Balancing roles: Teaching staff's dilemma in supporting bereaved college students

Martin Lytje & Atle Dyregrov

Published online: 19 Feb 2024.

Submit your article to this journal ⬚

Article views: 573

View related articles ⬚

View Crossmark data ⬚

Citing articles: 2 View citing articles ⬚

Taylor & Francis
Taylor & Francis Group

OPEN ACCESS   Check for updates

Balancing roles: Teaching staff's dilemma in supporting bereaved college students

Martin Lytje[a,b] and Atle Dyregrov[a]

[a]Center for Crisis Psychology, Faculty of Psychology, University of Bergen, Bergen, Norway; [b]Danish Cancer Society, OmSorg, Copenhagen, Denmark

ABSTRACT

This study examines the challenges faced by teaching staff in supporting bereaved college students. A three-year study was conducted in Danish colleges, involving focus groups and 1-on-1 interviews with 18 teachers from five collaborating colleges, situated in all main regions of Denmark. The research aimed to understand the role of college teaching staff in providing support during critical illness and death. Findings reveal an absence of clear structures, leaving teaching staff uncertain about their responsibilities. Challenges include inconsistent engagement, difficulty identifying bereaved students, and the need for more time, support structures, and training. Clear guidelines are essential to empower teaching staff in effectively assisting bereaved students. Providing support, resources, and training will enhance student well-being and enable teachers to fulfill their support roles confidently.

Introduction

The transition from school to college represents a momentous change in the lives of young individuals, requiring them to become more self-reliant and navigate the complex environment between childhood and adulthood. Coleman (1974) suggests that the final years of adolescence are particularly characterized by a search to establish one's place and role in society. However, the loss of a close family member during this essential period can have significant repercussions on the educational performance, social relationships, and overall well-being of adolescents (Dyregrov et al., 2022; Lytje & Dyregrov, 2019).

Following bereavement, adolescents not only need to rely on support from family and friends but need assistance from the educational institution they attend. While primary and lower secondary schools in Scandinavia often play a supportive role (e.g., Lytje, 2016; Lytje et al., 2021), it remains uncertain how college institutions and teachers perceive their responsibility in providing support during such circumstances. As students engage in three years of college typically between the ages of 16 and 19, the transition to adulthood introduces new responsibilities that can further modify the support required and offered. Despite this, there is a lack of research exploring how

institutions and teachers at the college level view their role in supporting bereaved students and the potential challenges they face in delivering adequate support.

The impact of bereavement on adolescents: Educational, social, and institutional considerations

Numerous studies (A. Dyregrov et al., 2022; Farella Guzzo & Gobbi, 2023) have documented an elevated risk of educational underperformance in adolescents following the loss of a close family member. Among the frequently cited factors contributing to this phenomenon are concentration difficulties faced by these individuals during the period surrounding and following the death. Additionally, research has demonstrated that the decline in academic performance is associated with increased absence and self-esteem issues stemming from the bereavement (e.g., Dyregrov et al., 2015; Holland, 2008).

A cohort study conducted by Høeg et al. (2019) encompassing the entire Danish population (N = 1,043,813) born between 1982 and 2000, explored the educational consequences of parental loss before the age of eighteen. The study revealed that bereaved students had up to 23% lower likelihood of completing a secondary

and vocational education compared to non-bereaved individuals. Notably, this risk was higher for young men than for women, and the differences in attainment between bereaved and non-bereaved increased in both genders as the level of education became higher. Furthermore, several studies (e.g., Berg et al., 2014; Fronstin et al., 2001) have reported direct reductions in the learning ability among bereaved adolescents due to their loss, leading to decreased academic performance and greater challenges in transitioning to the labor market.

Moreover, the absence of support during the early periods of grief has been shown to significantly increase the risk of developing depression, anxiety, and mental disorders later in adulthood (e.g., Farella Guzzo & Gobbi, 2023; McKay et al., 2021). Parsons (2011) further described how the academic challenges faced by young individuals result in reduced educational attainment, lower career aspirations, and by the age of 30, a sense of unfulfilled life expectations.

Numerous studies (e.g. Lytje, 2016; Mandag Morgen, 2013) indicate that bereaved adolescents frequently experience the loss of their social network following a death, which can heighten feelings of loneliness, suicidal thoughts, and increase the risk of self-harm. Wentzel (1998) further emphasized that the loss of social relationships directly impacts the social well-being of adolescents.

Of particular interest, both Lytje (2016) and Nielsen et al. (2012), found that if adolescents felt they had a supportive adult, this played an essential role in alleviating feelings of loneliness as well as social and academic challenges. This is echoed by international grief experts (Holland, 2008; Worden & Silverman, 1996), that argue that professionals within educational institutions are ideally positioned to support bereaved children and adolescents, especially when their parents are also coping with profound grief.

