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# Systematic Literature Review: Programmatic Considerations for Grief Groups in Elementary Schools

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Systematic Literature Review: Programmatic Considerations for Grief Groups in  
Elementary Schools.

By

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MSW Clinical Research Paper

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School of Social Work  
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The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present the findings of the study. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation

### **Abstract**

There has been an increase of focus surrounding aiding children who have lost a loved one by death over the past decade. It is broadly assumed that school-based grief groups for children are a beneficial way to support children, who are experiencing the loss of a loved one, in a safe and familiar environment. This systematic literature review was designed to explore the research question: What are the different models and goals of grief groups in an elementary school setting for children who have lost a loved one due to death? The review was set up using peer-reviewed articles, which focused on grief groups in elementary school setting. The databases SocINDEX, PsychINFO and Child Development and Adolescent Studies were systematically searched using the terms; “Elementary, Grief Groups and Schools” “Goals and Grief Groups and Schools” “Structure and Grief Groups and Schools and Children.” Out of these searches, nine articles satisfied criteria for inclusion and were used in the final review. Three themes emerged from the research surrounding grief groups in the elementary school setting, which included; selection criteria for selecting members for the grief groups, the structure of the grief groups and the goals of the grief groups. Selection criterion used to select members of the grief groups was not originally part of the research question but has shown to provide significant information surrounding the structure and goals of the grief groups. The research suggests inconsistencies between different grief group models implemented in elementary schools. Moving forward more research is required with grief groups for loss of a loved one due to death for elementary aged children in the school setting. Exploring the effectiveness of different models used for grief groups in elementary schools will be beneficially to when finding a common model that can be used across all schools as a guideline.

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### **Background**

Humans have been experiencing loss since the beginning of time: loss of loved ones, friends or even pets. Bereavement is a term used to define the feeling experienced after the loss of a loved one (Howarth, 2011). Different cultures and generations within the United States have demonstrated different ways of aiding the bereaved ranging from rituals and spiritual help to support groups and therapy (Baggerly, J. & Abugideiri, S., 2010). Increasingly over time aiding the bereaved has become more focused on the physical and psychological experiences one may encounter during loss as well as the social isolation that may come with the loss (Graydon, Jimerson, & Fisher, 2010). Adults are not the only age group that experience bereavement in their lifetime, children also experience bereavement and they may be less equipped to be able to cope with the effects of bereavement.

There has been a shift in the way death is perceived and discussed currently, to the way death has been perceived and discussed in the past. For example in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century death appeared to be more common because of the way the death of a loved one was handled. It was common in the 19<sup>th</sup> century for the family of the deceased to keep the body in the home and prepare the body for the funeral. Today the bodies of the deceased are taken to the morgue, which puts up a barrier around the death (Flippin, 1997). Today the United States is experiencing less death in the home compared for example to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The means of death in present has remained similar to those in the past, such as war and illness, but it has changed in terms of, car accidents, natural disasters and death due to gun violence. With the shift in how death is perceived and discussed today, a taboo around the topic of death has appeared to form in our society (Flippin, 1997; Peacock, 2014; & Gerwig, 2015).

The current views of death in today's society has created a taboo around the topic making it difficult for people to have conversations around the topic of death compared to the past.

Gerwig (2015) maintains that there are six reasons why people do not talk about death: "there is a sense of not feeling prepared to talk about death, there is a sense that it is unsettling to think about mortality, there is a sense that we do not want to traumatize loved ones, there is a sense that we do not want to cause a family dispute, there is a sense that it causes thinking about what has not accomplished and gives the sense of guilt for asking loved ones to work on their behalf" (p. 1). There are many reasons people decide there is a lack of information around the topic of how children view and talk about death (Peacock, 2014; Gerwig, 2015).

Samide and Stockton (2002) state that children tend to understand death differently than adolescents and adults. First children tend to blame themselves for the death of their loved one, thinking that if they would have done something differently or behaved differently than their loved one would still be alive (Samide & Stockton, 2002). Once a child moves past the self-blaming they often move in to a magical thinking state according to Samide and Stockton (2002). They stated that children might use fantasy to explain circumstances regarding the death of a loved one that cannot be explained. This magical thinking can also involve the child thinking that the death is not permanent and that they will be reunited with their loved one (Samide & Stockton, 2002). While children tend to understand death differently than adolescents and adults, research has found that there are resources available to help children through the grieving process (Samide & Stockton, 2002).

Today in the United States there are many options available to the bereaved including: support groups, psychotherapy, and pharmacology. The aid and assistance for one who is bereaved might be found in many different locations including; hospitals, churches, private

clinics and schools (Forte, Hill, Pazder, & Feudtner, 2004). According to the National Center for Educational Statistics in 2013 there were 98,454 elementary schools across the United States. For children experiencing the loss of a loved one, accessing support groups in their schools is often an option, which can help, them work through the grieving process in a safe and familiar setting. It is important to note that currently, schools host programs that support children through many kinds of grief and loss: loss due to death of a loved one, due to divorce, due to military deployments or even a sibling graduating high school and moving away to college. While each of these losses can be challenging for a child to understand and manage, the focus of this paper will be strictly on the first and potentially, the most devastating loss; the loss of a loved on through death.

Children experience grief and loss of a loved one (parent, guardian, sibling, aunt, uncle, grandparent or friend) more commonly than many think (Harrison & Harrington, 2001). Harrison and Harrington (2001) found that 76% 11-16 year olds had been bereaved of a close relative or friend. In comparison 2008 it was found that one out of every 20 children will lose one of both or their parents by age fifteen and this does not include the number of children who lose a parental figure such as a caregiver, or grandparent (Owens, 2008). To put the numbers in a different lens 1.5 million children were living in single parent homes due to the death of one parent in 2008 (Owens, 2008). The death of a loved one can have significant effects both physically and psychologically on the child.

The awareness in regards to bereaved children has significantly increased and there are becoming more resources for the children such as bereavement/ grief groups in the school setting. The grief groups are aimed to help address the physical and psychological symptoms the child maybe experiencing as well as providing basic support for the child (Lohnes & Kalter,

1994). Research has shown that there is no constancy in the models and goals of the grief groups for children who have lost a loved one due to death in the school setting.

