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Bereavement and educational outcomes in children and young people: A systematic review

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Abstract

Experiencing bereavement due to the death of a close person is rife in the lives of young people. This review aimed to investigate how bereavement affects educational outcomes of students at various educational levels and what factors may be involved in moderating these outcomes. The systemic review was conducted according to the PRISMA guidelines with searches of peer-reviewed literature in Embase, Emcare, Medline, PsycINFO and Scopus. Twenty-two studies (17 quantitative and 5 qualitative) were included. In general, bereavement can constitute a barrier to educational achievement in young people compromising academic performance, and educational engagement and attainment. Several factors can place young people at greater risk of experiencing this disadvantage and further research into these mechanisms and interventions to mitigate short- and long-term consequences, especially among high-risk groups, is warranted.

Keywords

bereavement, educational outcome, academic performance, educational engagement, school engagement, educational attainment, mental health, systematic review

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Introduction

The experience of bereavement, defined by Stroebe et al. (2008, p. 4) as "the objective situation of having lost someone significant through death", is a common event that occurs in the lives of young people. In this review, the term 'young people' includes a wide age-range of students spanning education levels varying from pre-school to university age. In Western countries approximately 3.5% of children experience the death of a parent before the age of 18 (Dopp & Cain, 2012; Rostila et al., 2016), however, this percentage is likely higher in developing and conflict-afflicted countries (Dopp & Cain, 2012).

Bereavement has a strong impact on the mental health and social functioning of young people. In the two years following parental death young people are at increased risk of developing major depression, substance abuse and posttraumatic stress disorder (Brent et al., 2009; Melhem et al., 2011). Childhood bereavement has also been associated with lower stress resilience in late adolescence (Kennedy et al., 2018), destabilisation of self-confidence and self-image among adolescents (Balk, 1996), and distorted perceptions of interpersonal relationships (Servaty & Hayslip, 2001). The cumulative mental and social impact of bereavement can have long-term implications for a young person including diminished capacities in work, peer relations, career planning, and educational aspirations (Brent et al., 2012).

By affecting the mental and social wellbeing of young people, bereavement also influences educational outcomes. In this review the term 'educational outcomes' includes academic performance, as encapsulated by student grades (Berg et al., 2014); educational attainment, represented by completion of compulsory, secondary, vocational or university education (Burrell et al., 2020); and educational or school engagement, defined by positive behaviour, affect and intrinsic motivation (Fredricks et al., 2004). Bereaved students may face a variety of school adjustment problems, including deterioration in academic performance, problems with memory and concentration, and decreased motivation and attendance (Dyregrov et al., 2015; Morell-Velasco et al., 2020; Papadatou et al., 2002). A longitudinal study found that parentally bereaved adolescents attained on average a year less formal education than nonbereaved equivalents over 7 years and were more likely to be suspended, perceive teachers as apathetic, and lack hope about attending college (Feigelman et al., 2017).

A myriad of moderating factors such as circumstances surrounding the death, relationship with the deceased person, time elapsed since loss, and sociocultural considerations can influence the grieving process and how bereavement affects the educational outcomes of young people. Despite literature investigating how these factors moderate the mental and social implications of bereavement, little is known regarding their effects on the educational outcomes of bereaved young people. This review combines studies investigating the effects of bereavement on educational outcomes and draws on the unique populations of bereaved students from the studies to explore characteristics or circumstances of young people that may place them at greater risk of experiencing educational adversity. The review may assist in the future development of interventions for bereaved students and help inform the

practice of professionals such as school psychologists in assessing and addressing the needs of such populations.

Methods

This review was conducted according to the PRISMA guidelines (Moher et al., 2009) with searches conducted in Embase, Emcare, Medline, PsycINFO and Scopus. Medline was searched with a combination of MeSH and text words: (bereavement/ OR bereavement.mp OR grief/ OR grief.mp OR mourn.mp OR mourning.mp) AND (academic performance/ OR school performance.mp OR academic functioning.mp OR school functioning.mp OR educational performance.mp OR educational status/ OR educational attainment.mp OR academic outcomes.mp OR academic success/ OR academic achievement.mp) AND (child/ OR children.mp OR youth.mp OR adolescent/ OR adolescen.mp OR young people.mp OR young adult/ OR students/ OR students.mp). The same search string was used in the other databases. Researcher TE conducted the searches in August 2020, which were not limited by year of publication, location, or language. TE removed duplicates and three researchers (TE, KA, KK) independently assessed titles and abstracts for eligibility, and screened full-texts using the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Any disagreement between researchers was resolved through discussion. The review protocol was registered in the PROSPERO database (CRD42020205100).

