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Strategies Employed by School Social Workers in Virginia to Help Children Cope With Parental Death

Jamitta Covington
Walden University

Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Jamitta Covington

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Review Committee
Dr. Renata Hedrington-Jones, Committee Chairperson, Social Work Faculty
Dr. Debora Rice, Committee Member, Social Work Faculty

Chief Academic Officer and Provost
Sue Subocz, Ph.D.

Walden University
2024

Abstract

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MSW, Norfolk State University, 2016

BS, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2014

Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Social Work

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Abstract

Research has indicated that school social workers employ a variety of strategies or interventions that affect the child's adjustment in school. The psychological, physical, and social issues impacting children after the death of a parent can have long term effects on their development. However, there is a lack of knowledge regarding strategies that provide support for children's adjustment to the grief process following a parent's death. The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to identify strategies to improve, enhance, and contribute to social work practice. The study was guided by Kubler-Ross's grief theory, ecological systems theory, and assumptions of trauma-informed care. Interview questions were designed to identify school social workers role in supporting children after a parental death, the strategies used, the benefits, and challenges of implementation. Data were collected from semistructured interviews with 10 participants who were school social workers in Virginia school systems. Through open-ended questions and conversations, the researcher was able to create an understanding of the phenomenon of supporting bereaved students. The findings of this study include the following themes: the need to implement parental death into grief treatment, the need to ensure professionals receive proper training and education, the importance of policies to be introduced to support evidenced based treatment, and the importance of acknowledging the efforts of school social workers to service their clients. All social workers working in the field of child welfare may benefit from the results of this study, leading to positive social change. The research in this study highlights the benefits of implementing grief and loss strategies due to parental death in school settings.

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Dedication

This is dedicated to those who have walked this journey with me and have given endless support. I want to let you all know how much I appreciate you. I want to thank my family and friends who have been there from the beginning. I also appreciate those who I have met along this journey. Each person has contributed to my success and inspired me to never give up. Also, this study is dedicated to those who have experienced parental death during childhood, I hope this research positively contributes to making a difference in the world by providing children with the needed support. I want to dedicate this accomplishment to my son, Nashan Jr. who has been the driving force in the last 3.5 years. To my mother, who has sacrificed so much in her life to provide opportunities like this for her children, I am grateful. To my heavenly angel, my grandfather, thank you for your words of encouragement from the time I started this program until your passing. To anyone who has a dream, I dedicate this to each of you and would like you to continue believing in yourself and never give up no matter the obstacles you face.

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge my baby boy, Nashan Jr. "NJ" who gave me the motivation I needed to finish this journey, as well as my amazing family for their continued support and patience since I embarked on this rewarding journey. I would also like to acknowledge my chair, Dr. Hedrington-Jones and committee member, Dr. Rice for their positive feedback, guidance, and encouragement. Thank you for your generous support, constructive criticism, and patience throughout this journey. Additionally, I would like to thank my beloved family for always believing in me and providing me with encouragement and a lifetime of determination to succeed. Most importantly, I want to give an honor to God for allowing me to keep the faith throughout this journey without giving up.

Table of Contents

ii

List of Tables

Section 1: Foundation of the Study and Literature Review

School social workers are vital in educational settings. In their work with students and families, school social workers provide services to target the emotional and social needs of students (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2021). School social workers are essential workers who connect home, school, and community. School social workers can serve as companions for grieving students. According to Alahakoon (2018), statistics have shown that 5% of children (1.5 million) in the United States lose one or both parents by age 15. Children's grief responses may differ depending on their developmental level and maturity; therefore, some children may express grief reactions in more emotional and behavioral ways than verbal (Chen, 2018).

Schools are not exempt from having children in family situations that may affect the child's daily functioning. Students' negative behaviors and emotional responses reflect the issues they are experiencing. Burns et al. (2019) suggested that biopsychosocial assessments help school social workers assess biological, psychological, and social factors that can be contributing to developmental problems. School social workers use a holistic approach to focus on the student's environment and resiliency (Virginia Department of Education [VADOE], 2022). School social workers can play a vital role in helping children process their grief.

Working with students who may have experienced the loss of a parent is a possible aspect of social work practice. This may support the need for services provided by school social workers. School social workers may employ interventions to help students find ways to cope with their loss. Over the past decade, in the state of Virginia,

the number of school professionals decreased, while student enrollment has increased (Alahakoon, 2018). In 2017, the Virginia Board of Education recommended to the General Assembly the need to amend their formula used to determine the level of support needed in schools. This need resulted in the General Assembly approving policies that provided (mandated) one-full time social worker for every 1,000 students (Egerton et al., 2018). Also, the report noted Virginia public schools as having a growing need of poor students to provide services. The students may not have access to counseling, career development, and mental health services outside of the school (VADOE, 2022). School social workers can use evidenced-based practices to teach positive behaviors, promote social emotional development, and ensure a school climate conducive to learning (NASW, 2021).

School social workers offer support services in the educational setting. There is a need for high-quality therapeutic interventions to support bereaved children following the death of a parent (Flahault et al., 2018). An estimated 1,500,000 children younger than 15 years of age in the United States have lost one or both of their parents (Krull, 2020). Children who experience the grief related to losing a parent may show signs related to depression (American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry [AACAP], 2018). However, the bereaved students may not be able to grieve properly because they do not comprehend the concept of death due to their developmental stage (Mitchell, 2017; Pham et al., 2018). Failure to grieve properly may increase one's risks of health concerns or further complicate any present symptoms (Cipriano & Cipriano, 2019). Most people, children included, may experience depression symptoms after a loss and need emotional

support (Stroebe et al., 2017). School social workers may play a critical role in easing the grief journey for students who experienced a parental death.

Problem Statement

The research problem focused on understanding school social workers' responses to children after a child experiences a parental death. This study identified the interventions used by school social workers to support bereaved children through the grief process. In Virginia, the school board employs one school counselor and one social worker for every 250 students in each elementary school, middle school, and high school in which at least 50% of students are eligible for federal free lunch (VADOE, 2022).

Among school social workers' responsibilities include the following: truancy, family conflict, abuse and neglect, social/emotional stressors, substance abuse, mental health issues, and crisis intervention (VASSW, 2022). Also, the school social worker collaborates with school administration to manage crises and emergencies in the community (Egerton et al., 2018). Through the identified activities, school social workers may contribute positively to the growth and development of families.

School social workers may support children and their families with coping with their loss. A study by Hoeg et al. (2018) showed that children who lost a parent became depressed and anxious and often engaged in self-harm, drug involvement, or overeating behaviors. Researcher Wijayanti (2019) suggested that the death of a parent can result in a loss of attention and love, role model, sense of security, and loss of direction in life. School social workers are a valuable resource for helping children improve their emotional well-being (Balmer et al., 2018). These findings indicated that following a

parental death, children could benefit from a substitute figure, such as a stepparent, a teacher, or any adult figure; the substitute figure may help the child become more responsible and emotionally stable (Wijayanti, 2019). However, it is not clear what interventions are used by school social workers to best meet the needs of students who are experiencing grief and loss.

Schonfeld et al. (2016) submitted that misinformation or misconceptions can impair children's adjustment to loss. Therefore, the best approach is to be present, authentic, and honest when helping children grieve (Schonfeld et al., 2016). Implementing effective strategies in the school setting could assist children learn how to deal with the personal experiences of losing a loved one. When identifying such strategies, social workers should consider the effects of traumatic events on a child's behavior, academic achievements, and relationship with others (Stylianou & Zembylas, 2018).

The NASW (2021) emphasized that social workers can protect children by identifying safe and loving environments to reduce traumatic exposures. Understanding the roles of school social workers may enhance social work knowledge, training, and education, with the goal of benefiting bereaved children in Virginia. School-wide trauma-informed practices have been implemented in Virginia educational settings to ensure school counselor, social workers, psychologists, and nurses are qualified to identify unmet mental health needs and provide direct support (Egerton et al., 2018).

The approach of trauma-informed care is used in previous studies when discussing how to support an individual after the death of a loved one. Levenson (2017)

noted that trauma-informed care was developed to help clients discuss painful memories and increase their ability to manage their emotional or behavioral responses. Social workers apply trauma-informed care in practice to create a safe environment to allow for coping mechanisms and traumatic experiences (Coyle et al., 2019). Trauma-informed care has six principles: safety, trust, choice, empowerment, collaboration, and respect. Although trauma informed interventions are being used in various settings, research can help expand interventions to address a range of trauma, including racism and discrimination (Han et al., 2021).

The loss of a parent is described as a traumatic experience associated with emotional, cognitive, and developmental risks (Tafa et al., 2018). Although children lose one or more parents due to a variety of reasons, such as death, long-term absence from divorce, incarceration, illness, and termination of rights, parental death has the greatest impact on children because they do not fully comprehend the concept of death (Mitchell, 2017). There is a gap in strategies to support children's adjustment to the grief process (Nilsson & Anagame-Linberg, 2016). Understanding the strategies used by social workers to improve, enhance, and contribute to the well-being of the child is critical. Previous research has focused on adolescents' experiences after parental loss (Feigelman et al., 2017). The inclusion of children in future research could provide social workers with insights on how to support the needs of children of different ages because services should be tailored to one's needs (Steenbakkers et al., 2018). There is a need for future research focused on how to best support bereaved children (Bergman et al., 2017).

Trauma-informed social workers rely on their knowledge to understand human behavior, coping mechanisms, and how an individual process traumatic experience (Bent-Goodley, 2019). Furthermore, Berg et al. (2016) recognized a need for interventions to improve the social, emotional, physical, and cognitive well-being of affected children. Children's age, emotional development, environment, and past experiences with death should be considered factors that may influence their idea of death (Kronaizl, 2019; Warnick, 2015). However, it is unknown if school social workers use consistent strategies to support children with grief and loss. The findings of the current study may help guide social work practice by identifying effective strategies to support grieving children.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of the qualitative research study was to identify experiences and challenges of school social workers in Virginia addressing childhood bereavement following the death of a parent and strategies school social workers in Virginia employ to improve, enhance, and contribute to the well-being of children who experienced parental death. According to NASW (2021), childhood bereavement is one of society's widespread phenomena. One in 13 of children in the United States will experience the death of a parent or a sibling by age 18 (VASSW, 2022). Childhood grief has significant impacts on youth, families, and communities. School social workers are skilled professionals in educational settings to help bereaved children process their grief.

The following research questions (RQs) guided the study:

RQ1: What are the experiences of school social workers in Virginia working with bereaved children?

