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Abstract: Background: The loss of a co-worker always evokes complex emotions. Such a loss is particularly challenging for those who spend many hours at work and develop close interpersonal relationships with their colleagues. While many studies have examined how losing colleagues affects employees in various organizations, no research has specifically examined this topic in the school environment. **Methods**: This qualitative study explored the experiences of school counsellors facing the loss of colleagues from their school educational team. Twenty-one school counselors ranging in age from 28 to 61 who had lost a colleague within the past five years were examined by semi-structured in-depth interviews. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using thematic content analysis. **Results**: Three main themes emerged from the data: (1) "From Shock to Action": School Counsellors' Reactions to Colleague Loss; (2) "From Friendship to Conflict": School Counsellors' Diverse Experiences with Colleague Loss; and (3) "The Burden of Care": Coping Mechanisms for School Counsellors Facing Colleague Loss. **Conclusion**: This study highlights the complex experiences of school counsellors in dealing with the death of colleagues. It underscores the importance of providing long-term emotional support for counsellors throughout their careers, particularly when coping with crises and emergencies.

Keywords: colleague loss; educational counsellors; bereavement; coping strategies

1. Introduction

Workplace loss can be complex and painful [1,2]. Individuals who work together and spend long hours at their place of employment often forge significant social connections and become meaningful to one another [3]. Consequently, when a loss occurs, the bereavement experienced by coworkers can significantly impact their productivity and career trajectory [4]. Despite their expectation that they will be able to maintain their usual work routines, some employees may struggle with their grief for extended periods [5]. Many organizations lack comprehensive policies and guidelines to support grieving employees, and this lack can potentially harm their well-being and reduce the overall level of support available to them [4].

Research on loss in educational environments has primarily focused on the support educators provide to students who have experienced losses [6,7]. Studies examining teachers' experiences with bereavement at school have revealed that teachers often face emotional flooding, heightened personal death anxiety, and fear of losing family members. These teachers also reported a lack of knowledge on how to support their grieving students and expressed a need for emotional support from school therapists [6–8]. Nevertheless, there is a notable gap in the literature regarding the experiences of educational counsellors who face the loss of a coworker while simultaneously needing to support other educational staff members at their school.

Loss and Bereavement in the Workplace

Grief is a universal experience, yet its impact is individual, subjective, and deeply influenced by cultural factors [9,10]. Cultural beliefs and rituals play a crucial role in shaping how people process grief and receive support [11,12]. Studies have suggested that nearly all individuals (96%) lose a loved

one during their adult and working lives [10]. The loss of a coworker can be particularly challenging for employees, managers and organizations, as the significant amount of time spent at work fosters strong interpersonal relationships [3].

Individuals often find themselves dealing with loss for extended periods, and this significantly affects their functioning [2,13]. Several studies highlight the difficulties employees face in adapting to work after the death of colleagues [4,7,14,15]. These challenges include emotional and physical struggles, which may lead to changes in work attitudes, increased absences, career breaks, and a desire for layoffs or occupational changes [4,16]. Loss in the workplace can have significant consequences for the individual, the organization, and its customers and supervisors [17]. Wilson et al. [18] examined workplace loss at 131 different organizations. They found that 61% of employees took a few days off due to personal loss and 11.3% experienced long-term effects, such as prolonged crying, distractions, difficulty focusing on work, and irritability.

When death occurs in the workplace, some co-workers may grapple with personal grief for extended periods, despite the requirement to continue working [5]. While many employers show sympathy, some fail to exhibit sensitivity toward the needs of grieving employees and their struggle to acquire adequate support [4,7,14]. Such difficulties often arise from a lack of organizational knowledge about bereavement and the absence of organizational programs and support services for dealing with loss. Additionally, managers and colleagues frequently do not provide adequate support and often expect employees to recover quickly from the loss to maintain workplace productivity [4,15].

