

Graduate and Undergraduate Student Development as a Result of Participation in a Grief Education Service Learning Course

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ABSTRACT

Limited research exists on the role service learning can play in helping students understand loss and grief. Through semi-structured interviews with students and instructors, online surveys, and course feedback, this qualitative case study examined the experiences of 15 university students in an outreach course working with grieving K-12 students. Students self-reported gaining greater intra- and interpersonal understanding and grief processing self-efficacy. Instructors emphasized intentionality and the intertwined nature of course experiences influencing meaning making.

Keywords: outreach, loss, mentoring, experiential learning

Service learning is defined as experiential learning that involves both academic coursework and community engagement. Courses that include service learning typically involve identifying and meeting community needs and engaging students so they develop enhanced community understanding and civic responsibility (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Jett & Delgado-Romero, 2009; Servaty-Seib & Tedrick Parikh, 2014). Service learning effectively increases student understanding of certain populations through immersion (Midgett, Hausheer, & Doumas, 2016; O'Brien, Risco, Castro, & Goodman, 2014).

For graduate and undergraduate students considering a helping profession, service learning can increase understanding of current issues and provide an opportunity to apply content knowledge with real people in need (Jett & Delgado-Romero, 2009; O'Brien et al., 2014; Weiler et al., 2013). One under-researched topic for service learning is the understanding of loss and grief. Limited research examines grief education (Doughty Horn, Crews, & Harrawood, 2013) even though loss and grief are universal experiences. The purpose of this

study was to describe the impact of a service-learning course focused on loss and grief on students' learning, personal growth, and professional development.

SERVICE LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Emerging research on service learning in higher education suggests it is a valuable way to learn about complex topics. Service-learning experiences that complement learning objectives set up increased social engagement, enhanced content knowledge, and greater community connection (Holland, 2001). Having the opportunity to expand knowledge while gaining hands-on experience gives students time to explore career options and space for increased awareness of community needs (Jett & Delgado-Romero, 2009).

Service learning should connect to coursework and engage students in critical reflection (Bjornestad, Mims, & Mims, 2016; Jett & Delgado-Romero, 2009; Weiler et al., 2013). Through critical reflection, students gain better understanding and experience personal development, greater

self-awareness, and stronger interpersonal skills as well as professional growth (Bjornestad et al., 2016; Weiler et al., 2013). Halx (2010) also acknowledged with increased reflection, undergraduate students in particular are better prepared for careers and leadership roles. Bringle and Hatcher (1996) asserted students participating in service learning gained enhanced understanding of course material, and deepened appreciation for their field of study and community engagement.

To support service-learning instruction, planning and coordination is needed, along with time and commitment from students and faculty (Holland, 2001). Instructors plan to meet the needs of the identified community and also how they will evaluate the services provided. Students are evaluated on their reflections of their experiences in relation to course material. For the service-learning project to be maintained, the community, institution, and students must recognize the benefits (Holland, 2001). Anecdotes from the past ten years suggest the course under focus in the current study meets these standards and demonstrates many benefits of service learning in a grief education course; however, a rigorous analysis of students' experiences is needed to provide evidence.

Undergraduates engaging in service-learning activities develop personally and professionally. In a mixed methods study, O'Brien et al. (2014) explored the influence of a two-course module about intimate partner violence. Students who successfully completed the didactic first course were invited to participate in a semester-long service-learning activity at a domestic violence shelter. Students in this course demonstrated greater empathy, helpfulness, and respect for the complexities of domestic violence as compared to those who only completed the didactic course. Similarly, Weiler et al.'s (2013) quantitative study explored the effects of a service-learning course on college student development. In this course, participants mentored at-risk youth. Afterwards, participants demonstrated higher

civic attitudes, community service self-efficacy, self-esteem, and problem-solving skills, as compared to a control group that did not participate in service learning. These studies suggest the multifaceted ways undergraduates may benefit from service-learning courses.

Graduate students in helping professions also demonstrate professional and personal growth after service-learning participation. Jett and Delgado-Romero (2009) conducted a qualitative case study of one counselor training program including 12 participants who were instructors, students, and alumni. They explored perceived effects of pre-practicum service learning and noted greater knowledge of professional roles and overall increased professional development among students and alumni. Midgett et al. (2016) explored the effects of service learning on group leadership self-efficacy and cultural competence in counselor trainees in a quantitative study. Participants facilitated debriefing groups for college students engaging in cultural awareness training, completing pre- and post-test measures. They demonstrated significant increases in group leadership self-efficacy, but not cultural competence. Similarly, Bjornestad et al. (2016) also studied how leading a counseling group at a high school influenced counseling students' personal and professional development. These groups served as a service-learning project in the group counseling course. Participants completed reflective journals after each session. The qualitative study found participants enhanced their leadership skills, counseling self-efficacy, and awareness of the complexities of group work. Clearly, both graduate and undergraduate students may benefit from service-learning courses. Much less is understood about how this kind of course may enhance student understanding and tolerance of grief, however.

