

**TEACHERS' BEREAVEMENT EXPERIENCES AFTER THE SUDDEN AND  
VIOLENT DEATH OF A STUDENT: AN EXPLORATION OF LIVED  
EXPERIENCES**

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## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to Matt Flitton.

Trying to find a light in the dark.

We miss you.

## **Abstract**

Following the deaths of students, teachers have expectations to be grieving role models and perform similar roles to helping professionals when they care and support grieving children (Rowling, 1995). Yet teachers' bereavement is sparsely documented in academic literature. This research focuses on discovering more about the bereavement experiences of teachers who have their student(s) die suddenly and violently. After five individual, semi-structured interviews, five thematic categories emerged: (1) So Much More Than Teaching; (2) Student Death Lifts the Curriculum Veil; (3) Place of Work, Place of Grief, Place of Being; (4) Teachers May Not Wave for Help on the Healing Journey; and (5) No Two Sudden Deaths Are the Same. Death and difficulty go together in unique ways with teachers who lose a student to death, but there are narratives of others, research, and practical supports by administration, counselling, teacher educators, and colleagues that can mediate grief in healthier ways.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Problem

Throughout the world, death touches the lives of school-going children for a variety of reasons, including the sudden and violent death of a fellow classmate (McGovern & Tracey, 2010). Schools become more than just a place of academic learning during such times of bereavement since that is what society has come to expect, positioning teachers as important grieving role models (Cullinan, 1990; Rowling & Holland, 2000). If society expects teachers to aid in fostering adaptive grieving in the classroom, then teachers themselves must be able to adequately cope with the loss of their students (Cullinan, 1990). Although assumed capable of being a “supportive, emotionally detached adult who can perform this role,” this might not always be the case (Rowling, 1995, p. 317), especially in circumstances of violent loss (i.e., accident, homicide, suicide), which has been associated with several factors that contribute to prolonged complicated grief (Armour 2007; Green 2000; Rando, 1993).

Unfortunately, very few studies have focused on the bereavement experience of teachers, with Rowling (1995) being the primary foundational article. Rowling (1995) found that teachers experience disenfranchised grief because of conflicting personal and professional values that put restrictions on their open expression of bereavement. According to Rowling (1995), social context plays a huge role, because conceptualizations of death, grieving norms, expectations placed on teachers, and the school’s current grief protocols are all culturally sensitive constructs contributing to a teacher’s grieving experience.

### **Purpose of this Study**

The purpose of this study was to discover more about the bereavement experiences of teachers who have had a student or multiple students die in a manner by which the academic literature categorizes as violent loss. Accordingly, the main research question was as follows: “What is the bereavement experience of teachers who have had their student(s) die suddenly and violently?” Van Manen’s (1990) phenomenological methodology was adopted to explore the essence of teachers’ bereavement experiences pertaining to the sudden and violent death of their student(s) in hopes that the findings will help the public better understand what that experience is like.

### **Outline of Design**

Data was collected through individual, semi-structured interviews, which provided a framework for researching this sensitive subject, while also allowing the freedom to explore participant responses (Patton, 2002). Because death is considered a “sensitive” topic, it was most appropriate to do in-person interviews (McCosker, Barnard, & Gerber, 2001). Five emergent themes were noted and a rich description was developed from the collected, organized, and transcribed interview data (Creswell, 2013).

### **Significance of this Study**

Understanding teachers’ bereavement experiences after the sudden and violent death of their student(s) is important because there is an underlying expectation for teachers to be supportive and a role model of adaptive mourning for their grieving students (Rowling 1995). During times of bereavement for youth the presence of trustworthy adults can greatly influence mourning, meaning teachers’ grief reactions are significant (Lane, Rowland, & Beinart, 2014; O’Brien & McGuckin, 2014). Furthermore,

when a student passes away teachers perform roles similar to helping professionals (e.g., emergency service personnel, nurses, or social workers) when they care and support grieving children, but without the same level of recognition (Rowling, 1995). The sudden loss of a student is “a traumatic incident in the workplace” for teachers (Rowling, 1995, p. 325). However, it appears hardly anyone is asking teachers how they are doing after such a loss since very few studies focus on teachers’ bereavement experiences. Rowling (1995) discovered that many of the factors that influence teachers’ grieving experience are sociocultural constructs; therefore there is a need for a study to be done specifically on a Canadian population. This study aims to fill a major gap in the academic literature and can inform and foster future services for teachers affected by the death of a student.

## Chapter 2: Background Information

### Defining Loss, Grief, and Mourning

According to Rando (1993), loss can be broken down into two general categories: physical loss and psychosocial loss. A physical loss is classified as such because it is tangible in nature (e.g., stolen car, burnt down house, or amputation of limb), whereas a psychosocial loss, also referred to as a symbolic loss, is an intangible loss (e.g., divorce, retirement, or the crushing of a dream). Physical losses are easier for outsiders or other people to recognize over psychosocial losses (Rando, 1993).

A *secondary loss* can be physical or psychosocial and coincide with, or develop as a result of, the initial loss (Rando, 1993). For example, when a pet dies, the owner may experience a secondary loss when they lose their desire to go for daily morning walks. *Bereavement* is a related term to loss in that it describes “the state of having suffered a loss” and always refers to a death (Rando, 1993, p. 20).

Rando (1993) defines grief as “the process of experiencing the psychological, behavioural, social, and physical reactions to the perception of loss” (p. 22). Five important implications arise when defining grief in such a manner:

- Grief can be experienced through psychological, behavioural, social, and physical means. Those four categories encompass aspects like attitude, cognition, personal demeanor, interaction with others, and physical health (Rando, 1993).
- Grief is not static, but rather a continuing process that evolves and changes over time (Rando, 1993).

- Grief is natural and an expected reaction. Depending on the circumstances the absence of grieving reactions may be an indicator of pathology (Bowlby, 1980; Lindemann, 1944; Rando, 1993).
- Death is not the only loss that warrants grief reactions; all kinds of losses can elicit a grief reaction (Rando, 1993).
- Grief is a highly personal process, thus unique and highly dependent upon a person's perception of loss. Grief can be a completely individual experience, meaning it does not need to be recognized socially or validated by another person to exist (Rando, 1993).

Following Rando's (1993) conceptualization, grief can be summarized as one's reaction to loss and the beginning of mourning. In other words, grief encompasses what a person thinks and feels on the inside after experiencing a loss (Wolfelt, 2015).

Traditionally conceptualized as cultural and/or public grief behaviours and rituals, the definition of mourning has come to mean more than just that (Rando, 1993). Rando differentiates mourning from grief by making the distinction that grief represents the passive reactions that come from experiencing a loss, whereas mourning can be thought of as the conscious and unconscious processes involved when actively working to adapt to a loss. In other words, mourning involves being an active participant in the grieving journey (Wolfelt, 2015). Rando proposes that a person can be mourning without manifesting any psychological, behavioural, social, or physical grief reactions in that moment. In contrast, a person may feel like they are no longer mourning (have successfully integrated the loss into their life), but experience random moments of intense grief reactions. The distinction between grieving and mourning is important to make,

because grief represents the reaction to a loss and is the beginning of mourning, but on the other hand, mourning is not necessarily a part of the grieving process because some people never actively adapt to life after a loss (Rando, 1993). According to Wolfelt (2015), in order to heal after the death of a loved one, a person must not only grieve, but mourn as well.

## **Grief: A Brief History**

### **Traditional conceptualizations and models.**

One may think that death and grieving, being two very universal experiences would have a singular conceptualization, but in reality, various conceptualizations have been proposed in the academic literature throughout the years (Granek, 2010).

**Darwin.** Charles Darwin (1873) wrote a book, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, where he documented the expressions of sorrow and grief in human adults and children, while also doing the same for animals. Darwin's outline of human reactions to grief included frantic and motionless behaviours. Additionally, Darwin noted that weeping was a grief reaction that spanned across multiple species, including monkeys. According to Worden (2009), Darwin was not alone in documenting grieving in the animal kingdom; several researchers, such as Konrad Lorenz and George Engel, documented grief reactions, such as pacing and loss of appetite, in various animals like the greylag goose, an ostrich, and dolphins. It is held that the early substantial documentation of grieving in the animal kingdom has influenced the thinking of many psychiatrists to develop a biologically based theory of grief (Worden, 2009).

**Freud.** A pioneer in several aspects of psychology, grief being no exception, Sigmund Freud's (1917) publication *Mourning and Melancholia* was one of the earlier

contributions to explore the phenomenon of grief and greatly impacted future psychological research. “Grief work” is arguably the most influential idea that Freud introduced because several aspects underlying grief work have remained foundational to Western psychological research, like the assumption mourning is an active process that involves the time and energy of the mourner (Granek, 2010). Freud’s (1917) grief work involved giving up emotional attachment energy to the deceased and channelling that energy into other relationships or areas of the mourner’s life. Freud (1917) regarded mourning as a natural process stating “although mourning involves grave departures from the normal attitude to life, it never occurs to us to regard it as a pathological condition and to refer it to medical treatment” (p. 243). Although mourning was thought to be a natural response to loss, a person under the circumstances to mourn may instead exhibit melancholia, which included mental features like losing the capacity to love and painful dejection, and in such cases Freud suspected pathology could be applicable (Freud, 1917).

***Lindemann.*** After Freud put grief work on the map, Lindemann’s pivotal study secured the place of grief as an area of interest in the field of psychology (Granek, 2010). The first of its kind, Lindemann (1944) attempted to empirically study bereaved patients by interviewing 101 subjects. Lindemann’s work was revolutionary because his underlying assumptions surrounding the conceptualization of grief continue to influence clinical psychology today (Granek, 2010). Lindemann (1944) opened the doors to conceptualize grief as a medical disease when he wrote, “[a]cute grief is a definite syndrome with psychological and somatic symptomatology” (p. 141). Going even further, Lindemann clearly outlined the course of normal grief reactions versus morbid

grief reactions. Morbid grief reactions included: delay in grief reaction, alteration in relationships with friends and relatives, hostility against specific persons, agitated depression, and lasting loss of social interaction patterns. It was thought morbid grief could be transformed into “normal reactions,” thereby making resolution possible (Lindemann, 1944). Lindemann (1944) noted that how long a person grieved seemed to depend on how successfully they completed their grief work, “namely, emancipation from the bondage to the deceased, readjustment to the environment in which the deceased is missing, and the formation of new relationships” (p. 141). To aid in finding resolution, Lindemann argued that psychiatrists should be the ones to help people manage their grief work.

***Bowlby.*** The father of attachment theory, John Bowlby played a very important role in developing grief literature: to understand loss, one must first understand attachment (Jones-Smith, 2016; Worden, 2009). Attachment theory initially set out to explain why babies become attached to their caregivers and why they exhibit emotional distress when separated (Bowlby, 1982). Bowlby proposed that attachment in infants is regulated by innate safety and survival systems, which follows why children seek support from caregivers when frightened. Even though he focused on children, Bowlby believed the basic function of innate attachment held true even in adulthood, hence the quality of “safe haven” attachment figures provided greatly influence the development of one’s attachment bonds and thus impacts healthy emotional development overall (Collins & Feeney, 2000). Bowlby’s attachment theory outlines the human tendency to make strong bonds, providing a way to conceptualize the array of strong emotions that often ensue when that bond is threatened or broken, like in the case of death (Worden, 2009).

Bowlby was a pioneer detailing mourning in different stages. Stage theories are appealing because they can help bring conceptual order to chaotic developments and allude to a road of “recovery” and “closure” (Worden, 2002). Originally in 1961, Bowlby described mourning in three stages, but this numbering was later omitted and replaced with a four-stage model (Bowlby, 1980). Bowlby’s (1980) four stages of mourning are as follows:

1. Shock-numbness: usually lasts a few hours to a week, with interruptive moments of intense distress and/or anger.
2. Yearning-searching: involves looking for the lost figure and can last months, sometimes years.
3. Disorganization-despair: involves enduring a buffeting of emotions.
4. Reorganization: when varying degrees of restructuring occurs.

Bowlby (1980) developed his stages by observing individuals’ responses to the loss of a close relative and noted that a person may oscillate back and forth between two stages, but overall he thought responses could be discerned sequentially.

**Kübler-Ross.** Perhaps the best-known death model, even to the general public, was postulated in 1969 by Kübler-Ross in her book *On Death and Dying* (Hall, 2011). Kübler-Ross’s model was based on her clinical work with terminally ill patients, describing how a person passes through certain stages when responding to a terminal diagnosis, those being: (1) denial, (2) anger, (3) bargaining, (4) depression, and (5) acceptance (Kübler-Ross, Wessler, & Avioli, 1972). Even though Kübler-Ross’s model was describing anticipatory grief, over time, the model has come to be known more commonly as the five stages of grief (Hall, 2011). Kübler-Ross’s model has been widely

criticized for stressing that complications would develop as a consequence of failing to complete any of the five stages (Downe-Womboldt & Tamlyn, 1997; Hall, 2011).

Despite the criticisms and misinterpretations, Downe-Wamboldt and Tamlyn (1997) found that of the nursing and medical professionals they studied in Canada and the United Kingdom, Kübler-Ross's model of grieving was still the model predominantly presented in their education about death and dying.

**Conceptual shift to modern theories and models.** As previously mentioned, stage theories can be an appealing conceptual framework, but have come under a lot of scrutiny for their rigid application to processes as complex, diverse, and idiosyncratic as grieving and mourning (Hall, 2011). Stage models do not often speak to the wide variety of psychological, behavioural, social, physical, and spiritual responses of griever (Hall, 2011). In addition, the idea that all bereaved people will grieve and mourn in a precise, prescribed manner to find resolution is fading (Rothaupt & Becker, 2007). Despite their shortcomings, it is important to note that the conceptualization of grief having stages is now deeply rooted in cultural, educational, and professional beliefs about death and bereavement (Downe-Womboldt & Tamlyn, 1997; Hall, 2011). To combat the downfalls of previous stage theories, newer "phasal" or task conceptualizations have gained popularity, two of the most comprehensive being the Dual-Process Model by Stroebe and Schut and Worden's Task-Based Model (Hall, 2011).

**Dual process model.** Stroebe and Schut's (1999) *Dual Process Model of Coping with Bereavement* is meant to describe means by which people come to terms with the death of someone close and is based on oscillating between two types of bereavement stressors: loss-orientation and restoration-orientation. In loss-orientation the bereaved is

concentrating on and dealing with the emotional processing of the loss experience, specifically in regards to the deceased person and encompasses traditional conceptualizations of grief work (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). An example of this would be when the bereaved cries over the loss of the deceased. In restoration-orientation, the griever is focused on dealing and coping with several secondary losses by making the necessary external adjustments (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). An example of this would be when the remaining spouse learns to take on the responsibilities around the house that the deceased spouse once performed. This model stands apart from most others because it recognizes that bereavement is “a dynamic, regulatory coping process of oscillation, whereby the grieving individual at times confronts, at other times avoids, the different tasks of grieving” (Stroebe & Schut, 1999, p. 197). Stroebe and Schut postulated that oscillation is required for optimal adjustment to a loss based on the relationship they found between oscillation and mental and physical health.

Stroebe made another significant contribution to modern grief conceptualization by challenging the traditionally held belief that grief work was necessary for adjustment to a loss after death (Stroebe & Stroebe, 1991). Stroebe and Stroebe conducted a longitudinal study of 30 widows and 30 widowers that consisted of three interviews over a two-year period. Results did not support the traditionally held belief that everyone needs to do grief work; some widows who avoided addressing their loss did not rate any different on depression scores than widows who actively worked through their grief. Despite this discovery, it is important to note that Stroebe and Stroebe (1991) did find a relationship between participants’ performance of grief work and their level of adjustment; “our study shows that extreme avoidance of grief work is detrimental to

adjustment, this partially confirming the grief work hypothesis” (p. 481). Grief work, though perhaps not as universal as originally conceived, is still an important conceptualization in modern grief psychology.

***Task-based model.*** With minor revisions throughout the years, the Task-based model by Worden (2002/2009) presents grieving as an active process requiring participation in four tasks. Worden (2002) called the four tasks: accepting the reality of the loss; processing the pain of the grief; adjusting to an environment without the deceased; and emotionally relocating the deceased and moving on with life. A few years later, Worden (2009) labeled the four tasks as follows: to accept the reality of the loss; to process the pain of grief; to adjust to a world without the deceased; and to find an enduring connection with the deceased while embarking on a new life. Worden stressed that tasks could be returned to and reworked, but considered mourning to be finished when all the tasks of mourning were accomplished, though he recognized that “[a]sking when mourning is finished is a little like asking, ‘How high is up’” (Worden, 2009, p. 76)? This was a major shift from traditional stage models that perpetuated linear grief work (Rothaupt & Becker, 2007). However vague the timeline of mourning may be, Worden (2002) did note, “uncompleted tasks can impair further growth and development” (p. 27). Wada and Park (2009) have criticized Worden’s word choice in his work, arguing it implies that once a task is achieved it can be left behind and “it is tempting to use the task model as kind of checklist in which one expects to be done with grief when all the tasks are crossed out” (p. 667).

***Continuing bonds model.*** Past theories, such as Lindemann’s (1944) grief work, commonly emphasized letting go of bonds to the deceased, but more recent theories have

criticized the “letting go” approach (Klass, Silverman & Nickman, 1996; Rubin, 1985). Rubin (1985) observed a correlation between the intensity of the relationship to the deceased and the ability of the bereaved to cope effectively. Research findings such as these, led Klass, Silverman, and Nickman (1996) to outline the continuing bonds model. Klass, Silverman, and Nickman (1996) noticed that instead of disengaging, people experiencing bereavement would often alter, but continue, their relationship to the deceased, finding solace and comfort in these new connections. Unlike past models, the continuing bonds model does not label dependence automatically as undesirable, but rather postulates that it is “normative for mourners to maintain a presence and connection with the deceased, and that this presence is not static” (p. 18). Klass, Silverman, and Nickman (1996) stress that is not about living in the past, but alternately being aware of how past bonds can influence people’s present and future. Many people incorporate connections with the deceased into the fabric of their daily lives, for example continuing bonds could include visiting the deceased in dreams or going to their gravesite (Hall, 2011; Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996). It is important to note that more recent research is closely examining circumstances under which continuing bonds are healthy and adaptive, and when continuing bonds can be maladaptive (Field, 2006). An important shift in bereavement understanding arises from the continuing bonds model. Klass, Silverman, and Nickman (1996) argue, “[w]e cannot look at bereavement as a psychological state that ends and from which one recovers.” (p. 18).

**Meaning making.** Neimeyer (2006) presents a “paradigm of grief that views meaning reconstruction as the principal task in coping with a loss” (p.184). This approach takes on a narrative perspective, meaning people’s sense of self is created through self-

narratives, so people weave their life story with meaning making a natural construct for fostering significance (Neimeyer, 2006). Earthshattering life events, like the death of a loved one, can shake a person's story, essentially crumbling the assumptions one has made about the world (Janoff-Bulman, 1985; Neimeyer, 2006; Neimeyer, Prigerson, & Davies, 2002). One implication of Neimeyer's (2006) 'constructivist' view stands that every person's self-biography will be complex and made up of various belief systems from which their personal meaning making is informed, accordingly, people's reactions to reworking their narrative after a loss will be just as complex, unique, and personal. Inspired by Bowlby's attachment theory, there is evidence to support that "early childhood attachment patterns can affect responses to bereavement by configuring the meaning of the loss in such a way that is more radically threatening for individuals with less secure attachment histories" (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006, p. 34; Neimeyer, Prigerson & Davies, 2002). After a systematic review of the literature, Gillies and Neimeyer (2006) concluded there are three mechanisms that bereaved individuals seem to use to engage in meaning making, specifically in response to a loss: (a) making sense of the death, (b) finding benefit in the experience, and (c) undergoing identity change. One of the most significant pieces of evidence supporting meaning making comes from a study conducted by Keesee, Currier, and Neimeyer (2008), where it was found that out of 157 parents who have lost a child to death, "sense-making emerged as the most salient predictor of grief severity, with parents who reported having made little to no sense of their child's death being more likely to report greater intensity of grief" (p. 1145). With that being said, Davis, Wortman, Lehman, and Silver's (2000) study of 124 parents who had an infant pass away and 93 adults who lost a spouse or child in a motor vehicle accident, found that

a substantial subset of people do not search for meaning and yet seem well-adjusted to their loss.

***Reconciliation needs of mourning.*** As alluded to before, many professionals who study grief believe that it is a process that changes over time, but never fully ends (Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996; Rando, 1993), with Alan Wolfelt being no exception. According to Wolfelt (2015), “people do not “get over” grief,” thus he has adopted the term reconciliation as an appropriate way to describe what occurs when a mourner “works to integrate the new reality of moving forward in life without the physical presence of the person who died” (p. 2). Feelings of loss will never completely disappear, but with reconciliation comes a renewed sense of energy, purpose, and hope for a continued life (Wolfelt, 2015). Wolfelt acknowledges that grief journeys are highly unique and personal experiences, yet he outlines six “yield signs” that people are likely to encounter and must explore in order to heal. The six reconciliations needs are as followed: (1) acknowledging the reality of the death, (2) embracing the pain of the loss, (3) remembering the person who died, (4) developing a new self-identity, (5) searching for meaning, and (6) receiving ongoing support from others (Wolfelt, 2015).

***Grief trajectories and resilience.*** Bonanno et al. (2002) contributed a very important study to the field of grief psychology; it was the first of its kind to examine if individuals exhibit different patterns of distress following the loss of a loved one (i.e., spouse). Five core bereavement patterns were noted: common grief, chronic grief, chronic depression, improvement during bereavement, and resilience (Bonanno et al., 2002). “Chronic grief was associated with pre-loss dependency and resilience with pre-loss acceptance of death and belief in a just world” (Bonanno et al., 2002, p. 1150).

Bonanno et al. (2002) challenged the traditional belief that the absence of overt grief reactions indicates pathology (Bowlby, 1980; Lindemann, 1944; Rando, 1993), arguing that some people may show less distress because of their resilience to loss. Later, Bonanno, Wortman, and Nesse (2004) further differentiated between chronic grief, which stemmed from the loss of a spouse in a healthy relationship, and chronic depression, which stemmed from lasting emotional struggles that were present in the relationship prior to death that were then exacerbated by the loss. These findings indicate that there are different trajectories to bereavement, and antecedents to death (e.g., relationship conflict) can predict bereavement trajectories, in addition to the factors that arise after death (Bonanno, Wortman, & Nesse, 2004).

**Normal versus abnormal grief.** Some researchers hold that grieving is natural and has always existed in some form (Rando, 1993). Lindemann (1944) on some level believed this, but also opened the doors to conceptualize grief as pathological when he clearly made a distinction between the course of normal grief reactions and morbid grief reactions. By listing normal versus abnormal symptoms, Lindemann constructs grief as a disease, thereby implying grief has an etiology or cause for the condition that could potentially be predicted, managed, or even treated by medical professionals (Granek, 2010). Bonanno et al. (2002) work supported Lindemann's ideas when their study found some people's grieving patterns were more detrimental (e.g., chronic grief and chronic depression) than others (e.g., resilience).

Bereavement is a universal human experience to which most people eventually adequately resume a state of equilibrium. However, there is substantial evidence that bereaved individuals themselves are at higher risk, than non-bereaved individuals, of

death and substance abuse (Stroebe, Schut, & Stroebe, 2007). They also are at increased risk of ill health, higher risk for psychiatric disorders, show higher rates of disability, and tend to be more heavily medicated (Houwen, Stroebe, Stroebe, Schut, Bout, & Meij, 2010; Prigerson et al., 2009). In addition, there is also overwhelming evidence supporting that for a subset of individuals the bereavement process is difficult and can have lasting health impairments (Bonanno et al., 2002; Horowitz et al., 1997).

According to Lobb et al. (2010), the term traumatic grief was originally used and later replaced by complicated grief in the academic literature. Complicated grief is still used along with prolonged grief to broadly describe “a pattern of adaptation to bereavement that involves the presentation of certain grief-related symptoms at a time beyond that which is considered adaptive” (Lobb et al., 2010, p. 676). During the 1990’s two different researchers, Horowitz and Prigerson, were separately publishing their proposed set of diagnostic criteria for assessing complicated grief disorder (Horwitz et al., 1997; Prigerson et al., 1999). Later, Horwitz and Prigerson joined forces to test the psychometric validation of their proposed criteria of Prolonged Grief Disorder (Prigerson et al., 2009). One can now find, in *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)*, “persistent complex bereavement disorder” under Section III: Emerging Measures and Models, Conditions for Further Study (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013).

It is important to note, the fourth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV)* excluded grief as a mental illness, because, according to Prigerson et al. (2009), grief was labeled "an expectable and culturally sanctioned response to a particular event" (p. 2). Besides the addition of persistent complex

bereavement disorder, one of the big changes in the *DSM-V* was that the bereavement exclusion criteria previously put on major depressive episodes was removed (Regier, Kuhl, & Kupfer, 2013; Rodríguez-Testal, Senín-Calderón, & Perona-Garcelán, 2014). In the *DSM-IV* major depressive episodes were not to be diagnosed following a death for at least two months' time, the reason being to prevent normal grievers from receiving a mental disorder label, but this also prevented bereaved individuals who were experiencing extreme depressive episodes from receiving help (Regier, Kuhl, & Kupfer, 2013; Rodríguez-Testal, Senín-Calderón, & Perona-Garcelán, 2014). Another implication of the old criteria was that it set an arbitrary time line for bereavement (Regier, Kuhl, & Kupfer, 2013; Rodríguez-Testal, Senín-Calderón, & Perona-Garcelán, 2014). To combat these shortcomings, in the *DSM-V* "[t]he bereavement exclusion was lifted and replaced with much more descriptive guidance on the distinction between symptoms characteristic of normal grief and those that are indicative of a clinical disorder" (Regier, Kuhl, & Kupfer, 2013, p. 97). Despite having roots in attachment behavior, separation distress, and traumatic distress, persistent complex bereavement has been found to be distinct from Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and Major Depression Panic Disorder (Horowitz et al., 1997; Jacob, Maure, & Prigerson, 2000; Prigerson et al, 2009; Shear, Frank, Houck, & Reynolds, 2005).

In a review of the literature, Lobb et al. (2010) found prolonged grief to be associated with symptoms like marked and chronic separation distress (i.e., yearning for the deceased and preoccupation with intrusive thoughts of the deceased), symptoms of traumatic distress (e.g., feelings of disbelief, mistrust, anger, shock, detachment), and experiencing somatic symptoms of the deceased (e.g., being restless). In other words,

people who suffer from prolonged bereavement experience persistent disbelief surrounding death, resistance to accept reality, intrusive and/or consuming thoughts about the deceased, and have limited interest in ongoing life engagements for at least six months and to the point of functional impairment (Horowitz, et al., 1997; Lobb et al., 2010; Shear & Shair, 2005). Prolonged grieving is also associated with mental and physical health issues including: insomnia, substance abuse, compromised immunity, hypertension, cardiac problems, difficulties with work, and social impairments (Burgess, 1975; Jacobs, Mazure, & Prigerson, 2000). In order to better identify and help individuals who may experience complicated grief reactions, a lot of research has gone into discovering factors associated with prolonged grief (Keese, Currier, & Neimeyer, 2008; Lobb et al., 2010; Shear & Shair, 2005).

When Worden (2002) outlined his Task-Based Model he also identified seven mediators of mourning, those being: (1) who the deceased was, (2) the nature of the attachment to deceased, (3) how the person died, (4) historical antecedents, (5) personality variables, (6) social variables, and (7) concurrent stressors. Inclusive of a few of Worden's (2002) mediators, Lobb et al. (2010) conducted a systematic review of the literature and compiled possible predictors of complicated grief, their results included: (a) previous loss experiences, (b) exposure to trauma, (c) previous psychiatric history, (d) attachment style, and (e) relationship to the deceased. They also found factors specifically surrounding the death that influenced bereavement outcome, such as (a) the level of violence with death, (b) the quality of the care-giving or dying experience, (c) close kinship relationship to the deceased, (d) marital closeness and dependency, and (e) lack of preparation for the death (Lobb et al., 2010). Green (2000) compiled a similar list,

stating eight factors that specifically increase the likelihood bereavement will be complicated and prolonged, those factors being: (a) the characteristics of death, (b) the survivor's personal vulnerability factors, (c) characteristics of the relationship with the deceased, (d) demographics, (e) previous life experience, (f) mental health history, (g) the support received after death, and (h) secondary crisis that may arise in the aftermath of death. In the same paper Green (2000) argued that the modes of death connected to poor recovery, are modes that make the bereavement more "traumatic" in nature. Given the factors that contribute to complicated grief, several researchers are beginning to recognize that people experiencing a violent loss (e.g., by accident, homicide, suicide) are at higher risk for prolonged grieving (Armour, 2007; Bonanno et al., 2002; Currier, Holland, & Neimeyer, 2006; Green 2000; Prigerson et al., 2009; Jacobs, Wellman, Fuller, Anderson, & Jurado, 2015; Rando, 1993).

### **Grieving and Mourning Traumatic Loss**

**How violent deaths differ.** "Grief as trauma" perspectives have now been put forth in the academic literature focusing on the violent circumstances surrounding some people's death and the impact that has on the process of grieving for those left behind (Graneck, 2010; Rando, 1993). Green's (2000) paper examined the link between trauma and bereavement, concluding there are certainly differences in trauma and bereavement reactions and subsequent recovery processes, but especially "in the area of 'unnatural' or traumatic death, there may be a great deal of overlap" (p. 14). When looking at a school sniper shooting, Pynoos and Nader (1988) found Posttraumatic Stress Disorder symptoms to be highly correlated with the severity of exposure to the life-threatening episode,

whereas the strength of the relationship that survivors had with the deceased children was a better predictor of grief symptoms.

Traumatic loss, used interchangeably with violent loss, can be defined as “ ‘a sudden and violent mode of death’ that is characterized by one of three causes: suicide, homicide, or a fatal accident” (Currier, Holland, & Neimeyer, 2006, p. 404-405). There are several factors that make suicide, homicide, and fatal accidents (e.g., vehicular fatalities) different from more “natural” or “normative” bereavement circumstances, like dying from old age or even disease (Armour, 2007; Currier, Holland, & Neimeyer, 2006; Green, 2000; Rando, 1993). Factors like suddenness, violence, disrupted worldview, social stigma, and lack of information often come into play when someone dies in an accident, is murdered, or takes their own life (Armour, 2002, 2007; Asaro, 2001; Currier, Holland, & Neimeyer, 2006; Janoff-Bulman, 1985; Neimeyer, Prigerson, & Davies, 2002; Green, 2000). Remembering back to Neimeyer’s (2006) meaning making and the narrative perspective, a persons constructed life story or worldview can be shattered in the face of death (Asaro, 2001; Janoff-Bulman, 1985; Neimeyer, 2006; Neimeyer, Prigerson, & Davies, 2002), and even more so in the case of traumatic loss because “beliefs about the goodness of people, the natural order of events, or self-worthiness may be imploded ... leaving the survivor to revamp basic assumptions about the world and how it operates” (Armour, 2007, p. 55). In many cases of traumatic loss there is a lack of information about the circumstances surrounding the death, leaving loved ones to “obsessively feel the need to assign blame and responsibility, search for reasons, or dwell on the missing details in an attempt to have the senseless loss make sense” (Asaro, 2001; Armour, 2007, p. 55).