### **Effects of the Loss of Loved Ones on Child**

Loss of a loved one is difficult on children and can have significant effects on them physically, emotionally, socially and academically. Loved ones play a significant role in the development of a child's brain. In recent research it has been found that children who have the special nurturing bond with a loved one tend to have a larger hippocampus, which allows them to better deal with stress and do better academically (Castro, 2012). When a child loses a loved one who they have a nurturing bond with experience a change in their hippocampus and are effected in their ability to cope with stress and are effected academically (Castro, 2012). When elementary aged children lose a close loved one they also experience physical changes. Physical symptoms, include in part, headaches, stomachaches and difficulty sleeping which impacts the child's ability to focus in school. Furthermore, when children lose a loved, children may experience changes in emotions, such as: becoming depressed, easily irritable, increased anxiety and anger.

Children do not only experience physical and emotional changes after the loss of a loved one, but this experience may also impact their ability to be in social situations. For example, children may demonstrate a range of atypical behavior, such as becoming more withdrawn from social situations, demonstrating aggressive behaviors towards others and continually discussing how their loved one died which can push others away. Finally, the loss of a loved one affects a child academically. Teachers report that after a child loses a loved one, they lose their ability to focus and their grades begin to decrease (Graydon, Jimerson, & Fisher, 2010). The loss of a

loved one and the grieving process has a significant toll on the child physically, emotionally, socially and academically.

The effects of grief not only effect the child while there are experiencing the loss but as well as after they have been through the grieving process. It was found that 56% of adults who lost a parent growing up would trade a year of their life for one more day with their departed parent (Children's Grief Awareness Day, n.d.). Adults who lose a parent as a child were then asked to think about what their life would be like if they had not lost their parent as a child, 72% believe their life would have been "much better" if their parent had not died so young ("Children's Grief Awareness Day," n.d.). Of American adults who lost a parent growing up, 69% still think about their parent frequently ("Children's Grief Awareness Day," n.d.). In addition to thoughts and feelings expressed during adulthood, loss of a parent as a child has effects on the child when the loss occurs. Tedeschi and Calhoun (2008) state that coping with loss is exhausting especially for children and can bring out similar traits one would see with depression, and this is normal when a child is coping with loss. After the loss of a parent about 85% of children experience symptoms such as trouble sleeping, trouble controlling anger, symptoms similar to those that are seen with depression and regressive behaviors that they may have out grown such as wetting the bed (Athans, 2009). The loss of a parent or loved one has a significant effect on the child and the effects can last for a long period of time, unless the child is able to effectively cope with the loss.

### **Grief Groups**

Grief groups, also known as bereavement groups, are becoming more available to children in the United States who have lost a parent or guardian (Fredricks & McColskey, 2012, *Wall Street Journal*, 1999). The awareness around the amount of bereaved children and possible

effects they many experience in result of the loss of a loved one have increased over time (Fredricks & McColskey, 2012, *Wall Street Journal*, 1999). The main goal of support in schools is to help children return to and move on with their life (Lohnes & Kalter, 1994).

Grief groups are important for children to be a part of if they are suitable to be in a group. Grief groups provide children with a safe space to explore their thoughts and feelings surrounding the death of their parent. Participating in a grief group allows the child to begin to accept and focus on their thoughts and feelings while receiving the support of the group leader and their peers (Wolfelt, 1996). In comparison to children who did not receive any support after the death of a parent, children who took part in a grief group in one study were able to navigate their feelings related to the loss they have been experiencing. Grief groups also provided children with the opportunity to learn how to effectively cope with the death of their parent resulting in a significant decrease in depressive-like symptoms (Abi-Hashem, 1999). Along with being able to navigate feelings surrounding grief and learning how to effectively cope, children in grief groups were provided education around the topic of death, which highlighted points including death as a permanent change and what the grieving process is. Children who did not take part in a grief group or get additional outside support were not able to work through the death of their parent, which in the long term can lead to the development of psychiatric disorders (Middleton, Raphael, Martinek, & Misso, 1993). Grief groups appear to be beneficial to children overall and are available to children in the school setting, which is safe and familiar.

While grief groups are beneficial for some children, there is not one common model used to develop selection criteria, structure and goals of the grief groups. Data is difficult to collect on the topic of grief groups because there are multiple phrases being used to address grief groups in schools, such as “grief groups”, “peer support groups” and “bereavement groups.” Not only are

there differences in what these grief groups are called there is also different opinions as to what aged children should be included in the group, how the group should be modeled (structured versus open) and how children should be selected to be a part of the grief group. Overall available research seems to suggest that having a grief group available to children in the school setting is beneficial to the child.

### **Selection Criteria for Participants of Grief Groups**

Selecting children to be a part of a grief group tends to be based on criteria set by the school or based on the type of support group being offer (American Society of Clinical Oncology, 2016) Many schools will most likely have their own type of criteria to select children to be in the grief group, however, some may not have distinctively considered this. As it appears that the selection process is up to the school there are different criteria the schools use to determine if a child is suitable for the grief group.

**Age of children in grief groups.** American Society of Clinical Oncology (2016) and Graydon, Jimerson, and Fisher (2010) agree that there should not be a large age span in the grief group as children's ability to express there emotions appears to be dependent upon their age. Graydon, Jimerson, and Fisher, argue that children should be divided in three different age groups. They state the children should be divided into either the preschool age group, which includes ages three to four, elementary aged group, including ages five to ten or middle and high school aged group, including ages 11-18. It is also pointed out that younger children struggle to express their emotions effectively. In comparison American Society of Clinical Oncology states that children as young as two and a half years old should take part in grief groups. Age is an important factor to be considered when selecting children to be in a grief group. Some schools

will pay close attention to the age and gender of the children in the group while others do not (Samide & Stockton, 2002).

### **Focus of the support group**

Schools may choose to invite everyone who has lost a parent into the grief group while others may tend to focus on children who are having difficulty with the grieving process. Bunce and Rickards (2004) stated that the only criteria that should be used when selecting members of the group should be the age of the grief group and the focus of the support group. In discussing the focus of the support group, Bunce and Rickards underscore considering what the focus of the support group was for. For example, was for it any child who was experiencing grief/loss or was it specifically for children who lost a loved one in regards to death?

