Addressing the Need for School Based Support for Bereavement and Loss: Perceptions, Experiences and Intervention

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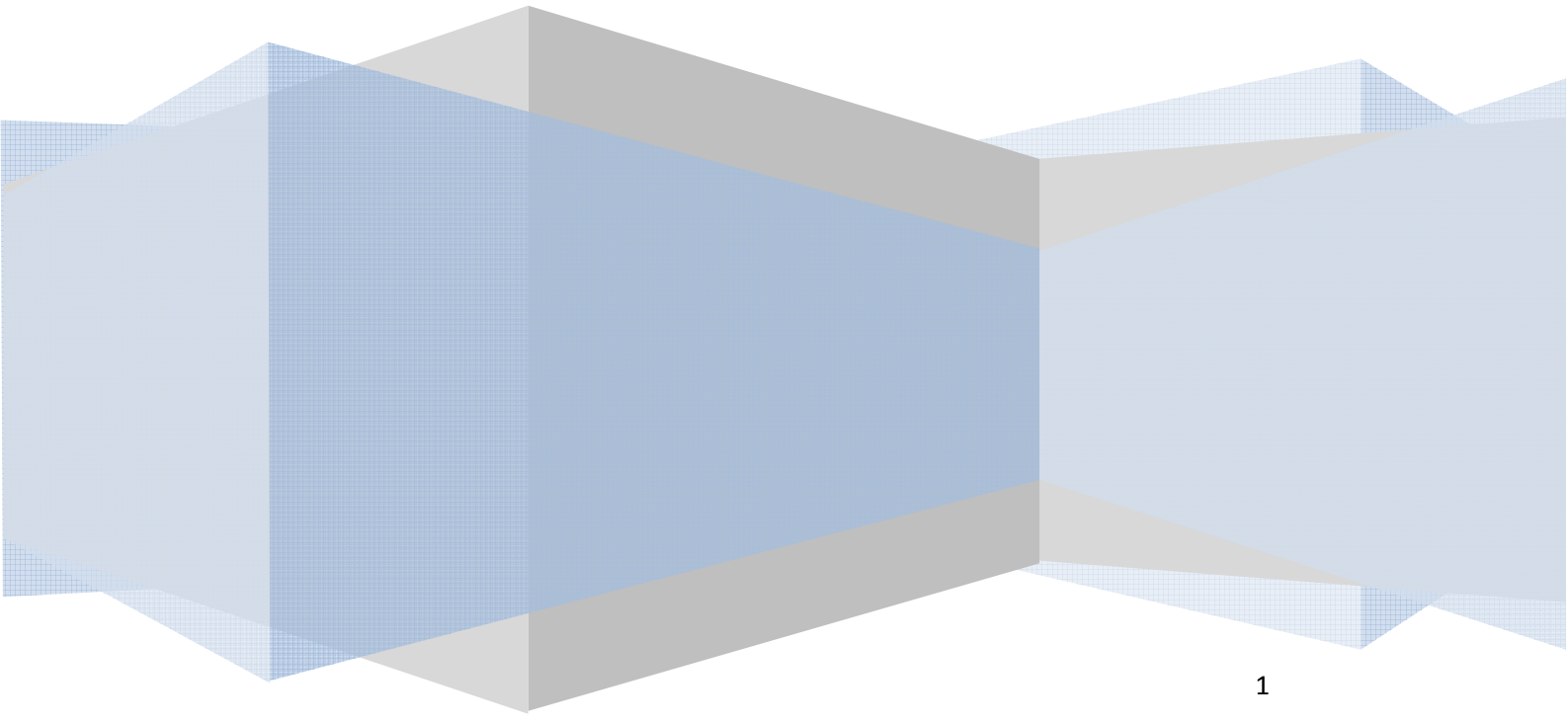

Summary of Contents

No.	Section	Page
Section 1	**Research Introduction**	7
	1.1 Overview	7
	1.2 Visual representation of research overview	8
	1.3 Context of Research	9
	1.4 Research Aims	9
	1.5 Terms of Definition	10
Section 2	**Phase One:** Identifying the perceptions and experiences of school based staff on the issue of loss for children and young people	12
2.1	**Abstract**	12
2.2	**Phase One Tables and Figures**	13
2.3	**Introduction**	15
	2.3.1 Purpose	15
	2.3.2 Research Problem	15
	2.3.3 Theoretical Background	17
	a) The role of schools in supporting children and young people experiencing loss	18
	b) The identification of 'at risk' pupils	19
	c) Perceptions of school staff in supporting young people who have experienced loss	20
	2.3.4 Research Aims	21
	2.3.5 Research Questions	22
2.4	**Method**	23
	2.4.1 Research Design	23
	2.4.2 Sampling	24

a) Management Participants 24
b) School staff participants 25
c) Multi-agency staff 26
2.4.3 Measures 26
a) Questionnaire development 26
b) Vignettes 27
c) Interviews 27
2.4.4 Procedures 29
2.4.5 Ethical Considerations 29