Research conducted on primary and secondary schools has revealed that teachers face difficulties in striking a balance between their roles as teachers and as caregivers when addressing student bereavement (Alisic, 2011; A. Dyregrov et al., 2013; Papadatou et al., 2002). Teachers are engaged in numerous pedagogical tasks throughout the school day that may impede their ability to provide individualized care for students. A need for written guidelines has been suggested to navigate this area, as well as the need for better role clarity between teachers and support personnel (A. Dyregrov et al., 2013; K. Dyregrov et al., 2014), accompanied by support from school administrators (Levkovich & Elyoseph, 2023). Primary and secondary schools typically adopt an ad hoc approach

to parental bereavement, resulting in a lack of well-defined procedures, policies, and active involvement from staff members in this domain (Holland & McLennan, 2015). Still, considerable variation exists in the planning and implementation of supportive frameworks for bereavement within schools (Rowling & Holland, 2000).

A review of higher education (universities) describe that students avoid revealing their losses to prevent others from feeling uncomfortable, and that they experience disenfranchised grief and unhelpful and unempathetic responses from faculty and peers (Hay et al., 2022). However, whether college students face a similar situation remains unknown.

To achieve a better and more comprehensive understanding of the of the support provided in Danish colleges, its effectiveness, and areas for improvement, a three-year study was undertaken. The study aimed to explore how college administrators, study counselors, teachers, and affected students perceive the role of the college during critical illness and death. Furthermore, the study aimed to identify the specific support these individuals felt they needed.

The Danish college system

The Danish College System, which is an integral part of the Danish education system, holds significant importance offering free upper secondary education to students between the ages of 15 and 20. It is similar to High school in the United States and Sixth form college in the UK. Its primary objective is to prepare students for higher education and equips them with the essential skills and knowledge necessary for their future academic endeavors. Within the Danish College System, a range of study programs are available, including STX (General exam), HTX (Higher Technical Examination), HHX (Higher Commercial Examination), and HF (Higher Preparatory Examination). The provision of support and guidance constitutes fundamental elements within the Danish College System. Dedicated study counselors are available to offer individual support regarding academic and personal development.

Method

This study adopts a pragmatist stance and seeks to employ a multi-method research design, which aligns with the broader category of mixed methods research. The development of mixed methods research has been influenced by various scholars, including Campbell

and Fiske (1959) as well as Onwuegbuzie and Johnson (2006).

Participant recruitment

Based on the goals for the study, recruitment of teachers was broad. The only teacher participation criteria were having taught a student who had suffered a loss of a close relative (such as a parent, sibling, or someone occupying a similar important role) either before arriving or while attending college.

The study utilized a pragmatic design framework recruiting teaching staff from colleges across all regions of Denmark. A total of 18 teachers were recruited with the assistance of five collaborating colleges situated in all five regions of Denmark. These colleges were contacted via mail and offered the opportunity to contribute to the study by sharing insights into their systems and support needs. Included in the mail was a pamphlet, describing the goals of the study, highlighting the interview subjects the study was looking for (leadership, student counselors, teachers, and students) as well as a description of ethics. Management was further offered a phone conversation, where questions could be asked, and a post-study briefing on the study findings with suggestions and free materials for enhancing help to students.

If a college agreed to participate, it was responsible for internal participant recruitment, while the research team were responsible for conducting the interviews. During site visits, the research team conducted interviews with various stakeholders, including college administrators, student counselors, teachers, and students themselves. This comprehensive approach aimed to develop a broad understanding of how support was provided at the college and identify any gaps in the existing system. However, due to the substantial amount of data generated from these sessions, this article only presents data obtained from the teaching staff.

Data collection

The study was carried out by three interviewers through focus group interviews (FGIs) and individual interviews. FGI's were chosen as the primary interview method, but due to illness, two participants were interviewed on their own, using Microsoft Teams. The decision to use FGIs as the primary method was based on its potential to facilitate collaborative opinion development and investigation, which can be hard to achieve through individual interviews (Kitzinger, 1995). While it is generally recommended to have a minimum of four participants in each interview session (Krueger & Casey, 2014), the group sizes in this study varied from two to six participants. This variation was primarily due to some participants being unable to attend the scheduled interviews due to illness or other reasons.

