may be necessary. Developmental research consistently demonstrates that while most children eventually integrate loss into their developmental trajectory, a subset of children do experience persistent and impairing distress that can interfere with emotional, social, and academic functioning (Boelen et al., 2021; Sandler et al., 2024). Grief education serves as a preventative role by helping students understand that grief responses vary widely and that seeking support when emotions feel overwhelming is both appropriate and adaptive. Putting an emphasis on emotional literacy, normalization, and help-seeking behaviors, education settings can reduce stigma without labeling ordinary sadness as pathological. This way, grief education balances two important goals: respecting the normality of grief while ensuring that students who experience prolonged or complicated reactions are recognized and supported appropriately.

The Need for School-Clinician Collaboration

Pediatricians and mental health clinicians play an essential role in supporting grieving children, and effective collaboration with schools is critical for meeting student needs (Schonfeld et al., 2024). Many students who are grieving do not display signs of obvious distress during routine school activities, and teachers often feel unsure of how to address or even identify concerns related to grief. Actually, children often suppress their emotional reactions at school due to fears of burdening adults or out of fear of appearing different from peers, and as a result, grief may remain hidden when students are internally struggling (Schonfeld et al. 2024). Oftentimes, educators can misinterpret these difficulties as behavioral problems or a lack of effort, rather than as signs of bereavement-related distress. Pediatric clinicians are trained to

identify these complicated emotions, including addressing the prolonged guilt, fear, withdrawal, and emotional dysregulation associated with childhood bereavement. This means that school staff benefits greatly from guidance that can be provided by these professionals.

Schonfeld et al. (2024) further describe how schools often serve as the setting in which grief triggers emerge. Events such as anniversaries, classroom transitions, academic stress, or peer interactions can trigger a child's sense of loss, and these situations require sensitive and informed responses. It is for this reason that coordinated communication between schools and clinicians is nothing short of essential. Collaboration, such as those ensure that children receive support that is consistent, timely, and responsive to their ever-changing emotional needs. Together, educators and clinicians alike can create a more comprehensive support network that addresses acute grief and also prevents the development of long-term psychological difficulties.

Preventative Clinical Approaches and Why They Belong in Schools

The research on CBT for prolonged grief and the clinical guidance outlined by pediatric experts provide strong evidence for the need for preventative, clinically informed approaches within school settings. Nearly all children are subject to experiencing the death of someone who is close to them during their school years, so grief must be understood as a developmental reality that influences learning and emotional growth, and not an occasional crisis. Preventative practices that are based on clinical evidence have the ability to help students integrate the reality of the loss, reduce maladaptive thinking patterns, and maintain a connection to academic and social environments. Teachers should also be responsible for the knowledge and confidence needed to support grieving students appropriately, rather than leaving them to navigate these responsibilities without adequate training as they currently are.

By embedding these preventative measures into educational settings, schools can create environments that are supportive, where grief is acknowledged, addressed, and understood as a normal part of life. The integration of clinical knowledge, preventative intervention, and educational practice is needed to prepare students for coping with loss, supporting one another, and developing resilience across the lifespan.

What Grief Education Should Look Like

Practical considerations regarding curriculum time also present a challenge to the implementation of grief education. Schools already face significant pressure to meet academic benchmarks in areas such as literacy, mathematics, and standardized testing, often leaving limited space for additional programming (Greenberg et al., 2017; Jones & Kahn, 2017). Critics argue that introducing new emotional education requirements could strain instructional time and divert attention from core academic subjects that are directly tied to school accountability measures. Educators and administrators may question whether grief education is realistically able to be incorporated into already crowded curricula without compromising academic outcomes (Elias et al., 1997; Durlak et al., 2011).

However, research on social-emotional learning (SEL) consistently demonstrates that emotional literacy programs enhance rather than detract from academic functioning. Meta-analytic findings indicate that students participating in SEL interventions show improved academic performance, stronger classroom behavior, and increased engagement compared to peers who do not receive such instruction (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017). These improvements are attributed to gains in emotional regulation, attention, and interpersonal skills, all of which directly support learning. Unresolved grief can interfere with concentration,

motivation, and executive functioning (Linder et al., 2022). Integrating grief education may actually remove barriers to academic success rather than create them. When embedded within the existing SEL frameworks, grief education complements educational priorities by strengthening both emotional well-being and academic achievement (Greenberg et al., 2017; Jones & Kahn, 2017).