Furthermore, bereavement does not occur in a vacuum, social constructions influence the bereavement process (Rando, 1993). Unfortunately, traumatic losses are different, hence negative social attitudes and stigmatizations may override the usual expressions of condolences (Armour, 2007; Chapple, Ziebland, & Hawton, 2015). It is harder for peers to navigate around traumatic loss because the usual phrases that are meant to be comforting no longer seem appropriate when someone dies via accident, homicide, or suicide. Two examples being: “He died peacefully” and “At least she is no longer suffering” (Armour, 2007, p. 55).

So it follows that “[w]hen compared with the grief that accompanies “natural” dying, the intensity and duration of reactions to traumatic loss appear to be atypical or even pathological” (Armour, 2007, p. 55). What would be considered pathological for normative grieving circumstances might actually be the norm for griever of traumatic loss. People who experience such a traumatic death in their lifetime may become part of a vulnerable population that are highly susceptible to the adverse health concerns associated with complicated grief as a baseline for their grieving experience (Armour, 2002, 2007).

### **Death and Schools**

Throughout the world, death touches the lives of school-going children for a variety of reasons, such as experiencing the death of a parent, grandparent, sibling, and/or friend (Lowton & Higginson, 2003; McGovern & Tracey, 2010). Considering the amount of time children and adolescence spend at school, it is inevitable that grief and bereavement reactions will be experienced by some youth in the classroom (Mahon, Goldberg, & Washington, 1999; McGovern & Tracey, 2010; O’Brien & McGuckin,

2014). Consequently, important research has been done around the world concerning the extent to which schools and teachers should respond and react to students' bereavement (Lane, Rowland, & Beinart, 2014; Lowton & Higginson, 2003; Mahon, Goldberg, & Washington, 1999; McGovern & Tracey, 2010; O'Brien & McGuckin, 2014; Rowling, 2008). During times of bereavement for youth, the presence of trustworthy adults can greatly influence mourning, thus teachers' reactions are significant (Lane, Rowland, & Beinart, 2014; O'Brien & McGuckin, 2014). Schools, due to societal expectations, have become more than just a place of academic learning (Rowling & Holland, 2000).

Rowling (2008) "proposes that school communities are significant public places that help shape identity and can also contribute to [the] social and emotional well-being" of students, hence schools can be a "place where loss and learning occur" (p. 241). Indeed, schools can be a place of loss and learning, especially when students' bereavement is the due to the violent death of a fellow student.

**Traumatic loss of a student.** The majority of research done on youth grief reactions has been founded in circumstances where a parent or sibling has died, but less research has been done on grief reactions that result from a classmate suddenly passing and, unfortunately, this is not a rare occurrence (Dyregrov, Wikander, & Vigerust, 1999). In the U.S.A. approximately each year, 20, 000 youth, aged 10 to 19, die, often suddenly, with the three leading causes of death being accident, homicide, and suicide (Dyregrov, Wikander, & Vigerust, 1999). Back in 2005, Statistics Canada (2009) reported that 617 youth, ages five to 19, died from accidents and 256 adolescence, ages 10 to 19, died by suicide. So it follows, many students throughout Canada and the world have experienced the sudden and violent death of a classmate.

According to Rowling and Holland (2000), “grief and suicide are seen within the social context of school communities ... constructed within the school’s history, local community and culture, and are reflected in their current practices and programs” (p. 36). The little research that has been done, on death in school communities, has mainly focused on the individual experiences of students and the need to provide them with support during times of crisis (Rowling 1995; Rowling & Holland, 2000). As Cullinan (1990) points out, “children can best learn to cope with death and other losses, without lasting traumatic effects, by learning from adults who grieve appropriately” (p. 148). As alluded to earlier, “teachers have often been identified as supportive, emotionally detached adults who can perform this role” (Rowling, 1995, p. 317), but there is a significant gap in the academic literature on how teachers themselves handle the death of their student(s).

***Teachers’ grief experiences and coping strategies.*** Very little is known about the way teachers’ grief and mourn the sudden death of a student, because it has rarely been studied (Rowling, 1995). After extensive searching, Rowling (1995) was identified as one of the few, and possibly only studies, that truly focused solely on teachers’ grief. That being said, Cullinan’s (1990) study did address teachers’ death anxiety and ability to cope with death, but still in the context of assessing the correlation between teachers’ death attitudes and their self-efficacy to help students.

Rowling (1995) did not initially set out to focus on teachers’ grief experience, but that is what emerged, revealing that teachers may face many issues trying to navigate death from the professional role of a teacher. When a student passes away teachers perform roles similar to helping professionals (e.g., emergency service personnel, nurses,

or social workers) when they care and support grieving children, but without the same level of recognition (Rowling, 1995). The schools included in the case study had experienced traumatic events over the last couple years, such as students dying via accidents and a student being murdered (Rowling, 1995). After collecting numerous interviews, Rowling's (1995) findings could generally be summarized by disenfranchised grief, in other words, when a loss is experienced, but cannot be "openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported" (Doka, 1989, p. 21). Teachers may experience disenfranchised grief because of several factors: firstly, teachers are human and a connection exists between teacher and student, secondly, teaching is a profession and professionals have certain behavioural expectations (i.e., being in control), and thirdly, part of a teacher's duty is caring for students (Rowling, 1995). Teachers found their professional values (i.e., leadership) at times conflicted with their personal grieving (i.e., over the loss of a student whom they had a bond with). In addition, the teacher's relationship with the student was not always recognized, which contributed to the disenfranchised grief experienced (Rowling, 1995). Rowling (1995) found that social context played a huge role, because conceptualizations of death, grieving norms, and expectations of teachers are all culturally sensitive constructs contributing to teachers' grieving experience. It is also important to note that many teachers are also parents and the death of a student may be a strong trigger for anxiety around losing their own child (Rowling, 1995).

Participants in Rowling's (1995) study did have access to support, but not all staff took advantage. "Many teachers saw it as unnecessary or that people should cope by themselves" (Rowling, 1995, p. 322). Rowling (1995) proposed such personal

suppression of emotions stems from teacher's professional and personal beliefs around control and leadership. More research into teachers' coping and mourning strategies after the loss of a student would be beneficial and informative. Such information would allow for better support services for teachers to be implemented.

### **Current State of Knowledge**

**Gaps in the literature.** The field of psychology itself is relatively young, and the study of bereavement within that field an even younger discipline. Wittkowski, Doka, Neimeyer, and Vallerga (2015) recently reviewed 1,500 articles, from the last 20 years that appeared in two of the most popular death journals, *Death Studies* and *Omega*, finding only a mere 4% of publications addressed reactions to traumatic death. Meaning studies that look at traumatic death specifically in school communities, would be less than 4%. Of those studies, most look at the student's reactions and ability to cope with death, but hardly any examine the sudden loss of a student through the perspective of a teacher. The one solid case example that does, Rowling (1995), was conducted in Australia. Studies that examine Canadian teachers' grieving experiences after the sudden and violent loss of a student seem not to appear yet in the literature and this proposed study can provide an original, significant contribution to knowledge in this area.

**Present study.** Although Rowling's (1995) study, coming out of Australia, provided a valuable foundation of knowledge in an emerging field, at the present moment, there is a complete lack of research on Canadian teachers' experience of having their student(s) suddenly pass away. Death attitudes and practices are highly culturally sensitive, and social constructions influence the bereavement process, therefore Canada requires research done on its own population (Neimeyer, Wittkowski, & Moser, 2004;

Rando, 1993). In addition, teacher's professional role expectations and the school's established grief practices are socially and culturally constructed (Rowling & Holland, 2000), reinforcing the importance of examining a Canadian demographic for the present study.

Kids learn through social interaction, including the reactions their teachers' model when it comes to mourning the death of a student (Cullinan, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978). Some research has "argued that the teacher encountering death in the classroom needs to come to terms with his or her own death feelings" (Cullinan, 1990, p. 149). Hence, it seems that if teachers are to aid students in adaptive grieving, then a better understanding of how teachers grieve is necessary. The purpose of this study was to discover more about the bereavement experience of teachers following the sudden and violent death of their student(s). Utilizing a phenomenological methodology, the current study aimed to fill the gap in the academic literature and provide valuable information that may help inform and foster support services for teachers who are affected by the death of their student(s).

### **Chapter 3: Research Methodology**

Based on the review of the literature, research focusing on teachers' bereavement experiences is lacking. Consequently, this current study is aimed to contribute to the understanding of the grief and mourning experienced by teachers who have had a student die in a sudden and violent manner; including participants for whom this was a single experience and participants who can speak to having gone through this experience more than once.

In order to help reduce the glaring gap in the academic literature about the actual experience of grief by teachers, a phenomenological method was adopted. This chapter elucidates and articulates why such an approach was chosen, gives a general overview of phenomenology, and describes specifically how the method put forth by van Manen is applied to this study of teachers' bereavement experiences.

#### **Selecting and Defending Methodology**

As indicated earlier, far too little is known about bereavement experiences of teachers. It is hoped that these experiences collected from teachers who faced the sudden loss of their student(s) will shed light on this phenomenon. Accordingly, the primary research question of this investigation is: "What is the bereavement experience of teachers who have had their student(s) die suddenly and violently?"

Generally, qualitative research aims to: (a) explore the nature of individual's experience with a phenomenon, (b) bring to light a phenomenon about which little is known, and (c) obtain details (i.e., feelings, thought process, and emotions) pertaining to a phenomenon that would be difficult to obtain through quantitative methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Due to the lack of information available in the academic literature on

teachers' bereavement experiences, undertaking a qualitative approach gains more insight into such a personal phenomenon.

Given the personal and sensitive nature of the topic of study, a qualitative method that is meant to foster depth over broad generalizability also is appropriate. With the focus of van Manen's phenomenological inquiry being a deep, rich, thick description of lived experience; it was the most fitting method to study teachers' bereavement experiences (Johnson & Christensen, 2017; van Manen, 1990, 1997, 2014).

The research method put forth by van Manen ontologically aligns well with death research because "reality is perceived as an individual construct dependent to different situations," thus recognizing that multiple realities exist, even across similar experiences (Kafle, 2011, p. 193). Epistemologically this approach also works because it supports subjective knowledge, "the belief that knowledge making is possible through subjective experience and insights" (Kafle, 2011, p. 194). As far as axiology is concerned, the interpretive aspect of van Manen's (1997) phenomenology recognizes the researcher's involvement in the research, as well as embodies the social constructivist view that learning and knowing are embedded in social life (Vygotsky, 1978). Consequently, this is an apt method for studying the bereavement experiences of teachers, an experience influenced by various social constructions (Rowling, 1995). In addition, such a method considers time a factor of importance (Sloan & Bowe, 2014; Tuohy et al., 2013), which is necessary when studying bereavement; a process that changes over time, but never truly ends. Phenomenology recognizes "the way in which we interpret or ascribe meaning to events that occur at a particular time in our lives may influence understanding or perceptions" (Tuohy et al., 2013, p. 19).

Considered to be both descriptive and interpretive, van Manen's phenomenology is meant to give space for individual participants to tell about their experiences as they lived them (textural descriptions), while also portraying the phenomenon being studied (structural descriptions), using interpretive language. As such, a rich description of teachers' individual lived bereavement experiences and the meanings they derived from such an experience, as well as a more synthesized thematic description of the experience of teachers' bereavement, was composed in hopes that after reading this, people will better understand what it is like for teachers to lose their student(s) in a sudden and violent manner.

### **Overview of Phenomenology**

Phenomenology is an umbrella term that encompasses philosophy, methodology, and method (Kafle, 2011). As a philosophy, phenomenology purports "that knowledge and understanding are embedded in our everyday world" (Byrne, 2001, p. 830). Prior to the seventeenth century, nature or religion usually provided the foundation for man's understanding of the world, but phenomenologists thought that truth and understanding could be derived from people's lived experiences (Byrne, 2001). Over time, phenomenology has become an important method in the human sciences and is currently utilized by many disciplines like education, psychology, nursing, and medicine (van Manen, 2014).

**Descriptive phenomenology.** Even though the origins of phenomenology can be mapped back to early philosophers like Kant and Hegel, Husserl has come to be known in the academic literature as the father of phenomenology (Groenewald, 2004; Moran, 2000). A German philosopher and mathematician, "Husserl rejected the belief that

objects in the external world exist independently” and instead sought to analyze a particular phenomenon as it appeared through human consciousness (Groenewald, 2004, p. 43). Consequently, phenomenology, as a research method, is still currently broadly defined as “the description of one or more individual’s consciousness and experience of a phenomenon” (Johnson & Christensen, 2017, p. 444). Husserl’s phenomenology has now been labeled descriptive or transcendental phenomenology due to his promotion of bracketing, also referred to as epoché or reduction (Tuohy, Cooney, Dowling, Murphy, & Sixsmith, 2013); a concept that upholds “the observer could transcend the phenomena and meanings being investigated to take a global view of the essences discovered” (Sloan & Bowe, 2014, p. 1294). To get at the true essence of a phenomenon, Husserl felt it was necessary to suspend or bracket out any preconceived ideas, and everyday assumptions (Moran, 2000; Tuohy et al., 2013). There is great debate whether Husserl’s envisioned bracketing is actually achievable (Tuohy et al., 2013); consequently, a major divide in phenomenological methodology arose from such dispute.

**Interpretive phenomenology.** Though many branches of phenomenology have since sprouted from Husserl’s phenomenology, the academic literature often highlights the significant division between descriptive phenomenology and interpretive phenomenology (Lopez & Willis, 2004). A student of Husserl’s, Heidegger is credited for developing interpretive phenomenology; an approach that rejects bracketing and does not endorse that a researcher is neutral and value-free, but rather should be part of the research (Tuohy et al., 2013). Since the emphasis of interpretive phenomenology is placed on exploration of lived experience, recognition that people’s realities are influenced by the world around them is essential; “the researcher needs to understand that

experiences are linked to social, cultural and political contexts” (Tuohy et al., 2013, p. 19).

Heidegger’s interpretive phenomenology appears to be heavily influenced by his conceptualization of *dasein*, the concept of “being-in-the-world,” which highlights how humans are constantly situated in activity and interaction with the world around them (Lavery, 2003; Tuohy et al., 2013). Just like the name suggests, interpretive phenomenology places emphasis on how humans interpret their experiences (Lavery, 2003), unlike descriptive phenomenology that is focused solely on describing consciousness (Tuohy et al., 2013). Time and space become of great importance to interpretive phenomenology (Tuohy et al., 2013); hence processes that change over time may be examined with this method. Often in the academic literature, Heidegger is also credited for hermeneutic phenomenology, a term that is commonly used interchangeably with interpretive phenomenology (Lavery, 2003; Sloan & Bowe, 2014; Tuohy et al., 2013).

**Hermeneutic phenomenology.** Even though hermeneutic phenomenology is often used synonymously with interpretive phenomenology, a distinction can also be noted. “Hermeneutics is the interpretation of text or language by an observer” (Sloan & Bowe, 2014, p. 1293). Sometimes hermeneutics is used to describe a data analysis technique or method; in other cases, hermeneutics may actually represent an underlying philosophy being adopted (Webb & Pollard, 2006). For example, Gadamer, a student of Heidegger, developed Gadamerian hermeneutics that further focuses on how language reveals being and views language as being key to interpretation (Sloan & Bowe, 2014; Webb & Pollard, 2006).

*van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenology.* Following Gadamer, van Manen has developed a more recent hermeneutic phenomenological approach (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). As defined by van Manen (2014), “hermeneutic phenomenology is a method of abstemious reflection on the basic structures of the lived experience of human existence” (p. 26). To van Manen (2014), “hermeneutic means that reflecting on experience must aim for discursive language and sensitive interpretive devices that make phenomenological analysis, explication, and description possible and intelligible” (p. 26).

Indeed, it can be difficult to express *pathic* knowledge, that is, peoples’ senses and bodily responses to situations and relations when interacting with the world, in everyday language (van Manen, 2007). When deliberating the place of poetry in phenomenology, van Manen stressed that the power of phenomenological writing resides with how well the words can advance the reader’s understanding of an experience. Simply put, “phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences” (van Manen, 1990, p. 9). Therefore, the goal of a phenomenological inquiry is to facilitate the expression of what an experience is like and means to a person or persons, so that others may gain a deeper understanding. Though phenomenology is not aimed at developing effective theories or problem solving, though rich, thick descriptions “it offers us the possibility of plausible insights that bring us in more direct contact with the world” (van Manen, 1990, p. 9).

For a new researcher, hermeneutic phenomenology can be difficult to learn. It is not so much a research method, as it is a way of being. van Manen (1990) admits that, “in a serious sense there is not really a “method” understood as a set of investigative procedures that one can master relatively quickly” (p. 29). His best answer to the difficult

question on how to execute his phenomenological research method is scholarship. “A human science researcher is a scholar: a sensitive observer of the subtleties of everyday life, and an avid reader of relevant text in the human science tradition” (van Manen, 1990, p. 29). To provide some guidance, van Manen (1990) has outlined six dynamic research activities involved in phenomenology, those being:

- 1) turning to a phenomenon which seriously interests us and commits us to the world;
- 2) investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it;
- 3) reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon;
- 4) describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting;
- 5) maintaining a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon;
- 6) balancing the research context by considering parts and whole. (pp. 30-31).

*Present study.* Like previously mentioned, hermeneutic phenomenology can be used interchangeably with interpretive, or be used more intentionally to describe a method of analysis and/or an underlying philosophy being adopted (Webb & Pollard, 2006). For the present study, van Manen’s definition and conceptualization of hermeneutic phenomenology was adopted. According to van Manen (1997):

Hermeneutic phenomenology tries to be attentive to both terms of its methodology; it is a *descriptive* (phenomenological) methodology because it wants to be attentive to how things appear, it wants to let things speak for themselves; it is an *interpretive* (hermeneutic) methodology because it claims that there are no such things as uninterpreted phenomena. (p. 180)

For ease of language, phenomenology will be used from here on out to describe the methodology being adopted. Keeping in mind, phenomenology will essentially represent van Manen's style of interpretive-descriptive phenomenology (van Manen, 2014).

### **Current Research Methods**

As previously alluded to, the "phenomenological method does not offer a procedural system; rather, its method requires an ability to be reflective, insightful, sensitive to language, and constantly open to experience" (van Manen, 1997, p. xi). van Manen (1990) suggested that the only simple resolution to the complicated question on how to execute research on lived experience was to embody scholarship; as a result, I became a scholar. Spending years avidly reading relevant scholarly texts, and developing insights by being open, curious, and reflective to the subtle life phenomenon that is teachers' bereavement, I conducted phenomenology by living it, and reflecting on those experiences through language. Further outlining the execution of the methodology, the paragraphs to follow explore the subsequent research design elements: research focus, recruitment and participants, data collection, data analyses, and establishing rigour.

### **Research Focus**

According to van Manen's (1990) first research activity, phenomenological research always starts the same way; it is somebody's project, a person who is situated in their own social and historical life circumstances, that decides they want to make sense of an aspect of human existence. The current study was no exception. Coming to the topic of teachers' bereavement was greatly influenced by being in a counselling psychology masters' program that was housed within an education department, in combination with experiencing the murder of a friend. Always having been interested in grief counselling,

paired with trying to make sense of my own first traumatic loss experience, naturally lead me to sudden death research. Determined to study sudden death experiences, in any capacity, while also understanding that supervisors were necessary, lead me to investigate the intersection of education and sudden death experiences.

Doing research on lived experience involves turning to a phenomenon of serious interest, an everyday moment that usually goes unquestioned and gets taken-for granted (Finlay, 2013), and during my research on sudden death and education, it became clear that teachers' bereavement experiences are a perfect example of just that, for it is assumed that teachers are capable of being adaptive grieving role models for grieving students (Rowling, 1995), but very few people are asking how teachers themselves are grieving. Accordingly, the main research question developed into: "What is the bereavement experience of teachers who have had their student(s) die suddenly and violently?" The current research endeavour aimed to gain understanding of such experience by creating a deep, rich description after talking to teachers who have lived through such a loss.

**Ethical considerations.** It should be noted that ethical approval was obtained from the Human Subjects Research Committee at the University of Lethbridge, prior to initiating the research endeavour. Given the sensitive nature of this study, careful considerations were made to minimize any potential risks to participants and to ensure and uphold the confidentiality of participants throughout the research process. Consequently, research participants either chose or were given a pseudonym and quotes have been edited to remove or change any identifying information. After five years' time,

all raw data that was collected during the research endeavour will be disposed of via electronic deletion or shredding.

### **Recruitment and Participants**

Because researching a specific demographic (i.e., Canadian teachers who have experienced a violent loss) was built into this study, purposive sampling, specifically snowball sampling, was utilized to recruit suitable participants. Snowball sampling relies on a system of referrals, whereby participants can suggest other participants who may also meet the study selection criteria. Though snowball sampling has faced criticism, it was ideal for the current study for the following reasons: it enabled the recruitment of a precise population, referral based recruitment fosters a level of trust appropriate for this study, and it was economically efficient (Atkinson & Flint, 2001, p. 1). One of my supervisors and myself acted as the initiators of the 'snowball' through contact with teachers, who were introduced to the study and invited to consider being a participant. Potential participants were emailed a participation recruitment letter that introduced the research endeavour, outlined the participant criteria, and provided a thesis-specific email for correspondence (Appendix A). As part of the participation recruitment letter, the potential participants were asked if they met criteria and would like to participate or would know of other teachers who would meet criteria and would be interested in being a participant.

The participant criteria for this study was as follows: (a) be of legal age (18+), (b) self-identify as Canadian, (c) are or have been a secondary teacher (i.e., grades 7 through 12) in Canada, and (d) have experienced at least one sudden and violent death (i.e., suicide, homicide, accident) of a student during their time as a teacher. No time

restriction or cap was placed on how long ago the loss occurred because the literature supports the notion that grief is a process that changes over time, but never truly ends.

As a result of the snowball sampling, five out of the six people initially contacted got in touch and expressed their interest in becoming a participant. Through email correspondence, it was determined that all five people met criteria and were willingly volunteering for the study; consequently, five individual in-person interviews were scheduled and conducted.

### **Data Collection**

van Manen (1990) considered in-depth interviews suitable to be the primary means of data collection in phenomenology because:

- 1) [they] may be used as a means for exploring and gathering experiential narrative material that may serve as a resource for developing a richer and deeper understanding of a human phenomenon, and
- 2) the interview may be used as a vehicle to develop a conversational relation with a partner (interviewee) about the meaning of an experience. (p. 66)

In addition, always keeping in mind that death is considered a “sensitive” topic, individual, in-person interviews felt most appropriate.

Participants chose a quiet interview location, where they felt most comfortable talking (e.g., office, library, place of residence). Prior to beginning each interview, I went over the consent form with each participant, allowing for and answering any questions that arose. To ensure informed consent, participants were explicitly informed and reminded that their participation was completely voluntary, that they could refuse to

answer any question(s), and could withdraw from the study at any time. Written consent was obtained from every participant before the recorded interview began (Appendix B).

All five face-to-face interviews were audio-taped and observations, such as participant demeanor, silences, and non-verbal indications of emotion, were documented with pen and paper. The in-depth interviews lasted between 48 and 189 minutes; averaging 123 minutes per interview. Interviews were purposely semi-structured (Appendix C). An open-ended interview guide allowed for carefully crafted key questions (in order to prevent insensitive word choices pertaining to death), while still permitting flexibility to explore participant responses (Charmaz, 2014). At the end of every interview, participants were provided with the contact information for the mental health help line and thanked graciously of sharing such a personal experience.

The research data for this study was primarily derived from the interview transcriptions of the audio-taped interviews. I, the researcher, transcribed verbatim every interview. Additionally, written interview observations, journal entries, and information obtained through member checking contributed to the research data.

### **Describing the Lived Experience**

The data analysis for the current study was guided by the six dynamic research activities outlined by van Manen (1990). The first research activity, “turning to a phenomenon which seriously interests us and commits us to the world” (van Manen, 1990, p. 30), was already discussed earlier under research focus. Experiencing the sudden death of a friend, while beginning my Masters of Education Counselling Psychology program is why the interest to study teachers’ bereavement after the sudden and violent

death of their student(s) came to be. Now, what the rest of van Manen's (1990) research activities are and how the current study executed them will be discussed.

**Investigating experience as we live it.** Under his second research activity, "investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it," van Manen (1990) stresses just that (p. 30). The researcher is looking to study a phenomenon as it experienced immediately in the world, or pre-reflectively, as compared to theorizing it (van Manen, 1990). Unlike other methods, "phenomenology does not offer us the possibility of effective theory...but rather it offers us the possibility of plausible insights that brings us in more direct contact with the world" (van Manen, 1990, p. 9).

Phenomenology holds that humans' lived experiences can never be fully captured by a single theory; therefore instead it "always addresses any phenomenon as a possible human experience. It is in this sense that phenomenological descriptions have a universal (intersubjective) character," which differs from making generalizations about lived human experience (van Manen, 1990, p. 58). According to van Manen (1990), "the point of phenomenological research is to "borrow" other people's experiences and their reflections on their experiences in order to better be able to come to an understanding..." (p. 62). Not being a teacher myself, through use of transcribed in-depth interviews, I "borrowed" narratives from teachers who had experienced the sudden and violent death of their student(s) in order to gain a deeper understanding of such lived experience. As van Manen (1990) wrote, "*we gather other people's experiences because they allow us to become more experienced ourselves*" (p. 62).

**Reflecting on essential themes.** Simply put, phenomenology aims "to grasp the essential meaning of something" (van Manen, 1990, p. 77). How a researcher does this is

by, “reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon,” which is the third research activity (van Manen, 1990, p. 30). Getting at the essence of a phenomenon is not an easy task; it “involves a process of reflectively appropriating, of clarifying, and of making explicit the structure of meaning of the lived experience.” (van Manen, 1990, p. 77). Since human experiences are complex, perhaps especially when pertaining to death, the essence of a phenomenon or “meaning can only be communicated textually—by way of organized narrative or prose,” it follows that “reflecting on lived experience then becomes reflectively analyzing the structural or thematic aspects of that experience” (van Manen, 1990, p. 78). Engaging in such reflection, five thematic aspects of teachers’ bereavement experiences after the sudden and violent death of their student(s) emerged. The following paragraph will go into more detail about how such reflection was conducted.

van Manen (1990) gave three approaches on how to isolate thematic statements and all three approaches were utilized during the current study. Firstly, “the wholistic or sententious approach” involves examining “the text as a whole,” then trying to put in writing “*the fundamental meaning or main significance*” (van Manen, 1990, pp. 92-93). For the present study, every participant interview was read in its entirety and then I attempted to capture predominant notions from each of the interview in a few phrases. Secondly, “the selective or highlighting approach,” is the process of combing through the text numerous times, highlighting or noting any statements that “*seem particularly essential or revealing about the phenomenon*” (van Manen, 1990, p. 93). Getting to the point where I have memorized many parts of every interview, the interview transcriptions were indeed read through numerous times. Interesting, surprising, reoccurring aspects

were literally highlighted and copied to a new document, one for each participant. Thirdly, “the detailed or line-by-line approach” is where the researcher ponders the different phrases “or sentence cluster and ask, *What does this...sentence cluster reveal about the phenomenon or experience being described?* (van Manen, 199, p. 93). For the present study, the highlighted phrases that were compiled into a new document were each closely looked at and any thoughts or reflections about the deeper meaning were noted. After each phrase had a description attached, phrases were moved around and grouped by similarity and, again, this was done for each individual participant. After each participant’s document was organized, participants’ responses were also compiled together and sorted.

Now that I have described how the thematic statements were isolated it is important to note that a “*theme is always a reduction of a notion,*” just meaning that no possible “thematic formulation can completely unlock the deep meaning,” tell the entire tale, unravel “the full mystery” of a phenomenon (van Manen, 1990, p. 79). A thematic phrase should not be considered the ‘be all end all,’ because in actuality it “only serves to point at, to allude to, or to hint at, an aspect of the phenomenon” (van Manen, 1990, p. 92). Especially given the personal and complex nature of grief, it be wrong to make it seem that the five themes that I saw come to fruition can paint a complete picture of the vast phenomenon that is teachers’ bereavement after the violent loss of their student(s).

**Art of writing and rewriting.** Themes do not really begin to have life until the researcher has written them out fully, for “one does not write primarily for being understood; one writes for having understood being” (van Manen, 2014, p. 373). Thus, as given as it may appear, that the results of a research study do involve writing,

phenomenology is different in that the results *are* the writing. Accordingly, van Manen's (1990) fourth research activity is "describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting" (p. 30). When attempting to write out exactly what you mean, it becomes obvious just how "the reflective process of phenomenological inquiry largely happens in the practice of writing" (van Manen, 1990, pp. 30-31). Because text is the only way to convey the results, a deep, rich, thick description of lived experience must be developed, but such things take time and work. It was only after several times of writing and rewriting were the final thematic aspects of teachers' bereavement experiences after the sudden and violent death of their student(s) developed.

**Maintaining a strong and oriented relation.** Given the enormity of lived human experience and the humanness of a researcher, van Manen (1990) acknowledges how "there will be many temptations to get side-tracked or to wander aimlessly and indulge in wishy-washy speculations, to settle for preconceived opinions and conceptions, to become enchanted with narcissistic reflection of self-indulgent preoccupations, or to fall back onto...abstracting theories" (p. 33). Hence why, "maintains a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon," is the fifth research activity (van Manen, 1990, p. 31). For the present study, I did find it difficult to stay on track when so many little details about the participants' experiences were interesting. To uphold the fifth research activity, I did what van Manen (1990) suggested and established "a strong relation with a certain question" (p. 33), that question being my research question: "What is the bereavement experience of teachers who have had their student(s) die suddenly and violently?" Keeping this question in the forefront during analysis helped to keep me on course. I also used journaling to record and explore my own preconceived opinions and

conceptualizations around teachers' sudden death experiences. In addition, consultations with my supervisors and committee helped to ensure a strong and oriented relation to the phenomenon that is teachers' bereavement.

