School pupils and their understanding of significant change and losses in life.

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Acknowledgements

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School Pupils And Their Understanding Of Major Change Or Losses In Life

Executive Summary

Background

The impact of bereavement in childhood is significant. The Childhood Bereavement Network suggests that 78% of 11-16 year olds in the UK have experienced the death of a close relative or friend. Children respond to bereavement in different ways depending on their age and understanding of death. Abdelnoor and Hollins (2003) suggest bereaved children experience significant anxiety in addition to underachieving at school.

Pallium Canada's Compassionate Schools initiative suggests a compassionate school is one that includes death education as part of its curriculum and policies and provides a supportive community for pupils, staff and parents. Pallium Canada highlights that "all natural cycles of sickness and health, birth and death, and love and loss occur every day within these educational institutions." (Pallium Canada, http://pallium.ca/cc/compassionate-schools/what-is-a-compassionate-school/)

This study, involving pupils, parents and staff, sought to understand young people's perceptions of loss, death and dying. This collaborative qualitative pilot study was undertaken in conjunction with colleagues in Canada and was designed to gain knowledge of how children of different ages understand loss, death and dying; the support they access and their awareness of what is available to them. The pupils in Canada were of primary school age; whereas the study's Scottish component involved one secondary school with participants aged between 12-18 years.

This report focuses on the findings from the Scotland study.

Research questions

Five research questions were addressed:

- What are children's understanding of change, loss and death at ages 12-18?
- To whom, and how, do children communicate their understanding of change, loss and death?
- What, if any, coping skills do children demonstrate in dealing with change, loss and death?
- What support are they aware of and do they choose to access this?
- How do parents and teachers communicate or educate children regarding coping skills associated with major loss?

Methodology

Three online questionnaires were designed, tailored for pupils, parents and staff respectively. These were piloted and revised before being finalised and disseminated by way of Survey Monkey

The proposed sample sought 20 participants for each group. The response however exceeded this and the final sample size was 31 pupils, 108 parents and 37 staff. Given the apparent interest the study was left open to maximise the data. The numerical data gave context to the qualitative findings and were analysed using Survey Monkey. A thematic analysis of free text data was also undertaken.

Strengths and Limitations

A key strength of this study is the high level and quality of responses. Notwithstanding this, researchers found that pupils were more difficult to recruit to the study than either parents or teachers. As to why this is the case is not evident.

Funding and time constraints precluded any follow up to the questionnaires to explore the findings in more depth. The collected data came from one school with a largely middle class catchment area making the generalizability of the findings limited.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was granted by Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen.

Questionnaires were anonymous and participants advised that all data collected would be confidential. Preliminary information regarding the study advised that involvement was discretionary and that participants could withdraw at any stage. All young people were encouraged to discuss participation with their parents or guardian and those under the age of 16 required signed consent before participation.

Care was taken to minimise the risk of identifying individuals and any distinguishing information has been withheld from the report.

Findings

The study found that these young people feel a complex range of emotions around change, loss and death. In seeking support they primarily turn to parents and friends. Evidence suggests there is little awareness of formal support, advice or counselling and this has been accessed by only a small minority. Parents also see family as the principal source of support for their children. Only a minority of parents indicated

that their children had accessed formal support, thus resonating with the responses from pupils.

Most parents and teachers reported that they believed conversations on loss, death and dying to be useful for young people. Parents had strong views on who should have these conversations with their children. Many believed that these should only happen within close family. Some, however, recognised that conversations outside the immediate family could be helpful. Others expressed the view that society should be open to talking about loss, death and dying and children should feel able to have these conversations with anyone with whom they feel comfortable.

Almost all parents and most teachers have had conversations with young people about change, loss and death. For the most part, these conversations have been instigated by the young person suffering bereavement. For most teachers this was a one-to-one conversation with a pupil who had sought support rather than a lesson topic. Some teachers expressed the view that forcing conversations or having a teaching session would not be helpful. The majority thought that the current Scottish Curriculum provides for discussion of this topic.

Few parents and teachers had used any resources or sought advice about having conversations on loss, grief and bereavement. Rather they drew upon personal experience. Most teachers and approximately 50% of parents stated they found the conversation difficult, in particular dealing with distress and emotions.

Conclusion

Conclusions may be drawn from this study but are limited to the context of the study. Coping skills as reported by this particular group of pupils appear to be strong. They find support from families, friends, interests and social groups. It is interesting to note that the internet, social media and written information seems to be of less significance.

Parents and teachers have an important role to play in providing support. However, there is a significant disconnect between the resources that young people identified as helping them and those that parents and teachers would use or recommend.

This would suggest the need to ask, rather than assume, what it is young people need. The approach to bereavement support should rather be participatory and involve the young people themselves. Peer support emerges as important to young people and this could be built upon as key resource.

Recommendations

It is recognised the findings of this study can only be seen from the perspective of this particular school and therefore one recommendation is that such research be extended into schools with different socioeconomic, ethnic and geographical catchments. This will allow for comparison of findings

Further study is necessary before any conclusions may be postulated as to the place of loss, grief and death in the school curriculum.

School Pupils and Their Understanding of Major Change or Losses In Life

Background

The impact of bereavement in childhood is significant. The Childhood Bereavement Network suggest that in the UK 78% of 12-16 year olds have experienced the death of a close relative or friend. Children respond to bereavement in different ways depending on their age and understanding of death. The impact of bereavement in childhood can be significant. Abdelnoor and Hollins (2003) suggest bereaved children experience significant anxiety in addition to underachieving at school. This may be compounded by regressive behaviour and teenagers engaging in risk taking activities such as petty crime (Holland 2008). Guldin et.al (2015) found that children who experience the death of a parent have a long-term increased risk of suicide.

Children spend a significant proportion of their childhood at school. Pallium Canada's Compassionate Schools initiative suggests a compassionate school is one that includes education about death and loss as part of its curriculum and policies and provides a supportive community for pupils, staff and parents. Pallium Canada also highlights that "all natural cycles of sickness and health, birth and death, and love and loss occur every day within these educational institutions." (Pallium Canada http://pallium.ca/cc/compassionate-schools/what-is-a-compassionate-school/) It is important to consider the role of the school community in preparing children for and supporting them through loss, grief and bereavement.

There is evidence of support for bereaved children in schools but Holland suggests that it is geographically patchy (Holland, 2008).

This collaborative qualitative pilot study was undertaken in conjunction with colleagues in Canada and was designed to gain knowledge of how children of different ages understand loss, death and dying, the support they access and the awareness of what is available to them. The pupils in Canada were of primary school age whereas the study's Scottish component involved one secondary school in Scotland with participants aged between 12-18 years.

This report focuses on the findings from the Scotland study.

Research questions

Five research questions were addressed:

- What are children's understanding of change, loss and death at ages 12-18?
- To whom, and how, do children communicate their understanding of change, loss and death?
- What, if any, coping skills do children demonstrate in dealing with change, loss and death?

- What support are they aware of and do they choose to access this?
- How do parents and teachers communicate or educate children regarding coping skills associated with major loss?

Methodology

This was primarily a qualitative study with a small number of quantitative questions to give it context. Pupils, parents and teachers were contacted and invited by the school to take part.   Three online questionnaires were designed tailored for pupils, parents and staff respectively. These were piloted and revised before being finalised and disseminated by way of Survey Monkey. Questionnaires included multiple choice and open text questions. Paper copies were also made available.

The proposed sample sought 20 participants for each group. The response, however, exceeded this and the final sample size was 31 pupils (14 male and 17 female), 108 parents and 37 staff. Given the apparent interest the study was left open to maximise the data.

Numerical data were analysed using Survey Monkey. A thematic analysis of free text data was also undertaken.

It should be noted that the parents included in the study may not necessarily be those of the pupils who took part.

Strengths and Limitations

A key strength of this study is the high level and quality of responses. Notwithstanding this, researchers found that pupils were more difficult to recruit to the study than either parents or teachers. As to why this is the case is not evident.

Funding and time constraints precluded any follow up to the questionnaires to explore the findings in more depth. The collected data came from one school with a largely middle class catchment area making the generalizability of the findings limited.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for this project has been given by Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen

Questionnaires were anonymous and participants were advised that all data collected would be confidential. Preliminary information regarding the study advised participants that involvement was discretionary and that participants could withdraw

at any stage. All young people were encouraged to discuss participation with their parents or guardian. Young people under the age of 16 years required signed consent from a parent or guardian before participation.

Care was taken to minimise the risk of identifying individuals and any distinguishing information has been withheld from the report.

Findings

As already noted, the response rate for the study was high. Pupils taking part grouped by school year are shown in Figure 1.
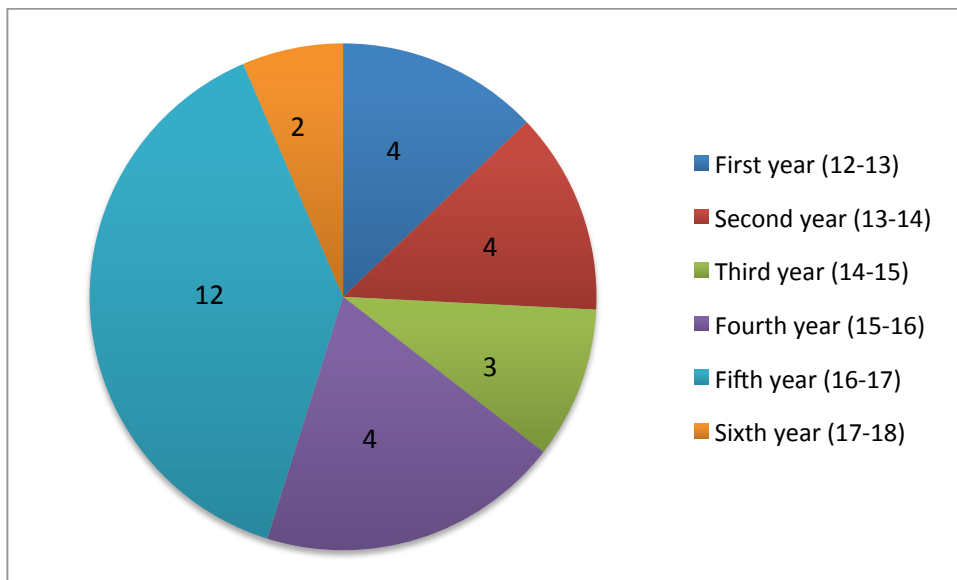

Figure 1 Age groupings of pupil participants.

Research Question 1: What are children's understanding of change, loss and death at ages 12-18?

This research question explores pupils' emotional responses to different kinds of change and loss, their awareness of these and how far they can articulate the complexity of such responses.

Pupils were asked about their reactions to change, loss and death by selecting as many words as they liked to describe their feelings about three different situations:

1) Losing an item which was important to them

2) Encountering the death of a character in a fictional situation (for example television programmes or computer game)
3) Losing someone close to them, either through death or the person moving away.