### **Willingness to participate**

Samide and Stockton (2002) think that not only should age be focused on as a criterion, but the child must also be willing to participate in the group and that should be a part of the criteria when trying to form a group. If a child does not demonstrate a willingness to participate in a group setting the grief group may not be beneficial for the child and other types of interventions should be considered (Samide & Stockton, 2002). Willingness to participate in the group can be used as a part of the selection criteria but again is up to the school to decide.

The criteria the school has for their grief groups should be constructed by the school based on the needs and structure of the grief group in place and the school must assess if they have the right grief groups in place for the children who are in need of a grief group (Bunce & Rickards, 2004; Samide & Stockton, 2002). Schools should evaluate the needs of their grieving students before creating specific criteria for who can join the grief group.

## **Structure and Goal of Grief Groups**

In addition to the different research criteria for grief groups in school there is also differentiating research on how grief groups should be structured. Samide and Stockton (2002) believe that all grief groups should be structured, because they assert that there are certain steps that children must go through during the grieving process. They suggest that grief groups go for eight weeks with each week having a different topic. These topics are organized into specific order to help the child throughout the grieving process. Baggerly and Abugideiri, (2010) state that the age of the children in the grief group should impact the way the group is run. For example while Samide and Stockton (2002) believe that younger children should have the most structured group, Baggerly and Abugideiri (2010) argue that younger children need less structure in order to explore their thoughts and feelings at their own pace since emotions are harder for younger children to identify. Currently there is no significant evidence that one structure of a support group is more beneficial than another.

Grief groups differ in goals they want to accomplish during the group as well. Some grief groups have one major goal such as to alleviate the suffering of the child through support (Samide & Stockdon, 2002). Some grief groups choose to have one overall goal others choose to have multiple specific goals. For example, Finn and Pearson (2003) set five goals for their grief groups which include for the child to: better understand the emotions they feel, realize they can learn for difficulties they face, understand the stages of grief and loss, understand emotions when going through a loss, and learn the differences between positive and negative ways of emotions. Goals are based on the school and what the school wants the children to get out of the grief group. There appears that there is not one consistent goal for grief groups in an elementary school setting.

While there are differences in research as to what structure and goals should look like for grief groups for elementary aged children many schools appear to focus specifically on grief groups. Graydon, Jimerson, and Fisher (2010) argue that there should be three levels of support to help children in the grieving process and grief groups should be a part of second. The first level of support identified by Graydon, Jimerson, and Fisher (2010) consists of the school offering children stable and supportive relationships. The school is able to provide the child with supportive relationships from teachers, peers, and other school staff. The second level of support in a school is more focused on psychoeducational and therapeutic interventions. These interventions would come from teachers, school counselors, school social workers, or school therapist. The interventions are commonly support groups and/or individual counseling that is provided in school, before, during or after the school day. The third type of support the school can offer is off site where the school therapist or social worker refers the child to an outside therapist where they are able to get extra support that maybe needed (Graydon, Jimerson, & Fisher, 2010). They argue grief groups should be an integrated part of the three levels and not the only level of support the school offers.

### **Research Question**

While there are many different frameworks, models and techniques used in school grief groups it is important to note that each child handles grief differently. According to research, children seem to benefit from sharing their grief experience with peers who are undergoing similar loss. Grief groups also provide a safe space for children to explore their feelings and ask questions about death and the grieving process. While children are processing their emotions and feelings they are also able to begin the process of letting go but letting go in a healthy way, which will hopefully allow children to effectively move on (Samide & Stockton, 2002).

Currently there is no systematic literature review that analyzes and gathers current research on structure and goals of grief groups for children who have lost a close family member due to death in schools. This systematic literature review will review the research to determine different models and goals of grief groups for children who have experienced the loss of a close member due to death in a school setting in the United States.

## **Methods**

### **Research Question and Concepts**

The question that this systematic literature review seeks to address is: What are the different models and goals of grief groups in an elementary school setting for children who have lost a loved one due to death?

Key terms addressed included: “grief groups,” “elementary school,” “goals,” and “structure” as well as synonyms for each. When looking at elementary aged children the researcher will be looking at grief groups that focus on working with children kindergarten through fifth grade and ages 5-11. The term “loved one” included immediate adult family such as; mother, father, aunt, uncle, grandma or grandfather, sibling, step-parents as well as a guardian. A guardian was defined but was not limited to someone who has legal custody and is legally responsible for caring for the child. A guardian was also someone who has significant daily involvement with the child. The term school setting referred to public or private elementary schools where the child went out of their home to receive an education from a licensed teacher with peers.

### **Study Type**

The studies that used will consisted of conceptual and empirical studies peer reviewed studies with findings either of quantitative and qualitative nature that focused on grief groups in

elementary school. Studies that presented models and program objectives were included. It was not necessary to have empirical findings as this research was interested in models and stated goals. Therefore, overall studies used focused on the structure or model of the grief group as well as what the goals of the grief group were. Studies that showed specific structures and specific goals of the grief group were particularly beneficial in this study.

### **Levels of Publication**

This study consisted of peer-reviewed articles that focused on structure and goals of grief groups in elementary school setting. Grey literature was considered if there was not a significant amount of empirical articles. Grey literature websites consisted of reports that have been peer reviewed as well as websites that were .edu and .gov.

### **Search Terms, Sensitivity and Specificity**

A systematic literature review is intended to be a reliable source, which pulls information from all relative research. In order to get a sense of the possibility and parameters of the research, sensitivity and specificity searches were conducted. Sensitivity searches gathered a large number of sources: some relevant and some irrelevant. On the other side, specificity searches gathered a smaller number of studies, which were highly specific to the topic. Although the specificity search gathered studies that were highly specific to the research question, it provided a more narrow lens that could have missed research that is relevant to the topic (Petticrew & Roberts, 2005). Conducting both searches helped provide a scope of the study.

For the sensitivity search the search terms included “grief groups” and “grief and children”. The researcher searched the terms “grief groups” on SocIndex and 832 articles came up and when “grief groups and children” was searched 271 articles came up. The terms used for the specificity search included “Grief groups in elementary schools” which presented 8 articles

and “Grief support in elementary schools” which presented 8 studies through the SocIndex database.

### **Review Protocol**

The search terms that were used included; “Elementary, Grief Groups and Schools” “Goals and Grief Groups and Schools” “Structure and Grief Groups and Schools and Children.” The databases that were used to retrieve the peer-reviewed articles included SocINDEX, PsychINFO and Child Development and Adolescent Studies. The grey literature was retrieved from government websites, education websites and research that had been peer reviewed. Once quantitative, qualitative and grey literature articles were collected from the databases and grey literature resources, they were analyzed based on the research question of models and goals of grief groups in elementary school settings.