RQ2: What challenges do school social workers in Virginia face when helping children through the grief process?

RQ3: What specific strategies have school social workers in Virginia used to help children after a parental death?

This study used a generic qualitative approach to identify experiences, challenges, and the strategies social workers use to support children who experience a parental loss through death. Researchers use the qualitative method to understand how people interpret, construct, or make the best from their world and their experiences (Liu, 2016). Social workers' experiences and knowledge were collected to develop insights into the actions the social work practice can take to improve children's adjustment to a parental loss.

Definitions

To better understand the research study, the following concepts were defined:

Childhood bereavement: Refers to the death of an attachment figure or someone of importance in their life. This death can significantly disrupt a child's life and lead to possible complications (Burns et al., 2020).

Childhood trauma: Refers to an event that affects children as an emotional response to a tragic event that may affect a person emotionally, physically, or mentally (Maynard et al., 2019).

Parental death: A term used for the death of a father, mother, or another person in this role (Wray et al., 2022).

School social worker: A member of an interdisciplinary team who assists in providing leadership in forming school discipline policies, mental health interventions, and crisis management (NASW, 2021).

Nature of the Study

This study used a generic qualitative approach to identify the strategies social workers use to support children who experience a parental loss through death. Researchers use the qualitative method to understand how people interpret, construct, or make the best from their world and their experiences (Liu, 2016). Social workers' experiences and knowledge were collected to develop insights into the actions the social work practice can take to improve children's adjustment to a parental loss. Sixty-one percent of Virginia adults have experienced at least one adverse childhood experience before the age of 18, including all types of abuse, neglect, and other potentially traumatic experiences (OMNI Institute, 2020). The generic qualitative research design assisted me in identifying strategies school social workers use when supporting children following a parental death.

The data collection method in this study was semistructured interviews. Semistructured interviews in qualitative research allow flexibility and allow the researcher to approach their questions from different perspectives (Ruslin et al., 2022). The sample consisted of 10 school social workers in Virginia who were currently employed in this role, providing interventions to help them cope with grieving challenges. The inclusion criteria were current school social workers in the state of Virginia, with an active license to practice. Using the specified criteria for this study

allowed school social workers to discuss how they have or have not been able to support children with grief and loss. Also, data from current literature were used to explain the challenges and gaps in school resources involving social workers. With this study, I hope that school social workers can enhance their clinical skills to identify appropriate strategies for children who experience the death of a loved one.

Significance of the Study

The study involved an exploration of school social workers in Virginia experiences to identify effective strategies to use with children following a parental death. The findings from the study may inform social workers of strategies to improve, enhance, and contribute to the well-being of children who experienced a parental death. The findings of this study could be used to inform practitioners on various systemic levels of care for traumatized children. The results might be used to persuade lawmakers to create laws supporting children's mental health support, give social workers resources for dealing with children's loss and grieving, and aid educators in putting policies that support pupils returning to school after a parent's passing. These findings may provide insight leading to increased education and training for social workers. School social workers can use the results of this study to address the needs of children following a parental death.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The theories that grounded this study were Kubler-Ross's grief theory and ecological systems theory. Kubler-Ross's theory, in general, explains how individuals are affected by personal losses (Kubler, 1969). Kubler-Ross and Kessler (2009) further

explored grief theory by showing how a person becomes impacted after the death of a

loved one. According to Kubler-Ross (1969), grief theory comprises of five stages:

denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Grief theory has been used in the

social work practice more frequently with children because it addresses ways of

understanding the grief process (Bergman et al., 2017). The grief theory shows that

people experience emotional changes when grieving (Stylianou & Zembylas, 2018).

Kubler-Ross et al. (2005) suggested that for healthy grief, people should become

vulnerable.

Importantly, there are differences between children's perceived understanding of

grief and their actual grief responses. Worden (1996) established that there are four

aspects of mourning among children experiencing parental loss: accepting the reality of

loss, experiencing the pain or emotional aspects of loss, adjusting to an environment from

which the deceased is missing, and relocating the person within one's life and finding

ways to memorialize the person. Walsh (2019) noted that children's adjustment following

a major stressful event, such as a parental death, is influenced by other events following

the death. Bronfenbrenner defined ecological systems as systems in which the individual

belongs, the interactions between those systems, and their impact on development (as

cited in Campbell & Khin, 2020).

Ecological systems theory provided an applicable framework for understanding

children's grief responses, the assumptions of school social workers on bereaved

children, and the benefits and challenges with implementation of strategies. Ecological

systems theory can be used to understand the relationship between grief and the role of

school social workers. The influential factors include a child's experiences, protective resources, and the interactions between the child's experiences and resources (Anupama et al., 2017; Walsh, 2019). Grief consists of a child being able to explore their past and present needs and to recognize the emotional support provided to them. This study can inform school social workers of strategies to help children cope with grief.

Values and Ethics

The primary intention of the NASW Code of Ethics is to guide the social work practice and ensure social workers utilize effective strategies to assist children who experienced a parental loss through death. Social workers have the responsibility of following both personal and professional ethical guidelines. The NASW (2021) provided ethical principles and standards for practicing social workers to follow. Standards 1.02, 1.04, and 1.05 may be used to advocate on behalf of those unable to do so themselves, which often is the case for children. The importance of human relationships is a specific component of social work values and ethics, and social workers on promoting social change. This qualitative research study addressed the importance of human relationships by identifying strategies to help children cope with parental death. These standards allow the patient the right to self-determination and require social workers to practice competency within their practice (NASW, 2021). Social workers improve their skills and knowledge to support children, families, and community by addressing their needs.

The NASW Code of Ethics guide school social workers in this area by obliging social workers to advocate for marginalized groups. Understanding how relationships directly impact social work is necessary (Kennedy, 2018). Furthermore, due to the gaps in

literature on this topic, social workers must remain aware of their competence to remain informed of evidence-based practices related to strategies. School social workers may use this information obtained in this study to increase their knowledge and skills in both advocacy and clinical practice.

Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

The aim of this section is to highlight the relevant professional and academic literature related to the strategies school social workers use to assist children with grieving the death of a loved one. To locate literature for this review, the following databases were searched and accessed through the Walden University Library: PsycINFO, Social Work Abstracts, and SocINDEX with full text. The following key terms were used to search the databases: *social workers, school social workers, children, youth, early childhood, parental death, grief, disenfranchised grief, support,* and *adjustment.* The search parameters included full-text, peer scholarly journals published in the last 5 years. Furthermore, I conducted an extensive manual search of several academic journals that focus on bereavement, parental death, and children's grief. Additional information regarding statistics and data included information from the NASW website and Virginia Department of Education website. I used these websites to learn more information about school social workers and parental death. The literature review provides a foundation of knowledge from which to conceptualize the research topic.

Parental Death

Parental death, particularly the death of a mother, father, or caregiver, may increase risks for long term emotional and mental health issues. Previous research has investigated the impact of parental death upon individuals in adolescence or early adulthood. Fu (2019) conducted a qualitative study to estimate the impact of early parental death on severe cognitive impairment among Chinese oldest-old (aged 80 and older). Fu used the Chinese Longitudinal Healthy Longevity Survey to evaluate 10,953 respondents aged 80 to 105 years. The results of the study suggested that experiencing the death of a mother at or before age 16 increases the risk of severe cognitive impairment in older men, but not women. Findings of earlier studies have generally agreed that children could benefit from support to help them cope with their parental death. Children experience grief and loss in many ways. A recent study showed that the rates of parental deaths in childhood have increased since COVID-19 (Fitzgerald et al., 2021). Parental death has significantly been researched for years; however, despite this existing research, the phenomenon continues to remain prevalent.

During the pandemic, the world was impacted by emotional and physical trauma. Researchers have been exploring the long-term consequences of COVID-19 on children and their families (Fitzgerald et al., 2021). Kidman et al. (2021) suggested that as of February 2021, 37,300 children aged 0 to 17 lost at least one parent to COVID-19. An indication of the importance of the study is based on Ener and Ray's (2018) findings that approximately 4% of children may experience the death of a primary caregiver before the age of 18. Interest has been generated in exploring how children are impacted by parental

death. Several studies have taken the position of how children are impacted in adolescence or early adulthood, as they learn to balance development and grief. Previous research findings have shown an estimated 2.2 million people have experienced the death of one or both parents before age 18 (Greene & McGovern, 2017). However, determining effective strategies for children can be subjective (Williams et al., 2021). Research on the school social worker's role in identifying effective coping strategies for parental death is limited.

The provided statistics do not provide a representation of children who experienced parental loss of a biological parent because primary caregivers may include grandparents, aunts, uncles, and other relatives. Most literature has suggested that there is some relationship between parental death and development. Childhood bereavement because of parental death is a significant event a child can experience affecting their emotional and social development. Socioeconomic disadvantages may contribute to outcomes such as school problems that occur affecting a child's ability to succeed (Feigelman et al., 2017). Social workers' mission includes advocacy for vulnerable populations and providing competent services (NASW, 2017). Several studies have pointed out how attachments and bonds could impact children's response to grief.

Researchers have raised questions about children's emotional responses to grief based on their attachment to the deceased parent. During early childhood, children are dependent on the bonds with the adults in their lives. These attachments are initially formed at birth and grow throughout development. There are several reasons for inquiring into attachments and their contribution to children's psychological development. As

studies have shown, children's ecological systems may impact their grief process. Children raised in loving and nurturing environments are more attached to the adults in their lives (Hoeg et al., 2018). Parents are not only caretakers, but also essential elements in the development of their child's social, emotional, physical, and cognitive well-being (Hiyoshi et al., 2021). Parental death during childhood is associated with increased risks of mental health disorders in adulthood (Berg et al., 2016). Children obtain security from the adults who love and care for them, and parental loss can make them feel afraid or vulnerable (Guild et al., 2017).

As noted previously, the lack of care for individuals following the death of a loved one impacts their adjustment and overall well-being (Gijzen et al., 2016). There is a need to address the lack of support provided to bereaved children as an effort to help social work practice increase the accessibility of its resources. Additionally, attention should be directed to early interventions to address ways for individuals to positively adjust to the sudden death of a parent (Nilsson & Anagame-Lindberg, 2016). The study revealed accessible resources to support children following the loss of a primary caregiver. One of the central questions of the current studies is identifying how school social workers help children cope with their loss.

With few exceptions, there is limited extant research on strategies to support children with positively adjusting to grief and loss. It is crucial to gain insight into the psychological impact that parental death has on children because death is an inevitable phenomenon that impacts how surviving individuals move forward in life. The experience of death is universal and synonymous with trauma (Dye, 2018).

