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"I Could Hardly Breathe": Teachers' Lived Experiences of Bereavement After the Violent Death of a Student
« J'arrivais à peine respirer » : Expériences de deuil vécues par des enseignants après la mort violente d'un élève

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ABSTRACT
Teachers' bereavement experiences after the violent death of a student consist of an area that warrants more study, given the increased risk of experiencing persistent complex bereavement due to the traumatic nature of violent deaths. A phenomenological methodology was adopted to explore teachers' experiences after the violent death of one or more of their students. Interviewing five participants revealed that such experiences are both personal and professional. Students and teachers can form strong, long-lasting bonds that act as the foundation for understanding the bereavement experienced when students die. Participants identified several barriers that can arise when seeking help. Collegial support was reported to be important for teachers' journeys of healing. In regards to counselling, teachers' needs immediately following such a loss may differ from ongoing counselling needs. Follow-up counselling support (utilizing a trauma and bereavement lens), targeted 1 or more years after the loss, may be more important than previously considered.

RÉSUMÉ
L'expérience de deuil vécue par des enseignants après la mort violente d'un élève est un domaine qui nécessiterait des études plus approfondies, compte tenu du risque accru de vivre un deuil complexe et persistant en raison de la nature traumatique des morts violentes. Une méthode phénoménologique a été adoptée pour explorer les expériences d'enseignants à la suite de la mort violente d'élèves. D'après les entrevues menées auprès de cinq participants, cette expérience est à la fois personnelle et professionnelle. Les élèves et les enseignants peuvent tisser des liens forts et durables qui servent de base pour comprendre le deuil ressenti quand des élèves meurent. Les participants ont fait état de plusieurs obstacles susceptibles de se présenter lorsqu'ils cherchent à obtenir de l'aide. Ils ont signalé que l'appui des collègues était important dans le processus de guérison. Sur le plan du counseling, les besoins des enseignants immédiatement après la disparition peuvent différer des besoins de counseling courants. Un soutien

de suivi (à travers le prisme du traumatisme et du deuil), prévu 1 ou 2 ans après la disparition, pourrait être plus important que ce qu'on pensait auparavant.

Bereavement describes "the state of having suffered a loss" following a death (Rando, 1993, p. 20) and consists of an ongoing process that does not necessarily end, with the possibility of intense grief reactions resurfacing during the anniversary of a loss (Echterling et al., 2012; Worden, 2009; Wolfelt, 2015). Grief is a natural condition, and while mourning work is not necessary for adjustment following a death (Stroebe and Stroebe, 1991), for some individuals the bereavement process can have lasting health consequences (Bonanno et al., 2002).

Trauma Meets Bereavement

Green (2000) argued that the modes of death that are connected to poor recovery are those that make bereavement more traumatic in nature. Green acknowledged how differences exist between trauma and bereavement reactions as well as between their subsequent recovery processes, but it was noted that there was greater overlap between the two when it came to traumatic or unnatural deaths. According to Currier et al. (2006), traumatic and violent loss as well as traumatic and violent death have a history of being used interchangeably in the bereavement and trauma literature to describe a "loss in which the mode of death is sudden, violent, or unexpected" (Green, 2000, p. 2). A death is considered to be violent when it aligns with one of three unnatural ways of dying: by suicide, by homicide, or by accident. The current study will use the term *violent death* to define the mode of death and violent loss when describing the resulting experience.

Violent Deaths in Schools

Throughout the world, death touches the lives of schoolchildren (McGovern & Tracey, 2010). Although teachers' bereavement after a student's death is a topic that is gaining momentum, there is a lack of research that focuses on violent student deaths. Hart and Garza (2013) looked at unanticipated deaths (including students dying of illness), Levkovich and Duyshan (2020) excluded suicides from their study, and Rowling (1995) looked at traumatic events (including road accidents in which students had been injured). Given that violent deaths are connected to poor recovery in survivors due to their traumatic nature (Armour, 2007), the purpose of this study was to describe the lived experiences of teachers after the violent deaths of students in order to provide insight on how better to support teachers who may be at higher risk for experiencing persistent complex bereavement. Complicated grief is still used along with prolonged grief to describe in broad terms "a pattern of adaptation to bereavement that involves

the presentation of certain grief-related symptoms at a time beyond that which is considered adaptive" (Lobb et al., 2010, p. 676). The American Psychiatric Association's (APA, 2013) *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed.) has put "persistent complex bereavement disorder" in Section 3, entitled "Emerging Measures and Models, Conditions for Further Study."

Teachers' Responses to Student Deaths

In a foundational article, Rowling (1995) brought to light issues that teachers face when navigating bereavement from the role of a teacher. Teachers described disenfranchised grief, which occurs when a loss is experienced but cannot be "openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported" (Doka, 1989, p. 21). Teachers' disenfranchised grief stemmed from the duality of being in a professional role while also having a personal experience, which put both teachers' personal welfare and professional performance at risk (Rowling, 1995). In regards to social context, disenfranchised grief arose from the lack of recognition of the relationship between students and teachers, the lack of recognition of teachers' experiences of grief, and expectations defined by norms or rules pertaining to grieving.