This study underscores the importance of supportive policies in the workplace to assist bereaved employees in coping with losses. Implementing such policies can mitigate the negative impact of bereavement on employees' well-being and productivity, ultimately benefiting both employees and the organization [4,13,15].

How School Counsellors Cope with Bereavement at School

School counselling plays a crucial role in school mental health support systems. Counselling aims to foster the developmental processes of both individuals and organizations to ensure optimal functioning and to support the mental well-being of students and educational staff members [19]. The school setting serves as a vital support system for bereaved individuals, acting as an anchor and safety net during complex times and thereby enhancing their inner strength and mental resilience [20].

Despite the empathy of educators and their desire to help, many report a lack of professional training and support that leads to feelings of insecurity and emotional flooding [7]. Educators who have experienced the loss of a student report having difficulty in accepting such news, often describing such loss as an experience that induces shock, confusion, helplessness, fear, and guilt. The loss of a student profoundly affects teachers' daily lives, prompting them to seek ways to preserve the student's memory as part of their grieving process. Simultaneously, returning to routine and work can help teachers cope with the loss by distracting them from their intense grief. Some educators who have lost a student even consider quitting their jobs and changing professions, while others hold onto painful memories for a long time [6].

Research indicates that long-term exposure to student trauma and the act of providing compassion and mental resources can generate stress and emotional distress among educators. This is particularly worrisome, as educators often are not aware of their losses, leaving their grief unacknowledged [20–24]. Challenging emotional content can significantly impact educators' personal and professional lives, especially if they have experienced trauma. Early familiarity with the theoretical background on loss can prepare educators to anticipate, understand, and respond to grief in an informed and appropriate manner, enabling them to manage such occurrences more compassionately [6,7].

In conclusion, school counsellors are responsible for the mental well-being of the entire school population and must be able to handle crises, including the loss of a colleague [25]. Such occurrences have a dual impact on counsellors, as they often have a personal connection with the deceased and

simultaneously need to support the administration, educational staff, students, and parents who have experienced this loss [20,25].

Theoretical Paradigm: The Disenfranchised Grief Theory

Doka [26] defines disenfranchised grief as an experience of loss that is not openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported. Public acknowledgment of mourners' emotions and attitudes is a crucial resource for coping with and processing losses. Thus, a lack of such acknowledgment can lead to feelings of non-belonging, rejection, loneliness, and hostility [18]. Disenfranchised grief can emerge in three primary scenarios: when the relationship between the mourner and the deceased is not recognized (e.g., the loss of a friend), when the circumstances of the loss are stigmatized (e.g., societal attitudes toward suicide), or when the mourner's capacity to grieve is questioned (e.g., individuals with special needs or dementia) [27].

The lack of opportunity to express grief and engage in mourning rituals leaves mourners feeling isolated from their surroundings, increasing their risk of developing complex grief disorders [28]. Disenfranchised grief is also shaped by the social contexts and norms of different societies. These societal "laws of mourning" often do not consider the nature of the attachment, the sense of loss, or the feelings of those left behind in non-traditional relationships, thereby leaving their grief unrecognized and disenfranchised [28].

2. Materials and Methods

This study was conducted using a qualitative method within the phenomenological paradigm that focuses on capturing the essence of human experience and its central meaning [29]. The aim of research in the phenomenological paradigm is to understand the subjective and human experiences of participants by acknowledging the multiple interpretations that exist in these experiences [30]. This methodological approach is well-suited for the purposes of this research as it allows for an in-depth examination of counsellors' experiences, providing a platform for them to freely and comprehensively express their feelings, thoughts, insights, and worldviews. This approach also facilitates a deeper understanding of the research issue by expanding the topics examined within the study framework [29].

The research question is as follows: How do educational counsellors experience the loss of a colleague on the personal and professional levels?