If grief education is to be meaningfully integrated into school systems, its structure must reflect developmental science, empirical research, and preventative mental health principles. Grief education should not function solely as a reactive intervention for students who have already experienced bereavement. Rather, it should operate as a universal emotional literacy curriculum that prepares all students to understand loss, regulate complex emotions, and respond sensitively to the suffering of others. Research shows that structured, reflective, and evidence-based programming can increase emotional intelligence, reduce stigma, and foster peer-supported resilience across entire school communities.

A foundational component of effective grief education is the implementation of a self-directed reflective curriculum designed to enhance emotional intelligence among all students. A guided reflection on themes of death and loss significantly improved students' emotional awareness, empathy, and perspective-taking capacities (Dawson et al., 2021). Importantly, this curriculum does not center exclusively on personal bereavement; instead, it encourages students to critically examine cultural attitudes toward death, the variability of grief responses, and the importance of compassionate communication. Such reflective engagement equips non-grieving students with the emotional vocabulary and cognitive flexibility needed to understand peers whose behaviors may shift following a loss.

The importance of grief education for non-bereaved students extends beyond general emotional literacy and directly influences peer dynamics within school settings. Adolescents are highly influenced by peer relationships, and social responses significantly shape grief adjustment trajectories (Sandler et al., 2024). Without explicit instruction, students may avoid grieving classmates due to discomfort, fear of saying the wrong thing, or misconceptions about grief. This avoidance can inadvertently intensify feelings of alienation for bereaved youth. Therefore, a structured grief curriculum can serve a preventative social function by teaching students how to approach grieving peers with sensitivity rather than silence. When students are educated about the variability of grief responses, including withdrawal, irritability, fluctuating concentration, or changes in social engagement, they are less likely to see these behaviors as rejection or misconduct. Instead, they are more prepared to respond with patience, validation, and inclusive peer support.

Empathy-building is further strengthened through structured classroom practices that model compassionate engagement. Legacy-building interventions provide opportunities for collective acknowledgment of loss within developmentally appropriate boundaries (Lawrence et al., 2022). Classroom-based legacy projects, such as reflective writing, symbolic rituals, or shared remembrance activities, not only assist grieving students in meaning-making but also teach non-grieving peers how to respectfully participate in commemorative practices. Through guided participation, students learn that support does not require eliminating another's pain, but rather bearing witness to it with presence and care. Experiences such as these cultivate social empathy and reduce the stigma that often surrounds bereavement.

Developmental considerations are especially important when implementing legacy-building work. The *Appendix B Middle School and High School Legacy Building Sample Lesson Plan* outlines age-appropriate models for facilitating reflective writing, symbolic projects, and guided dialogue among adolescents. At the secondary level, students are able to engage in abstract discussions about identity, values, and the long-term influence of loss. Structured legacy activities allow them to explore these themes within a supportive environment while also reinforcing peer solidarity. Participation in these exercises should remain voluntary and trauma-informed to ensure that students are not pressured into disclosure but are instead offered safe avenues for expression.

In addition to reflective and commemorative practices, grief education should incorporate empirically supported coping skill development. Sandler et al. (2024) identify emotional expression, cognitive restructuring, caregiver communication, and the development of an internal locus of control as critical protective factors in adaptive grief trajectories. Within school-based curricula, these principles can be translated into instruction on emotional identification, challenging maladaptive self-blame, problem-solving skills, and the maintenance of routine and peer connection. Importantly, these coping skills benefit not only bereaved youth but also their classmates. When non-grieving students develop emotional regulation and communication skills, they are better equipped to provide appropriate peer support and less likely to withdraw from or stigmatize grieving individuals.

Bibliotherapy further enhances developmentally sensitive communication about death and fosters empathic understanding. Joy (2024) underscores the value of carefully selected literature in facilitating age-appropriate conversations about mortality and grief. Through guided

reading and discussion, students are exposed to diverse narratives of loss, which promote perspective-taking and reduce social discomfort surrounding death-related topics. Shared literary experiences provide non-grieving students with structured opportunities to imaginatively engage with bereavement experiences, thereby strengthening their capacity for compassionate peer interaction.

A comprehensive model of grief education should function within a tiered preventative framework. Universal instruction establishes foundational emotional literacy and peer sensitivity across the entire student body. Targeted small-group interventions provide additional support for students experiencing bereavement. Individual referral pathways ensure that students exhibiting symptoms consistent with prolonged or traumatic grief receive appropriate clinical care. This structure avoids over-pathologizing normative sadness while maintaining safeguards for students at risk of chronic intrusive grief trajectories (Sandler et al., 2024).