GRIEF EDUCATION

Although loss and grief are universal experiences, they have not constituted a

major portion of education in undergraduate studies or health and helping professions, the population represented by graduate student participants in the current study. In recent decades, professional health associations constructed initial standards and suggestions for death education (Wass, 2004), but loss and grief issues remain greatly underemphasized in health and helping professions. Wass (2004) asserted that while the field of thanatology (the study of death, dying, and bereavement) has made major strides in research, this research has not been adequately translated into the classroom. Further, the dearth of research on death education limits understanding of grief and death-centered training programs (Doughty Horn et al., 2013). Multiple authors proposed reasons for these limitations. Doughty Horn et al. (2013) advocated for greater inclusion of grief education in graduate counseling programs, suggesting that institutional support is often limited as faculty and administration may be uncomfortable with the subject or consider it extraneous. Echoing this assertion, Basu and Heuser (2003) discussed such resistance in their report of integrating service learning into two undergraduate death-related courses, describing discomfort and intimidation as factors inhibiting administrative approval.

Death anxiety may also limit classroom application of research. In a meta-analysis of quantitative studies on death education, Maglio and Robinson (1994) found that death-related training can increase death anxiety, especially with didactic approaches. Increases in death anxiety are associated with decreases in the crucial skills of empathy and effective listening among graduate counseling students (Harrawood, Doughty, & Wilde, 2011). Therefore, the potential for negatively impacting students, whether graduate or undergraduate, in death and grief education courses adds to the complexity and high-stakes nature of teaching these subjects. This increases the need to understand how students experience a loss- and grief-related service-learning

course, in order to mitigate any negative effects.

Despite these challenges, Gamino and Ritter (2012), in their review of literature on competence in bereavement supporters, asserted death-related training is an ethical necessity for those who provide services to grieving individuals. Hannon and Hunt (2015) encouraged inclusion of grief-related training in graduate counseling programs, saying counselors should understand models of grief, reactions to grief, and self-care in the grieving process. They noted the importance of both didactic and experiential learning to cover these topics. Combining these two types of learning enables grief supporters to mobilize their knowledge for the support of grieving and dying people.

Some researchers have explored changes in student behavior, cognition, and affect after a course on loss and grief. Harrawood et al. (2011) conducted a qualitative content analysis of graduate counseling students' attitudes about death. They included 11 participants, all enrolled in a death education course in their program. The authors identified three major student outcomes: 1) greater willingness to discuss and explore death-related issues, 2) greater self-awareness of personal beliefs about and attitudes toward death, and 3) lower negative responses to death-related subjects. Inclusion of experiential learning and emotional processing enabled students to grow in cognitive and emotional domains without experiencing large increases in death anxiety or other negative responses.

In an anecdotal report, Pagano (2016) examined feedback and reflections from undergraduate communications students in a service-learning course on death. In this course, students studied death-related communication while volunteering at a hospice. This review indicated lessening of death anxiety and more openness to discussing death and offering support for death-related concerns. Servaty-Seib and Tedrick Parikh (2014) provided the only existing case example and mixed-methods program evaluation regarding a service-

learning course in which graduate counseling students aided bereaved families. Based on their findings, the authors suggested service learning may be an effective way to include experiential learning and emotional processing in grief education. They noted service-learning opportunities may help students more effectively engage a daunting subject.

As outlined above, existing literature on service learning in death education suggests it may be an effective strategy for death- and grief-related education. However, this body of literature is limited in multiple ways. First, only two articles, Harrawood et al. (2011) and Servaty-Seib and Tedrick Parikh (2014), were empirical rather than conceptual, indicating a major lack of empirical evidence on the subject. Second, only one study examined service learning in death and grief education (Servaty-Seib & Tedrick Parikh, 2014). Finally, Harrawood et al.'s (2011) course focused solely on death losses. Few explored courses open to broader definitions of loss or the emotional impacts of such courses.

To add to current literature, we explored the professional and personal effects of a service-learning course for graduate and undergraduate students on death and non-death loss and grief. Although service-learning research includes a variety of methodologies, the only study of service learning in grief education used mixed methods. Therefore, because of the exploratory nature of the study and the uniqueness of the course, we chose a qualitative case study approach (Hays & Singh, 2012). We sought to understand students' perceptions of how the course impacted them, what they learned, ways they grew, and to uncover the processes facilitating those changes. The overarching research question guiding the study was: How do graduate and undergraduate students experience a service-learning course on death and non-death loss and grief? Sub-questions included: (a) How did participation in the course enhance or detract from students' personal growth?, (b) How did participation in the course enhance

or detract from students' professional growth?, and (c) What underlying processes facilitated these changes?