When exploring the lived experiences of teachers after a student's death, Hart and Garza (2013) reported that teachers had termed the unanticipated death of a student as "being devastating to the student body" (p. 308). During the same study, teachers also shared how hard it had been to keep remaining students focused on academic work and how they had desired more resources, including a structured plan and external professionals to provide supportive counselling.

Levkovich and Duvshan (2020) conducted a study of how Israeli high school homeroom teachers had coped with the deaths of students and reported how such losses had affected their personal lives, how they had experienced profound grief, and how they practised preserving the deceased students' memories to aid in their healing. A key theme involved how teachers had been responsible for conveying news of the loss to the remaining students in their classes while in shock and pain from having just received that news themselves. Some teachers had trouble functioning following the loss and decided to leave the teaching profession altogether.

A form of complexity that teachers may face involves assisting students in their grieving while attending to their own grief experiences. When a student dies, teachers are thrust into crisis management and perform roles similar to those of helping professionals (e.g., emergency service personnel, nurses, or counsellors) when they care and support grieving children, but without the same level of recognition or necessary training (Rowling, 1995; Taylor et al., 1991). Kahn (2013) noted how the absence of any training to address bereavement in the classroom was the most relevant factor when examining teachers' sense of efficacy with assisting grieving children. In their guidelines for organizing a school's response to a student's death, Jellinek and Okoli (2012) stated how "principals, teachers,

and guidance counsellors feel ill-prepared to address a student's death" (p. 57). None of the teachers in Ducy and Stough's (2018) study had received grief training during their teaching education. Studying how teachers in Southeast London manage bereavement in the classroom, Lowton and Higginson (2003) reported how several staff members were apprehensive about engaging students in discussion about death and bereavement, even when students brought up these topics. When making suggestions on how schools can strengthen their grief support to adolescents following a peer death, Balk et al. (2011) stated that teachers should have knowledge pertaining to the "signs and symptoms of traumatic, prolonged, and complicated grieving" (p. 153), areas in which counselling professionals are often trained. A number of teachers in Dyregrov et al.'s (2013) study felt that counsellors should be the ones to support grieving children.

Whether they believe it is their role or not, teachers are on the front line following a traumatic incident and therefore are at risk of experiencing compassion fatigue (Figley, 1995) or secondary traumatic stress (STS) from helping suffering students (Hydon et al., 2015). This means that teachers who live through the violent death of a student and who therefore are already at a higher risk of experiencing persistent complex bereavement may also be at risk of experiencing STS from aiding their grieving students. For that reason, the current research on gaining insight into teachers' bereavement experiences following the violent death of a student is important in terms of learning how to support teachers better.

Bereavement Counselling

There has been a push in the academic literature to move away from stage theories and toward newer phasal or task conceptualizations (Friedman & James, 2008; Hall, 2014), in order to find better ways to capture and theorize the personal journey of dealing with loss and moving toward continuing life (Stroebe et al., 2017). The dual process model (Stroebe & Schut, 1999) and Worden's Task-Based Model (2009) are both gaining traction (Hall, 2014). Larson (2013) has proposed that a person-centred approach to grief counselling could provide the much-needed foundation for effective bereavement counselling. After reviewing the literature, Schut and Stroebe (2006) concluded that general bereavement interventions do not have the quantitative backing in terms of their effectiveness. Consequently, with general bereavement interventions not being found as an evidence-based practice, Schut and Stroebe could not support the use of outreach strategies, but they did note how interventions were found to be more effective in the case of more complicated bereavement, a finding supported by more recent research (Newsom et al., 2017). Consequently, teachers may benefit from bereavement counselling after the violent death of a student given the increased risk of persistent complex bereavement.

Method

Research Design

The hermeneutic phenomenological approach put forth by van Manen (1990) was adopted because the goal of phenomenological inquiry aligned with the research question at the heart of this study: "What is the bereavement experience of teachers whose student has died suddenly and violently?" The goal of phenomenological inquiry is to use detailed description to facilitate the expression of what a lived experience is like and what it means to one or more individuals who have lived through it so that others may gain a deeper understanding of it. Given the personal and sensitive nature of the research topic, it was appropriate to adopt a method that is meant to foster depth, and van Manen stressed that the power of phenomenological writing resides in how well the description can advance a reader's understanding of an experience. As such, this study drew on the descriptive and interpretive nature of van Manen's phenomenology, detailed accounts (i.e., textual descriptions) of teachers' individual lived experiences of bereavement, and thematic (i.e., structural) descriptions of the experiences of teachers' bereavement.

The method aligns with death research because it allows multiple realities to exist, even across similar experiences, and supports subjective knowledge. The interpretive aspect of van Manen's (1997) phenomenology recognizes the researcher's involvement in the research and embodies the social constructivist view that learning and knowing are embedded in social life (Vygotsky, 1978), which is fitting, since social context impacts bereavement (Rowling & Holland, 2000).