**Balancing the research context by considering parts and whole.** Just as it sounds, the sixth research activity of “balancing the research context by considering parts and whole” is about looking closely at all the little aspects that make up a lived experience, but also remembering to take a step back so as not to get lost down a rabbit hole and lose sight of the phenomenon as a whole (van Manen, 1990, p. 31). Considering both the parts and the bigger picture, in Chapter Four: Presentation of Findings, a rich textual description of individual participant experiences is presented, and then participant narratives are combined for a more structural description of the experience that is teachers' bereavement as a whole.

### **Evaluating the Quality of Data and Establishing Rigor**

Validity is more challenging to discuss in qualitative research, in comparison to quantitative, but ensuring the quality of the data is crucial to the credibility of a study (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Hence, the current research endeavour adopted Creswell and Miller's (2000) outline of determining validity or trustworthiness in qualitative research, which utilizes the following methods: (a) disconfirming evidence, (b) researcher reflexivity, (c) member checking, (d) audit trail, and (e) thick, rich description.

**Disconfirming evidence.** Creswell and Miller (2000) understood how awkward it may be for a researcher to look for disconfirming evidence, when usually they spend their time trying to find confirming evidence; but that is exactly why it makes for a good way to challenge preliminary themes. It also forces the researcher to explore “all of the

multiple perspectives on a theme” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 127), which aligned well with the current studies underlying adoption of the constructivist view, which purports that multiple realities and interpretations exist. Time was taken to contemplate disconfirming evidence; it was not found that disconfirming evidence, outweighed the confirming.

**Researcher reflexivity.** Another “validity procedure is for researchers to self-disclose their assumptions, beliefs, and biases” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 127). Such a validity procedure perfectly aligns with van Manen’s (1990) version of epoché or bracketing. He did not stand with Husserl because he questioned humans’ ability to actually bracket out everything we know about a phenomenon, but van Manen (1990) also believed that a researcher could get side tracked by “narcissistic reflection” and “preconceived opinions” (p. 33). Therefore, van Manen (1990) also suggested that “it is better to make explicit our understandings, beliefs, biases, assumptions, presuppositions, and theories” (p. 47). By bringing it all out in the open it prevents such influences from hiding in the shadows, where they could “persistently creep back into our reflections” (van Manen, 1990, p. 47). Besides, bracketing by explicitly reporting one’s personal values, beliefs, presumptions, and biases, as is coming next, the use of “hermeneutic reduction consists of a search for genuine openness in one’s conversational relation with the phenomenon” (van Manen, 2014, p. 224). As to van Manen’s (2014) suggestion, for the current research endeavour I practiced self-awareness and radical openness by continually questioning my assumptions and thematic developments.

***Introducing reflexive bracketing.*** To gain clarity on the process of how to bracket in a fashion that upholds van Manen’s (1990) values, Gearings (2004) paper,

“Bracketing in Research: A Typology” was consulted. According to Gearing (2004) the reflexive or cultural form of bracketing involves a researcher identifying and making transparent their “values, culture, and judgments” (p. 1437). Such reflexive bracketing, though done heavily prior to beginning research, is a process that is done throughout the research endeavour to try and prevent van Manen’s fears of presuppositions creeping back into our reflections (Gearing, 2004). Documented through journaling, the following sections will reveal any values, beliefs, assumptions, and thoughts that would have the potential to influence the research.

*Positioning myself.* I have always loved school, learning, and education. Though after the completion of this thesis it will be time to take a break from education, I have always felt most comfortable being a student: A student, but never the teacher. Part of the reason van Manen’s (1990) methods include a form of bracketing is because it is usually the problem that the researcher enters a research endeavour with too much knowledge on their subject. By not being a teacher, I am not influenced by my personal experiences of being a teacher, but all that I do know about teaching and what that means or what it is like comes from an outside perspective. I explicitly remember never wanting to be a teacher, despite the fact that I had a knack for it, because in my experience, growing up in a small town, there seemed to be more students who did not like school than did. From that observation, I developed this idea, which has stuck with me, that teaching people who want to learn would not be too bad, but teaching people who do not want to learn would be a nightmare.

Though I do not have any experience with being a teacher, I do have quite a bit of personal experience with death and even sudden death. When I left my small town to

attend university in Lethbridge, I moved into my Grandparent's basement suite. I got to witness the slow decline of my Grandparents over those years, which is when I learned a lot about death, cultivated death positivity, and was inspired to specialize in grief counselling. My Grandmother died prior to my master's journey, but my Grandfather had learned of my acceptance to the program and passed away the month before my classes began. Around the same time, my boyfriend and I had to put down a beloved dog, Chancellor Ziggens. It was but a few months after that when one of my boyfriend's best friends was murdered and it was different than anything I had ever experienced. Being a student through and through, I turned to doing research on sudden and violent death to help cope with the loss. From my experience, I do believe that there is something different, and something potentially more painful, about violent loss experiences.

*Reflexive bracketing prior to data collection.* During a practice interview with my supervisor, my biases from counselling came through. I was too concerned with making sure that the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural domain was receiving attention, but I became aware of how I could steer an interview in a direction I deemed important, but the participant did not. The counselling mask had to be laid down and the researcher adopted.

*Reflexive bracketing during data collection.* It was during the interview phase that my ideas and biases around what healthy, adaptive grieving looks like came through. I found myself making judgments around how well the participants have healthily incorporated such losses into their lives. I was taken aback both by how much some participants seemed to still be hurting and the lack of hurt displayed by others. Feeling surprised acted as a good indicator that I needed to expand my conceptualization because

it brought to attention what I never considered before and gave insight into what I assumed or expected of my participants.

*Reflexive bracketing during data analysis.* The biggest presumption that was revealed during data analysis was how emotionally easy I thought this research would be. Being very death positive and feeling very comfortable with death, I did not predict how emotionally grueling it would be to place myself in the shoes of teachers' who experienced the sudden and violent death of their student(s). Being a very vivid dreamer, many nights I had nightmares of children dying, which really drove home how sad it is when children die. I honestly did not predict to be personally impacted so much by vicarious bereavement.

**Member checking.** Simply, member checking involves taking data and interpretations back to participants, in order for them to confirm the credibility of the information and give their input (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Though simple, great importance is placed on member checking as a crucial technique for establishing credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Since, the current research endeavour is considered a co-creation between the participants and the researcher, member checking was utilized to gain feedback from participants on the accuracy of preliminary themes. Each participant was emailed a document that contained the highlighted phrases abstracted from their interview transcriptions in a roughly thematic organized manner and were asked to comment whether my interpretations were accurate and resonated with their experience. Three out of five participants responded via email and did provide such feedback.

**Audit trail.** "An audit trail is established by researchers documenting the inquiry process" (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 128). For the present study, an audit trail was

established through the use of journaling and by using different word documents to chronologically record the process by which the themes evolved (Creswell & Miller, 2000). To better ensure findings make sense, an audit trail is a way to for researchers to track their thought process throughout the research endeavour. In addition, because the current research endeavour is for a Masters dissertation, committee members, who are trained in research, acted as auditors evaluating the study and providing critical feedback.

**Thick, rich description.** According to Creswell and Miller (2000), it is the “vivid details” that “help readers understand that the account is credible” (p. 129). The goal of phenomenology, likewise the goal of a thick, rich description, is to write about phenomenon in such a way that can “produce for the readers the feeling that they have experienced, or could experience, the events being described in [the] study” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, pp. 128-129). I hope that my in-depth description of teachers’ bereavement after the sudden and violent death of their student(s) can do just that for all who read it.

## Chapter 4: Presentation of Findings

This chapter includes the data resulting from the primary research question: “What is the bereavement experience of teachers who have had their student(s) die suddenly and violently?” As previously explained, the data on lived experience came into being through van Manen guided interpretive analysis of five interview transcriptions. First, a rich textural description of individual participant experiences is presented, upholding the descriptive aspect by allowing participant experiences to “speak for themselves” (van Manen, 1997, p. 180). Second, participant’s narratives are synthesized into a more structural description of the experience that is teachers’ bereavement, presented via five thematic categories that emerged.

### **Participant #1: David Smith**

David Smith described his twenty years of working in education, as “a great career so far.” David spoke effortlessly and passionately about the journey he has taken working in a variety of positions within the realm of education, but the energy in the room quickly shifted when transitioning to the topic of student death. David stuttered slightly when sharing how he has experienced the suicide of two students in his career; explaining, “it would be hard for me to talk about one without the other.” David has experienced relatively few deaths during his lifetime, with the loss of his two students making up the majority of his bereavement experiences. However, it is interesting to note that David did himself actually go through a near-death experience prior to the loss of his students.

**Introducing the sudden loss experience.** David was encouraged to begin telling his story “however and whenever” he wanted. As a result, he decided to begin with his

first loss experience involving Meg, a high school aged girl who took her own life about 15 years ago, before speaking about his experience losing another student named Brandon, which happened four years ago.

*Meg.* During those first few years of teaching building rapport with students who had a difficult upbringing drastically opened David's eyes. Having grown up in a rather happily sheltered environment, David recalled how "frightfully, terrifyingly naive" he was about the violence and abuse students experience as part of their everyday life. By providing a safe space to talk and be heard a strong bond developed over the couple years that David got to be Meg's teacher. Although he could tell she was having a hard time, David received positive feedback about how his work with Meg was fostering positive effects. Ultimately a school year began where David was no longer Meg's teacher.

"I didn't teach Meg in any capacity that year. I would never say that I didn't feel close to her, 'cause she would still stop by and say hi in the morning and I always said hello to her. Those are things, you know, passing in the hall and even if she had her head down, 'Hey Meg.' 'Oh hey Mr. Smith.' You know it was like we were always okay like that."

Wanting to make the change as smooth as possible for Meg, David set up a few meetings with the administration and the homeroom teacher that would be taking over.

"I guess I can say I was concerned, immediately, 'cause I never got the sense that the teacher took any of what I was saying seriously and I would literally say, 'no it's really important that you understand this, like this girl, this child comes from a very, very, very difficult background.' And I think the choice of phrase I used was like, 'I've been putting in a lot of work,' and I don't mean, I mean it's good work,

but I was attending to that child in ways that were very important to her. And I never in any of those meetings got the sense that that teacher was even listening, let alone willing to sort of engage or let alone follow through.”

David’s uneasiness at the beginning of the school year was warranted. Before the first semester was over, Meg committed suicide. David was new to teaching when Meg died and recalled what it was like first hearing of the loss.

“I was in my classroom and there’s an intercom, so the administrators called the staff down to the staff room and they announced it...but you know how some things just slow right down? I was standing in the staffroom and when that happened it was almost like my hearing got better or something and I could just acutely hear. There, the homeroom teacher was like halfway across the room and I could hear it like it was whispering in my ear, but the teacher was dismissive of it, you know? I would just say that it was really difficult for me because I think it was part of that naivety, well on so many levels...”

Returning to the classroom after receiving the news, it was the first time David had to face a class of grieving students.

“I had never experienced anything like this in my life. I was trying to figure out, as everything was happening, what my role was supposed to be. Like so these kids are all grieving big time, three quarters of them are in shock, I think I was still mostly in shock, but I had intellectualized the concept so I’m like what am I supposed to do? Am I supposed to fire up the computer and start giving notes? Like that just didn’t, I didn’t know what to do, but it didn’t feel right to just do nothing, so that’s why I just kind of opened it up to this conversation...”

During such a conversation, the students were swapping tales about Meg when out of the blue one of David's students made a rather touching remark.

“So kids were telling different stories, and I don't know even know if I had said a word. I was pretty quiet anyway, so as the conversation was going on kids were taking turns telling stories about Meg and stuff and then it was [Garrett] that just popped up and said, ‘but guys, like no one here forgets how close Mr. Smith and Meg were, like Meg really liked Mr. Smith.’ So [Garrett] said, ‘so Mr. Smith, this must be hard for you too.’”

On the surface, it would appear that David mostly refrained from grieving in front of his class. However, David's grief was felt by his class, not due to the addition of grief behaviours, but rather by the absence of behaviours that were present prior to the loss.

“And I do remember, I think it was probably about two months since the loss. I can't remember what happened, but there's something happening in the class and I laughed out loud and I heard. I think even the kids picked up on it; that was the first time. And I used to laugh like all the time. That was probably the first time and I think what it was that startled me is ‘cause I hadn't heard myself laugh in a while, right? So, the kids kind of heard it and then they saw me hearing it, there was that thing, then we were all like, you know, it's okay, it's all right. Then those moments just kind of came back with a little more frequency and the kids knew that we were still okay...”

Over time the pain of losing Meg shifted for David.

“Back then, in the first two months after Meg killed herself, it would almost be equivalent of getting branded, like this searing, visceral, intensity; electrode kind

of stuff in your brain. I just remember it being such an overwhelming, more than powerful; like it would just hit you like a tidal wave. There'd just be, this visceral, sharp, almost a pain associated with, like this pain response where you just want to shut down or something... But compared to then, it was just such a visceral thing, like total information overload and very painful and sharp. Now it's more of a warm than a sharp. I think maybe that's the benefit of time, I'm better able to remember Meg, like she was such a talented kid and I'm so appreciative of that. Maybe that's the benefit of it, I'm able to focus on the good things now, whereas before it just almost felt like an attack Meg's gone."

Even though the intensity of the grief has faded for David, the memory of Meg will never fade. "I think of her often. Easily once a month there's something and I just see her." David described how, over time, life's little miracles began to add up, making it easier to focus on the good to make it through. However, many small signs, such as David's early hesitancy around agreeing to be a participant and his initial difficulty reading the interview transcription during member checking, seem to suggest that David is still on his healing journey. Even David himself admitted, "recovery is a pretty strong word, I don't think I've healed from it."

**Brandon.** David went over a decade teaching before once again experiencing the sudden loss of a student. David was working as the principal, as well as teaching, when he grew close with an older male high school student, Brandon; "I was closer to that kid than anybody in our building and everyone knew it." Feeling, once again, naive to the world of drugs and gangs in which this student was brought up, through calm listening, racial barriers were overcome and David achieved the difficult task of gaining Brandon's

trust; “he shared a lot of things with me, even said there are things that I shouldn’t be telling you because you’re white.” Having gone through this once already, David expressed how he saw similar patterns of behaviour between Meg and Brandon.

“I thought I had learned everything I needed to learn from Meg, and then all the rules change because we are dealing with different cultures, different politics, different funding, racism in my own district, and can’t get funding for the kids that need help.”

Brandon had an extensive history of mental illness and David did everything in his capacity to get Brandon help, including personally driving him to the hospital on more than one occasion just during his final school year alone. “I’d spent a lot of time with him ‘cause we knew it was getting more serious.... I certainly was noticing the decline.” Trying to connect Brandon with resources proved to be difficult.

“I created a lot of heat administratively, ‘cause...I knew it was going to happen, we were going to lose somebody. So, I think I become a bit of a thorn in central offices side because I kept advocating for things despite the answer being no.”

Before Brandon got a chance to graduate, he committed suicide. Prior to passing Brandon told David during a conversation that he was not in any way at fault, but there appeared to be a lingering pain that spoke louder than words.

“It was our system that failed again, but this time it was way closer to me, because I was closer to Brandon, so I have failed, right? ... That experience then was just so much more complex, more draining, more visceral, more emotional, and more traumatizing than Meg’s, ‘cause I, again, had this sense that based on everything I learnt, how can you lose when you do the right thing?”

The call about Brandon's passing came just prior to the beginning of a school day. David remembered how stressful that situation was. "The secretary had taken the call," told David the news, and then went "into hysterics." Meanwhile David, as principal, was left to decide what all needed to be done, such as telling the rest of the teaching staff and organizing how to pull Brandon's siblings aside who had yet to hear the bad news.

"That was traumatizing for all of us, like everybody. Teachers, especially some of the elementary teachers that knew that kid just a little kid, they were super upset. Everyone knew him really well and I could see how visceral the response was from so many people. I was feeling it too, but again, I was standing there delivering this message going I'm the principal, like what am I supposed to do? Am I supposed to cry? Is it okay for me to show that I'm really upset by this right now? Because I'm really upset by this right now, but I also have central office administrators that have inevitably contributed to this; I told them this was going to happen. So, I think they would be upset with me if I showed that I was upset in front of my staff."

While trying to navigate his own distress, and be a leader, David recalled giving a difficult speech to his teaching staff.

"I remember saying this.... counselling services are on the way to the school right now, but for today, they are for students only. I have also been reassured that counselling services will be made available starting tomorrow morning for the teaching staff... So I said, 'today your job is to be the teacher, as I'm doing now being the principal. I'm telling you your job and I fully expect you to do your job today, which is bells as usual.' We had support staff; I said, 'they're going to be

in between classrooms about every five minutes and that's how we are going to support each other, so if you find that you can't hold it together, you take that opportunity when that TA gets there, you go out of the classroom, you go to the bathroom, you come to see me, you do whatever you need to do, but we need people that are holding it together in front of kids today.' I remember how that went over; that was like a bad joke. People were pissed off, so was I. Be mad, you know."

A difficult position to be in, it pulled on my heartstrings to hear the way David described his grieving journey as being lonely.

"I felt really alone... so I felt alone when I was at work actually.... I felt betrayed. I started to wonder if I was wrong, like maybe I shouldn't care, like maybe the problem's with me. Like maybe everyone else has this figured out and I'm the dummy, you know. So, in terms of the grieving process, I tried to invest myself. I think inevitably I doubled down. I re-invested my efforts to do what I thought was important in the first place, was be there for kids and help them get through things, you know, and maximize opportunities... But that was a very, very, isolating time and I would say that it permanently changed my view of what the role of a central office administrator should be..."

David did not feel supported by his superiors following the loss of Brandon.

"We always talk about support services and wrap around services and all sorts of stuff for kids. Basically, the services offered to the staff and to myself were just desperately, dangerously inadequate... My job and the expectations that were placed on me from central office, point blank, are inhumane. I was never once

offered direct assistance in any capacity whatsoever. Not personally. I don't recall being asked how I was doing. So somewhere in there there's this assumption that as an educator, or certainly as a principal, you're this bullet proof, non-feeling entity. And I know that is modeled quite effectively throughout the province, but I'm just not that person. And I know that I needed help, right."

Feeling the loss, Brandon's death had a lasting impact on David's life.

"I thought my system was perfect. I would never have even questioned losing... because if you do the right thing, how can you lose, right? So before I think the value system was the same, but I didn't have a sense of what's at stake. I didn't think that if I can keep the door open and be that person for somebody there is no way they'd kill themselves, right? Ya I just underestimated very, very, very badly underestimated how powerful some of these influences are in our lives; that's my fault, I needed to learn that. I wish someone could have told me. My first two years of teaching, it was just joy. I loved what I did, everybody knew I loved what I did; I was genuine, I just loved what I did... Ya at one point, I guess it was reckless; like I mean I never did anything risky or stupid or anything like that, but just my naivety. I just thought that if you were just good to people than everything's good and ya. Terrible. So that's what changed."

The personal change that brought me close to David's pain was the way David talked about no longer being able to watch and enjoy a once favored sports team.

"I know that was more traumatizing for me because there's things like, actually, I think I might have actually gotten Brandon hooked on this [sports team.] But in his casket, it was an open casket, he was buried with his [sports team] hat, so I

don't watch that [sports team] anymore. I don't know why that is. That's the impact, there's things like that."

**Sharing about the lived experience.** The loss of Meg and Brandon both literally and figuratively left David gasping for air. A physical response to the losses, David experienced newfound panic attacks.

"I could hardly breathe. I never had a panic attack in my entire life. I couldn't breathe, I felt like I was dying... I didn't know what those were, I thought I was having a heart attack, I didn't know. I didn't even know they existed. I went to the counselling and they said, 'well you're having a panic attack.' 'Well make it stop!'"

David remembered having to go to school and still do his job, but doing so on virtually no rest. For the first time, David found himself seeking sleep aid.

"I couldn't sleep. I went on a medication that would basically just knock me out. I can't say I slept it's just that I was basically rendered unconscious. 'Cause after about... I wasn't able to go to the doctors until after the funeral. I went to the doctor on the Tuesday the next week, 'cause I basically hadn't slept, maybe an hour, every other day. I was just going into zombie mode or whatever, but you know the responsibilities of the school don't go away."

David used one word to summarize experiencing the sudden death of his students.

"I feel that these experiences have been traumatizing. I think traumatizing is the right word. And I know this gets Band-Aid around, but in this case no, I think legitimately traumatizing. Either you can't sleep, can't eat, or your too much of one or the other and all that stuff. Just the emotional lingering effects of that."

David considered his loss experiences to be “pretty humbling...there’s humility there, a humbling of what I thought I was capable of; I’m not capable of anything. So ya it changed me that way, I tend to just listen...” David’s loss experiences acted as a reminder of what really matters: “Understanding... what it means to be breathing and be alive and the importance of treating each other well.”

### **Participant #2: Paul Richardson**

Paul Richardson taught for eight years, stating that his favourite part of teaching was “the interaction with the students.” Teaching more traditional core courses, as well as trades related classes, Paul explained how it was “nice to see” students in both environments; fondly recalling how, especially in “those trades areas, it’s like a sports team where you have a close-knit community.” For Paul, “that relationship with the students,” was a part of teaching that he treasured. Thinking back on his career Paul recalled “one major one” in reference to the sudden loss of a student.

“It was a student that actually graduated that we knew very well, or I knew very well that went through my program. But it was a major, I don’t know what you’d say, situation?” Paul used the pronoun “we”, before switching to “I” because much of his interview revolved around Kevin, a co-worker, friend, and former teacher of Benjamin’s. When reflecting on the losses in his life, Paul shared his experience of a painful personal loss that happened prior to Benjamin’s death. According to Paul, such personal loss experience acted as a strong reference point when it came to the passing of Benjamin about six years ago: “it was put in perspective. Benjamin was sad and everything else, but that’s why I could be there.” Such perspective allowed Paul to focus on helping his colleague Kevin cope with the loss of Benjamin.

**Introducing the sudden loss experience.** Expanding on what Paul meant when he said “a major situation,” Benjamin took the life of more than one person before he committed suicide. Paul first heard about the incident on the radio when driving to work, but he put it to the back of his mind because no names had been released, so he did not yet realize how close to home this incident was. Shortly after arriving at school Paul found out about the connection to Benjamin.

“I’ll always remember the look in his face and the shock... So my vivid memory, like one that comes back to me, is my friend [Kevin] came in, he was just white, pale, and he said, ‘did you know that was Benjamin out there?’ And I said, ‘no!’ As you go back and the memories of what Benjamin was and who he was and everything else, you were in shock. You couldn’t, you know? So my thing was, it was that this disbelief and the shock and my other thing was that I knew he had a better or close relationship with [Kevin], so I was more worried about how he was doing.”

**Sharing about the lived experience.** “I was more there for my friend, to support him, ‘cause I know about what he was going through and how much it was affecting him. To me, it’s funny, ‘cause seeing [Kevin] grieve, frustrated, sad, and angry, and all those different emotions that come with grieving, it was I, trying to help him through that was helping me kind of come to terms.”

Even though Paul felt like he could be the strong one for Kevin, coming to terms with such an incident took time. Paul had difficulty sleeping while first trying to process the loss. When asked if he recalled any major changes to sleep, he responded: “Oh ya! You’d think about it. Once your mind shuts off for the day, you’d sit there and wind

down, and think about it. You know, it's just the wow factor." Paul then explained how he came to calm his mind:

"But the reality is when you have 60-80 kids going through your classroom a day, roughly on average, you do get the relationships, but you don't know the whole story of students, right? And then reality is you got to just come to the terms that...you didn't, I didn't know him that well, you know. So [a few years] after he graduates, who knows what happens, what could happen to a student's life. You just do the best when they're there and give them a positive experience and you guide them and you're in the place of a parent when they're in school so you do your best, right."

Since Benjamin went to such extreme lengths before ending his own life, it opened a door that "anything's possible." Paul became more aware and diligent about trying to recognize potential warning signs in his students.

"Because of the awareness; seeing students and trying to see triggers. Like when you get a student, you don't expect them to go to that extreme. Then, you kind of look at students and see if there's trouble, or just open up to them, or if there is, if you see consistent patterns."

Because Benjamin had been graduated for some time, Paul's current students were not grieving the loss with him.

"Because he wasn't a student at the time, it was a different situation. I guess that's why you had to put your face on, because you had to go teach the students. The students might have talked about it, I can't remember if they talked about it, or

just said, ‘oh ya,’ you know. And then word gets out that he was a former student [from our school] a day or two later.”

Overall, it is not in Paul’s nature to wear his emotions on his sleeve; “I just personally put on a face and dig stuff down deep.” But if Paul felt like he needed to express his grief, he felt comfortable doing so in front of fellow teachers, who were also upset by the loss of Benjamin.

“Well you put your face on. I don’t know if it’s a male thing, but you put your face on and you just go. And any chance I did, [Kevin], and I went and talked with each other, and another trades teacher; was talking to him too. That is where the support was, with the three of us.”

Paul ended his interview by making a point about bringing in qualified counselling professionals to help teachers after the sudden loss of a student. In Paul’s experience, this would require bringing in outside counselling resources, because the school counsellor at that time was someone with primarily a teaching degree. “The teaching profession, and this is nothing against it, but we try to be everything. We have breadth, but we don’t have a lot of depth. We need to have more depth, when dealing with this.”

### **Participant #3: Nancy Colley**

Over her 35 years as a teacher, Nancy Colley had dabbled in teaching various grade school levels, having experience with elementary, junior high, and high school. Nancy fondly recalled teaching junior high being her absolute favourite; “They are wonderful... Junior high is really exciting and fun. They have a really great curriculum that has a lot of flexibility and you can do different things...the doors wide open.”

Nancy had gathered the old yearbooks and was able to show me tributes and pictures of the four students who she lost suddenly about six years ago. The interview started with Nancy becoming quite emotional talking about another significant loss she experienced as a teacher, that is, the passing of a fellow teacher and friend. The accident that claimed the lives of Nancy's students and the loss of that fellow teacher made up, what Nancy considered to be, the majority of her intense bereavement experiences. Nancy recalled during the sudden death of her students, "it wasn't like I had oodles of experience with that or anything."

**Introducing the sudden loss experience.** "There were four children who died, all on that day; all in that one fell swoop," Nancy had begun. Anthony, Tanner, Britney, and Cassidy passed away together in an accident, but had differed some in grade level so multiple teachers lost students that day. However, at the time of their deaths, Nancy was in the rare position of having been actively teaching all four students.

"I was the only person who taught all four of those kids at that particular point in time. There were teachers who taught the boys, there were teachers who taught the girls, but I was the only person who kind of crossed over. Then once people kind of figured that out, then they realized why it was so hard for me; it wasn't just that she had two to deal with, she had all four. I knew those boys really well; 'cause when you do a little, kind of, one on one teaching thing, you know them well. I had also taught them before, so ya."

With the accident happening on the weekend, Nancy came to learn of her students passing through a phone call. An already bad call was made worse for the person relaying the message could only remember three out of the four students' names;

“Can you believe it? The man could not remember one of them,” Nancy exclaimed. “Once I knew who three of them were,” having known all the kids well and who their friend groups were, Nancy was able to narrow it down to two students. Eventually finding out from someone else that, “no it wasn’t [so and so.]” Nancy remembers saying, “oh thank goodness it wasn’t.” Having more than teacher ties to such a student, Nancy felt relieved to find out they were still alive, but at the same time she described how “you have guilt over that.” Nancy has since let go of any guilt coming to understand that the automatic reaction wasn’t out of actual joy that one student had died over another.

**Sharing about the lived experience.** “All these memories flooded back about this,” Nancy admitted as she shared her story. The first thing Nancy recalled was how her entire lesson plan had to be scrapped.

“I had to change my whole year’s plan. Because the story we were going to read was about a kid who... leaves the dance to go get cigarettes and he gets shot, then he dies and his girlfriend finds him. Meanwhile, the story is told from his perspective where he doesn’t realize he’s dying and so it’s like his long thinking about what’s happening, what’s going on, why he can’t move, how he feels, and the people who come by... Anyway, but how could I do a story about a 16-year-old kid dying! How could I do that? That was not going to work, at all.”

Nancy remembered how the week following the loss was particularly difficult. She talked passionately about how ill received the message from central office was.

“That was a pretty hard week. Administration said, you know, the instruction from central office is that you have to keep on teaching. I’m going my whole week’s lesson just went down the tube and my novel for the year...and then to

have central office say, 'you know, you need to be teaching every day.' There are words that start with letters, start with F that you want to say...I didn't listen to them. I was the person in charge of that classroom. I was responsible for them.

And if this was not a day we could work, this is not a day we could work."

Another reason why the week following the loss was so hard for Nancy was due to the fatigue that set in from supporting grieving kids, while grieving herself.

"You not only had to be there as a teacher every day, but you were also there as a warm, compassionate person, experiencing sort of the same thing...I was just really tired. I was really, really tired just because you're exhausted from emotionally supporting people."

After a few weeks Nancy came to realize that she needed to take some time off.

"You think you're okay; 'cause I thought I was okay for those two weeks and then I realized I was not okay. After that last funeral and through that week I realized that I was not okay. I just couldn't face the sad, sad faces another day; like how hurt they were. I just thought, I couldn't hold anymore crying, grieving children...I just crashed and burned. I was off for a week. I just couldn't support anybody else, any longer...I was just done. I stayed home...it was overwhelming to have that much grief in one day."

Using her time off to rest and recuperate, Nancy said, "When I went back, it was fine." Upon returning to class, the students were curious as to why Mrs. Colley had been absent the past week and she answered honestly. "When the kids asked, I said, 'I was just really, really sad; just like you in the beginning, I was really sad.'" Much of Nancy's interview revolved around her students.

“I was looking out the hall, ‘cause in those first days, I was always kind of like: Okay, are we all here? Is everybody here today? Did anybody get lost? Anybody crying in the bathroom? I was always kind of wary of this thing, because they would. They would get together and they’d start talking about them, then they’d be crying, and they’d go sit in the bathroom, or they’d go to some other little [nook] that we had. So, I was kind of always checking...”

Nancy felt comfortable crying, talking, and grieving with her students. Nancy stressed the importance of putting grieving students’ feelings first, above schoolwork following a loss.

“I remember...one student was coming down and she’s carrying these books and just sobbing. So I stepped out of the room and I met her partway in the hall. ‘I’m so sad today Mrs. Colley.’ She just collapses into me. Something happened in the class and it made her feel really bad. Anyways, I cried with her a little bit in the hall too. There were often times that we had people crying; I mean just for that period of time and then it was okay after that. But I mean if we hadn’t have done that; if we had just kind of been like, well here’s work get it done, it wouldn’t have been good. You really have to be prepared to meet students where they’re at, on each day, ‘cause each day is different depending on what’s happening. Did they go visit the family that night? Or is it one of those people that passed, is it their birthday? Is it your birthday and they didn’t come? Is it the day you were supposed to go to the show?”

Moments of grief with the students became a big part of Nancy’s teaching reality.