Loss of an Item: pupil responses

Pupils described feeling strongly about losing an item which was important to them. As shown in Figure 2 the three feelings selected most frequently were "panic", "frustrated" and "annoyed" suggesting that the pupils experienced emotions commonly associated with stress. "Panic" in particular suggests a strong reaction. The word "sad" was used by 23% of pupils, suggesting an emotional attachment to the item and a sense of loss. None selected "unconcerned" or "calm".
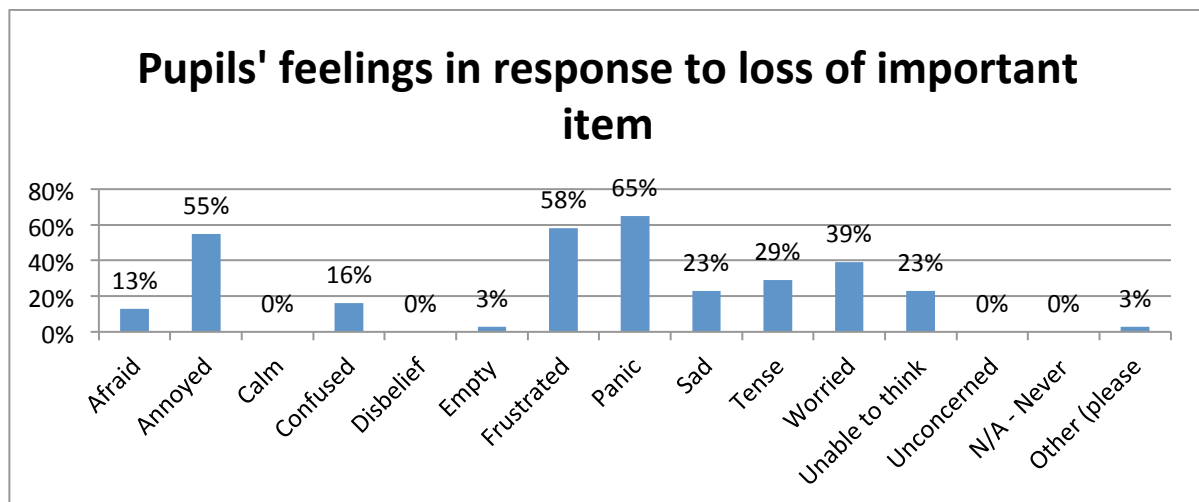

Figure 2

Pupils were then asked, in a free-text question, to explain why they felt this way. The two most frequently occurring explanations were that the lost item was something the person needed or depended on, (35%) or that it was something they valued (29%). These explanations are reflected in the words selected in the previous question.
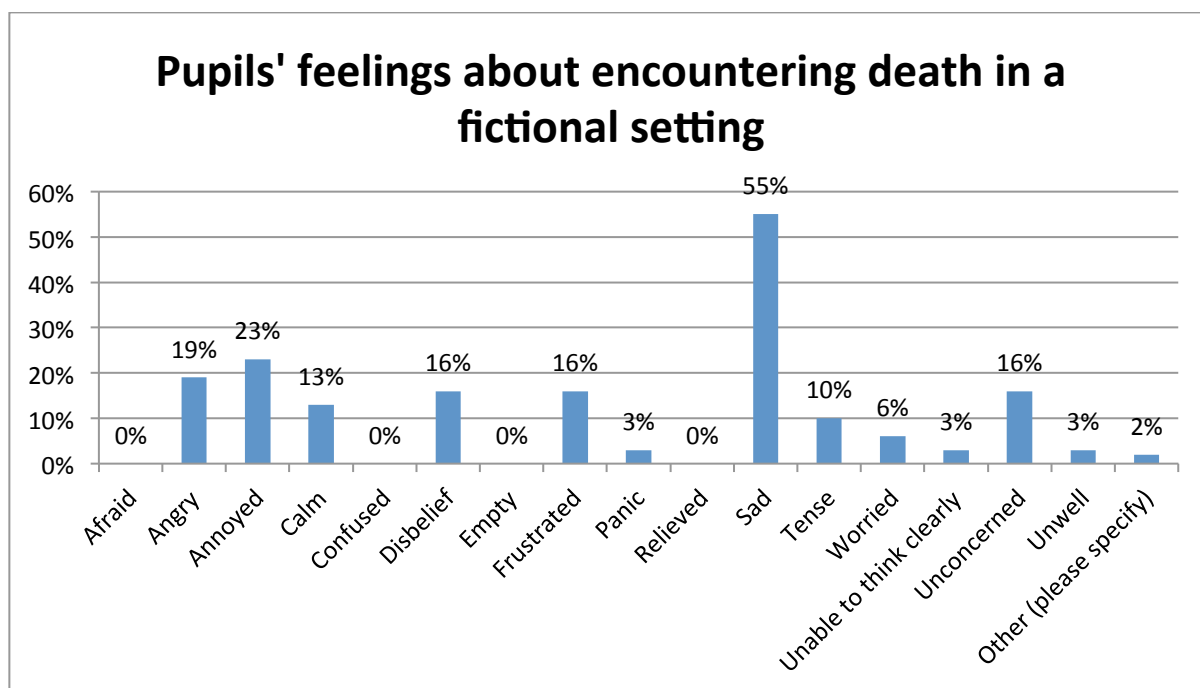
Pupils' feelings about encountering death in a fictional setting

Chart showing pupils' feelings about encountering death in a fictional setting: Afraid 0%, Angry 19%, Annoyed 23%, Calm 13%, Confused 0%, Disbelief 16%, Empty 0%, Frustrated 16%, Panic 3%, Relieved 0%, Sad 55%, Tense 10%, Worried 6%, Unable to think clearly 3%, Unconcerned 16%, Unwell 3%, Other (please specify) 2%.

Figure 3

Death in a fictional setting: pupil responses

This question asked about pupils' feelings about death in fictional situations such as in television programmes or computer games. Pupils identified a wider range of emotions. As shown in Figure 3, the emotion selected most often was "sad", selected by 55% pupils. Several also identified a number of strong emotional responses; ("angry" reported by 19%) whilst in contrast others selected "unconcerned" (16%) and "calm" (13%).

Pupils were also asked as to whether they felt differently about losing a possession as opposed to death in a fictional setting. Of the respondents 74% replied in the affirmative. Some pupils indicated that they experienced more sense of loss or grief about this than about losing an important possession with 35% of respondents selecting the word "sad" in this question, who had not used it in relation to losing an item. In contrast a number of other pupils expressed their feelings as "unconcerned" (16%) or "calm" (13%).

As to why this should be the case, (38%) acknowledged "it's not real" while 29% stated "it's only a game".

Pupils who selected "other" (17%) indicated that they could have an emotional attachment to people on films and TV who die and find it upsetting even though it is not real.

> *"Losing someone in a TV show could be like losing someone you looked up to but your phone is just a way of contacting people."*

Death in a fictional setting: parent and teacher opinions

Seventy-five percent of parents and 54% of teachers reported having had a conversation with young people about death in this context. Of those, 92% of parents and 100% of teachers found that the young people were engaged and interested in the conversation.

As to whether young people were affected by death on TV and in games; 77% of teachers and 58% of parents perceived that they were.

The loss of someone close: pupil responses

This question was in two parts and explored responses to losing someone close either as a result of moving away or dying. Almost all (90%) pupils had experienced the loss of someone close. They were asked to choose words to describe their feelings about this.
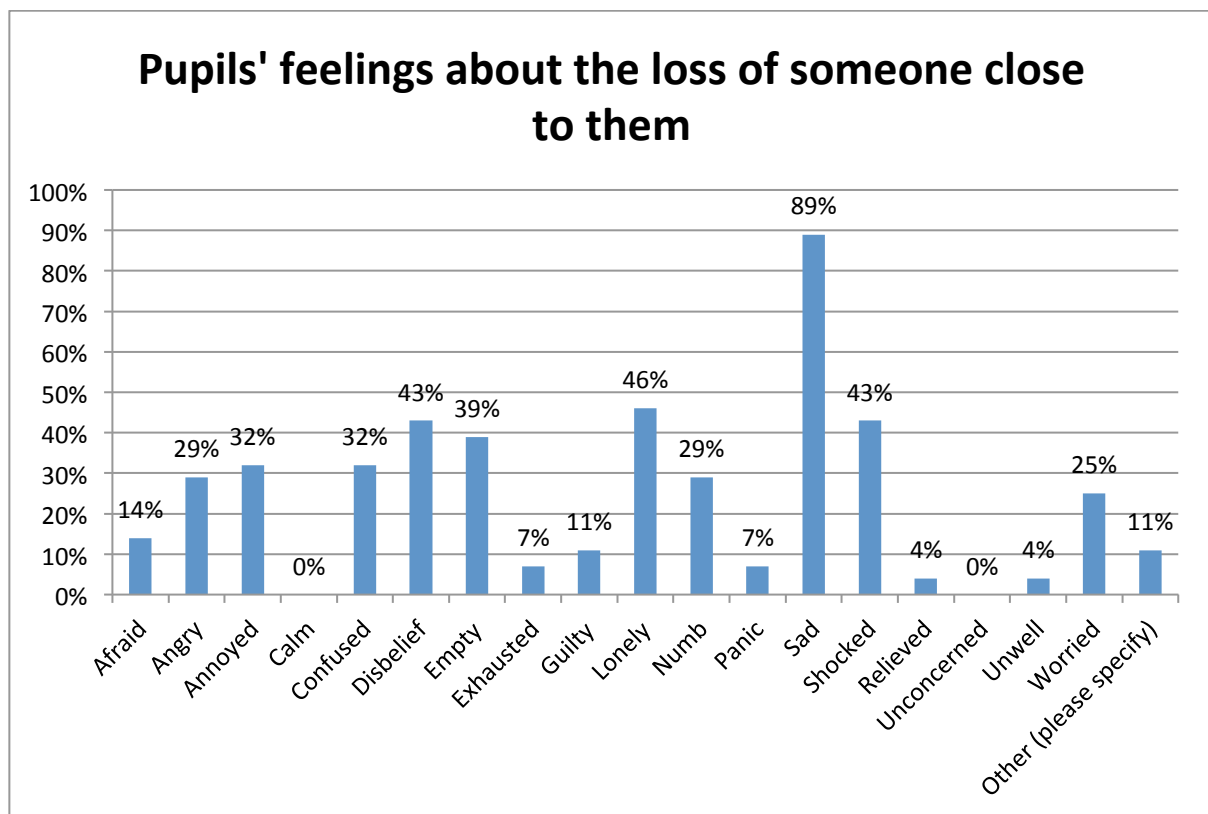

Figure 4

As shown in Figure 4, almost all pupils (89%) selected "sad" to describe their feelings about losing someone close. Nearly half chose "lonely" (46%) "disbelief"

(43%) and "shocked" (43%). Other responses under 'other' included "devastated" and "depressed".

It could be considered that selecting a greater number of words might suggest a stronger and / or more complex emotional response. Pupils selected more words in responding to the question on losing someone close with an average 4.6 words and several choosing between 6 and 10 words. The number of words chosen suggests complex emotional responses to real loss and an ability to identify this.

Interestingly pupils selected considerably fewer words in response to losing an important possession (on average 3.3 words) and on encountering death in a fictional situation (on average 1.9 words). This would suggest that these young people don't feel as strongly about death in a fictional situation as they do about losing an item which was important to them.

Pupils were also asked to reflect on how they would feel about fellow pupils leaving the school in two different contexts: a friend or someone who had bullied them.

In response to a friend moving away, 90% of pupils expressed negative emotions, usually using the words "sad" or "upset". Many explained that they would miss their friend or fear losing contact, with a few selecting "depressed" or "angry". Interestingly, however, 6% expressed mixed emotions indicating that they would miss their friend but would be happy for them moving on to new experiences or meeting new people.

