

Supporting the bereaved child: teacher's perceptions and experiences in Greece

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ABSTRACT *The purpose of this national survey was to explore the general perceptions of Greek teachers (n = 1792) about bereaved children, and investigate the experiences of those who had a student who grieved over the death of a relative (n = 590, 33%) and those who had a class which grieved over the death of a classmate (n = 215, 12%). Findings suggest that most educators are perceptive of children's grief responses and changes in academic performance and behaviour. They consider their role significant in supporting bereaved students, but feel inadequately prepared and request specialized knowledge and skills. Educators who had a student who grieved over the death of a relative expressed considerable difficulty in openly discussing the loss with their student, yet described changes in their own and in the peers' attitudes towards the bereaved student. While the death of a family member was likely to be perceived as a private affair, the death of a student was experienced as a community loss that disrupted school life, and educators were more likely to discuss and engage in collective activities that commemorated the death of the child.*

During the past few decades, research findings have revealed that childhood bereavement is largely affected by the quality of support that children receive throughout the mourning process. The needs of bereaved youngsters are better met in an accepting and caring family environment which allows open expression of feelings and concerns, and promotes sharing of personal experiences (Figley, 1983; Kaffman & Elizur, 1983; Green *et al.*, 1985; Vess *et al.*, 1985; La Grande, 1988; Vachon & Stylianos, 1988; Worden, 1996). Quite often, however, the surviving parent or family members fail to recognize a child's grief responses and mistakenly believe that they are too young to mourn. Sometimes, absorbed by their own grief, adults are unavailable and experience difficulties in supporting the child, talking about death, sharing feelings, and answering his/her questions (Cruse & Cruse, 1984; Hummer & Samuels, 1988; Fitzgerald, 1992; Oates, 1993; Deaton & Berkan, 1995; Rowling, 1996; Stevenson, 1998; Machon *et al.*, 1999).

Under these circumstances the school can assume a significant role by

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helping the bereaved child to regain control over his/her life and by providing a sense of safety and stability. The presence of a sensitive and concerned teacher who acknowledges the student's needs and accompanies him/her through mourning is crucial in facilitating childhood adjustment to loss (Blackburn, 1991; Stevenson, 1998, 1999). When children's grief responses are neglected or misinterpreted, relationships with educators and peers are negatively affected and are likely to cause classroom problems which become an additional source of strain for all concerned (Wass, 1991; Stevenson, 1995, 1998).

Even though research studies are in agreement that the loss of a significant person causes major changes in several areas of a child's life, findings are inconsistent as to how self-esteem, school functioning and relationships with peers are affected (van Eerdewegh *et al.*, 1982; Martinson *et al.*, 1987; Balmer, 1992; Silverman & Worden, 1992; Fristad *et al.*, 1993).

In Silverman & Worden's study (1992) of 125 bereaved children aged 6–17 years, the large majority of the sample coped effectively with the loss, while only 17% displayed significant behavioural problems within the four month period following the death. According to the findings, children's grief responses are part of a natural process, which helps them to accommodate the loss experience into their life and to keep an ongoing connection with the deceased (Silverman *et al.*, 1992; Worden, 1996). The mourning process is best understood within the context of the child's family and social system, which includes the school community.

Studies which explore school behavior and school performance are based mostly on children's and parents' reports, whereas experiences of educators who have had a bereaved student in their class have not been systematically studied. Only a few studies describe teachers' attitudes towards bereaved children and towards death education (Cullinan, 1990; Machon *et al.*, 1999; Reid & Dixon, 1999; McGovern & Barry, 2000). Cullinan (1990), who studied teachers' death anxiety and perceived ability to support bereaved students, concluded that student support depended upon the educator's perception of his/her role as a helper and his/her perceived comfort in dealing with death-related issues. While the majority of the respondents who participated in the study were willing to listen to students' worries and feelings (87%) and considered it proper to help a grieving child (94%), 46% reported difficulties and tended to refer their student to a counsellor. Teachers' discomfort in discussing grief in the classroom was evidenced in Reid and Dixon's survey (1999) of elementary, middle school teachers and other school staff. Sixty-one percent of the respondents reported having discussed death with their students, while 51% among them felt "minimally prepared" or "completely unprepared" to handle the subject.