Nancy admitted, “Both my colleague and I would agree that we were about a month to

six weeks before we could get back on track.” Even when the waters seemed to calm, every now and then grief would make waves. As Nancy spoke about Travis, I could not help but shed a tear.

“We were doing a writing assignment; I was walking around and [Travis] has nothing on his paper, nothing. So, I kind of bent down and said, ‘what’s the problem [Travis?]?’ I said, ‘do you want to talk about it a little bit, see if we can get some ideas for you to write?’ He says, ‘no, it’s okay.’ When he couldn’t think of what to write he said, ‘I use to just go like this and I would just play with Britney’s hair and she’s not here to focus.’ It was so sad, so sad. A whole month has gone by and we’re doing a writing assignment, he can’t think of what to write so he was going to play with her hair and now he can’t even think about what to write, ‘cause all he can think about is her...so things like that. And people don’t realize that those are the things that come back to kids. And because the other day he was fine, lots of other times you never even, you know, he used to work, but that day, when he couldn’t think of something to write, his go to was not there; it was not there. And so those are really hard moments.”

Nancy recalled finding relief when she was not teaching the classes that were most triggering. “And sometimes it was so nice, when my other class came or when I went to teach another subject; you’re away from that, you’re away from the heaviness of that.” After having to go to so many funerals in such a short time span, it is no wonder that a significant portion of Nancy’s interview involved students’ funerals. In Nancy’s experience, the funerals were a “shared experience,” not only between the students and

teachers, but also between the parents of the deceased students and teachers. Nancy recalled sharing a special moment with one set of grieving parents at the funeral.

“And now we’re like hundreds of people at those funerals, hundreds; so I sat there crying, stunned. And so the parents, when it was over, and it was alright to talk, you know, I saw them staring at the coffin; In our conversation there was just something about how they were so appreciative, they were so thankful I brought that one project. They were just so grateful to have those things of hers that she, you know, put herself into that. And you know when you’re talking to somebody and you’re in a group, another person kind of comes to enter the conversation, people kind of open up to let them in. They didn’t. We stood right there, the three of us just like this. This one time, the father kind of moved to shoulder like, ‘you’re not coming in this conversation.’ And then they hugged me. So you have no idea the impact that you can actually have on a student’s life and their family.”

After having such a touching experience, Nancy advocates for teachers attending the funerals of students; stating how important it is that when “students die, parents need to know they were cared for by teachers.”

“The school needs to think about how to let teachers attend that funeral. Don’t go, ‘oh well it’s a weekday afternoon, we’re having regular school.’ You know what, sometimes you don’t get to have regular school; sometimes you need to be some place else. And don’t expect teachers to take a personal day for that either. They are going, not for personal reasons, they’re going ‘cause they’re a teacher. And you might look to build something like that into your contract. And I know they’ll say, ‘well we don’t have enough subs.’ Okay, if you don’t have enough subs for

all the teachers that want to go that means you need to close the school. Like what's half a day? You waste half a day lots of times. Lots of times you can waste half a day, so don't even begin to tell me that 'no we can't afford it,' because we closed the school for a bit."

Nancy distinctly remembered the media intrusion following the funerals when a group of students from another school also got into an accident and died suddenly.

"...then those kids were killed. It was absolutely gut wrenching. And to top it all off, they became these big, like really parallels between a group of students being killed here and a group of students being killed here. And this dominated the papers. It was like, 'there's no connection people!' Don't even be stupid, like there is nothing to connect these two. 'But are students not being careful?' Oh my god, it was ridiculous. Then of course the reporters called back these families wanting to know how this is affecting your family, seeing how this is so common, and they were just like, 'get out of my life,' you know. Anyways, it was very, very, it just magnified the problem all over again, because you sort of thought it was coming, like after we get through the last funeral it will be, you know, things will be better; it will kind of relax a little bit, it will be okay. And it just ramped it right back up again. It was really hard."

"When I think about it, I think about what a really hard time it was, how emotionally draining it was, how sad it was, and how it went on for a long time." That profound sadness, over half a decade later, easily resurfaced as Nancy spoke about her experience mostly through a tear-stained face. When discussing becoming a participant for this study with her husband, Nancy recalled her husband responding, "well maybe it

will be kind of helpful for you, ‘cause I know you’re still really sad about it lots of times.” To my great surprise and pleasure, for Nancy our interview seems to have been helpful on her healing journey. During the member checking process, Nancy wrote:

“I told you that my husband encouraged me to speak with you as he thought talking to you about this might help me. It did. I realize that I can now talk about my students dying without falling apart. Since our conversation, I have spoken about these deaths many times with many people I met on my travels. I found it so much easier. It was sad. People were extremely sympathetic, but I didn’t cry about it. Maybe this has been some healing for me.”

#### **Participant #4: Betty Warner**

Betty Warner spent 34 years working in education. Teaching all grade levels throughout her teaching experience, Betty had also spent some of her career working in a leadership capacity. When asked about what her favourite aspect of teaching was, Betty responded: “I think watching the growth in the students and having relationships with students. But I pretty well loved all of it, you know.” Betty witnessed a lot over her career. When asked about her experience with the sudden death of students, Betty began to give what seemed like a long list of names; the simple answer was “too many.” Betty went on to explain, how in general, she has a somewhat unique relationship with death.

“I guess my situation with death is a little bit different than some people, because I’ve played [instruments] in our church, so I’ve played for, I don’t know, hundreds of funerals probably. So, when you do that, you get to where, I don’t think it’s a callousness, but you get to where you can deal with death a little bit

more than some people, because you've been so close to it so many times and so close to the people."

**Introducing the sudden loss experience.** Betty's first encounter with sudden loss came about 23 years ago when a recent graduate, that summer, died in an accident while trying to help others. Betty's second loss came 13 years ago when a student named Peter, just about to graduate, was killed in an accident. Six years later, during the summertime, a classmate of Betty's child committed suicide; "so that was, as a teacher, but that was also as a Mom of a classmate." Acting as vice principal at the time, the last experience Betty had with the sudden death of a student was only four years ago when, just before graduating, a student committed suicide.

*Peter.* Betty was encouraged to begin telling her story "however and whenever" she wanted; "Okay, I'll probably focus more on Peter 'cause that one was closest to me." Having worked very closely with this student in numerous capacities, Peter's death was especially hard on Betty. The timing of his passing, just prior to graduation and after having road tripped together for a big competition, seemed to make things worse. Furthermore, the sadness was amplified by the fact that "everyone described him as one of those good kids" and thought he was "just a joy to have in the school."

**Sharing about the lived experience.** "Everything about Peter's death was really surreal to me, because he was just that wonderful kid." Betty found out immediately about Peter's death.

"His Mom and Dad phoned me right away, just because I was a good friend of the family. I wouldn't say I was, I wasn't a good friend of the family, I was a good

teacher friend of the family's and so they phoned me to let me know and they said, 'this news is going to get out and we're not sure what to do about the kids.'"

Betty explained how, soon after, she gathered with the vice principal and principal to try and develop a plan of action. A big believer in visiting grieving families, Betty thought it important to organize a visit to Peter's family for the students. While recalling the bodily sensations experienced during such time, Betty spoke about the persistent chill that grief alone can bring.

"So when you talk about bodily feeling, I guess it's sort of a stress, headache, that sort of thing. I'm at the age now when I say I never get cold, but I remember very well being out at Peter's house and his Mom, being a real caregiver, brought a blanket over and put it on me because she said, 'I could see that you're cold.' And so, things like that, I do think that you get cold and things like that."

When Betty thought back on the week following Peter's loss, the sheer exhaustion came to mind. "It was basically, for me, a week with no sleep and total stress; you're just being there for the kids and you're doing everything for other people." Betty acknowledged having such feelings across many of her sudden death experiences.

"That whole week. And I think even, when I think of the other deaths too, the amazing changes in, especially sleep, and just your thoughts, and how you process things... I remember after that the last suicide going out to the family's home, I was driving, and there was a group of teachers who we were taking food out to the home and I missed the turnoff; I never would have missed the turnoff at other times, and you just go, 'okay where is my brain?' Sometimes you go, 'how safe am I driving?'"

Identifying with being a “stress eater,” Betty did recall turning to chocolate for comfort following the stressful days of teaching after the loss of Peter.

“At times of grieving, or things like that, I definitely eat sugar things. I’m a terrible, terrible snacker, like chocolate. And I really do remember when Peter died going down to the grocery store after school, ‘cause it had been such a stressful day with kids and everything, and I remember stopping and my kids in the car said, ‘oh how come you’re buying so many chocolate bars?’ Like I really do remember that. And just eating chocolate bars, which is terrible, but ya.”

Tired and stressed Betty was grateful that she already had time-off booked. The timing worked out as such that Betty left for a family holiday the week after Peter’s passing, immediately after the funeral.

“I got on that bus and collapsed... I was very happy to get on the bus, ‘cause I was just so exhausted and I remember just thinking, I’ve given everything I absolutely have in this last week, and I knew that things were okay, and the kids were okay and that sort of stuff. So, it was good to get on that bus and be away from everything too; that might sound really selfish. But I know I was really, really exhausted, just mentally, totally broken or whatever, not broken, but exhausted... It was necessary to have some down time then.”

After experiencing some difficult losses at a young age, Betty identified with “being the strong one.” Because of this, Betty’s family sometimes teased her about actually being “the cold-hearted one.” However, it became apparent that Betty was not devoid of feeling, but rather was very good at becoming emotional only during times she felt were appropriate, which was usually when she was alone.

“But the kids do look to the teachers on how to grieve. And again, I think maybe that’s where the cold-heartedness comes in; I am a person that believes if your time is up, it’s up, and so I’m not a hysterical griever. But is that good or bad? So if you have someone that deals with a death hysterically, or they’re just losing it or whatever, that’s okay too. And sometimes when the kids have an example of someone very composed and everything, it’s hard if they’re feeling like they want to be hysterical. And so, like I say, is it the right example? I don’t know. I think we feel like we have to be composed for the kids. I would say that I felt like I had to be composed and I wasn’t composed the night I found out about Peter, but I was happy to have that time just by myself and with my family, before I had to deal with it with the kids. As compared to the last suicide that we found out the morning of school and that was really difficult, but again, you just sort of try to maintain your composure and you go on. I think that is what we think we have to do and that’s why I said, *The Strong One*, that song always speaks to me, because I think sometimes you feel you have to be the strong one, but at the same time, I think I also, I hope I showed the kids that it’s okay to be emotional as well.”

As Betty said, “I think I’m forever changed by every single student that comes through my life, but I think you’re changed in small ways by deaths of students.” One such change for Betty was in teaching demeanor, which her students picked up on.

“Well I know the kids always say, ‘oh you’re being so nice to us.’ And that’s really sad when they say that. I think it does change you and make you more caring. Makes you stop and say, you know, what were my last exchanges with the students who died? Or was I a gift to that child? And then you also look at the

other kids that are hurting. So, I think during the immediate time, I think I probably was a lot more, I mean I'd like to think that I was a caring teacher all the time, I hope I was; I know I certainly had some times where others wouldn't describe me as caring, you have your moments and so do kids."

During such time, Betty did not explicitly recall help being provided from her school; "I don't remember as a teacher the schools offering counselling. We offered so much to the kids, but they do when they come in say, 'if the teachers want to talk that's fine and everything.' But not afterwards..." Although recognizing the importance of open invitations, Betty thought, "being very specific in offering help, can be a help too," especially in grieving circumstances.

"I think most of the time for teachers it's, 'we're here if you need it.' Well, teachers, I don't think for the most part, think that they need that and I think that there's lots of time when we do, but we won't admit it."

Betty used creative outlets like writing and music to help her after the loss, but a big part of her healing journey was letting parents "know that their kids were really loved by teachers." In Betty's experience, "What I have found is that people are afraid to go to the homes of the people who have lost someone and I'm not afraid. I actually think it's a really big part of the healing." Overall when looking back on her experiences of suddenly losing students, for Betty it was love that emerged from the sadness.

"I think what also stood out for me, and it still does, is how much you can love your kids, like your students and how extremely sad you are when they die. And you know they're just your students, but they're your kids. Ya I think that stands

out for me, that you don't forget them. You loved those kids and their death affects you just like it would be your own, your own kids, so it's hard."

### **Participant #5: Norm Brown**

"This is my 21st year teaching. I can't believe it." When asked about his favorite part of teaching, Norm Brown found it difficult to pick just a few aspects. As much fun as Norm has had teaching, he noted that not all days are filled with laughter; "there is also days when you just want to go home and close the door, the windows, and not ever leave again." As Norm went on to explain his experience with death in schools, it seemed that he had a fair few experiences to draw on, though not all of his experiences would fall under the sudden death category; "I've had students in the past who have been ill and have passed away...but it wasn't sudden." In contrast, outside of school, death was not really a regular part of Norm's life; "close knit wise, not really."

**Introducing the sudden loss experience.** Thinking back to only the instances of sudden death, Norm is able to recall four experiences. He notes the majority of such experiences involved former students whom had been graduated at the time of their passing, but none of them longer than five years out; one student died in an accident just a few months after graduating; another former student drowned; and another committed suicide. Yet, Norm did have one experience that involved the sudden passing of a current student, an experience that forever changed his life about 14 years ago.

**Donny.** "Well I have one main experience that I think might be relevant to what you're doing," Norm began to explain. At the time, Norm was a newer teacher at the school and was teaching a class that had a new student Donny. It was a typical day of teaching, until Norm asked Donny to lift his head off the desk.

“And he went ballistic on me and...at the top of his lungs just yelling profanity at me and I didn't move out of my desk because I thought, if I move I'm going to get the shit kicked out of me here in class. He was just going on and on and on. I was like, 'you need to leave. I won't accept this. You can't sit in here and talk to me this way in front of all these people. Go to the office right now.' So, I got him out of the room. He left, threw his stuff and then he left. But I phoned the office right away and said, 'okay just had this incident, I've sent him to the office, I'm not walking him down 'cause he's unhinged, unglued, and a danger; he had threatened to kill me basically.' So the office was like, 'okay.' So they're waiting for him. Then the vice principal came up was like, 'what happened? Donny never came down. I went down to check, he's not there.' ... When the vice principal left he said to the kids, 'what do you need?' And they're like, 'can you lock the door? Can you lock the classroom door?' Cause they were worried that this kid was going to come back. So, I go in and we're working and the bell changes, but in the meantime, Donny had gone home... and he killed himself.”

Hours passed between the classroom incident and when Norm was officially told of Donny's death. Having learned the news, Norm described the rest of his day.

“So then we go to the staffroom and I have to go see the vice principal and I'm like, 'do I need to see the cops?' They're like, 'we're not sure.' Then I just go home and I'm at home stunned, just stunned. It's all in the news and I'm just like, 'okay.' Then I think a couple hours later, my principal, he came over with the counsellor, another counsellor, and one of the associate superintendents of the school district; they all came at one point. I'm just like, 'holy shit, I have done

something wrong because I have all these adults in my space right now.’ And they’re like, ‘we don’t think you should go to school tomorrow.’ I’m like, ‘why?’ ‘Because there’s an element of the students who are in that building who blame you, this is your fault.’ And I’m like, ‘is this my fault?’ They’re like, ‘no.’ Even when I talked earlier with the Vice Principal and they talked to the police, they’re like, ‘you’ve done nothing wrong. You did nothing wrong. You’re fine.’ I’m like, ‘are you sure?’ And then that seed of doubt just gets planted in there.”

**Sharing about the lived experience.** While trying to process the loss of a student and the feelings of guilt that were starting to take hold, Norm described the strange ways in which his mind tried to process the trauma.

“Like it’s interesting the tricks your mind plays or the stories that it tells you; the night before when all these guys would come over to my house, all I could think is that the one lady kept her shoes on; like everyone else took their shoes off, but she kept her shoes on and I just put in hardwood. I’m mad at her cause she didn’t take her damn shoes off in my house and it’s the stupidest thing, but your brain; I was traumatized, I was trying to process things.”

Despite the recommendations, Norm immediately returned to school. Norm stood by that decision, despite how hard it was to persuade his feet to move when he got there.

“I remember the next day when I went to school. I was up all night, didn’t sleep very well. It was really early, I sat in the car for 20 minutes before I went in the building. I talked to myself like, ‘I’m going.’ Then I talked myself into it when I got there. And I’m glad I did, ‘cause that moment of going back would have been

just as difficult whenever, so going back right away, even though I think I was still kind of in a state of shock. Still a little bit stunned by things.”

The school provided much support on Norm’s first day back. He received a counsellor and a substitute was hired to be on hand as a backup. Even with such support the hardship of the first day back took its toll on Norm.

“They brought in a sub for me that day that I went to school right after, just on call, just in case and actually it was smart, ‘cause I only did the morning. I got to lunch and the staffroom, in there, there’s all these counsellors and all these people and it was too much. I was overestimated at that point. I was done. I went into the washroom and I closed the door and I fell apart. I was ugly crying, snot like the whole nine yards. Then I was embarrassed ‘cause I’m in the bathroom, the doors locked, and people are trying to get in. And I’m like, ‘it’s busy.’”

Norm eventually made his way out of the bathroom. When he did, the substitute teacher that covered his afternoon shared some great words of wisdom.

“And the person who subbed for me, he said to me, ‘you need to take care of this. This is the kind of thing that ends people’s careers. You need to take care of yourself.’ And that really stuck with me at that moment; this is sort of the thing that stuck in there with all the other stuff I need to, so it’s interesting the things that get through the fog that latch on and the things that just sort of bounce off and go away.”

Teaching was not the same following the loss. “I became aware, really for the first year, especially with that one class, of the material that I chose.” Besides having to filter out triggering material, another classroom change was the way the loss experience

became a reference for students to deepen their understanding of their schoolwork. Norm distinctly remembered one personally heart-touching moment.

“And we were talking about something like, bad things happen to good people. And one kid goes, ‘oh like you?’ I’m like, ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about.’ He’s like, ‘that thing with the student. That was a bad thing and you’re a good person. You didn’t deserve that.’ And I went, ‘Oh, okay, thanks. I need to step out for a moment.’ Right!”

Following Donny’s passing, Norm remembers taking moments to step out of the classroom to collect himself.

“I was like the teacher who, ‘I’m going to hide my feelings from you’ and stuff like that. I didn’t shy away from it, but there were a couple times where I would just have to step out of the room for a minute. I’m like, ‘Kay, I need to get a drink of water. I’ll be right back.’ They knew. I think they just knew that he just needs a moment. And there were more so of those when I first got back then as the semester went, ‘cause we found our stride again as a class. ... So, I was able to separate that kind of personal, private part and if I wanted to, you know any kind of emotion I might have been feeling. I think I went through a period of numbness for a while. I kind of was angry and that was my predominant emotion, but I kept it in check, though I was a little bit snappy with people, partly because I was just tired. I didn’t cry a lot with this. I didn’t cry till that first day back at lunch when I fell apart. I had some other moments of weakness...”

Another change that occurred following the loss was how Norm experienced a shift in his teaching demeanor. Lowering his voice and listening more, Norm became

more aware of some of the issues his students were facing. “I think I just became more intuitive to people and to look for things. I was hyper-vigilant for a while, but then I found that balance.” Not only focusing more on students’ wellbeing, Norm gave priority to his own mental health. The words spoken by that substitute teacher steered Norm to seek assistance through “the recovery. It’s like a recovery of some sort... ‘cause you’re seeing kids die.” It was only a short couple of months after Donny’s loss that Norm began counselling.

“So the gap of time really wasn’t a huge amount of time because I knew I was in trouble, just from my behaviours at home and the anger.... I think it might have been what that sub said, ‘if you don’t handle this, this could end your career.’”

Norm was in a unique and somewhat isolating position as “the teacher” this happened to.

“And it was funny because I remember talking to somebody one time and I had mentioned it and they’re like, ‘that? That happened like months ago. You’re not over that yet?’ I was like, ‘no.’ Then through my own kind of research and my knowledge of that I realized that we have trauma moments, right. And everybody was past, but I was stuck here in this moment, just in this moment of thinking, because of those guys when they came over and they were like, ‘you shouldn’t go to school ‘cause people are blaming you.’ The idea that I was at fault stuck with me; it took me a year to lay that down. I refer to it sometimes like a coat; I took that coat off, I laid that burden down, and once I was done with that, I was done with that.”

Looking back on it all now, it was clear to Norm how his grief has transformed over time.

“When I talk to people about it, this is a really good example of how this grief has changed, because at first it was really hard; it was a tough year. When we got to the second-year anniversary of it, I was aware of it, but couldn’t remember the exact date; I don’t know if it was because I had moved on or just because I’d forgotten. As times gone by, the grief part didn’t stick with me so much as the, what do we do now for people who get in the same situation?”

### **Structural Description of Teachers’ Bereavement**

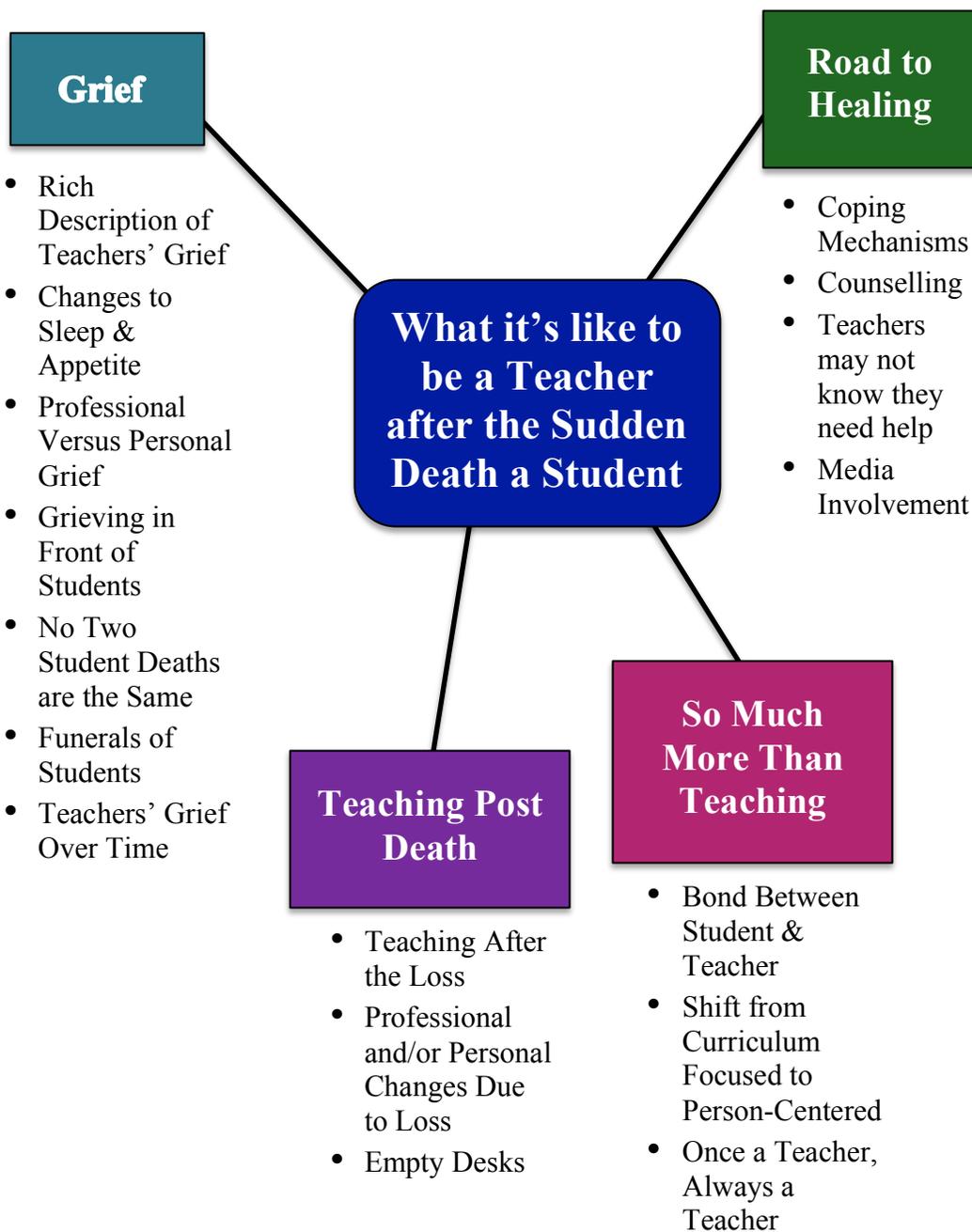
Being attentive to how things appear, the previous textural description of individual participant experiences gave insight into what each interview was like by allowing participants’ narratives to speak for themselves. The following section will now synthesize participants’ narratives to review them as a collective body of experiences fitting van Manen’s methodology. According to van Manen (1990):

In phenomenological research the emphasis is always on the meaning of lived experience. The point of phenomenological research is to “borrow” other people’s experiences and their reflections on their experiences in order to better be able to come to an understanding of the deeper meaning or significance of an aspect of human experience, in the context of the whole of human experience. (p. 62)

To convey such deeper meaning or significance a more structural description of the experience that is teachers’ bereavement is presented via the five thematic categories that emerged: (1) So Much More Than Teaching, (2) Student Death Lifts the Curriculum Veil, (3) Place of Work, Place of Grief, Place of Being (4) Teachers May Not Wave for Help on the Healing Journey, and (5) No Two Sudden Deaths Are the Same. The five themes emerged after using van Manen’s (1990) three approaches to isolate thematic

statements; the wholistic or sententious approach, the selective or highlighting approach, and the detailed or line-by-line approach.

The following two figures (see Figure 1 and Figure 2) depict the process by which the themes emerged. Figure 1 demonstrates the initial conceptual headings used to organize the data and Figure 2 depicts how the headings came to be the building blocks of the final thematic statements.



*Figure 1.* Initial attempt at organizing the data into conceptual headings.

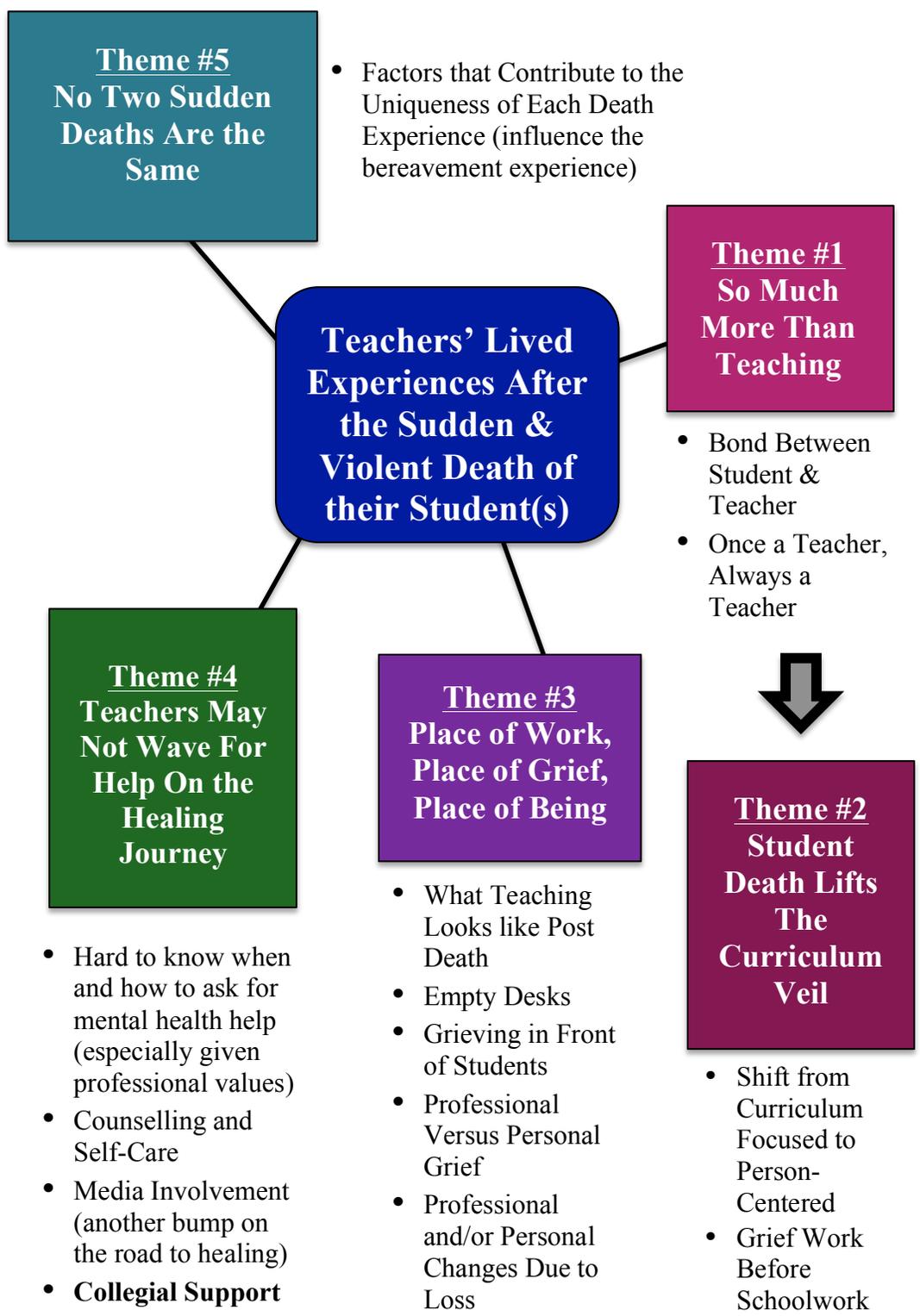


Figure 2. How conceptual headers developed into themes.

Each thematic phrase “serves to point at, to allude to, or to hint at, an aspect of the phenomenon” (van Manen, 1990, p. 92). Not every conceptual heading or thematic phrase were meaningful descriptions for every participant as shown in Appendix D, Conceptual Headings Displayed in Accordance to Participant. For more details about participants’ responses and further insight into the emergence of themes please see Appendix E: Participant Quotes Organized in Accordance to Conceptual Headings. Indeed, “phenomenological themes are not objects or generalizations; metaphorically speaking they are more like knots in the webs of our experiences, around which certain lived experiences are spun and thus lived through as meaningful wholes” (van Manen, 1990, p. 90).

**Theme #1 - so much more than teaching.** Central to understanding the lived experience of teachers who have had their student(s) pass suddenly and violently is examining what it means to be a teacher. Teaching is so much more than teaching course material. Every participant talked about “this idea of *in loco parentis*...in care of, the role of, a loving parent” (David). According to Paul, *in loco parentis* is an underlying understanding that “you’re not the parent, but you’re in the place of a parent.” Teachers seem to carry a lot of weight when it comes to the upbringing of children. Nancy explained, “they think of teachers as almost secondary parents, because they are the people that spend the most time with children.” This underlying expectation seemed to be quite apparent to the teachers I spoke with, yet there was a curious disparity between the expectations teachers felt were placed on them and their perceptions of the recognition from the public about such expectancies. As Norm shared, “I don’t think the average person gets that; just how much a teacher knows their kids.” Nancy vocalized, “Teachers

are struggling too. You just can't think that they just teach these kids and there's no, like no connection there; because there is."