In response to a 'bully' leaving the school, 68% of pupils expressed positive emotions, usually using the words "relieved" or "happy", many of them explaining simply relief that the person wouldn't be there to bully them any more. Others (19%) expressed negative emotions – some focusing on how they felt about the initial bullying, others on the fact that the bullies were "getting away with it". Mixed emotions were expressed by 10%: relief that the bully had gone, mixed with a negative emotion. Two pupils suggested they would feel guilt that the bully may be leaving because of them.

Death in older age: pupil responses

Pupils were asked about their feelings on the death of people in older age compared with a younger person. They selected their response from a list and the responses are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Response	Percentage
It's still very sad	55%
It's natural	16 %
It's less upsetting	10%
It's no different to when younger people die	10%
age makes no difference	6%
other "It is upsetting but everyone eventually has to die."	3% (1 person)

This shows that a majority would feel a strongly about the death of an older person (71%, selecting "it's still very sad" "age makes no difference" and "it's no different to when younger people die") while 29% would appear to feel less sad perceiving that death at an older age is natural.

Response to loss: broken down by age

As previously noted, pupils taking part in the study were drawn from S1-S6 and responses across different age groups as shown in Table 2.

Responses to loss of an important possession and death in fictional settings showed no difference when compared by year group. There was also little difference across year groups in responses to the loss of someone close. However in this question feelings of shock and disbelief did appear to increase as pupils got older.

Table 2: Reported feelings of shock and disbelief in response to the loss of someone close, by age.

Year	Shocked	Disbelief
S1	25%	25%
S2	25%	25%
S3	33%	33%
S4	40%	40%
S5	60%	50%
S6	50%	100%

The question on feelings about death in older age showed no relationship to the age of the pupils.

Research Question 2: To whom, and how, do children communicate their understanding of change, loss and death?

Pupils were asked "who helps you the most during difficult times?" The question did not specify bereavement but 90% had experienced the loss of someone close. Pupils could select multiple options in this question.
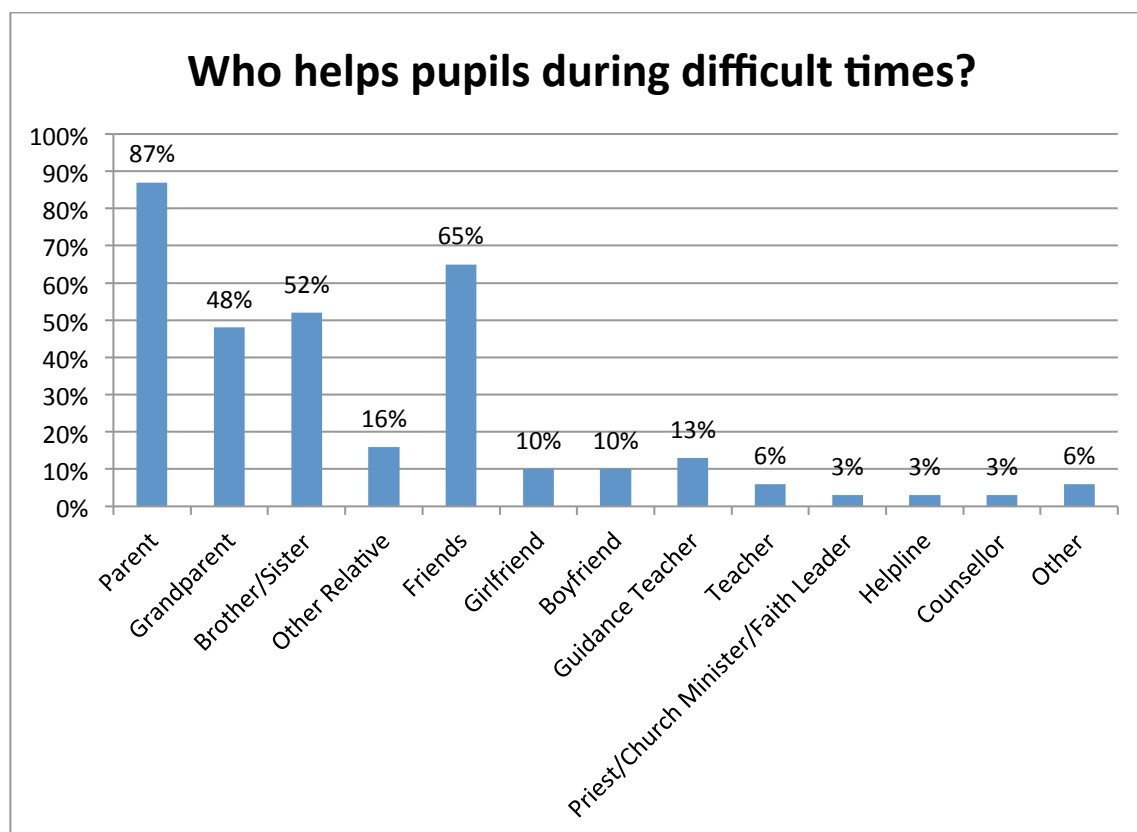

Figure 5

As shown in Figure 5 the largest number of pupils (87%) selected "parents" followed by "friends" (65%), suggesting that the first people these young people turn to would be their parents and friends. Under "other" pupils responded *"I keep it to myself"* and *"my dog".*

Pupils were then asked "what do they do that helps the most?" and could select multiple responses. As shown in Figure 6 the majority highlighted "listen" (81%), many also selected "understand" (65%) and "comfort me" (61%). Fewer selected "encourage me to talk" (32%) and "give me space" (26%). Some suggested other things that helped included *"watch a movie and talk"* and *"let me express my feelings".* When comparing the responses across age groups "give me space" and "understand" were selected by larger numbers of older pupils, but there was no other

What do they do that helps the most?

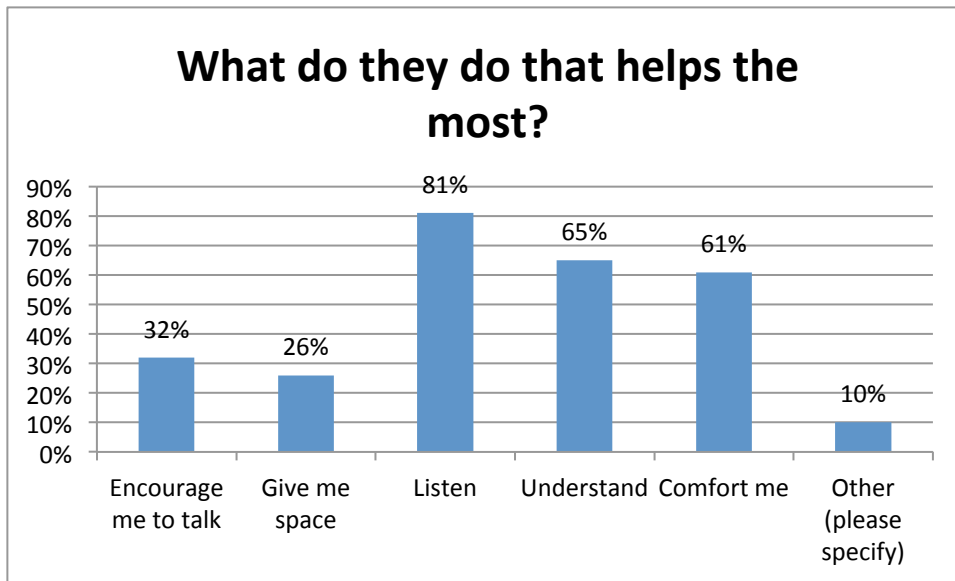| Category	Percentage
Encourage me to talk	32%
Give me space	26%
Listen	81%
Understand	65%
Comfort me	61%
Other (please specify)	10%

Figure 6

pattern associated with age. These results suggest that it is important for young people to have someone to talk but only when they wish.

Parent and Teacher conversations with young people about loss and death

A significant percentage of parents (97%) and teachers (78%) indicated that they had engaged in a conversation with their children or pupils about loss and death. In the case of parents 33% of parents indicated that this had occurred more than a year previously. However, more than 50% had had a conversation in the last 6 months and 69% within the last year.

Parents and teachers were also asked in a free text question what had prompted this conversation. The answers have been categorised as shown in Figure 7. Some respondents selected multiple reasons.
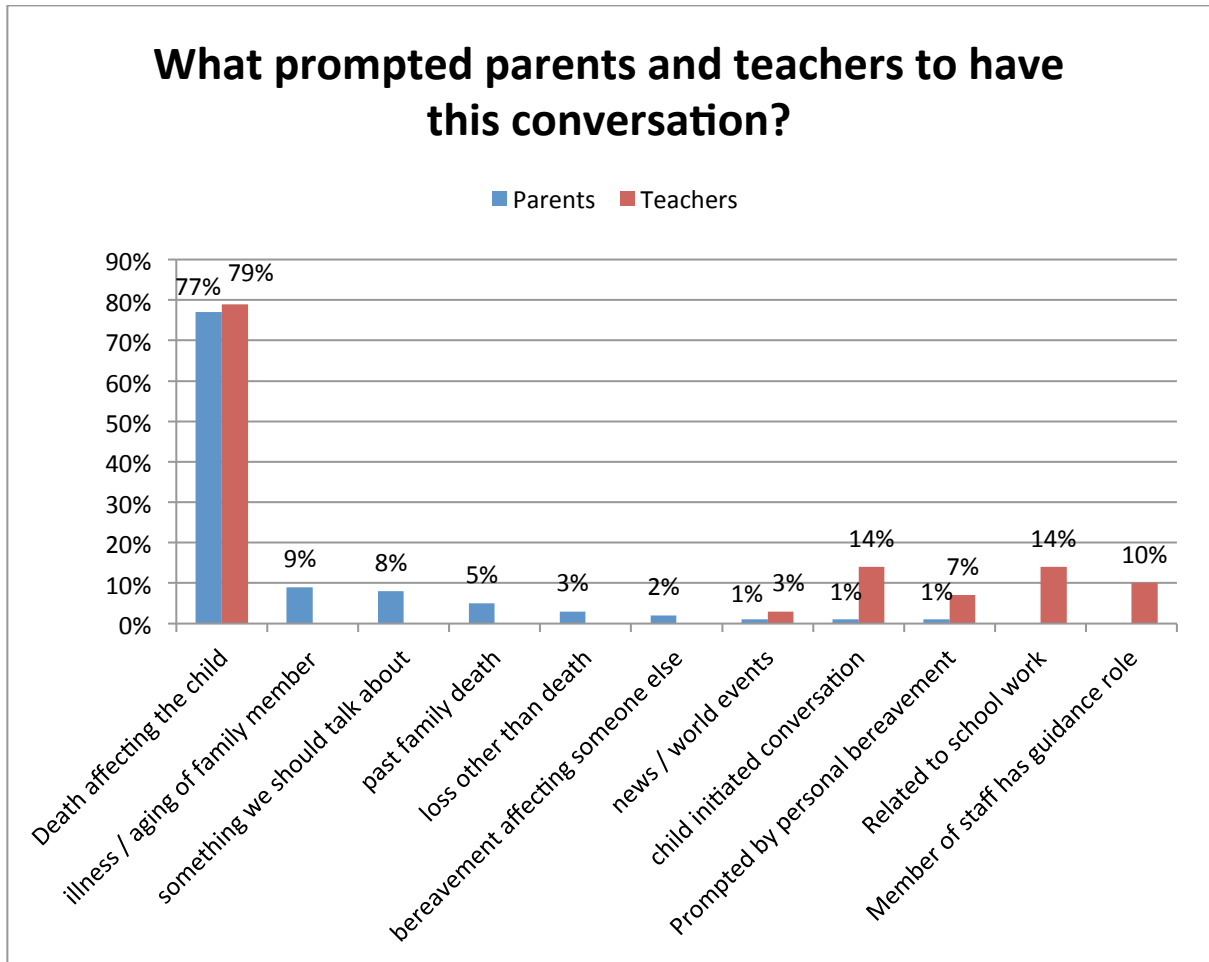
What prompted parents and teachers to have this conversation?