Recruitment and Participants

The participant criteria were outlined as follows: participants needed to be of legal age (e.g., 18 or older), to be or to have been a teacher at a secondary school (i.e., grades 7 through 12) in Canada, and to have experienced at least one sudden and violent death (i.e., by suicide, by homicide, or by accident) of a current or former student during their time as a teacher. No time restriction or cap was placed on how long ago the loss occurred. Purposive sampling, specifically snowball sampling, was utilized to recruit suitable participants (Atkinson & Flint, 2001). Potential participants were emailed a participation recruitment letter that introduced the research endeavour, outlined the participant criteria, and provided a thesis-specific email address for correspondence. Below is an introduction to the participants, which includes their years of teaching experience, a summary of their lived experience(s) with the violent death of a student, and a short description of their personal history with death and loss. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the confidentiality of participants and students.

David

David worked a variety of positions (including leadership) during his 20 years in education. David experienced the suicide of two students, the first 15 years before the present study and the second 4 years before the present study. David had experienced relatively few deaths besides these two, with his own near-death experience and the loss of his two students making up the more significant occurrences.

Paul

Paul taught traditional core courses as well as trades-related courses for 8 years. His former student Benjamin took the life of more than one person before he died by suicide. Paul shared that he had experienced a painful personal loss prior to Benjamin's death.

Nancy

Over her 35 years as a teacher, Nancy taught various grades. Four of Nancy's students passed away together in an accident about 6 years prior to this study. Nancy considered the loss of these four students and the death of a fellow teacher to be her two most intense bereavement experiences.

Betty

Betty taught various grades and spent time in a leadership role during her 34 years in education. Betty had four experiences of violent loss. Two of her students died as a result of an accident (one just after graduation 23 years before the current study and one prior to graduation 13 years before the current study), and two more students died by suicide (one 6 years and one 4 years before the current study). Betty had a unique history with death, having played music at hundreds of funerals.

Norm

Norm was on his 21st year of teaching at the time of this study, by which point he had experienced four student deaths that fit the violent death criteria. Three of these involved former students who had been within 5 years of graduation at the time of their passing: one died in an accident, one drowned, and one died by suicide. Norm did have one experience of the violent death of a current student 14 years ago. A newer student named Donny began "yelling profanity" after Norm had asked him to lift his head off the desk. After Norm asked Donny to go to the office, Donny left the classroom and Norm informed the office of the incident. Later that day, Norm was told that Donny had died by suicide at his home. Outside of school, death was not a regular occurrence in Norm's life.

Data Collection and Analysis

Ethical approval was obtained from a human subjects research committee for this study. The primary means of data collection in phenomenology are in-depth interviews, and due to the sensitive nature of the topic, semi-structured in-person interviews were completed with five participants (McCosker et al., 2001; van Manen, 1990). Participants chose a quiet and comfortable interview location. Prior to the start of each interview, the consent form was reviewed and time was dedicated to answer any questions that arose. After establishing their teaching experience and their experience with the violent death of one or more students, participants were asked to begin sharing their story from the moment they were notified that their student(s) had died (Jacobs et al., 2016). The in-depth interviews lasted between 48 and 189 minutes and were audio-recorded, while observations (concerning participant demeanour, silences, and non-verbal indications of emotion) were documented in written form. At the end of the interview, each participant was provided with the contact information for a mental health helpline and was thanked for sharing such a personal experience.

The researcher transcribed the interviews verbatim, using van Manen's (1990) three approaches (i.e., wholistic, selective, and detailed) to isolate thematic statements. In order for the researcher to capture the text in its entirety, each interview was read through (alongside the documented participant demeanours, silences, and non-verbal indications of emotion) and a few phrases were generated, with the aim of capturing the predominant notions of each interview. The selective approach involved combing through the interviews several times and highlighting any statements that appeared essential or enlightening in terms of the phenomenon being studied. Interesting, surprising, and reoccurring aspects were marked and copied to a new document, one for each participant. Finally, the researcher ruminated on different sentence clusters using the detailed approach, and any reflections of deeper meaning regarding what that grouping revealed about teachers' bereavement experiences were noted. After each grouping had a description attached, sentence clusters were moved around and grouped by similarity. After each participant's individual document was organized, participants' responses were compiled together and sorted, at which point five themes emerged.

Evaluating the Quality of Data and Establishing Rigour

When it comes to the evaluation criteria of phenomenological text, van Manen (1990) states that "our texts need to be oriented, strong, rich, and deep" (p. 151). Researchers must assess self-consciously the ways in which they observe, listen, and relate to the studied phenomenon for the text to be considered oriented. As such, van Manen's concept of epoché was adopted, and so any of the researcher's values, beliefs, assumptions, and thoughts that had the potential to influence the study were made explicit and documented through journaling. To meet van Manen's conceptualization of a strong and rich text, the researcher used her

orientation as a resource when aiming to develop descriptions that illuminate meaning of lived experiences and included quotes that would engage, involve, and require a response from readers. Finally, van Manen (1997) purported that the level of openness that the researcher has is directly linked to the level of depth that can be achieved in the text. Thus, the researcher practised radical openness by continually questioning assumptions and thematic developments while also remaining open to feedback from thesis committee members. Because van Manen's (1997) phenomenology acknowledges how generating data is an act of joint creation between participants and researchers, member checking was utilized to gain feedback from participants on the accuracy of preliminary themes. Each participant was emailed a document containing highlighted phrases pulled from their interview transcriptions in a roughly thematic organized manner and was asked to comment on whether the researcher's interpretations were accurate and resonated with their experience. Three out of five participants responded via email and provided feedback.