A big part of why teaching is so much more than teaching is due to the strong bond that may form between students and teachers. Such a bond is also at the foundation of teachers' bereavement experiences. Human beings build bonds to fulfill deeper needs of belonging, safety, and worthiness. When such bonds are broken, it is normal that strong emotions follow the loss. Teachers who experience intense bereavement are likely to have been strongly bonded with the student who passed. Still aligned with the notion of *in loco parentis*, Betty expressed how tough it is when a teacher loses a student; "you loved those kids and their death affects you just like it would be your own, your own kids, so it's hard." As Norm conveyed, "These kids come into our classrooms as students, but at some point, the vocabulary changes to 'these are my kids.'" When David recalled the first time he let himself get emotional after Brandon's passing he shared, "I guess that's where I maybe broke down a little bit and I was so mad! Like, I love that kid, you know."

The other interesting piece that contributes to Theme #1 (So Much More Than Teaching) is the concept of "once a teacher, always a teacher": which represents how the teacher student relationship has the potential to last a long time. Once a teacher, always a teacher was explicitly expressed in Norm's interview when he gave a speech to his students that included the line, "doesn't matter where you go in life or what you do, I'm always your teacher and you'll always be my student." It was also brought up in subtle ways like when David described still feeling bonded to Meg, even though she was no longer in his class. Paul, Betty, and Norm also talked about experiences pertaining to the

sudden death of former students, providing further corroboration for once a teacher, always a teacher. When a summer time accident claimed the life of one student, just a few months after graduation, Norm did not recall the school being supportive.

“So that felt like the school year and I even said to my principal, because it was in the summer so we haven’t even come back and I said, ‘we taught this kid for many years.’ And just connecting with my colleagues through social media or through phoning and stuff like that a lot of people were really hurting. The one woman I know, her husband taught at the school, and she’s like, ‘he’s a wreck; he’s a mess right now.’ But nobody did anything for them because it was the summer.” (Norm)

That was not the only experience Norm had like that. With a large turnover in staff and a new principal the passing of another former student went unacknowledged; “so again you suffer a little bit in silence” Norm explained. Just as grief is a process that changes over time but never truly ends, student teacher bonds have the potential to be the same way.

The bond between students and teachers was predominant throughout every interview; however, it can be best understood as a spectrum. Not every teacher felt strongly bonded to every student. For example, David felt the new homeroom teacher did not care for Meg as much as he did. Norm described at first being surprised that some former students’ deaths were not brought up, until coming to the realization that “we had a big turnover in our staff so not everybody would know this kid.” Paul said, “when you have 60 to 80 kids going through your classroom a day, roughly on average, you do get the relationships, but you don’t know the whole story of students.” In Paul’s experience,

Kevin, had more ties with the former student Benjamin than he did and also suffered more so in grieving the loss. Each student teacher bond is unique, however understanding the existence of the unique student-teacher bonds is essential to understanding teachers' bereavement experiences.

**Theme #2 - student death lifts the curriculum veil.** Teaching is a complex profession with many expectations and responsibilities; as such, a teacher will likely place emphasis on different aspects of the job throughout their career. Early in their careers, teachers may find themselves focusing on the curriculum and content delivery. When teachers wear this curriculum veil, they may be blind or ignorant to other aspects of teaching, such as seeing the humanness of their students. Paul recalled the vast difference between being a new teacher versus gaining experience.

“So I was about halfway through my career when I was teaching so I had a lot of experience. That makes a difference too, if you're a new teacher going into a mere survival mode, but once you start building, what I found was that when you start teaching you're looking at the curriculum, trying to get the curriculum in, trying to get it in their heads; this is what we need to do. But once you get to the second, third year, if you're teaching the same subject, you start looking at the students, you kind of step back ...” (Paul)

David also spoke about how his early days of teaching looked vastly different than now; “I think when I started my career I was really rigid, really ridiculously organized. Then I just came to realize that those things are important, but not as nearly important as making sure that your always sort of accessible.” Every participant spoke about the shift in their teaching career when their attention switched from the curriculum

to focusing on students' wellbeing, as people. Although a natural shift that may occur as teachers gain work experience, it appears that the violent loss of a student acts as a catalyst for such change.

“These moments of loss represent the pinnacle of our responsibilities in society. They clarify what it is we're actually doing, 'cause it isn't about a textbook, it isn't about a swimming field trip. And it's actually the core work of working with kids... We have a system that is in an identity crisis. It thinks it's something, but it isn't. Or it thinks it's one thing, but it isn't.... And it's terrifying that we have adults in education that think teaching is about content delivery and that's their job... There's way more to education than that and there's this human factor that is front and center all the time... The teaching role is more than curriculum, you're the curriculum, and it's relational, like it is all intertwined...” (David)

There is something about the darkness of death that allows only for light to shine on what is really important. Though there are so many aspects to being a teacher, death can be a reminder to “be a human being first. Be present. Listen. It's not about the answers, it's about listening, and it's about honoring people, young people” (David). After Donny's passing, Norm changed his teaching demeanor. Listening more, Norm found that he could “get further with students” by “treat[ing] them with a little bit more grace.” Sometimes when a student says, “I just don't get it,” they actually mean they are stressed about a personal situation as Norm came to understand through calmly listening.

Multiple participants talked about the serious issues that some of their students were dealing with, such as homelessness, abuse, and gang violence. David and Norm recognized how such upbringings were greatly different than their happily sheltered

childhoods. A student's sudden and violent death can shatter the illusion that all children grow up carefree, safe, and loved. Teachers are not simply ignoring students' issues, it is more so that they may be unaware of them; you only know, what you know. Teachers are humans who have vastly different experiences of growing up and they only know what the students choose to share with them. Even experiences where the signs of struggle in a student were obvious, teachers are still just humans who can only do so much. The reality is student deaths will happen no matter what teachers do or do not do. Teachers have the opportunity to be a positive influence in a child's life and a student's passing can make a teacher, like Betty, stop and reflect: "what were my last exchanges with the students who died? Was I a gift to that child?" But to think that teachers are in complete control of a student's life and can prevent their passing would be a fallacy; teachers have enough expectations without 'playing God' being a part of that list.

In more ways than one, the sudden and violent passing of a current student lifts the curriculum veil. Not only does it open the eyes of teachers to the potential for students to be dealing with very serious and difficult life experiences, but also when a current student passes they leave behind grieving classmates. Nancy advocated that during such times of loss schoolwork should come second to grief work. "You have to be there for those kids and I don't mean, I say at the expense of the curriculum, but you have to be there for them above everything else." A very difficult time for grieving students, for whom the passing of a fellow student may be the first significant loss in their lives, Nancy stressed the importance of teachers to be emotionally supportive for the students first and foremost; "They are the most important people and they need you more than anything else that can be given to them at that time. It's just how it is."

**Theme #3 - place of work, place of grief, place of being.** When a student dies suddenly and violently, what was once just a place of work becomes a place of grief as well. It is true for when a former student dies, but perhaps the most poignant transformation occurs when a current student dies during the school year because the school as a whole is more likely to be grieving.

In Nancy's experience, what was once just a normal way to form groups prior to the accident became a startling reminder of the loss.

“And so the one day I said something about we need to talk for whatever we're going to do and I said, ‘put your desks into groups of four.’ And said, ‘will someone go sit here so there's a group of four.’ Nobody moved. And the girls turned that desk and made the group of four; they stayed a group of three. They never ever made a group of four without putting that empty desk there... If I wanted them to be a group of four, for some reason or another, then I would spread the desks all around the room and then just say make groups of four. That's how I could avoid that problem.”

With no easy way to resolve the empty desk situation, Nancy was upset by some of the suggestions that she received, which exposed the lack of understanding from others, including fellow teachers, on the significance of an empty desk.

“And some teacher said, ‘why don't you just move it out of the room then?’ I was like, ‘the first desk will always be the first desk; it doesn't matter what I change it to, the first desk will always be the first desk. So, I can leave a hole there, my god, that be more conspicuous!’ But you could tell that other teachers didn't get it as much as we got it in that classroom. And I saw those kids six times a week; so,

you know, we saw each other a lot. But no one ever sat there... And you have to understand that you can't just say, 'look sit in that seat,' 'cause you are causing them and all the other students great pain. And you can't get rid of that seat either."

Being more than classroom furniture, Norm gave insight into the significance of a desk. "It's cause it's their space, right. I can look out at my room and go, oh well I'm missing that kid, that kid, and that kid, because I'm used to where they are in the space." Upon returning to school Norm had considered changing classrooms, "...when I was struggling a little bit, I thought I had to transfer because I went back day, after day, after day to the same classroom where the incident happened, right. And that was hard on me." After talking it over with his counsellor Norm decided against switching rooms, but he recognized "...that was a hard thing too was to go back into that room." Which is perhaps why Norm did not at first notice the change that had been made to his classroom.

"It took a lot for me to figure out that I was missing a desk and when I did, I was indignant as hell that they had done this. But then realizing that the janitor just had his heart was in the right spot; he wanted to take a reminder out."

The violent loss of a student leads to a very confusing time for teachers who are, not only personally in shock over the loss, but also trying to navigate what feels like a new job of teaching grieving students. David's mind was racing with questions as he tried to figure out what to do with a grieving class for the first time; "What would a loving parent do right now? What would a good teacher do right now? ...Am I supposed to fire up the computer and start giving notes?" Not feeling like that was appropriate, the last question may seem silly, but it really speaks volumes to how the job of teaching really

changes after the sudden and violent loss of a student. Even though David thought about teaching as usual, it actually didn't feel right to do so. Teaching as usual appeared to be the underlying message from central office in Nancy's experience. Nancy ignored central offices instructions that the teachers' "need to be teaching everyday" because she recognized that when children are grieving they cannot always "get work done," saying how "it wouldn't have been good" if she had continued teaching as usual. It is not teaching as usual, in fact, teaching slides into the background to make way for teachers to hold and support masses of crying children. "There were often times that we had people crying" Nancy recalled immediately following the loss.

Betty said that "kids do look to the teachers on how to grieve," but came to question whether she presented too narrow a version of grief. Betty hoped she "showed the kids that it's okay to be emotional as well," but was not confident she did being a conservative griever. Nancy appeared to feel comfortable grieving as usual in front of the students. Norm admitted, "I don't know if I ever grieved in front of them" and left the room to have his moments of grief, only to return to his class when more composed. It is clear that different teachers grieve differently from one another in front of their students. While human grieving is always unique and very personal, for teachers the loss is not just personal in nature, it is also professional. Therefore, teachers' grief can be strongly influenced by professional values. These professional values, like of strength, leadership, and composure, can seem like the opposite of grieving making the boundaries and expectations around teachers' grieving in front of their students very unclear.

The death of a student raises an interesting grey area for teachers; the loss is both personal and professional in nature. Consequently, it appears that personal and

professional values can make being a grieving teacher quite complicated. On the one hand, they are a human being who has experienced the loss of a child with whom they were bonded, and on the other hand, the only reason they were bonded with this child in the first place was because of their profession as a teacher that places them in a leadership capacity. The grieving process is an intense journey as is, but for teachers grieving the violent loss of their students, it appears that all sorts of conflicting personal and professional values can add further complications. “I think teachers often are caregivers and every once and awhile, I just want to be a wreck and I can’t be” is how Betty explained it. Many participants spoke about having to remain strong and not show any sign of weakness. Like David put forth, “somewhere in there there’s this assumption that as an educator...you’re this bullet proof, non-feeling entity.” Norm described how his personal grief “reaction came later” because he first went into “teacher mode.” When a teacher’s place of work, becomes a place of grief it can be a very difficult place to be. The teaching profession appears to hold values of leadership and strength in high regard creating a culture of fear around showing any sign of weakness, which may include things like crying at work. As David thought following the loss of Brandon:

“Am I supposed to cry? Is it okay for me to show that I’m really upset by this right now? Because I’m really upset by this right now, but I also have central office administrators that have inevitably contributed to this; I told them this was going to happen. So, I think they would be upset with me if I showed that I was upset in front of my staff.”

Teaching after a loss is difficult. Each day teachers come into work, packing their grief, only to be constantly reminded of the loss. It is the things like the empty desks that

remain after a student dies, or the removal of such a desk that can spark an intense emotional response. It is the little unforeseen changes, like having to come up with a new way to form groups so as not to upset the students. It is the bigger changes, like having to switch the lesson plan for that entire year and the dropping of whole units to remove triggering material for years to come. It is the moments where you can see your own pain expressed in the eyes of the grieving students you are comforting. It is significant to try and picture how drastically the profession of teaching changes after the sudden and violent loss of students. Teachers are dealing with so much, while exhausted and sleep deprived. When ones' place of work becomes a place of grief it is significant because, just as that sub informed Norm, "this could end your career."

**Theme #4 - teachers may not wave for help on the healing journey.** "You can put all the things in place to say this is to help teachers; they don't always take advantage of it because it's like, that's pretty weak if you need that," articulated Nancy. In general, people can have trouble with recognizing and admitting they need help and then struggle even more with asking for help; teachers are no exception. In fact, it may be even harder for teachers to recognize that they need assistance and then ask for help because of their leadership positions and the values of professionalism. When talking generally about teachers and the teaching field, teachers expressed; "we try to be everything," "it's sort of in that teacher persona that we think we have to be strong for everybody else," "don't want to show any kind of weakness," "got to be the strong one," "got to be composed," and "bullet proof." When a person is trying to be there for everyone else, it means they are putting themselves last. But grief cannot be kept at bay indefinitely. After spending weeks supporting grieving children, Nancy and Betty needed some time-off. Even

expressing how selfish this felt at times, they also understood what Norm came to understand; “if you’re not healthy, how effective are you going to be?”

Even though by a loop, teachers placing their self-care above the needs of their students, allows teachers to be in the best position possible to meet the needs of their students, this message does not seem to come across teachers’ awareness often. The sudden death of a student can be a time when teachers must learn this lesson. That is when David learned to “apply airline crisis emergency response” and “take care of yourself” and “put your mask on first.” After Norm’s loss experience he strongly believes that “university pre-service programs should teach teachers how to take care of themselves.”

Both self-care and bereavement are heavily tied to the mental health realm. In general, it still seems harder for people to seek help for mental ailments versus physical. “So any kind of struggles like if I had broken my leg, I got a cast, oh ya your injured, but if my psyche is injured like that you can’t see it, right” as Norm explained that important difference. Both Norm and David expressed how the sudden loss of their students broadened their concept of mental health.

Although many participants found it difficult to ask for help, some participants, like Norm, were able to recognize that they required assistance when coping with the loss; “I knew I was in trouble, just from my behaviours at home, and the anger.” Norm did attend counselling, which helped immensely with his healing journey. On the other hand, David also knew he was in trouble, but struggled to find services in his less than supportive work environment; “And I know that I needed help, right? ...But I can’t tell

you what services I would have needed, but I would have needed something, rather than nothing.”

David knew he needed help, but was not sure what would help. It appeared that David’s struggle with healing may be greatly influenced by just how unprepared he was to have a student die; “. . . I feel I was blind-sided ‘cause, I mean, I could hardly breathe. . . How can we possibly prepare ourselves? I would have, but there was no mention of any of this whatsoever in my teacher development program.” Not even having awareness that student death may become a part of his career seemed to really take a toll on David. Betty also spoke about the importance of anticipating student death:

“One of the things is to anticipate it. I don’t know if all teachers really have that feeling, that ya somewhere in my career I’m either going to lose a student through an accident, or suicide, or homicide. . . there’s going to be a reason and there’s going to be a death and I’m going to lose a student. And so, I think the pre-, you know, just knowing it’s going to happen.”

It is not unreasonable to imagine why the topic of student death is not an everyday conversation, but often educators of teachers do not talk about student death either.

Another possible roadblock to being able to openly talk about student death and ask for help may arise from the media’s involvement and the stigmas attached to sudden deaths. Paul grieved the loss of Benjamin despite the fact that the media “looked at him as the bad guy.” Paul was subjected to many people who were not grieving the loss and would speak ill of Benjamin, many of whom never even knew him when he was alive. Media involvement can add to suffering by only representing one viewpoint or blowing things out of proportion. Recalling how in Nancy’s experience another accident involving

students around the time of the last funeral caused a media frenzy and “magnified the problem all over again,” even though Nancy knew “there’s no connection people!” The media is like an invitation for outsiders to get involved and hold an opinion; including people that teachers may consider to be part of their support circle. Having seen the incident on the news, but not knowing that it was their son involved, Norm remembered that his parents’ first reaction was that of anger. “Then my phone blew up and my parents were mad at me ‘cause I didn’t tell them until the weekend what had happened. Cause I couldn’t say it out loud just yet, especially to my Mom and Dad.”

Given, the leadership expectations placed on the shoulders of teachers, the fact that teachers may be completely caught off-guard by student death, combined with the general difficulties in identifying and asking for mental health help, and with the complications that media involvement can bring, teachers may find it very hard to wave for help on the healing journey after the sudden and violent loss of a student.

With that being said, hope remains that there does exist a group that teachers may be more comfortable waving down for help. Collegial support is an interesting sub-theme that came to fruition when I explored the responses given by the participants to the following interview question: “After having this experience, what advice would you give to other teachers who have just discovered that one of their students has passed away?” The predominant advice to arise was to “just ask for help” and find a support system and confide in them. More often than not it was colleagues and fellow teachers that the participants acknowledged as the supportive system that helped following the loss. The loss experience made it clear to Norm that there is a divide between the people you can count on and “the tourists.”

“Like when I was speaking earlier about the tourist. I really learned to value the relationships that I had with the people who were supportive and really learned, not to fence off people, but almost it’s like a two-tiered thing; These are my good friends who have had my back and these were the people that wanted to know the gossip and really who I didn’t hear much after the fact right. Okay, you contacted me, whatever I need? Okay, ‘I need something,’ but then they weren’t there. So, I kind of learned that personalized, that way of really valuing who those relationships were, and a lot of those people that I worked with that were really supportive, I’m still really good friends with them 14 years after the fact...”

Collegial support also came through during Paul’s interview. If Paul felt like he needed to express his grief, he felt comfortable doing so in front of fellow teachers, who were also upset by the loss of Benjamin.

“Well you put your face on. I don’t know if it’s a male thing, but you put your face on and you just go. And any chance I did, Kevin, and I went and talked with each other, and another trades teacher; was talking to him too. That is where the support was, with the three of us.” (Paul)

David heavily relied on his vice-principal as a pillar of support following the loss of Brandon. After the loss of Meg, David recalled grief counsellors being made available, but remembered how he thought, “I didn’t even know what is that; I didn’t know anything about it.” In David’s experience, counsellors were his version of “the tourists.”

“I took the school up on a thing, where I don’t know, grief counsellors or whatever, but I didn’t understand the concept. You sit and talk with someone you

don't know, about someone they don't know, and they don't give you any answers anyways..."

All of the participants advised that teachers should ask for help and find a support system to confide in. It would appear that the lack of judgment, the understanding, and the normalization that can come from collegial support makes it easier for teachers to turn to other teachers for help on the healing journey.

**Theme #5 - no two sudden deaths are the same.** A lot of similarities in experience arose after talking with the five participants. Despite the similarities, there were also variances to the way teachers' experience the sudden and violent death of their students. There were differences between participants as well as differences within an individual teacher's experience of different student deaths. These differences are described as in the following six categories: time of death, means of death, one of a kind bond, experience level, social influences, and educational influences.

***Time of death.*** It became clear that the timing of a student's sudden death makes a difference to the bereavement experience of teachers. Firstly, what generates variance is whether the student is a current student or a former student at the time of their passing. The violent loss of a former student still has the potential to cause just as much sorrow for teachers, but compared to the passing of a current student, Norm expressed how it is not the same because with a current student "you're with them kind of every day, in that moment when you're teaching them.... the other incidents, it's different because they were out of school. So they are not in my classroom all the time." Proximity to one's everyday life is a factor that can easily influence bereavement. In addition, when a former student dies it is not as likely that the entire school will be grieving as a whole, like what

usually happens when a current student passes. Like Paul said, “because he wasn’t a student at the time, it was a different situation...The students might have talked about it, I can’t remember if they talked about it.” Nancy spoke a lot about having to face several grieving students after the loss of Anthony, Tanner, Britney, and Cassidy. When the school is not grieving as a whole, it does not mean that teachers are not. There were discrepancies in the way the school responded to the deaths of Norm’s former students. One time, having a pleasant experience where a school meeting was held to organize teacher representation at the funeral and the sending of condolences, but his other two experiences weren’t as positive. Having a big staff turn-over resulted in not a word being spoken at the staff meeting about the passing of one former student and another time nothing was done for the passing of a former student who had only been graduated a few months; “a lot of people were really hurting...but nobody did anything for them because it was the summer.” This brought up an interesting challenge to the binary division of current student versus former student. When a student passes away the summer after graduation, another school year has not even begun, a new class does not yet exist, therefore should that person who dies so soon after graduation really be considered a former student? Betty also had a recent graduate that summer die in an accident. After listening about Betty’s loss of Peter and David’s loss of Brandon, it is important to note that student death seemed even more difficult when the student suddenly passed away just prior to graduation. Betty had been working with Peter on a special graduation presentation for his parents at the time of Peter’s passing.

Secondly, what generates variance for circumstances pertaining to current students’ deaths is the timing of their death (e.g., weekday, weekend, school holiday,

summer break, morning, evening). When a young person dies suddenly and violently it may seem like little details about when they died, such as on the weekend versus a school night or if it was the morning versus the night, may seem trivial; however, for teachers those small details can be significant. One significant discrepancy being whether teachers are placed in a position to break the news of a fellow classmate's death to their students; like Betty explained "I don't think there were any kids who came on Monday morning to school who didn't know already... As teachers, we didn't have to tell the kids about the death. I think that makes it easier on us." Betty also had experience with the other end of the spectrum, "as compared to the last suicide that we found out the morning of school and that was really difficult." The timing of a student's death may greatly influence when and how a teacher first comes to learn the news. Whether they find out, on the weekend, a weeknight, or a holiday versus at school as the kids are coming in, creates two differing scenarios; one where the teacher has alone time before they have "to deal with it with the kids," the other where "you just sort of try to maintain your composure and go on" in Betty's words. Timing may greatly influence how a teacher first comes to learn the news, which is a good time to draw attention to the fact that how a teacher finds out about a student's death also matters. Recalling the guilt Nancy experienced after having to do detective work to find the name of the fourth student who died because the person relaying the message could only remember three out of the four students' names. Nancy's narrative illustrates how the way a teacher finds out about a student's death influences the bereavement experience.

***Means of death.*** Norm had gone through some student deaths that could not be categorized as violent losses and stated that the experiences were indeed different than

the loss of those students whose deaths were sudden and violent in nature. But even within the realm of violent loss experiences (i.e., suicides, homicides, and accidents), many teachers expressed how different they were from each other.

There were definitely unique aspects to Paul's story given the means of Benjamin's death, having violently taken the lives of others before his own.

“Well that was the thing, the media part, it was because they only had the one side, they looked at him as the bad guy. The media doesn't tell anything of that he was this, this, and this. It was never that. He was the enemy. But there is nothing you can change about that.”

A lot of people agreed with the media so there were many who did not grieve Benjamin's passing. Having to hear the majority of people, both ones that knew Benjamin and ones that did not, talking poorly about Benjamin perhaps made it even more difficult for those that were grieving his loss. For Paul and Kevin, their grieving was going against the grain.

According to Betty it was “very different; very different between the accidents and the suicides.” Perhaps Norm's narrative helps to illuminate why there may be such a difference.

“To me I always think that it's tragic. Especially the ones who commit suicide, their life was so dark at that moment that was their only alternative that they could see. That really breaks my heart. Nothing is so bad that, that's your moment that you need to do it, but it happens. Accidents, I mean you have no control. It's that control factor, you don't have control over it so you can let it go, because there's no control, but it's still difficult.” (Norm)

Feeling like you could have done more to prevent a student's death and feeling like it was an accident will result in two distinct bereavement experiences. Not only can different means of death produce distinctive experiences, participants spoke about how different deaths within the same means still varied in experience. Right after Betty responded how "huge" of difference there was between her experience with suicides and accidents, she went on to say, "In fact, the two suicides were also really, really different." Though the two students shared many things in common, their suicides ended up being vastly different.

"The suicide, that was a really hard, that was a really, really hard suicide for the kids, because he was not your typical kid that presented with suicidal thoughts or anything... That was different from the next one. There had been many, not many, but a number of things before than to indicate that he was in real trouble."  
(Betty)

Betty explained that the first suicide was a rare experience because, at school "you didn't feel like you were saying goodbye to a kid that was at risk of anything, so it was such a shock to us... there wasn't a feeling of, did I do enough? Cause it was so odd." On the other end of the spectrum, with the second student's struggle being more obvious, "you have that pervasive, what could I have changed to help that kid?" Betty also thought to herself "how could I have done anymore?" Even after knowing that a helping hand was extended on various occasions and understanding her limitations as a teacher, vice-principal, and human, that second suicide will always be different for Betty because of that seed of doubt around, did I do enough?

David felt that, even though both of his experiences were suicides, they were different from one another. In his interview David said, “I’m mad at Brandon for doing that. He didn’t have to do that.” When I then asked him if that anger was present for Meg as well, he responded, “No. Brandon was different.” Same means of death, but different feelings around such deaths; simply put, no two deaths are the same.

***One of a kind bond.*** Strength of bond greatly impacts bereavement experiences. As discussed in depth under Theme #1 (So Much More Than Teaching), there exists a potential bond between students and teachers, but the strength of such bond varies from student to student and teacher to teacher. Not every teacher will feel strongly bonded to every student. During Betty’s interview, although she had many violent loss experiences, she chose to focus most of her time on Peter’s experience because he “was probably the one closest to me.” Norm’s experiences with changing staff reinforced how closely strength of relationship and grief are tied, because teachers and principals simply do not grieve the students they did not lose. Again, reinforced in Paul’s experience where it was Kevin who grieved more intensely because of his additional connections outside of school to Benjamin. Also, why for Nancy, even though she lost four students in the same accident she spoke of each student as an individual, taking the time to paint a picture of the relationship she had with each student; each painting a one-off piece of art. No two deaths will be the same, because each student teacher bond is one of a kind.

***Experience level.*** Firstly, the amount of teaching experience a teacher has at the time of a student’s passing appears to matter. As Paul conveyed, “I was about halfway through my career when I was teaching so I had a lot of experience. That makes a difference too.” Whereas David was a little earlier in his career, remembering how his

“first two years of teaching was just joy,” until Meg passed away, shattering the picturesque teaching career David had come to know and love. As discussed earlier in Theme #2 (Student Death Lifts the Curriculum Veil), newer teachers may be more focused on trying to deliver the curriculum. In addition, as mentioned in Theme #4 (Teachers May Not Wave for Help on the Healing Journey), teachers in training might not even be made aware that student death can and will likely be a part of their profession. Consequently, for a newer teacher, who is already “going into a mere survival mode,” being “blind-sided” by the sudden death of a student can be grim. A student’s passing is not an easy experience to navigate, but perhaps for newer teachers it may be that much more challenging. Being newer to the teaching profession it may be that much harder to switch out now triggering lesson plans. Even though Nancy’s entire plan for the year had to be tossed, she just thought, “I’ve been doing this long enough, I can go back and pick out other stuff to do,” and therefore was able to focus on self-care during her week off.

Secondly, the amount of death experience a teacher has at the time of a student’s passing also matters. Paul described having less intense grief over the loss of Benjamin after going through a difficult personal loss that acted as a reference point. Nancy described an intense bereavement experience, but also considered the violent loss of her four students to be one of her most significant losses to date. Betty recognized, “my situation with death is a little bit different than some people,” after having attended hundreds of funerals in her lifetime. In contrast, David did not have a lot of experience with others dying, but he himself had a near death experience prior to the loss of his

students. Betty recalled, “I know that there were some teachers for the last funeral, it was the only funeral they’d ever been too. So, that’s harsh.”

***Social influences.*** Humans are social beings and grief does not occur in a vacuum, so it is not surprising that social factors can influence teachers’ bereavement experiences. David described how different Brandon’s death was from Meg’s, “all the rules change because we are dealing with different cultures, different politics, different funding, racism in my own district, and can’t get funding for the kids that need help.” Betty too addressed an interesting nuance about how sometimes funerals are comforting and sometimes they are not, a big factor being how your beliefs and traditions align with the grieving family; “the way the families responded and the funerals of the two students that committed suicide... I don’t know, it was just handled really differently and I was really uncomfortable with it.” Fully recognizing her judgments on the matter, it still did not change the fact that “there was just a significant difference in the two funerals and they impacted the staff differently, because of that.”

***Educational influences.*** Across participants’ experiences there were differentiations to how much support was offered by the administrators of the school, the district, and/or central office, which inevitably impacted teachers’ bereavement experiences. Betty came right out and said it, “we had different, like a different superintendent and different people in central office throughout the different times and there definitely were different responses and different ways of feeling supported or not supported during that time.” When Donny died, Norm received so much support from his school and principal; he was assigned a counsellor following the incident, a counsellor was brought in after some time had passed to speak about trauma, and Norm could easily

attend counselling because his principal made sure his classes would be covered; “if the principal couldn’t do it, someone else came, because it was a priority that I got that done.” Arguably too supported, on the first day back, a student in his class had to say, “we need all of you to leave, like we want to be in this space with just Mr. Brown.” On the complete other end of the spectrum was David’s experience.

“Basically the services offered to the staff and to myself were just desperately, dangerously inadequate... My job and the expectations that were placed on me from central office, point blank, are inhumane. I was never once offered direct assistance in any capacity whatsoever. Not personally. I don’t recall being asked how I was doing.” (David)

Nancy expressed her anger towards central office’s lack of understanding around how the school environment was now a grieving environment; “that was a pretty hard week...and then to have central office say, ‘you know, you need to be teaching every day.’ There are words that start with letters, start with F that you want to say.” Because the loss of a student is both personal and professional in nature, administrators of the school, the district, and/or central office will have a huge influence over teachers’ bereavement experiences.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter covered the data resulting from the primary research question, that is: “What is the bereavement experience of teachers who have had their student(s) die suddenly and violently?” Initially, a rich textural description of individual participant experiences was presented. Followed by a more structural description of the experience that is teachers’ bereavement via the five thematic categories: (1) So Much More Than

Teaching, (2) Student Death Lifts the Curriculum Veil, (3) Place of Work, Place of Grief, Place of Being, (4) Teachers May Not Wave for Help on the Healing Journey, and (5) No Two Sudden Deaths Are the Same. Such themes are not meant to minimize the participant's experiences, but rather, act as colours in which to paint a picture of what it may be like for a teacher to suddenly lose their student. Such thematic categories and their connection to the academic literature presented in Chapter Two will be examined in the following chapter.