Participants

The study included 21 educational counsellors employed by the Ministry of Education in Israel who had personally and professionally faced the loss of a colleague during their tenure. The inclusion criteria for the study required participants to be school counsellors with at least 33% job scope, who had lost a colleague within the past five years and attributed significance to this loss. Educational counselling students who were merely present at the time of the loss but did not play a professional role were excluded from the study. The selection process emphasized diversity in such characteristics as type of school, age, and seniority in counselling work. Eighteen of the participants were women and three were men, and most were married. The participants' ages ranged from 27 to 61 years (M=41.56, SD=8.32), and their seniority in educational counselling ranged from 1 to 26 years (M=9.36, SD=7.26) (Table 1).

Table 1. Participants' characteristics (N = 21).

Socio-demographic characteristics	
Gender (%)	
Male	3 (14.28)
Female	18 (85.72)
Mean age (SD), range	41.46 (8.32), 27–61

Marital status (%)	
Married	13 (61.9)
Single	3 (14.28)
Divorced	5 (23.28)
Academic education (%)	
M.A.	19 (90.47)
Ph.D.	2 (9.53)
Mean years of seniority in the profession (SD), range	9.36 (7.26), 1–26

Research Tools

Semi-structured interviews and a reflective journal served as the primary research tools. Semi-structured interviews are particularly effective in exploring a phenomenon from the perspective of participants [29]. The main advantages of this method include the possibility of dialogue between interviewer and interviewee, the flexibility to add questions based on participant responses, and the opportunity for participants to express themselves verbally in a personal manner [31]. The initial questions were designed to encourage introspection and allow participants to reflect on their experiences before expanding on their personal interpretations [29]. The interview guide was developed specifically for this study based on an extensive review of professional literature (Table 2).

Table 2. Interview Guide.

Questions
1. What does loss mean to you?
2. I understand that you lost a colleague from your educational team. How did you find out about the loss?
3. How did you feel and behave the moment you were informed?
4. What were the circumstances surrounding the colleague's death?
5. Tell me about your relationship with the deceased (e.g., how long did you know each other).
6. How did you perceive your advisory role in handling the loss?
7. How did the educational team react, and what methods did you use to deal with the team members (both in the short term and the long term)?
8. What did the loss trigger in you?
9. How did you deal with the loss?
10. Who were the significant figures for you during the mourning period?

11.	What helped you cope?
12.	What professional support or guidance did you receive as you supported the members of the educational team in coping with the loss?
13.	What do you think can help counsellors who must deal with the loss of a colleague?
14.	How do you think we can improve the professional functioning and personal well-being of members of the educational team facing such a situation?
15.	What would you recommend to other counsellors dealing with the loss of a colleague?

Research Process

After the study was approved by the university institutional ethics committee (approval no. 982003), participants were recruited using non-probability sampling methods such as social networks and snowball sampling techniques. After the participants expressed their willingness to participate in the study, zoom interviews were scheduled throughout September 2023. At the beginning of each interview, the participants were provided a detailed explanation of the study's purpose, course, and framework. Participants were asked to provide the researcher with a signed informed consent indicating they agreed to the recording and transcription of the interview, which lasted approximately one hour. They were informed that they could choose not to answer any question and could stop the interviews at any stage. They were told that pseudonyms would be used in the study to protect their identity, and no identifying details about them, their schools or their students would be published. At the end of each interview, participants were provided with the researcher's cell phone number in case they needed to discuss any difficulties or emotional distress or if they wished to express any regrets post-interview. None of the participants contacted the researcher after the interviews.

Research Data Analysis

The data were processed using thematic content analysis [32]. This type of analysis aims at organizing and deriving meaning from the collected data by categorizing them into groups, thus facilitating an understanding of the participants' experiences [33]. Data processing involved three stages: 1) Open Coding: Each interview was transcribed, followed by a comprehensive and careful reading of all texts to gain an initial impression of the contents. This stage involved identifying and coding the various themes present in the data. 2) Axial Coding: This stage involved a horizontal comparison of all interviews. An analysis was conducted according to the topics and meaning units identified during the open-coding stage. The researcher took notes throughout the process to ensure thorough documentation. 3) Selective Coding: The identified categories were further analyzed, with some categories subdivided and others grouped together to form broader and more abstract categories. Each theme was named to reflect its content. The process of defining themes incorporated notes from the participants' reflective journals [34] and included quotes from participants in the findings section to enhance the reliability of the themes identified [35].