■ Parents ■ Teachers

Death affecting the child: 77% / 79%
illness / aging of family member: 9%
something we should talk about: 8%
past family death: 5%
loss other than death: 3%
bereavement affecting someone else: 2%
news / world events: 1% / 3%
child initiated conversation: 1% / 14%
Prompted by personal bereavement: 1% / 7%
Related to school work: 14%
Member of staff has guidance role: 10%

Figure 7

Parents identified a wider range of reasons for having the conversation, but a large majority of parents (77%) and teachers (79%) had been prompted by a death which affected the child. Of teachers, 28% specifically mentioned the recent death of a teacher at the school. Fourteen percent of teachers noted that the conversation was initiated by the pupil while 10% stated that they had approached pupils who were upset. One teacher indicated that pupils frequently want to speak about their feelings when a celebrity has died.

Those parents (3 people) and teachers (8 people) who had never had such a conversation were asked why. As shown in Table 3 all parents and 63% of teachers, selected "there has not been an opportunity".

Table 3 Reasons for not discussing loss and death

Response	% parents	% teachers
There has not been an opportunity	100%	63%
I do not see it as my role	0%	13%
I was concerned how the young person would react	0%	25%
I was afraid of causing upset	33%	25%
I was not sure what to say	0%	25%
I was concerned that I would become upset	0%	0%
I was not sure if they would understand	0%	0%
Because of my own feelings	0%	0%
Other	66%	0%

These responses suggest that this topic is seen generally as something to be addressed when it the need arises. One parent suggested *"There hasn't been a need to cover this subject so far."*

Teachers who had not discussed this topic selected "I was concerned how the pupils would react" "I was afraid of causing upset" and "I was not sure what to say". One teacher chose "I do not see it as my role". One parent additionally selected "I was afraid of causing upset" and stated under "other" *"I wanted to protect them from these emotions"*.

These responses reflect the complexity of this subject. The number of teachers who had not had this conversation because of fear of upset or not knowing what to say was small. However, it was still 5% of all the teachers who took part. If this was the norm across schools, it would suggest a large number of teachers who feel unable to have these conversations. Indeed the number may be larger than 5% as teachers taking part in this survey were self-selecting and therefore, likely to be more engaged in the topic.

There was consensus among parents and pupils at this particular school that most young people turn to their parents at a time of change, loss or death. While only a minority of pupils reported talking to teachers those who did found it helpful.

Appropriate people: conversations with young people

Recognising that some young people would have no experience of change, loss and death, parents and teachers were asked who in these circumstances was appropriate to have conversations on this subject. The results are shown in Figure 8.
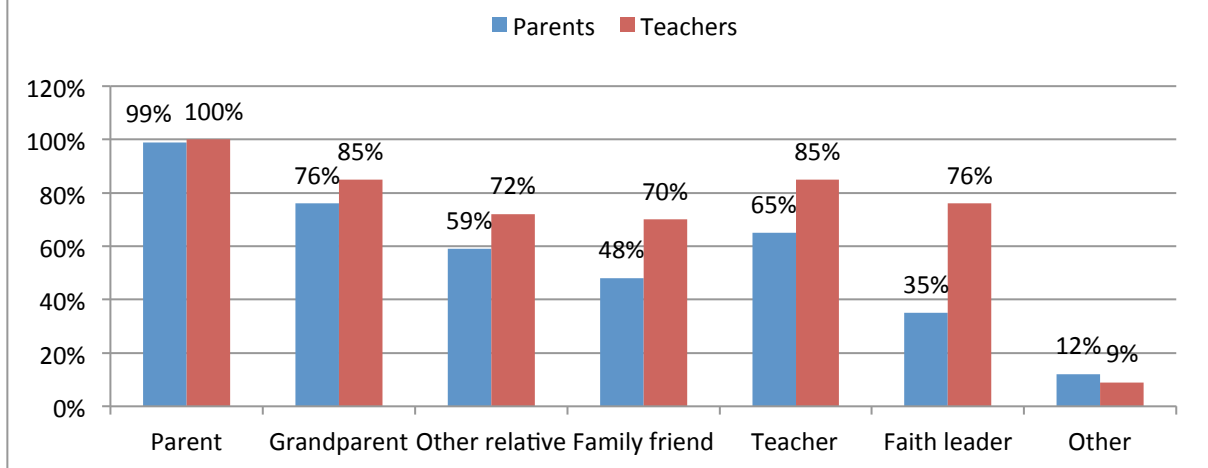
Figure 8

A majority of teachers (61%) selected all options. However there is a slight trend in favour of parents, grandparents and teachers. Others suggested by teachers included pupil support workers, youth workers, guidance teachers, peer educators and friends.

Fewer parents selected all options (20%). This may reflect that parents were thinking particularly about their own child whereas teachers may think more collectively. It may also suggest that parents have stronger opinions about who is and who is not appropriate to talk to their child. Only one parent did not select "parent" but stated "anyone they feel comfortable with," whereas 13 % thought that **only** parents should discuss this with young people.

Evidence from all three surveys suggests that young people, at least in this school, discuss their feelings about change, loss and death primarily with their parents and friends. These conversations most often happen in response to a young person suffering bereavement.

Research Question 3: What, if any, coping skills do children demonstrate in dealing with change, loss and death?

Pupils were also asked in a multiple choice question what else helps them feel better. The findings are shown in Figure 9.
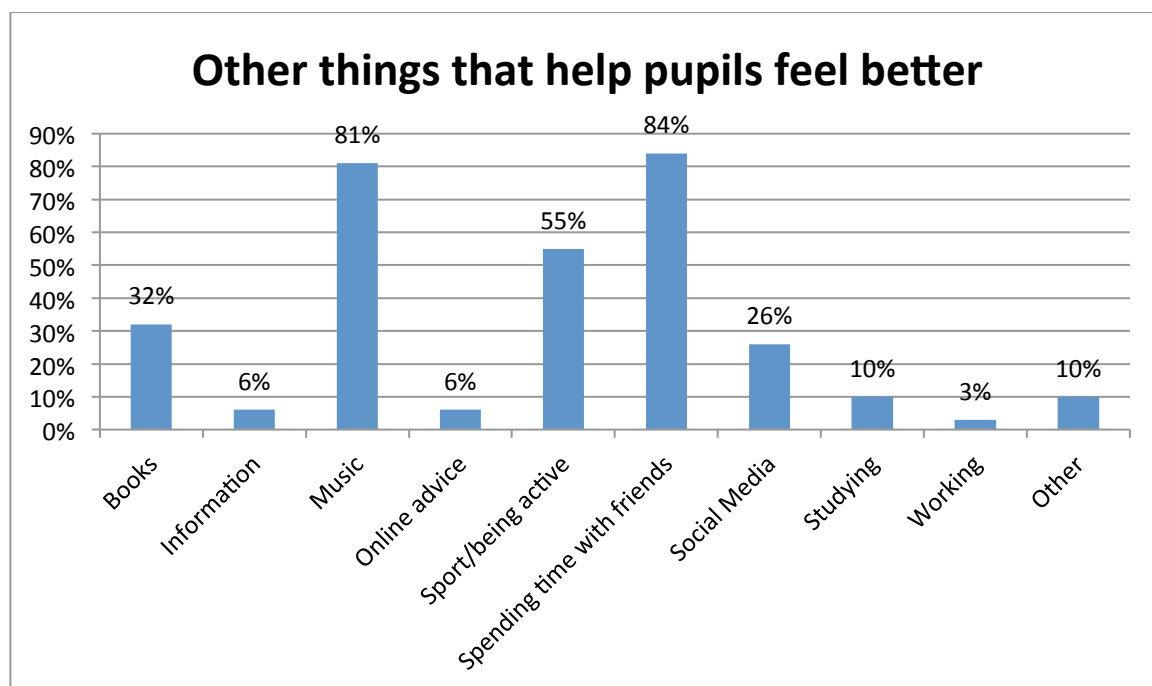

Figure 9

The majority of pupils chose "spending time with friends" (84%) and "music" (81%). Around half selected "sport / being active" (55%) and around a third selected "books" (32%). A minority selected "Information" (6%) or "online advice" (6%). This group of young people therefore seem to cope by finding support within existing interests and social networks. It is also interesting to note that only around a quarter selected "social media" (26%), so these young people find real contact with friends more comforting than being in contact via social media.

Other factors included *"playing games with family such as Monopoly or Cluedo"*, *"painting"*, and *"Keeping my mind off it and not spending too much time thinking about it."*

Comparing the data by year group shows no particular pattern except that only those in S5 chose "studying".

Research Question 4: Awareness of and access to support

Pupils were asked if they were aware where they could find support and whether they had ever accessed it. Parents and teachers were asked where they would direct a young person who needed support.

Pupils' awareness of support

Over half of pupils (58%) were aware of where to find support and 33% stated that they had accessed support. Pupils identified a range of support as shown in Figure 10.
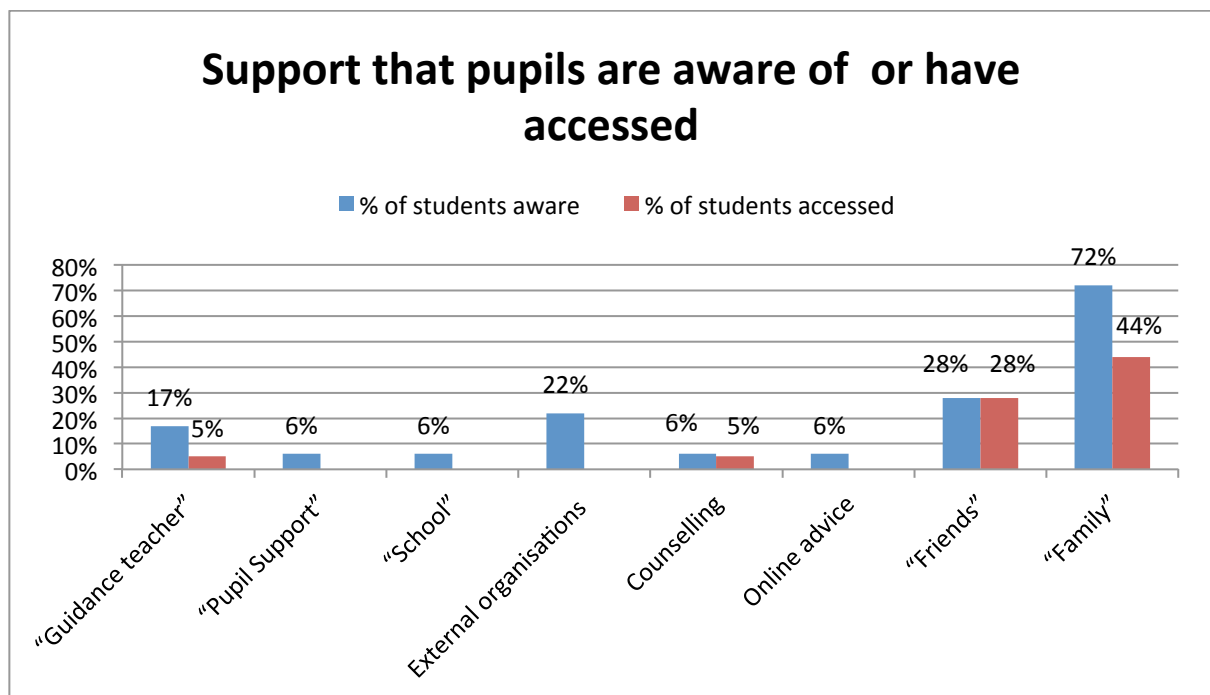

Figure 10

Percentages are calculated as a proportion of the number of pupils indicating their awareness support. Some pupils were aware of support but had not accessed this.