Educators acknowledge their lack of knowledge and skills, and express a need for specialized training. Moreover, they ask for specific guidelines, particularly when a school community is faced with the death of a student. Under those circumstances they feel totally unable to support students and often perceive their personal grief as a threat to their professional identity (Rowling, 1995). Various death intervention programmes have been described in the

literature. Some of them are proactive and include a preventive component that incorporates death education curricula. The majority, however, are crisis-oriented programmes, planned in response to death-related events that affect the school community (Wass *et al.*, 1990). Even though reactive interventions are beneficial when a crisis occurs, experts in the field of thanatology emphasize the need to introduce age-appropriate death education in all school curricula, and to provide appropriate training for teachers on how to support a grieving child.

In Greece schools do not integrate any course or programme on death- and loss-related issues, while death-related topics in readers and history books are not addressed in ways that would appropriately sensitize students on loss, death and mourning. Moreover, there is a lack of training programmes for educators on how to support bereaved students effectively and facilitate their school integration. Within this context a large project entitled 'Sensitization and Training of Educators and Health Care Providers in Supporting Seriously Ill and Bereaved Children' (Papadatou, 2002a), was proposed and conducted during the period 1998–2000 at the School of Nursing of the University of Athens, and funded by the European Union and the Greek Ministry of Education. As part of this project a national study was conducted for the first time in Greece in order to identify the existing perceptions and experiences of educators regarding seriously ill and/or bereaved children. The purpose of the present article is to describe Greek educators' general perceptions of bereaved children, and their specific experiences in supporting students who were grieving the death of a relative or a classmate. The basic theoretical assumption that guided the study viewed childhood mourning as a natural process that helps children accommodate the loss experience into their life. Loss accommodation can be significantly facilitated when those who are close to bereaved children recognize their grief responses and effectively meet their needs. In this respect, educators and the school community at large, may play a significant role in facilitating or hindering adjustment to loss.

Method

Participants

A representative sample of the total number of Greek schools was identified, according to data obtained by the Ministry of Education, National Statistical Service (1998–99) and used as the sampling frame. The study's population included educators who worked in 480 schools (300 elementary schools, 97 junior high schools, 83 high schools). The identified schools were randomly selected according to the following four criteria: educational level (elementary vs junior high vs high school), type of school (public vs private), geographic regions (52 Greek counties), and population size in each county (five categories). The selected schools were located in Athens (17%), in cities with more than 50,000 inhabitants (22%), in towns with 10,000 to 49,999 inhabitants (25%), in small towns with 2,000 to 9,999 inhabitants (22%), and in villages with fewer than

2,000 inhabitants (14%). There was an equal representation of rural and urban counties. Information was not collected on those educators who refused to take part and we are, therefore, unable to state whether any selection bias occurred. However, there was no selection bias in terms of educational level and geographical region as there was no significant difference in the response rate among educators working in elementary vs junior high vs high school settings, or among educators from different geographical regions across the nation.

Of 3,500 questionnaires distributed, 1,810 were completed and returned (response rate 52%) and a total of 1,792 were included in the final analysis of the data. The sample comprised 58% female and 42% male teachers. The smaller percentage of males is not surprising, given the higher overall ratio of female to male educators in Greece. The age of educators ranged as follows: 30–40 years (53%), 41–50 (35%), and over 51 years of age (12%). Educators' teaching experience ranged from less than one year to more than 19 years. These were classified into the following three categories: (a) <1 to 8 years' experience (24%), (b) 9 to 18 years' experience (42%), and (c) more than 19 years' experience (34%). The majority of teachers (83%) had a personal experience of death, 26% of them having experienced it in their childhood.

Measures

An extensive questionnaire was designed comprising the following two sections: teachers' general perceptions about the impact that illness and death have upon a student's behaviour and school performance; their personal experiences with responses to a student who (a) suffered from a chronic and life-limiting health condition, (b) grieved over the death of a relative, (c) grieved over the death of a peer, and their personal grief responses to the death of a colleague. The questionnaire also included personal and demographic information. In this paper we present findings that refer only to the general perceptions of teachers about how children are affected by death, the personal experiences of those who had a student who was grieving the death of a relative, and the experiences of teachers confronted with the death of a student. Findings of teachers' perceptions and experiences with seriously ill students have been the subject of another article (Papadatou *et al.*, 2002b).