Grief Responses to Parental Death

The death of a loved one represents one of the most distressing events in a person's life. To many, death is a natural part of life. Due to its perceived normalcy, its emotional impact may be overlooked. However, this aspect of grief as it relates to bereaved children speaks volumes. Grief may refer to the reaction to a loss and is an overwhelming emotion because there is no specific way of how a person responds to grief, as seen in Dye's (2018) research study. More attention is being devoted to the increased rates of childhood bereavement since COVID-19 (Alvis et al., 2022) as sudden deaths increased for most Americans. However, while studies have continued to identify the psychological impact of COVID-19, researchers have relatively agreed that a parental death shifts the family dynamic. For instance, Kidman et al. (2021) conducted a quantitative study to estimate the expected number of affected children for each COVID-death. The researchers used kinship networks of White and Black individuals in the United States, and bereavement multipliers were used for calculations. Based on the results, Kidman et al. concluded that brief evidenced-based interventions could help prevent the development of severe psychological problems in children. Therefore, it is suggested for health-care professionals to be involved in grief treatment to help young people with grief psychoeducation, building emotion identification and regulation skills, cognitive coping, and restructuring, caregivers grief support, and future planning (Kentor & Kaplow, 2020). Hoeg et al. (2018) also suggested that this is true as they focused on the association between parental loss before age 18 and the formation of marriage and cohabitation relationships in adulthood. The researchers of this study used data from

national registries to follow children born in Denmark between 1970 and 1995; Poisson regression models were used to assess rate ratios by gender for relationship formation and separation according to early parental loss (Hoeg et al., 2018). The results indicated early parental loss and its relationship to maladaptive coping, and the researchers found that bereaved adults reported more substance use, behavioral disengagement, and emotional eating than nonbereaved adults. Their hypothesis was that early loss may negatively impact the development of adulthood coping.

It is important to consider how the family systems becomes disrupted following a parental death. Ferow (2019) conducted a qualitative study to examine caregivers, teachers, clinicians, and other helping professionals' role in helping a child through grief. The researchers found a connection between grief and developmental stage, as research has suggested that more severe psychological difficulties are experienced by children who lose a parent before age 3. When death occurs, the family system becomes disrupted, and the surviving children learn how to adjust to their new roles within the family dynamic. There is a growing body of evidence that shows that everyone grieves differently. Grief involves coping with loss. Whether a child experiences grief as a result of loss from parental death, the child needs support. Ferow found that to help children cope with their loss, it is critical for parents, teachers, pastors and other influential adults to recognize the risk factors associated with complicated or unresolved grief. Without adequate care, bereaved children may experience an impact to their adjustment and long-term well-being (Gijzen et al., 2016). Early interventions are needed to address the sudden death of a parent (Nilsson & Anagame-Lindberg, 2016). The involvement of

extended family, school, church, or other supports as a collaborative approach helps a child to comprehend imminent changes (Russell, 2017). Chen and Panebianco (2018) conducted a systematic review of the literature to investigate the effects of interventions for children ages 3 to 5 who experience the death of a family member. Seventeen studies that met the inclusion criteria for the purpose of the review were used. Most of the selected studies involved a small sample, and the majority of the sample mixed preschool children with other children in the sample. Based on the systematic review, Chen and Panbianco found that schools are a place of security for grieving children to explore their emotions without the influence of their family.

Ecological Systems and Grief

The first part of the literature review focused on parental death and grief responses; this section focuses on how systems impact the grief process and how school social workers can offer additional support. While children value their parents, they may seek support from the system in which they interact with the most. Although grief has no timeline, extended grief may have adverse effects on younger children. Dye (2018) examined the impact of trauma exposure: neurologically, physiologically, and psychologically. The outcome of the study advanced the notion that children are usually at the risk of developing psychological difficulties that could become mental health disorders due to the lack of coping skills. In support of this hypothesis, Ferow (2019) emphasized that it is critical that parents, teachers, religious leaders, and other influential leaders understand the risks of complicated grief. The literature has revealed a diversity of data on grief support, without specification to children following a parental death.

Interventions and techniques should be tailored to help children with increasing their communication and learning to express their feelings.

Children encounter disenfranchised grief, which refers to grief that goes unacknowledged by society (Lynes & Sitoe, 2019). This level of grief is experienced when individuals do not receive adequate support to grieve in a healthy manner. When experiencing the loss of a loved one, everyone is not afforded the same opportunity to grieve without feeling emotionally unattached. Disenfranchised grief occurs when a griever's relationship is not recognized as significant, thus becoming isolated as their honoring style may be socially unacceptable (Lynes & Sitoe, 2019). Coping at a time of loss may seem impossible for the griever because of fear of the unknown (Dye, 2018). Therefore, children should receive the necessary support to help them rather than having to grieve alone.

Children also experience griever exclusion when their capacity to grieve is overlooked by others (Mitchell, 2018). Due to children's age and developmental stage, they are perceived as too young to understand loss. Chen and Panebianco (2018) supported this argument placing emphasis on how preschool children lack a full understanding of death. Schwartz et al. (2018) conducted a qualitative study on 546 emerging adults between ages 18 and 24 who lost a loved one at any point during their life. The participants were divided into three groups: recent loss, past loss, or combination. Based on Schwartz et al.'s research, providing bereaved families with psychoeducational support could provide an understanding of children's and adults grief journey. The misconception of griever exclusion is problematic because it fails to

recognize how children are affected when their grief is not acknowledged. The stages of grief are useful for understanding the difference between normal and complicated grief reactions, especially in the context of children. There is no timeframe for a person to grieve (Griese et al., 2018). Grief that is not properly addressed increases psychological risks (Greene & McGovern, 2017).

Scholars have attempted to identify the precipitating ideas that lead to children feeling valued and supported through their grief process. Implicit attitudes and biases may influence school social workers implemented strategies or interventions (Marcucci, 2020). Ecological systems theory provides a framework for understanding the correlation between people and the environment A child's ecosystem includes their parents, extended family, school, church, religious leaders, and community affiliations; each system contributes to a child's growth and ability to function in society (Guy-Evans, 2020). Crosby (2015) examined emerging trauma informed responses to students; the responses were examined through the ecological perspective lens. Crosby found that individuals are not only influenced by biological and psychological characteristics, but also their family system, school, community, and the larger society around them. Chen and Panebianco (2018) posited that family environment postdeath is a predictor of bereaved children's behaviors and symptoms. When grief occurs, children could benefit from their support system because they may not be able to understand grief and loss or express their emotions in a healthy manner. Bereaved children are at greater risks for developing posttraumatic stress or maladaptive reactions (Schwartz et al., 2018). Hence, examining individuals' ecosystems may assist the social work practice with identifying strategies

and addressing potential problems that may complicate a child's ability to respond to their trauma.

In Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, child development is viewed as a complex system of relationships affected by multiple levels in their surrounding environment, including family, school, cultural views, and laws (as cited in Guy-Evans, 2020). Bronfenbrenner's perspectives share views similar to the works of Bandura's social learning theory and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory in which the environment contributes to the child's development (Yang & Park, 2017). A child's interactions within their environment should be a factor in the lens of child's development. Bronfenbrenner (1979) divided a person's environment into five systems: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. The systems are structured by their importance for a child's development. The microsystem is the most influential in a child's development from the housing environment to the school environment (Campos-Gil et al., 2018). The microsystem also contributes to how a child copes with stress and other emotions. The systems are interrelated because each system influences the child's relationships in other systems (Guys-Evans, 2020).

Bronfenbrenner's theory is relevant today. However, theorists have introduced ecological systems with modern developments. Kelly and Coughlan (2019) linked Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory and constructivist ground theory analysis to develop a framework for youth mental health recovery. Their theory suggests ecological systems such as peers, school, and family help with mental health development. The loss of a parent in the early stages of life has greater risks of developing depressive symptoms in

adolescence (Tafa et al., 2018). Regarding the surviving parent, their personal emotional struggles may impose as less sensitive and supportive to grief-related emotions in their children. The systems within a child's environment reveal how their emotional responses are influenced by those around them (Guys-Evans, 2020). School social workers practice in ecological systems and are equipped to provide interventions to support people from all walks of life through their grief.

Previous studies have examined how children are impacted by parental death without the perspectives of school social workers. School social workers serve individuals, groups, and communities by helping them address problems they face in their everyday lives. According to the NASW (2021), the mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic needs of all people. Social workers are responsible for assessing needs, formulating a treatment plan, connecting clients to resources, and serving as an advocate. School social workers specialize in the psychosocial functioning of students. With the application of techniques and interventions, social workers can assist with understanding the loss of a loved one, communicating about the loss impact on individual's well-being, and identifying grief coping mechanisms. NASW (2021) discussed the importance of social workers practicing within their scope of practice by being aware of the respect for human rights and professional conduct. School social workers should understand their own cultural values, beliefs, and biases to ensure the NASW ethical standards are applied to clients and families dealing with grief.

Researchers continue to explore how after a death, a family may experience challenges, transitions, and additional losses which may complicate their grief (Perry et al., 2018). As Perry et al. (2018) concluded from their qualitative analysis of grief reactions, the role of the school social worker is to recognize these risks and help the family to limit the impact of additional stressors. Throughout the grief process, rituals can be used to help the family express their feelings. Wardecker et al. (2017) conducted a qualitative cross-sectional study of 39 parentally bereaved children and their caregivers, they investigated the frequency of caregivers' use of positive emotion words. The results of their study suggested following the death of a family member, mourners' experiences of grief are influenced by their support systems. Thus, a school social worker should use a systems approach to integrate how one's environment impacts their emotional responses to grief. The process of grief can be a complex process, which varies from person to person (Lynes & Sitoe, 2019). While school social workers are trained mental health professionals who can assist with mental health concerns this study brought to light different perspectives on how to support children following a parental death. Patak-Pietrafesa et al. (2019) also found similar responses from school social workers claiming they attend summer professional development event to explore current perceptions of evidenced based practices, their experiences finding evidenced based practices online, and preferences of formatting resources. These findings could increase school social workers skills in applying grief-loss techniques and interventions, that could guide people through the stages of grief to minimize risk factors.