## Chapter 5: Discussion and Interpretation of Findings

A summary of the themes is followed by a discussion on Worden's (2009) Task-Based Model as a grieving theory that is relevant given the data on lived experience that was uncovered during the current study. Then a comparison between the current findings will be made to Rowling's (1995) article "The Disenfranchised Grief of Teachers," followed by a discussion on how best to define traumatic loss in the academic literature. This chapter also includes limitations of the study, implications for future research, and implications for practice, before the final conclusion.

### Summary of Themes

Theme #1 (So Much More Than Teaching) is essentially made up of two components: Recognizing the bond that can form between students and teachers and the idea that such bond has the potential to last a long time (once a teacher, always a teacher). Teachers have expectations to be like secondary parents, "this idea of *in loco parentis*," and care for students as if they were their own. Strong bonds can and often do form in such environments of mentorship where teachers are responsible for so much more than teaching the curriculum. However, not every teacher will feel strongly bonded to every student: there is a spectrum. But for the bonds that do form between student and teacher, such bonds can endure over time. After a child has been through the classroom, they will always be the student and the teacher will always remain the teacher. That bond is the foundation of teachers' bereavement. As indicated in the research literature, my findings confirm that the experience of grief is dependent on the qualities of the relationship.

Theme #2 (Student Death Lifts the Curriculum Veil) manifested in two different ways. Firstly, by the way teachers described the shift in their teaching career when their

attention switched from the curriculum to focusing on students' wellbeing as people. Although a natural shift that may occur as teachers gain work experience, the sudden and violent death of a student seemed to act as a catalyst for such change. In some circumstances student-death can act as a serious wake-up call to the violence and abuse students may experience as part of their everyday life and remind teachers to "be a human being first. Be present. Listen." Secondly, when a current student suddenly passes away schoolwork may have to come second to grief work for a while. Falling behind in the curriculum may be normal and necessary on a school's healing journey. "You have to be there for those kids and I don't mean, I say at the expense of the curriculum, but you have to be there for them above everything else." This is what a parent would do, or any reasonable adult, to support the young and make the time together meaning and relevant.

Theme #3 (Place of Work, Place of Grief, Place of Being) overall is made up of aspects about the teaching profession that change after the sudden and violent loss of a student. Such aspects include: empty desks, grieving in front of students, change in teaching demeanor, and the removal of now triggering lesson plans. Following the loss of a student, teachers' work environment is instantly transformed into a triggering grieving environment. It can be a very confusing time for teachers who are, not only personally in shock over the loss, but also trying to navigate what feels like a new job of teaching grieving students. With the students looking "to the teacher on how to grieve," teachers' grieving is complicated because such a loss is both personal and professional in nature. As follows teachers' grief can be strongly influenced by professional values. Such professional values, like of strength, leadership, and composure, can seem like the opposite of grieving, making the boundaries and expectations around teachers' grieving

in front of their students very unclear. Teachers are dealing with so much post loss, all while very exhausted and sleep deprived. Theme #3 (Place of Work, Place of Grief, Place of Being) paints a picture of how drastically the profession of teaching can change after the sudden and violent loss of students.

Theme #4 (Teachers May Not Wave for Help on the Healing Journey) sheds light on potential roadblocks that may discourage teachers' from asking for help following the loss of a student. Roadblocks included, difficulty asking for help due to leadership qualities valued by the teaching profession, difficulty asking for mental health help over physical ailments, difficulty asking for help when "blind-sided" by student death, and difficulty asking for help with media complications. Although many roadblocks were identified, teachers stated that asking for help and finding a support system to confide in would be their advice to other teachers who are experiencing the loss of a student. Budding from such advice, collegial support was identified as a sub-theme because it was often colleagues and fellow teachers that the participants acknowledged as the supportive system that helped them on their healing journey following the loss. The normalization that can come from collegial support may make it easier for teachers to turn to other teachers for help and support, an important part of the healing journey.

Theme #5 (No Two Sudden Deaths are the Same) is comprised of factors that appear to make great variances to the way teachers' experience the sudden and violent death of their students. Six categories were used to organize such factors: time of death, means of death, one of a kind bond, experience level, social influences, and educational influences. What time a student dies can make the difference to whether a teacher has to break the news to the other students or not. Teachers described accidents feeling different

than suicides, and even suicides being different from each other because of factors like one of a kind bond and funeral practices. Teachers' level of experience with teaching and level of experience with death both made a difference. There were differentiations to how much support was offered by the administrators of the school, the district, and/or central office following a loss, which inevitably impacted teachers' bereavement. Overall there are numerous factors that make each student death a completely unique lived experience.

### **Application of Worden's Task-Based Model of Mourning**

Given the findings, Worden's (2009) Task-Based Model is a relevant grieving theory when exploring the bereavement experiences of teachers after the sudden and violent loss of their student(s). Out of the grieving theories presented in chapter two: Background Information, Worden's (2009) conceptualization was chosen due to how well his "Tasks of Mourning" and additional "Mediators of Mourning" helped illuminate participants' responses. The following paragraphs further explicate Worden's "Tasks of Mourning" and "Mediators of Mourning," while bringing attention to relevant findings from the current study.

Worden's first "Tasks of Mourning" is to accept the reality of the loss. "When someone dies, even if the death is expected, there is always a sense that it hasn't happened" (Worden, 2009, p. 39). As follows, the first task involves coming to terms that the person is dead and facing the reality that they are physically gone, not to be returning. According to Worden (2009), acceptance takes time and has two different dimensions: intellectual acceptance and emotional acceptance. David's narrative captured both dimensions; "...I think I was still mostly in shock, but I had intellectualized the concept so I'm like what am I supposed to do?" Upon hearing about what Benjamin had done,

Paul recalled being “in shock.” Paul’s initial grief reaction was characterized by “disbelief and the shock” around, not only Benjamin’s death, but also what Benjamin had done before taking his own life. To begin her story, Betty had said, “Everything about Peter’s death was really surreal to me, because he was just that wonderful kid.” A few synonyms for surreal include strange, odd, unreal, and dreamlike; all of which imply a deviation from what is in the realm of normal and possible. The sudden and violent death of students can be a surreal experience where it may be difficult for teachers to reach both intellectual and emotional acceptance.

Worden’s second “Tasks of Mourning” is to process the pain of grief. Worden (2009) considered his conceptualization of pain to include both the emotional and physical pain that can manifest during bereavement. Recognizing it as a spectrum, Worden suggested that not all people feel the same intensity of pain following a loss. David was one who experienced great pain after Meg’s passing:

“Back then, in the first two months after Meg killed herself, it would almost be equivalent of getting branded, like this searing, visceral, intensity; electrode kind of stuff in your brain. I just remember it being such an overwhelming, more than powerful; like it would just hit you like a tidal wave. There’d just be, this visceral, sharp, almost a pain associated with, like this pain response where you just want to shut down or something... But compared to then, it was just such a visceral thing, like total information overload and very painful and sharp. Now it’s more of a warm than a sharp.”

According to Worden (2009), “[t]he negotiation of this second task of processing the pain results in *not feeling*” (p.44). This was true for Norm; “...I was able to separate

that kind of personal, private part and if I wanted to...any kind of emotion I might have been feeling. I think I went through a period of numbness for a while.” Norm also was tempted to “find a geographic cure” when he considered changing classrooms (Worden, 2009, p. 45). Although for Norm “that was a hard thing too was to go back into that room” where the incident had happened, Norm’s counsellor took a position similar to Worden. Instead of finding temporary relief from the pain, it is better “to feel it and to know that one day it will pass” (Worden, 2009, p. 45).

Worden’s third “Tasks of Mourning” is to adjust to a world without the deceased. Worden (2009) considered there to be three areas of adjustment: external adjustments, internal adjustments, and spiritual adjustments. External adjustments involve living without the deceased person. When a current student passes away, teachers may face lots of external adjustments in their workplace, such as removing triggering curriculum material. Norm said, “I became aware, really for the first year, especially with that one class, of the material that I chose.” “I had to change my whole year’s plan,” explained Nancy. Another external change teachers mentioned was navigating what to do with the empty desks. “And you have to understand that you can’t just say, ‘look, sit in that seat,’ ‘cause you are causing them and all the other students great pain. And you can’t get rid of that seat either” voiced Nancy.

Internal adjustments pertain to “how death affects self-definition, self-esteem, and sense of self-efficacy” (Worden, 2009, p. 47). David expressed how the sudden death of his students was a humbling experience; “...there’s humility there, a humbling of what I thought I was capable of; I’m not capable of anything. So ya, it changed me that way, I tend to just listen...” Betty described how the death of students “[m]akes you stop and

say, you know, what were my last exchanges with the students who died? Or was I a gift to that child?" When talking about the last suicide she experienced during her teaching career, Betty said, "you have that pervasive, what could I have changed to help that kid?" Exploring such self-efficacy Betty also thought, "how could I have done anymore?"

Lastly, spiritual adjustments speak to the assumptions about the world that may be shattered after a loss, especially sudden or untimely deaths. David described experiencing spiritual adjustments and re-evaluating his outlook on the world after the losses of his students:

"I would actually say that, in both instances, both in Meg's suicide and in Brandon's suicide, have probably inevitably sort of enriched my spiritual sense. I don't even know if that makes sense, but it does, for me it does. Understanding... what it means to be breathing and be alive and the importance of treating each other well."

Worden's fourth "Tasks of Mourning" is to find an enduring connection with the deceased while embarking on a new life. Such a task respects Klass, Silverman, and Nickman's work (1996) on the continuing bonds model. According to Worden (2009), "[w]e need to find ways to memorialize, that is, to remember dead loved ones—keeping them with us but still going on with life" (p. 50). Just as David mentioned, "I think of her often. Easily once a month there's something and I just see her." Thinking about Meg David pondered, "Maybe that's the benefit of it, I'm able to focus on the good things now, whereas before it just almost felt like an attack – Meg's gone."

In addition to his "Tasks of Mourning," Worden (2009) provides "Mediators of Mourning" that do provide much more insight into the possible manifestation of

bereavement. “In order to understand why individuals handle the tasks of mourning in different ways, one must understand how these tasks are mediated by various factors (Worden, 2009, p. 57). Worden’s (2009) “Mediators of Mourning” are as follows: (1) kinship; (2) nature of attachment (strength of attachment, security of attachment, ambivalence in relationship, conflicts with the deceased, and dependency issues); (3) death circumstances (proximity of death, expectedness of death, traumatic death, multiple losses, preventable death, ambiguous death, and stigmatized death); (4) historical antecedents (loss history and mental health history); (5) personality mediators (age/gender, coping style, attachment style, cognitive style, ego strength, and assumptive world); (6) social mediators (support availability, support satisfaction, social role involvements, religious resources, and ethnic expectations); and (7) concurrent stresses. It is interesting to note that many of the factors identified in Theme #5 (No Two Sudden Deaths are the Same), that appear to make great variances to the way teachers’ experience the sudden and violent death of their students are supported by Worden’s “Mediators of Mourning.” For example: means of death matches with the third mediator death circumstances; one of a kind bond aligns with the second mediator nature of the attachment; experience level speaks to the fourth mediator historical antecedents; and finally, social influences and educational influences represent similar aspects as to social mediators, the sixth mediator which encompasses support availability and support satisfaction. Furthermore, Theme #3 (Place of Work, Place of Grief, Place of Being) in some ways parallels the seventh mediator of concurrent stresses, because it is made up of aspects about the teaching profession that change after the violent loss of a student.

Worden's (2009) conceptualization was chosen due to how well his "Tasks of Mourning" and additional "Mediators of Mourning" helped illuminate participants' responses. It would appear that the thematic statements that emerged from the current study on teachers' bereavement have notable linkages to the academic literature on grieving.

### **Discussion of Results and Previous Research on Teachers' Bereavement**

As described earlier, there are not many studies in the academic literature that focus on teachers' grief, with Rowling's (1995) article "The Disenfranchised Grief of Teachers" being the exception. Results from the current study on Canadian teachers' bereavement experiences will be compared to Rowling's findings that came out of Australia 23 year's prior.

Rowling's (1995) study revealed that there are concerns for teachers pertaining to loss and grief. Because of the personal/professional duality of the teaching role disenfranchised grief emerged as Rowling's predominant finding after hearing about teachers' grief experiences. Disenfranchised grief is comprised of three elements: (1) the need to be human, (2) teacher's professional beliefs, and (3) teachers' duty of care for young people. Firstly, the profession of teaching includes a lot of human interaction and as a result personal connections do occur between students and teachers (Rowling, 1995). Rowling's findings are also supported by Theme #1 (So Much More Than Teaching) because that theme also articulates the importance of recognizing the potential bond that does form and exist between teachers and their students. Secondly, Rowling (1995) found that teacher's professional beliefs around providing leadership, controlling situations, and having emotional control greatly contributes to the experience of disenfranchised grief.

Likewise, the current study, under Theme #3 (Place of Work, Place of Grief, Place of Being), noted that teachers' grief can be strongly influenced by professional values, such as strength, leadership, and composure. Thirdly, teacher's duty to care for young people acknowledges the responsibility society has placed on teachers to safeguard children while under their care, which leads to how the loss or injury of a student may act as a reflection on teachers' competency (Rowling, 1995). The concept of *in loco parentis* also was prevalent in the current study and was illuminated under Theme #1 (So Much More Than Teaching). It appears clear that teachers have expectations to be like secondary parents and can experience feelings of "did I do enough?" when a student passes as Betty spoke about. Even having feelings of failure like David described; "It was our system that failed again, but this time it was way closer to me, because I was closer to Brandon, so I have failed, right?"

Although disenfranchised grief is made up of three elements, Rowling (1995) also identified two foci: (1) the social context (relationship not being recognized, grief not being recognized, and grieving rules); and (2) the self (teachers' personal beliefs about competence as a professional, shame experienced for feeling helplessness, the relationship teachers perceive between coping with their personal life and coping with their professional life, gender role, school and personal history, and beliefs of those in leadership positions). The initial two subcategories under social context, both the relationship and the grief not being recognized, encompasses how "the role expectations surrounding the concept of professional behavior of a teacher and being a caring person as a teacher, coexist for many, and have the potential to create a role conflict and personal trauma" (Rowling, 1995, p. 322). Teachers from the current study expressed similar ideas

around lack of recognition for the student teacher bond and their grief over student loss and also how the job of teaching can be riddled with issues that were not present prior to the death of a student due to conflicting roles. Nancy said, “I don’t think the average person gets that; just how much a teacher knows their kids.” The way Rowling’s (1995) participant described the dichotomy of experiencing a personal painful loss, while also wanting to be supportive to the kids echoed the sentiments of David, Nancy, Betty, and Norm. Interestingly, Rowling (1995) noted that the schools involved in the study “did recognize these relationships and integrate care for staff in their plans,” but not all the teachers participated (p. 322). Several teachers expressed how they “saw it as unnecessary or that people should cope by themselves, “maintain a British stiff upper lip”” (Rowling, 1995, p. 322). Once again, similar talk arose during the current study. “You can put all the things in place to say this is to help teachers; they don’t always take advantage of it because it’s like, that’s pretty weak if you need that,” articulated Nancy. The third subcategory of social context that Rowling (1995) identified was grieving rules, which “exist in all schools, for example, in the amount of leave staff are allowed for deaths, and for whose deaths and funerals” (p. 321). Under Theme #5 (No Two Sudden Deaths are the Same), educational influences encompass how central office and administrators do influence teachers’ bereavement experiences. Specifically, how central office and administrators show or do not show recognition of the teachers’ bond with the student and the grief they are experiencing following a loss, how student funerals are handled (e.g., closing the school so everyone can attend), and how accommodating the schools are for teachers’ counselling arrangements.

Rowling (1995) identified six subcategories for the second loci of the self. Teachers' personal beliefs about competence as a professional described how teachers' felt as if they were navigating an "emotional tightrope" and there was great concern around "breaking down" around students (Rowling, 1995, p. 323). Perhaps not to the same extent, but the current study did record similar beliefs. Norm said, "I don't know if I ever grieved in front of them; maybe that first day" and would leave the class to compose himself when moments of grief would come. Paul described how he put on his face and powered through following the loss of Benjamin. Rowling (1995) described how shame experienced for feeling helplessness arose from the expectations teachers had "of being "all knowing," that is, having the answers; and of being "in control" of their reactions and the situation" (p. 323). David's narrative illustrated such point when he described his loss experiences to be "pretty humbling...there's humility there, a humbling of what I thought I was capable of; I'm not capable of anything." David even said himself, "it's not about the answers, it's about listening, and it's about honoring people, young people."

Just as Rowling (1995) found that school and personal history matter, the current study also identified personal grief history as a factor that influences teachers' bereavement under Theme #5 (No Two Sudden Deaths are the Same). For example, Betty's unique relationship with death having performed for so many funerals influenced her experience and Paul spoke about how a difficult personal loss gave him a different perspective when it came to grieving the loss of his student. The sixth subcategory, beliefs of those in leadership positions, described how some teachers expressed that it was their responsibility to "rise above" in order to be leaders for the grieving students,

going so far as to say it is “a moral obligation” (Rowling, 1995, p. 325). Though not quite the same, it is reminiscent of the speech David gave to his teaching staff where he said, “today your job is to be the teacher, as I’m doing now being the principal. I’m telling you your job and I fully expect you to do your job today, which is bells as usual.”

A lot of overlap exists between the findings from the current study and the findings from Rowling’s study. However, it is important to note that the current study did not support all of Rowling’s (1995) subcategories of self; Gender roles or the relationship teachers perceive between coping with personal life and coping with their professional life did not arise as prominent factors. It is important to note that the current study had a specific criterion of violent loss, whereas Rowling’s (1995) study did include the permanent injury of a student. In addition, Theme #2 (Student Death Lifts the Curriculum Veil), Theme #4 (Teachers May Not Wave for Help on the Healing Journey, with a sub-theme of collegial support), and Theme #5 (No Two Sudden Deaths are the Same), from the current research endeavour appear to be findings that contribute some new insight into teachers’ bereavement experiences, building upon Rowling’s foundational work.

### **Discussion of Results and Traumatic Loss in Academia**

According to Rowling (1995), the sudden loss of a student is “a traumatic incident in the workplace” for teachers (p. 325). Also in the trauma and bereavement literature it is common practice to use the terms traumatic loss and violent loss interchangeably to refer specifically to sudden and violent modes of death by suicide, homicide, or fatal accident (Currier, Holland, & Neimeyer, 2006). However, the term traumatic loss does seem to evoke different meaning than violent loss. “Though the terms have been used interchangeably,” Currier, Holland and Neimeyer’s (2006) study used “‘violent loss’ to

denote the objective mode of death and ‘traumatic loss’ to describe the subjective aspects of the survivor’s experience” (p. 405). Currier, Holland, and Neimeyer’s distinction between the two terms should be considered in future literature on and the study of sudden and violent modes of death given the findings from the current study. Only two of five participants used the word traumatic, traumatized, and/or traumatizing when describing their experience after the sudden and violent loss of their student(s). In such circumstances violent loss and traumatic loss both seem fitting. But given that the majority of participants did not use any form of the word trauma while describing their lived experience, using traumatic loss to solely represent the category of sudden and violent deaths may be misleading as to peoples’ experience of the loss, therefore violent loss is a more appropriate term for such categorization of homicides, suicides, and fatal accidents. Teachers’ bereavement is best conceptualized as a spectrum and the current study documented various grief intensities and many factors that influence the bereavement experience. It does not appear appropriate to assume that teachers’ experience of losing a student by means of sudden and violent death will be a traumatic one. Given that the current findings support a distinction in terms, only violent loss and defining terms like sudden and violent death were utilized throughout this thesis to represent the specific category of losses being studied.

Terminology aside, there is consensus in the academic literature that violent losses are different from more “natural” or “normative” bereavement circumstances because factors like suddenness, violence, disrupted worldview, social stigma, and lack of information (Armour, 2002, 2007; Asaro, 2001; Currier, Holland, & Neimeyer, 2006; Janoff-Bulman, 1985; Neimeyer, Prigerson, & Davies, 2002; Green, 2000; Rando, 1993).

The current study supported such findings about how violent death differs. Remembering back to Neimeyer's (2006) meaning making and the narrative perspective, a person's constructed life story or worldview can be shattered in the face of death and even more so in the case of violent loss because "beliefs about the goodness of people, the natural order of events, or self-worthiness may be imploded ... leaving the survivor to revamp basic assumptions about the world and how it operates" (Armour, 2007, p. 55). David echoed these sentiments when he explained how Brandon's suicide differed from Meg's in that it "was just so much more complex, more draining, more visceral, more emotional, and more traumatizing... 'cause I, again, had this sense that based on everything I learnt, how can you lose when you do the right thing?" In many cases of violent loss there is a lack of information about the circumstances surrounding the death, leaving people to "feel the need to assign blame and responsibility, search for reasons, or dwell on the missing details in an attempt to have the senseless loss make sense" (Asaro, 2001; Armour, 2007, p. 55). Similarly in regards to the last suicide Betty experienced, she explained how "you have that pervasive, what could I have changed to help that kid?" Betty also thought "how could I have done anymore?" But even so, that responsibility factor is completely different for violent losses as compared to death by more "natural" causes. Furthermore, bereavement does not occur in a vacuum, social constructions influence the bereavement process and unfortunately negative social attitudes and stigmatizations can override the usual expressions of condolences when it comes to violent losses (Armour, 2007; Chapple, Ziebland, & Hawton, 2015; Rando, 1993). Paul grieved the loss of Benjamin despite the fact that the media "looked at him as the bad guy." Paul was subjected to many people who were not grieving the loss and would speak ill of Benjamin. Likewise

in Nancy's experience another accident involving students around the time of the last funeral caused a media frenzy and "magnified the problem all over again" disrupting what little peace was starting to come. Media involvement is a unique social aspect that is often associated with violent losses. Overall, the current research endeavour provides further evidence to how violent deaths are different.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Using the research method put forth by van Manen (1990) means the researcher becomes a co-creator writing and describing conversations, interviews, and narratives of experience. As such, research findings are comprised of participants' responses filtered through the lens of the researcher. This means that the findings presented may be limited by the researcher's interpretations. To combat such limitations the researcher throughout the study practiced reflexive bracketing where biases were made apparent through journaling. Member checking was also a vital step for establishing credibility by obtaining feedback from participants on the accuracy of developing thematic statements. Unfortunately, only three out of the five participants partook in the member checking process. Speculations can only be made as to why this occurred, but one participant who did partake in the member checking process shared how difficult it was to read and re-live their responses. When conducting future research on sensitive subjects such as death, it may be wise to set up another interview for member checking instead of using email correspondence. It is still important to recognize that there will always be part of the participants' experiences that remains unknown and mysterious.

More a consideration than limitation, the current study focused solely on secondary teachers' bereavement experiences; elementary teachers were purposely

excluded from the participation criteria. Since teaching junior high and high school is a different experience than teaching elementary, it was predicted that the bereavement experience might also differ between elementary and secondary teachers. Elementary teachers tend to spend more daily time with the same students, as they are usually responsible for teaching all their courses, whereas secondary teachers are often responsible for particular courses and are not with the same class for the entire day. Also with teaching younger students, the concept of *in loco parentis* may take on a different and more literal meaning when children are less independent and more reliant on adults. That being said, some of the changes that happen post loss for secondary teachers may not ring true for elementary teachers; for example, it be far less likely that an elementary teacher needs to change their lesson plans to remove triggering material. After conducting research on secondary teachers and learning about factors that influence their bereavement experience it is not unreasonable to believe that teaching younger students (elementary) versus older students (secondary) may be another factor that influences teachers' experience of grief. Future bereavement research that focuses on and/or includes elementary teachers could add to the understanding of such phenomenon.

### **Implications for Practice**

The sudden and violent death of students is an experience likely to be a part of a teacher's life. Although more research is required, the findings from the current study do have implications for counselling professionals, school administrators, central office, and for teaching professionals.

**Suggestions for counselling professionals.** Three implications for counselling professionals who may work with teachers who have lost a student suddenly and

violently arose from the current study. Earlier in the chapter, Worden's (2009) Task-Based Model was used to explore the bereavement experience of teachers. When looking at Worden's (2009) "Mediators of Mourning" and thinking about the bereavement experiences of teachers after the violent loss of their student(s) there are certain mediators that stand out as being areas of interest given the participants' narratives. Each violent loss of a student will involve different circumstances, so the following list is not meant to be exhaustive of the mediators that should be considered when working with such population, but rather act as a beginning guide for exploring factors that influence teachers' bereavement experiences.

Every participant talked about the one of a kind bond between student and teacher, which is why strength of the attachment, listed under mediator two, is one for counsellors to pay attention to. Also under mediator two, conflicts with the deceased may be applicable; Thinking back to the incident Norm experienced with Donny just prior to him taking his own life and the way Betty questioned what her last interactions with the students that passed were. When discussing the sudden loss of students many of the mediators under how the person died become relevant, such as suddenness or unexpectedness, violent/traumatic deaths, and stigmatized deaths. With the media's solely negative betrayal of Benjamin, Paul's grieving was going against the grain. Learning from Nancy's experience of losing four students in one accident, multiple losses may also be applicable. Another mediator that is good to focus on would be loss history, under historical antecedents. Paul's previous grieving experience of a difficult personal loss gave him different perspective when it came to grieving the loss of Benjamin. When Betty was explaining how different the funerals were for the students who committed

suicide, she brought up how the one funeral was not comforting due to the differences in beliefs and values between herself and the grieving family. Hence, assumptive world under the fifth mediator of personality variables may be another area for counsellors to focus on. Given the advice to teachers from teachers on finding a support system to talk to and confide in, support satisfaction under the sixth mediator of social variables should not be overlooked. Lastly, given all the changes that may arise in the workplace after the sudden loss of a student, the seventh mediator of concurrent stresses should always receive attention.

Secondly, given the sub-theme of collegial support that arose, counselling professionals may want to consider hosting group counselling sessions. It was often colleagues and fellow teachers that the participants acknowledged as the supportive system that helped them on their healing journey following the loss. To help teachers avoid “the tourists,” counsellors may consider bringing a peer support group together. Worden (2009) recognized that social mediators, such as support availability and support satisfaction, influence grief. In addition, Green (2000) identified the support received after death as one of the eight factors that specifically increase the likelihood bereavement will be complicated and prolonged. The normalization that can come from collegial support appears to be a very powerful part of teachers’ healing journey following the loss of a student given the findings from the current study. Professionals who are then working with the grieving teacher population should make sure such kinds of peer support is made available and easily accessible.

Thirdly, teachers spoke about more often having immediate counselling services available following the loss, but it was rare and desirable to have counselling

professionals come in months after the fact. Immediately following the loss counsellors may want to focus on coming to terms with the death and providing psycho-education/normalization around grief responses like changes to sleep and appetite. Months following a loss, counsellors may want to look into how teachers are coping with the secondary-losses or concurrent stresses that have now probably come up. Even years later, counsellors may still want to be made available for teachers during anniversaries of the death. As supported by the academic literature, grief is a process that changes over time, but never truly ends, so it is not unreasonable to think that teachers will require different kinds of support over time.

**Suggestions for school administrators and central office.** Betty came right out and said, “we had different, like a different superintendent and different people in central office throughout the different times and there definitely were different responses and different ways of feeling supported or not supported during that time.” How school administrators and central office handle a loss situation matters and does influence teachers’ bereavement experiences as was found in the current study. Rowling (1995) also identified how grieving rules contributes to teachers’ disenfranchised grief and points out how those rules are set in the formal policies of schools and how employers enforce such policies. In Nancy’s experience:

“Administration said, you know, the instruction from central office is that you have to keep on teaching. I’m going, my whole week’s lesson just went down the tube and my novel for the year...’ and then to have central office say, ‘you know, you need to be teaching every day.’ There are words that start with letters, start with F that you want to say. ... I didn’t listen to them. I was the person in charge

of that classroom. I was responsible for them. And if this was not a day we could work, this is not a day we could work.”

It would appear that following a student’s sudden and violent death teachers would appreciate more support and understanding from school administrators and central office on how the school environment becomes a grieving environment; it is not teaching as usual. Rowling (1995) also stated how, under the loci of social context, the relationship between student and teacher going unrecognized and teachers’ grief going unrecognized underwrites disenfranchised grief. Being honest David said, “My job and the expectations that were placed on me from central office, point blank, are inhumane. I was never once offered direct assistance in any capacity whatsoever. Not personally. I don’t recall being asked how I was doing.” It is vital that school administrators and central office acknowledge that teachers are grieving the loss of their students, because they did feel a connection and bond with them.

Support could be shown to teachers by providing counselling services to aid in teachers’ healing journey following a loss. Betty suggested a more mandatory staff counselling meeting might be the way to go following the loss of a student.

“Maybe instead of saying, ‘I’m here if you need me,’ saying, ‘we’re having a staff meeting after school today and a counsellor’s going to talk to us about the grieving process a little bit.’ ... Because it’s in our teacher persona to say, ‘I’m okay.’ So, to maybe say, ‘no, you’re not okay and we’re going to just blanket everyone with this love for a little bit.’”

School administrators could also offer classroom coverage so that counselling services may be easier for teachers to attend during school hours. As to Nancy’s

suggestion, administrators should not only make counselling services available to teachers on their lunch break or during prep. Like Nancy said:

“And to the point that, that you don’t have to go during your prep. Cause that’s what they always say, ‘you can go during your prep.’ Give me a break. With the 50 things I have to do during my prep, I don’t have a prep...”

Another way for central office and administrators to help teachers would be to make sure a professional development day each year focuses on or at least covers the topic of student death. The findings from the current study suggest that teachers are likely receiving little to no education on the possibility of student deaths during their training to become a teaching professional. During Lobb et al. (2010) systematic review of the literature they found factors pertaining to a death that influence bereavement outcome, one of those factors being lack of preparation for the death. The current study proposes that being “blind-sided” by the death of students, as David said, adds to the difficulty in asking for help following a student loss. Bringing awareness to such topic may help teachers be better prepared to cope with the loss of students.