The principal support of which pupils were aware or had accessed was "family" followed by "friends". Relatively few pupils acknowledged awareness of any kind of formal support either in school or from external organisations. Even fewer had accessed such support.

Support identified included a local youth organisation and Child Line in addition to "counselling" and "online advice". Outside school, only counselling had been accessed whereas in school only the support of a guidance teacher had been accessed.

Directing young people to support: parents' responses

Parents were asked to where they would direct a young person for support. Several responses suggest that these conversations should remain within the family.

> "Not everyone has experience and not everyone is good at dealing with this, I really do think this is depending on the individual concerned and one rule does not fix all in these circumstances. I personally would not appreciate someone else speaking to my child on a one to one basis. If in a group discussion with other children and with someone who knows what they are doing, then that is fine and only for educational purposes."

> "Although the subject of death is an important one to discuss with children I have some reservations about the subject being dealt with too deeply by teachers. A general discussion with a group would be appropriate, but, and for a number of reasons, talking too deeply about death with children by a teacher may cause more confusion, misunderstanding and upset than good."

However other parents expressed different opinions suggesting they would refer young people to individuals beyond the family. Additional suggestions included peers, *"anyone they're comfortable with",* professionals beyond school, RE teacher and GP.

A number of parents consider that it is helpful for young people to have these conversations with persons beyond the immediate family.

"Sometimes it is easier for another member of the family to become involved to discuss these issues rather than parents."

"My daughter has counselling at school, it has really helped as she needed to talk outwith the family"

Others felt the view that society generally should be more open about death and young people should not feel it is a taboo topic.

"I think it can only be helpful to talk more about loss and death. We all experience this in life and allowing teenagers to express themselves and being informed is a good thing."

"I think it is absolutely crucial that kids are aware of issues surrounding death etc, and that conversation about this is 'normalised'. Death is an inevitable part of life and kids should not see it as a fearful topic of conversation."

"I think the more open we all are about it and see it as a normal and natural part of life the easier it will be to talk openly about it."

Parents' responses as shown in Figure 11 reflect a similar trend to those of pupils, as they focus on informal support from family and friends. This was a free text

question and the responses have been categorised. The question sought to identify what support structures and/ or mechanisms are available to young people which are recognised and advocated by their parents.
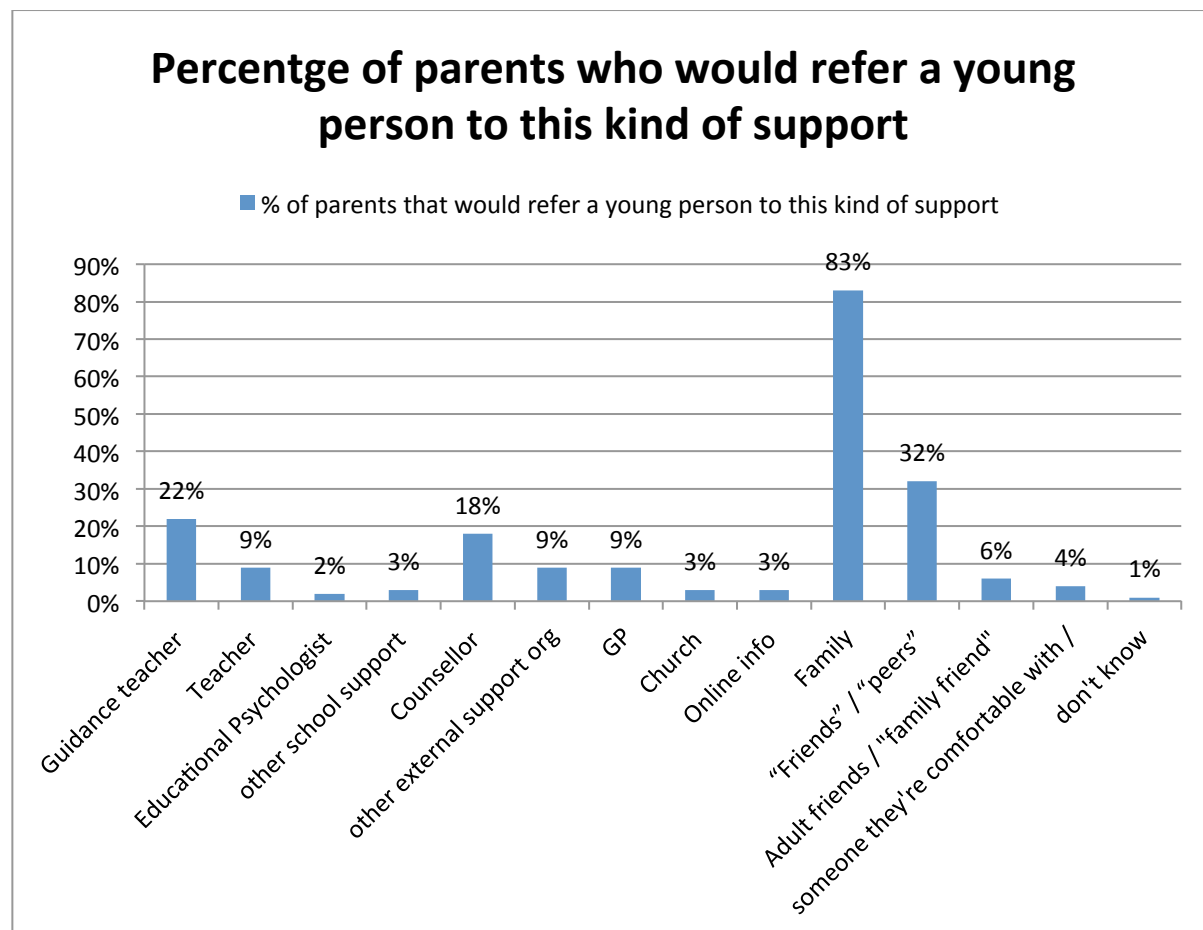
Percentge of parents who would refer a young person to this kind of support

■ % of parents that would refer a young person to this kind of support

Figure 11

The type of support mentioned most frequently was "family" (83%). Many responses referred to "myself" or "parents", some also specifically mentioned other close family members although some parents unequivocally maintained they don't believe any support outside the family is necessary or desirable.

> "We would deal with this at home as a family"

> "No. We as parents would be first port of call for that."

> "I wouldn't, they've got all the support they need at home."

One parent however specifically states "maybe not their parent".

Other "informal" supports were mentioned by a majority of parents with "friends" / "peers", highlighted by 32% of parents.

Formal support was also recognised and indeed parents highlighted external organisations slightly more frequently than school support. The main external support mentioned was a counsellor, mentioned by 18% of parents.

Formal support organisations included: Barnardos Roller Coaster Project, Cruse, Maggie's Centre, Women's Aid Children's Team, MacMillan Cancer Support, a local youth organisation, and Insight Counselling.

The school support most frequently identified was the guidance teacher.

Parents were also asked whether their child had accessed any kind of bereavement support. Only a small number had: 6% mentioned external organisations' support and 3% mentioned school support. The specific types of support mentioned were: Maggie's Centre, Guidance teacher, private counsellor, Barnardos roller coaster project, Women's Aid Children's Team, Art Therapy from the local Council for Alcohol.

Directing young people to support: teachers' responses

Teachers' responses were quite different from those of parents and pupils as they emphasised school support as shown in Figure 12.
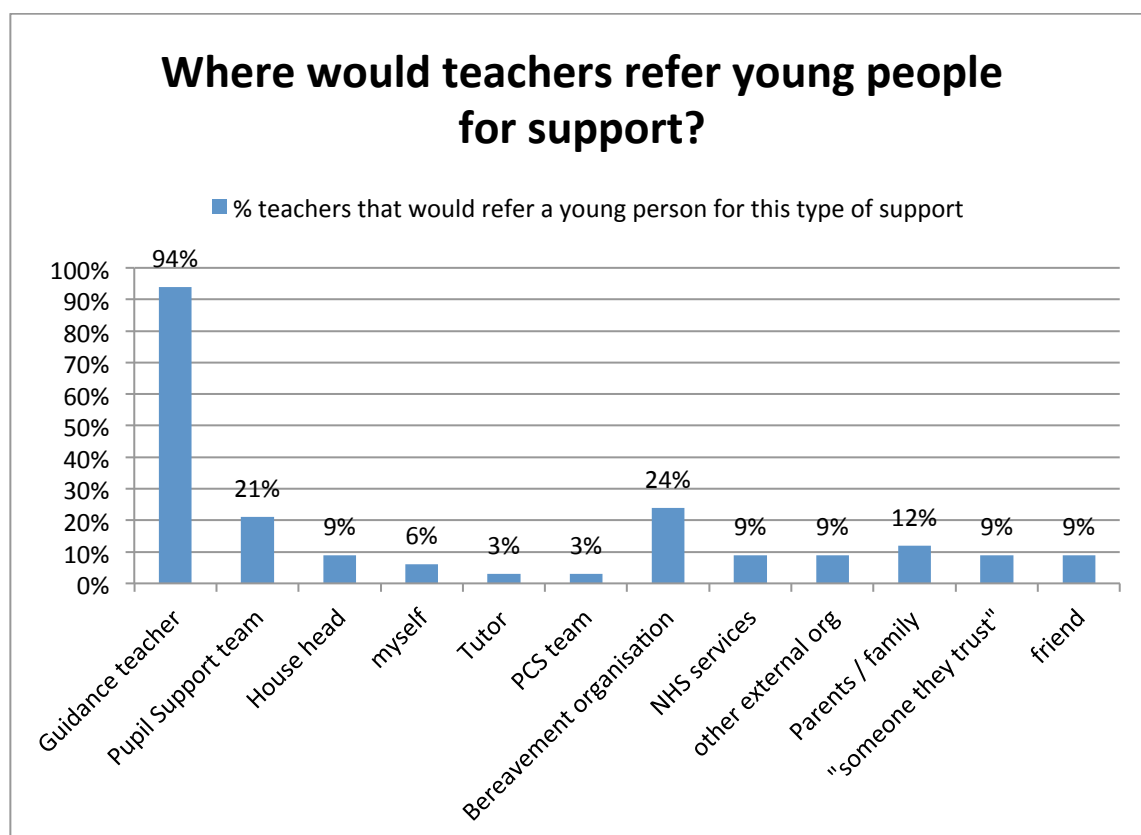

Figure 12

The primary support identified by teachers was the pupil's guidance teacher (94%). Other sources of school support included the Pupil Support Team (21%).

Teachers also mentioned external organisations, some referring to generic "bereavement organisation" (24%) but specific organisations were identified: Barnardos Rollercoaster, Cruse (Bereavement Scotland) and a local youth organisation. NHS services mentioned were the GP and CAMHS.

