Psychosocial Adaptation of a Mother-Bereaved Elementary School Child during Erikson's Industry-versus-Inferiority Stage

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Abstract

Background - Parental bereavement may disrupt children's emotional security, daily routines, peer relationships, and school participation, but outcomes vary according to developmental demands and the support available after the loss.
Research Urgency - Evidence concerning mother-bereaved elementary school children in Indonesian educational contexts remains limited, particularly regarding how caregiving and school support interact with Erikson's industry-versus-inferiority task.
Research Objectives - This study describes the psychosocial adaptation of an 11-year-old mother-bereaved child and identifies family and school conditions that support the development of competence.
Research Method - A descriptive qualitative case study used caregiver and teacher interviews, observations, and documentation. Data were organized through reduction, display, and interpretive conclusion drawing, using self-confidence, independence, responsibility, peer relations, competence, and inferiority as analytical dimensions.
Research Findings - The child showed emerging strengths in independence, responsibility, task completion, and learning motivation. Self-confidence and initiation of peer communication remained context-dependent, especially during public performance and social comparison. Consistent care from the father and grandmother, together with teacher encouragement, functioned as protective resources.
Conclusion - Maternal loss did not uniformly produce psychosocial failure in this case; adaptation reflected the interaction between grief, developmental tasks, caregiving continuity, and school recognition.
Research Novelty/Contribution - The study reframes mother-bereavement through an educational-developmental lens and proposes coordinated family-school support as a practical pathway for strengthening competence without pathologizing grief.

Keywords: Childhood Bereavement, Educational Psychology, Elementary School Child, Industry versus Inferiority, Psychosocial Adaptation

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INTRODUCTION

Elementary school is a period in which children increasingly define themselves through learning, task completion, cooperation, and recognition from adults and peers. Physical growth continues, but the most visible changes occur in children's ability to regulate emotion, follow rules, assume responsibility, and evaluate their own performance. School therefore becomes more than a place for academic instruction: it is a social arena in which children learn whether they are capable, valued, and able to contribute. Indonesian research similarly emphasizes that school-age development involves interrelated cognitive, emotional, social, and moral processes rather than academic achievement alone (Zakiyah et al., 2024). When these processes are supported, children are more likely to participate confidently, persist with difficult tasks, and build constructive relationships with teachers and classmates.

Erikson's psychosocial theory describes the central crisis of middle childhood as industry versus inferiority (Erikson, 1963; Kamilla et al., 2022). Industry refers to the developing belief that effort can produce valued skills and accomplishments. It is strengthened when children are given manageable responsibilities, receive specific recognition, and experience progress in tasks that matter to their families and schools. Inferiority emerges when children repeatedly interpret mistakes, social comparison, or lack of recognition as evidence that they are less capable than others. The two tendencies are not mutually exclusive categories. A child may demonstrate industry when completing familiar schoolwork yet experience inferiority when speaking before the class or entering an unfamiliar peer group. Recent Indonesian evidence also links psychosocial maturity at this stage with learning responsibility, showing why competence should be interpreted through both behavior and educational participation (Mutiara et al., 2024).

The death of a parent can complicate this developmental task because it changes the emotional and practical ecology in which competence is built. Bereavement may interrupt routines, redistribute household roles, reduce the availability of an adult who previously offered reassurance, and make concentration at school more difficult. Systematic reviews associate childhood bereavement with a wide range of possible educational and psychosocial outcomes, including temporary concentration problems, altered school engagement, emotional distress, and difficulties with peer interaction (Bergman et al., 2017; Elsner et al., 2022). However, these findings do not imply that every bereaved child will develop psychological disorder or academic failure. The consequences of parental death vary according to age, prior relationships, the circumstances of the death, surviving-caregiver functioning, family communication, material security, and the quality of support available in school and community settings (Hoppe et al., 2025).