**Inclusion criteria.** In the databases of SocINDEX, PsychINFO and Child Development and Adolescent Studies, searches were carried out using the following combination of search terms, “elementary” or “child” AND “grief groups” or “bereavement groups” AND “school.” All articles that came up in these databases, using these search terms, were peer-reviewed. In SocINDEX, 56 peer-reviewed articles satisfied the specific search criteria. A search using PsychINFO generated 153 peer-reviewed articles. In Child Development and Adolescent Studies, eight peer-reviewed articles were retrieved.

The focal point of this research was around structure and goals of grief groups in an elementary school setting, therefore articles that were included involved elementary aged children grades kindergarten through fifth grade or ages 5-12 years. Articles were included that used grief groups or bereavement groups as a way to provide support for children after the loss

of a loved one. Articles that focused on grief or bereavement groups in the school setting were also included in this research.

**Exclusion criteria.** Of the 217 peer-reviewed articles that met the initial search only 11 met criteria to be included in this literature review. Articles which were excluded from the research review included: studies focused on bereaved parents; articles that focused on grief groups not in a school setting; articles that focused on an age group outside of the elementary age; articles that did not focus on structure of the grief group; and articles that focused on trauma or loss not related to the loss of a significant loved one. Selected articles were also limited to those written in English.

Inclusion and exclusion decisions were made based on the title and abstract of the articles. Of the 11 articles that satisfied the inclusion and exclusion criteria *Play therapy for bereaved children: Adapting Strategies to Community, School and Home Settings* by Nancy Boyd Webb (2011) was excluded because it referenced a book for the layout of the structure of the grief group. *Exploring the Effects of the 'Seasons for Growth' Intervention for Pupils Experiencing Change and Loss* by Anna Riley (2012) was also excluded because no structure for the grief group was identified. The final review consisted of nine peer-reviewed articles. See Table 1 for a complete list of included articles. A more detailed list of included articles with a brief break down of content included in articles can be found in Appendix A.

**Table 1** Studies Included in the Research Synthesis

Author(s), Year Published	Model	Selection Criteria	Goals	Structure of Group
Baggerly & Abugideiri (2010)	Religion	Yes	Multiple	Stages
Finn (2002)	Art Therapy	Yes	Multiple	Weekly
Gloumakoff (2007)	Elementary Model	No*	Multiple	Weekly
Goldberg & Leyden (1998)	Rehabilitation Model	Yes	Single	Order topics should be addressed
Hillard (2007)	Orff Based Music Therapy	Yes	Single	Weekly
Lohnes & Kalter (1994)	Time Limited	Yes	Multiple	Weekly
Murphy (1997)	Psychotherapy			
Salloum, Garside, Irwin, Anderson & Francois (2009)	CBT Group Intervention	Yes	Multiple	Phases
Samide & Stockton (2002)	Education	Yes	Single	Weekly
Schonfeld & Kappelman (1991)	School-Based Education	Yes	Single	Same topic each week

Note: \* this article did not meet the selection criteria, but was included because it provided significant information on the structure and goals of the grief groups.

### Research Synthesis

The purpose of this systematic literature review was to explore the question: what are goals and the structure of grief groups in elementary schools for children who have lost a loved one. Using the databases of SocINDEX, PsychINFO and Child Development and Adolescent Studies and working within the inclusion and exclusion criteria, nine peer-reviewed articles met criteria and were reviewed. Of the nine articles five (55%) of the articles focused on grief groups just for children who had lost a close loved one. Four (44%) of the articles focused on grief groups for children who had lost a loved one in combination with trauma. All nine of the articles (100%) focused on children who were in elementary school.

Well over half of the research included in this systematic literature review (88%, n=8) focused on grief groups that included both boys and girls. One article (11%) contained research

that focused on gender specific grief groups. One (11%) article also focused on grief groups for children who are of Muslim Religion. The other seven (77%) articles did not focus on grief groups for any specific identifier.

The research included in this review demonstrated a variety of design types. The first design type demonstrated was classical experimental design; three of the nine articles (33%) of the articles fell into this category. Five out of the nine articles used (55%) were classified as case studies and one out of the nine articles (11%) was classified as a literature review as well as a classical experiment. Overall three of the nine articles (33%) are classified as a quantitative data study, five of the nine articles (55%) are classified as qualitative data studies, and one of the studies (11%) is classified as both a qualitative and quantitative data study.

While there were differences in specific ages and genders covered in the research, all articles considered in this systematic review focused on the structure and goals of grief groups in elementary school settings.

### **Thematic Analysis**

Through analysis of the literature, three interrelated themes emerged from this systematic review around the structure and goals of grief groups for the loss of a loved one in the elementary school setting. These themes include: 1) criteria for selecting participants to be a part of the grief group; 2) the goals of the grief group, single versus multiple goals; and 3) the structure of the grief group (weekly, phases, stages or none.)

**Selecting participants for the grief group.** Many of the programs discussed in the literature established strict criteria which was followed in selecting members of the grief groups (Baggerly & Abugideiri, 2010; Finn, 2003; Goldberg & Leyden, 1998; Hillard, 2007; Lohnes & Kalter, 1994; Murphy, 1997; Salloum, Garside, Irwin, Anderson & Francois, 2009; Samide &

Stockton, 2002; Schonfeld & Kappelman, 1991). The criteria identified were based on the type of grief group and the structure of the grief group. Some of the criteria used focused on specific ages, gender of participants, how recent the loss of a loved one was, if there were any presenting problems that could inhibit the child's ability to participate in the group, and how the child heard about the program.

Age appeared as a prominent factor when selecting children to be in the grief group across the nine articles that discussed criteria. The structure of the grief group, as well as the goals influenced the appropriate age for members of the grief group. Some models are open allowing a variety of ages as a part of selecting children in elementary school to be members of the grief group. Lohnes and Kalter (1994) as well as Hillard (2007) focus on selecting kids five to eleven for their grief groups. They assert that all kids can benefit from the support of a grief group, however, the younger the kid the more structured the group may have to be (Lohnes &Kalter, 1994; Hillard, 2007).