METHOD

Our case study approach focused on a single service-learning course at a major research university. Case studies involve use of multiple data sources and focus on exploring a case from multiple perspectives (Hays & Singh, 2012). They also offer the opportunity to gather rich and deep description related to a specific issue (Flyvbjerg, 2011). We next detail the program and its context before describing participants and procedures of the study.

The Case

The Grief Outreach Initiative (GOI) is housed in the College of Education at a major public research university. Established in 2008, the GOI helps K-12 students grieving any death or non-death loss. To date, the GOI has trained 328 grief mentors and served 432 mentees. Local public school counselors or parents contact the doctoral student coordinator of the GOI with referrals, and undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in the service-learning course serve as grief mentors. Mentors travel to a mentee's school and visit with them over the course of a semester; the GOI course serves to train and supervise the mentors.

Beyond serving the local community, a secondary goal of the GOI is to help university students learn about the complexities of loss and grief. Currently, the faculty director teaches a graduate-only section in the fall semester with assistance from the coordinator, who then teaches the undergraduate section in the spring as instructor of record.

Practicum in grief support. The content and objectives of the undergraduate and graduate sections are quite similar, with differences mostly in assignment complexity and readings. Paraphrased learning objectives include building an ethical mentor-

ing relationship with a grieving child or adolescent; discussing the concept of grief from both death and non-death losses, and the wide-ranging impacts of loss; differentiating developmental responses to loss; exploring multicultural views of loss and mourning rituals; and describing the interplay of trauma and grief. Course topics alternate from among two primary areas, the service component and content knowledge.

Topics in the service component include GOI history, differentiating mentorship and counseling, and multimodal activities to aid rapport building. A crucial part of this component is “consultation time,” a recurring focus on students’ time with their mentees. During consultation time, students share their experiences thus far and consult with their peers and instructor regarding any difficulties. This helps instructors monitor service delivery and empowers students to help each other.

The content, or didactic, component of the course includes topics such as defining loss, grief, and mourning; grief in children and adolescents; complicated grief in these age groups; types of loss such as bereavement, divorce, foster care, and addiction in the family; theories of grief; trauma and grief; and healing rituals. Assignments in both courses include a cultural presentation in which students teach their classmates about cultural mourning practices and a reflection paper at the beginning and end of the semester. Each reflection is open ended and guides students’ introspection on first what their expectations of themselves and the course are, and later on processing what they experienced. Finally, the undergraduate section includes a “student choice” assignment to watch a movie or read a book from a list and write about its applications to the course. A third choice involves writing a letter to a personal mentor. The graduate section includes a research and application paper. Students describe their mentee’s primary loss, discuss scholarly literature on the subject, and recommend a possible strategy for assisting the mentee based on their reading.

Service logistics. Near the second week of the semester, the GOI’s faculty director and coordinator “match” as many of the mentees on the referral list as possible with students in the course. Matching depends on several factors including mentees’ type of loss, age, gender, any personality factors or preferences given by school counselors, and mentor factors such as personality, major or level of training in a helping profession, known reliability and stability, and occasionally loss history. For example, a mentee grieving a parent’s incarceration might be matched with a mentor who had a similar experience at that age, if the instructors are sure the mentor would be able to handle it and the loss match would be helpful for the mentee. This type of match is usually made with mentors already known to instructors to increase the chance of success.

Following matching, mentors coordinate with school counselors to find a regular, once weekly time for mentors to visit with mentees at school. These visits typically last 30-45 minutes to reduce mentees’ out-of-class time; meetings can last up to 1.5 hours, though this is less common. The amount of time spent is not strictly regulated by the course, though mentors must strive to meet for at least 30 minutes and make up time if possible if the mentee is absent. This is tracked through a time log and meeting notes mentors keep, which instructors view every two weeks.

Mentors meet with mentees for the duration of the semester. Activities are individualized, tailored to each mentee’s need and the type of relationship mentors have with them. Ideas for activities come from in-class exercises, readings, and consultation time. Mentors are encouraged to be creative and intentional, following a “companionship” model of walking alongside a grieving mentee and allowing them to show mentors what they need through interaction, rather than a “treatment” model wherein the mentor responds as an expert and prescribes interventions (Wolfelt, 2006). The only mandated activity is a clo-

sure ritual at the last meeting, for the purpose of honoring their time together and reinforcing coping strategies for the future, but mentors and mentees create the ritual together. Recent rituals have involved sharing a favorite food or making items to exchange.