For this reason, the term mother-bereaved is more precise than treating motherlessness as a single deficit condition. A mother may be absent because of death, migration, separation, illness, or other circumstances, and each condition creates a different developmental context. The case examined in this study concerns maternal death. It should therefore be understood as a process of grief and reorganization rather than as proof that an irreplaceable gender role has disappeared. Attachment theory is useful when interpreted in this relational way: security develops through dependable, responsive relationships with significant caregivers, not merely through the formal identity of one caregiver (Bowlby, 1988). A father, grandparent, or other adult can provide continuity, emotional availability, protection, and a secure base for exploration. Parent-child attachment is also closely connected with emotion regulation and later interpersonal functioning (Ali et al., 2021).

Protective-process research supports this non-deterministic interpretation. The Family Bereavement Program demonstrates that effective parenting, open communication, stable routines, adaptive coping, and positive caregiver-child relationships can reduce risk and promote resilience after

parental death (Sandler et al., 2013). Other research shows that peer relationships may either buffer distress or intensify feelings of difference, depending on whether bereaved children experience acceptance, exclusion, or discomfort when talking about the deceased parent (Dopp & Cain, 2012). Consequently, independence after bereavement should not automatically be interpreted as healthy adaptation; it may represent competence, necessity, or emotional withdrawal. The meaning of behavior must be examined within the child's relationships and daily setting.

The school environment is especially important during industry versus inferiority because it provides routines, achievable tasks, peer contact, and repeated opportunities for recognition. A systematic review of educational outcomes found that bereavement can influence attendance, concentration, achievement, and engagement, although the evidence is heterogeneous and shaped by contextual factors (Elsner et al., 2022). Teachers may notice changes that are less visible at home, such as hesitation to speak, reduced participation, conflict with peers, or unusual sensitivity to comparison. Reviews of school-based and educational responses recommend calm acknowledgement of the loss, flexible expectations, predictable routines, opportunities to participate without forced disclosure, and referral when distress interferes persistently with functioning (Duncan, 2020). Harrop et al. (2022) similarly found that families valued teachers who were aware of bereavement circumstances, checked in with children, and connected them with appropriate emotional support.

In Indonesia, research on psychosocial development frequently examines parenting, early-childhood confidence, or general school-age development. Democratic and responsive parenting has been associated with cooperation, tolerance, emotional expression, and responsibility (Syahrul & Nurhafizah, 2022), while parents and teachers are both identified as important sources of encouragement for children's confidence (Rifa & Rakimahwati, 2023). These studies are relevant but do not fully explain how a child negotiates the industry-inferiority crisis after maternal death. International research, meanwhile, often aggregates parental loss, includes adolescents and young adults, or focuses on intervention outcomes. A qualitative case can contribute by showing how apparently positive functioning and continuing vulnerability coexist within one child's everyday educational experience.

Initial school observations identified an 11-year-old child, referred to here as NR, who had experienced maternal death and was being cared for primarily by the father with support from the grandmother. NR generally completed school assignments, managed personal needs, and followed home and school responsibilities. At the same time, the child appeared hesitant when asked to express opinions publicly, was not always proactive in initiating peer communication, and sometimes compared personal ability with that of classmates. This combination challenges a deficit-based assumption that maternal loss necessarily results in global developmental failure. It also challenges an overly positive interpretation in which task completion alone is treated as evidence that grief has been resolved.

The study therefore asks two related questions: how is psychosocial adaptation expressed across the dimensions of self-confidence, independence, responsibility, social relationships, competence, and inferiority in a mother-bereaved elementary school child; and what family and school conditions appear to support that adaptation? The purpose is not to estimate prevalence or establish a causal effect from a single case. Rather, it is to construct a contextually grounded account of how grief, caregiving continuity, school participation, and developmental tasks intersect. The study's contribution lies in connecting Erikson's industry-versus-inferiority framework with childhood-bereavement research and translating the interpretation into practical directions for coordinated family-school support.

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METHODS

Research design and case boundary

The study employed a descriptive qualitative case-study design. A case study is appropriate when a contemporary phenomenon must be understood within the relationships and settings that give it meaning rather than separated from them (Yin, 2018). The bounded case was the psychosocial adaptation of one mother-bereaved child during the industry-versus-inferiority stage, considered across home and school contexts. The unit of analysis was not maternal absence in general, but the child's pattern of competence, participation, confidence, and social adjustment after maternal death. This boundary prevents the case from being interpreted as representative of all children who do not live with their mothers.