Despite the varying group sizes, the term FGI is used throughout this report, as the main objective of the study was to discuss challenges and support needs at both the institutional and individual levels. Although individual interviews are traditionally preferred for sensitive research, several authors (Guest et al., 2017; Kitzinger et al., 2000) have challenged the assumption that FGIs are unsuitable for such research. In fact, Guest et al. (2017) suggested that FGIs can facilitate more open and personal revelations. Furthermore, FGIs grant participants control over the information they choose to share, allowing them to decide when to speak and when to remain silent. Thus, FGIs were deemed a powerful and appropriate tool for conducting the qualitative study. The interviews followed a semi-structured guide that allowed interviewers to deviate from the script when necessary.

Procedure

To facilitate participation and minimize the time commitment for participants, all focus group interviews (FGIs) were conducted at the college premises, in a room provided by the college. Three interviewers took turns leading the FGIs. All interviewers had prior experience conducting research interviews, and participated in a session that ensured that the same approach was used in all interviews. The same research questions were also used for the two Microsoft teams interviews.

At the start of each interview, the interviewer provided a comprehensive overview of the interview's purpose, participant rights, the expected session agenda, and offered an opportunity for participants to ask any clarifying questions. Additionally, all interviewees signed an informed consent form.

While a set of research questions had been prepared, the interviews adopted a flexible approach, fostering open discussions and free-flowing conversations. Consequently, the sessions primarily centered around topics of importance as determined by the participants. The duration of the sessions ranged from 30 to 70 minutes, and they were recorded in audio format for transcription purposes. Upon conclusion, participants were invited to share their experiences with the interviewers, and a brief check-in was conducted to gauge their feelings about participating.

Data analysis

To ensure a comprehensive exploration of staff members' stories and perspectives, thematic analysis was employed as the chosen method. Thematic analysis is recognized for its flexibility and ability to provide detailed accounts of complex data (Nowell et al., 2017). In this study, the analysis process consisted of six steps: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) initial coding, (3) identification of themes, (4) review of themes, (5) definition of themes, and (6) report writing. To address concerns regarding transparency, an adapted version of the framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) was utilized. During each step of the analytic process, a second researcher independently reviewed the data, and a consensus meeting was conducted to ensure agreement on the final themes.

All FGIs were conducted, transcribed, and analyzed in Danish. Subsequently, selected quotations were translated into English, with a focus on capturing the intended meaning rather than adhering strictly to a word-for-word translation.

Quality and rigor

Thematic analysis is characterized by its emphasis on systematic and transparent data analysis, which contributes to the overall rigor of the study (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Terry et al., 2017). To ensure the documentation of each analytical step, the NVivo 12 software developed by QSR International was utilized. The initial data analysis was carried out by the first author, followed by a review of the analytical process and final themes by a second researcher. Additionally, the data were presented to a researcher affiliated with an international university, who provided valuable feedback on the analysis. These measures were taken to enhance the credibility and validity of the findings.

Ethics

The study adhered to the ethical guidelines outlined in the framework for good practice in counseling and psychotherapy (Bond & Griffin, 2013), ensuring that participants were provided with necessary information for informed consent and minimizing any potential discomfort during interviews. Additionally, the study complied with the regulations mandated by the European General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) to protect participant data (*General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) – Official Legal Text*, n.d.).

To maintain participant confidentiality, all teachers involved in the study were anonymized and given aliases. Prior to its initiation, the study underwent an internal ethics review as per the protocols of the independent non-governmental institution where it was conducted. In Denmark the ethic committee will only review research applications that involve the collection of biological material (National Scientific Comittee, 2020). To provide additional support and ensure participant well-being, psychologists from the Danish Cancer Society were available for post-interview assistance if required.

Findings

Through this comprehensive analysis, eight initial themes emerged across the three staff groups. However, during the consensus review process, these themes were refined and consolidated into five main themes: (1) Supporting grieving students amidst teaching responsibilities, (2) Challenges associated with identifying and supporting bereaved college students (3), The conundrum of knowledge, structure, and role clarity for college teachers (4) Teacher dilemmas in addressing absences (5) The need for support structures and guidelines.

Supporting grieving students amidst teaching responsibilities

In the investigation of teachers' perspectives on the role that colleges should assume in supporting bereaved students, they drew particular attention to the unique position of colleges. This viewpoint was underscored by Nicholas:

> Our students are somewhat further away from us than they were in school. You know, if you attend university, there will be a significant distance between teacher and student. And in primary school, there is less distance, while colleges are somewhere in between. It becomes more academically focused.

The increased distance, coupled with the demanding nature of the teaching environment, where each teacher handles multiple classes, posed challenges in establishing connections with individual students. Consequently, questions arose regarding the specific support role that teaching staff should undertake within the college setting. Christine expressed her belief that the responsibility for handling such matters primarily rested with the student counseling services:

> I often feel that it's the student counseling service who talks with the family. That's been my experience. And then they inform the class teachers, saying, 'You

should know that he or she has been through this and that. So, it's quite rare for us to discover it on our own.