Some teachers indicated they would refer the pupil to informal supports such as family and friends (12%).
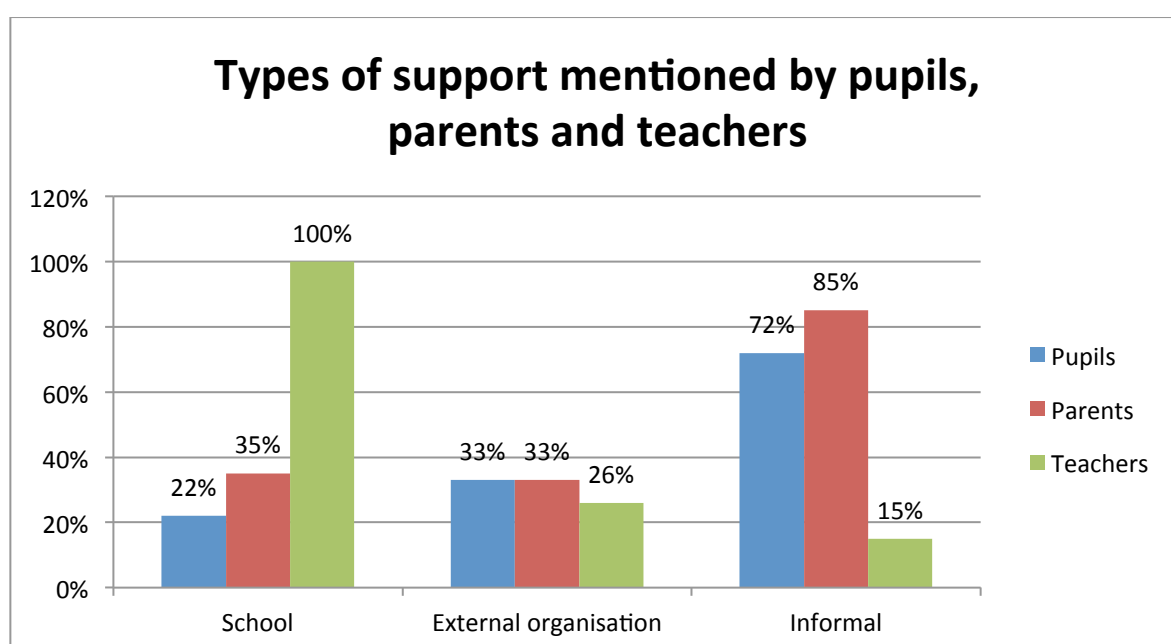
Types of support mentioned by pupils, parents and teachers

Figure 13

Figure 13 highlights the responses from the three groups of participants. The proportion of teachers, parents and pupils who highlighted external organisations is broadly similar. However, teachers identify school support more frequently than either of the other two groups. This possibly reflects that the first support thought of by most people is that with which they are most familiar. However, it is somewhat disconcerting that pupils and parents see school support so differently to teachers.

Interestingly, few respondents identify external sources of support. This may reflect a low awareness of what is available or a sense that additional support is not needed. Some teacher responses suggest that there is a referral protocol within the school – whereby teachers would initially refer to guidance staff.

Research Question 5: How do parents and teachers communicate or educate children regarding coping skills associated with major loss?

Most of the questions in the parents' and teachers' survey focus on how they communicate or educate young people about coping with change, loss and death.

Usefulness of conversations about loss and death

Parents and teachers were asked how much they agreed or disagreed with two statements:

1."These conversations are useful to young people, family and community"

2. "These conversations will disturb the young people and are harmful to children, family and community"

Figure 14
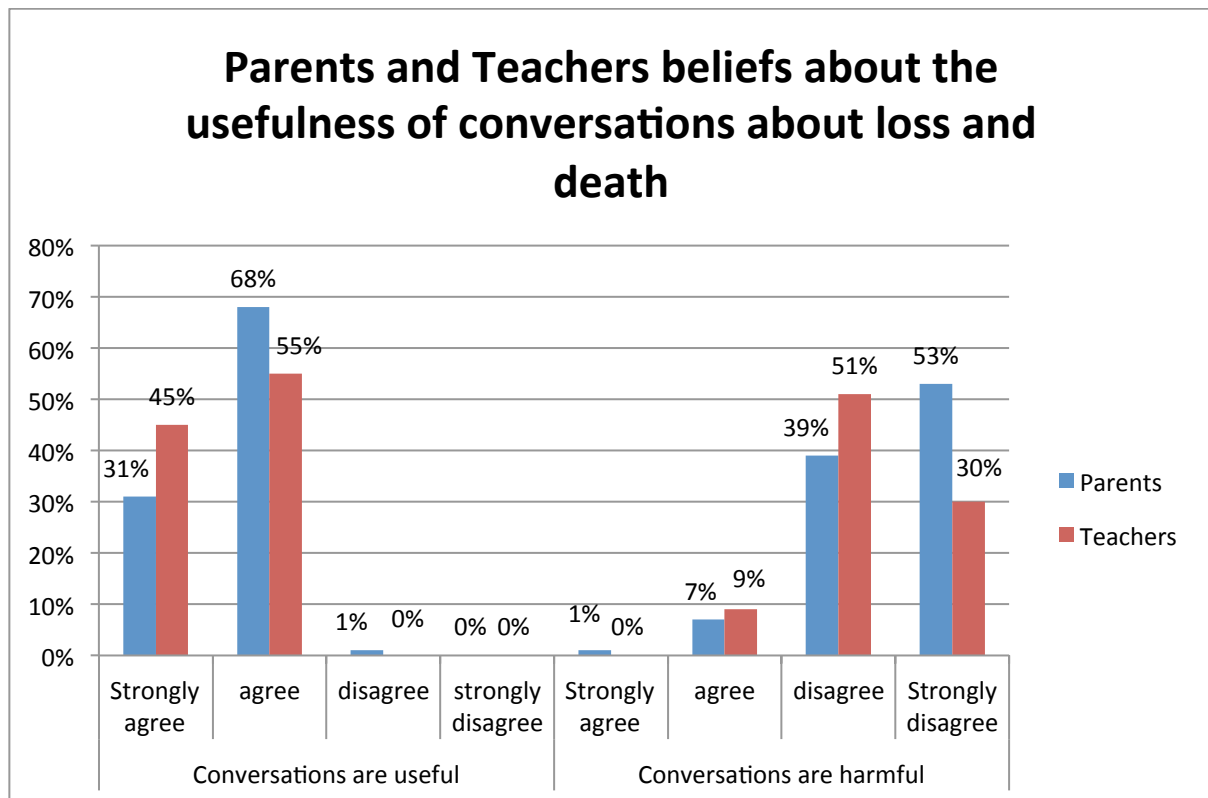
Figure 14 demonstrates that parents and teachers had similar responses. 99% of parents and 100% of teachers either agreed or strongly agreed with the first statement, (conversations are useful) while 1% of parents disagreed.

92% of parents and 90% of teachers either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the second statement (conversations will disturb young people). However 7% of parents

and 9% of teachers agreed and 1% of parents strongly agreed with the second statement.

It is apparent that there is consensus amongst parents and teachers that these conversations are useful for young people as well as their families and communities and most disagree that they are disturbing or harmful to young people. However a small number agreed with the second statement as well as the first, possibly reflecting belief that it's important to have these conversations with young people, even if the conversations may be difficult and upsetting.

Role of teachers and school in talking about loss and death

Other responses in the surveys reveal how parents and teachers see their role in having such conversations with young people; whether as a support at difficult times or in helping the young people to develop and mature emotionally by encouraging them to talk about change, loss and death.

Survey responses suggest that teachers frequently see their role as that of supporting pupils who are upset, struggling in class or who seek support rather than educating in class all pupils about death and loss. Most teachers had engaged in such conversations only when a pupil had been bereaved. Some teachers also suggest that this should be the extent of their involvement.

> *"I feel that discussion 'for the sake of discussion' about death may not be wholly appropriate in a school setting; however, if a young person is experiencing imminent loss or has just gone through the death of a loved one, staff should be ready to support them."*

> *"Death and loss is a very real issue that we all face through our lives. In the interest of building resilience in our young people it is something that we should welcome conversation on and not shy away from. That being said, I am not sure if it is right for us to encourage young people to discuss it via whole direct lessons - forcing them into the issue may not be helpful - but rather be there and be prepared for these discussions should they arise naturally."*

Role of parents in talking about loss and death

Among parents, there may be some who would see their role as similar to that of teachers. The majority indicated that this conversation had been precipitated by a bereavement. A small number had never had such a conversation. Findings suggest that a small number of parents see their role more broadly, as 8% of parents refer in

some way to this being an important topic that they discuss with their children as part of their upbringing:

> *"It is an important part of growing up"*

> *"We openly discuss any topic."*

> *"It's part of life, we discuss whatever is around us"*

In response to a question on how they prepared for speaking to their children about death and loss, several parents again talk about the importance of "openness" in the family.

School engagement with young people on loss and bereavement.

Parents were asked whether their child's school engaged with pupils about loss, death and grief and if not, whether they thought it should so engage. Seventy five per cent of parents were unaware as to whether the school engages with pupils about loss, death and grief while 20% believed it did so engage and 5% believed no engagement occurred.

The question on whether or not the school should engage was only answered by a small number of parents, although this included some of the people who had answered "don't know" as well as those who had answered "no". However, 86% of those who answered believed that the school should engage with this topic.

Teachers were asked whether the current Scottish Curriculum makes provision for engagement with pupils about loss, death and grief and if not, whether it should. Fifty one percent answered that it does, 37% that it does not, but should, and 11% that it does not and should not. It is interesting to note the contrasting perceptions.

Findings suggest parents and teachers believe a school should engage pupils on this topic. Parents and teachers also agree that openness about this topic generally is helpful for young people and most have had conversations with their children or pupils about it.

As previously highlighted, young people mainly turn to family and friends and some parents see the family as the only support that is necessary. The findings also suggest that a significant minority of parents may be less comfortable with their child's school or other external organisations engaging with their child about this sensitive topic.