**Suggestions for teachers.** The suggestions that arise for teachers following this study revolve around teachers taking care of themselves. Since this is easier said than done, some more tangible suggestions on how to accomplish this will be provided. More conversations need to be happening on the topic of student death to help prevent teachers from being completely “blind-sided” by such experience. Teachers or Professors that train people to become teachers should consider including a grief and mourning curriculum. Psychoeducation on grieving and mourning could help pave the way for healing through normalization and knowledge. Teachers bereavement curriculum should

include definitions of grief and mourning, more updated models of bereavement; such as Worden's (2009) Task-Based Model or Wolfelt's (2015) six reconciliation needs of mourning (not Kübler-Ross's five stages of grief that was designed for anticipatory grief only), factors that can influence a person's bereavement experience (Worden's Mediators of Mourning), specifically aspects about the teaching profession that may change after the loss of a student (e.g., empty desks, grieving students, grieving in front of students, change in lesson plans), and education around coping after a loss.

There is no quick fix for bereavement and since grieving and mourning is very personal and individual in nature it is difficult to give advice on how to heal. However, when participants were asked what their advice would be to teachers who are experiencing the sudden and violent loss of a student, what arose was "ask for help" and find a support system to confide in. Theme #4 (Teachers May Not Wave for Help on the Healing Journey) brought to light how difficult it can be for teachers to ask for assistance, but it is strongly suggested that teachers ask for help following the loss of their student(s). There is much in the grieving literature to back the importance of receiving support following a death (Green, 2000). In addition, the literature supports how talking about a loss can actually aid in the healing journey (Worden, 2009). Talking about a loss can help people to accept the reality of the loss, which is Worden's first mourning task. Evidently, after thoroughly interviewing Nancy about her loss experience, upon member checking Nancy wrote: "Since our conversation, I have spoken about these deaths many times with many people I met on my travels. I found it so much easier.... Maybe this has been some healing for me."

Participants used phrases like “we try to be everything,” “it’s sort of in that teacher persona that we think we have to be strong for everybody else,” “don’t want to show any kind of weakness,” “got to be the strong one,” “got to be composed,” and “bullet proof” when generally talking about the teaching field. Considering those phrases and the narrow focus in the academic literature on teachers helping students post loss, it is very important to remind teachers that is acceptable to put themselves first. As David suggested; “apply airline crisis emergency response,” “take care of yourself,” and “put your mask on first.” Although such approach may be viewed as selfish, Norm came to understand; “if you’re not healthy, how effective are you going to be?” Teachers placing their self-care above the needs of their students, allows such teachers to be in the best position possible to meet the needs of their students and this message does not seem to come across teachers’ awareness often enough.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Although aspects of the academic literature supported the findings from the current study, this study paves the way for many new possible areas for future research. The current study added to the sparse literature on teachers’ bereavement. The current study and Rowling’s (1995) foundational article utilized qualitative methodology so there remains a need for quantitative research on the subject matter of teachers’ grief. The thematic statements that emerged from the current study could be transformed into a questionnaire or survey. A quantitative research design would facilitate a way to see if the findings may be relevant to a broader population of teaching professionals across Canada or even worldwide given the overlap found between the Canadian and Australian teachers’ experiences from the current study and Rowling’s work.

Another area that could be explored is the relationship between teachers' grieving in the classroom and the way students grieve. If little is known about the bereavement experience of teachers in the academic literature, less is known about the relationship between teachers' grief and students' grief. Cullinan (1990) somewhat touched on such subject matter in the article "Teachers' Death Anxiety, Ability to Cope with Death, and Perceived Ability to Aid Bereaved Students." Schools are considered more than just a place of academic learning during times of bereavement since that is what society has come to expect, positioning teachers as important grieving role models (Cullinan, 1990; Rowling & Holland, 2000). The current study adds evidence for this, as Betty herself said, "the kids do look to the teachers on how to grieve." Although it has come to be assumed that teachers are a "supportive, emotionally detached adult who can perform this role" there is mounting evidence that this may not be fully accurate (Rowling, 1995, p. 317). Both the current study and Rowling's (1995) study identified the bond between students and teachers as an important aspect to understanding teachers' bereavement experiences. Such contradictions in teachers' role pertaining to grieving children also came through in Cullinan's (1990) article where there was "a discrepancy between the vast majority of respondents who thought it proper for a teacher to help a grieving child, and the substantial number who believed that the best action was to refer a grieving student to a counsellor" (pp. 156-157). The research thus far suggests that inconsistencies exist pertaining to the role of teachers with grieving students. A study focused on exploring the roots of such inconsistencies would be beneficial to gaining more insight into the expectations placed on and internalized by teachers regarding student death circumstances.

Theme #4 (Teachers May Not Wave for Help on the Healing Journey) shed some light on the potential roadblocks that may discourage teachers' from asking for help following the loss of a student. Not asking for help was brought up enough to become a theme, hence it is a significant aspect of teachers' bereavement. This notion was also supported by Rowling's (1995) research where many teachers chose to cope by themselves and did not partake in the services the school provided. Besides noting how that contributes to disenfranchised grief, Rowling did not at all look into the coping strategies teachers adopted. With the current study having only begun to scratch the surface of teachers' coping following the loss of a student, a study that looks more closely into the aspects that help or hinder teachers' healing journey would be of value to the academic literature and could aid in fostering future services for teachers affected by the sudden death of their student(s).

### **Final Conclusion**

In summation, the purpose of this study was to discover more about the bereavement experiences of teachers who have a student or multiple students die suddenly and violently. Deep, rich descriptions developed from five participant interviews helped give insight into such lived experience. Illustrated through five thematic statements, the current study discovered that the potential bond between student and teacher means the profession of teaching is so much more than teaching subjects, but sometimes it does take a student dying to have that realization that teaching is more than the curriculum. Following a sudden loss that is both personal and professional in nature, teachers' place of work becomes a place of grief. While trying to navigate the personal and professional changes that arise, teachers may not be the first people to wave for help

on the healing journey. Finally, no matter how many times a teacher does experience the loss of a student, no two sudden deaths are the same. Such findings have implications for counselling professionals, school administrators, central office, and teaching professionals. What may be a great start to helping the public better understand what this experience is like; more research on teacher's bereavement is warranted. Although bereavement is a huge, complex, deeply personal experience, if the bereavement experience of teachers' after the sudden loss of their student(s) had to be summarized with just one word, that word would be one that came from the lips of several participants: "hard." As Betty voiced, "Ya, I think that stands out for me, that you don't forget them. You loved those kids and their death affects you just like it would be your own, your own kids, so it's hard." Death and difficulty go together in unique ways with teachers losing a student to death, but there are narratives of others, research and practical supports by administration, counselling, teacher educators, and colleagues that can mediate that grief in healthier ways.

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## Appendix A

### Email for Participant Recruitment

Greetings **[insert name here]**,

**[Insert personal greeting if known to writer]**. As part of her M. Ed. requirements, Aleigha Arksey is conducting a thesis on “Teachers’ Bereavement Experiences After the Sudden Death of a Student: A Phenomenological Inquiry.” Teachers are often expected to be supportive and a role model of adaptive mourning for grieving students when the class experiences the loss of a student. A lot of research is aimed at how teachers can better assist students through their grieving journey, yet very few studies acknowledge how teachers have also experienced a loss. This thesis, through individual interviews, intends to explore the bereavement experienced when suddenly losing a student from the perspective of teachers. This study aims to fill a major gap in the academic literature and can inform and foster future services for teachers affected by the sudden death of their student(s).

Currently, the researcher is looking for people who would meet the following criteria:

- (a) be of legal age (18+)
- (b) self-identify as Canadian
- (c) are or have been a secondary teacher (i.e., grades 7 through 12) in Canada
- (d) have experienced at least one sudden death (e.g., suicide, homicide, accident) of a student during their time as a teacher.

If you feel these criteria apply to you and would be willing to find out more about participating in this study, please feel free to email Aleigha Arksey at [uleth.thesis.research@gmail.com](mailto:uleth.thesis.research@gmail.com). If you know of anyone else who may meet criteria and would be willing to participate, please feel free to forward this email.

Thank you greatly for your time and consideration,

**[Insert name here]**

## Appendix B

### Participant Consent Form

#### **Teachers' Bereavement Experiences After The Sudden Death Of A Student: A Phenomenological Inquiry**

You are being invited to participate in a study entitled "Teachers' Bereavement Experiences After The Sudden Death Of A Student: A Phenomenological Inquiry" that is being conducted by Aleigha Arksey. Aleigha Arksey is a counselling psychology graduate student in the Faculty of Education at the University of Lethbridge and you may contact her if you have further questions by phone 780-385-4422 or email [uleth.thesis.research@gmail.com](mailto:uleth.thesis.research@gmail.com).

As a graduate student, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a degree in counselling psychology. It is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Elaine Greidanus and Dr. Leah Fowler. You may contact Dr. Greidanus by phone at 403-329-2186 or by email [elaine.greidanus@uleth.ca](mailto:elaine.greidanus@uleth.ca) and contact Dr. Leah Fowler by email at [leah.fowler@uleth.ca](mailto:leah.fowler@uleth.ca) or phone at 403-329-2457.

This research is being funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

The purpose of this study is to discover more about the bereavement experiences of secondary teachers who have a student or multiple students die suddenly. Currently, the main research question is as follows: (1) What is the experience of grief for teachers who have had their student(s) die suddenly?

Research of this type is important because teachers are often expected to be supportive and a role model of adaptive mourning for their grieving students, but very few studies focus on teachers' grief experience and none have been conducted in Canada. This study aims to fill a major gap in the academic literature and can inform and foster services for teachers who are affected by the sudden death of their student(s).

You are being asked to participate in this study because you self-identify as Canadian, are in or were in the teaching profession, and at some point during your secondary teaching career in Canada have had a student (grade 7-12) die suddenly (e.g., accident, suicide, homicide). You also live in Alberta and are of legal age, which makes you ideal for a study that focuses on Canadian teacher's experiences coping with the sudden death of a student.

If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will include an initial taped individual interview (approx. 1-2 hours) about the experiences and coping strategies adopted after the sudden death of a student. Shorter follow-up phone interviews may also take place.

Participation in this study may cause some inconvenience to you because of the length of the interview. Additionally, participation in this study may trigger emotional and psychological difficulties, such as post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms, anxiety, deep sadness, and/or grief, due to the sensitive subject matter. To minimize these risks you will be reminded throughout the interview that you can take a break whenever you need, refuse questions, and amenities like tissues and water will be provided. If you appear to be in distress, you will be asked if you would prefer to end or postpone the interview. Understanding there are potential anticipated risks, please note that the Alberta Mental Health Help Line can be reached toll free at #1-877-303-2642.

The potential benefits of your participation in this research includes providing valuable information that could inform and foster support services for future teachers dealing with the sudden death of students, which in turn could eventually help grieving students. In addition, your contribution would be helping to fill a large gap in the academic literature.

Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw from the study, your interview data will be removed from the research and destroyed at such time.

To make sure that you continue to consent to participate in this research, I will remind you of your rights every half an hour during the initial interview. I will also review consent before conducting any follow-up interviews.

In terms of protecting your anonymity interviews will be conducted in person and some identifying demographic information will be collected, but nothing to give away personal identity.

Your confidentiality and the confidentiality of the data will be protected by holding all tapings and transcriptions of interviews on password protected devices and keeping any hard copies in a locked file cabinet.

Data, both electronic and paper-based, from this study will be destroyed after five-years time.

It is anticipated that the results of this study will be shared with others in the following ways, by thesis dissertation, conference presentations, and published academic articles.

In addition to being able to contact the researcher Aleigha Arksey and her supervisor Dr. Elaine Greidanus at the above phone numbers, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Chair of the Faculty of Education Human Subjects Research Committee at the University of Lethbridge (403-329-2425).

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researchers.

---

*Name of Participant*

---

*Signature*

---

*Date*

***A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.***

## Appendix C

### Interview Questions

#### Demographic Questions

1. How many years have you been a teacher? Or How many years were you a teacher for?
2. What subjects do you or have you taught?
3. What is or was your favorite thing about being a teacher?
4. Will you be speaking about one sudden loss experience, or will you be drawing from multiple experiences? How many experiences have you had?

#### Initial Experience Questions

5. Can you please begin sharing your story, from the moment you were notified that your student had died? (Jacobs et al., 2015).
6. Can you please tell me about when and where you were, when you first received the news?
7. “Please describe your thoughts, feelings, and reactions when you found out about the death” of the student? (Sharpe, Joe, & Taylor, 2013, p. 160).
8. Can you describe any bodily sensations experienced upon receiving the news?
9. What was it like for you to get that news?
10. Can you describe what you did and felt a few hours after receiving the news?
11. Tell me about how you got through the day, after receiving the bad news.
12. How did you allow yourself to express grief in front of your class and/or other students after receiving the news?
13. Can you recall and describe any changes to your sleep, appetite, and/or behaviours?
14. What factors do you think influenced or contributed to your grieving journey?
15. Would you describe any spiritual beliefs that you think affected your response to student death?
16. What have you found helpful when coping with such a loss? (Charmaz, 2014).
17. Was there any person or organization that you found to be particularly helpful after the loss? (Charmaz, 2014).
18. How would you describe the kind of teacher you were before the loss? Did this view of yourself as a teacher change after experiencing the loss?
19. What was your sense of significant personal life changes after the loss?
20. Have any of your core beliefs changed since experiencing the loss? (Charmaz, 2014).
21. Looking back on this experience, what stands out the most for you? (Charmaz, 2014).
22. “Could I ask you to describe the most important lesson you learned through experiencing” the sudden loss of your student(s)? (Charmaz, 2014, p. 67).
23. Tell me about any strengths that you discovered or developed through this grieving experience. (Charmaz, 2014).

24. So, it has been \_\_\_\_\_ years since the loss first occurred, can you tell me about how your grief experience has changed over time, from first hearing about it to now?
25. How has the experience of suddenly losing of a student or students affected you as a teacher?

### **Specific to Multiple Experiences**

26. After living through one sudden loss of a student, how was the next experience similar and/or different than the first time?
27. After having gone through this experience more than once, how would you say your grief has changed over time?

### **Ending Questions**

28. After having this experience, what advice would you give to other teachers who have just discovered that one of their students has passed away? (Charmaz, 2014).
29. After this experience, is there anything you believe counselling professionals should know?
30. Is there anything else you can think of that I should know to better understand your experience? (Charmaz, 2014)
31. “Is there anything you would like to ask me?” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 67).

## Appendix D

### Conceptual Headings Displayed in Accordance to Participant

#1 David Smith	#2 Paul Richardson	#3 Nancy Colley	#4 Betty Warner	#5 Norm Brown
Teachers' Grief				
Professional Versus Personal Grief				
Grieving in Front of Students				
		Attending the Funerals of Students	Attending the Funerals of Students	
Grief Over Time		Grief Over Time		Grief Over Time
What Teaching Looks like Post Death		What Teaching Looks like Post Death	What Teaching Looks like Post Death	What Teaching Looks like Post Death
Professional &/or Personal Changes due to Loss				
		Empty Desks		Empty Desks
So Much More than Teaching				
Shift from Curriculum Focused to Person-Centered				
The Healing Journey				
Counselling & Support Services				

## Appendix E

### Participant Quotes Organized in Accordance to Conceptual Headings

P#	Categorical Headers
	<b>Teachers' Grief</b>
#1	<p>“I was in my classroom and there’s an intercom, so the administrators called the staff down to the staff room and they announced it...but you know how some things just slow right down? I was standing in the staffroom and when that happened it was almost like my hearing got better or something and I could just acutely hear. There, the homeroom teacher was like halfway across the room and I could hear it like it was whispering in my ear, but the teacher was dismissive of it, you know? I would just say that it was really difficult for me because I think it was part of that naivety, well on so many levels...”</p> <p>“I feel that these experiences have been traumatizing. I think traumatizing is the right word. And I know this gets Band-Aid around, but in this case no, I think legitimately traumatizing. Either you can’t sleep, can’t eat, or your too much of one or the other and all that stuff. Just the emotional lingering effects of that.”</p> <p>“I couldn’t sleep. I went on a medication that would basically just knock me out. I can’t say I slept it’s just that I was basically rendered unconscious. ‘Cause after about...I wasn’t able to go to the doctors until after the funeral. I went to the doctor on the Tuesday the next week, ‘cause I basically hadn’t slept, maybe an hour, every other day. I was just going into zombie mode or whatever, but you know the responsibilities of the school don’t go away.”</p> <p>“I could hardly breathe. I never had a panic attack in my entire life. I couldn’t breathe, I felt like I was dying... I didn’t know what those were, I thought I was having a heart attack, I didn’t know. I didn’t even know they existed. I went to the counselling and they said, ‘well you’re having a panic attack.’ ‘Well make it stop!’”</p> <p>“I felt really alone... so I felt alone when I was at work actually.... I felt betrayed. I started to wonder if I was wrong, like maybe I shouldn’t care, like maybe the problem’s with me. Like maybe everyone else has this figured out and I’m the dummy, you know. So, in terms of the grieving process, I tried to invest myself. I think inevitably I doubled down. I re-invested my efforts to do what I thought was important in the first place, was be there for kids and help them get through things, you know, and maximize opportunities... But that was a very, very, isolating time and I would say that it permanently changed my view of what the role of a central office administrator should be...”</p>
#2	<p>“I was more there for my friend, to support him, ‘cause I know about what he was going through and how much it was affecting him. To me, it’s funny, ‘cause seeing [Kevin] grieve, frustrated, sad, and angry, and all those different emotions that come with grieving, it was I, trying to help him through that was helping me kind of come to terms.”</p> <p>When asked if he recalled any major changes to sleep, he responded:</p> <p>“Oh ya! You’d think about it. Once your mind shuts off for the day, you’d sit there and wind down, and think about it. You know, it’s just the wow factor.”</p>

	<p>“But the reality is when you have 60 to 80 kids going through your class a day, roughly on average, you do get the relationships, but you don’t know the whole story of students, right? And then reality is you got to just come to the terms that...you didn’t, I didn’t know him that well, you know.”</p>
#3	<p>“I was just really tired. I was really, really tired just because you’re exhausted from emotionally supporting people.”</p> <p>“You think you’re okay; ‘cause I thought I was okay for those two weeks and then I realized I was not okay. After that last funeral and through that week I realized that I was not okay. I just couldn’t face the sad, sad faces another day; like how hurt they were. I just thought, I couldn’t hold anymore crying, grieving children... I just crashed and burned. I was off for a week. I just couldn’t support anybody else, any longer... I was just done. I stayed home...it was overwhelming to have that much grief in one day.”</p>
#4	<p>“So when you talk about bodily feeling, I guess it’s sort of a stress, headache, that sort of thing. I’m at the age now when I say I never get cold, but I remember very well being out at Peter’s house and his Mom, being a real caregiver, brought a blanket over and put it on me because she said, ‘I could see that you’re cold.’ And so things like that, I do think that you get cold and things like that.”</p> <p>“At times of grieving, or things like that, I definitely eat sugar things. I’m a terrible, terrible snacker, like chocolate. And I really do remember when Peter died going down to the grocery store after school, ‘cause it had been such a stressful day with kids and everything, and I remember stopping and my kids in the car said, ‘oh how come you’re buying so many chocolate bars?’ Like I really do remember that. And just eating chocolate bars, which is terrible, but ya.”</p> <p>“That whole week. And I think even, when I think of the other deaths too, the amazing changes in, especially sleep, and just your thoughts, and how you process things... I remember after that the last suicide going out to the family’s home, I was driving, and there was a group of teachers who we were taking food out to the home and I missed the turnoff; I never would have missed the turnoff at other times, and you just go, ‘okay where is my brain?’ Sometimes you go, ‘how safe am I driving?’”</p> <p>“I got on that bus and collapsed... I was very happy to get on the bus, ‘cause I was just so exhausted and I remember just thinking, I’ve given everything I absolutely have in this last week, and I knew that things were okay, and the kids were okay and that sort of stuff. So it was good to get on that bus and be away from everything too; that might sound really selfish. But I know I was really, really exhausted, just mentally, totally broken or whatever, not broken, but exhausted... It was necessary to have some down time then.”</p>
#5	<p>“Like it’s interesting the tricks your mind plays or the stories that it tells you; the night before when all these guys would come over to my house, all I could think is that the one lady kept her shoes on; like everyone else took their shoes off, but she kept her shoes on and I just put in hardwood. I’m mad at her ‘cause she didn’t take her damn shoes off in my house and it’s the stupidest thing, but your brain; I was traumatized, I was trying to process things.”</p> <p>“I remember the next day when I went to school. I was up all night, didn’t sleep very well. It was really early, I sat in the car for 20 minutes before I went in the building. I talked to myself like, ‘I’m going.’ Then I talked myself into it when I got there. And I’m glad I did, ‘cause that moment of going back would have been just as difficult whenever, so going</p>

	<p>back right away, even though I think I was still kind of in a state of shock. Still a little bit stunned by things.”</p> <p>“They brought in a sub for me that day that I went to school right after, just on call, just in case and actually it was smart, ‘cause I only did the morning. I got to lunch and the staffroom, in there, there’s all these counsellors and all these people and it was too much. I was overestimated at that point. I was done. I went into the washroom and I closed the door and I fell apart. I was ugly crying, snot like the whole nine yards. Then I was embarrassed ‘cause I’m in the bathroom, the doors locked, and people are trying to get in. And I’m like, ‘it’s busy.’”</p> <p>“I lost a lot of sleep... I remember at one point I have to, I went to my family doctor and I got sleeping pills, because I just wasn’t sleeping. Cause I’m naturally an over thinker, I over think the hell out of everything all the time, and that I could not sleep and it was just, and you try all sorts of things, so finally I was just like, ‘okay, this is what happened.’ Whoop, prescription, ‘here you go.’ So I’m like, ‘I’ve never taken a sleeping pill before, this is weird.’ So I took one on a weekend, just to see. And I took one and god, it hit me like a ton of bricks and I must have hit every wall between my living room and my bedroom; which told me when I took them during a school day I had to take them by a certain time and I only took half, ‘cause I was out like a light.”</p>
	<p><b>Professional Versus Personal Grief</b></p>
#1	<p>“I had never experienced anything like this in my life. I was trying to figure out, as everything was happening, what my role was supposed to be. Like so these kids are all grieving big time, three quarters of them are in shock, I think I was still mostly in shock, but I had intellectualized the concept so I’m like what am I suppose to do? Am I supposed to fire up the computer and start giving notes? Like that just didn’t, I didn’t know what to do, but it didn’t feel right to just do nothing, so that’s why I just kind of opened it up to this conversation...”</p> <p>“That was traumatizing for all of us, like everybody. Teachers, especially some of the elementary teachers that knew that kid just a little kid, they were super upset. Everyone knew him really well and I could see how visceral the response was from so many people. I was feeling it too, but again, I was standing there delivering this message going I’m the principal, like what am I suppose to do? Am I supposed to cry? Is it okay for me to show that I’m really upset by this right now? Because I’m really upset by this right now, but I also have central office administrators that have inevitably contributed to this; I told them this was going to happen. So I think they would be upset with me if I showed that I was upset in front of my staff.”</p> <p>“I remember saying this.... counselling services are on the way to the school right now, but for today, they are for students only. I have also been reassured that counselling services will be made available starting tomorrow morning for the teaching staff... So I said, ‘today your job is to be the teacher, as I’m doing now being the principal. I’m telling you your job and I fully expect you to do your job today, which is bells as usual.’ We had support staff; I said, ‘they’re going to be in between classrooms bout every five minutes and that’s how we are going to support each other, so if you find that you can’t hold it together, you take that opportunity when that TA gets there, you go out of the classroom, you go to the bathroom, you come to see me, you do whatever you need to do, but we need people that are holding it together in front of kids today.’ I remember how that went over; that was like a bad joke.</p>

	People were pissed off, so was I. Be mad, you know.”
#2	<p>“I just personally put on a face and dig stuff down deep.”</p> <p>“Well you put your face on. I don’t know if it’s a male thing, but you put your face on and you just go. And any chance I did, [Kevin], and I went and talked with each other, and another trades teacher; was talking to him too. That is where the support was, with the three of us.”</p>
#3	<p>“That was a pretty hard week. Administration said, you know, the instruction from central office is that you have to keep on teaching. I’m going my whole weeks lesson just went down the tube and my novel for the year...and then to have central office say, ‘you know, you need to be teaching everyday.’ There are words that start with letters, start with F that you want to say. ... I didn’t listen to them. I was the person in charge of that classroom. I was responsible for them. And if this was not a day we could work, this is not a day we could work.”</p> <p>“You not only had to be there as a teacher everyday, but you were also there as a warm, compassionate person, experiencing sort of the same thing.”</p>
#4	<p>“I’m definitely the strong one and I think sometimes teachers end up being the strong ones in their families, because they’ve had to deal with things. So often we do end up being the strong ones that sort have to take over and say, ‘we got to get this done.’ But I also know that I tend to be, I’m quite strong when I’m around other people, but when I get by myself. There’s a song that Kelita sings, <i>The Strong One</i>, and she wrote it just after her brother committed suicide, and that song really speaks to me, ‘cause I often have to be the strong one, but when I’m by myself, I don’t want to be that anymore, you just want to have someone look after you sometimes. And I think teachers often are caregivers and every once and awhile, I just want to be a wreck and I can’t be.”</p>
#5	<p>“I think the reaction came later, ‘cause part of me, I’m in teacher mode. I need to get back up to my room with my students and they were fine; they were with another teacher that they knew longer than me, so I knew they were fine. I just think I was in the mode. The idea that teachers get into teacher mode, we got to protect our kids, and push this aside, and push this aside, push this aside, help, help, help, help, help.”</p> <p>“Part of it too that is it was such an unusual circumstance, people didn’t know how to react, right. I think that’s prevalent in schools; we know what we need to do for the kids, we don’t know what to do for each other. And you don’t want to show any kind of weakness and you don’t want this or that.”</p>
	<b>Grieving in Front of Students</b>
#1	<p>“And I do remember, I think it was probably about two months since the loss. I can’t remember what happened, but there’s something happening in the class and I laughed out loud and I heard. I think even the kids picked up on it; that was the first time. And I used to laugh like all the time. That was probably the first time and I think what it was that startled me is ‘cause I hadn’t heard myself laugh in awhile, right? So the kids kind of heard it and then they saw me hearing it, there was that thing, then we were all like, you know, it’s okay, it’s all right. Then those moments just kind of came back with a little more frequency and the kids knew that we were still okay...”</p>

#2	<p>“Because he wasn’t a student at the time, it was a different situation. I guess that’s why you had to put your face on, because you had to go teach the students. The students might have talked about it, I can’t remember if they talked about it, or just said, ‘oh ya,’ you know. And then word gets out that he was a former student [from our school] a day or two later.”</p>
#3	<p>“I remember...one student was coming down and she’s carrying these books and just sobbing. So I stepped out of the room and I met her partway in the hall. ‘I’m so sad today Mrs. Colley.’ She just collapses into me. Something happened in the class and it made her feel really bad. Anyways, I cried with her a little bit in the hall too. There were often times that we had people crying; I mean just for that period of time and then it was okay after that. But I mean if we hadn’t have done that; if we had just kind of been like, well here’s work get it done, it wouldn’t have been good. You really have to be prepared to meet students where they’re at, on each day, ‘cause each day is different depending on what’s happening. Did they go visit the family that night? Or is it one of those people that passed, is it their birthday? Is it your birthday and they didn’t come? Is it the day you were supposed to go to the show?”</p>
#4	<p>“But the kids do look to the teachers on how to grieve. And again, I think maybe that’s where the cold-heartedness comes in; I am a person that believes if your time is up, it’s up, and so I’m not a hysterical griever. But is that good or bad? So if you have someone that deals with a death hysterically, or they’re just losing it or whatever, that’s okay too. And sometimes when the kids have an example of someone very composed and everything, it’s hard if they’re feeling like they want to be hysterical. And so like I say, is it the right example? I don’t know. I think we feel like we have to be composed for the kids. I would say that I felt like I had to be composed and I wasn’t composed the night I found out about Peter, but I was happy to have that time just by myself and with my family, before I had to deal with it with the kids. As compared to the last suicide that we found out the morning of school and that was really difficult, but again, you just sort of try to maintain your composure and you go on. I think that is what we think we have to do and that’s why I said, <i>The Strong One</i>, that song always speaks to me, because I think sometimes you feel you have to be the strong one, but at the same time, I think I also, I hope I showed the kids that it’s okay to be emotional as well.”</p>
#5	<p>“I don’t know if I ever grieved in front of them; maybe that first day. I was just trying to keep it together myself and they’re like, ‘oh we’re so sorry.’ I’m thinking like, ‘no don’t touch me, oh you’re hugging me.’ But I just kind of recognized in them that they just needed, I think they needed to know that I was okay. So I don’t know if I really grieved in front of them. I was like the teacher who, ‘I’m going to hide my feelings from you’ and stuff like that. I didn’t shy away from it, but there were a couple times where I would just have to step out of the room for a minute. I’m like, ‘Kay, I need to get a drink of water. I’ll be right back.’ They knew. I think they just knew that he just needs a moment. And there were more so of those when I first got back then as the semester went, ‘cause we found our stride again as a class. ... So I was able to separate that kind of personal, private part and if I wanted to, you know any kind of emotion I might have been feeling. I think I went through a period of numbness for a while. I kind of was angry and that was my predominant emotion, but I kept it in check, though I was a little bit snappy with people, partly because I was just tired. I didn’t cry a lot with this. I didn’t cry till that first day back at lunch when I fell apart. I had some other moments of weakness...”</p>

	<b>Attending the Funerals of Students</b>
#3	<p>“So I go to the funeral and both families talk about that one project and how grateful they were to get back these personal things...and I was just sitting there absolutely stunned.”</p> <p>“And now we’re like hundreds of people at those funerals, hundreds; so I sat there crying, stunned. And so the parents, when it was over, and it was alright to talk, you know, I saw them staring at the coffin; In our conversation there was just something about how they were so appreciative, they were so thankful I brought that one project. They were just so grateful to have those things of hers that she, you know, put herself into that. And you know when you’re talking to somebody and you’re in a group, another person kind of comes to enter the conversation, people kind of open up to let them in. They didn’t. We stood right there, the three of us just like this. This one time, the father kind of moved to shoulder like, ‘you’re not coming in this conversation.’ And then they hugged me. So you have no idea the impact that you can actually have on a student’s life and their family.”</p> <p>When “students die, parents need to know they were cared for by teachers.”</p> <p>“The school needs to think about how to let teachers attend that funeral. Don’t go, ‘oh well it’s a weekday afternoon, we’re having regular school.’ You know what, sometimes you don’t get to have regular school; sometimes you need to be some place else. And don’t expect teachers to take a personal day for that either. They are going, not for personal reasons, they’re going ‘cause they’re a teacher. And you might look to build something like that into your contract. And I know they’ll say, ‘well we don’t have enough subs.’ Okay, if you don’t have enough subs for all the teachers that want to go that means you need to close the school. Like what’s half a day? You waste half a day lots of times. Lots of times you can waste half a day, so don’t even begin to tell me that ‘no we can’t afford it,’ because we closed the school for a bit.”</p>
#5	<p>“In fact, the two suicides were also really, really different. And the way the families responded and the funerals of the two students that committed suicide... I don’t know, it was just handled really differently and I was really uncomfortable with it. Because I came away worrying that it was glorified and you just worry about your kids, I mean my kids in school, and how they would respond to it. Lots of the kids they came back and they were saying to us like, ‘did that seem right to you?’ The kids were questioning it too... Again, I’m being very judgmental and I feel that in myself, but I was really uncomfortable at the last funeral, and being judgmental about it; just saying, ‘this is wrong, this is not what our kids need to hear.’ But that’s what maybe the family needed. So I’m being really judgmental when I say that and the kids were confused with that, but maybe that’s what the family needed to do to heal... There was just a significant difference in the two funerals and they impacted the staff differently, because of that.”</p> <p>“And there were a lot of really young teachers who haven’t experienced death, in their families, and so there are a lot of teachers, who they themselves have not had a death in their immediate family or even their extended family yet. And I know that there were some teachers for the last funeral, it was the only funeral they’d ever been too. So that’s harsh.”</p>