Procedure

The Greek Ministry of Education granted permission. The director of each selected school was contacted by phone and informed about the goals of the study and was asked to distribute to his/her personnel the questionnaires which were sent by air courier. Each educator received an envelope with instructions and was asked to complete anonymously the questionnaire, put it in an enclosed envelope and return it to the school director who forwarded all the material to the researchers. The educators' participation was voluntary.

Data analysis

Findings were quantitatively and qualitatively analysed. Descriptive statistics were used to calculate educators' distribution in relation to the following demographic variables: gender, age, teaching experience, type of school, educational status, educators' personal experience with death and if that death had happened in their childhood. The data from the study were evaluated using the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS). Multiple two-way chi-square analyses were done to assess differences between certain demographic/personal variables on educators' specific perceptions and responses towards issues related to bereaved students. Significant differences only are reported. Data obtained from open-ended questions were analysed using content analysis.

Results

The results are presented in three parts. The first part addresses educators' general perceptions of bereaved students ($N = 1792$), the second part addresses the specific experiences of educators who had in their class a student who was grieving over the loss of a close relative (parent, sibling, grandparent) ($n = 590$), and the third part refers to the experiences of educators who were confronted with the death of a student ($n = 215$).

1. Teachers' general perceptions of bereaved students

A number of closed and open-ended questions explored whether educators ($N = 1792$) believed that school-aged children had death-related questions and concerns. Educators were also asked to assess on a 5-point Likert scale (1: very little, 5: very much) how much the death of a relative affected children's learning performance and school behaviour. Moreover, participants were asked to describe their perceived role in supporting bereaved students. Data are presented according to the following three thematic parts.

Educators' perceptions of children's death-related questions and concerns. The large majority of the respondents (68%) recognize that death is a topic of concern to school-aged children. Educators who had more than 19 years of teaching experience ($\chi^2 = 12.048$, $df = 4$, $p < 0.017$), and those who worked in elementary schools ($\chi^2 = 7.386$, $df = 2$, $p < 0.025$), were more likely to recognize that death was a topic of concern to students. Gender and personal experience with death were also found marginally to differentiate their responses with female teachers ($\chi^2 = 3.618$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.057$) and educators who had a personal experience with death ($\chi^2 = 3.572$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.059$) reporting with greater frequency that children have death-related questions and concerns.

Perceptions of bereaved students' academic performance and school behaviour. When educators were asked to identify how much the death of a relative affected

children's learning performance and school behaviour, a significant percentage acknowledged that both academic performance (80%) and behaviour (72%) of bereaved students were 'much' and 'very much' affected. Moreover, children's academic performance and school behaviour was perceived as significantly less affected by the death of a classmate. Only 39% of the sample recognized that the death of a peer is likely to affect 'much' or 'very much' learning performance, and 35% of the students' school behaviour. Female teachers ($\chi^2 = 11.853$, $df = 4$, $p < 0.018$) were more likely to acknowledge the major effects of a relative's loss upon students' academic performance. Those with more than 19 years of teaching experience were more likely to report changes both in students' academic performance ($\chi^2 = 44.309$, $df = 16$, $p < 0.000$) and school behavior ($\chi^2 = 37.893$, $df = 16$, $p < 0.002$). Elementary school teachers, by comparison with those who worked in junior and high school, ($\chi^2 = 31.347$, $df = 8$, $p < 0.000$), were more likely to report major changes in students' school behaviour.

Teachers with more than 19 years' teaching experience reported with greater frequency changes in students' academic performance ($\chi^2 = 28.280$, $df = 16$, $p < .029$) and school behavior ($\chi^2 = 35.329$, $df = 16$, $p < .004$). Similarly, teachers with a death experience in their childhood were more perceptive of changes in classmates' learning performance ($\chi^2 = 13.947$, $df = 4$, $p < 0.007$) and behavior ($\chi^2 = 14.667$, $df = 4$, $p < 0.005$). Female teachers ($\chi^2 = 15.580$, $df = 4$, $p < 0.004$), were more sensitive to the effects of the death of a classmate upon students' academic performance while elementary school teachers ($\chi^2 = 18.689$, $df = 8$, $p < 0.017$) were more likely to report changes in students' school behaviour.

Educators' perceived ability to support bereaved students. Educators identified as 'key providers' of student support the school psychologist (78%), the child's teacher (66%), the educational consultant of the school (14%) and the school administrator (13%). Eighty percent of the respondents reported feeling inadequately trained to handle death-related situations. They suggested four different ways that could eventually prepare them to support such students effectively: a) information provided by specialists (psychologists, physicians); b) increased training in child psychology; c) training in death education; and d) the presence of a school psychologist who would work in close cooperation with them.