While Lohnes and Kalter (1994) and Hillard (2007) believe that children as young as five can take part in a grief group in a school setting, Salloum, Garside, Irwin, Anderson and Francois (2009) presented a smaller range, 7-12 years old, (although they did not indicate why they use that age range). Finn (2003) applies an even narrower and older age range of children for her grief groups of 11-13 years old when selecting members. She also did not indicate why she used an older age range when selecting members of her group.

Grief groups may use narrow age ranges to help with the selection process of the members of their grief group, while some leave the age range more open. Baggerly and Abugideiri (2010) do not focus on a specific age range, instead they focus on the elementary population with the idea that the children must be within two years of each other in order for the

group to be effective. Other models of grief groups do not focus on specific age ranges or making sure that the children are within two years of each other, instead they just focus on the elementary population and do not even use age as selection criteria (Goldberg & Leyden, 1998; Samide & Stockton, 2002; Schonfeld & Kappelman, 1991).

Another factor considered when selecting children to become members of the grief groups was the gender of the children. Four of the nine articles used for this systematic review identified gender as one of the factors used when selecting members of a group. Finn (2003), Goldberg and Leyden (1998) and Lohnes and Kalter (1994) all identified that their grief groups should consist of both boy and girl group members. Salloum, Garside, Irwin, Anderson and Francois (2009) on the other hand believe that grief groups should be gender-specific to help tailor strategies that would be effective for one gender and not the other, as well as providing more comfort and trust among group members. Gender appears to be important to some models of grief groups while not as important to others.

Along with gender and age of participants, some grief group models also focused on how recent the loss of the loved one was when selecting members of the group. Four out of the nine models focused on how recent the loss of the loved one was. The time period these models suggest when selecting members of the group varies from one month to two years. Finn (2003) and Hillard (2007) both agree that participants in the group should have experienced loss within the past two years. Similarly, Samide and Stockton (2002) agree that participants should have experienced the loss of a loved one in the past two years but no more recent than four months. Their approach behind having participants who experienced loss at least four months ago is that they have had time with family and by themselves to start to process the death of the loved one. Unlike Samide and Stockton (2002) Salloum, Garside, Irwin, Anderson and Francois (2009) look

for participants who have been grieving one-month post death. They recommend one month post-death for similar reasons as Samide and Stockton (2002). The time frame for the children grieving post death used to select members of the grief groups ranges from one month to no more than two years.

Grief group models also look at whether or not the children are presenting with behavior problems. Finn (2003) focused their grief group selection criteria specifically on children who were presenting with behavioral problems. She used this factor when selecting children due to the fact the grief group was taking place in an alternative learning school for children experiencing behavioral problems. Unlike Finn (2003), Baggerly and Abugideiri (2010), Salloum Garside, Irwin, Anderson and Francois (2009) focused on selecting children who did not have any presenting behavior or mental health issues. Baggerly and Abugideiri (2010) focused on selecting children who were non-disruptive and were able to effectively participate in a group. Salloum, Garside, Irwin, Anderson and Francois (2009) do not focus on disruptive behaviors but instead focus on if the child is presenting with any suicidal thoughts or ideations. Both Baggerly and Abugideiri (2010), and Salloum, Garside, Irwin, Anderson & Francois (2009) used different questionnaires that were created to help measure these behaviors. Other models did not focus on any behavioral or mental health issues.

Selection criteria varies from model to model and research shows that the selection criteria should be based on the model and the school setting (Baggerly & Abugideiri, 2010; Finn, 2002; Goldberg & Leyden, 1998; Hillard, 2007; Lohnes & Kalter, 1994; Murphy, 1997; Salloum, Garside, Irwin, Anderson & Francois, 2009; Samide & Stockton, 2002; Schonfeld & Kappelman, 1991). Research studies that do focus on selection criteria are looking at factors such as age,

gender, how recent the loss of their loved one was and if there were or were not any presenting mental or behavioral health concerns.

**Structure of grief groups.** Research indicates that it is critical to provide structure to grief groups in elementary schools in order to best help the children cope with the loss (Baggerly & Abugideiri, 2010; Finn, 2003; Gloumakoff, 2007; Goldberg & Leyden, 1998; Hillard, 2007; Lohnes & Kalter, 1994; Murphy, 1997; Salloum, Garside, Irwin, Anderson & Francois, 2009; Samide & Stockton, 2002; Schonfeld & Kappelman, 1991). The structure of the grief groups focuses on what topics should be addressed and when. Many of the articles identified specific models in which each week is laid out with a certain topic to be discussed, while others presented with a more general idea, including phases, stages and general order in which topics should be addressed.

According to Samide and Stockton (2002), having structure when working through grief with children is important in order to help the children effectively cope with the loss of a loved one. They lay out their grief group week by week for eight weeks with each week designated a specific topic. During week one children are identifying and exploring feelings which Samide and Stockton (2002) believe needs to take place before the children can move on to the more difficult grief work. Week two children are receiving the opportunity to receive death education and ask any questions related to death they may have. Week three the children are discussing memories they have of their deceased loved one. Week four is focused on changes that the children are experiencing related to the loss of a loved one and the children are given the opportunity to process through these changes. Weeks five and six are focused on grief education, during these two weeks children are oriented to the stages of grief. During week seven children

are focused on letting go and finding ways to say good-bye to the deceased. Finally, in week eight children work on saying good-bye to the loved one they lost as well as the group.

Similar to Samide and Stockton (2002), Lohnes and Kalter (1994) also focus on a weekly structure. The structure Lohnes and Kalter presented shared similar topics with Samide and Stockton but in a different order. Their structure of their grief group for children in the elementary school setting was also laid out weekly over a span of 12 weeks. During week one children were focused on learning about death and building group cohesion. During weeks two and three the children were continuing their conversations about death education and asking questions about death while identifying death misconceptions. Week four was focused on answering the question “What happens right after a parent dies?” This gave the children the opportunity to ask questions and discuss memorial services and what happens to the body. Weeks five through eight gave children the opportunity to share their experiences with losing a parent, which gave the children an opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings surrounding the death of their parent and receive support from peers. During week nine children were given the opportunity to discuss holidays and how they were affected after the loss of a parent. Week 10 the children were encouraged to bring in a memento and share stories of their deceased parent. Week 11 was focused on creating a bereavement newspaper. During this session the children interviewed each other on what it was like to lose a parent. These stories were gathered and put into a newspaper. Finally, during week 12 the newspaper was handed out to the children and they were encouraged to share with loved ones. This last week also focused on saying good-bye to the grief group as it came to a close.