Findings

The participants' lived experiences of bereavement following the violent death of a student will be presented according to the following five themes: (a) so much more than teaching, (b) student death lifts the curriculum veil, (c) place of work, place of grief, place of being, (d) teachers may not wave for help on the healing journey, and (e) no two sudden deaths are the same.

So Much More Than Teaching

Central to understanding the lived experiences of teachers who have experienced the violent death of a student is examining what it means to be a teacher. Teaching is so much more than teaching course material. Every participant talked about "*in loco parentis*," the expectation that teachers act as secondary parents and care for students accordingly. Strong bonds can and often do form in environments of mentorship, but participants spoke about how the public may not be aware of these connections. "I don't think the average person gets that, just how much a teacher knows their kids," Norm shared. Not every teacher will feel strongly bonded to every student—there is a spectrum—yet the bonds that do form provide the foundation of teachers' bereavement. "You loved those kids and their death affects you just like it would be your own, your own kids, so it's hard," Betty affirmed. When describing the pain of losing his student Meg, David explained that "it would almost be [the] equivalent of getting branded—this searing, visceral intensity—electrode kind of stuff in your brain. I just remember it being such an overwhelming—more than powerful—it would just hit you like a tidal wave."

The bond formed between students and teachers can endure over time. Norm explained to his students that it "doesn't matter where you go in life or what you do, I'm always your teacher and you'll always be my student." The fact that four of the five participants talked about experiences pertaining to the death of former students supports the notion that bonds can last beyond the classroom.

Student Death Lifts the Curriculum Veil

Early in their careers, teachers may find themselves focusing on the curriculum and content delivery, but violent loss can act as a catalyst for change. "These moments of loss represent the pinnacle of our responsibilities in society. They clarify what it is we're actually doing," David said. "The teaching role is more than curriculum; you're the curriculum and it's relational—it is all intertwined." Teachers described a switch from being highly focused on curriculum delivery to adopting a more person-centred approach. Student death can act as a serious wake-up call to the hardships students may experience and can remind teachers to "be a human being first. Be present. Listen. It's not about the answers—it's about listening, and it's about honouring people, young people," as David articulated.

When a current student dies, school work may have to come second to bereavement work for a time. Teachers' focus can switch from teaching students course material to aiding students through bereavement. Falling behind in the curriculum may be normal and necessary as part of a school's healing journey. "You have to be there for those kids and I don't mean … at the expense of the curriculum, but you have to be there for them above everything else," Nancy declared.

Place of Work, Place of Grief, Place of Being

When a student dies, a place of work also becomes a place of loss. This is true when a former student dies, but perhaps the most poignant transformation occurs when a current student dies during the school year. Nancy shared that what was once a typical way to form student groups in a classroom before the accident became a startling reminder of the loss when she asked the remaining students to fill the empty spot. "Nobody moved," she reported. "And the girls turned that desk and made the group of four [but] they stayed a group of three. They never ever made a group of four without putting that empty desk there." Norm gave insight into the significance of a desk as being more than classroom furniture: "It's their space, right? I can look out at my room and go, oh, well, I'm missing that kid, that kid, and that kid, because I'm used to where they are in the space." Upon returning to school following the loss, Norm had considered changing classrooms because of the initial struggle of being in the "same classroom where the incident happened" and that being the last place where he had interacted with his student before the student died by suicide. The classroom goes from a workplace to a place of loss as well.

The violent death of a student leads to a confusing time for teachers, who not only are in shock over the loss but also are trying to navigate the realities of teaching grieving students, which feels like a new job. David recalled his mind racing with questions as he tried to figure out what to do with a bereaved class for the first time. "What would a loving parent do right now? What would a good teacher do right now?… Am I supposed to fire up the computer and start giving notes?" The realization that giving regular lessons under these circumstances is not appropriate speaks volumes to how the job of teaching does change after a student's death. Teaching as usual appeared to be the underlying message from administration in Nancy's experience. Nancy ignored the instructions from administration that teachers "need to be teaching every day" because she recognized that when children are bereaved, they cannot always "get work done," saying how "it wouldn't have been good" if she had continued on as normal. It is not teaching as usual because teachers are now faced with instructing a classroom of bereaved students while experiencing bereavement themselves.

Although human reactions to loss are always unique and very personal, for teachers, the loss is both personal and professional. Therefore, teachers' bereavement can be strongly influenced by professional values. Professional values of strength, leadership, and composure can create unclear boundaries and expectations surrounding teachers' expression of bereavement in front of their students. "Kids do look to the teachers on how to grieve," stated Betty, who came to question whether she presented a reaction to loss that was too narrow. While Betty felt she presented conservatively, she also hoped she had "showed the kids that it's okay to be emotional as well." Norm admitted, "I don't know if I ever grieved in front of them," having left the classroom during his moments of intense emotion and returning only once he'd felt more composed. In contrast, Nancy felt comfortable crying, talking, and grieving with her students. Professional boundaries pertaining to the duty to care for students also influenced how teachers were able to experience their bereavement. "I think teachers often are caregivers and every once in a while, I just want to be a wreck and I can't be," Betty explained. Many participants spoke about having to remain strong and to hide any signs of weakness. As David stated, "There's this assumption that as an educator … you're this bulletproof, non-feeling entity." Norm described how his personal reaction to loss "came later" because first he went into "teacher mode." Teachers are often dealing with so much, all while exhausted and sleep deprived. "I was just going into zombie mode or whatever, but you know the responsibilities of the school don't go away," David pointed out. "A week with no sleep and total stress" is how Betty recalled the days following the loss she experienced. When a teacher's place of work becomes a place of loss, that change is significant because, as Norm was informed, a student loss "could end your career."