2.5 Results and Analysis 30
2.5.1 How do school staff members perceive loss to affect children and young people in their care? 31
a) Effects of loss and 'risk' indicators for children and young people 31
b) Factors influencing staff perceptions 32
c) Key findings 34
2.5.2 How are different types of loss experience perceived and addressed by school staff? 35
a) Staff perceptions on longer term effects in relation to type of loss experience 35
b) How loss is currently addressed in participating schools 38
c) Key findings 39
2.5.3 How do school staff conceptualise their role in addressing loss? 40
a) Current roles adopted by school staff 40
b) Views of staff on their role in supporting loss 41
c) Key Findings 43

2.6 Discussion 44
2.6.1 Overview of key findings 44

2.6.2 Discussion 45

a) School staff perceptions of the effects of loss and 'at risk' indicators 45

b) Different types of loss 46

c) How school staff conceptualise their role in supporting loss 48

d) Where could Educational Psychology Services target support to increase the capacity of schools to support loss? 50

e) Methodological considerations 53

2.7 Future directions 54

Section 3 **Phase Two:** The 'Loss and Change' Programme: A case study of an Educational Psychology Service group intervention to support secondary age students who have experienced loss 55

3.1 Abstract 55

3.2 Tables and figures 56

3.3 Introduction 57

3.3.1. Purpose 57

3.3.2 Research Problem 57

3.3.3. Theoretical Background 59

a) Models of loss 59

b) Stages of intervention 59

c) The role of Educational Psychology Services and schools in interventions for loss 62

d) Why a group intervention? 63

3.3.4 Research Aims 65
3.3.5 Research Questions 66

3.4 Method 67

3.4.1 Research Design 67
3.4.2 Sampling 67
3.4.3 Data Collection 68
a) Observation 68
b) Semi-structured interviews 69
c) Additional measures 69
3.4.4. The 'Loss and Change' Intervention Programme 70
3.4.5 Psychological approaches underpinning the intervention programme 71
3.4.6 Procedures 73
3.4.7 Ethical considerations 74
3.4.8 Data Analysis 74
3.4.9 Qualitative analysis procedure 75

3.5 Results 76

3.5.1 **Research Question 1**: What are the key processes that impact on the effectiveness of the 'Loss and Change' model of group intervention? 76
3.5.2 **Research Question 2:** How does the 6 week group intervention affect the emotional health and well-being of a group of secondary age students? 80
a) Parent/carer responses 80
b) Student self-report including measures 81
c) Participant views 82
d) Semantic differential scale 84

3.6 Discussion 85
3.6.1 Key findings 85

	3.6.2 Processes	85
	3.6.3 Outcomes	87
	3.6.4 Methodological considerations	89
	3.6.5 What are the emergent issues for Educational Psychology Services in embedding this model of intervention within schools?	90
3.7	**Future directions**	92
Section 4	**Research Conclusions**	96
Section 5	**5.1 References**	96
	5.2 Bibliography	107
	5.3 Acknowledgements	109
Section 8		
	Appendices	110

Phase 1: Identifying the perceptions and experiences of school based staff on the issue of loss for children and young people

Abstract

Effects of loss on the emotional health and well-being of children are wide-ranging and increase the risk of longer term impact on educational success and mental health (McLanahan 1999; Abdelnoor & Hollins 2004a). As frontline workers, school staff hold a role in identifying and supporting pupils at a universal level. How staff view the issue of loss and their role in supporting this is therefore pivotal. A survey design using two devised online questionnaires and semi-structured interviews identifies the experiences and perceptions of school based staff on the issue of loss for schools in one local authority. Using interactive analysis, qualitative and quantitative data from senior leaders in 20 schools, 25 additional school staff members and 9 multi-agency professionals is triangulated to determine perceptions.

A range of effects across social, emotional, behaviour and learning are well recognised by staff although behaviour is used as the most frequent indicator of those at longer term 'risk'. A more structured and rigorous school response exists for loss through death compared to family breakdown despite some specific staff concerns for pupils experiencing loss through multiple changes in the family. Whilst staff members indicate a high expectation to support pupils with loss, they report lower confidence in doing so. A series of influencing factors on staff perceptions are identified at a contextual, situational and individual level. Factors that could be targeted by Educational Psychology Service to help schools build capacity are highlighted, with future considerations for support with identification, training and supervision.

Phase 2: The 'Loss and Change' Programme: A case study of an Educational Psychology Service group intervention to support secondary age students who have experienced loss

Abstract

This second phase of a two part research design investigates how an Educational Psychology Service can increase the capacity of schools to support pupils who have experienced loss. Following a survey design identifying staff attitudes on the issue of loss for schools, a multi-method case study approach is used to research the implementation of a 6-week 'Loss and Change' intervention programme. Seven secondary age students participated in the group intervention for pupils who have experienced loss, facilitated by two Educational Psychologists working alongside a member of school staff. A grounded theory approach analysed data from observation, semi-structured interviews and self-report measures. Eight key processes that impact on the effectiveness of the programme are identified and the positive effects spanning social, emotional and behavioural mechanisms are reported for six of the participants. Potential implications of this model of practice for Educational Psychology Services seeking to develop the capacity of schools to support loss are discussed.