3. Results

Three themes emerged from the interview analysis (Table 3).

Theme 1: "From Shock to Action": School Counsellors' Reactions to Colleague Loss

School counselors indicated that they were informed about the loss of a colleague in various ways: by the school principal, through social networks, and from students who had heard the news. Some of the deceased colleagues had been sick for a long time, making their deaths less surprising.

"I felt terrible even though I knew we were expecting it. We knew this was the point of no return, but it was still very difficult because this teacher was important to me, and we had a close relationship outside of school. Even when she was sick, we stayed in close contact. It was very, very difficult."

Table 3. Classification of main categories and subcategories.

Main categories	Subcategories
Theme 1: "From Shock to Action": School Counsellors' Reactions to Colleague Loss	• *Receiving the bad news in various ways* • *Sudden loss versus loss after prolonged illness* • *Nature of relationship between counsellors and deceased colleagues* • *Feelings upon receiving the news* • *Management of the emergency*
Theme 2: "From Friendship to Conflict": School Counsellors' Diverse Experiences with Colleague Loss	• *Relationships between educational counsellors and deceased colleagues ranged from close and warm to complex and conflictual* • *Some counsellors felt the death of a close colleague as a deeply personal loss* • *Other counsellors had ambivalent relationships with the deceased that were marked by professional challenges* • *Closer relationships with the deceased blurred counsellors' professional boundaries* • *Counsellors reflected on whether personal connections influenced their professional conduct*
Theme 3: "The Burden of Care": Coping Mechanisms for School Counsellors Facing Colleague Loss	• *Need for ongoing support and emotional accompaniment after loss* • *Establishment of support groups for educational staff members* • *Coping strategies in personal lives: emotional burden and its consequences* • *Prolonged exposure to loss and impact on counsellor's role*

In addition, knowing about the illness before the death allowed the counsellors to better prepare members of the educational staff and the children for receiving the bad news.

"I worked with the class and really prepared the students and teachers for this announcement. We held many meetings and discussions about this matter and how to cope with the situation. No one was surprised by the news since the teacher had been sick for a long time and had been treated in hospice before. The death was very gradual."

Conversely, some counsellors described sudden losses that sometimes occurred under tragic circumstances. These counsellors experienced shock and confusion, which were compounded by their meaningful friendships with their deceased colleagues.

"He was a classroom teacher, a young man. When I arrived at school in the morning, the teachers told me he had not shown up for work and they were looking for him. When the school principal arrived, I immediately understood. He told me that the teacher was found dead at home. I was the only one in the teachers' room who received the message."

Counsellors who were close to deceased colleagues shared that the news evoked feelings of pain, guilt, sadness, and vulnerability. Others who were less intimately familiar with the deceased were able to act immediately and make decisions that affected how they managed the incident.

"We were on an annual trip with grades 9-10 when a student quietly told me a teacher had passed away and the news was spreading on WhatsApp. I was afraid the news would spread uncontrollably. [The counsellor cries.] I told her, 'Before we spread this to others, let's handle this in a more organized way.' We informed the principal and consulted. In the end, we decided to stop the trip."

Despite their emotional turmoil, most counsellors immediately began handling the emergency situation at school. They set aside their feelings and focused on action: assembling an emergency team, dividing roles, and updating relevant parties (school principal, Ministry of Education officials, and school psychologists).

"I know the mechanisms well. In such situations, I immediately enter the 'doing' mode and set aside all 'being' for later. It's not something I choose; it's just mechanical. So, I can't tell you how I felt at that moment because I didn't feel it until later."