II. Teachers' experiences with bereaved students

Among the 1,792 respondents, 590 educators (33%) reported having had a bereaved student in their classroom who was grieving over the loss of a relative. The most frequently reported deaths over which students were grieving involved those of a father (62%), a mother (31%), a grandparent (23%) and a sibling

(11%). These educators completed an additional section in the questionnaire, which aimed to identify: a) the perceived changes in bereaved students' academic performance and behaviour; b) educators' responses to bereaved children; and c) school interventions that facilitate the child's class reintegration.

Perceived changes in bereaved students' academic performance and behaviour. Most teachers (72%) identified changes in the students' academic performance, which included difficulties in memory and concentration, loss of enthusiasm and excitement, lack of enjoyment from pleasurable activities, and sadness. Written accounts included comments such as: "The first days after the death, the child was 'elsewhere', he was distracted and didn't have any desire to participate in class", or "He couldn't absorb and forgot what he was taught", "His academic performance dramatically dropped". By contrast, changes in student behaviour were reported with less frequency (45%). The perceived changes were classified in three categories: a) the development of a more trustful and close relationship with the teacher and/or some peers (e.g. "She sought support among a small group of peers", "He sought the company of some close friends", "The student came first to me, to his teacher"), b) the loss of interest in school activities and tendency to become introverted (e.g. "He was in no mood for play and he withdrew from his group of friends"), and finally c) the display of increased aggressive behaviours towards peers (e.g. "She was aggressive with her classmates and provoked them enough so they would hit her, and she would then complain").

Educators' responses to bereaved children. Educators were asked to describe their own responses to bereaved children. Those who were affected by the child's loss described a wide range of feelings, which included love, understanding, distress and pity. Some reported that they identified with the child because they had experienced a similar loss in their own life, as demonstrated in their written comments: "I understood very well my student's reactions, because I had experienced a similar loss, the death of my child", "I was sensitive to her grief over the death of her father, because I had also experienced the same loss". When the educator's personal loss seemed unresolved, they felt helpless in supporting bereaved children, as reported in the following example: "Death at school is always a shock to me and a very difficult experience to deal with, probably because I have never gotten over my uncle's death when I was young". Some described mixed feelings of sadness, guilt and helplessness because of their personal difficulty in approaching and supporting the bereaved student: "I felt helpless, because I did not know how to handle this experience", "I felt incompetent because I did not know what I could do". The majority (63%) acknowledged changes in their own attitude and behaviour towards the bereaved child, which involved: (a) decreased expectations of academic performance, and (b) the development of a closer and more intimate relationship with their student.

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In reference to the first category of answers, educators reported becoming 'more lenient' and 'less demanding' of bereaved students' academic performance. One teacher wrote in her comments: "I was more lenient, I had not the same expectations as before", and another reported, "I was softer and more lenient towards him ... I avoided asking for his attention and participation in class". With regard to the second category of answers, educators developed a closer relationship with the bereaved student as a result of being more sensitive to his/her psychological needs (e.g. "I showed more compassion to his ups and downs", "I was more aware of what the child was going through ..."). However, few assumed a surrogate parental role in their attempt to support the bereaved student, as shown in the following accounts: "I came very close to this student in hope that she consider me as a friend or a mother substitute", "I became overprotective, I felt I was replacing his lost father". In addition 37% of educators reported no changes in their attitude or behaviour, because they did not wish to differentiate bereaved students from their peers: "My behaviour did not change, because I didn't want the student to feel that, all of a sudden, he was a different person ... someone to feel sorry for", "I behaved towards my student as before, as if nothing had happened", "I wanted this [loss experience] to pass unnoticed".

Finally, educators were asked whether they discussed with their student the death of his/her relative. Findings suggest that 40% took the initiative to address openly the issue of loss with the bereaved child, while 15% responded only on the child's initiative. A significant percentage of educators (45%) avoided the topic of death because they felt frustrated and helpless, not knowing how to respond to a bereaved child. This was clearly illustrated in some of their accounts: "I felt at a loss and I wondered how I should react", "I did not know how to approach this student", "It's very hard for an educator to discuss with his student the death of a family member". Nevertheless, the majority of the teachers (63%) indicated a preference to address the death experience with the student's parent. Usually, it was the parent who informed the teacher about the family loss, in an attempt to excuse the child's absences, decrease in academic performance, or display of sadness, crying and introversion. Communication between teacher and parent enhanced the exchange of information and contributed to a commonly agreed plan aiming to support the bereaved child.