Ultimately, grief education should cultivate a school culture in which loss is acknowledged, emotional expression is normalized, and peer compassion is explicitly taught. When students are equipped with the knowledge and skills to approach grieving peers thoughtfully and respectfully, schools become environments that buffer rather than compound the social isolation associated with bereavement. Through reflective curriculum (Dawson et al., 2021), legacy-based classroom practices (Lawrence et al., 2022), evidence-based coping instruction (Sandler et al., 2024), and bibliotherapy-informed dialogue (Joy, 2024), grief education can function not merely as a crisis response but as a preventative developmental investment in empathy, resilience, and communal responsibility.

Introduction to Lesson Plan

To translate the theoretical and empirical findings of this paper into practical application, the following lesson plans demonstrate how grief education can be implemented across developmental stages within school settings. Drawing on research related to developmental manifestations of grief, coping mechanisms, family and environmental influences, and evidence-based interventions, these lessons are intentionally structured to align with children's cognitive and emotional capacities at different ages.

Each lesson integrates core principles identified in the literature, such as emotional literacy, meaning-making, normalization of grief responses, and the development of adaptive coping strategies, while also incorporating expression and social learning modalities (Heath et al., 2008; Alvis et al., 2022). By putting these evidence-based components into classroom instruction, the lesson plans act as a preventative intervention that promotes resilience and reduces the likelihood of maladaptive grief trajectories (Boelen et al., 2021; Sandler et al., 2024).

Lesson Plan A: Early Elementary (Grades K-2)

Lesson Plan 1, "*Understanding Feelings When Someone is Gone*," is designed to introduce early elementary students to grief through emotional recognition and expression rather than abstract conceptualization (Appendix A). This approach is grounded in developmental research which indicates that younger children do not yet fully understand the permanence of death and instead experience grief through behavioral and emotional responses (Schonfeld et al., 2024). Children at this developmental stage often engage in egocentric and concrete thinking; sometimes the death can even be perceived as reversible and expressing grief through confusion, regression, or symbolic behaviors rather than verbal articulation (Schonfeld et al., 2024).

These developmental limitations cause a need for the simplification of expressing emotions associated with loss. Helping students recognize and express basic emotions associated with loss aligns with research that puts an emphasis on emotional literacy as a foundational coping skill. Grief is a multifaceted emotional response that requires the ability to identify and process feelings to be adaptively integrated (Doughty Horn et al., 2013). When children do not have the language to describe their emotions, grief may manifest through behavioral disruptions such as irritability, withdrawal, or difficulty concentrating (Hung & Rabin, 2009). Therefore, structured opportunities to identify emotions such as sadness, confusion, fear, and anger serve as protective factors that support adaptive grief trajectories and reduce the likelihood of prolonged distress (Sandler et al., 2024).

The lesson's integration of children's literature reflects evidence supporting bibliotherapy as an effective, developmentally appropriate intervention. Books such as *The Invisible String* and *When Dinosaurs Die* externalize grief in symbolic and narrative forms, allowing children to engage with complex emotions indirectly and safely. This aligns with research demonstrating that storytelling facilitates emotional processing and meaning-making in children by giving concrete representations of abstract experiences (Joy, 2024). Through guided discussion, students are able to observe and interpret characters' emotions, which strengthens both empathy and emotional regulation.

Also, the use of emotion identification activities directly addresses findings that children benefit from structured tools that help them label and organize their emotional experiences. Articulation of emotions is closely tied to improved emotional regulation and reduced internalizing symptoms, specifically in the context of bereavement (Alvis et al., 2022). A range

of emotional responses can be normalized through the lesson, which reinforces the idea that grief is not a singular or pathological experience, but rather a natural reaction to loss (Hung & Rabin, 2009).

The incorporation of creative expression through drawing and music-based reflection further reflects evidence that young children heavily rely on nonverbal modes of communication when processing grief. Expressive interventions such as art, music, and play allow children to externalize emotions that they may not yet have the cognitive or linguistic capacity to verbalize (Heath et al., 2008). These modalities are able to adequately support both loss-oriented and restoration-oriented coping, as it was described in the Dual Process Model, by allowing children to oscillate between engaging with emotional pain and participating in adaptive, restorative activities (Stroebe & Schut, 1999).

Importantly, the lesson emphasizes the normalization and communication a child can have with trusted adults, which is strongly supported by research identifying supportive caregiving and open emotional dialogue as critical protective factors in childhood grief. Children who are encouraged to express their emotions within a responsive environment are more likely to develop adaptive coping strategies and demonstrate resilience over time (Sandler et al., 2024). On the other hand, environments that discourage emotional expression may increase the risk of maladaptive coping and prolonged grief symptoms (Hung & Rabin, 2009).