The counsellors' immediate responses provided emotional support to everyone at school. This included sending messages to parents, conducting emotional discussions in classrooms, and identifying distressed students and educators who needed short- and long-term help. Newer educational counsellors felt they lacked sufficient professional knowledge and needed guidance to handle such complex situations.

"After the principal and I informed the educational staff and the children about the loss, from that moment on the school moved to an emergency format. I went into classrooms and administered 'first aid' – personal conversations with children who expressed anxiety and emotional difficulty in continuing the day. As a school counsellor it was important to me that everyone receive the proper emotional response immediately so that negative feelings would not snowball."

Theme 2: *"From Friendship to Conflict": School Counsellors' Diverse Experiences with Colleague Loss*

In the interviews, the school counsellors described a variety of relationships with deceased colleagues, ranging from close and warm ties to complex and conflictual ones. One counsellor described a very close relationship and significant personal loss:

"It was the first time someone close to me died. I had lost my grandparents, but this felt different because it was like losing a friend, a teammate, who worked with me every day. She loved me very much, and I loved her. We had a very close relationship."

Conversely, some counsellors had complex relationships with the deceased, marked by disagreements that clouded their professional interactions. These counsellors described their relationships as ambivalent: while the deceased was loved and valued by students and staff, he was also challenging to work with.

"It is difficult for me to articulate this after his death, but he was a teacher with whom I had a challenging relationship. He excelled in many areas and was highly talented; yet, he was also very stubborn and often rejected my suggestions. He was reluctant to attend many of the meetings I organized for the teachers, leading to several disagreements between us. After his death, I felt a profound sense of confusion and fear, and I was unsure how I was supposed to feel."

The interviews revealed that the nature of the relationship between educational counselors and deceased members of the educational staff significantly affected how counsellors handled their roles during the tragic occurrence. The deeper and friendlier the relationship, the more they felt a blurring of professional boundaries. This introspection led some counsellors to question their actions and to wonder whether they would have behaved differently without personal connections.

"I think that because I was so involved, I had a hard time dealing with the incident. It was really professionally wrong. It was too painful, and I felt a deep sadness, as if a family member had died. If it had been a different case, perhaps I would have conducted more meetings in classes and held more commemorative events. In this case I could not. Looking back, I should have let someone else handle the case."

Theme 3: "The Burden of Care": Coping Mechanisms for School Counsellors Facing Colleague Loss

The counsellors reported that while they provided support and long-term responses to those expressing difficulty, anxiety, and distress in the face of tragedy, they themselves also needed assistance. They expressed a need for ongoing support and emotional accompaniment, which they found difficult to obtain from the school psychologists because of their busy schedules. While school psychologists played a crucial role in helping counsellors manage the educational staff and students, this support was often short-term and inconsistent, given the high demand for psychologists.

"... since it is a small school, there is no full-time psychologist. He comes twice a week. When he arrives, he has many urgent things to take care of. Thus, even when we have a fixed time in the schedule, it does not always work out, and I often manage and deal with such situations alone. There is no doubt that this is frustrating. I find myself wanting to talk, vent, ask, and I do not always feel comfortable with the psychologist. The support and emotional envelope is strong at the beginning but ultimately fades away."

Several counsellors noted that the educational staff often expects the counsellor to show restraint and care for everyone, yet they themselves also sometimes needed support and reinforcement. They also needed someone to listen to them and legitimize their feelings. One counsellor explained that because she was part of the school staff rather than an external counsellor, she often discussed the loss with colleagues in their daily interactions. She did not see herself in the role of a counsellor in this situation and therefore did not invite the educational staff members to talk to her in her office.

"I'm always expected to know everything and take care of everyone. I do not know how many people are aware that sometimes the counsellor also needs help in these cases. If there's any conclusion from this work, I suppose this is one of the important conclusions to consider."