The research was conducted in a public elementary-school context in Central Java, Indonesia. The school is described generically in this revised manuscript to reduce the risk of identifying a minor who experienced a sensitive family event. The focal participant was an 11-year-old student given the pseudonym NR. Purposive selection was based on three considerations: the child had experienced maternal death, was within the age range associated with industry versus inferiority, and was available for observation across ordinary educational activities. Supporting informants were caregivers familiar with the child's daily development and a teacher familiar with the child's classroom participation. The father served as the principal caregiver, while the grandmother provided additional care and emotional continuity.

Data collection

Data collection combined semi-structured interviews, observation, and documentation. Caregiver interviews explored changes following the mother's death, daily routines, expressions of grief, household responsibility, learning habits, and the support provided by family members. The teacher interview focused on classroom confidence, task completion, peer interaction, participation in school activities, and responses to encouragement. Observation was used to examine behavior in natural contexts, particularly whether NR initiated interaction, persisted with tasks, sought assistance, complied with rules, and responded to public-performance demands. Documentation was used as corroborating material for educational participation and task completion where such records were available.

The use of multiple sources was intended to avoid reducing the child's adaptation to a single adult's impression. Caregiver accounts provided the history and home context, while teacher information and observation provided evidence from the school setting. The sources were treated as complementary rather than identical: a child may appear independent at home, for example, while remaining hesitant during classroom performance. The analytic emphasis was therefore placed on convergence, divergence, and context-dependent behavior across the available records.

Data analysis and trustworthiness

Analysis followed the interactive logic of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing described by Miles et al. (2014). First, material relevant to psychosocial functioning was selected from interview, observation, and documentation records. Second, evidence was organized in a case matrix using six dimensions derived from the research focus: self-confidence, independence, social relationships, responsibility, competence or industry, and experiences of inferiority. Third, the researchers compared evidence across home and school contexts and considered whether each

dimension represented an emerging strength, a context-dependent strength, or an area requiring support. Interpretations were then examined in relation to Erikson's developmental theory and childhood-bereavement literature.

Source triangulation compared the perspectives of caregivers and the teacher, while methodological triangulation compared interview accounts with observation and documentation. These procedures support credibility by identifying whether an interpretation is repeated across sources or is limited to a specific situation. The study does not claim statistical generalizability. Its quality depends instead on transparent description of the case boundary, preservation of contextual differences, cautious interpretation, and consistency between the evidence and the conclusions (Fadli, 2021). The child was identified by the pseudonym NR, the school was generalized, and unnecessary identifying details were removed from the report.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Case context and early adaptation after maternal death

The results are presented as an integrated case narrative because the purpose was to understand the relationship among grief, caregiving, school participation, and developmental competence. Shortly after the mother's death, caregiver accounts described pronounced sadness, frequent crying, and repeated questions about the mother's whereabouts. These responses are consistent with an early grief reaction and should not be interpreted automatically as psychopathology. Childhood grief often appears intermittently, is revisited as cognitive understanding develops, and may coexist with periods of play, learning, and apparently ordinary behavior (Melhem et al., 2011). In NR's case, emotional distress was followed by a gradual return to routines supported by the father and grandmother.

The child's later functioning was neither uniformly impaired nor fully unaffected. NR participated in school, interacted with classmates, completed tasks, and accepted household responsibilities, yet remained hesitant in situations that required public expression or exposed the child to comparison with peers. This pattern illustrates why psychosocial adaptation is better understood dimensionally. Industry was visible through effort, responsibility, and engagement, while inferiority remained possible in evaluative social situations. The case therefore reflects an adaptive process rather than a completed recovery or a fixed developmental outcome.

Table 1. Integrated psychosocial profile of the case

Dimension	Integrated case evidence	Interpretation	Educational support priority
Self-confidence	Hesitant to express opinions or speak before the class; participation improved with teacher encouragement.	Context-dependent strength	Low-risk opportunities to speak, specific feedback, and avoidance of forced disclosure.
Independence	Managed personal needs and completed familiar tasks without continuous reminders.	Emerging strength	Maintain age-appropriate autonomy while ensuring help remains available.