Feelings, education about death and education on the stages of grief are similarities presented in research done by Samide and Stockton (2002); Lohnes and Kalter (1994);

Gloumakoff (2007); Finn (2003) and Hillard (2007). These common themes are presented in each study but the order and other content demonstrates the differences between the structures. For example Gloumakoff's (2007) structure differs in the way that the grief group only lasts for six weeks. During week one children are being introduced to the concept of feelings and they are exploring their own feelings regarding the loss of a loved one. During week two the children in the grief group are being exposed to the concept of loss and they are exploring their own losses. Week three the children are introduced to the life cycle, during this week they are exploring the differences between life and death. Week four is focused on having the children think of ways in which they can remember their loved one that they have lost. During week five children learn how to support other peers who have lost a loved one. Finally, during week six the children focus on themselves and how to raise their self-esteem and how they can celebrate their life as well as the life of the loved one they have lost.

Like previous research (Samide & Stockton,2002, Lohnes & Kalter,1994) Gloumakoff (2007), Hillard (2007) and Finn (2003) focus on weekly structure but they try to incorporate other therapy techniques such as music and art. Each week is still assigned a specific topic and similar topics such as; feelings, education on death and the stages of grief, as seen in Samide and Stockton (2002); Lohnes &Kalter (1994); Gloumakoff (2007). There are differences in the order of the topics as well as the accompanying topics for the other weeks. Hillard (2007) focuses on using music therapy in a school setting grief group for elementary aged children. His grief group lasted seven weeks and each week incorporated music to help guide the topic for that week. During week one the children were focused on learning basic death education. During week two the focus for the group was on normalizing death as change and a normal part of life. Week three was focused on the children being able to identify their sadness and find effective coping skills.

Week four consisted of the children working on identifying their anger and discovering ways to safely express the anger related to the loss of their loved one. The focus for week five was on how the children can remember their loved one. Week six allowed the children to discuss what they have learned so far from the grief group as well as learning how to move past the death of their loved one. During the final week the grief group focused on promoting positive coping skills and positive supports for the children.

Similar to Hillard (2007), Finn (2003) also focuses on using a fine art in their grief groups. They incorporate visual art into their nine-week grief group. Their grief group is still laid out week by week with specific topics for each week. They share similar topics such as feelings, and stages of grief with Samide and Stockton (2002); Lohnes and Kalter (1994); and Gloumakoff (2007). Similar to Hillard (2007), Finn (2003) also incorporates coping skills into their structure. Their week by week structure is as follows; week one focuses on introductions and forming group rules, week two focuses on exploring feelings that are associated with loss, week three focuses on reviewing feelings, reducing isolation and remembering the deceased with art, week four is a continuation of remembering the deceased with art, week five focuses on how to cope with feelings evoked by grief, week six focuses on education about the grieving process, week seven is a review of the stages of grief, week eight focuses on learning appropriate reactions to grief, finally week nine focuses on reflection of the group and how to create new beginnings.

While Samide and Stockton (2002); Lohnes and Kalter (1994); Gloumakoff (2007); Hillard (2007); Finn (2003) all focus on week by week models with each week representing a different topic, there are still differences on which topics are covered and when. Weekly models are not the only way grief groups in the elementary schools are structured. Salloum, Garside,

Irwin, Anderson and Francois (2009) use a model that is broken down into three phases. Their grief group lasts for 10 weeks. Phase one, weeks one through five focuses on resilience and safety. During this phase the focus is on promoting strengths, coping skills, safety, resilience and getting the children comfortable with participating in the group. Phase two, weeks six through nine, focuses on restorative retelling, which consists of the children sharing their personal experiences and receiving support from other children in the group. There is a slight overlap between phase two and three. Phase three, weeks eight through 10 focuses on reconnecting, which involves the children connecting and reconnecting to the living memory of the deceased and engaging in meaningful relationships. The phases allow the structure to be more flexible which Salloum, Garside, Irwin, Anderson and Francois (2009) note is important because children process and grieve at different rates.

Similar to Salloum, Garside, Irwin, Anderson and Francois (2009), Baggerly and Abugideiri (2010) do not use a week-by-week structure in order to allow more flexibility to focus on what the children in the grief group need. Baggerly and Abugideiri (2010) present their model and structure in stages. Their grief groups last anywhere from eight to 10 weeks and during that time period the grief group travels through five stages. Stage one is focused on bonding and building trust with participants in the grief group. Stage two focused on introducing the Muslim concept of death. Stage three is where the children began exploring issues, feelings and thoughts around death. Stage four focused on normalizing the feelings the children were experiencing related to death while starting to increase faith based thoughts around the topic of death. The final stage, stage five, focused on developing effective coping skills for the present and future in relation to the loss of their loved one. With the structure of stages the grief group is able to spend more time in stages that the group needs more time in.

While Salloum, Garside, Irwin, Anderson and Francois (2009) and Baggerly and Abugideiri (2010) use less structure than the week-by-week models, they are still providing some structure by providing stages or phases that grief groups should use. Other models do not use a week-by-week or stages/phases structure, instead Goldberg and Leyden (1998) provides a list of topics and the order in which they should be discussed. They do not provide a timeline of how long each topic should be addressed; they focus on the needs of the grief group and what the children need. Their model is known as the rehabilitation model and aims to address four topics which are as follows: receiving support, answering questions related to the loss of the loved one, skills on how to discuss death, and building resources and supports. Similar to Salloum, Garside, Irwin, Anderson and Francois (2009) and Baggerly and Abugideiri (2010), Goldberg and Leyden (1998) provided less structure in their grief groups in hopes of allowing the children to process and work through the loss at their own pace while still providing structure to help the children gain effective coping skills and knowledge around the loss they are experiencing.