Teachers May Not Wave for Help on the Healing Journey

"You can put all the things in place to say this is to help teachers; they don't always take advantage of it because … that's pretty weak if you need that," articulated Nancy. Below is a description of the potential roadblocks teachers identified in terms of trying to seek help.

Professional Expectations

It may be harder for teachers to recognize they need assistance and to ask for help because of their leadership positions and because of the values of professionalism. Participants made several relevant statements about teachers and the teaching field generally: "We try to be everything"; "It's sort of in that teacher persona that we think we have to be strong for everybody else"; "[We] don't want to show any kind of weakness"; "Got to be the strong one"; and "Got to be composed." In addition to expectations concerning leadership, teachers have expectations about being caregivers. After spending weeks supporting their bereaved students, Nancy and Betty needed some time off. "I just couldn't face the sad, sad faces another day.… It was overwhelming to have that much grief in one day," Nancy shared. When Betty described her "necessary down time," she also expressed concern about sounding "selfish," reinforcing how hard it may be for teachers to put their needs first given the professional expectations they face to be caregivers. It was following the violent death of a student that David learned to "apply airline crisis emergency response" and "put your mask on first." Norm now believes that "university pre-service programs should teach teachers how to take care of themselves" because "if you're not healthy, how effective are you going to be?"

Administrative staff members also contribute to the professional expectations placed on teachers. Nancy expressed her anger toward the administration's lack of trauma-informed responses to student deaths, including barriers surrounding the logistics of attending students' funerals. "The school needs to think about how to let teachers attend … and don't expect teachers to take a personal day.… If you don't have enough subs for all the teachers that want to go that means … close the school."

Mental Health Stigma

For teachers, both self-care and bereavement felt like they might be mental health concerns, with the associated stigma attached. It appeared harder to seek help for mental health issues compared to those pertaining to physical health. "So any kind of struggles like if I had broken my leg, I got a cast, oh yeah, you're injured, but if my psyche is injured like that you can't see it," as Norm explained. Despite the stigma, Norm recognized that he required assistance coping with the loss: "I knew I was in trouble, just from my behaviours at home, and the anger." Norm did attend counselling, which helped immensely with his healing journey.

Both Norm and David expressed how the violent losses they experienced broadened their concepts of mental health.

Finding and Accessing Mental Health Services

Finding or being offered the appropriate mental health services is another potential roadblock for teachers who seek help. David struggled to find services in his less than supportive work environment. "I know that I needed help," he said. "I can't tell you what services I would have needed, but I would have needed something, rather than nothing." Sometimes teachers were offered no help. If support services were offered, that happened often as a supplement to services being brought in for students. "I don't remember as a teacher the schools offering counselling. We offered so much to the kids, but they do … say, 'If the teachers want to talk that's fine and everything.' But not afterwards," explained Betty. Her description also highlights the importance of timing when it comes to services offered. Mental health services, if provided at all, tended to be offered immediately following the loss. Only Norm experienced counsellors coming in months later to talk about the impact of the loss. Having time to access services was also a factor. Nancy was displeased with the suggestion from her school's administration that she get counselling during her prep. "Give me a break. With the 50 things I have to do during my prep, I don't have a prep!"

Being Blindsided by Death

Betty spoke about how teachers may not anticipate student death: "I don't know if all teachers really have that feeling, that somewhere in my career I'm either going to lose a student through an accident, suicide, or homicide … there's going to be a reason … I'm going to lose a student." David was one such teacher who had not anticipated this kind of occurrence. "I feel I was blindsided 'cause, I mean, I could hardly breathe," he said. "How can we possibly prepare ourselves? I would have, but there was no mention of any of this whatsoever in my teacher development program." Even though it is likely that a teacher will have a student die during their career, it appears that the educators of teachers are not bringing up the topic, leading to even more shock when the event does occur.

Media Involvement

Another possible roadblock to talking openly about student death and to asking for help may arise from the media's involvement and the stigmas attached to violent death. Paul grieved the death of his former student Benjamin even though the media "looked at him as the bad guy" given that he had taken the life of others before dying by suicide. Paul was subjected to many people who were not grieving and would speak ill of Benjamin. Media involvement can add to suffering by representing only one viewpoint or by blowing things out of proportion.

In Nancy's experience, an accident involving other students around the time of her student's funeral caused a media frenzy and "magnified the problem all over again." Media attention can become an invitation for outsiders to get involved and to express opinions, and this can include people that a teacher considers to be part of their support circle. Norm recalled the initial reaction of his parents, who had seen reports of his student's suicide on the news without realizing their son had been the student's teacher: "My parents were mad at me 'cause I didn't tell them until the weekend what had happened.… I couldn't say it out loud just yet, especially to my mom and dad."