Some counsellors created support groups for counsellors from other schools. This initiative, driven by the counsellors themselves, served not only to support the educational team members but also to maintain emotional distance by keeping them in the role of "helpers."

"...Together with counsellors who had been my friends for years and who worked in other schools, we held several discussion circles for the staff members a few weeks after the incident. We formed small groups to share and grieve together."

The interviews also revealed that prolonged exposure to losses of colleagues sometimes led counsellors to leave their positions or to take breaks. After dealing with multiple incidents of student loss followed by the death of a fellow educator, one counsellor reached the breaking point. Several counsellors shared that they took a sabbatical year to recharge their batteries so they could return with renewed strength. They emphasized that the counsellor's role involves holding in a lot of emotional pain while dealing with tragic incidents; to effectively manage this, they needed to be emotionally replenished.

"The role of the counsellor requires holding in a lot of pain while dealing with tragic incidents. The counsellor holds in these emotions, and to hold in an emotion, one has to be full. They felt they needed to 'recharge'."

4. Discussion

This study aimed to examine the experiences of school counsellors in dealing with the death of an educational team colleague from both personal and professional perspectives. The participating counsellors shared that they had forged meaningful friendships with their colleagues beyond their professional relationships, such that the unexpected news of a colleague's death caused deep sorrow, confusion, and astonishment. These findings support the claim that unexpected losses can have difficult and traumatic consequences, including the risk of developing post-traumatic stress disorder and deep grief [36]. The death of someone close is challenging, requires adaptation, and is accompanied by feelings of sadness, anxiety, guilt, anger, and depression. The coping process is subjective, individual, and cultural and varies from person to person [37]. The loss of a coworker can be devastating, as people who spend many hours together in the workplace usually form meaningful professional and personal relationships with their colleagues [3].

This study found that upon hearing of the death of a colleague, school counsellors were immediately required to become messengers of the bitter news. As part of the therapeutic system in schools, school counsellors are responsible for maintaining the mental well-being of educational staff members to ensure optimal functioning [19]. Counsellors can use their inner world as a tool to help other staff members [20]. Despite their own difficult emotions, most counsellors shared that they were able to convene the educational team, announce the news, focus on action, and immediately handle the emergency. The counsellors understood the importance of their role, which required them

to prioritize the mental well-being of students and staff, even at their personal expense, as they were not allowed time to process the loss [38].

Research focusing on mental health professionals shows that delivering bad news results in high anxiety and stress before and after delivering the message [39]. Additionally, this responsibility causes apprehension and fear, and requires skill and knowledge with little time to prepare [40]. Other studies examining how educators cope with receiving news of a loss indicate that the transition from receiving to delivering the bad news was almost immediate, such that they had difficulty processing the information [6,41].

For many of the counsellors participating in this study, the boundaries between their personal and professional roles were blurred, leading to emotional distress and conflict between the personal and professional as well as many doubts about how they should proceed. They reported that the nature of their relationship with the deceased was a significant factor in how they handled their advisory role. Janoff-Bulman [42] claims that with loss, one's sense of control is shattered. The mental breakdown emerging as a result of trauma originates in the shattering of three basic human worldviews: the view of the environment as fundamentally benevolent, the view of the world as having meaning and logic, and the view of the self as having positive, decent, and moral value. According to Janoff-Bulman, trauma survivors seek to reestablish their mental balance in order to regain it. Trauma makes people aware of their own vulnerabilities and strengths, leading to the development of coping behaviors [43,44].

The school counsellors in the current study stated that after the loss of a colleague, they provided support and prolonged responses to teachers and students when needed. From the moment the news was received, they provided support quickly and intensively, leading to situations of overload and stress at work and making it difficult for the counsellors to grieve the loss personally. The counsellors felt pain and longing for the absent staff member. The emptiness that remained made them sad and helpless about their roles. These findings support Doka's theory [26] of disenfranchised grief, defined as the grief of a person unable to mourn publicly. Research evidence indicates that counsellors are subject to a great deal of pressure and burden that may damage their emotional well-being and functioning, as well as their level of satisfaction in the workplace and their tendency toward burnout [20,45,46].