Participants

Potential participants for this case study included 49 undergraduates and 54 graduate students who recently completed or were currently enrolled in the GOI course, in addition to the five current and previous instructors. Only students still enrolled or working at the university were invited due to lack of contact information for alumni. Of these, 15 students (seven undergraduates, all female; eight graduate students, one male and seven female) completed the interview. Among these, one of the undergraduates and all of the graduate students had completed the course from one semester to four years prior, with the remaining undergraduates currently enrolled during the semester of data collection.

All five instructors, three current and two former, completed the interview; among this group, three are now tenure track assistant professors and two are doctoral candidates. Four of the five instructors identified as female and one as male.

Six current undergraduate students also consented to participate in the online survey. Four of these students (67.67%) completed the first administration; three (50%) completed the second.

Instrumentation

Undergraduate and graduate student interviews. The interview protocol was designed by the authors of the study to gain information about students' experiences in the GOI course. The semi-structured interviews included seven main questions: 1) "Why did you choose to take the Grief Outreach course?", 2) "What stands out to you the most regarding the Grief Outreach course?", 3) "To what extent did the course meet your expectations?", 4) "How did the

course content enhance or detract from your professional development?", 5) "How did the course content enhance or detract from your personal development?", 6) "What recommendations would you make for improving or changing the Grief Outreach course?", and 7) "Anything else you would like to add?" Prompts such as "Can you tell me more about that?" and "Can you give me an example?" were used to elicit rich details.

Instructor interviews. Semi-structured individual interviews were also conducted with current and previous course instructors in the same manner as with students, mainly to provide context for the course structure, service learning, and instructor goals. Again, these semi-structured interviews were designed by the authors of this study to elicit information about the experience of teaching the GOI course. Five main questions included: 1) "What was your experience teaching the Grief Outreach course?", 2) "How did you help your students learn from their experiences?", 3) "What went well?", 4) "What were the greatest challenges in teaching this course?", and 5) a request for general feedback. Prompts similar to those used with the students helped elicit thick description.

Online questionnaire. An online survey was distributed to all currently enrolled students who agreed to participate. The survey consisted of four basic demographic questions and four open-response questions: 1) "How has the mentoring experience enhanced your learning so far?", 2) "How has the mentoring experience detracted from your learning so far?", 3) "How have the other course activities and class meetings enhanced or detracted from your learning so far?", and 4) "What has stood out to you the most related to the Grief Outreach service-learning course?"

End-of-course evaluations. End-of-course evaluations, collected as part of the regular evaluation process at the university, give students the opportunity to offer feedback on courses and their instructors. For

this study, student evaluation data from the prior four semesters were included in our analysis. Questions on the evaluations, which are designed by the university, prompt students to consider the value of the course, the instruction quality, and the content delivery process.

Procedures

Interviews. We received IRB approval for the study before conducting interviews with students and instructors. Students enrolled in the course at the time of the study were contacted during a class meeting. The instructor left the room and one of the authors introduced the study and distributed the informed consent document. Everyone completed the form and indicated either whether they would or would not participate. The consent form included a line for participants to add their email address if they agreed to participate. We then contacted participants to schedule interviews and sent the link for the online questionnaire. All former students still at the university and all instructors were also contacted by email and invited to participate in face-to-face interviews. We interviewed current students only after the semester was completed and grades were submitted. Participants scheduled time with one of the research team members and the interview took place in a team member's office. Each team member audio recorded interviews on a computer or mobile device and files were encrypted or password protected. Students were offered a \$10 Amazon gift card as an incentive. Interviews ranged from 18 to 47 minutes in length.

Other data. The online survey was administered twice during the semester, once at midterm and once at the end of the semester. The review of this data did not occur until after grades were submitted at the end of the semester. Review of the four semesters of end-of-course evaluations also occurred after the end of the semester. The first author collected these as she had direct access to the data.

Data Analysis

We used the constant comparative method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to analyze the data. The research team broke into pairs and immersed themselves in the interview transcripts. Every transcript was coded independently; then the pairs met to gain consensus. A shared codebook was created and edited as partners recoded transcripts between meetings; codes were added or modified as needed. The team also met as a whole with the fifth author, who provided an unbiased perspective and helped with triangulation of the data. Three themes were also identified from course evaluations. These were triangulated with emerging themes from the transcript data to provide multiple perspectives and a fuller view of students' experiences. Meetings continued until consensus was achieved. The additional data (online surveys, end-of-course evaluations) were reviewed to help in triangulation of the overall themes and minimize bias in the data analysis activities.

Trustworthiness

Tracy (2010) suggested a series of steps to increase rigor in qualitative studies and we followed these for this study. Tracy specified the research topic should be worthy of study. Our topic, the impact of a grief outreach service learning course, is one that is needed in the literature, particularly regarding how students learn about loss and grief. Tracy also recommended a rigorous data collection and analysis process; therefore, we attempted to include a diverse sample and an appropriately complex semi-structured interview process. Triangulation among team members and sources of data, team member reflexivity, and thick description help increase the credibility of our research. We also followed Tracy's recommendation for ethical research by gaining IRB approval and maintaining ethical conduct throughout our process. Finally, we worked to connect our current findings with research already in the field.