However, contrasting perspectives were also observed with staff members who adopted a more proactive approach and felt they had a substantial role to play in supporting bereaved students. Olivia, acknowledged that spending a significant time with students in the classroom, made her a primary point of contact for those who were facing difficulties:

> I constantly assess their well-being. Are they able to handle challenges? Are they attending school? Have they completed their assignments? Not because completing tasks is obligatory, but it can provide valuable insights into their overall development. It's reassuring for them to know that someone is consistently looking out for them, in their day-to-day lives. This is important because student counselors often interact with students only during scheduled meetings.

Through discussions of the role of colleges and staff members in supporting bereaved students it was clear that college teachers perceived that they typically offered less support compared to their counterparts in earlier school levels. However, when it came to the individual responsibility of teaching staff in assisting bereaved students, they also lacked explicit guidance from the college administration. As a result, teachers often had to navigate this responsibility on their own, leading to diverse interpretations of the extent and nature of their role in supporting bereaved students. This led to some teachers arguing that their responsibility was teaching, while others saw themselves also having a role to play in offering support when students were not doing well.

Challenges associated with identifying and supporting bereaved college students

Staff members frequently encountered difficulties in identifying bereaved students, partly due to the absence of well-established identification structures and because some students preferred not to draw attention to their bereavement during their college experience. Margery shared her insights on this matter:

> There are some students who keep a low profile. For instance, we only find out when they receive their graduation caps, and say, 'You should just know that's why I was so moody.' It makes you think, it would have been nice if you had told us. We often experience this. Personally, I and my colleagues are ready to

accommodate the necessary considerations, but it's challenging when we are not informed.

Due to the abovementioned factors, college staff frequently struggled to identify bereaved students. Both because there seldom was any transfer of knowledge about the student from secondary school to college, but also because there infrequently were any mechanisms in place at college to pick up challenges that the students might bring with them. The lack of awareness regarding a student's bereavement within the classroom had significant implications for teaching staff, as it left them unprepared to address potential support needs and navigate complex situations. Lisbeth encountered one such situation while leading a class trip:

> We had a student on a trip who was unwell… We told him, 'You should take some painkillers.' But he flat out refused. It went on for three days, and he remained confined to his bed. Then one evening he came out. We talked to him, and suddenly he just… completely broke down. It turned out, his father had attempted suicide with those pills. So, he refused to take them. You can fully understand that. But we had no idea.

In other instances, staff members were informed about a bereavement but struggled to approach the student. Karen talked about this:

> She had written to the teachers that she wouldn't be attending school or a presentation because she was abroad, where they were burying her younger sister. We hadn't heard anything about it. What was going on? Then she came to school, and I saw her, so I asked her in the hallway if she wanted to talk. She didn't want to at all. She was completely dismissive of it. So, everything that had happened had been kept secret. So, I didn't do anything further.

The lack of information and the challenge in commencing conversations with bereaved students led to notable disparities in the assistance rendered by teaching personnel. Since teacher education did not include instructions on this matter and no guidelines were provided by the college administration, the quality of support depended heavily on the individual skills of the teacher. Rainbow discussed this aspect:

> I also think it's about who your teacher is. We have different approaches in our relationships with students. Some feel more comfortable taking on that caring role than others. So, I sometimes think with the students that it's like a game of chance: Who do they have as a teacher? Who understands them? Who is there for them? It's not something we are trained and educated for, after all.

The conundrum of knowledge, structure, and role clarity for college teachers

The difficulties faced by teaching staff in providing support to bereaved college students can be categorized into three main points: lack of knowledge, lack of support structures, and uncertainty about the extent of support they should provide. Participants highlighted this uncertainty surrounding their role, with Helle discussing the challenges stemming from their insufficient understanding or knowledge on how to aid grieving students:

> I think it's because we're in a void between being academic experts who deliver what we can in our subject area, but increasingly also have a role of building relationships… Somehow, our role has never been clearly defined, and there isn't anyone who has specifically defined what we do in traumatic situations.

Similarly, the lack of support structure makes it difficult to access the necessary information to provide support. Helle commented on this:

> I recently had a student who informed me about her father's serious illness. It deeply affected her, but now she has returned and appears to be doing well. However, it struck me that I am unaware of her father's current condition… I cannot find any information about it anywhere, so I question where to seek this information… Should I rely on the student herself or look elsewhere? It becomes a dilemma of realizing that I forgot to follow up on this matter and questioning if it falls under my responsibility.