Overall, Lesson Plan 1 translates developmental theory and empirical research into a practical classroom intervention that supports early emotional literacy, promotes adaptive coping, and normalizes grief as a universal human experience. The alignment of instructional

strategies with children's cognitive and emotional capacities, the lesson provides a developmentally appropriate foundation for lifelong resilience in the face of loss.

Lesson Plan B: Middle School (Grade 6-8)

Lesson Plan B reflects the developmental and social complexity of grief during early adolescence, particularly the growing capacity for perspective-taking and the increasing importance of peer relationships. As outlined in the literature, middle school students begin to understand the variability of grief responses but may struggle with how to respond appropriately to others' experiences (Schonfeld et al., 2024). This lesson directly addresses that gap by emphasizing empathy, normalization, and peer support skills.

At this stage, grief is both an internal emotional experience and also a social one, as adolescents become increasingly aware of how their reactions are perceived by peers. Research shows that social context plays a critical role in shaping grief trajectories, with supportive peer environments acting as protective factors against prolonged distress (Sandler et al., 2024). By incorporating grief into a peer-based framework, this lesson acknowledges that middle school students often turn to one another for support, even when they lack the tools to respond effectively.

The introductory discussion of grief variability aligns with Stroebe and Schut's (1999) Dual Process Model, which underscores that individuals oscillate between emotional confrontation and restoration-oriented coping. By teaching students that there is no "right way" to grieve, the lesson helps prevent rigid or judgmental interpretations of others' emotional responses, which is especially important given adolescents' sensitivity to peer norms.

This normalization is important in particular for preventing maladaptive beliefs, such as the idea that grief should follow a linear timeline or that certain emotions (e.g., anger or numbness) are inappropriate. Challenging these misconceptions early reduces the likelihood of internalized shame or emotional suppression, which are associated with more complicated grief outcomes (Alvis et al., 2022).

The use of literature and media, as shown (e.g., *Bridge to Terabithia*, *A Monster Calls*), supports meaning-making processes identified as central to adaptive coping (Joy, 2024). These narratives allow students to externalize grief and observe diverse responses, reinforcing findings that children benefit from indirect and symbolic engagement with loss and emotional expression (Heath et al., 2008). Furthermore, engaging with fictional characters creates psychological distance, allowing students to safely explore complex emotions without the pressure of personal disclosure. This aligns with research suggesting that symbolic processing can facilitate emotional understanding while minimizing defensiveness or discomfort in group settings (Heath et al., 2008). Similarly, the music reflection activity connects to research suggesting that emotional expression through nonverbal modalities enhances emotional processing and identity development in adolescence (Alvis et al., 2022). Music, in particular, serves as a culturally relevant medium by which adolescents often process and communicate emotions. Incorporating music into the lesson helps encourage students to connect it to their own lived experiences and emotional identities, reinforcing the role of creative expression as a form of restoration-oriented coping (Stroebe & Schut, 1999).

The scenario-based empathy activity emphasizes the importance of social environments in shaping grief trajectories (Sandler et al., 2024). By practicing supportive responses, students

are actively contributing to a peer culture that fosters open communication and emotional validation, protective factors associated with resilience rather than chronic grief outcomes. Importantly, this activity moves beyond awareness and into skill building. Students will be able to build awareness as well as skill-building. Rather than simply understanding grief conceptually, students rehearse concrete supportive behaviors (e.g., active listening, validating statements), which increases the likelihood that they will respond effectively in real-life situations; this reflects the broader goal of preventative intervention by equipping students with interpersonal tools that can mitigate isolation among grieving peers.

The reflective writing component also aligns with expressive intervention strategies shown to facilitate emotional articulation and cognitive integrations of loss (Heath et al., 2008). This activity provides a private and developmentally appropriate outlet for processing, which is crucial given that adolescents sometimes suppress emotions to maintain social standing (Schonfeld et al., 2024).

Overall, Lesson Plan B addresses the developmental and social complexities of early adolescent grief by emphasizing empathy, normalization, and peer-based support. This lesson plan is grounded in research and recognizes that middle school students are increasingly influenced by peer relationships, yet often lack the skills to respond effectively to others' grief. By incorporating frameworks such as the Dual Process Model (Stroebe & Schut, 1999) and emphasizing variability in grief responses, the lesson challenges maladaptive beliefs and reduces stigma. Activities that include literature analysis, music reflection, scenario-based practice, and expressive writing help to promote symbolic processing, emotional expression, and meaning-making, key components of adaptive coping (Heath et al., 2008; Alvis et al., 2022). This lesson

plan moves beyond awareness to skill-building, equipping students with practical tools to foster supportive peer environments and mitigate the risk of prolonged or complicated grief.