The Relationship Between Trauma and Grief

When experiencing death, it is important for individuals to learn to cope with and manage their grief in a healthy manner. Grieving is a personal journey that varies for each person. Koblenz (2016) facilitated a qualitative study of 19 adults who experienced a loss during childhood, they were interviewed to assess what has been helpful and harmful in coping through the years following the death. They found that children may experience feelings of anger, sadness, or loneliness as a result of trauma. Death of a parent in childhood is a traumatic experience and could lead to lifelong trauma (Bergman, 2017). The death of a parent may affect the performance of a child in school. Demuth et al. (2020) conducted a study on school personnel exploring their experiences and opinions regarding approaches to addressing the needs of bereaved students in the classroom. The study found 93% of the staff reported interacting with bereaved students and 72% expressed interest in a templated bereavement plan with education and resources for school personnel along with suggested accommodations for students (Demuth et al., 2020). These strategies included providing emotional support, making classroom accommodations, collaborating with the family/community, and referring the student for counseling. School social workers can play a vital role in helping bereaved children to process their grief. This is a big step for academic success because such a plan would allow school social workers to provide guidance to grieving students both emotionally and academically. Trauma arising from losing a parent has dire psychological effects on grieving children.

Several studies have shown how children who experienced complex have difficulty managing their behaviors and emotions. Dye (2018) mentioned how exposure to trauma during childhood contributes to long-term consequences linked to childhood and adulthood psychopathology. Similarly, Revet et al. (2021) conducted a longitudinal cohort between April 2016 and April 2020, the sample included 34 parentally bereaved children and adolescents from 24 families, who consulted with their surviving parent at Toulouse University Paedetrics Hospital to participate in support groups were enrolled in the study. The study found children and adolescents who experienced losing a loved one had grief responses that later developed into mental health diagnoses including attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), depression, and anxiety. Although there are numerous interventions for bereaved children and adolescents there is little evidence to support them (Revet et al., 2021). Children struggle to cope with trauma due to their lack of cognitive, emotional, and social competencies; these barriers could be a result of developmental delays, environmental issues, or poor access to resources (Nilsson & Angame-Lindberg, 2016). However, researchers address how social workers and mental health professionals play a collaborative role with clinically trained providers in minimizing the depression epidemic that occurs because of trauma (Brown et al., 2017). Human service professionals are prevalent in improving the wellbeing of children and families; and they can implement strategies to support grieving clients as they navigate their loss and learn to reframe their attachments (Blueford & Adams, 2019). The use of community resources could lead to the grieving families receiving adequate support.

Death is a common traumatic event experienced in childhood. Research shows between the ages of 5 and 12, children who lose a parent frequently face difficulties with attachment because these events change how they see themselves and the world, as well as how they view other people (Dye, 2018). In comparison, Flahault et al. (2018) conducted a qualitative study that explored bereaved children's experience, non-directive interviews were completed with 14 children (eight boys, six girls, and a mean age of 8.5). It noted children's peers play a vital role in their development. Regarding social work practice, the absence of perspectives from school social workers limits engagement for identifying strategies to support children (Stroebe et al., 2017). Although school social workers could provide emotional support in school settings, children and adolescents depend on their peers for support. Flahault et al. found social support of same-age peers has been positively correlated with better adjustment among bereaved children. While some studies support this (Chen & Panebianco, 2018), the effectiveness of social support depends on various factors, peer support groups continue for grief has become popular, low-cost, and efficient way to address unmet social needs (Robinson & Pond, 2019). This interesting finding indicates children and adolescents may be willing to receive adequate support to navigate grief and loss.

Since children have diverse needs and respond to grief differently, Stylianou and Zembylas (2018) reviewed 64 empirical articles from 6 databases and categorized them into four categories: medical, belongingness, psychological, and self-actualization needs. Based on their review, they found that client centered techniques would help guide children through the challenges because such interventions have a constructive impact on

children's understanding of grief and grieving. By identifying practical interventions tailored to parental loss, school social workers may be able to enhance their tools to improve roles within the family dynamic. Berg et al. (2016) conducted a quantitative study to investigate the associations between parental death from natural and external (suicides, accidents, or homicides) causes before 18 years of age. A national cohort born in Sweden during 1973-1982 was followed regarding hospital admissions and outpatient care for depression during 2006-2013. The study outcome found that customized interventions for addressing grief after parental loss may decrease children's risks of developing future mental health complications. Lewis et al. (2017) used a schoolwide multitiered systems of support to address children's social and emotional behaviors established in 20,000 schools across the United States and 19 countries. Through research, Lewis et al. support this by acknowledging how behavioral strategies are designed to influence children and adolescents for academic success. Nilsson and Angame-Lindberg (2016) conducted a qualitative study that interviewed 14 adolescents and 15 parents, to identify what children and the surviving parent perceived to be helpful or unhelpful in terms of the interventions they received when a parent died suddenly. It was concluded interventions related to feeling confident and secure may assist children overcome grief over parental death effectively.

An additional factor is the implementation of strategies by school social workers to provide positive support for bereaved children academic success. Bent-Goodley (2019) examined in a qualitative analysis how social workers should be trauma-informed to support trauma survivors. The findings suggest trauma-informed social workers could use

proactive strategies to support individuals throughout their grief recovery. The most important tasks of school social workers are to identify strategies such as attachment-based therapy to support children who experience parental loss by exploring grief (Blueford & Adams, 2019). This perspective could contribute to promoting positive changes to improve the level of support towards bereaved children could have long-term benefits. Levenson (2017) conducted a qualitative study through a sample of social workers to assess how trauma-informed practice incorporates the core principles of safety, trust, collaboration, choice, and empowerment. Based on findings, they concluded by using respect, compassion, and self-determination to address trauma in the school setting, school social workers can improve the relationship between bereaved students and administrators (Kentor & Kaplow, 2020). These strategies may help children normalize grief experiences, express grief and loss, and develop coping skills (Chen & Panebianco, 2018). With trauma becoming a common experience for individuals, school social workers can advocate for improvements of techniques and interventions to address emerging issues when working with children after their parental death.

Gaps in Literature

After a review of the literature, I identified a gap regarding my topic on how school social workers in Virginia use interventions to help children after the death of a parent. In fact, the research is sparse regarding school social workers in Virginia experience of supporting children through the grief process. Statistics show in Virginia, there has been an increase in economically disadvantaged children with mental health needs. Part of that issue, I believe, is that all schools do not employ school social

workers; and the available school social workers rotate between schools in their district. Therefore, school social workers have limited availability at their assigned schools. There has been little investigation of school social workers in Virginia role with supporting children through grief. Within the context of mental health advocacy, the Virginia Board of Education has recommended an increase in obtaining funding to the General Assembly, due to the inadequate staffing of one full-time school social worker to 1,000 students (Egerton et al., 2018).

Moreover, as indicated in the literature review, the role of school social workers in supporting students with grief is not clearly defined. In educational settings, school counselors also provide mental health services to students; therefore, interventions used in the school settings are not tailored towards the social work practice. This limitation contributes to the gap of previous studies exploring interventions used by school social workers with bereaved children.

My study helped fill the gap by exploring the strategies used by school social workers in Virginia to support children after a parental death. Exploring in-depth knowledge via semi-structured interviews with school social workers in Virginia may not reveal only strategies but can contribute to the research leading to social change. Therefore, this study aims to explore school social workers in experiences with children following parental death. Social workers' insight will help bridge the information concerning the potential for exposure to trauma from parental death and its psychological effects on children in Virginia. Most studies related to parental death focused on the

children and adolescence population (Anupama et al., 2017; Berg et al., 2016; Brown, 2017; Feigelman et al., 2017; Kirsch et al., 2018).

Although school social workers are vital in school systems, school counselors contribute to improving student's emotional well-being as well. The limited information hinders social workers' ability to improve the quality of care and support provided to children and adolescents (Lynes & Sitoe, 2019). The remaining parent's coping mechanisms and support system are critical in minimizing distress for the child, as the parent's functioning contributes to children's emotions throughout the grieving process (Cipriano & Cipriano, 2019). The gaps in the literature are not specific to children in geographical locations for ages 6-17. By addressing these gaps, school social workers in Virginia can utilize the identified strategies to help children cope after experiencing a parental loss through death. Also, determining what interventions and solutions are available to bridge the gaps and address future clinical needs to improve the overall well-being of bereaved children. Although, these topics have been explored in previous research, they remain prevalent and create a social issue. Additionally, research of school social workers roles and strategies following a parental death remains scarce.

Summary

School social workers play a critical role in helping children through their grief process. Parental death is an ongoing life adjustment that continues to affect children and their developmental growth. There has been minimal research revealing school social workers in Virginia attitudes, beliefs, and opinions regarding bereaved children in

Virginia experience of parental death. A systems perspective is relevant to show how various systems work and contribute to children's responses to grief and loss.

School social workers' competence and skills may help children positively adjust to the grief process. The exploration of school social workers' in Virginia professional experiences may enhance the understanding of effective strategies to use with children following a parental death. The findings from the study may inform the social work practice on the ways to improve, enhance, and contribute to the wellbeing of children with grief and loss. Intervention strategies may help children learn skills to maintain emotional and social support throughout the grief process. Ultimately, results from the study can benefit bereaved children by encouraging school social workers to use culturally appropriate models of care. These considerations can further assist social workers with providing an individualistic approach to each client, which has the potential to improve the quality of life. In Section 2, I present the research design for this study and address the use of qualitative research to include methodology, data collection, data analysis, and ethical procedures.

Section 2: Research Design and Data Collection

The purpose of this project was to explore school social workers in Virginia strategies when working with bereaved children following a parental death. The problem of the study was the lack of identified strategies for social workers to use when responding to children who are experiencing grief and loss because of a parental death.

Children who experienced a parental death are more likely to face emotional, psychological, and developmental problems than their peers who have not lost a parent (Greene & McGovern, 2017). The NASW (2021) emphasized that child welfare social workers have a role to protect children from harm; they should provide children with a safe and loving environment.

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to identify strategies social workers may employ to improve, enhance, and contribute to the well-being of children in Virginia who experienced parental death. A parent's absence may have disruptive effects on a children's development. Bergman et al. (2017) stated that there is a need for brief interventions to prevent children from developing more severe problems after the loss of a parent, such as traumatic grief and mental health problems. Children positively adjust to their loss when strategies to help them cope are prioritized (Berg et al., 2016). The following RQs guided the study:

RQ1: What are the experiences of school social workers' in Virginia working with bereaved children?

RQ2: What challenges do school social workers in Virginia face when helping children through the grief process?

RQ3: What specific strategies have school social workers in Virginia used to help children after a parental death?