The absence of knowledge and supportive frameworks prompted numerous teachers to question the precise nature of their supportive role and the suitable degree of engagement. Liv expressed caution about assuming the role of support provider:

> I'm also cautious about asking students if something is wrong because I have started questioning if that's really my role. Then I suddenly become unsure about my role and what I'm actually supposed to do if I take on that role. What does it entail if I tell the student they can come to me if there's something wrong?

For teaching staff who choose to take an active role in supporting bereaved students, a significant challenge lied in their perceived lack of knowledge and tools to provide appropriate support. Liv described such a situation:

> I experienced a situation where a student lost their father in a car accident, a week before a study trip. The student chose to come along, which was fine. The student participated in the trip, and the class was very

caring, but there were moments when the student became very upset. Afterwards, I thought it would have been helpful if I had some tools. Of course, I had my colleague whom I discussed it with, but afterwards, it felt a bit odd because I don't have personal experiences, and my colleagues and I didn't receive any guidance on how to handle it.

Nicholas underscored the importance of receiving training and having support structures in place to handle crisis situations involving bereaved students by drawing a parallel to military training:

> I think there's a reason why people in the military are trained to act decisively…They need to be able to handle and manage crisis situations. It's somewhat similar here when a crisis arises; you need to be clear about what to do… So, it would be nice to have a clear plan and structure for what should happen, for example, who has what responsibilities.

Teacher dilemmas in addressing absences

The issues experienced by teaching staff in supporting bereaved students encompass various issues, including decreased motivation, reduced participation in class activities, and increased absences. Notably, recently bereaved students appeared to have a higher rate of absence, which presented a dilemma regarding the appropriate response. The question of whether to reprimand students for increased absences or intervene to address declining performance was a source of difficulty for the teacher Sonya:

> I found it challenging because it was evident that she was a talented student, but she had fallen behind. The question was: How long should we let it go before we intervene and tell her, 'Now you really need to make an effort because otherwise, you will fall behind and it will be difficult to catch up with your assignments'? How long should we wait before stepping in?

Sonya struggled to find a balance between being supportive and acknowledging the potential consequences of the student falling too far behind. This created a complex dilemma as she considered the student's future performance in examinations. While Sonya and others shared this concern, some teachers held the belief that such matters were not their responsibility. William expressed this perspective:

> I merely record their absence. As a teacher, I believe my role is primarily focused on classroom engagement and facilitating learning. If certain academic standards are not met, the established rules provide clear guidance. Therefore, I simply note the absence or assign a lower grade accordingly.

In addition to grappling with how to handle absences, teachers also struggled with figuring out how to deal with the student while in their class. Mona discussed this:

> There have been times when I've dealt with the [bereaved] student and thought, 'I should do more here'… There was a long period when she would sit at the back of the class. She used to be a diligent student. It made me wonder, 'Should I reach out to her or not?' I tried to support her as best I could and even got her phone number. Normally, I don't give my number to students, but I did with her. I tried texting her and expressing my condolences. I even went to her family's place to offer my condolences there, just to show that I'm there for her if needed.

The experiences of Sonya and Mona highlight the internal conflicts faced by teachers when balancing their roles as teachers with the needs for empathy and support for bereaved students.

The need for support structures and guidelines

When examining the desired support that teaching staff would like to have to provide better support for bereaved college students, the issue of time emerged as a significant factor. Mia expressed her concerns regarding the constraints on their teaching responsibilities:

> Sometimes, I feel like we don't have the time to take on the role of a caring soul for students to talk to. It's not because we are bad people. It's because we feel pulled in multiple directions… But I think it would be easier if we could have conversations in the class, where we say, we have this teacher who is really good at having those discussions with you, or 'We have a group you can join.' I would like to have something like that.

In addition to the lack of time, many staff members expressed the need for clear support structures to enhance their ability to provide effective support. Well-defined support structures within colleges could outline the roles and responsibilities of staff members, ensuring that everyone is aware of what is expected of them. Lisbeth emphasized the importance of having a concrete guidance:

> I also believe that having something concrete to say or do could alleviate some of the hesitation… When you don't know what to say or how to help, it becomes quite challenging… I may have felt this way when I was younger, but not as much now due to my experience… Having specific guidelines for different situations would be helpful.

Moreover, the establishment of support structures alone may not be sufficient if staff members do not receive additional training or advice on how to effectively provide support and communicate with bereaved students. Maria highlighted the necessity of having knowledge on how to approach individuals who are struggling:

> I believe it is crucial to have some understanding of how to communicate with individuals going through difficult times. While it may come naturally to some, it may not be the case for everyone. We may hesitate to engage in those conversations, even if it's as simple as asking how students are doing… Therefore, having guidelines or practical tips on how to approach them would be beneficial.