The majority of the grief groups focused on children who are experiencing loss of a loved one (Baggerly & Abugideiri, 2010; Finn, 2003; Gloumakoff, 2007; Goldberg & Leyden, 1998; Hillard, 2007; Lohnes & Kalter, 1994; Murphy, 1997; Salloum, Garside, Irwin, Anderson & Francois, 2009; Samide & Stockton, 2002). As discussed earlier Schonfeld and Kappelman (1991) focus on all children, even if they have not experienced the loss of a loved one. They addressed children as whole classrooms and considered the entire classroom a grief group. Since they were addressing a large population their structure of the grief group looked different from the previous structures described. In a classroom setting Schonfeld and Kappelman (1991) provided six 45-minute presentations over the time period of six weeks. Each presentation covered the same topic of death education and effective reactions to death. The idea behind

covering the same topic each week was that children would be provided death education and gain a better understanding of how to effectively react to death even if they were not experiencing loss.

The structure of grief groups in the elementary school setting can vary from model to model. Some models use a week-by-week structure, which focuses on working through the grieving process sequentially. Two models offer more flexibility in the understanding of how grief works as there are longer phases/stages. The last model is the most flexible, as it does not present movement in anyone direction, but focuses on a deeper understanding of the grieving process and offers repeated attempts to address it in hope that one of the times will work for the children.

**Goals of grief groups.** While the structures of the grief groups are important in order to help children work through, or even engage the grieving process, the goals of the grief groups drive the structure and are perhaps more fundamental. The goals of the grief group can influence the selection criteria as well as the structure of the grief groups. Each of the nine articles used for this systematic literature review identified at least one goal of their grief group, while some of the models identified multiple goals. Some of the goals that grief groups had established for their grief groups included gain death education, gain coping skills, and share personal stories.

The grief groups that provided a single goal for their grief group were all aimed to assist the children work through the grieving process although they each proposed a different focus on how the children would work through the grieving process. Samide and Stockton (2002) developed a singular goal for their grief group, which was identified as alleviating the suffering a child who has lost a loved one through mutual support. With a similar goal to Samide and Stockton (2002), Hillard (2007) developed a single goal, which was to improve the mood and

behavior of the children who had experienced the loss of a loved one. Similarly Schonfeld and Kappelman (1991) also focused on a singular goal, but their goal was to provide death education and education around the grieving process. Also providing a single goal, Goldberg and Leyden (1998) focused on the goal of providing intellectual and emotional skills that will help children be able to break the silence around talking about death and be able to actively discuss death and the grieving process.

While single goals are used in some models of these grief groups, other models develop multiple goals. One model (Lohnes & Kalter, 1994) identified six goals for their grief group which are identified as: 1) normalize the children's experience and reaction to the loss of their loved on, 2) clarify confusing issues related to death, 3) provide a safe place for children to work through the grieving process and the difficult and confusing topic of death, 4) help children develop coping skills for feelings that may be difficult for them, 5) help the children remain connected in a healthy way to the loss loved one, and 6) help the children share their difficulties and concerns with surviving loved ones about the death of the loved one (Lohnes & Kalter, 1994).

There are similar goals identified by Finn and (2003) as Lohnes and Kalter (1994). Like Lohnes and Kalter (1994) one of the goals developed by Finn (2003) focuses on the children understanding the emotions they are feeling and why they are feeling them which can normalize their emotions. She identified a total of five goals for their grief group which are as follows: 1) to better understand their emotions, 2) to help the children learn from the difficulties they face, 3) to gain education on grief and loss, 4) to gain understanding of emotions the child feels when they are coping with the loss and 5) to learn the difference between positive and negative coping skills in relation to coping with grief and loss.

Gaining effective coping skills and exploring emotions related to death are just two of the goals identified by Finn (2003), which are also identified in the five goals developed by Baggerly and Abugideiri (2010). In the goals identified by Baggerly and Abugideiri (2010) they also focus on normalizing the emotions the children are experiencing which is similar to one of the goals identified by Lohnes and Kalter (1994). The five goals for the children identified by Baggerly and Abugideiri (2010) are as follows; 1) gain trust from other members of the group, 2) learn the religious concept of death, 3) explore their emotions in relation to the loss of the loved one, 4) normalize the emotions and thoughts the child is experiencing and 5) develop effective coping skills.

While Lohnes and Kalter (1994), Baggerly and Abugideiri (2010), and Finn (2003), all identify five or more goals for their grief groups, Gloumakoff (2007) and Salloum, Garside, Irwin, Anderson and Francois (2009) identify fewer goals for their grief groups. Two goals were identified by Gloumakoff (2007) in her grief group model. Her two goal were; 1) teach children about death and how to deal with it and 2) teach children to appreciate the life they have. Her first goal about children learning about death can tie into other models' goals about educating about death (Baggerly & Abugideiri, 2010; Finn 2002; Schonfeld & Kappelman, 1991).

Sharing similar goals with Lohnes and Kalter (1994), Salloum, Garside, Irwin, Anderson and Francois (2009) only identify three goals their grief groups focus on. Their goals are identified as: 1) learn about grief and trauma reactions, 2) express thoughts about what happened, and 3) decrease posttraumatic stress reactions. Similar to Lohnes and Kalter (1994), Salloum, Garside, Irwin, Anderson and Francois (2009) focus on the children being able to share their experience and feel comfortable enough the share their thoughts and feelings surrounding their experience of the loss of a loved one.

While some grief groups for the loss of a loved one in an elementary school setting focus on a single goal while others focus on multiple goals, there appears to be overlap and similar goals as well as different goals. The prominent goals found during the systematic literature review included: gain death education, gain coping skills, and share personal stories. The goals all aim at the children being able to work through and learn about the grieving process, in order to effectively cope with the loss they are experiencing.

### **Discussion**

This systematic literature review was developed to explore the available research on the topic of identifying goals and structure for grief groups for elementary aged children in the school setting. This review focused on grief groups where the children had experienced the loss of a close loved one (i.e., parents, step-parent, aunt, uncle, grandparent, sibling or guardian). This review was set up using systematic rules for inclusion and exclusion criteria within identified literature databases to find the most accurate and current research on this topic. What emerged from this systematic review was the criteria for selecting participants for the grief groups, the structure of the grief groups and the goals for the grief groups. Addressing selection criteria for participants for the grief groups was not included in the research question but proved to be an important finding. The selection criteria used to select members for the grief groups has appeared to shape the structure and goals of the grief groups. The findings suggest that there is still inconsistency when it comes to selection criteria, structure and goals of the grief groups.