Research Design

The research design for this project was a generic qualitative approach using semistructured interviews of school social workers in Virginia. The follow-up with individual contacts using the same questions allowed participants to further elaborate on the questions, if needed. Participating school social workers were asked to offer their understanding of the needed support for bereaved children, relay relevant professional values and ethics, and discuss strategies they implement within their practice. To identify the strategies school social workers in Virginia use while working with children and adolescents following a parental death, three RQs were developed. The RQs helped to achieve the purpose of the study, which was to identify strategies school social workers use to help children grieve. Specifically, the RQs addressed potential effects and practice recommendations for social workers servicing children and adolescents. In this study, parental death or parental loss were used interchangeably to refer to a child or adolescent's loss of a parent through death. In the same context, the child or adolescent who experienced the death were referenced as a bereaved child. A bereaved child is categorized when one parent dies not both.

A qualitative approach allowed for an exploration of personal themes to create strategies to best help children following parental death. The specific methodology involved interviews conducted with 10 school social workers in Virginia. The interviews were limited to the number of social workers within the identified practice area who were

willing to participate voluntarily. I anticipated that social workers participating in the interviews would offer insight into specific culturally appropriate interventions used to support children experiencing parental death.

Methodology

Prior to recruitment and data collection, I waited for the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. I conducted a qualitative research study to identify strategies used by school social workers in Virginia to support students following a parental death. Purposive sampling was used to recruit the targeted population. In qualitive research, an appropriate sample size is determined through data saturation, which is the point the researcher continues to receive interviews until no new information emerges from the collected data (Ellis, 2020). The interviews were approximately 30-45 minutes in length and conducted virtually via Zoom. Participants were provided a consent form to be recorded with audio or video recording devices.

Participants

Research has shown that there are not guidelines regarding establishing an adequate sample size. The literature has suggested that the sample size is determined by multiple factors, including research topic, RQs, theoretical framework, methods, and population's structure to help determine an appropriate sample size (Mocanasu, 2020). I collected data for the study through interviews. The sample consisted of 10 school social workers in Virginia who had experience with children and adolescents, providing interventions to help them cope with grieving challenges. To be eligible for participation, school social workers had to be master-level clinicians (with or without licensure). The

selected sample size was appropriate in obtaining responses to the RQs in a timely manner. Once recruited, interested participants were provided with information on the purpose of the project and the expectations of participants. They were also provided with informed consent materials, confidentiality, and other relevant resources to understand the study before deciding whether to participate. Lastly, participants received a letter of consent reviewing the benefits of their participation and any prospective risks anticipated with their involvement.

Participants were recruited through social media and professional organizations. A recruitment flyer was posted on social media platforms (i.e. Facebook and LinkedIn) for school social workers in the state of Virginia. Taking part in this study was completely voluntary. Semistructured interviews were used to encourage collaborative dialogue, which could provide insight into the social relevant issues related to culture, grief, and bereavement. Once participants were identified, an email was sent to inform them about participation procedures, informed consent, and confidentiality. Participants were able to stop or drop out at any time. They were also able to decline to respond to any question they did not wish to answer. There were no right or wrong answers to the interview questions asked. Participants' responses are completely anonymous. The raw data – spreadsheets, results, and so forth -- are stored on a USB flash drive and a hard-drive, and physical handouts are stored in a locked file cabinet. After 5 years, data will be destroyed by burning or pulverizing.

Instrumentation

Data were collected by interviewing participants. Semistructured interviews with open-ended questions were used to identify strategies social workers used to support children experiencing parental loss. To ensure the time of the participant was respected and maintained, the interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. After the semistructured interviews, member checking was completed for additional information. Prior to the interview, participants were verbally reminded of the participation procedures, informed consent, and confidentiality practices.

The data collection was through Zoom to allow participants the flexibility to participate in the project from a convenient location. As the researcher, I reserved a space of a private meeting area to ensure privacy and that nobody could hear the interview. Participants verified that no other persons were present in their room and were asked to keep their room door closed to respect confidentiality. Participants agreed to the privacy rules before the study began. Also, virtual interviews provided an opportunity to safely secure and record sessions during data collection. Open-ended questions were asked to identify strategies used to help children deal with their parental death. Participants provided information on their perceived experience while working with clients from diverse backgrounds. Dependability was established by providing a detailed description of the research methods, allowing it to be repeated step by step if applicable. Lastly, following interviews, I made notes of personal biases or insights that arose to maintain trustworthiness.

Data Analysis

I completed individual interviews with the participants. I designed the interview questions for the purpose of answering the RQs (see Appendix). Once the interviews were completed, I began to analyze the data using thematic analysis through hand coding. I used the transcription feature on Zoom to help with accuracy. Next, I reviewed the audio-recorded interviews and transcripts to determine which words or phrases were prevalent.

Trustworthiness and Components

The data collection consisted of entries from the transcribed recordings of informed participants in virtual interviews. Researchers have used qualitative criteria to evaluate aspects of validity in data analysis. Qualitative researchers' goal of trustworthiness is for readers to interpret their written work and feel confident in what the researcher has reported (Stahl & King, 2020). Lincoln and Guba (1985) developed the most widely used criteria for evaluating qualitative content analysis. Lincoln and Guba redefined the concept of trustworthiness by introducing credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability.

The research findings should be trustworthy as possible. Qualitative researchers used contact analysis to analyze answers to open-ended questions (Stahl & King, 2020). This helped to develop a better description of trustworthiness in this study. One method of promoting credibility is through various processes of triangulation. Triangulation reflects using several sources to establish identifiable patterns. Theory triangulation in qualitative research refers to the researcher using different theoretical frameworks instead

of approaching the RQ from one theoretical perspective (Noble & Heale, 2019). In this study, Kubler-Ross's grief theory and the ecological systems theory to guide the study were utilized. Another way to strengthen trustworthiness is dependability, where the researcher will take action to build trust by providing records that provide raw data. The obtained data were prepared and organized with the use of the audio transcript via Zoom. Themes were identified in each of the interviews through coding.

Ethical Procedures

I followed the IRB guidelines, ethics, and the NASW values because there are consequences to a researcher performing unethically. Safety precautions were employed to ensure ethical treatment of the study participants. Before any study data were collected, approval from Walden University's IRB was obtained (IRB #11-22-23-0735844). Once approval was provided, prospective participants were solicited. All data were stored in an electronic form on my personal password-protected computer. Participants were given an informed consent form detailing the risks and discomforts, benefits, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. The informed consent forms were submitted prior to the start of the study. Participant identifiers information was protected and removed from the study.

All documentation remained confidential to protect the rights of the participants. No identifying information will be shared with other participants or individuals outside of the study. Personal identified information was maintained in a password protected file and stored on a hard drive. Pseudonyms replaced participant names, agencies, and any other identifying information to ensure confidentiality. Upon project completion,

information will be retained for the minimum required 5 years in an encrypted document and then shredded or burned. Additionally, hard copies of the study are safely locked in my personal file cabinet in the office. Paper records will be destroyed through a local city's documenting shredding service, where items are locked in a secure location and shredded by an on-site private contractor. Digital records will be discarded by burning.

Summary

The purpose of the study was to identify strategies school social workers in Virginia use to improve, enhance, and contribute to the well-being of children in Virginia who experienced parental death. This study relied on in-depth semistructured interviews to collect data regarding social worker experiences with children and adolescents after a parental death. Following IRB approval, I recruited school social workers in Virginia with the required education and experience. The study may enhance participants' understanding of cultural barriers and how social workers can implement various interventions when working with clients from diverse backgrounds. The study can inform school social workers of strategies to support children following a parental death to minimize physiological and psychological risk factors. The identified strategies may help children normalize grief experiences, express grief and loss, and develop coping skills (Chen & Panebianco, 2018). Ultimately, focusing on such issues may benefit the bereaved child by encouraging social workers to practice culturally appropriate models of care. Section 3 will present and discuss the findings.

Section 3: Presentation of the Findings

I conducted this basic qualitative study to identify the experiences of school social workers in Virginia and challenges addressing childhood bereavement following the death of a parent and to identify strategies school social workers in Virginia employ to improve, enhance, and contribute to the well-being of children who experienced parental death. The following questions guided this study:

RQ1: What are the experiences of school social workers in Virginia working with bereaved children?

RQ2: What challenges do school social workers in Virginia face when helping children through the grief process?

RQ3: What specific strategies have school social workers in Virginia used to help children after a parental death?

In this section, I outline the qualitative method and procedures used to gather information to better understand the lived experiences of school social workers. This section describes data analysis and the findings of the research concluded with a summarization.

Data Analysis Techniques

After obtaining the IRB approval I recruited 10 participants who completed a one-on-one interview via Zoom. The recruiting process began on November 27, 2023, and ended on December 23, 2023, when all 10 of the interviews were completed. The interviews covered school social workers' experiences with grief and loss. There was a total of 12 questions asked of all the participants. One-one-one interviews were chosen in

preference to focus group interviews to maximize participation as school social workers have busy schedules due to their multiroles in the school. As a result, it can be challenging to bring groups of school social workers together. The semistructured interviews involved several open-ended questions around specific topic areas. This technique gave an opportunity to allow a range of detailed and personalized responses.

The flyer advertised the research study (i.e., purpose, qualifications to participate, and the name of the study) and directed those with interest in the study and who met the qualifications to email me at my Walden University email address. The participants who reached out about the study were able to ask questions before the consent form was emailed for review. After reviewing the consent form, participants were required to respond "I consent" to move forward with scheduling their interview. The response "I consent" served as the participant's signature. Within 24 hours of receiving consent and availability was discussed, interviews were scheduled. The Zoom link for the meeting was sent to participants 24 hours before their scheduled interview time.

The response of the participants was slower than I expected. There were several responses to the flyer that did not transition into an interview. All participants completed their interviews within a few days of providing consent. Each participant engaged in an audio-recorded Zoom interview. Each participant answered all questions. After the interviews, I listened to the recordings while reviewing the transcriptions to make sure everything was heard clearly, and I cross checked the validity of the data. Following this step, I began to analyze the data.

Thematic analysis was chosen to allow better engagement with the data. It gives the researcher an approach to explore the similarities and common features, such as themes, within the data (Lehmann et al., 2019). The goal of using thematic analysis is to identify themes from the gathered data that aligns with the RQs. One of the benefits of thematic analysis is flexibility for identifying, describing, and interpretating themes within a data set in detail (Dawadi, 2020). There are no specific guidelines as the objectives can be changed during the research process. Dawadi (2020) further noted that a disadvantage of thematic analysis is that many themes may become generated, finding it difficult to distinguish between codes and themes. As a result, I carefully read through all 10 of the transcriptions and hand coded words line by line onto sticky notes. I took the coded words and grouped them together into themes.