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Studies were included if: (1) the study population included people who had experienced the death of a significant person during the years they were pursuing education, (2) the study used quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods, (3) the study reported on educational outcomes of participants (4) the study was published in a peer-reviewed journal. Studies were excluded if they: (1) focussed on bereavement not involving humans, (2) had a study population that did not describe bereaved people, (3) were case studies, review or opinion papers. Figure 1 presents the search and selection process.

Data extraction

Three researchers (TE, KK, KA) reviewed each of the included studies and independently tabulated the following data: author, year of publication, country, eligibility criteria, sample size, participants' age and sex distribution, time since bereavement, relationship to deceased, cause of death of deceased, study setting, study design, informants, outcome measures and main results. The researchers resolved any discrepancies in the tabulated data through discussion.

Data synthesis

We anticipated substantial heterogeneity regarding variables such age, sex distribution, time since bereavement, cause of death of the deceased and relationship to the deceased,

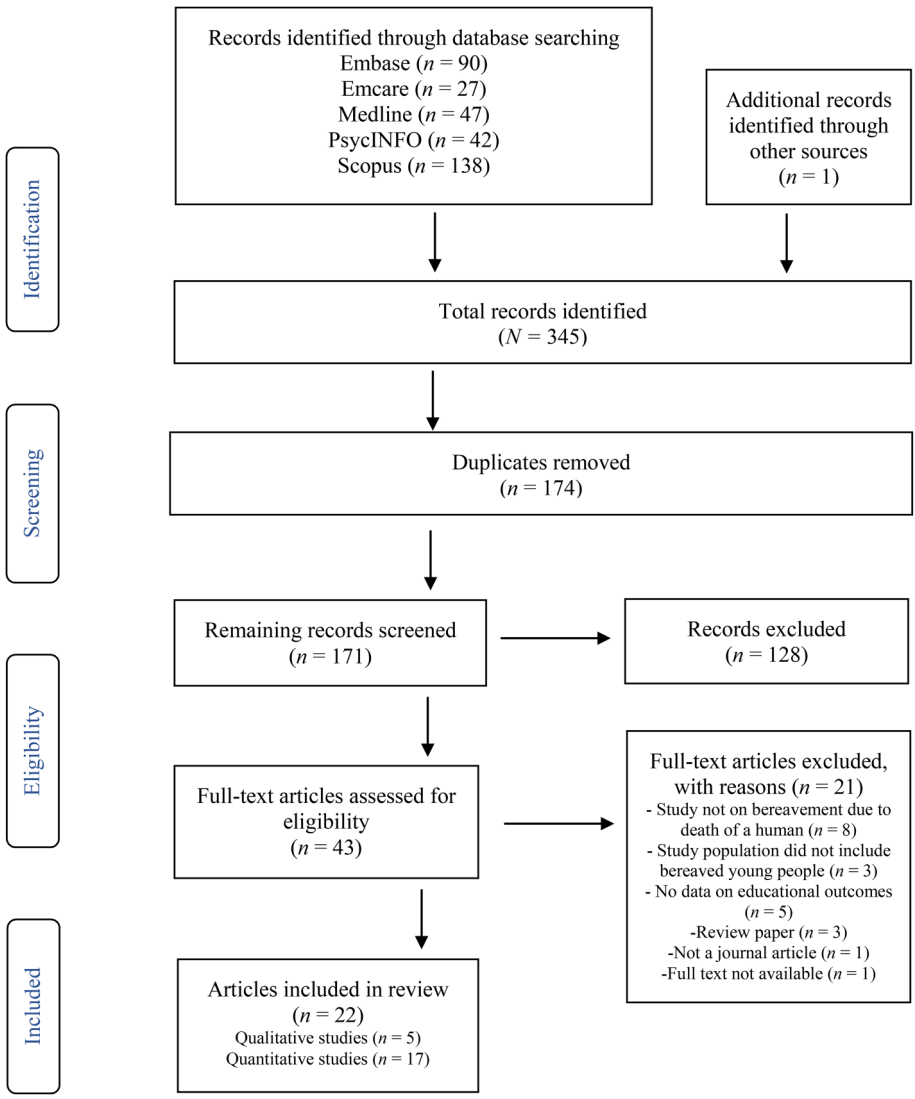


Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram

among the study populations, which precluded pooling the statistical data and conducting a meta-analysis (Pati & Lorusso, 2018). Also expecting both qualitative and quantitative data, we chose a narrative synthesis approach which is useful for investigating heterogeneity across studies (Popay et al., 2006).