FINDINGS

For this study, we wondered whether service learning could serve as a meaningful model for students to learn about grief given the dearth of research in this area. Our analysis suggested themes within two intertwined, iterative processes which helped students make meaning of their ex-

periences, leading to greater understanding of self and others and increased comfort and self-efficacy relative to grief and helping grieving people (see Figure 1). One process centered on the interplay of experiences inside and outside the classroom; the second process mediated an integration of personal with professional focus.

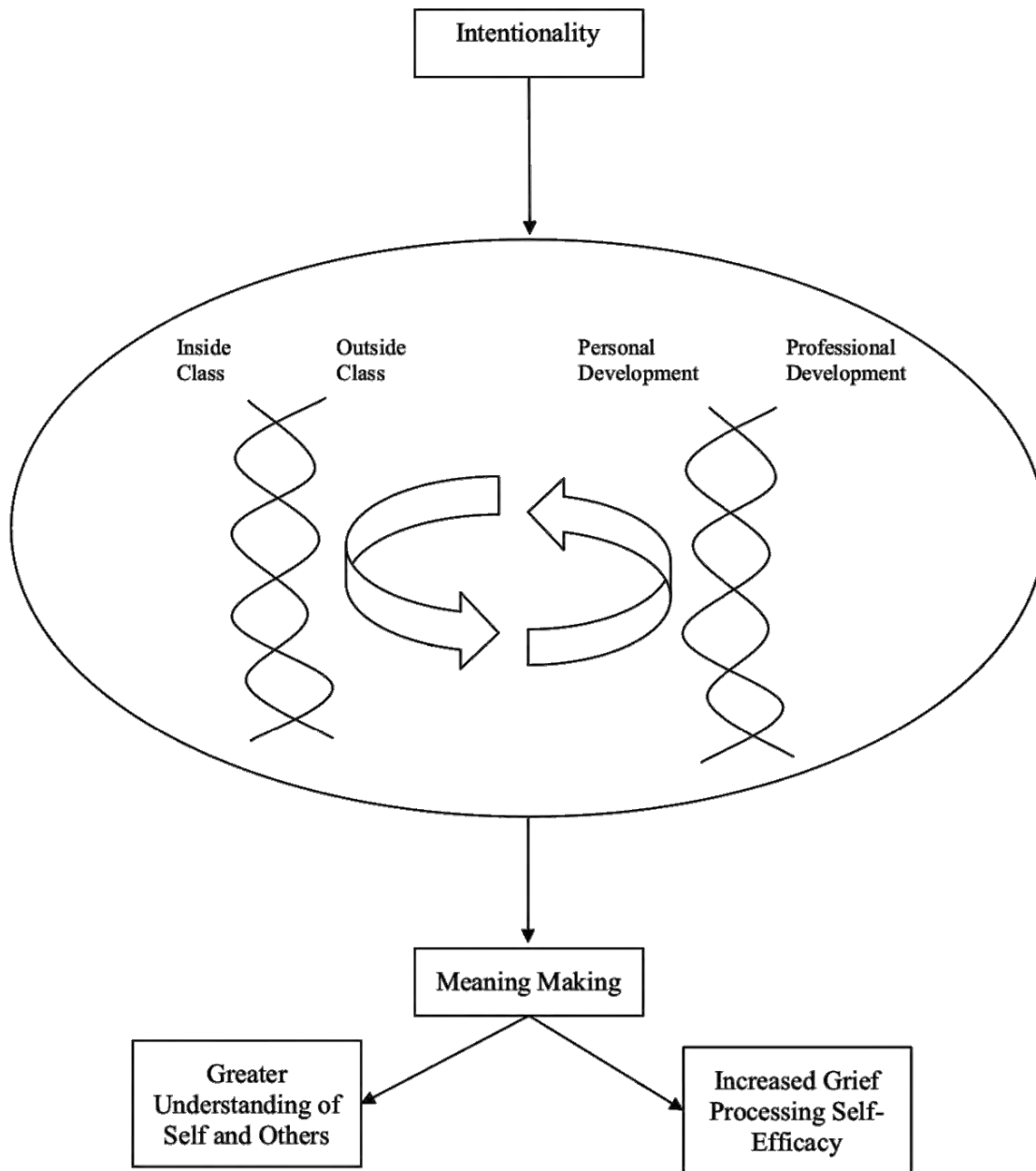


Figure 1. Model of student development in a grief-focused service-learning course.