When looking at member selection criteria of the grief group there was inconsistency and a wide variety on what factors are important to consider. For age some of the programs looked at specific ages while others were broader. When looking at gender some of the programs included both boys and girls while others focused on selecting members of the same gender. The range of

recency of loss of the loved one ranged from one month to two years. Some programs considered related behavior problems of the children, while others did not. In summary, the review showed that was inconsistency in factors selected and how those factors were used to select participants for the grief groups.

Similar to selection criteria, the structure of the grief groups was variable. The structure of the nine grief groups used in this systematic literature review ranged from a week by week structure, to a phase/stage structure, to the order in which topics should be addressed, to discussing the same topic each week. Grief groups that focused on the same structure, for example the week-by-week structure, were not consistent in the topics covered each week and the order of the topics. Only two grief groups were structured in exactly the same way. Some groups a few similar topics, but they did not fall into the same place in their structure. Most commonly, the groups did not have any direct similarities in structure and topics covered during the grief group.

The goals of the grief groups also were inconsistent across the nine grief groups. Five programs had multiple goals laid out for their grief groups. The grief group with the most goals identified six goals for their group; the rest of the grief groups ranged from two to six goals and none of the goals were the same. This is similar to the four articles that identified a single goal. None of the grief groups that identified and single goal identified the same goal. There were some similar components of goals across the nine grief groups but there was not significant consistency in the number of goals identified and what those goals were. Of the nine programs collectively the top five goals included understanding the stages of grief and loss, how to cope with grief and loss, normalizing and understanding emotions, decrease sadness and to clarify confusing issues surrounding the topic of death.

## **State of the Literature**

While this systematic review was designed to include all current and appropriate research on the topic of grief groups for elementary school aged children who have lost a loved one in a school setting, but this review indicated there are a number of limitations of the state of the body of literature. First there has not been a significant amount of research done focusing on grief groups for elementary school aged children who have lost a loved one (i.e parents, step-parent, aunt, uncle, grandparent, sibling or guardian) and more specifically grief groups for these children that take place in a school setting. There was a limited number of articles that focused on this specific population and the selection criteria, structure and goals of the grief groups.

With the limited amount of articles there was also inconsistency across the three themes of selection criteria, structure and goals of the grief groups. This made it particularly difficult to determine what selection criteria, structure, and goals are being identified and used when developing grief groups for this specific population. This review looked at all different types of studies consisting mostly of quantitative and qualitative and one dissertation. The research on this topic is descriptive and there are not enough articles or consistency on this topic to discover which selection criteria, structure and goals should be used when developing a grief group for elementary school aged children who have lost a loved one in a school setting.

The literature used in this systematic literature review encompassed a variety of models that are currently being used in the school setting. It demonstrated how children do experience and cope with death differently. This research provides a variety on concepts that can be drawn upon if future research leads to creating a singular model that can be used universally and can be used no matter how the children in the grief group cope with the loss of a loved one.

### **Further Research and Implications**

The first thing to emerge from this systematic review was the inconsistency in the data collected in the three areas of selection criteria, structure and goals. Future research should look at the different factors used in selection criteria, the different structure and topics covered, and the number of goals and what the goals are and conduct research to determine what selection criteria, structure, and goals are the most beneficial to this specific population of children in a grief group at school. Not only are there a wide variety of current proposed benefits to grief groups, there is very little evidence about which of these are actually being met. Thus the recommendation is twofold: first, which outcomes should programs attend to, and second, how well are they met? These considerations would be beneficial to schools to have a better understanding of what is beneficial to children who are experiencing the loss of a loved one and how a grief group can better support them.

Along with the inconsistency of the existing research there is also a need for more research focused on grief groups for children who have lost a loved one due to death and especially in the school setting. Future research should focus on grief groups in settings such as schools where there currently a lack or research. Having the children participate in a grief group in a school setting is beneficial because it provides them with a safe place to process the grief and they are also in a familiar setting. Future research should also address grief groups for children who have lost a loved one due to death specifically, currently there appears to be more focus on support groups for children who have lost a parent due to divorce than death. This may stem from the concept that divorce is seen as more prevalent and easier to discuss than the loss of a loved one. Providing children with support and resources in the school setting to help them process through the loss of a loved one is broadly assumed to be beneficial for them.

Along with inconsistency in structure, goals and selection criteria for grief groups, and the need for more research to be completed focusing on grief groups for children who have lost a loved one due to death, it is important that selection criteria for selecting members of the group be included. Throughout this research the theme of selection criteria for members of the grief groups emerged and appeared to influence the goals and structure of the grief groups. There was an emphasis on certain selection criteria such as age of participants, their gender, how recent the loss of their loved one was and if they demonstrated any behavioral problems. Addressing selection criteria in the research question will provide more insight on how grief groups are formed and best carried out.

Overall, there needs to be more research conducted specifically on children who have lost a loved one due to death with a focus on the grief group taking place in a school setting. Hopefully as more research is conducted on how to select participants for the grief groups and what structure and goals are the most beneficial to the children in the grief group, grief groups will be utilized more in the school setting. Grief groups address physical and psychological symptoms that children may experience in reaction to the loss of a loved one, as well as provide support to the child. Once there is a model that is proven to be effective schools should implement it to help aid the children who maybe bereaved.

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## Appendix A

Database	Title	Author(s)
PsychINFO	The effects of Orff-based music therapy and social work groups on childhood grief symptoms and behaviors.	Hillard, R. (2007)
	Letting go of grief: Bereavement groups for children in the school setting.	Samide, L.L., & Stockton, R. (2002)
	Preventative intervention groups for parentally bereaved children.	Lohnes, K.L., & Kalter, N. (1994)
	The impact of school-based education on the young child's understanding of death.	Schonfeld, D.J., & Kappelman, M. (1991)
	Left and left out: Teaching children to grieve through a rehabilitation curriculum.	Goldberg, F.R., & Leyden, H.D. (1998)
SocIndex	Helping students cope with loss: incorporating art into group counseling.	Finn, C.A. (2002)
	Grief counseling for Muslim preschool and elementary school children.	Baggerly, J., & Abugideiri, S. (2010)
	Grief and trauma group therapy for children after Hurricane Katrina.	Salloum, A., Garside, L.W., Irwin, C.L., Anderson, A.D., & Francois, A.H. (2009)
	Students sharing feelings of grief: An elementary curriculum on loss.	Gloumakoff, K. (2007)