Quality assessment

Three researchers (KK, TE, KA) independently conducted the quality assessment, and resolved disagreements through discussion. Quantitative studies were assessed using the Newcastle-Ottawa Quality Assessment Form for Cohort Studies (Wells et al., 2014), comprising eight items across three domains: (1) selection (four items), (2) comparability (one item), (3) outcome (three items). Scores in each domain were totalled to determine study quality as good, fair, or poor. The interrater reliability was substantial ($\kappa = .79$). The qualitative studies were assessed using the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) (Tong et al., 2007) consisting of thirty-two items across three domains: (1) research team and reflexivity (eight items), (2) study design (fifteen items), (3) analysis and findings (nine items). For each study, the percentage of items satisfied within each domain and across all domains was calculated. The interrater agreement was high ($\kappa = .93$). As the review aimed to summarise the available knowledge regarding the effect of bereavement on educational outcomes and potential moderating factors, no eligible study was excluded based on its quality.

Results

Study characteristics

Twenty-two studies, published between 1982 and 2020, met the inclusion criteria. Supplementary Tables 1 and 2 summarize the quantitative and qualitative studies, respectively. About half of the studies were conducted in the United States (Balk, 1990; Cox et al., 2016; Fristad et al., 1993; Harris, 1991; Jenkins et al., 2014; Oosterhoff et al., 2018; Servaty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006; Thyden et al., 2020; Van Eerdewegh et al., 1982, 1985; Williams & Aber, 2016; Youngblut et al., 2019). The remaining studies originated from the United Kingdom (Abdelnoor & Hollins, 2004a; Abdelnoor & Hollins, 2004b; Pitman et al., 2018), Norway (Burrell et al., 2020; Steele et al., 2009), Sweden (Berg et al., 2014), Denmark (Høeg et al., 2019), Finland (Prix & Erola, 2017), China/Tibet (Liu et al., 2019) and South Korea (Khang et al., 2020). The study populations had a wide participant age range consisting of young people aged between 2 and 42 years old, so as not to exclude good quality data from retrospective cohort studies or limit the data to only include recent experiences of bereavement. Nineteen studies involved populations bereaved by loss of a family member (mostly a parent), out of which two included the loss of a friend and one, the loss of a stepparent. Out of the remaining studies, one defined the deceased as a 'loved one' or 'close person' and the other did not specify kinship. The proportion of males across the study populations varied from 19%-60%. Most studies involved the bereaved young people as informants; however, some studies involved parental and/or teacher reports and five studies drew on data from national population registers. Out of seventeen quantitative studies, thirteen were cohort studies and four were cross-sectional. The five qualitative studies employed semi-structured interviews and questionnaires.

Quality assessment

Supplementary Table 3 outlines the methodological quality of the quantitative studies. Out of the seventeen studies, nine received a rating of 'poor' quality, one rated as 'fair' and six rated as 'good'. Studies scored well in the 'selection' and 'comparability' domains; however, tended to score poorly in the 'outcome' domain with seven studies relying on self-reported outcomes and ten studies either having no statement regarding adequacy of follow-up or no follow-up at all. Supplementary Table 4 displays the quality assessment of the five qualitative studies. The studies satisfied between 25% and 53% of the COREQ criteria (Tong et al., 2007). The studies were notably weak across the 'research team and reflexivity' domain; however, scored better in the 'study design' and 'analysis and findings' domains.

Bereavement and educational outcomes

In general, the studies reported negative impacts of bereavement on educational outcomes. Five quantitative studies reported lower academic grades in bereaved children and adolescents (Abdelnoor & Hollins, 2004b; Berg et al., 2014; Jenkins et al., 2014; Oosterhoff et al., 2018; Van Eerdewegh et al., 1982, 1985). Whilst Berg et al. (2014) additionally reported a higher risk of academic failure longitudinally, Van Eerdewegh et al. (1982; 1985) did not find any association between bereavement and grade failure in 13 months after bereavement. Despite bereaved undergraduate college students scoring lower grades than non-bereaved controls during the semester of bereavement, their grades did not differ from controls in the following semester (Servaty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006). Similarly attributing their results to the length of time since bereavement, Williams and Aber (2016) found no association between parental bereavement and academic scores. In four qualitative studies, the bereaved participants reported a decline in academic performance (Balk, 1990; Harris, 1991; Khang et al., 2020; Pitman et al., 2018). Studies also largely reported bereavement negatively interfering with educational engagement of young people; among bereaved adolescents, Liu et al. (2019) reported a higher risk of school maladaptation, and Oosterhoff et al. (2018) recorded reduced ability to concentrate and learn. Conversely, Fristad et al. (1993) found no difference in academic functioning of bereaved and non-bereaved school children, perhaps owing to the inclusion criteria being stable families protecting against dysfunctional grief responses.

Youngblut et al. (2019) and Van Eerdewegh et al. (1982) commented on how academic engagement evolved over the first 13 months following bereavement of children and adolescents. Youngblut et al. (2019) found that at 2 months post-sibling bereavement, girls had less difficulty focussing on schoolwork than boys. Difficulties concentrating were more pronounced in children and adolescents who had not seen their sibling before or after their death in the hospital. Interestingly, Van Eerdewegh et al. (1982; 1985) found that disinterestedness in school was increased at 13 months post-bereavement in children and adolescents compared to 1 month.