Helle supported this viewpoint and suggested the provision of practical tools and structures for this purpose:

> In an ideal scenario, having accessible and straightforward tools would be valuable. Some form of structure…Perhaps also colleagues who are trained or specialized in this area. And it should be up to the students to decide whether they want to avail themselves of these resources or not.

Based on the interviews, there were thus several areas where teachers felt that improved tools or knowledge could help the better support bereaved students.

Discussion

Our findings reveal a noteworthy insight into how college teachers perceive their institution as occupying an intermediary position between schools and universities. In this context, the personal connection between teacher and students is often less pronounced than that of elementary school teachers. The resulting increased gap between teacher and students, coupled with limited guidance from college administration, leads to varied interpretations regarding the role of teaching personnel in supporting bereaved students. Some teachers perceive their role as restricted, deferring primary support responsibilities to student support services, while others recognize the significance of being the initial point of contact for bereaved students. The absence of a clearly defined framework for addressing bereaved students within colleges often leaves teaching staff uncertain about their actions and the extent of their responsibilities. Generally, they perceive offering less support than teachers at earlier school levels.

These concerns contribute to inconsistent levels of engagement among different teachers. The lack of clear guidelines on actions and responsibilities echoes international studies on schools, particularly in the British school system, where uncertainty among staff can lead to inaction (Holland, 2001; Lowton & Higginson, 2003). The situation in colleges mirrors the challenges observed in primary and secondary schools regarding the conflict between educational and caring roles (Alisic, 2011; A. Dyregrov et al., 2013; Papadatou et al., 2002). However, the emphasis on the educational aspect appears stronger in colleges, potentially leaving bereaved students feeling increasingly isolated, overlooked, and disregarded, especially given the students' desire for autonomy and self-sufficiency, making the balance between caring and educating roles even more challenging.

Most colleges lack systematic transfer of information about grieving students from previous schools that students have attended, as well as well-established systems for identifying bereaved students in their midst. In addition, students may prefer to keep their bereavement private. As a result, teachers find it difficult to identify students who are experiencing grief. Some students avoid discussing their emotions and loss to spare others from discomfort. The lack of information about students' losses often leads to missed opportunities for timely support. Additionally, students may seek solace and refuge from their grief within the college environment, although complete detachment from their loss is not always possible. Varying perspectives on the balance between pedagogy and providing care can result in different responses to bereaved students, as well as missed opportunities to support and help struggling students.

Staff members noted a decline in motivation, diminished engagement in class activities, and heightened absenteeism among students who were grieving. These outcomes align with earlier investigations into the effects of bereavement on educational progress (A. Dyregrov et al., 2022). The dilemma of determining when and how to intervene to tackle these challenges surfaced, as teachers navigated the delicate balance between their roles as teachers and their aspiration to provide empathetic support.

Regarding the desired support, the findings indicate that teachers would benefit from having more time, clear support structures, and additional training to effectively assist bereaved students. The lack of time and well-defined support structures within colleges hindered teachers' ability to provide high-quality support, leaving it up to the individual teacher to define

their support roles. This is in line with what teachers have reported in previous studies (DeMuth et al., 2020; Levkovich & Elyoseph, 2023). Staff members expressed the need for guidelines, tools, and education on how to communicate with and approach bereaved students, ensuring that they receive the necessary support during their grieving processes. It seems crucial to establish clarity on which staff members have specific roles in providing support, that is 'who does what, when and how'.

Limitations

This study highlights the practices and challenges encountered by college teachers, yet several limitations should be acknowledged. Firstly, the sample size, though drawn from all regions of Denmark, calls for caution when generalizing the findings. Secondly, the selection of seven collaboration colleges, with participants facilitated by college leaders, introduces uncertainties. The possibility exists that college management selected teachers predisposed to sharing positive narratives about their institutions, potentially biasing the overall representation. However, the narratives provided by participants predominantly portray teachers grappling with various dilemmas, suggesting this bias may not be significant. Thirdly, participating colleges may inherently be more inclined to offer bereavement support compared to those that declined participation. This implies that the accounts provided by participants represent best-case scenarios, and less support may be available at colleges that chose not to participate. Nevertheless, such colleges might stand to benefit even more from updated guidelines on bereavement support than those that participated.

Implications

This article underscores key obstacles within colleges that can hinder the effective provision of support. Organizational hurdles can result in teacher inaction and the loss of critical information throughout the support process, ultimately impeding assistance. To address these issues, the establishment of a bereavement support policy or response plan is recommended. Such a plan would delineate the responsibilities of various stakeholders, including management, student support teams, and teachers, offering clear guidelines on necessary actions. Drawing inspiration from the longstanding bereavement response plans in Danish schools (Lytje & Bøge, 2018) and daycare settings (Lytje et al., 2021), an adapted version, tailored to the

specific challenges highlighted here, could form a robust foundation for developing a support structure within colleges.