School intervention and child support. Educators were asked whether their school used any intervention to facilitate the child's class reintegration and support throughout bereavement. Only one third (29%) described various forms of school interventions, which were classified into five categories: a) teacher participation at the funeral, b) financial assistance to the family, c) provision of time and space for adjustment, by being lenient in grading, excusing increased school absences, etc., d) emotional support by visiting the bereaved student at home, e) advice to the bereaved child and family and referral to a mental health service if deemed necessary.

Most educators (56%) reported that peers quite often displayed changes in their behaviour towards the bereaved child and thus facilitated his/her integration. Open expressions of love, acceptance, compassion and friendliness or sympathy were described as shown in the following examples: "Peers showed understanding, empathy, participated in his pain and also displayed more interest in their classmate", "Peers were more sensitive and compassionate towards their classmate". Educators offered the following suggestions they considered helpful in supporting bereaved children: a) communication of the death event to all members of the school community and funeral attendance, b) understanding of children's grieving process and its long-term manifestations through training programmes, c) collaboration with various mental health experts (e.g. psychologists), d) discussions about how to handle difficulties related to the child's school reintegration and peer support, e) collaboration with parents and relatives for an ongoing exchange of information regarding the child's adjustment to loss, f) financial assistance to the family through fund raising activities.

III. Grieving over the death of a student in their school

Among the 1,792 respondents, 215 educators (12%) experienced the death of one of their students. The three most frequently reported causes of student death involved an accident (55%); a life threatening illness such as cancer, Colley's anemia or meningitis (38%); and suicide (7%). These educators completed an additional section in the questionnaire, which aimed to identify: a) their personal responses to the death of a student; b) class discussions about the student's death; and c) school interventions following the death of a child.

Educators' personal responses to the death of a student. Educators were asked to describe what affected them most in the process of dealing with a student's death, and the majority referred to the unexpected nature of death. Their reported reactions comprised shock (e.g. "I was so shocked, I was staggered at the news", "I remained silent and numb ..."), disbelief (e.g. "I couldn't believe it had happened"), and predominant feelings of sadness and guilt (e.g. "I felt guilty, because I didn't prevent the accident" or "I still have a feeling of guilt and I wonder whether there was something that the school could have done to prevent the accident"). Some teachers reported extensive crying and a tendency to become introverted, while others became active, informed their students about what had happened or engaged in discussions with colleagues about funeral attendance and ways of supporting the bereaved family. As time went on, a few teachers reported difficulties (37%) in handling their own grief, as described in the following account: "For a very long time, I couldn't forget her lovely blue eyes. I constantly dreamt of, and still remember these eyes, seven years later". Others encountered difficulties in handling classmates' grief re-

sponses, as indicated in the following examples: "It was difficult to support his friends", or "I couldn't handle her classmates' crying". Finally, a few teachers felt unable to support the deceased's sibling or parents: "It was very difficult to cope with his brother's reaction after the death", "I found it very difficult to meet her parents again".

Class discussions about student's death. Less than half the sample (44%) took the initiative to address openly the child's death with peers, 28% approached the topic only after students voiced questions, or made remarks, and 28% avoided any reference to the child's death. Such avoidance was attributed to their discomfort in dealing with students' grief, and to the educator's overwhelming emotions. Educators who engaged in an open discussion with classmates usually gave some explanations about the events that led to the student's death and answered children's questions, many of which involved: "How is it possible for someone who was so young and healthy a few days ago, to die?" "What happens to one's body", "Where does that person go?" "Can he/she see us?" Some teachers highlighted the value of life and how children should protect themselves from accidents. Finally, some teachers addressed the pain of loss and invited the expression of feelings of love, sadness and anger, as indicated in the following accounts: "We talked about how much we loved her, how suddenly she went away, and how she will always remain alive in our memories", "We referred to the unfairness of death at such an early age, and to our need to answer the question of 'why?'"