Lesson Plan C: High School (Grades 9-12)

Lesson Plan C builds upon adolescents' advanced cognitive and emotional capacities by directly integrating psychological frameworks, mental health awareness, and coping strategies. At this stage of development, individuals are able to engage in abstract reasoning and identity-based reflection, making it appropriate to introduce distinctions between normative grief and pathological grief, such as PGD (Boelen et al., 2021).

In addition to increased cognitive capacity, adolescence is marked by heightened emotional intensity, identity exploration, and vulnerability to risk-taking behaviors, all of which can complicate the grieving process. As the literature suggests, grief during this stage is not only about loss itself, but also about how that loss reshapes an individual's sense of self, future orientation, and interpersonal relationships (Schonfeld et al., 2024). They are intentionally designed to move beyond basic emotional recognition and toward deeper psychological understanding and self-reflection. High school students are also at a developmental point where they are forming long-term beliefs about mental health, coping, and help-seeking behaviors. As such, this lesson not only addresses grief as an emotional experience but situates it within broader psychological and clinical frameworks, helping to reduce stigma and increase mental health literacy. This emphasis on mental health literacy directly reflects research indicating that adolescents who are educated about psychological processes are more likely to engage in adaptive coping and seek support when needed (Edwards et al., 2023). By framing grief within a

mental health context, the lesson normalizes emotional struggle while also reinforcing that support and intervention are both appropriate and accessible.

The psychoeducation component is directly informed by research emphasizing the importance of differentiating typical grief from maladaptive patterns. By teaching students about prolonged distress and variability in grief timelines, the lesson addresses the risks of pathologizing normal grief and overlooking signs of impairment, an issue that is highlighted throughout the literature (Boelen et al., 2021). This distinction is important because it helps students understand that while grief is a universal and expectable response, it can, under certain conditions, develop into more impairing forms that require additional support. This is reinforced by the findings that approximately 5–10% of bereaved youth experience PGD, particularly in the absence of protective factors such as open communication and stable support systems (Boelen et al., 2021). By naming these distinctions explicitly, the lesson equips students with the knowledge to recognize when grief may be interfering with functioning in academic, social, or personal domains.

The integration of literature and film allows students to critically evaluate coping strategies, aligning with cognitive-behavioral principles that focus on identifying and modifying maladaptive thoughts and behaviors. This reflects the mechanisms of CBT Grief-Help, which targets avoidance, negative beliefs, and emotional dysregulation (Boelen et al., 2021). Through discussion, students learn to distinguish between adaptive and maladaptive coping in a way that is very close to the therapeutic intervention process. This component also facilitates metacognitive engagement, as students are encouraged to analyze what characters feel and also how they interpret and respond to those emotions. For example, identifying patterns such as self-

blame, avoidance, or hopelessness in characters allows students to externalize and critically examine these cognitive distortions; this mirrors core CBT strategies, particularly cognitive restructuring, which has been shown to significantly reduce grief-related distress (Boelen et al., 2021).

The coping strategies workshop explicitly translates research on adaptive coping into practice. By identifying healthy versus unhealthy coping mechanisms, students participate in an activity that is supported by the findings from Alvis et al. (2022) and Heath et al. (2008), which emphasize emotional expression, routine maintenance, and social support as key protective factors. This also reflects the restoration-oriented component of the Dual Process Model, encouraging re-engagement with daily life while still acknowledging emotional pain (Stroebe & Schut, 1999).

Furthermore, this activity reinforces the concept that coping is not about eliminating grief but about managing it in ways that allow continued functioning and development. By presenting coping as a dynamic and individualized process, the lesson aligns with the Dual Process Model's emphasis on oscillation between confronting and avoiding grief. This helps students understand that periods of distraction, engagement in activities, or even moments of happiness are not signs of "moving on" too quickly, but rather a vital component of adaptive adjustment (Stroebe & Schut, 1999).

Additionally, explicitly contrasting healthy and unhealthy coping behaviors helps students recognize risk factors for maladaptive outcomes, such as avoidance, substance use, or social withdrawal, which are particularly prevalent during adolescence (Boelen et al., 2021). By identifying these patterns in a structured setting, the lesson functions as a preventative

intervention, equipping students with the awareness needed to make more adaptive choices in response to distress.

The inclusion of resource awareness further strengthens this preventative framework by addressing a key gap in adolescent help-seeking behavior. Even when students recognize distress, they often do not have the knowledge of how to access support or may perceive stigma in doing so. Introducing school-based services, crisis resources, and trusted adults, the lesson increases both accessibility and likelihood of support utilization, reinforcing findings that school systems play a critical role in early identification and intervention (Edwards et al., 2023).