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Dimension	Integrated case evidence	Interpretation	Educational support priority
Social relationships	Interacted with peers but was not consistently proactive in initiating communication.	Area for support	Structured peer collaboration and monitoring of exclusion or withdrawal.
Responsibility	Completed school assignments, followed rules, and helped with household tasks.	Emerging strength	Recognize effort without overburdening the child with adult-like responsibility.
Competence / industry	Showed learning motivation, task persistence, and willingness to participate in school activities.	Emerging strength	Provide achievable challenges and process-focused recognition.
Inferiority	Occasionally compared personal ability with peers and hesitated in evaluative situations.	Area for support	Use private formative feedback and emphasize individual progress over ranking.

Independence and responsibility as emerging forms of industry

NR's ability to manage personal needs and complete familiar tasks without continuous prompting was one of the clearest strengths across the case record. At school, the child completed assignments and followed classroom expectations; at home, the child helped with routine household tasks. Within Erikson's framework, these behaviors indicate an emerging sense that effort can produce useful and socially recognized outcomes. They also provide continuity after family disruption: predictable tasks can restore a sense of order and personal efficacy when other aspects of life have changed.

Nevertheless, independence after bereavement requires careful interpretation. A child may become more self-reliant because the surviving caregiver is managing grief, work, and new household demands. Such competence can be adaptive, but it can also conceal unmet emotional needs if adults praise self-sufficiency while becoming less available. The relevant question is therefore not simply whether NR can perform tasks, but whether autonomy exists alongside permission to seek help, express sadness, and remain developmentally dependent when needed. Protective family programs emphasize effective caregiving and open communication precisely because responsibility should not replace emotional support (Sandler et al., 2013).

The evidence in this case suggests that responsibility was supported rather than entirely imposed. The father remained the principal caregiver and the grandmother provided additional care, creating a network in which duties could be performed within continuing relationships. This pattern is consistent with research linking responsive parenting with responsibility and social-emotional competence (Syahrul & Nurhafizah, 2022). For educators, the practical implication is to recognize task completion as a strength while watching for exhaustion, perfectionism, or reluctance to request assistance. Praise should focus on effort and progress rather than communicating that the child must always be strong.

Learning motivation and the development of competence

Learning motivation and persistence provided additional evidence of industry. NR continued to participate in school activities and attempted to achieve satisfactory learning outcomes. These behaviors are developmentally meaningful because industry is formed through repeated experiences of practice, feedback, and improvement. A bereaved child who remains engaged with school is not necessarily free from grief; school engagement may instead function as a stabilizing routine, a source of identity beyond the loss, and an arena in which competence can still be experienced.

The relationship between psychosocial development and learning responsibility has been documented among Indonesian school-age children, with more mature industry-related functioning associated with stronger responsibility for learning activities (Mutiara et al., 2024). NR's task completion is consistent with this relationship, but the case adds an important contextual qualification: competence developed while the child was reorganizing family life after maternal death. It therefore cannot be attributed solely to individual personality. Caregiving continuity, teacher recognition, and access to ordinary school routines appear to have helped preserve opportunities for mastery.

Educational research on bereavement cautions that concentration and achievement may fluctuate over time, especially around reminders, anniversaries, family events, or assignments concerning parents (Elsner et al., 2022). Teachers should therefore avoid using one period of successful performance as evidence that no support is needed. A flexible approach can maintain high but realistic expectations, allow temporary adjustments when grief becomes salient, and continue to offer meaningful tasks. Such flexibility supports industry because it protects participation without redefining the child as incapable.

Self-confidence and context-dependent inferiority

Self-confidence was more fragile than task responsibility. NR was hesitant to state opinions and speak in front of the class, although participation improved after encouragement from the teacher. Public speaking places the child in an explicitly evaluative situation: performance is visible, comparison with classmates is immediate, and mistakes may feel socially consequential. In Eriksonian terms, this is a setting in which industry can shift toward inferiority even when the child is competent in less public tasks.