Counsellors are asked to respond to all the needs of their colleagues, even when they themselves are not always emotionally available [47]. The current study found that some counsellors who were exposed to prolonged loss experienced feelings of fear, sadness, and helplessness, with some expressing the desire to go on sabbatical or leave the profession entirely. Consequently, counsellors exposed to prolonged traumatic incidents may develop secondary traumatization. A possible explanation for this finding is Figley's [48] theory of secondary traumatization, described as a process in which a person who is not directly exposed to trauma develops secondary posttraumatic symptoms as a result of indirect exposure through the direct victim. Exposure to troublesome and painful content may evoke feelings of fear, sadness, anger, and helplessness. In addition, the length of time the helper experiences the symptoms is significant with respect to the development of secondary traumatization [20,49].

In the present study, some counsellors established and facilitated post-loss support groups to help themselves and other staff members cope with the loss. They reported that these groups helped them maintain emotional distance by keeping them in the role of "helpers." Additional studies indicate that many educators reported receiving support from their coworkers, which helped them deal positively with the challenges they faced in their work and adapt to the changing reality [50,51].

Implications

This study has several important implications for practice, policy, and future research on how school counsellors experience and deal with colleague loss. From a practical standpoint, the findings highlight the need for formalized support systems and protocols for school counsellors dealing with the loss of colleagues. Schools and educational institutions should consider implementing structured debriefing sessions, providing access to professional counselling services, and making temporary workload adjustments for counsellors after the death of a colleague. Additionally, training programs

for school counsellors should incorporate modules on grief counselling, self-care strategies, and maintenance of professional boundaries while dealing with personal loss. At the policy level, educational authorities should develop comprehensive guidelines for managing staff loss at school, with specific provisions for supporting school counsellors. These policies should address issues such as leave allowances, distribution of responsibilities, and long-term mental health support for counselling staff. Furthermore, professional associations for school counsellors could establish peer support networks and mentoring programs to provide additional resources for those who have lost colleagues.

Raising counsellors' awareness regarding their ability to receive professional help and support is crucial for fostering resilience and mental well-being and for enabling them to effectively balance their personal and professional lives. A therapeutic continuum should be created between educational counsellors and community members to reduce the burden on counsellors and help them successfully manage inevitable uncertainties and crises in their work. In the event of the death of a staff member at school, educational counsellors should collaborate with educational psychologists and other therapists rather than working in isolation. Additionally, it is essential to strengthen the sense of support that educational counsellors receive over time and to provide relevant professional training to ensure that they can effectively handle crises of this sort.

Study limitations

This study had several limitations. Owing to the nature of qualitative research, the sample size was limited. The study was based on a small sample of educational counsellors working in schools in Israel and does not claim representativeness or generalizability regarding all educational counsellors. Therefore, these conclusions may not necessarily apply to all counsellors dealing with losses. Another limitation arises from the sex distribution of the participants. Most of the study participants were female counsellors in that only a small number of male counsellors who had faced the loss of a staff member were identified during the recruitment process. Thus, the male perspective is underrepresented. Moreover, to reach educational locations in various geographic areas, interviews were conducted using the Zoom platform, which may have affected the depth and authenticity of the collected data.

5. Conclusion

This qualitative study explored the experiences of school counsellors dealing with the death of colleagues at their schools. Twenty-one counsellors participated in semi-structured interview. Thematic content analysis of the interviews revealed three main themes: (1) counsellors' reactions to colleague loss, (2) counsellors' diverse experiences with colleague loss, and (3) counsellors' coping mechanisms when facing colleague loss. The study highlights the complex experiences of educational counsellors when dealing with the death of a colleague on the educational team and emphasizes the importance of providing long-term emotional support for counsellors throughout their careers, particularly when coping with crises and emergencies.

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