The closing reflection activity supports meaning-making, which is a process identified as essential for integrating loss into one's identity and long-term psychological adjustment (Joy, 2024). By encouraging students to communicate their own personal insights, the lesson promotes deeper cognitive and emotional processing, allowing grief to be incorporated into broader life situations rather than remaining a source of disruption. This aligns with resilience trajectories described by Sandler et al. (2024), in which individuals are able to adapt to loss without prolonged dysfunction.

Overall, Lesson Plan C reflects a comprehensive, developmentally appropriate, and evidence-based approach to grief education. By integrating psychoeducation, cognitive-behavioral skill development, emotional expression, and resource awareness, the lesson addresses immediate emotional needs and also serves as a preventative model that equips adolescents with the tools necessary to navigate future experiences of loss in adaptive and resilient ways.

Conclusion

Grief is a universal experience that intersects with nearly every stage of childhood and adolescence. As the literature throughout this thesis demonstrates, experiences of loss are not rare disruptions but rather expected aspects of development that require appropriate emotional processing and support (Alvis et al., 2022; Schonfeld & Demaria, 2016). When effectively supported, grief can be integrated into an individual's developmental trajectory without long-term impairment. However, when it is unmanaged, it produces significant emotional, academic, and long-term psychological consequences, including anxiety, depression, academic disengagement, and the potential emergence of prolonged grief disorder (Boelen et al., 2021).

Although families play a critical protective role in buffering the effects of loss, they often require systemic reinforcement. Caregivers may themselves be grieving, emotionally unavailable, or uncertain about how to support a child's needs, limiting their ability to provide consistent guidance (Alvis et al., 2022). In these cases, the absence of additional support structures increases the likelihood that grief will go unrecognized or be misinterpreted as behavioral or academic problems. This highlights the importance of external systems of care that extend beyond the family unit.

Schools are uniquely positioned to intervene; however, they remain largely unprepared to support grieving students. As one of the most consistent and accessible environments in a child's life, schools have the capacity to provide stability, routine, and access to supportive adults. Although without formal training or structured programming, many educators lack the confidence and knowledge to respond effectively to student grief (Schonfeld & Demaria, 2016). As a consequence, grief frequently manifests in ways that are misunderstood, such as withdrawal, irritability, or declining academic performance, leading to disciplinary responses

rather than supportive interventions (Dawson et al., 2021). This gap not only exacerbates student distress but also perpetuates stigma surrounding grief and emotional expression.

Given the empirical evidence supporting both school-based grief education and clinical intervention, grief education should be formally mandated within school curricula.

Conceptualizing grief education as a preventative, developmentally informed practice rather than a reactive or clinical measure allows schools to proactively equip students with essential emotional skills. Research consistently demonstrates that emotional literacy, coping strategies, and opportunities for open discussion significantly improve adjustment outcomes and reduce the risk of prolonged or complicated grief responses (Boelen et al., 2021; Schonfeld & Demaria, 2016).

The scaffolded lesson plans presented in this thesis illustrate how grief education can be effectively integrated across developmental stages. In early childhood, approaches centered on emotional identification and expression align with children's limited cognitive understanding but strong emotional awareness (Hung & Rabin, 2009). At the middle school level, instruction that emphasizes empathy, normalization, and peer support reflects adolescents' increasing reliance on social relationships (Dawson et al., 2021). By high school, students are capable of engaging with complex psychological frameworks, allowing for deeper exploration of coping strategies, mental health awareness, and distinctions between normative and prolonged grief (Boelen et al., 2021). This developmental progression reinforces that grief education is not a one-time intervention, but an ongoing process that evolves alongside the individual.

Importantly, integrating grief education into school curricula benefits not only bereaved students but the broader student population. Exposure to structured conversations about loss

fosters empathy, reduces stigma, and prepares all students to navigate future experiences of grief, both their own and others'. In this way, grief education functions as both a preventative and community-building tool, strengthening social connectedness and emotional resilience within the school environment (Schonfeld & Demaria, 2016).

Ultimately, the absence of grief education reflects a broader limitation within educational systems: a tendency to prioritize academic achievement over emotional development. However, these domains are not mutually exclusive; emotional well-being is foundational to cognitive functioning, academic success, and long-term psychological health. By formally incorporating grief education into school curricula, educators and policymakers can begin to address this imbalance, ensuring that students are not only intellectually prepared but also emotionally equipped to navigate life's most profound and inevitable challenges.

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Appendix A

Sample Grief Education Curriculum

Introductory Framing Paragraph

To further demonstrate the practical implementation of grief education, the following expanded lesson plans provide developmentally appropriate instruction across elementary, middle, and high school levels. Each lesson integrates emotional literacy with culturally relevant materials, including literature, music, and multimedia, to help students engage with grief in accessible and meaningful ways. These materials are intentionally selected to model diverse expressions of loss while reinforcing that grief is a universal yet highly individualized experience.