Furthermore, enhancing awareness of the difficulties faced by students dealing with critical illness or bereavement is important. Equipping teachers and staff with a deeper understanding of how to engage with students in difficult life situations and provide support in the classroom is essential. This education could take the form of specialized training for designated student supporters or involve all college staff participating in seminars on effective support strategies.

Conclusion

In college, students may face challenging experiences like bereavement, entering a transitional phase where they seek independence but still require adult support. Effective support for grieving students necessitates tailored approaches. To address these challenges, teaching staff must be equipped with support, resources, and education. Our study finds that college teachers, often primary support figures, struggle with defining their role due to a lack of knowledge and unclear structures. Clear support structures and guidelines are crucial to delineate responsibilities. Establishing these, along with relevant guidance and education, empowers staff to confidently assist bereaved students, enhancing their well-being and enabling teachers to fulfill support roles effectively. This approach mitigates challenges associated with navigating college while dealing with loss, facilitating students' academic success with minimal adverse repercussions.

ORCID

Martin Lytje 🔴 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6366-6315

References

Alisic, E. (2011). *Children and trauma: A broad perspective on exposure and recovery*. Utrecht University.

Berg, L., Rostila, M., Saarela, J., & Hjern, A. (2014). Parental death during childhood and subsequent school performance. *Pediatrics, Peds*, *133*(4), 682–689. https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2013-2771

Bond, T., & Griffin, G. (2013). *Ethical framework for good practice in counselling and psychotherapy* (5th ed.). British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Campbell, D. T., & Fiske, D. W. (1959). Convergent and discriminant validation by the multitrait-multimethod matrix. *Psychological Bulletin*, *56*(2), 81–105. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0046016

Coleman, J. (1974). *Relationships in adolescence*. Routledge & Kegan Paul.

DeMuth, M., Taggi-Pinto, A., Miller, E. G., & Alderfer, M. A. (2020). Bereavement accommodations in the classroom: Experiences and opinions of school staff. *The Journal of School Health*, *90*(3), 165–171. https://doi.org/10.1111/josh.12870

Dyregrov, A., Dyregrov, K., & Idsoe, T. (2013). Teachers' perception of their role facing children in grief. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, *18*(2), 125–134. https://doi.org/10.1080/13632752.2012.754165

Dyregrov, A., Dyregrov, K., Endsjø, M., & Idsoe, T. (2015). Teachers' perception of bereaved children's academic performance. *Advances in School Mental Health Promotion*, *8*(3), 187–198. https://doi.org/10.1080/1754730X.2015.1051888

Dyregrov, A., Lytje, M., & Christensen, S. R. (2022). The price of loss–how childhood bereavement impacts education. *Bereavement*, *1*. https://doi.org/10.54210/bj.2022.14

Dyregrov, K., Endsjø, M., Idsøe, T., & Dyregrov, A. (2014). Suggestions for the ideal follow-up for bereaved students as seen by school personnel. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, *20*(3), 289–301. https://doi.org/10.1080/13632752.2014.955676

Farella Guzzo, M., & Gobbi, G. (2023). Parental death during adolescence: A review of the literature. *Omega*, *87*(4), 1207–1237. https://doi.org/10.1177/00302228211033661

Fronstin, P., Greenberg, D. H., & Robins, P. K. (2001). Parental disruption and the labour market performance of children when they reach adulthood. *Journal of Population Economics*, *14*(1), 137–172. https://doi.org/10.1007/s001480050163

General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) – Official Legal Text. (n.d.). General data protection regulation (GDPR). Retrieved September 4, 2020, from https://gdpr-info.eu/

Guest, G., Namey, E., Taylor, J., Eley, N., & McKenna, K. (2017). Comparing focus groups and individual interviews: Findings from a randomized study. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, *20*(6), 693–708. https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2017.1281601

Hay, A., Howell, J. A., Rudaizky, D., & Breen, L. J. (2022). Experiences and support needs of bereaved students in higher education. *Omega*. https://doi.org/10.1177/00302228221096565

Høeg, B. L., Johansen, C., Christensen, J., Frederiksen, K., Dalton, S. O., Bøge, P., Dencker, A., Dyregrov, A., & Bidstrup, P. E. (2019). Does losing a parent early

influence the education you obtain? A nationwide cohort study in Denmark. *Journal of Public Health (Oxford, England)*, *41*(2), 296–304. https://doi.org/10.1093/pubmed/fdy070