One of the limitations of the study was the small number of participants. The responses to the questions were subjective, although there was saturation across the interviews. Another limitation was the participants' geographical locations. The sample encompassed a small sample of school social workers in Virginia from various regions. However, most of the participants were from the Tidewater region of Virginia. Including school social workers from the rural areas would have diversified the data as many participants service large cities. The results may not be applicable to school social workers in other geographical locations as the roles and responsibilities vary. Each school district defines school social workers' differently; therefore, their roles and responsibilities varied shifting their encounters with grief and loss. Also, the sample included eight females and two males; more males would have added a diversifying

perspective. Additionally, because the recruitment started around the holidays, I had to complete the interviews while participants expressed interest before their winter break started. The ethnicity and race of participants were not discussed.

Although there were limitations as mentioned above, the participants presented vulnerable and honest with their responses. Having participants with different years of experience gave additional information on the history of school social work and the positive changes by Virginia school systems to promote student wellbeing. The participants acknowledged gaps associated with their role, students receiving treatment, barriers to implementing strategies, and ways to enhance the school social work culture.

Findings

Participants

I recruited 10 participants for this study, and each participated in the one-on-one interview. Eight of the participants identified as females and two identified as males. The ethnicity and race of the participants were not discussed. All participants had an active school social work certificate for the state of Virginia and were currently employed in traditional school settings. All participants identified having at least 1 year of experience: five had less than 5 years, four had more than 5 but less than 10, and one had over 20 years of experience. The participants' ages ranged between 29 to 53 years old. Three participants were assigned to one school, and the other seven were assigned to multiple schools. The diverse years of experience provided various perspectives on the presented topic. Although education level was not discussed, all participants had at least a MSW

degree. All the participants identified having specific experience as a school social worker in Virginia. Table 1 shows the participants' demographic information.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant	Gender	Age	Years of experience	School assignment
#1	Female	35	7	1 high school
#2	Female	30	5	1 elementary school & 1 middle school
#3	Male	29	2	1 high school & 2 elementary schools
#4	Female	33	1	2 elementary schools
#5	Female	35	4	1 elementary & 1 middle school
#6	Female	38	6	1 high school & 1 child center
#7	Female	30	1	1 high school
#8	Female	32	1	1 elementary school
#9	Male	40	6	1 elementary, 1 middle, and 1 high school
#10	Female	53	28	2 elementary schools & 1 high school

RQ Findings

I used thematic coding to answer the RQs. Each participant was asked 12 questions related to their experiences when addressing parental death in the school setting to help answer the RQs. Participants shared their experiences and perceptions associated with the understanding of their role as a school social worker when supporting bereaved children. Although each participant answered each of the 12 interview questions uniquely, several themes emerged throughout the data analysis process about parental death.

A total of 10 school social workers in Virginia participated in the semistructured interview. The participants provided insight into their reasons for becoming a school social worker. The participants were reflective in sharing their connections to the social work practice and how they contribute to enhance the student wellbeing. The major subthemes included attitudes toward school policy, social work in providing mental health support, ethical dilemmas addressing grief and loss, the definition of school social work, school social work duties, attitudes towards school social work duties, and attitude on support received by social work practice and Virginia school system.

The themes and subthemes correlated to this study's aim to better understand school social workers' role in providing support to children following the death of a parent. Furthermore, the themes and subthemes identified in the one-on-one interviews filled the gap in the literature regarding school social workers' role in identifying grief and loss support strategies.

Theme 1: Grief and Loss

The first theme that emerged in the study was grief and loss. This theme is defined as the absence of a loved one with a primary focus on parental death. This first theme of three shows how the death of a parent may impact a student's wellbeing. School social workers' experiences with bereaved students contribute to helping students process their loss, learn how to cope, and understand the grief process. Family members are often overwhelmed, and their grief responses may pose as a challenge to digest the traumatic experience and help the child grieve properly. The first theme that emerged in the study was grief and loss. This theme is defined as the various responses of a person following the absence of a loved one. Participants were asked of their experiences when providing support to students following a parental death. Three out of 10 participants shared that thus far, they had not had a parental death in their role whereas other participants shared their experiences and the strategies they used to support the student. Participant 1 stated, "I had a student who lost their mother unexpectedly. I was there to provide support." Participant 1 further detailed the importance of connecting this student to resources as the mother was undocumented, so the school social worker had to figure out kinship care. Similarly, Participant 9 stated,

> We had a high school student whose father committed suicide two days before Thanksgiving, we were on break when we got the news. As soon as we got back, I met with the student individually and let him know he doesn't have to go through it alone. I set him up with individual counseling, we talked about the cycles of grief, and has been working with the family that is planning to adopt him.

When discussing school social worker's roles surrounding parental death, participants provide their unique experiences related to prevention and interventions. Participant 4 explained having two parental deaths of 3-year-old students in the same year: suicide and overdose. Due to the age and developmental level, the SSW participant explained the school requested immediate interventions to the students and education to the teachers on recognizing triggers. When asked of bereaved students' behavioral responses, all participants agreed students grieve differently. In agreement, Participant 3 stated, "It's different depending on their developmental level. I think kids at the lower level sometimes don't understand." Participants measured children's responses to grief as internalized or externalized behaviors. Internalized behaviors are defined as negative behaviors that focus inward; externalized behaviors are directed out toward others (Vanmeter et al., 2020). Participant 5 added, "At the Pre-K level we see more external behaviors, so we see a lot of aggression, property destruction, and tantrums. In high school, a little more depression- sleeping and withdrawn behaviors." Participant 1 stated, "I think it goes from one end of the spectrum to the other, because it depends on the student, and the support they may have." Participant 10 stated, "Children don't know how to respond to grief. It is an unusual and different emotion for them." Participant 4 stated, "Some children are angry, some lash out, some emotionally shutdown, but it is a wide spectrum." Participant 7 explained at the middle and high school level when students display "aggression" that is when school staff learn of the triggering behavior. Participant 5 stated,

I think it is frustrating sometimes seeing kids come back and their expected to go on with life as usual. And it is like no we have to recognize they went through this trauma of losing a parent, sibling, or whatever and we have to recognize that and give them support.

The connections between grief and behavioral responses confirm school social workers awareness of how a death may impact a student's emotional well-being. The participants were clear in their responses. Many participants who had several years of experiences shared similar experiences in traditional school settings, whereas the newer school social workers had minimal encounters with parental death. Despite not having direct experiences to parental death in the school settings, all participants were able to discuss how children respond differently to grief. School social workers appear to recognize influential factors surrounding grief and loss that may impact a student's academic success.

The analysis of the findings showed that the participants of this study linked grief responses to processes where children respond based on their relationship with the deceased, their developmental stage, and their understanding of what grief is. Participants provided clear responses showing the connection school social worker's experiences and parental death to align with RQ1. More themes developed as school social workers were asked about their ability to provide support to bereaved students in the school setting. The participants shared similar responses around the increase in student's experience of grief, but their involvement was limited due to other tasks.

Theme 2: School Social Worker's Roles and Policies

As stated above, the findings showed that school social workers are not aware of many parental deaths due to the tasks and responsibilities associated with their job position. These findings were organized by RQ2 to obtain insight into the challenges school social workers face when implementing strategies to bereaved children. All of the participants reported having at least one challenge when helping children through the grief process. Most participants acknowledged adhering to tasks outlined in their job description. Although they are educated and trained to use clinical skills, most participants highlighted within each school district certain tasks are prioritized. Additionally, the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) provides the job description of school social workers and defines them as trained mental health professionals who provide direct as well as indirect services to students, families, and school personnel (VDOE, 2021). Despite the different needs of their students, school social workers are expected to adhere to the duties outlined in their job description even though there are no clear policies or job tasks that distinguish school social worker's role in relation to parental death.

The participants explained their roles and duties during their interview. The roles and responsibilities included the completion of assessments, social emotional learning interventions, attendance, provide support, resources, special education services, home visits, McKinney veto, and counseling sessions. Some of the participants in shared districts highlighted how special education services are prioritized by school social workers whereas other school social workers indicated that mental health support is

growing as a priority with consideration to the needs of the community. Participants were able to distinguish the tasks that are prioritized within their district. Participant 2 stated, "School social work falls under special education. It is not like that across the board." Similarly, Participant 4 stated, "The main focus is special education and then attendance." Participant 10 stated, "School social work is more than just being in a building." Participant 10 discussed how advocacy, outreach, and the implementation of programs (parental and mental welfare) are nontraditional tasks completed in their school district to support students and their families.

Participant 8 shared due to an increase in community gun violence and gang retaliation, school social workers were tasked to include strategies to enhance the mental wellbeing of its students. The participants who are licensed clinical social workers noted their role includes additional clinical responsibilities such as clinical supervision, individual counseling sessions, and facilitation of trainings or workshops. Participant 5 highlighted, "Because I am licensed, I am used differently. I help with social emotional learning." School social workers were able to identify unconventional tasks within their role when they offer clinical support. This level of engagement in the school setting from the school social worker has the potential to assist in the event mental health is ever needed.

Participants were asked to discuss how their role differentiates from the school counselor's role in a traditional school setting. All participants highlighted the value of both school social workers and school counselors in the school community. The question was proposed to understand the differences in the two positions as both professionals are

utilized in traditional school settings to address issues that may interfere with a student's academic success. Many participants shared that school counselors are the first responders to students since they are housed in the school to establish a connection. Participant 5 stated, "They respond to crisis then call us in." Participant #6 described the comparison as "school social workers work outside in consider environmental risk factors." Participant 9 noted school social workers offer "an intense therapeutic lens." Although school social workers and school counselors share different roles and responsibilities, all participants responded "yes" to having a positive collaboration when addressing the school's needs. Despite the availability of school counselors, school social workers noted the demands of their tasks and responsibilities limits their level of effectiveness.