Parental Consent and Ethical Considerations

Before implementing this grief education curriculum, parental/guardian consent should be obtained. Given the sensitive nature of grief and loss, families must be informed about the content, goals, and activities involved in each lesson. Communication should emphasize that student participation in personal sharing is always voluntary and that alternative assignments will be provided if needed. Additionally, parents should be made aware of available school counseling resources in the event that the material elicits emotional responses requiring further support. This approach ensures transparency, respects family preferences, and aligns with ethical standards for working with minors in emotionally sensitive contexts.

Lesson Plan A: Early Elementary (Grades K–2)

Lesson Title: Understanding Feelings When Someone Is Gone

Duration: 30–40 minutes

Main Learning Objective:

- Students will be able to recognize, label, and express basic emotions associated with loss using words, visuals, storytelling, and other forms of creative expression.

Developmental Context:

- Children in early elementary school tend to understand death in concrete and sometimes reversible terms. They may not fully grasp permanence, but are highly responsive to emotional cues. At this stage, instruction should focus on naming feelings and normalizing emotional expression, rather than abstract explanations of death (Schonfeld & Demaria, 2016; Worden, 2018).

Expanded Lesson Procedure:**1. Opening Conversation (5 minutes)****Teacher gently introduces the concept of missing someone:**

- “Sometimes people or pets go away or die, and that can make us feel many different things.”
- Students are invited (but not required) to share simple experiences
 - “Have you ever missed someone?”
 - “What did that feel like?”

Teacher Role:

- Validate all responses without correction
- Avoid minimizing statements (“don’t be sad”)
- Normalize the variation of feelings

Rationale:

This establishes psychological safety and models that emotional expression is acceptable (Alvis et al., 2022)

2. Literature Integration (10 minutes)

Teacher reads an age-appropriate book such as:

- The Invisible String (by Patrice Karst)
- When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death (by Laurie Krasny Brown)
- Ida, Always (by Caron Levis and Charles Santoso)

Interactive reading strategy:

Pause during reading to ask:

- “How is the character feeling right now?”
- “What helped them when they were sad?”
- “What do you see in the picture that shows this feeling?”

Rationale:

Stories provide a symbolic representation of grief, allowing children to externalize complex emotions safely (Hung & Rabin, 2009).

3. Emotion Identification Activity (10 minutes)

Students use an emotion chart to identify feelings in the story:

Students are shown a visual emotion chart with faces and words:

- Sad
- Confused
- Scared
- Angry

Students identify emotions from the story and match them to visuals.

Teacher reinforces:

- “All of these feelings are okay.”
- “There are no wrong feelings.”

Rationale:

Developing emotional vocabulary is foundational for later coping and regulation (Schonfeld & Demaria, 2016).

4. Music/Sensory Reflection (5 minutes)

Play a gentle instrumental piece such as:

- Gymnopédie No. 1

Ask Students:

- “What feeling does this music remind you of?”
- “Does it feel calm, sad, or something else?”

Rationale:

Young children often express emotion nonverbally; music provides an alternative pathway for emotional processing (Alvis et al., 2022).

5. Creative Expression Activity (10 minutes)

Students draw:

- someone or something they care about
- or how they feel when they miss someone

Teacher circulates and gently prompts:

- “Tell me about your drawing.”

- “What feelings did you draw?”

Rationale:

Art allows expression when **language is limited**, making it a developmentally appropriate coping tool (Worden, 2018).

6. Closing Reflection (5 minutes)**Teacher reinforces:**

- “It’s okay to feel lots of different things when we miss someone.”
- “We can talk to people we trust when we have feelings about loss.”

Students are invited to share one feeling word they learned.

Assessment (Informal)

- Ability to identify at least one emotion
- Participation in drawing or discussion
- Engagement with story content

Appendix B

Lesson Plan B: Middle School (Grades 6–8)

Lesson Title: Understanding Grief and Supporting Others

Duration: 45–60 minutes

Main Learning Objective:

Students will be able to:

1. Explain how grief responses vary among individuals
2. Demonstrate at least two ways to support a peer experiencing loss

Developmental Rationale:

- Adolescents begin developing abstract thinking and empathy, but are highly influenced by peer dynamics. Instruction should focus on normalization, perspective-taking, and social support skills (Dawson et al., 2021).

Expanded Lesson Procedure

1. Introduction to Grief (10 minutes)

Teacher presents key ideas:

- Grief includes many emotions (sadness, anger, numbness)
- There is no “right way” to grieve
- People grieve differently based on their experiences.