Experience of holding conversations

Parents and teachers were asked whether they found such conversations with young people hard and 55% of parents and 76% of teachers responded that they did. The hardest aspects are shown in Figure 15 below.
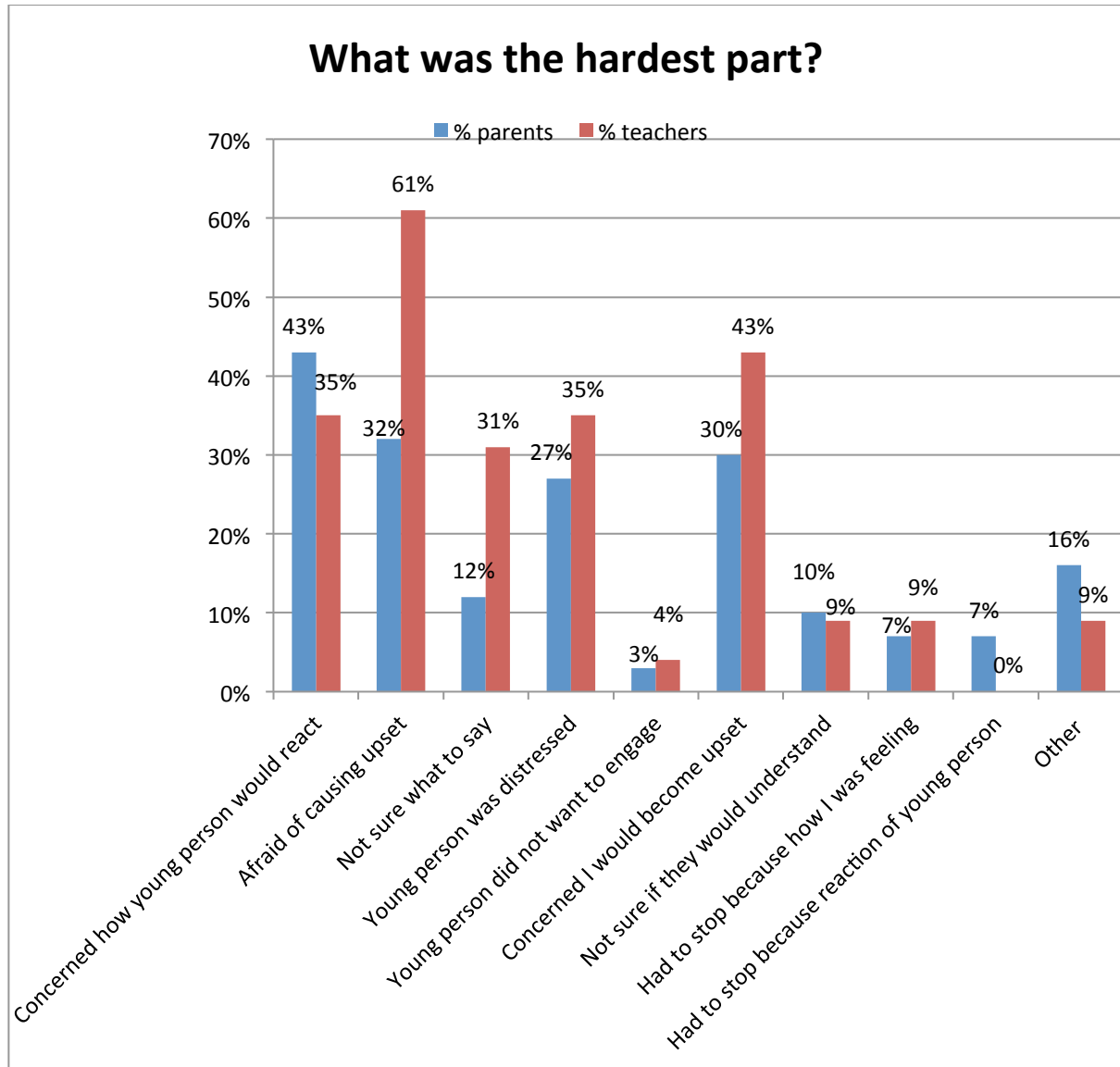
What was the hardest part?

■ % parents   ■ % teachers

Figure 15

"I was concerned how my child would react", was selected by most parents (43%), followed by "I was afraid of causing upset" (32%).

In the teachers' survey a larger proportion selected "I was afraid of causing upset" (61%), followed by "I was concerned I would become upset" (43%). However the top four responses were the same ones for teachers and parents, reflecting the difficulty of dealing with the children's and the adults' emotions and several parents, under

"other" describe more about their own feelings of loss and their empathy for their children's feelings.

A higher percentage of teachers than parents selected "I was not sure what to say" (31%).

How parents and teachers prepare for conversations

Parents and teachers were asked what they had found helpful in preparing to talk to young people about change, loss and death. This was a free text question and the answers have been categorised. Some responses included more than one category.

What helped parents and teachers to prepare for the conversation?
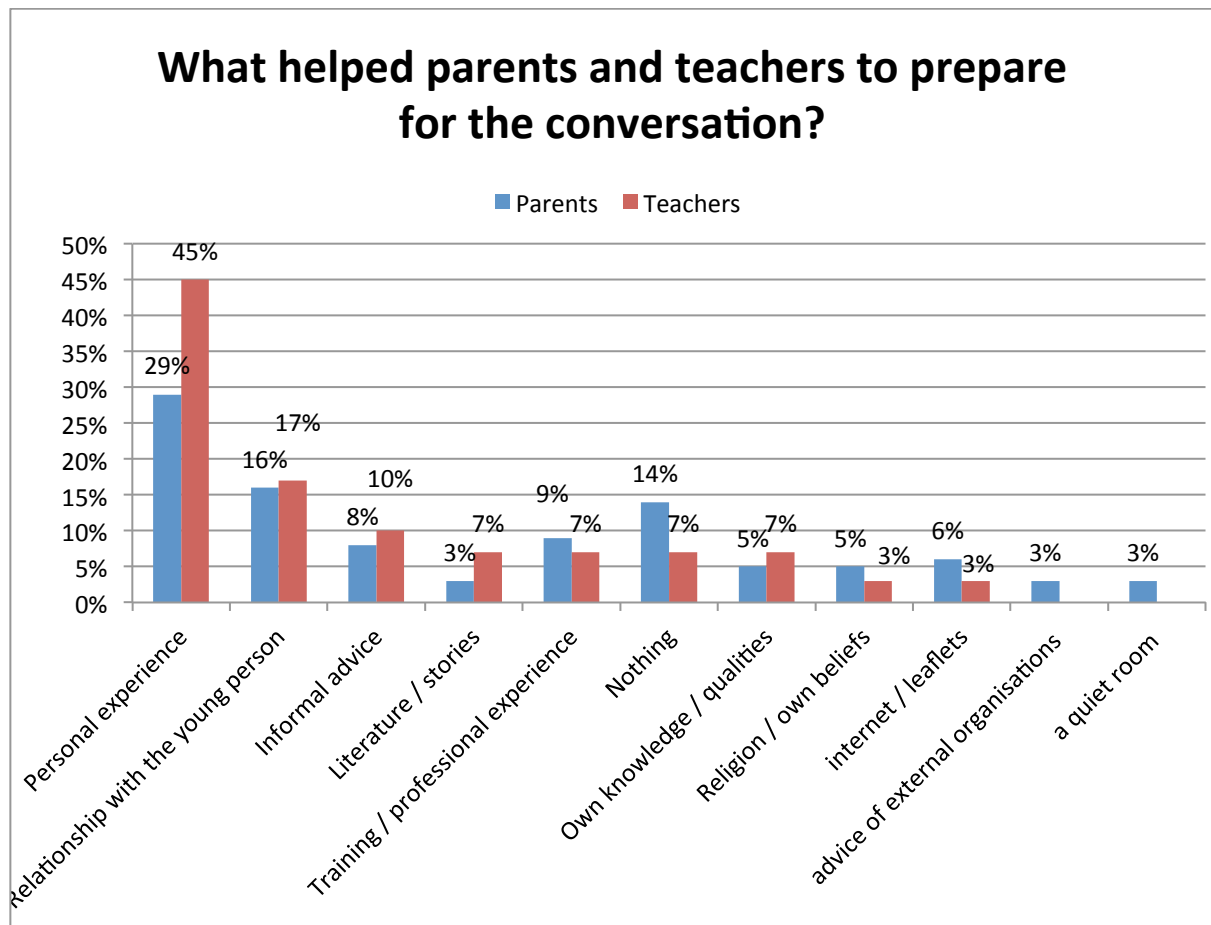
■ Parents ■ Teachers

Figure 16

Figure 16 illustrates that there was a wider range of responses from parents than from teachers.

The most frequently identified resource from parents and teachers was personal experience. Several from both groups referred to their relationship with the young person, although this was expressed in different ways. Teachers talked about

building trust so pupils would feel comfortable coming to the teacher if they needed to talk. Parents talked about having created a family culture of talking or openness. Some parents talked about giving children opportunities to talk, others focused more on not treating death as taboo.

A small number of parents and teachers refer to training or professional experience, while a relatively small number from both groups mention seeking any kind of external advice or information. Parents and teachers seem to use their initiative and personal emotional resources in holding these conversations. 14% of parents and 7% of teachers stated that nothing prepared them.

In addition to the responses included in Figure 15, several parents and teachers discussed how they responded to the situation rather than what had prepared them. Many of these responses also provide useful information about how parents and teachers communicate with young people about this topic. 6% of parents specifically mentioned that they hadn't prepared but found support by talking as a family when the bereavement happened. Others described remembering the person who died, accepting the young person's feelings or giving the young person time to talk.

A particularly important theme for many parents, but not mentioned at all by teachers, was openness or honesty, referred to by 20% of parents. Some were referring to openness or honesty about feelings, others to being open or honest about death – telling children what's happening or not treating the subject as taboo.

Resources used to prepare for conversations

Parents and teachers were also asked initially if they were aware of any specific tools or resources that could help to start conversations about loss and death and secondly whether they had used any of these. Results are shown in Figure 17.
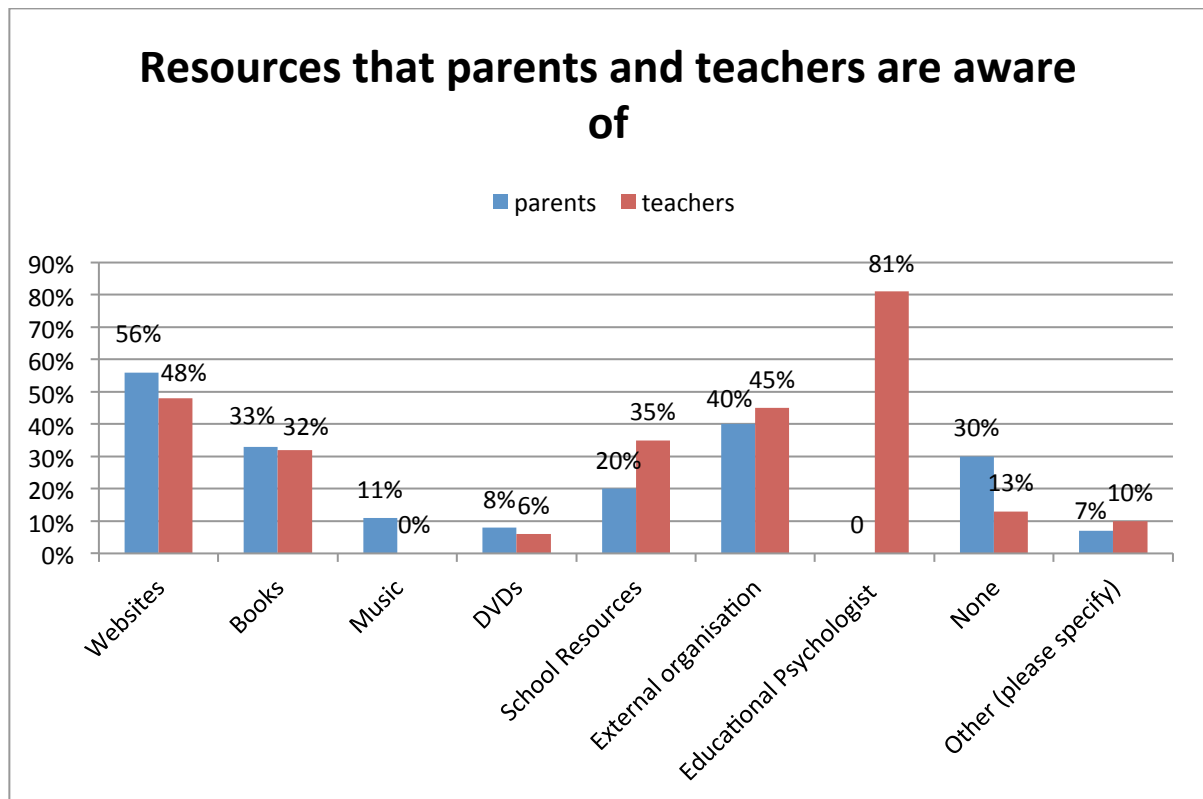
Resources that parents and teachers are aware of

■ parents ■ teachers

Websites — parents 56%, teachers 48%
Books — parents 33%, teachers 32%
Music — parents 11%, teachers 0%
DVDs — parents 8%, teachers 6%
School Resources — parents 20%, teachers 35%
External organisation — parents 40%, teachers 45%
Educational Psychologist — parents 0, teachers 81%
None — parents 30%, teachers 13%
Other (please specify) — parents 7%, teachers 10%

Figure 17

Parents' and teachers' awareness of resources available were compared. Educational psychologist was not included in the parents' survey and was removed from the comparison. The results show that parents and teachers are aware of around the same number of resources. 30% of parents and 32% of teachers were not aware of any resources. 70% of parents and 71% of teachers were aware of two resources or fewer. 30% of parents and 29% of teachers were aware of three or more.