When suicide was the cause of death in a child, discussions focused upon questions such as: "Why did this happen?" or "Who's fault is it?". Even though educators invited discussions around the student's suicide, they often felt unable to handle the topic, as shown in some of the following accounts: "Children talked about the student's family problems that they believed had led to suicide. I disagreed with them but I couldn't say a single word. I let them keep on talking ..." "At first, they attributed the responsibility to their teachers, but later they suggested that problems had their origin in the child's home".

School interventions following the death of a child. Seventy nine percent of the educators attended the student's funeral. For 58% of them the motive was their personal desire to be present, while for 42% it was in response to the school's policy. Interestingly, students' participation at their classmate's funeral was even higher (96%) according to educators' reports. Funeral attendance was a practice that occurred with the same frequency in all geographic regions of our sample, in schools located in rural as well as urban settings. As reported in the following accounts, the death of a student was perceived as a community affair: "The entire school community, teachers and students alike, attended the funeral and gave orations", "The school administration gave permission to students to attend the funeral and helped with their transport to the cemetery". Commemorations, such as letters and poems attributed to the dead student, flowers on his/her empty desk, a speech at the end of the academic year, were some of the

reported expressions of acknowledgement of the child's death. Financial assistance to the bereaved family, and occasional home visits, were additional interventions undertaken by some schools, as a way of displaying their active support towards the bereaved family.

Educators were invited to offer additional suggestions about appropriate school interventions, which included the ongoing collaboration with a social worker or psychologist, and the development of a programme for the prevention of suicidal and self-destructive behaviours among teenagers.

Discussion

This article has highlighted some findings of a national survey which, among other variables, has explored the perceptions of Greek educators about children's preoccupation with and adjustment to death, and their personal experiences with a student who was grieving the death of a relative, and a bereaved class which was mourning the death of a peer. The choice of a representative sample of Greek schools, and the high response rate of educators who participated in the study, allows us to draw some general conclusions as to how death is handled within the school community in Greece. These findings, however, reflect how educators perceive and handle bereaved children and further study is needed in order to explore students' and parents' perceptions and experiences.

With regard to the overall perceptions ($n = 1792$), most educators mentioned that school-aged children have death-related questions and concerns. Children's loss and grief were perceived as negatively affecting their academic performance and school behaviour, while the impact of death was considered to be more profound when students grieved over the loss of a relative than when they mourned the loss of a classmate. Educators who reported with increased frequency observable or subtle expressions of childhood grief and changes in academic performance and behaviour were those who had had more than 19 years of teaching experience, were female and worked in elementary schools. Increased teaching experience exposes teachers to more opportunities to observe and support bereaved children and makes them more sensitive to children's grief responses. This is more likely to happen among elementary school educators who spend several hours teaching and are involved with their students, in contrast to secondary school educators who teach one or two subjects and follow a very structured curriculum which allows for fewer personal interactions. The finding that female school teachers acknowledged with greater frequency the possible effects of loss upon students is similar to results found in the same survey that also explored teachers' perceptions and experiences with seriously ill students (Papadatou *et al.*, 2002b). Perhaps female teachers are more likely unconsciously to identify and assume a maternal and supportive role in their relation with bereaved students. Moreover, educators who had a personal death experience supported with greater frequency the view that both bereaved and non-bereaved children have death-related questions and concerns. It is necess-

ary to point out that further research is required to establish whether previous personal death-related experience affects teachers' perceptions and responses towards bereaved students.

Most participants perceived their role in supporting a bereaved student as significant, but the large majority felt inadequately prepared to assume such a responsibility. They requested the acquisition of knowledge, skills and collaboration with mental health experts. These findings are in agreement with similar studies conducted in the UK and the USA (Cullinan, 1990; Machon *et al.*, 1999; Reid & Dixon, 1999; McGoven & Barry, 2000), in which educators acknowledge the importance of loss upon a child's life, but express inability and discomfort in dealing with death-related issues.

Findings regarding educators who had a bereaved student in their class ($n = 590$, 33%) indicate that the majority acknowledged a decrease in the child's school performance but reported behavioural changes less frequently. It is argued that teachers tend to focus primarily upon academic performance, as they often feel uneasy addressing grief responses. Only 40% of these educators discussed with their student his/her loss experience, and such a discussion was undertaken when a child displayed learning difficulties and/or poor school attendance, while an additional percentage of 15% addressed the topic of death after the bereaved child initiated such a discussion. A significant percentage (45%) never talked about or openly acknowledged this major loss that deeply affected a child's life. Nevertheless, most educators recognized that their behaviour towards a bereaved student changed and reported a decrease in their expectations regarding academic performance and the development of a perceived close relationship with their student. Yet some educators, in their attempt to prevent discrimination, maintained a totally unchanged demeanour and avoided all death-related discussions. Stevenson (1995, 1998) and Wass (1991) suggest that, when a student's loss remains unrecognized, he/she is likely to develop classroom problems or difficulties which cause additional strain for educators.