Process 1: Inside and Outside the Classroom

Experiential learning and practical application. For many student participants, experiences they had as part of class time connected with experiences they had with their mentees and others outside the classroom; those in turn informed future classroom experiences. Repeated mentions in end-of-course evaluations about the helpful organization of the course and its overall format supported these themes. One of the most common experiences participants highlighted, in interviews and the online survey, was experiential learning through practical applications of strategies for helping their mentees explore and express their stories. One student participant noted, “I really liked that we did activities in class that we could do with our mentees and I think going through that experience myself helped me understand what benefits could come out of doing the activities...” The in-class experiential activities often helped students think how they might relate with a child or adolescent on their level. Another student participant stated, “It was nice to have that offered as a part of the course and kinda built into it.”

For many student participants, some aspect of mentorship pushed them outside their comfort zone, whether it was the developmental level of their mentee, being in a school setting, broaching an uncomfortable topic with a child, or using tactile strategies. Two of the four students responding to the online survey described anxiety in working with people outside the classroom. Class experiences often mitigated students’ anxiety, however. One online survey participant, recalling the relationship between in-class activities and her work with her mentee, stated the “mentoring experience enhanced knowledge of grief, cultural differences, and age differences in the process.” Another expressed, “If my mentee was an artsy person, I had options. But it was mostly learning new ways to express and teach and help.”

Instructor intentionality played a role in fostering students’ experiential learning and reduction of anxiety about meeting with mentees. For instance, one instructor participant noted using more activities toward the beginning of the semester for a double purpose. One purpose was to help students introspect and apply course concepts to their own loss history, and the other was to give students ideas for how to relate with their mentees. Another instructor participant, who himself served as a grief mentor as a graduate student, commented, “Being aware of that anxiety made interacting with students unique in that answering questions about the experience, what could they expect, how could they could be preparing” helped structure the learning experiences offered in class.

Holding environment. The concrete activities student participants completed in class included time to reflect internally and externally as a class. Many student participants, in both the interviews and course evaluations, alluded to a “space that was really open and really safe.” One instructor participant referred to this as “setting the stage.” This safety gave tacit permission for students to risk vulnerability but allowed them to control the risk. One participant noted, “...our class didn’t really feel like a class, it was like family and we were just wading through these waters together... our class was just really open...” Another participant saw this safety as a necessary connector between in-class learning and application with mentees when she stated the class was “very confidential and everyone in the class trusted each other even though we didn’t know each other.”

The safety of the classroom created a holding environment for students to connect with themselves, each other, the instructors, and the material in such a way that they were then free to connect with their mentees and offer the same space to them. One participant described their mentor-mentee relationship as a “safe, open relationship for a student to talk about their experiences and me to talk about mine

when it was appropriate..." Another student, who struggled a bit to connect with her mentee because of his age, felt sometimes he was "in it for the Legos." One day, however:

...We talked about how it's okay to be sad and really upset about your stepdad dying... And it's also okay to be really excited and happy around your biological dad... So that was the moment in which I felt as though I was really making a difference...

Challenges to connection. Though student participants strove to connect with their mentees in supportive ways, recreating the same safe space they experienced in the classroom, the process was not always easy or smooth. Sometimes adults in mentees' lives overstepped. A participant who had two boys in eighth grade surmised, "I feel like they would not have said that they would have needed this... and their mom had been the one who was like, 'I want my kids to do this and experience this process.'" Frequently, logistical challenges got in the way when mentees were absent on their meeting day, when mentees changed schools without notice, or when illness, weather, or holidays closed schools. Sometimes these challenges kept participants from saying goodbye properly: "I came for our final session and they weren't there, so that was kind of sad... We had been preparing for the end but I didn't get that [closure]."

Learning from multiple perspectives. Nearly every student participant noted the mentoring relationship as a pivotal or satisfying experience. One stated, "...That service learning, mentor-mentee element was... meaningful. Like, it wasn't just work for the sake of there being work... it's something that means something to the students." Another participant declared, "I really enjoyed... getting to know a student... [in] a safe, open relationship... It was a good experience I think on his part and mine."

The direct service component of this course was influenced by course material and the safety of the class environment. However, mentoring experiences found their way into the classroom as well. Course instructors created intentional space in class for consultation time, and participants viewed this time in different ways. One student participant said, "...If I had trouble or felt like something wasn't going right, then I can talk to a group of other people who were also maybe experiencing something similar in a very relaxed and comfortable setting." Another participant described this time as the "ability to work as a team... to really collaborate on different ideas on how to help the kids open up, to kind of talk about what things worked and what things didn't." Finally, a fourth participant noted classmates' multiple disciplines as a factor in the helpfulness of this time: "I enjoyed the other students. There was a diverse group of students from School Counseling and Counseling Psych and Social Work... just an understanding for what some other folks in the helping profession will be doing is helpful."