More specifically, participants were asked to list the challenges that interfere with their ability to successfully navigate students through the grief process. Participant 1 stated, "At my school we are limited in what we can do, especially here in a high school." Participants shared how time is a major dilemma, which prevents them from providing students with adequate support. Time limitation may be due to school social workers assignment to multiple schools, the prioritization of special education needs, and students missing instructional time. Participant 1 described "trying to figure out how deep to get without opening up a Pandora's box." Similarly, Participant 9 shared "time and human resources" due to "students having to perform in the classroom, get seat hours, and they can't be pulled during instructional time." Participant 5 discussed how students lack awareness of the accessibility to the school social worker. Participant 8 stressed the

importance of self-awareness to minimize transference especially students are not ready to get help. In discussion, participants highlighted how culture and environment influence a person's grief process. Participant 5 described "the community" as a barrier due to the stigma around mental health. Participant 7 added, "If they grew up or live in environments where the parents are not showing them how they are processing, they are going to mirror the parent's behaviors." Most of the participants emphasized the need to normalize expressing feelings and helping students learn to express their feelings in a safe space. As there is no clear policy regarding school social worker's role toward parental death, school social workers rely on the NASW Code of Ethics to determine the best course of action in creating sustainable interventions for grief and loss. Furthermore, the participants in this research study report highly relying on their experience and professional clinical consultation with their supervisor and colleagues to determine the best practices for parental death. The participants' consensus indicates that the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE, 2021) dictates how involved school social workers can be to improving student's well-being following a traumatic experience, such as a parental death. Participants shared their perspectives on strategies the VDOE can do to best enhance the school social worker role. Time constraints and caseloads were two barriers to effective practice for school social workers. Participant 5 stated, "Being able to have social workers that have different roles, for examples schools with higher referrals for eligibility meetings, because that takes away from the direct contact with a kid." Participant 3 described "loneliness" in the social worker role and stated, "I think more than one school social worker in a building. We could do better assisting with

everything." Participant 5 stated, "People get discouraged behind the lack of visibility of the school social worker." Similarly, Participant 1 stated, "Hire more social workers." Participant 1 emphasized hiring more school social workers may create opportunities to provide therapeutic support when unique situations occur. Participants emphasized the importance of consistency for all school districts to ensure students have equal opportunities to enhance their emotional well-being. Participant 5 discussed how the title social worker is misunderstood as in many communities it becomes associated with "taking people children." Participants pointed out how the community's lack of awareness when it comes to resources and services hinders those from receiving adequate treatment. Most of the participants acknowledged the importance of continued education and training opportunities for school social workers. Participant 1 stated, "I feel like I am not well versed in grief training and grief therapy. If I had more training, I would feel more comfortable." Participant 8 shared that one way the social work practice can contribute to school social worker's growth is "grief being a topic that receives more focus, as it happens daily and is unavoidable.

Lastly, Participants 2, 9, and 10 pointed out the value of retention in the workplace. Some participants discussed how their school districts made significant changes to ensure school social workers are valued and supported. Participant 9 highlighted the importance of job security for school social workers, with a focus on "competitive pay nationwide." Participant 2 discussed how previously school social workers were assigned to 5 or 6 schools, "but now they have less schools, they are able to do more." Participant 5 best explained the impact of the school social work mentorship

program as a new employee, "You have someone you can go to, talk about different things, and get insight or their perspective." Participant 10 detailed how school personnel are promoting employee retention in her district:

I think my district understands school social workers, so they are always advocating, trying to get more positions, and doing things to retain people. They don't want to lose people to other districts, so they have given financial retribution for that and try to do things to keep us motivated since there is a shortage in school social work positions.

Theme 3: Support and Resources

The final theme that emerged indicates participants experience in implementing strategies to help children following a parental death. Participants described several strategies and interventions used in the school setting, with the most common strategy providing support and resources to students, families, and school personnel. Most of the participants encountered situations where they had to provide strategies following a parental death. Participants provided examples of strategies they identified to be effective when helping students cope with their loss. Participant 10 stated, "Establish that rapport so they can trust you to be able to share information." Participant 4 shared allowing the students to normalize their feelings, "it is okay to express your feelings." Similarly, Participant 6 discussed "we have to normalize it and not minimize any loss." Participant 2 described "support groups" as a strategy to provide bereaved students an opportunity to connect with students who share similar experiences. Some participants highlighted the inclusion of families when providing support. Most of the participants shared how their

experiences in traditional school settings limit their ability to be clinical despite their skillset due to priority of the school district. Some of the participants who provide individual and group counseling sessions, discussed that intervention allows them to address various topics in a small group format; however, they are strategic in how much can be explored as students due to time. Other participants provided examples of memory activities they have used in grief support groups with their students. The participants responses indicate they use unconventional moments to provide support to their students.

Some participants discussed how they are comfortable providing grief and loss support to their students; whereas participants who lacked training and education did not feel equipped to provide grief support. One of the participants stated, "it's not my strongest" and another participant said, "grief is tough for me." Participants 4 and 5 discussed the importance of professional development for school social workers with an emphasis on topics such grief. Participant 5 shared "I do feel overall as a district we could have more resources and more trainings." Most participants highlighted the value of community resources for referrals. Participant 8 discussed how her school collaborates with outpatient providers for referrals. Participant 7 shared receiving positive feedback from families following referrals to youth programs. However, all participants identified relying on resources to ensure their students' needs are met as time constraints is a barrier to supporting their students within the school setting.

Despite not having specific school policies surrounding school social workers' role in navigating school support, school social workers have been able to generate intervention strategies that meet bereaved students' specific needs. Participants explained

supervisors and colleagues played a role in helping them learn about strategies to best support their students. Participants applied their experiences and expectations to dictate the strategies appropriate in vulnerable situations. Participants discussed how relationships are important in helping when serving students, families, and school personnel. Most of the participants shared similar responses around the importance of building rapport and creating a safe space for bereaved children to process their grief. Participant 6 stated, "It is really important to develop those connections." Participants applied their experiences and expectations to identify ways to become effective. There was repetition of words and statements included "providing support, acknowledging the loss, and expressing their feelings." Participant 7 acknowledged providing mental health support is critical for students as it may be their only access to treatment.

Lastly, participants shared their perspectives of ideas, thoughts, or steps that the education system or the social work practice could do to best support school social workers moving forward. most of the participants pointed out that children do not receive adequate treatment following a death in their family or community. As a result, students use the safe space offered in the school setting to receive a level of support. Participant 4 shared that after a tragedy occurs in the community, students return to the school setting to seek revenge. Participants discussed how the visibility of school counselors limits their access to providing clinical support to students. Participant 1 stated, "They are the first point of contact from a teacher, parent, student, etc. If additional social supports are needed, they will call the SSW." Similarly, participant 10 explained students have a primary relationship with the school counselor due to roles, responsibilities, and

accessibility. The participants acknowledged the importance of connecting to community resources and making referrals as needed for students. Participant 10 emphasized the importance of connections between received support and access to resources to provide students and families with resources to manage the symptoms associated with parental death.

Summary

This section provided details on the recruitment process, data analysis, and limitations provided by the ten school social workers who participated in the one-on-one interviews with responses to the interview questions. The findings were consistent with the study's main theme of school social workers not having a clear guide of strategies to use when students experience a parental death. The interviews provided insight into how school social workers viewed their roles and duties. The findings also suggest that the school social worker's ability to provide support surrounding grief relies heavily on the demands of their school district. Also, it is not outlined in the policies on how school social workers should manage grief and loss. This section provided insight into the experiences of school social workers in Virginia to include their perspectives on interventions, collaboration, and attitudes towards grief. The most unanticipated data was school personnel misconception around school social workers; and in some school districts special education is prioritized over mental health. Overall participants responses were valuable and contextualized information regarding the research topic. The following section is the final part of this qualitative study. It provides an overview of the impact on professional ethics and social change in the practice of Virginia school social work.

Section 4: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Social Change

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to identify experiences and challenges of school social workers in Virginia when addressing childhood bereavement following the death of a parent while providing insight into the strategies school social workers in Virginia employ to improve, enhance, and contribute to the well-being of children who experienced parental death. The understanding of evidenced-based strategies surrounding grief and loss has the potential to improve the quality of care that is provided. The following RQs guided this study:

RQ1: What are the experiences of school social workers' in Virginia working with bereaved children?

RQ2: What challenges do school social workers in Virginia face when helping children through the grief process?

RQ3: What specific strategies have school social workers in Virginia used to help children after a parental death?

The research findings indicated that school social workers understand the concept of parental death and recognize the importance of implementing strategies to enhance the well-being of students, families, and school personnel. School social workers are aware of the adverse effects of children not receiving adequate treatment following a traumatic experience and how it may negatively affect one's development. The key findings in this study showed that school social workers do not have direct policies that guide them on how to intervene or how they should be involved with bereaved students following a parental death. Chock-Goldman (2022) showed that children and families rely on schools

as an anchor for education and health services, and more mental health services are needed within school systems. The results of this study indicated that school social workers often use innovative ways to intervene in providing interventions to their students. The results also showed there are no clear school policies regarding the school social worker's role in addressing grief, so school social workers are not required to intervene regularly in mental health matters. Previous researchers have acknowledged that school social workers offer expertise in mental health training through a social justice lens, and by using an ecological approach, school social workers are positioned to advocate for practices in schools (Sedillo-Hamann, 2022). School social workers experience the benefits of implementing strategies in the schools setting, which include learning coping skills, how to express feelings, and the delivery of quality services.

School social workers also indicated that they use a variety of strategies in the school setting but noted their practices change over time to tailor the school district's needs. With time, experience, professional development, and support from supervisors and colleagues, their understanding and application of strategies improved. Therefore, more experienced social workers could provide newer or less experienced social workers with building skills to implement strategies for bereaved students. The other aspect of change within the school social worker's grief practices refers to how social workers do not engage in the implementation of strategies due to different challenges. These challenges include difficulty offering clinical support to students due to other demands such as special education and 504 evaluations, truancy, home visits, coordinating multiagency services, and assisting in the development of programs and resources.

School social workers may benefit from support around prioritizing the demands of their job and normalization of boundaries to ensure all students have access to adequate care. Another challenge mentioned is workload management, unclear knowledge of school social worker's role, and school districts inconsistent use of school social workers. This prevents school social workers from engaging in clinical practices or allowing themselves to experience the full effect of trauma intervention due to the pressure of students not missing instructional time.

In this section, I focused on exploring the findings of this study and its implications for the ethics of school social work professionals. These findings indicate a need for a shift in how school social workers are defined by the Virginia Department of Education that offers consistency in all school districts, areas for career development, and an outlook that allows school social workers an individualized approach to care. The success of grief implementation strategies into the school setting requires school social workers to have proper education and training on the importance of evidence-based practice. In addition, insight into how to implement appropriately based on the population and the individual is necessary. Lastly, this study included the perspectives of school social workers in Virginia and may be beneficial in terms of education for current school social workers and social work students entering the field.