Most teachers reported feeling comfortable talking about the death experience with the student's parent(s) and often tried to establish a close cooperation with the family in order to facilitate childhood adjustment. Despite the fact that the child's loss was rarely openly addressed in class, more than half the study's participants reported that peers often displayed expressions of love, acceptance, understanding and sympathy towards the bereaved child. Similar observations were reported by Stevenson (1994) who supports the notion that classmates and/or a small group of peers are often the first to provide help and support to bereaved students.

Educators who had experience of students grieving over the death of a classmate ($n = 215$, 12%), reported that such death was perceived and dealt with as a 'community affair'. These teachers reported that they discussed the child's death in class on their own initiative (44%) or on their students' initiative (28%). Discussions usually focused on events that led to the death, on attempts to attribute meaning to loss and to existential concerns. Yet a percentage of

educators (28%) never alluded to or openly addressed the child's death in the classroom, even though most students and teachers attended the funeral and participated in collective activities through which the school community acknowledged and grieved over the death of its student.

If the death of a family member is likely to be perceived as a private affair, especially in rural areas, the death of a student is clearly considered as a community loss that affects everyone and disrupts school life. This was evident in the activities and interventions undertaken by schools following the death of a student. Participation at the funeral is a common practice in Greece and quite often bereaved children expected to attend and actively participate in ceremonies, funeral orations and commemorations to the deceased. In funerals the bereaved are expected to openly express feelings, confront the reality of loss, and receive and offer support to family and community members (Papadatou & Iossifides, 2002a). It is suggested that these deep-rooted cultural and orthodox practices serve as a guide, as well as a shield when teachers feel at a loss as to how to discuss death and deal with a child's or a class's grief responses.

Implications of this national study are important on several levels. On a prevention level, educators expressed a need for specialized training programmes to increase their knowledge and skills in dealing with death issues and bereaved students. Such knowledge and skills should be well integrated and make use of the culture's traditional religious practices and community resources which are mobilized in the face of death. Following the conduct of this national survey, a training programme was offered as part of a major project entitled 'Sensitization and training of educators and health care professionals in supporting seriously ill and bereaved children' (Papadatou, 2000). Both didactic and experiential methods were used to reach the programme's objectives and participants successfully applied the acquired knowledge and skills in real situations. The training programme, which lasted for a year (100 hours), was evaluated by participants and the project's external evaluator as highly successful. Moreover, a pamphlet on how to support bereaved children was distributed to all school districts of Greece. This pamphlet offers basic information about children's grief responses, concerns and needs, and provides guidelines for facilitating adjustment (Papadatou *et al.*, 1999). Similar training programmes are planned for the future with the goal of educating a selected number of educators across the country who will act as 'key persons' in their region, coordinate educational activities for their colleagues, and develop community-based interventions for bereaved children.

At an intervention level, findings suggested the need for a team approach involving educators, mental health professionals and family members in order to plan appropriate interventions that facilitate childhood adjustment to loss. Until the recent effect of a law, organized school psychological services were nonexistent in the Greek public educational system. Currently positions for school psychologists and social workers exist only in special education, while the provision of counselling services in death-related situations is theoretically

assumed by the school's educational consultant, who has no specialized knowledge in death education and bereavement support. Since the completion of this survey, 'Merimna', a non profit society for the care of children and families facing illness and death, has, through its Counselling Centre, which is unique of its kind in Greece, offered counseling services to several schools and educators who had a child in their class coping with a serious illness or death. The main objective of such community-based counselling programmes is to promote the psychological well-being of all children who are confronted with death, rather than to provide psychological services to a few who present serious problems of adjustment (Stokes *et al.*, 1999). Based on such a philosophy and approach towards bereaved children, the role played by educators becomes critical in facilitating the normal grieving process and in providing opportunities for death education in the classroom. As several thanatologists suggest (Wass *et al.*, 1988) learning through death experiences is life enhancing, since students learn to identify their values, priorities and goals in life and come to a deeper understanding of the life experience.

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