Process 2: Personal and Professional Focus

Personal growth in reflection.

Many student participants spoke about how engagement with course material and sometimes with mentees brought up their personal loss history. Instructors did not focus on personal therapeutic gains as a goal for the course; rather, they viewed this as a byproduct of meaningfully engaging with the course content. As one instructor participant described it, "Learning is most significant when it's self-discovered and when it's connected to something that's personal and meaningful to the individual student." Course activities helped students view their losses in a new light or challenged them to process these losses differently. For instance, one participant said she "became more aware" of how she grieves, and "it kind of helped me I guess kind of reflect on 'Oh, this is why I act the way I do' or 'this

is why I interact in this way.” Another participant focused on one specific loss for many of the in-class activities. She had never had a “label” for the kind of loss she experienced before, and hearing it named “ambiguous loss,” recognizing it, was powerful for her: “Being able to, like, label what I went through... was just, like, ‘Oh my gosh.’ Everything just made sense and I just felt this... kind of a sense of peace...” Others took a more expanded view of their losses: “Just learning more about it helps me look at grief through the lens of not just being death... but in all these different things that we grieve all the time...”

For other participants, working with mentees or anticipating it brought up memories of prior losses and spurred personal and professional growth. One participant stated: “...As a person who lost a parent and a grandparent while I was in school, I think it helped me heal and helped me relate back to what I experienced and what I felt during those times.” Another participant similarly expressed: “...I wanted to... understand what I was going through, but also, like, see how somebody younger than me was dealing with it.”

Mentee-centeredness and purposeful connection. While many student participants naturally used coursework to process or re-process their losses, they also reflected on mentees’ losses and how they might be most helpful. One student participant worked with an 11th grader whose most significant loss was similar to some of her own losses. She described relating to the mentee on some aspects but not others, so she focused on the commonalities and normalizing her mentee’s experience: “So she felt like everything she was going through was abnormal, [and] I was kind of able to help her... You know, ‘What you’re going through is okay.’”

Another participant noticed her mentee, likely because of his cognitive developmental level, misattributed his stepfather’s death. She worried her mentee would develop “fears about eating” as a result and wondered about correcting his understand-

ing of the cause of the heart attack. Via consultation, however, she realized her desire to rescue her mentee kept her from seeing what troubled him and that the mentee was not actually bothered by his explanation. The participant chose to refocus her support on what he really needed from her rather than what she thought he needed: “If he is content with what he knows and how he’s conceptualizing his stepdad’s death, if he has questions, then that’s something I can address... It’s not my place to say, ‘This is not actually how he died.’”

Most student participants described variations of “mentee-centeredness” in their interactions, despite what they expected or planned for the meeting. One participant noted an assignment required them to select a book to read with mentees: “...Although I thought that that was gonna be a great activity and a way to open up... [laugh] she just was not into it at all.” Instead, the participant played a version of the board game “Sorry” in which she used prompts tailored to the mentee’s needs and interests, and “that actually was the first time [she] opened up to me about her mom.” Another participant, whose mentee’s loss was very public, needed a break from continually focusing on it: “I think my time with him was his way of getting away from it [Interviewer: His private time.], yeah, so we didn’t talk about it... I think that’s what he needed in that moment.”

Finally, one participant summed up the interplay of personal and professional as she described what she learned:

I was taking home what was going on with my little kindergartner a lot. The finality of it, that I was never gonna see her again, was very hard for me. But that was also the good thing because I realized maybe that’s not the best career path for me.

Putting It All Together: Increased Grief Processing Self-Efficacy and Outward Impact

The two processes described above, one involving the dynamics inside and out-

side the classroom and the other involving simultaneous personal and professional focus, contributed to students' meaning making throughout the course. This resulted in themes of greater grief processing self-efficacy in student and professional roles and a sense of the greater impact of what they gleaned from the course and their service-learning work.

Grief processing self-efficacy. Student participants described feeling more comfortable with and able to handle their own and others' grief and better preparation for future roles as a result of participating in the course. One participant stated, "I will of course still [be] uncomfortable if I'm working with a grieving student, [but] I think that I'll feel much more prepared." Another noted she had a better sense "of what grief is and how different developmental areas react differently and how they express grief." Additionally, one participant in the online survey noted the course helped with "conceptualization of future occupational aspirations." Finally, end-of-course evaluations indicated it "provide[d] a learning experience that helps guide individuals to be better practitioners."

Broad impact. Many student participants felt the course had a broader impact than simply their personal growth and increased knowledge. One participant stated:

I have a workplace where I'm managing 27 people and it's a ministry... [the course] helped me be better for my staff [and] also helped them be better for their kids. And so I think this one connection I got to have with this little girl helped me help them, and then in turn thousands of kids got to be impacted by that 'cause I got the privilege of leading.