The child's tendency to compare personal ability with peers further supports this interpretation. Social comparison is normal in middle childhood, but bereavement may heighten sensitivity to difference. A child may already feel unlike classmates because of family circumstances, and evaluative experiences can activate a broader sense of being less fortunate or less secure. This does not mean that every hesitation is caused by maternal death. The case data support only a contextual association: self-confidence was weaker in performance and comparison situations than in familiar responsibility-based activities.

Teacher encouragement appeared to help NR participate, indicating that recognition from a trusted adult can function as a proximal protective process. Effective feedback should be specific, private when appropriate, and focused on strategy or improvement. Asking a bereaved child to discuss the loss publicly as a way of building confidence would be inappropriate unless the child initiates and consents. Instead, teachers can use paired discussion, small-group roles, rehearsal before presentation, and gradual increases in audience size. These strategies create mastery experiences while limiting unnecessary exposure. Parents and teachers jointly contribute to children's confidence when they provide encouragement without excessive pressure (Rifa & Rakimahwati, 2023).

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Peer relationships and social participation

NR was able to interact with classmates but did not consistently initiate communication. This distinction matters: the presence of peer contact does not necessarily indicate that a child feels socially secure, while low initiation does not necessarily indicate rejection. The evidence suggests access to peer relationships combined with a degree of social caution. Dopp and Cain (2012) note that peers can be important sources of normality and support after parental death, but bereaved children may also worry that peers will not understand the loss or will respond awkwardly.

School can support peer participation without identifying the child publicly. Structured cooperative learning, rotating classroom responsibilities, and teacher-facilitated pair work create legitimate reasons to interact that do not require the child to disclose private experiences. Teachers should also monitor subtle withdrawal, teasing, exclusion, or changes in friendship patterns. The goal is not to force sociability but to ensure that opportunities for belonging remain available. In industry-versus-inferiority terms, successful contribution to a group can reinforce competence and reduce the salience of comparison.

The case also indicates that social support operates across settings. The father and grandmother offered continuity at home, while classmates and teachers provided a broader social world in which NR could participate as a student rather than only as a bereaved child. This differentiation is valuable because resilience does not require forgetting the deceased parent. It involves maintaining a meaningful connection to the loss while continuing to engage with developmental opportunities. Research on bereaved youth consistently identifies supportive relationships and effective coping resources as central to adjustment (Hoppe et al., 2025; Lin et al., 2004).

Caregiving continuity as a protective process

The father and grandmother were central to the child's gradual adaptation. Their presence maintained daily care after maternal death and appears to have provided sufficient emotional continuity for NR to return to school routines, manage responsibilities, and remain motivated to learn. This finding should not be framed as one caregiver replacing another. A more accurate interpretation is that multiple caregivers reorganized the child's support system and made dependable relationships available after a major loss.

Attachment theory supports this relational interpretation. A secure base is created through consistent availability, protection, and responsiveness, enabling a child to explore and return for support when distressed (Bowlby, 1988). Contemporary concept analysis likewise emphasizes the behavioral and relational principles of parent-child attachment rather than reducing security to biological or gender identity (Ali et al., 2021). In NR's case, the father and grandmother offered complementary forms of continuity: the father held primary responsibility, while the grandmother expanded the network of care.

Family support also helps explain why maternal death did not produce uniform impairment. International studies report substantial variation after parental loss; the quality of surviving-caregiver functioning, communication, routines, and access to support can amplify or reduce risk (Bergman et al., 2017; Hoppe et al., 2025). Research involving motherless youth in another cultural setting similarly identifies emotional, social, educational, and economic consequences, but also points to community and family support as important resources (Ramatswi & Pfarelo, 2025). The present case adds a school-age Indonesian example in which caregiving continuity was associated with both competence and ongoing vulnerability.