The educational psychologist was the resource mentioned by most teachers but with this exception the awareness of different resources by parents and teachers was broadly similar. There appears to be greater awareness among parents of websites. Some parents were aware of music which was not mentioned by teachers. However, more teachers were aware of school and external organisations' resources.

Other resources mentioned by teachers were poetry, pupil support workers and news articles and by parents TV and the Bible.
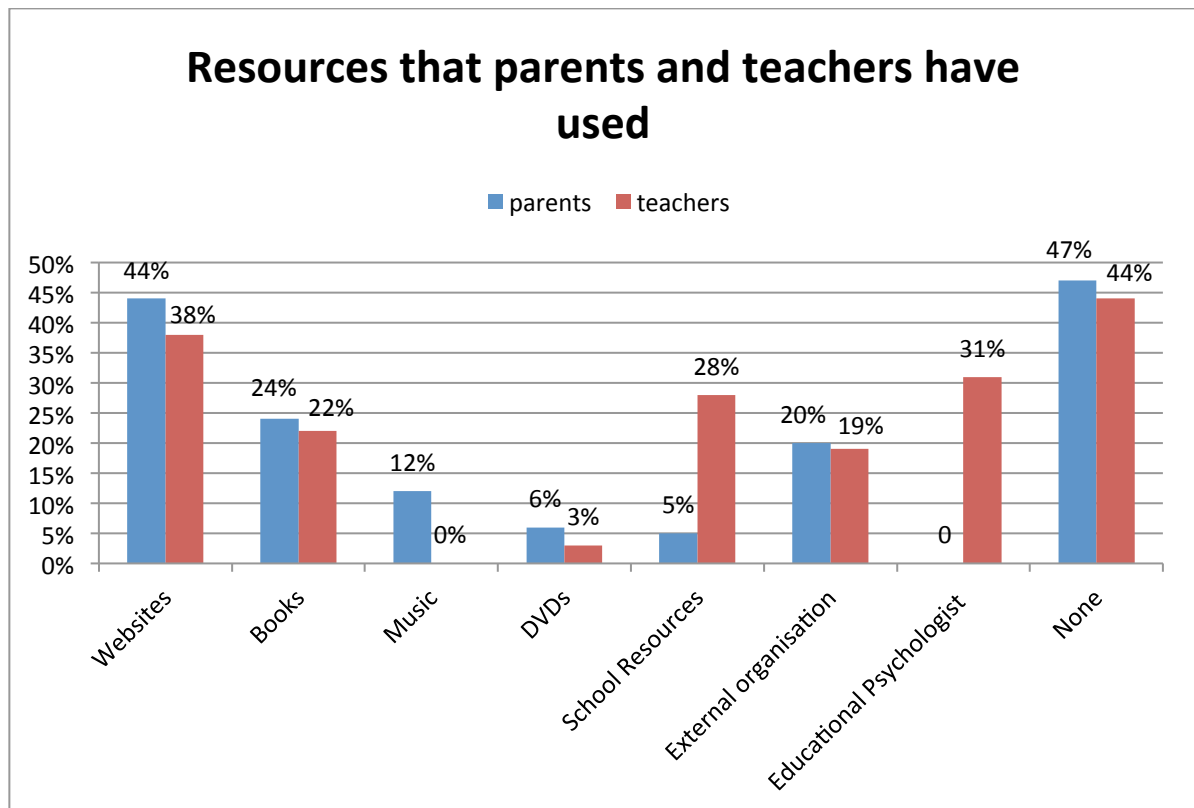
Resources that parents and teachers have used

■ parents ■ teachers

Resource	parents	teachers
Websites	44%	38%
Books	24%	22%
Music	12%	0%
DVDs	6%	3%
School Resources	5%	28%
External organisation	20%	19%
Educational Psychologist	0	31%
None	47%	44%

Figure 18

Figure 18 shows the resources used by parents and teachers. Again, comparing the figures omitting the educational psychologist shows that parents and teachers have used very similar numbers of resources.

What emerges most clearly is that approximately half of parents and teachers have not used any resources despite awareness of them. Of teachers who stated they had not used any resources 36% were aware of three or more and 36% were aware of one or two. Those parents who have not used any resources, 27% were aware of 3 or more and 41% were aware of one or two.

Although 81% of teachers are aware of the educational psychologist only 31% had accessed this resource.

Websites were the most used resource by both groups. Teachers have used school resources more than parents with parents using a wider range of resources including music and DVDs.

Parents and teachers tended to prioritise information-type resources for example websites and resources from external organisations. In contrast most pupils did not see these as helpful. What pupils found comforting was music, (see figure 9, p 20) whereas this is not mentioned by teachers and by only a small number of parents (see figures 17 and 18).

Parents' and teachers' beliefs about the impact of cultural or religious background

Over half of teachers (53%) and parents (51%) thought that cultural or religious backgrounds influenced conversations with young people about change, loss and death.

Those who answered yes were asked to explain how, in a free text question. The categorised responses are shown in Figure 19.
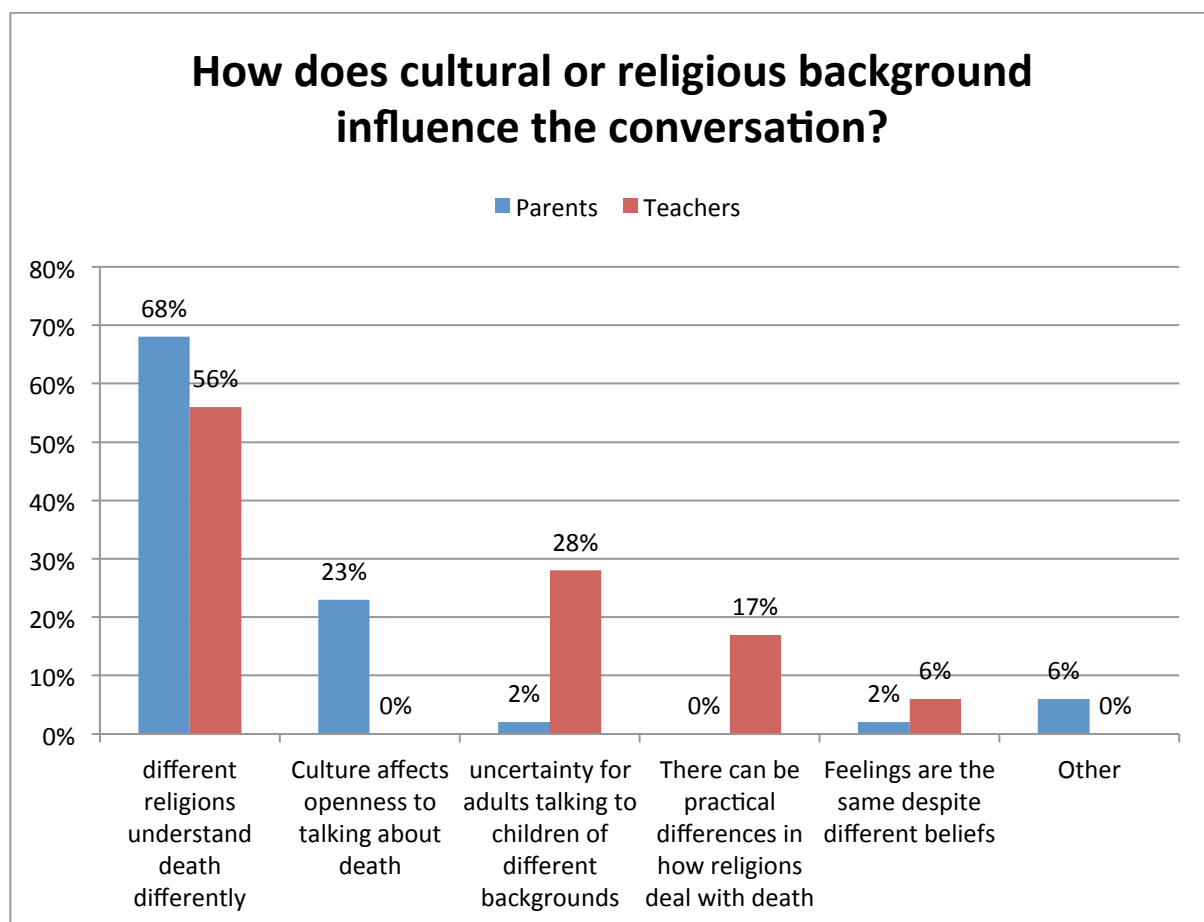

Figure 19

Some teachers' comments noted that they would approach the conversation in a different way depending on the pupil's beliefs:

> "If a young person is influenced by strong cultural or religious influences then I feel it does influence my conversation with young people. I am more likely to reinforce their religious beliefs."

> "Have to be mindful of their beliefs"

Among those parents and teachers who believe religious or cultural background does influence conversations, the majority described the difference in how different religions deal with death. Some took this further to say that faith or belief in an afterlife can be of comfort to young people, others talked about religion as giving perspective or context in which to talk about death. Many parents (but no teachers) also talked about culture affecting people's openness to talking about death. Several stated that it can be taboo in western culture thereby making it harder for young people.

A number of teachers described uncertainty in how to talk about death to a young person of a different culture, sometimes highlighting concern about what the young person's family would wish. Several teachers noted the different practices around death and how these may be determined by culture.

A small number of parents and teachers stated that despite differences in beliefs, the feelings of loss would be the same for people from any background.

Conclusion

Conclusions may be drawn from the findings emerging from this research, notwithstanding the single school context. This study sought to explore young people's perceptions of loss, death and dying and produced a rich source of data and insights which will provide a platform for future research.

Young people demonstrated a clear understanding of different types of loss and grief. Coping skills as reported by this particular group of pupils appear to be strong. They find support from families, friends, interests and social groups. It is interesting to note that the internet, social media and written information seems to be of less significance.

Parents and teachers have an important role to play in providing support. However, there is a significant disconnect between the resources that young people identified as helping them and those that parents and teachers would use or recommend.

This suggests that it is important to ask, rather than assume, what it is young people need. Young people should be invited to participate in designing age and culturally appropriate support mechanisms within the school. Peers emerge as an important source of support to young people. .

Every bereavement is unique and bereavement in childhood can have a significant adverse effect on a young person's future. Given that so much of their time is spent in school, the school community has a vital role to play.

Recommendations

It is recognised the findings of this study can only be seen from the perspective of this particular school and therefore one recommendation is that such research be extended into schools with different socioeconomic, ethnic and geographical catchments. This will allow for comparison of findings.

Schools should be encouraged to engage with researchers and appropriate bereavement organisations to explore approaches to supporting pupils experiencing loss.

Further study is necessary before any conclusions may be postulated as to the place of loss, grief and death in the school curriculum.

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