Whom Teachers Seek Support From

Given the leadership and caregiving expectations placed on teachers, the ways in which teachers can be caught off guard by the death of a student, the general difficulties in asking for and finding mental health help, and the complications that media involvement can bring, teachers may find it very hard to wave for help on the healing journey. However, *collegial support* was a sub-theme that came to fruition. More often than not, it was colleagues and fellow teachers whom the participants acknowledged as comprising the supportive system that helped following the loss. If Paul felt he needed to express his bereavement, he felt comfortable doing so with colleagues. "Kevin and I went and talked with each other … and [with] another trades teacher.… That is where the support was, with the three of us." David relied heavily on the vice-principal at his school as a pillar of support after the death of a student rather than on grief counsellors. "I didn't understand the concept [of grief counselling]. You sit and talk with someone you don't know, about someone they don't know, and they don't give you any answers anyways." It would appear that the lack of judgment, the increased understanding, and the normalization that can come from collegial support make it easier for teachers to turn to fellow teachers for help and support after a student's death.

No Two Sudden Deaths Are the Same

Despite the many similarities in the experiences described by the participants, there were also differences in the ways that teachers experienced violent loss. These differences emerged between participants and within the individual experiences of violent loss. Six sub-themes of difference emerged: (a) timing of death, (b) means of death, (c) one-of-a-kind bond, (d) experience level, (e) social influences, and (f) administrative influences.

Timing of Death

The timing of a student's death makes a difference. Whether the student is a current student or a former student at the time of their passing impacts the bereavement experience. When a current student dies, the school community as

a whole is more impacted, whereas when a former student dies, the experience seems to impact the classroom less directly and the response of the school can be less consistent. Paul recalled that, "because he wasn't a student at the time, it was a different situation.… The students might have talked about it; I can't remember if they talked about it." In contrast, Nancy had clear memories of comforting crying students in the hallway following the loss of four current students.

When speaking of a former student's death, Norm recalled that "a lot of people were really hurting … but nobody did anything for them because it was the summer." Timing within the school year, within the school week, and within a break schedule all matter, as does the time of day. Timing can determine whether or not teachers need to break the news to their students that a peer has died. After a student died over the weekend, Betty recalled how there were not "any kids who came on Monday morning to school who didn't know already.… As teachers, we didn't have to tell the kids about the death. I think that makes it easier on us." The timing of a student's death may greatly influence when and how teachers first come to learn the news themselves. When Betty learned of the loss prior to school, she had time alone before having "to deal with it with the kids." In contrast, when learning of a student's death while at school, "You just sort of try to maintain your composure and go on."

Means of Death

Norm had already experienced student deaths that had not been violent and stated that the experiences were indeed different from those of violent loss. That said, even within the realm of violent death (i.e., suicides, homicides, and accidents), many teachers expressed how different they were from each other. Given that Paul's student had taken the lives of others before dying by suicide, there were aspects to Paul's story (i.e., negative media attention) that were unique to this experience. According to Betty, student deaths by accident were "very different" from student deaths by suicide. For Norm, the difference between suicides and accidents was related to "that control factor": feeling like more could have been done to prevent a student's death and feeling like it was an accident will result in two distinct experiences for teachers.

Participants spoke about how different deaths within the same means also impacted the experience of grief. Even though both of David's experiences were suicides, they differed from each other. David stated, "I'm mad at Brandon for doing that. He didn't have to do that." When asked if that anger was present for Meg as well, he responded, "No. Brandon was different." Betty described how "the two suicides were also really, really different." Although the two students had shared many things in common, their suicides ended up being vastly different because one student "was not your typical kid that presented with suicidal thoughts," whereas with the other student "there had been … a number of things before then to indicate that he was in real trouble." Betty explained that the first

suicide was a rare experience because at school "you didn't feel like you were saying goodbye to a kid that was at risk of anything, so it was such a shock to us.… There wasn't a feeling of *did I do enough?*—'cause it was so odd." On the other end of the spectrum, with the second student's struggle being more obvious, "you have that pervasive [question] *what could I have changed to help that kid?*" Betty also thought to herself, "How could I have done any more?" Even after Betty knew that a helping hand had been extended to the student on various occasions and understood her limitations, that second suicide has always been different for her because of that seed of doubt. Such doubts can also grow into feelings of failure, as David described. "It was our system that failed again, but this time it was way closer to me, because I was closer to Brandon, so I have failed, right?" Simply put, no two deaths are the same.

One-of-a-Kind Bond

A potential bond exists between students and teachers, but the strength of that bond varies from student to student and from teacher to teacher. Although Betty had had many experiences of violent student death, she chose to focus most of her interview time on Peter, who "was probably the one closest to me." Norm explained that teachers who are very new to a school might not experience grief for the loss of a student due to the lack of existing relationship. Paul described the differences between his experience and that of a fellow teacher who had grieved Benjamin's death more intensely because of his additional connections to Benjamin outside of school. Even though Nancy lost four students in the same accident, she spoke of each student as an individual, taking the time to describe each student and her experience of loss for each one. Each student–teacher bond is one of a kind.