Holland, J. (2001). *Understanding children's experiences of parental bereavement*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Holland, J. (2008). How schools can support children who experience loss and death. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, *36*(4), 411–424. https://doi.org/10.1080/03069880802364569

Holland, J., & McLennan, D. (2015). North Yorkshire schools' responses to pupil bereavement. *Pastoral Care in Education*, *33*(2), 116–128. https://doi.org/10.1080/02643944.2015.1047400

Kitzinger, J. (1995). Qualitative Research: Introducing focus groups. *BMJ (Clinical Research ed.)*, *311*(7000), 299–302. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.311.7000.299

Kitzinger, J., Pope, C., & Mays, N. (2000). Focus groups with users and providers of health care. *Qualitative Research in Health Care*, *2*, 20–29.

Krueger, R. A., & Casey, M. A. (2014). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research* (5th ed.). SAGE.

Levkovich, I., & Elyoseph, Z. (2023). 'I don't know what to say': Teachers' perspectives on supporting bereaved students after the death of a parent. *Omega*, *86*(3), 945–965. https://doi.org/10.1177/00302228211993624

Lowton, K., & Higginson, I. J. (2003). Managing bereavement in the classroom: A conspiracy of silence? *Death Studies*, *27*(8), 717–741. https://doi.org/10.1080/713842340

Lytje, M. (2016). The Danish bereavement response in 2015 - historic development and evaluation of success. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, *62*(1), 140–149. https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2016.1212258

Lytje, M. (2018). Voices we forget—Danish students experience of returning to school following parental bereavement. *Omega*, *78*(1), 24–42. https://doi.org/10.1177/0030222816679660

Lytje, M., & Bøge, P. (2018). *Sorghandleplan 2.0* [Bereavement response plan 2.0]. Kræftens Bekæmpelse.

Lytje, M., & Dyregrov, A. (2019). The price of loss – a literature review of the psychosocial and health consequences of childhood bereavement. *Bereavement Care*, *38*(1), 13–22. https://doi.org/10.1080/02682621.2019.1580854

Lytje, M., Dyregrov, A., Bergstrøm, M. D., Fjærestad, A., & Fisher-Hoyrem, L. (2021). Same origin, different implementations: A document analysis of Norwegian and Danish bereavement response plans. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, *31*(4), 1071–1085. https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760.2021.1902787

Mandag Morgen. (2013). *Når sorgen rammer* [When grief strikes].

McKay, M. T., Cannon, M., Healy, C., Syer, S., O'Donnell, L., & Clarke, M. C. (2021). A meta-analysis of the relationship between parental death in childhood and subsequent psychiatric disorder. *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica*, *143*(6), 472–486. https://doi.org/10.1111/acps.13289

National Scientific Comittee. (2020). *Hvad skal jeg anmelde?* [What needs to be reported?]. National Scientific Committee. https://www.nvk.dk/forsker/naar-du-anmelder/hvilke-projekter-skal-jeg-anmelde

Nielsen, J. C., Sørensen, N. U., & Hansen, N. M. (2012). *Unge pårørende og efterladtes trivsel* [The well-being of young relatives and bereaved individuals]. Aarhus University.

Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E., & Moules, N. J. (2017). Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *16*(1), 160940691773384. https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847

Onwuegbuzie, A. J., & Johnson, R. B. (2006). The validity issue in mixed research. *Research in Schools*, *1*, 48–63.

Papadatou, D., Metallinou, O., Hatzichristou, C., & Pavlidi, L. (2002). Supporting the bereaved child: Teacher's perceptions and experiences in Greece. *Mortality*, *7*(3), 324–339. https://doi.org/10.1080/1357627021000025478

Parsons, S. (2011). *Long term outcomes of parental bereavement*. Childhood Wellbeing Research Center.

Rowling, L., & Holland, J. (2000). Grief and school communities: The impact of social context, a comparison between Australia and England. *Death Studies*, *24, 24*(1), 35–50. https://doi.org/10.1080/074811800200685

Terry, G., Hayfield, N., & Braun, V. (2017). Thematic analysis. In C. Willig & W. S. Rogers (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research in psychology* (2nd ed., pp. 17–37). SAGE.

Wentzel, K. R. (1998). Social relationships and motivation in middle school: The role of parents, teachers, and peers. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, *90*(2), 202–209. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.90.2.202

Worden, J. W., & Silverman, P. R. (1996). Parental death and the adjustment of school-age children. *OMEGA - Journal of Death and Dying*, *33*(2), 91–102. https://doi.org/10.2190/P77L-F6F6-5W06-NHBX