Application for Professional Ethics in Social Work Practice

Social workers are tasked to abide by their personal and professional guidelines. Social work professionals rely on the NASW Code of Ethics to determine the best course of action in determining how to best support their students. The NASW (2021) provided a

set of standards that guide the professional conduct of social workers. The importance of human relationships is a specific component of social work values and ethics because social workers advocate for children, families, and communities. Social workers seek to strengthen relationships among people to contribute to the process of change. The NASW Code of Ethics guide school social workers into this area by obliging social workers to advocate for marginalized groups. With this study, I addressed the importance of human relationships to identify strategies for children following a parental death. School social workers' relationships with their students, families, administrators, school staff, and community that allows school social workers to implement strategies to support bereaved students along their grief journey. This study supports the ethical values as set out in the NASW Code of Ethics as follows: service, social justice, the dignity and worth of a person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence.

School social workers demonstrate the value of social justice by addressing people's needs. Through advocacy, social workers strive to ensure their served population have access to information, services, and resources. As school social workers, participants recognized their role as change agents to promote the wellness of their students and families. School social workers work every day with issues to include trauma, child maltreatment and abuse, domestic violence, homelessness, and social inequities. School social workers expose themselves to physical, emotional, and mental health symptoms because of vicarious trauma or compassion fatigue. Even when faced with challenges, school social workers strive to carry out the code of ethics by performing with professional excellence. Research has confirmed that school social

workers play a vital role in identifying and treating mental health problems in youth (Chock-Goldman, 2022). This social work principle aligns with the current study's findings and provides insight into the importance of relationship building approaches to address sensitive topics, such as grief.

This study may also clarify how school social workers can implement therapeutic strategies to students within the school setting. School social workers may use the findings of this study to increase their knowledge and skills in advocacy and support, specifically within traditional school settings. Although the study does not provide specific strategies for school social workers to implement, it allows for future discussion in creating much needed policy reform for school social workers in Virginia. The code of ethics is a clear in providing social workers with a clear path on addressing challenges that may be faced when working with clients, colleagues, and the community.

Recommendations for Social Work Practice

In this subsection, I present actions steps for social work practitioners based on the findings of this study. These findings indicate that school social workers in Virginia experience several challenges that impact their ability to implement strategies following a parental death. Participants reported previous experience, school personnel support, and professional consultation contributing to their professional judgment to make decisions. The participants' interview responses provided insight into what was needed in their respective schools and how school social work practitioners could better serve their population. The grief theory following traumatic exposure highlights that in order to increase academic success, healthy behavioral responses, and resources, barriers must be

reduced (Sandler et al., 2021). The research has shown that a lack of time and accessibility to resources creates barriers for school social workers to implement bereavement strategies. Additionally, professionals who feel inadequate to serve this population due to their lack of education and training on supporting bereaved students are also barriers to implementing strategies. Although the National School of Social Work Association adopted the National School of Social Work Practice Model for the delivery of school social work services (VDOE, 2021), it is necessary to include grief and loss education to professionals. Although research on this general topic is prevalent, information on the school social worker's role regarding intervention, prevention, and practice is limited, further research is needed.

The first recommended action step is to reevaluate the current ratio of students to school social workers. Participants reported not being able to achieve their fullest potential in the workplace due to caseloads and having to prioritize specific services within their school division. Also, participants who are assigned to multiple schools reported difficulty managing tasks due to rotational days. The increase in school social workers could present an opportunity for practitioners to focus on addressing the needs of their assigned school. Currently, in the state of Virginia, the ratio is 1 school social worker to 2,067 students, whereas the ratio for school counselors is 1 to 345 students (National Center of Education Statistics, 2021). The policy may promote a flexible, supportive work environment that allocates time and resources for social workers to reduce barriers to servicing their clients. Participants shared how their time is limited due to their various roles and responsibilities. Also, assigning a school social worker to each

public school could provide practitioners with an opportunity to contribute to positive change by supporting the national emergency in children's mental health. According to the National Center of Education Statistics (2021), in 2022, 55.2% of youth diagnosed with Major Depressive Disorder did not receive treatment within that past year. By improving the ratio of school social workers in K-12 public schools, it contributes to their ability to provide a range of necessary mental health services in schools.

The second recommended action step is to expand on existing training requirements to ensure school social workers receive annual training on grief and loss. This would allow advanced practitioners leadership opportunities to promote positive social change. For example, education and trainings by advanced school social work practitioners could teach practitioners how to provide support managing the challenges of implementing strategies around grief and loss. An annual course on grief and loss could educate social work practitioners on interventions to use for bereaved students surrounding grief and loss. Participants responded having students who experienced grief and loss surrounding death, divorce, relationship breakups, relocation, and life transitions. The focus should be to prepare future school social workers with strategies to address their challenges and support them in having the skills necessary to help clients cope with grief and loss. Understanding the challenges school social workers face helps with problem-solving and developing solutions on a broader scale. This training could optimize the basic knowledge of school social workers to support students, families, and school personnel.

Lastly, participants reported feeling isolated within their role and having limited engagement with other school social workers. The school social work leadership could take measures to create a culture of respect by allowing practitioners to provide feedback on change they would like to see for employee retention. Participants highlighted that more support from leadership would help them understand the challenges of their role and offer guidance to those in disadvantaged environments. Additionally, an increase in administration support could ensure social work practitioners are managing their job duties, as well as engaging in self-care practices to minimize burnout. Although this study could be used to guide social work practitioners in the school setting, more research is needed that can assist in creating a specific blueprint for school social workers on both the micro and macro levels. Research can be used by organizations to inform new policies or implement changes to better support bereaved students in a traditional school setting. Current policy regarding school social workers in Virginia role on parental death is nonexistent.

Limitations of the Study

One limitation of this study is the lack of interview questions inquiring about the specifics of professional development opportunities offered to practitioners and exploring how practitioners prioritize their services. The gathered information about the experiences and its association to parental death. However, it is unknown how often the strategies were used to determine its effectiveness. Another limitation was the sample of the participants were predominantly females, middle-aged, and employed in large cities. Also, due to the limited amount of research specifically addressing the experiences of

school social workers in Virginia when providing strategies following a parental death, I sought to understand the individual and organizational factors associated with school social workers and their experience.

Recommendations for Future Research

The study's findings may impact the social work practice for advanced practitioners by highlighting how to inform future actions of school social workers providing support to bereaved students. The development of future research that focuses on exploring the psychological impact of parental death becomes more relevant as children become raised in nontraditional families. The diversity of trauma that social workers work with are factors that have the potential to impact children's emotional wellbeing. The 10 participants' interview responses provided insight into what was needed in their respective schools and how school social work practitioners could better service their students and families.

Conducting this study helped to improve my understanding and awareness of how school social workers impact student's academic success and wellbeing. There were no limitations to this study that impacted its usefulness and trustworthiness. The findings of this study will be provided to participants who contributed to the study in a one-page summary to further ensure reliability and trustworthiness. The study will also be submitted for publication in a peer-reviewed journal. Lastly, I will conduct oral presentations and poster presentations to disseminate to the target audience or the general population.

Implications for Social Change

This study's implications for social change include creating an avenue for school social workers to work directly with children and families around grief and loss that impacts their academic success. This study not only addresses the micro and macro level change but also the mezzo level by helping to implement social work practices rooted in ethical guidelines and advocacy for systematic change for marginalized groups. This positive social change is possible because social workers are grounded in understanding how children's ethnicity, culture, and community influence their development (Scott et al., 2020). Specifically, school social workers should be included in school districts implementing policy protocols within the school setting. School social workers involvement in policy advocacy assist in the development of programs, resources, and policies to support initiatives relating to safe and supportive school climates that ensure students are mentally, physically, and emotionally present in schools. Additionally, school social work programs would benefit from including a mental health track within their school programming to better equip social works with the skills needed to assist children and their families with improving their emotional wellbeing that create barriers to receiving adequate treatment. It is important to highlight how providing safe spaces and collaborating with other change agents contributes to enhancing the emotional wellbeing of children and their families.

Summary

Parental death is a traumatic experience that could reshape a child's life. In the United States, there has been an increase in childhood bereavement since the COVID-19

pandemic, especially for youth of color (Burns et al., 2020). From April 1, 2020, to June 30, 2021, data suggests more than 140,000 children lost a primary parent or secondary caregiver due to COVID-19 (Hillis et al., 2021). Treatment for childhood bereavement ultimately depends on the family's willingness, although significant research supports evidence-based treatment, including grief techniques. Grief and loss support is an important concept for social work due to social worker's ability to help the grieving person understand the grief process. Addressing grief and loss strategies in the school setting is important. The actions of caregivers, school social workers, and other school personnel relating to grief and loss for bereaved students may influence how they navigate their trauma, to support their future mental health and wellbeing. This study was conducted to determine school social workers perspectives of their role in providing insight into their understanding of the relationship between parental death strategies and school social workers involvement. The results provide insight into the perceived role of school social workers when creating interventions or making therapeutic decisions surrounding parental death. The findings also provide a social work perspective of the identified problems associated with the gap between social work interventions and school support. Policy reform, administrative support, and more human resources are key in addressing in-school interventions for bereaved students.

Additionally, professional development and grief training opportunities at the local, state, and national levels from organizations, such as the NASW would be beneficial in equipping school social workers with tools and skills to better serve bereaved students. Also, new policies by the Virginia Department of Education would be

beneficial in providing a guide and understanding of the role of school social workers. Due to the severe nature of the social problem, it is the interest of social work practitioners and researchers to generate more knowledge and the understanding of children's experiences with grief and loss. Study participants contributed to the importance of implementing evidence-based practices into school settings, specifically in the state of Virginia. More importantly, the study findings informed parental death practice and encouraged social change by increasing awareness of the problem.

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Appendix: Interview Questions

Zoom interviews: 30–45-minute sessions

1. What is your identified gender, age, and years as a school social worker?

2. Which school district do you service?

3. Do you cover elementary, middle, high school?

4. What led to you becoming a SSW?

5. What specific tasks do you have as a school social worker?

6. How is your role different from the school counselor?

7. In your experience, how do children respond to grief?

8. How do you feel about providing grief and loss support to students?

9. What are your perceptions about strategies to help children cope with their loss?

10. How does the implementation of strategies for bereaved children pose challenges and/or benefits?

11. How can you be better supported by social work organizations and/or Virginia school systems?

12. Do you have any questions for me about this study? Do you have any additional information you would like to add before we end?