Caregivers should therefore receive guidance rather than being treated only as providers of support. Surviving adults may be grieving, taking on new responsibilities, and uncertain about how to

talk with the child. Open, age-appropriate communication can reduce confusion, while routines and shared remembrance can support both security and continuing bonds. Schools can assist by maintaining respectful communication with the family, explaining changes observed in class, and identifying local counseling or bereavement services when the child's functioning deteriorates.

The teacher and school as a developmental support system

Teacher support was most visible in the improvement of classroom confidence after encouragement. This small but important finding illustrates how school responses can influence the industry-inferiority balance. Recognition communicates that the child remains a capable member of the class, while predictable opportunities to succeed create experiences of mastery. Harrop et al. (2022) found that families valued schools that understood bereavement circumstances, maintained contact, and offered or connected children with emotional support. Duncan's (2020) review likewise highlights the need for teachers to respond with sensitivity, accurate information, and referral awareness rather than silence or improvised counseling beyond their competence.

A coordinated response for NR would include regular but non-intrusive check-ins, communication with the father or grandmother, flexible support during grief triggers, and continued access to ordinary academic and social activities. The teacher can observe changes in concentration, attendance, task completion, peer relationships, and emotional regulation. Persistent deterioration, severe withdrawal, self-harm statements, or inability to function would require referral to qualified mental-health services. Ordinary sadness, temporary fluctuation, or reluctance to discuss the loss should not be pathologized automatically.

The educational contribution of the case is therefore practical as well as theoretical. Erikson's framework directs attention to competence, recognition, and comparison, while bereavement research directs attention to grief, caregiving continuity, and support access. When combined, the perspectives suggest that support should not consist only of comforting the child. It should also preserve opportunities to learn, contribute, cooperate, and experience progress. Family-school coordination becomes the mechanism through which emotional security and developmental mastery can reinforce one another.

Integrative interpretation, limitations, and transferability

Taken together, the case shows an uneven but coherent adaptation pattern. Independence, responsibility, and learning motivation represented emerging industry; public self-confidence, initiation of peer communication, and comparison with classmates remained areas in which inferiority could emerge. The coexistence of these tendencies is theoretically expected. Erikson's psychosocial crises are tensions to be negotiated, not tests that are passed once and permanently resolved. Maternal death altered the conditions of negotiation, but the father, grandmother, teacher, and school routines supplied resources that allowed competence to continue developing.

The case does not establish that family support caused the observed outcomes, nor does it permit conclusions about all mother-bereaved children. The evidence was derived from one child and a limited network of adult informants. Adult reports may not fully represent the child's private experience, and the available manuscript did not include sufficient verbatim data to compare the language used by each informant. The cross-sectional design also limits claims about developmental dynamics because change over time was reconstructed retrospectively rather than observed longitudinally. These limitations should guide interpretation and future research.

Transferability depends on whether readers encounter comparable conditions: a school-age child following maternal death, continuing care from a surviving parent and grandparent, access to school routines, and mixed strengths and vulnerabilities in the industry-inferiority domain. Future research should include the child's voice through developmentally appropriate and ethically safeguarded

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methods, compare several cases across different family arrangements, document time since loss, and follow adaptation longitudinally. Such work could clarify when ordinary educational support is sufficient and when specialist bereavement or mental-health intervention is needed.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative case indicates that maternal death did not result in uniform psychosocial failure. NR demonstrated emerging industry through independence, responsibility, task completion, learning motivation, and participation in school routines. At the same time, self-confidence and peer initiation remained context-dependent, particularly in public and comparative situations where feelings of inferiority could emerge. The father and grandmother provided caregiving continuity, while teacher encouragement and school participation offered recognition and opportunities for mastery. The case therefore supports a relational and developmental interpretation of childhood bereavement: adaptation reflects the interaction of grief, caregiving quality, school response, and the tasks of middle childhood. Schools should coordinate with caregivers, maintain predictable routines and realistic expectations, provide gradual opportunities for successful participation, and refer children for specialist assistance when distress persistently disrupts functioning. Because the study involves one case and relies substantially on adult accounts, its conclusions are analytically rather than statistically transferable. Longitudinal multi-case research that includes children's voices is needed to examine how industry and inferiority change across the course of bereavement.

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