Experience Level

The amount of teaching experience a teacher has at the time of a student's passing appears to matter. David was early in his career, remembering how his "first two years of teaching [were] just joy," until Meg passed away, shattering the picturesque teaching career David had come to know and love. Newer teachers may be more focused on trying to deliver the curriculum. Consequently, for a newer teacher who is already "going into a mere survival mode," being blindsided by student loss can be grim. For those who are newer to the teaching profession, it may be that much harder to switch gears away from grief and back toward lesson plans. Even though Nancy's entire plan for the year had to be tossed, she just thought, "I've been doing this long enough—I can go back and pick out other stuff to do," which allowed her to focus on self-care during her break.

The amount of experience with death that a teacher has at the time of a student's passing also matters. Paul described having less intense bereavement over the loss of Benjamin after going through a difficult personal loss that acted as

a reference point. Nancy described an intense bereavement experience, but she also considered the deaths of her four students to be one of her most significant losses to date. Betty had ample experience with funerals, but she recalled that "there were some teachers for the last funeral—it was the only funeral they'd ever been to. So that's harsh."

Social Influences

Social factors can influence teachers' bereavement, like who delivers news of the death, political influences, cultural differences, and loss practices. The person delivering news of the death heavily influenced Nancy's initial bereavement reaction, given that the person could recall only three of the four deceased students' names; it took work and time to figure out the identities of all four students. David described how different Brandon's death was from Meg's: "All the rules change because we are dealing with different cultures, different politics, different funding, racism in my own district.… Can't get funding for the kids that need help." Betty, too, addressed an interesting nuance about how funerals can be comforting or not based on how one's beliefs and traditions align with those of the grieving family. "[The funeral] was just handled really differently and I was really uncomfortable with it." Although she recognized fully her judgments on the matter, it still held true for Betty that "there was just a significant difference in the two funerals and they impacted the staff differently, because of that."

Administrative Influences

Across participants' experiences, there were differences in terms of how much support was offered by each school's administration. One policy that the administration sets regards whether or not teachers can get time off to attend a student's funeral. As Betty said, "We had … a different superintendent and different people in [administration] throughout the different times and there definitely were different responses and different ways of feeling supported or not supported during that time." Norm received a vast amount of support from his school and from its principal: he was assigned a counsellor, a counsellor was brought in after some time had passed to speak about trauma, and Norm could easily attend counselling because the principal made sure his class had coverage. On the other end of the spectrum was David's experience:

> Basically the services offered to the staff and to myself were just desperately, dangerously inadequate.… My job and the expectations that were placed on me from [the administration], point-blank, are inhumane. I was never once offered direct assistance in any capacity whatsoever. Not personally. I don't recall being asked how I was doing.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to describe the lived bereavement experiences of teachers after the violent death of their student(s). Taking the information collected to help inform and foster support services for teachers will be the focus of this section.

Findings Supported by the Literature

The findings of the current study echo those of other studies that examined teachers' lived experiences of student death, such as the difficulty of breaking the news about the death to the students in their classroom so soon after learning of the death themselves (Levkovich & Duvshan, 2020). Not being able to breathe, questioning what to do with a class of bereaved students, and seeing a deceased student's empty desk provide vivid insight into the experiences of a student's death. A disruption to academic work, not feeling adequately prepared to deal with the loss, and the importance of being able to attend students' funerals were identified as part of the bereavement journey (Hart and Garza, 2013; Levkovich & Duvshan, 2020). A student loss is personal and professional, potentially impacting teachers' personal health and their professional work (Bonanno et al., 2002; Rowling, 1995; Levkovich & Duvshan, 2020).

A Finding Not Supported by the Literature

A number of teachers in Hart and Garza's (2013) study focused on redirecting their students back to the curriculum. They conceptualized their responsibility to maintain the normalcy of the routine, arguing that it was the role of counsellors and not of teachers to focus on the aftermath of a loss with students. Dyregrov et al. (2013) also found that many teachers saw supporting students as the job of counsellors. In the current study, several participants took an opposing view and thought it was important that the focus in the classroom shift from the curriculum to providing support to grieving students and placed higher importance on the relational aspect of a teacher's role after a student's death. There are significant differences between the current study and the one conducted by Dyregrov et al. (2013) that could account for the different findings. They did not restrict their research to the death of students, so the interviewed teachers referred to children who were experiencing grief due to the loss of a close person outside of the school realm and their answers reflected this context. Teachers wondered how much they should be expected to be involved in personal health issues when they are not psychologists and have a limited capacity to provide students with this kind of support. Additionally, since students' homes were conceptualized as the place of grief and sadness, teachers felt that maintaining a sense of normalcy at school could be a way to give students a break from sorrow. At the same time,

Hart and Garza's (2013) study was conducted in a very similar manner to the current study and the potential explanations as to why different results arose are more difficult to determine. One difference to note is that the current study was conducted in Canada, whereas Hart and Garza examined a population from the southeast part of the United States. Cultural and educational differences may have contributed to the varying responses. Hart and Garza note that they specifically spoke to teachers from high-poverty schools that receive federal funding to aid students, whereas the current study did not have that inclusion criterion for the schools it studied.