	<b>Grief Over Time</b>
#1	<p>“Back then, in the first two months after Meg killed herself, it would almost be equivalent of getting branded, like this searing, visceral, intensity; electrode kind of stuff in your brain. I just remember it being such an overwhelming, more than powerful; like it would just hit you like a tidal wave. There’d just be, this visceral, sharp, almost a pain associated with, like this pain response where you just want to shut down or something... But compared to then, it was just such a visceral thing, like total information overload and very painful and sharp. Now it’s more of a warm than a sharp. I think maybe that’s the benefit of time, I’m better able to remember Meg, like she was such a talented kid and I’m so appreciative of that. Maybe that’s the benefit of it, I’m able to focus on the good things now, whereas before it just almost felt like an attack-Meg’s gone.”</p> <p>“I think of her often. Easily once a month there’s something and I just see her.”</p> <p>“Recovery is a pretty strong word, I don’t think I’ve healed from it.”</p>
#3	<p>“When I think about it, I think about what a really hard time it was, how emotionally draining it was, how sad it was, and how it went on for a long time.”</p> <p>When discussing becoming a participant for this study with her husband, Nancy recalled her husband responding, “well maybe it will be kind of helpful for you, ‘cause I know you’re still really sad about it lots of times.”</p> <p>“But over time too, each year, kids got farther and further from it, because it became more and more in the past and they were living more and more in the future. So it does recede into the background, but depending on what you do in your school as a memorial also brings it up. Like every grad there’s a memorial ....I kind of feel that in a way it kind of put a damper on grad. The year that those kids graduated, it was much more significant that year, but the other years I thought, I wonder if this puts a damper on how these kids were thinking about grad, was it making it sad for them in the moment? ... But it’s something to think about. Cause sometimes they put a big plaque on the wall or they put something there...how long do we keep thinking about that? How long does that go on?”</p>
#5	<p>“And it was funny because I remember talking to somebody one time and I had mentioned it, and they’re like, ‘that? That happened like months ago, you’re not over that yet?’ I was like, ‘no.’ Then through my own kind of research and my knowledge of that I realized that we have trauma moments, right. And everybody was past, but I was stuck here in this moment, just in this moment of thinking, because of those guys when they came over and they were like, ‘you shouldn’t go to school ‘cause people are blaming you.’ The idea that I was at fault, stuck with me; it took me a year to lay that down. I refer to it sometimes like a coat; I took that coat off, I laid that burden down, and once I was done with that, I was done with that.”</p> <p>“When I talk to people about it, this is a really good example of how this grief has changed, because at first it was really hard; it was a tough year. When we got to the second-year anniversary of it, I was aware of it, but couldn’t remember the exact date; I don’t know if it was because I had moved on or just because I’d forgotten. As times gone by, the grief part didn’t stick with me so much as the, what do we do now for people who get in the same situation?”</p>

	<p>“And so I think there’s a strong ability to talk about it without getting emotional, except for today obviously... So I don’t grieve the loss so much anymore just because it’s been a long time, so its just one of those things, stuff happens, and you move on, and I was able to move on.”</p>
	<p><b>What Teaching Looks like Post Death</b></p>
#1	<p>“It’s just so uncomfortable right? I didn’t know what to do. I do remember like...revisiting it in my mind trying to figure out like what is my role here. What should I do? What would a loving parent do right now? What would a good teacher do right now? I don’t know? ... Is there a right thing to do? Besides should I know what that is? I don’t know what to say; we built it. We just took it one class at a time, that’s all we did. We just made it through.”</p>
#3	<p>“I was looking out the hall, ‘cause in those first days, I was always kind of like: Okay, are we all here? Is everybody here today? Did anybody get lost? Anybody crying in the bathroom? I was always kind of wary of this thing, because they would. They would get together and they’d start talking about them, then they’d be crying, and they’d go sit in the bathroom, or they’d go to some other little [nook] that we had. So I was kind of always checking...”</p> <p>“And sometimes it was so nice, when my other class came or when I went to teach another subject; you’re away from that, you’re away from the heaviness of that.”</p> <p>“We were doing a writing assignment; I was walking around and Travis has nothing on his paper, nothing. So I kind of bent down and said, ‘what’s the problem Travis?’ I said, ‘do you want to talk about it a little bit, see if we can get some ideas for you to write?’ He says, ‘no, it’s okay.’ When he couldn’t think of what to write he said, ‘I use to just go like this and I would just play with Britney’s hair and she’s not here to focus.’ It was so sad, so sad. A whole month has gone by and we’re doing a writing assignment, he can’t think of what to write so he was going to play with her hair and now he can’t even think about what to write, ‘cause all he can think about is her... so things like that. And people don’t realize that those are the things that come back to kids. And because the other day he was fine, lots of other times you never even, you know, he used to work, but that day, when he couldn’t think of something to write, his go to was not there; it was not there. And so those are really hard moments.”</p> <p>“When a student dies you must immediately turn over all their schoolwork to the parents, like you can’t keep anything of theirs at the school. They go and they unlock the locker, they take out, they retrieve the textbooks, but all of their binders, their personal things, assignments that the teachers had that weren’t marked, marked, not marked, whatever, have to all be collected and given back to the parents. And so the principal called us together and said, ‘we need you to do that.’ And I said, ‘I have to give back that one project?’” Principal says, ‘oh ya, you better get those.’”</p>
#4	<p>“Well one of the things that we looked back on, because when Peter died that was before the Internet. Now something happens and you can go on and read about a bunch of stuff and get a bunch of information quite quickly. That was before the Internet was there and that kind of stuff, but there just wasn’t that plethora of information. So I remember going through a manual that we had from suicide or death of a student that we had, things in school, with the vice principal and the principal...”</p> <p>“I don’t think I was nearly as comforting to the kids as I was when Peter died.”</p>

#5	<p>“So then it was my class, where this incident had happened, and I thought, well they’ll all be there and ya they were all there, and then there’s a bunch of counsellors and the vice principal and this and that. They gave a little talk, and then they were like, ‘what do you guys need? As students, what do you need right now.’ And the one kids like, ‘we need all of you to leave, like we want to be in this space with just Mr. Brown.’ And it was kind of interesting, and I won’t get choked up, ‘cause those kids had my back. They’re giving me hugs and I don’t like to hug. They were so sorry that this had happened. I’m like, ‘well, you know, this was some of your friend...you know you lost a friend.’ And they’re like, ‘no, this is bigger than that right now.’ And they got it. And it was really cool to see...”</p> <p>“Two years after the fact, this one girl, she came up to me and she’s like, ‘Mr. Brown, I just want you to know I really hated you.’ I’m like, ‘Oh. Okay. But why?’ She’s like, ‘because of this incident.’ I’m like, ‘I know you were good friends with him and I know you lost a friend, I get that.’ She goes, ‘I was so wrong. You’re such a good person. I know that now. I am so sorry that I thought you had fault in this. I said very bad things about you.’ ‘It’s fine.’”</p> <p>“And we were talking about something like, bad things happen to good people. And one kid goes, ‘oh like you?’ I’m like, ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about.’ He’s like, ‘that thing with the student. That was a bad thing and you’re a good person. You didn’t deserve that.’ And I went, ‘Oh, okay, thanks. I need to step out for a moment.’ Right!”</p>
	<p><b>Professional &amp;/or Personal Changes due to Loss</b></p>
#1	<p>“What I view as my concept of mental health is far more...informed. If you sprain your ankle, go see a doctor. If your feeling depressed, go see somebody.”</p> <p>“I don’t come from a particular sort of religious foundation, but I very much understand spirituality. And that has evolved for me. I would actually say that, in both instances, both in Meg’s suicide and in Brandon’s suicide, have probably inevitably sort of enriched my spiritual sense. I don’t even know if that makes sense, but it does, for me it does. Understanding... what it means to be breathing and be alive and the importance of treating each other well.”</p> <p>“I know that was more traumatizing for me because there’s things like, actually, I think I might have actually gotten Brandon hooked on this ‘sports team.’ But in his casket, it was an open casket, he was buried with his ‘sports team’ hat, so I don’t watch that ‘sports team’ anymore. I don’t know why that is. That’s the impact, there’s things like that.”</p> <p>“People will say why are you so quiet...well what’s my job? Like is my job to come in here and puff my chest out and pretend like I know everything; what do I know? I’m just me. Pretty humbling...there’s humility there, a humbling of what I thought I was capable of; I’m not capable of anything. So ya it changed me that way, I tend to just listen...”</p> <p>“I think that maybe reinforces again, big picture, don’t sweat the small stuff as much... I don’t even care, well again, it’s not that I don’t care, I’m mindful of other, more important, what I would argue are more important things. That actually defined my leadership experience, certainly in a principal capacity, where people would be worried about whatever, like the temperature of the gymnasium, and I’d be going, well you should probably talk to a caretaker about that ‘cause literally I’m dealing with kids bringing drugs in on the bus, so you know, I’m trying to kind of get my priorities straight.”</p> <p>“I thought my system was perfect. I would never have even questioned losing... because if</p>

	<p>you do the right thing, how can you lose, right? So, before I think the value system was the same, but I didn't have a sense of what's at stake. I didn't think that if I can keep the door open and be that person for somebody there is no way they'd kill themselves, right? Ya I just underestimated very, very, very badly underestimated how powerful some of these influences are in our lives; that's my fault, I needed to learn that. I wish someone could have told me. My first two years of teaching, it was just joy. I loved what I did, everybody knew I loved what I did; I was genuine, I just loved what I did... Ya at one point, I guess it was reckless; like I mean I never did anything risky or stupid or anything like that, but just my naivety. I just thought that if you were just good to people than everything's good and ya. Terrible. So, that's what changed."</p>
#2	<p>"Because of the awareness; seeing students and trying to see triggers. Like when you get a student, you don't expect them to go to that extreme. Then you kind of look at students and see if there's trouble, or just open up to them, or if there is, if you see consistent patterns."</p>
#3	<p>"I had to change my whole year's plan. Because the story we were going to read was about a kid who... leaves the dance to go get cigarettes and he gets shot, then he dies and his girlfriend finds him. Meanwhile, the story is told from his perspective where he doesn't realize he's dying and so it's like his long thinking about what's happening, what's going on, why he can't move, how he feels, and the people who come by... Anyway, but how could I do a story about a 16-year-old kid dying! How could I do that? That was not going to work, at all... It doesn't affect the things that I do now. But over time it still affected what I taught, what pieces I taught, what pieces of literature I taught, simply because I still had those siblings coming along. You still had to kind of keep that in the back of your mind; can I do these? Should I do this or not? Who's in the room this year that has some connection?"</p> <p>"It became a really good reference point for me or a point I referred back to when kids would say, you know, their grandparent died or something like that. I realized how important it was to be sympathetic, to be understanding, to say you're sorry, to tell parents, 'I understand that so and so passed away and you don't need to worry about what we're going to be covering in class, I will catch them up when they get back; Please enjoy time together with your family and my thoughts and prayers are with you.' You learn that whatever's going on that day, they'll get it some other time, they'll get it when they need it, but now is not the when."</p>
#4	<p>"Well I know the kids always say, 'oh you're being so nice to us.' And that's really sad when they say that. I think it does change you and make you more caring."</p> <p>"I think I'm forever changed by every single student that comes through my life, but I think you're changed in small ways by deaths of students."</p>
#5	<p>"So I get them to hand them back in right away, and they're like, 'what?' I said, 'oh, you know what, this is the wrong grade; I'm sorry this isn't your grade.' So, I made up something and went, 'okay let's do this other stuff.' But I had to take a moment... I became aware, really for the first year, especially with that one class, of the material that I chose."</p> <p>"I remember I used to be that sort of teacher who roar, rage once in a while, and I didn't do it anymore. I didn't rage anymore, 'cause I didn't see the point in having to raise my voice... I could be effective, more effective, without being loud... Like I changed a lot in terms of how I interacted with people and my demeanor and stuff like that... So I was able</p>

	<p>to, I didn't sweat the small stuff anymore.”</p> <p>“Like when I was speaking earlier about the tourist. I really learned to value the relationships that I had with the people who were supportive and really learned, not to fence off people, but almost it's like a two-tiered thing; These are my good friends who have had my back and these were the people that wanted to know the gossip and really who I didn't hear much after the fact right. Okay, you contacted me, whatever I need? Okay, 'I need something,' but then they weren't there. So I kind of learned that personalized, that way of really valuing who those relationships were, and a lot of those people that I worked with that were really supportive, I'm still really good friends with them 14 years after the fact...”</p>
	<b>Empty Desks</b>
#3	<p>“And so the one day I said something about we need to talk for whatever we're going to do and I said, 'put your desks into groups of four.' And said, 'will someone go sit here so there's a group of four.' Nobody moved. And the girls turned that desk and made the group of four; they stayed a group of three. They never ever made a group of four without putting that empty desk there... If I wanted them to be a group of four, for some reason or another, then I would spread the desks all around the room and then just say make groups of four. That's how I could avoid that problem. ”</p> <p>“And some teacher said, 'why don't you just move it out of the room then?' I was like, 'the first desk will always be the first desk; it doesn't matter what I change it to, the first desk will always be the first desk. So, I can leave a hole there, my god, that be more conspicuous!' But you could tell that other teachers didn't get it as much as we got it in that classroom. And I saw those kids six times a week; so, you know, we saw each other a lot. But no one ever sat there... And you have to understand that you can't just say, 'look sit in that seat.' 'cause you are causing them and all the other students great pain. And you can't get rid of that seat either.”</p>
#5	<p>“It took a lot for me to figure out that I was missing a desk and when I did, I was indignant as hell that they had done this. But then realizing that the janitor just had his heart was in the right spot; he wanted to take a reminder out.”</p> <p>“It's 'cause it's their space, right. I can look out at my room and go, oh well I'm missing that kid, that kid, and that kid, because I'm used to where they are in the space.”</p>
	<b>So Much More than Teaching</b>
#1	<p>“I guess that's where I maybe broke down a little bit and I was so mad! Like, I love that kid, you know.”</p> <p>“So kids were telling different stories, and I don't know even know if I had said a word. I was pretty quiet anyway, so as the conversation was going on kids were taking turns telling stories about Meg and stuff and then it was Garrett that just popped up and said, 'but guys, like no one here forgets how close Mr. Smith and Meg were, like Meg really liked Mr. Smith.' So Garrett said, 'so Mr. Smith, this must be hard for you too.’”</p>
#2	<p>“You go back because once you have sort of that relationship with students, and I think it's different, a trades class where you're working hands on, you kind of get a different relationship with the students in a trades setting than in a classroom setting. And you know, you always think well how could he do it? What happened? Were there any triggers that I</p>

	could have, you know, that we could have saw or observed that would have got him to this point? You just go through the whole could I have, should I have, did I, you know.”
#3	<p>“Teachers are struggling too. You just can’t think that they just teach these kids and there’s no, like no connection there; because there is.”</p> <p>“I stayed, I ended up staying really close to a lot of kids from that class.”</p>
#4	<p>“I think what also stood out for me, and it still does, is how much you can love your kids, like your students and how extremely sad you are when they die. And you know they’re just your students, but they’re your kids. Ya I think that stands out for me, that you don’t forget them. You loved those kids and their death affects you just like it would be your own, your own kids, so it’s hard.”</p> <p>“What I’ve learned is that it’s really important for teachers to be there for the parents of the kids. The parents really need to know that their kids were really loved by teachers.”</p>
#5	<p>“These kids come into our classrooms as students, but at some point, the vocabulary changes to these are my kids. And that’s a part of that personal idea I think of teaching. So, then when one of your kids dies, that’s hard. That’s hard for people; it was hard for me.... I don’t think the average person gets that; just how much a teacher knows their kids.”</p> <p>“I struggled a lot when that class was done, like when the semester was over and that group of kids gone and I didn’t have them.”</p> <p>“...you’re still their teacher; they’re still your student.”</p> <p>“I will always be your teacher and you will always be my student. Doesn’t matter where you go in life or what you do, I’m always your teacher and you’ll always be my student.”</p> <p>“So that felt like the school year and I even said to my principal, ‘cause it was in the summer so we haven’t even come back and I said, ‘we taught this kid for many years.’ And just connecting with my colleagues through social media or through phoning and stuff like that a lot of people were really hurting. The one woman I know, her husband taught at the school, and she’s like, ‘he’s a wreck; he’s a mess right now.’ But nobody did anything for them because it was the summer.”</p> <p>“The other one was a student who just, again, we had a big turnover in our staff so not everybody would know this kid, I think they were a few years out of high school, committed suicide. So, my colleagues that knew the former student were communicating back and forth, but again, we came back and our first staff meeting kind of waiting; but we had a new principal who wouldn’t have known this kid. And so, I’m like, is anybody going to say anything about this student? Nope. And I’m like, should I say something about this student? But we had a lot of new staff, like probably three quarters of our staff had changed over in the last few years, so ya, I’m just like, I don’t think everyone would know who this kid was; so again, you suffer a little bit in silence.”</p>
	<b>Shift from Curriculum Focused to Person-Centered</b>
#1	<p>“I think when I started my career I was really rigid, really ridiculously organized. Then I just came to realize that those things are important, but not as nearly important as making sure that your always sort of accessible...be a human being first. Be present. Listen. It’s not about the answers, it’s about listening, and it’s about honoring people, young people... So</p>

	<p>that's a teaching philosophy element that may be more reinforced for me now..."</p> <p>"There's way more to education than that and there's this human factor that is front and center all the time... The teaching role is more than curriculum, you're the curriculum, and it's relational, like it is all intertwined..."</p> <p>"These moments of loss represent the pinnacle of our responsibilities in society. They clarify what it is we're actually doing, 'cause it isn't about a textbook, it isn't about a swimming field trip. And it's actually the core work of working with kids... We have a system that is in an identity crisis. It thinks it's something, but it isn't. Or it thinks it's one thing, but it isn't.... And it's terrifying that we have adults in education that think teaching is about content delivery and that's their job."</p>
#2	<p>"So I was about halfway through my career when I was teaching so I had a lot of experience. That makes a difference too, if you're a new teacher going into a mere survival mode, but once you start building, what I found was that when you start teaching you're looking at the curriculum, trying to get the curriculum in, trying to get it in their heads; this is what we need to do. But once you get to the second, third year, if you're teaching the same subject, you start looking at the students, you kind of step back..."</p> <p>"You're not the parent, but you're in the place of a parent so you try to continue on and try to guide them. It's not just about academics; it's about life skills. Especially high school."</p>
#3	<p>"But that's the thing, just how tiring it is, very tiring; and how you have to be there for those kids and I don't mean, I say at the expense of the curriculum, but you have to be there for them above everything else, over and above everything else, you have to be there for them. They are the most important people and they need you more than anything else that can be given to them at that time. It's just how it is... Both my colleague and I would agree that we were about a month to six weeks before we could get back on track."</p>
#4	<p>"Makes you stop and say, you know, what were my last exchanges with the students who died? Or was I a gift to that child? And then you also look at the other kids that are hurting. So I think during the immediate time, I think I probably was a lot more, I mean I'd like to think that I was a caring teacher all the time, I hope I was; I know I certainly had some times where others wouldn't describe me as caring, you have your moments and so do kids."</p>
#5	<p>"I think I just became more intuitive to people and to look for things. I was hyper-vigilant for a while, but then I found that balance."</p> <p>"It's interesting to know that it's a little bit of that idea of change in being; trying to be a little bit more positive, little bit more grace, little bit more, you know. Cause some of these kids come in bouncing off the walls, but they come from really bad lives. Lived bad lives and so you need to be someone who's calmly like, 'okay, alright, are you done?' Sometimes they just can't do work. One time I had a girl crying in my class; she's like, 'I just don't get it!' Well turns out she had forgot her meds in the morning and didn't know how she was going to get them. I'm like, 'let's not worry about class right now. Like what do you need? What do you need me to do? Do you want a granola bar?' ... Another year I had a student who was homeless."</p>

The Healing Journey	
#1	<p>“And I know that, I just wouldn’t know what else to do. If it was to happen tomorrow, I still wouldn’t know what to do different, other than take it one step at a time... I’m a pretty terrible model for what to do.”</p> <p>“...I feel I was blind-sided ‘cause, I mean, I could hardly breathe... How can we possibly prepare ourselves? I would have, but there was no mention of any of this whatsoever in my teacher development program.”</p>
#2	<p>“Well that was the thing, the media part, it was because they only had the one side, they looked at him as the bad guy. The media doesn’t tell anything of that he was this, this, and this. It was never that. He was the enemy. But there is nothing you can change about that.”</p>
#3	<p>“...when I went back, it was fine.”</p> <p>“When the kids asked, I said, ‘I was just really, really sad; just like you in the beginning, I was really sad.’ ‘Oh we’re so glad’; they were really glad I was back.”</p> <p>“...then those kids were killed. It was absolutely gut wrenching. And to top it all off, they became these big, like really parallels between a group of students being killed here and a group of students being killed here. And this dominated the papers. It was like, ‘there’s no connection people!’ Don’t even be stupid, like there is nothing to connect these two. ‘But are students not being careful?’ Oh my god, it was ridiculous. Then of course the reporters called back these families wanting to know how this is affecting your family, seeing how this is so common, and they were just like, ‘get out of my life,’ you know. Anyways, it was very, very, it just magnified the problem all over again, because you sort of thought it was coming, like after we get through the last funeral it will be, you know, things will be better; it will kind of relax a little bit, it will be okay. And it just ramped it right back up again. It was really hard.”</p> <p>“I have been talking about it for two and a half hours and I’ve never talked about it for that long. I’ve never talked about it in that much depth and it did bring back a lot of things that were not in the top of my memory bank when I did talk about it, that were not there, so ya.”</p>
#4	<p>“What I have found is that people are afraid to go to the homes of the people who have lost someone and I’m not afraid. I actually think it’s a really big part of the healing.”</p> <p>“One of the things is to anticipate it. That when you teach hundreds of students, that it’s going to happen. And I don’t know if all teachers really have that feeling, that ya somewhere in my career I’m either going to lose a student through an accident, or suicide, or homicide, or something, that there’s going to be a reason and there’s going to be a death and I’m going to lose a student. And so, I think the pre-, you know, just knowing it’s going to happen.”</p>
#5	<p>“The recovery. It’s like a recovery of some sort... ‘cause you’re seeing kids die.”</p> <p>“I think too something that happens, suicides happen in schools all the time, but it’s kind of quiet within the community, it’s not really something that’s talked about, but this was on the news; there was media coverage.”</p> <p>“...so the superintendent had come out and he was really good cause he was like, ‘you have done nothing wrong.’ He even said it in all the media, ‘the teacher involved in this incident</p>

	<p>did not do anything wrong.”</p> <p>“Then my phone blew up and my parents were mad at me ‘cause I didn’t tell them until later what had happened. Cause I couldn’t say it out loud just yet, especially to my Mom and Dad. So, they were mad at me, and I was like, ‘whatever.’ It’s fine we got over it.”</p> <p>“So then I had to go to the office and they’re like, ‘oh my god, what’s going on?’ I’m like, ‘I can’t do it; I can’t do the rest of the day.’ And the person who subbed for me, he said to me, ‘you need to take care of this. This is the kind of thing that ends people’s careers. You need to take care of yourself.’ And that really stuck with me at that moment; this is sort of the thing that stuck in there with all the other stuff I need to, so it’s interesting the things that get through the fog that latch on and the things that just sort of bounce off and go away.”</p>
	<b>Counselling &amp; Support Services</b>
#1	<p>“We always talk about support services and wrap around services and all sorts of stuff for kids. Basically, the services offered to the staff and to myself were just desperately, dangerously inadequate... My job and the expectations that were placed on me from central office, point blank, are inhumane. I was never once offered direct assistance in any capacity whatsoever. Not personally. I don’t recall being asked how I was doing. So somewhere in there there’s this assumption that as an educator, or certainly as a principal, you’re this bullet proof, non-feeling entity. And I know that is modeled quite effectively throughout the province, but I’m just not that person. And I know that I needed help, right.”</p> <p>“There was no release time to do that. Again, ‘cause I got drugs being muled into school, I got domestic violence things, and there was also a sexual assault thing. And you’re the principal, now somehow you’re supposed to figure this out social services, RCMP, and all this stuff. Plus, there was the gang stuff... I love my job, I was the one going to work, but there was no other way. There was no alternative for me, no healing circle for me, no retreat to work with a counsellor. There was no offering; you’re just on your own.”</p>
#2	<p>“I guess the big thing for the school setting is to be able to have the counsellors there at the school and then they have their skills there. To be able to say, ‘okay I’m dealing with this, we need to be able to bring other counsellors in to deal with this more specifically’ ...like a lot of these teachers become counsellors where they don’t have a lot of specialized training; they went to a couple quick, I’m not trying to belittle it, but compared to what counsellors go through and what they experience, to what teachers do going into a counselling experience, is a totally different avenue. So being aware of what a counsellor at the school can do and being able to go, ‘yes we need some outside help’; that we’ll deal with this and we’ve had experience dealing with this. It’s huge. It’s just getting someone in there, being able to talk and having that provided.”</p> <p>“The teaching profession, and this is nothing against it, but we try to be everything. We have breadth, but we don’t have a lot of depth. We need to have more depth, when dealing with this.”</p>
#3	<p>“I talked to all the kids. I talked to all the kids, countless times, I talked to the kids.”</p> <p>“You can put all the things in place to say this is to help teachers; they don’t always take advantage of it because it’s like, that’s pretty weak if you need that, you know. But it’s hard to not do that. But people need to be a lot more aware of how that affects the teacher, how it affects the class!”</p>

	<p>“Teachers probably really need to be invited into counselling, as opposed to like go if you want to go. They probably need to be invited in, like at the time. The principal kind of sets up so that everybody is going, it’s not kind of a choice thing, so they get a chance to say, ‘well I knew them through this or that.’ ... Sometimes they need to do that, because sometimes you don’t think you need to go to counselling, or you don’t need to talk to someone, but it could probably be more of a, ‘this is your time to go talk.’ ... Even if you don’t think you really need to talk to a person, go down to the office and shoot the breeze with them for 20 minutes anyway, ‘cause you never know. You never know.”</p> <p>“And to the point, you don’t have to go during your prep. ‘cause that’s what they always say, ‘you can go during your prep.’ Give me a break. With the 50 things I have to do during my prep, I don’t have a prep! That some of the administration is going to put on their big boy pants and their big boy hat and they’re going to go in and cover your class, no matter what it is and you don’t have to leave some sterile lesson plan, they’re just going to have something that they’re coming to do with the kids. And that’s it. And you get to go at that time, for a half an hour, whatever it takes, without a, ‘you have to get back here for this class’ or whatever. ‘cause for some people it would be, it could be much harder than others. But I think that is really, really important. The idea to assume that teachers will go on their own during their prep or lunch hour, it’s not quite working. It doesn’t work, ‘cause they don’t go. They just don’t go.”</p>
#4	<p>“It’s sort of in that teacher persona that we think we have to be strong for everybody else.”</p> <p>“I think most of the time for teachers it’s, ‘we’re here if you need it.’ Well, teachers, I don’t think for the most part, think that they need that and I think that there’s lots of time when we do, but we won’t admit it.”</p> <p>“Being very specific in offering help, can be a help too”</p> <p>“Maybe instead of saying, ‘I’m here if you need me,’ saying, ‘we’re having a staff meeting after school today and a counsellor’s going to talk to us about the grieving process a little bit.’ Because, again, you’re going to have people on staff, especially if you have young staff that never had a death in their circle before and it might be their first time ever going through the grieving process; forcing it on them, rather than saying, ‘we’re here if you need it.’ Because it’s in our teacher persona to say, ‘I’m okay.’ So, to maybe say, ‘no you’re not okay and we’re going to just blanket everyone with this love for a little bit.’ Yet some might take offence to that and someone might say, ‘well they made me go to a meeting with a counsellor and I didn’t need it,’ but I think it doesn’t have to be long, it’s not a big thing or whatever, but to have that available to teachers who need to talk about it afterwards.”</p> <p>“I don’t remember as a teacher the schools offering counselling. We offered so much to the kids, but they do when they come in say, ‘if the teachers want to talk that’s fine’ and everything. But not afterwards...”</p> <p>“I also think that it’s really important that your central office is really, really supportive of your school no matter what, no matter what the situation is, no matter what, that they show you that they care and love for you too. We had different, like a different superintendent and different people in central office throughout the different times and there definitely were different responses and different ways of feeling supported or not supported during that time.”</p>
#5	<p>“So the gap of time really wasn’t a huge amount of time because I knew I was in trouble, just from my behaviours at home and the anger.... I think it might have been what that sub</p>

said, ‘if you don’t handle this, this could end your career.’”

“They brought in a counsellor a couple months after the fact as well to talk about... okay it has been a couple months, what’s the impact of this?”

“...if the principal couldn’t do it, someone else came, because it was a priority that I got that done.”

“I think, you know. I made a decision when I started counselling not to be quiet about it. Because there was a stigma... Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is not physical, it’s mental, it’s internal; so, any kind of struggles like if I had broken my leg, I got a cast, oh ya your injured, but if my psyche is injured like that you can’t see it, right.”

“Because they teach you about these are the signs of suicide to recognize in kids, these are the signs of this to recognize in kids, these are the signs of this to recognize; what about the signs to recognize within yourself? They all say work-life balance. Well what the hell does that even mean if you can’t give me strategies on how to create that... And I actually always said too that I thought that this kind of recognition of, I think teacher mental health or being self-aware of what your needs are above and beyond what the kids needs are, because it’s always so driven towards them, selfishly, I think university pre-service programs should teach teachers how to take care of themselves.”

“‘Oh we’ve got so much to do anyways.’ Well ya, but if you’re not healthy, how effective are you going to be?”