Another participant used what she learned to design and lead a small group for middle schoolers grieving a loss as part of her internship. She stated, "It was definitely successful [and] I could definitely see... a lot of the skills I learned from the Grief Outreach class in that."

Finally, several participants discussed impacts on their relationships with others. One told of growing up in a military family and the changes in self-awareness and relational behaviors she saw: "I noticed this pattern of, okay, I kind of hold myself back from my friends. So I noticed that and so now I'm trying not to do that [laugh] but really fully invest in my friendships." The same participant also told a story of talking with a friend whose father died and how the course helped her be a better friend while he grieved.

Overall, participating in the grief-focused service-learning course benefited students in multiple ways. In-class activities impacted their work with mentees, which in turn affected discussions in class; they grew personally and professionally as they learned to navigate their own losses and change the way they responded to mentees; and the two processes together helped students build self-efficacy in helping grieving people and see a ripple effect of impact in the community.

DISCUSSION

This study focused on the impact of a service-learning approach in a course on grief for graduate and undergraduate students. Emergent themes indicated two iterative processes: a process of learning and reflection in the classroom as well as outside it, and a process of developing intrapersonally as well as professionally. As students made meaning of their experiences, their grief processing self-efficacy increased, and they saw a broader impact on their workplaces, their relationships with others, and their communities.

Consistent with prior research on service learning, students in the GOI course expressed gains in self-awareness and grief processing self-efficacy through direct engagement with their mentees, experiential learning in the classroom, and frequent reflection (Bjornestad et al., 2016; Holland, 2001; Weiler et al., 2013). These experiences happened simultaneously and each pro-

cess informed the other. As students engaged with the academic material and the hands-on activities in class, they reflected on their personal losses, shifting how they thought about them, learning to cope in new ways, or integrating new language to describe these losses. Students took these shifting perspectives with them as they met with their mentees, using them to inform how they saw mentees' responses to loss and their approaches to being responsive to mentees. They then reflected on their work with mentees and learned from consultation with each other. This iterative process generated continuous learning in personal and professional areas (Holland, 2001). These findings also align with prior studies related to grief education in that the course provided a balance of academic learning with personal reflection, and students perceived differences not only in what they knew at the end of the course but also believed themselves better able to support others or train others to serve in supportive roles with grieving people (Basu & Heuser, 2003; Gamino & Ritter, 2012; Pagano, 2016).

This study has several limitations. We focused on one course at one university, limiting our population size. Our sample was not gender diverse, with only one student and one instructor participant identifying as male. Though this course often attracts a disproportionate number of female-identifying students, the ratio of female to male in the population is lower than in our sample. We also did not collect other demographic information from interview participants, limiting the possible conclusions we may make. The amount of time since the experience also varied among participants. Finally, though several students agreed to complete two rounds of the online survey, few did. We attempted to increase the richness of our data and triangulate it by including other sources such as interviews and course evaluations; however, greater participation in online surveys would have added to this richness.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Findings indicate support for service learning as a modality for grief education. Though Servaty-Seib and Tedrick Parikh (2014) evaluated this modality for use in graduate curricula, our model suggests its applicability to undergraduates as well. Our study provides additional qualitative data supporting similar conclusions about the usefulness of service learning in grief education in a standalone course rather than as infused into another course. Additionally, there may be applications to a variety of perspectives on the topic, from a death-and-dying focused course to one including consideration of non-death losses. For existing clinical courses in helping professions, this model may be modified to integrate with work students perform onsite. Finally, this model could be adapted to populations other than children and adolescents in school systems. For example, students may visit grieving residents of nursing homes or patients in hospitals while learning about the needs of these special populations. Because a key element of our course is providing mentoring rather than counseling, anyone from any field can participate with oversight from instructors with qualified training and credentials.

Participants in this study confirmed growth in personal and professional roles, as stated in literature as one projected outcome of service learning (Holland, 2001). The current study expands on this, showing that although engagement in service learning is important, reflection, a safe environment, and the ability to learn from multiple perspectives also affects student development. Further research is needed to learn what aspects of this environment contribute to greater integration of grief knowledge and efficacy in processing loss. Future research should also focus on mentee outcomes, whether and how a mentor helped with emotional and behavioral symptoms of grief in the short and long term, and how mentors apply their enhanced understanding of grief in their future work.

This study sought to understand the impact of a service-learning course centered on grief on graduate and undergraduate students' personal and professional development. Courses and research studies focused on or infusing grief education in the helping professions are still scant, despite the high likelihood professionals will encounter clients and patients whose concerns relate to loss. The results of this study show the compatibility of using a service-learning model for grief education and the multifaceted gains students experience as a result of participation.

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