Implications for Teaching Administrations

Many teachers spoke to how the topic of student death was not addressed in their training to become a teacher. Administrators may look to organize educational sessions on student death as a way to plant a seed of awareness around this event possibility, taking a proactive approach rather than a reactionary one. School-wide proactive strategies can aid in protecting teachers' well-being and in minimizing stress and STS (Hydon et al., 2015). Setting up mentorship programs that pair newer teachers with more experienced teachers could be helpful both prior to and following the death a student as a way to encourage and strengthen collegial support.

A school-wide approach that has gained traction over the years (Thomas et al., 2019) involves how schools should adopt a trauma-informed lens to support their students and their teachers better (Cole et al., 2013; Hydon et al., 2015; Overstreet & Chafouleas, 2016). Teachers included in the current study expressed frustration with their respective administrations' lack of understanding and support after the death of a student. Utilizing a trauma-informed lens may help administrations to dissipate some of these issues by making it easier for teachers to attend a student's funeral (which appears to be important to the healing journey), by removing barriers to teachers' access to counselling services (e.g., providing classroom coverage), and by having counsellors available later on and not just immediately after the loss (given that trauma symptoms often take time to develop). Even years later, administrators may decide to make counsellors available for teachers during the anniversary of a student's death (Echterling et al., 2012).

To support teachers better, administrators need to provide them with quality crisis management training (Taylor et al., 1991), an idea that has been noted in various studies that look at bereavement and the classroom (Hart & Garza, 2013; Kahn, 2013; Lowton & Higginson, 2003). There is ample literature that outlines how schools can respond after a student's death (Balk et al., 2011; Jellinek & Okoli, 2012; McGovern & Tracey, 2010), so it falls to policy-makers to ensure that this knowledge gets utilized and implemented.

Implications for Counselling Professionals

Counselling professionals need to be aware of the trauma and bereavement overlap for violent losses and of the impact on their case conceptualization. What would be considered pathological for more natural bereavement circumstances might actually be the baseline for those who lose someone by violent death (Armour, 2007; Green, 2000). Practitioners need to be cautious with the label of persistent complex bereavement disorder (APA, 2013), but they need to be aware that interventions tend to be more effective with such bereavement presentations (Newsom et al., 2017; Schut & Stroebe, 2006). Studies have reported on the fact that teachers desired access to counsellors (Hart & Garza, 2013), but it is not supported that counsellors apply sweeping outreach support (Schut & Stroebe, 2006). Not all teachers included in this study expressed that they had experienced intense bereavement, and grief work is not necessary for adjustment after the violent death of a student (Stroebe & Stroebe, 1991). Counsellors should stay away from outdated stage theories (e.g., the five stages of anticipatory grief outlined in Kübler-Ross et al., 1972) that oversimplify the process (Hall, 2014; Stroebe et al., 2017) and that can lead to client harm (Friedman & James, 2008). Instead, counsellors may benefit from using phasal conceptualizations (i.e., the dual-process model and Worden's Task-Based Model). Counsellors should treat each teacher as an individual and tailor each teacher's bereavement therapy to meet their needs. Larson's (2013) person-centred grief counselling may help with that approach. Counsellors may also consider literature related to trauma therapy, such as Joseph (2015), who promotes a person-centred approach to facilitate post-traumatic growth.

Since teachers are in a helping role toward students following a death, counsellors may need to help teachers manage compassion fatigue and STS (Hydon et al., 2015; Figley, 1995) as well as bereavement. As Berger et al. (2016) noted, "To provide satisfactory care for children while potentially bearing the toll of dual trauma, teachers should be armed with tremendous levels of strength, resilience, and relevant skills" (p. 237).

Bereavement is a process that changes, but it never truly ends (Wolfelt, 2015; Worden, 2009). Counsellors may want to prepare their clients for the changes that can occur around loss anniversaries by normalizing the return of or the increased intensity of grief reactions, like crying, sadness, and changes in appetite and sleep (Echterling et al., 2012).

Limitations and Future Research

Van Manen's (1997) phenomenology recognizes the ways in which generating data is an act of joint creation between participants and researchers. Member checking was used, but only three of the five participants responded. It is unclear why the others did not do so, but additional member checking would have helped to substantiate the validity of the results. Furthermore, the phenomenological

qualitative method allowed for deeper understanding to come from the detailed descriptions compiled from a few in-depth interviews. But given the qualitative methodology and the small sample size, the results are not intended to be generalizable. Future researchers may want to use the themes that arose from the current study to help guide their questionnaire construction process. Obtaining more quantitative research on the topic of teachers' bereavement experiences after the violent death of a student would be beneficial given the generalizability.

The teachers included in this study also had significant experience with teaching, and experience level was noted as a factor that can influence the bereavement experience. It is possible that newer teachers may already be dealing with the learning curve that comes with being new to a field, in addition to the grief that can arise when a student passes away. It would be beneficial if further research compared newer teachers to more experienced teachers when it comes to lived experiences of a student's death. Such research may bring to light different ways to support new and experienced teachers after the violent death of a student.

Conclusion

Teachers' workplaces becomes places of bereavement after the violet death of a student. While navigating the personal and professional changes that arise when this event occurs, teachers often turn to colleagues for support. Every student–teacher relationship is unique, and no two deaths will be the same. Continued research on what assists teachers on their healing journey is warranted, so that better services can be implemented to help teachers following the violent death of a student.

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