Interactive Prompt:

- “Why do you think two people might react differently to the same loss?”

Rationale:

Promotes cognitive flexibility and reduces judgment of others’ grief responses.

2. Literature and Media Integration (10 minutes)

Students engage with excerpts from:

- Bridge to Terabithia (directed by Gabor Csupo)
- A Monster Calls (directed by J.A. Bayona)
- Optional Inside Out clip

Discussion Questions:

- “How does the character show their grief?”
- Why might they act this way?”
- “What would you think if this were your friend?”

Rationale:

Media helps adolescents analyze emotions through narrative distance, making discussion safer (Schonfeld & Demaria, 2016).

3. Music Reflection (5 minutes)

Play a song such as:

- See You Again by Wiz Khalifa and Charlie Puth

Ask:

- “What emotions does this song express?”
- “Why do people use music when they are grieving?”

Rationale:

Music is strongly tied to identity and emotional processing in adolescence.

4. Scenario-Based Empathy Activity (15 minutes)

Students analyze scenarios involving:

- death of a grandparent
- parental divorce
- loss of a pet

They answer:

- “What might this person feel?”
- “What could you say or do to help?”
- “What should you avoid saying?”

Teacher emphasizes:

- Listening > fixing
- Avoid cliches (“everything happens for a reason”)

Rationale:

Builds applied empathy and social competence, critical at this stage (Dawson et al., 2021)

5. Reflective Writing (10–15 minutes)

Students write privately respond to:

- “Describe a time you experienced loss or change.”

OR

- “How would you support a grieving friend?”

Rationale:

Encourages self-reflection and emotional processing, which supports identity development.

6. Closing Discussion (5 minutes)

Teacher reinforces:

- Listening matters more than “fixing.”

- Everyone grieves differently
- You don't need the perfect words—being there is what matters.

Assessment:

- Participation in discussion
- Quality of empathy responses
- Reflection depth (not graded on personal disclosure)

Appendix C

Lesson Plan C: High School (Grades 9–12)

Lesson Title: Grief, Mental Health, and Coping Strategies

Duration: 60 minutes

Main Learning Objective:

- Differentiate between typical grief and prolonged grief disorder (PGD)
- Identify healthy vs. maladaptive coping strategies
- Recognize when to seek help

Developmental Rationale:

- High school students possess advanced abstract reasoning and self-reflection abilities, allowing them to engage with grief in relation to mental health, identity, and future orientation. Instruction can include more direct discussion of psychological frameworks and coping strategies (Boelen et al., 2021).

Expanded Lesson Procedure

1. Psychoeducation (15 minutes)

Teacher introduces:

- Typical grief vs. prolonged grief disorder (PGD)
- Variability in timelines
- Signs of concern:
 - Persistent impairment
 - Intense longing
 - Avoidance

Rationale:

Promotes mental health literacy and early intervention awareness.

2. Literature and Media Integration (10 minutes)**Students engage with excerpts from:**

- The Fault in Our Stars (directed by Josh Boone)
- Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close (Jonathan Safran Foer)

Optional film:

- Manchester by the Sea

Discussion:

- “What coping strategies do you see?”
- “Which are helpful vs. harmful?”

Rationale:

Encourages critical thinking about coping behaviors

3. Music Analysis (10 minutes)**Students listen to:**

- Supermarket Flowers (by Ed Sheeran)
- Hurt (by Johnny Cash)
- Students can also pick their own song about grief and discuss with the same discussion questions

Discussion questions:

- “How does music communicate grief?”
- “Why do people relate to these songs?”

Rationale:

Facilitates emotional insights and cultural connection.

4. Coping Strategies Workshop (15 minutes)**Students identify and categorize:**

- Healthy coping
 - Talking to others
 - Journaling
 - Exercise
 - Therapy
- Unhealthy coping
 - Avoidance
 - Substance use
 - Isolation

Teacher adds nuance:

- “Some coping strategies feel good in the short term but harm long-term.”

Rationale:

Builds practical emotional regulation skills.

5. Resource Awareness (5–10 minutes)**Teacher introduces:**

- school counseling services
- crisis resources
- trusted adults

Important Framing:

“Asking for help is a strength, not a weakness.”

Rationale:

Reduces stigma and barriers to help-seeking (Boelen et al., 2021).

6. Closing Reflection (5 minutes)**Students write:**

- “One insight I gained about grief is...”
- “One way I would support myself or others is...”

Assessment

- Participation in discussion
- Accuracy in identifying coping strategies
- Reflection demonstrating understanding