Three qualitative studies emphasised the burden of bereavement on young peoples' ability to concentrate and focus on schoolwork (Balk, 1990; Harris, 1991; Pitman

et al., 2018). Balk (1990) found that sibling bereaved adolescents had short-lived worsened study habits. Khang et al. (2020) reported increased passiveness in class and disinterest in schoolwork of sibling bereaved adolescents. Comparably, half the adults who had experienced bereavement by suicide from age 10, reported decreased motivation and loss of interest and concentration (Pitman et al., 2018). Two qualitative studies described a minority of bereaved participants who used school as a coping mechanism to escape from their grief, leading to positive educational outcomes (Abdelnoor & Hollins, 2004a; Pitman et al., 2018).

Overall, the studies found that bereavement experienced by young people is associated with lower educational attainment. Two quantitative studies reported a lower likelihood of attainment at all educational levels among individuals who experienced parental bereavement during childhood (Burrell et al., 2020; Høeg et al., 2019). Prix and Erola (2017) and Steele et al. (2009) found that childhood paternal bereavement led to reduced likelihood of completing secondary education and entering higher education. Whilst Høeg et al. (2019) found the disparity of educational attainment between bereaved and non-bereaved individuals increased with level of education, Steele et al. (2009) reported that bereavement had its most marked effects at the lower educational levels with no significant impact on attainment past the higher secondary level. Thyden et al. (2020) observed that family bereavement during the college years of 19–22 years of age was associated with lower odds of attaining a bachelor's degree, yet Cox et al. (2016) did not find any correlation between experiencing bereavement during college years and students' likelihood of timely graduation.

An increased risk of dropping out of education was discussed by bereaved participants in three qualitative studies (Abdelnoor & Hollins, 2004a; Khang et al., 2020; Pitman et al., 2018), with difficulties persisting particularly noted at transitional points in education (Abdelnoor & Hollins, 2004a). Similarly, Khang et al. (2020) observed that sibling bereaved adolescents encountered a loss of direction and inability to make plans or decisions regarding the future.

Discussion

The aim of this review was to investigate the impact of bereavement on educational outcomes of young people and factors moderating this impact. The review found that bereavement had a negative impact across a broad range of educational outcomes including academic grades, subjective academic achievement, school adaptation, concentration, study habits, motivation, educational interest, involvement, attendance, and attainment, with coherence between quantitative and qualitative studies.

Short-term impacts

The findings reflect that grief is usually most debilitating in its acute stages and abates over time, however, some students may develop prolonged grief disorder, potentially affecting their functioning for years (Prigerson et al., 2021). Servaty-Seib and Hamilton (2006) found that bereaved college students' grade point averages dropped

below their matched controls' in the semester of bereavement but normalised in the following semester. Other studies found that experiencing bereavement at a certain age tended to only affect attainment at the age-corresponding stages of education rather than at later stages (Steele et al., 2009; Thyden et al., 2020), and qualitatively reported bereavement disrupting education in the short term (Abdelnoor & Hollins, 2004a). These findings emphasise that bereavement impacts educational outcomes acutely and underscores the importance of identifying and targeting supports to bereaved students in a time-critical manner.

Age at bereavement

The developing brain is vulnerable to the stress of losing a secure relationship with an adult caregiver, and younger children have fewer constitutional resources to cope with bereavement (Berg et al., 2016; Biank & Werner-Lin, 2011). This age vulnerability, however, was not reflected in the review which found no difference in educational attainment (Burrell et al., 2020; Høeg et al., 2019; Steele et al., 2009) or school performance (Berg et al., 2014) based on age at bereavement. The study by Abdelnoor and Hollins (2004b) found that bereaved students under age 5 and aged 12 had lower examination scores than other age groups. The authors attributed this result to students being affected by transitions in education, i.e. the commencement of primary and secondary school. Qualitative studies by Abdelnoor & Hollins (2004a); Khang et al. (2020), and Balk (1990) also suggest that bereavement may be particularly detrimental if transpiring at a transitional point in education particularly for adolescents in their final or penultimate year of secondary school who may find "grieving imperils their admission to colleges of their choice" (Balk, 1990, p. 124). Despite being inconclusive regarding the influence of age at bereavement, the findings suggest a possible avenue for further research investigating how educational transitions modulate academic consequences of bereavement and the utility of targeting interventions to bereaved students facing such transitions.

Resilience of youth

This review revealed both internal and external factors that conferred resilience among bereaved youth against negative impacts on education. High levels of maternal socioeconomic and educational resources were found to significantly compensate for the negative impact of paternal bereavement before the age of 16, on upper secondary education attendance and entry into polytechnic higher education (Prix & Erola, 2017), revealing the resources of the surviving parent as a moderator of the impact of bereavement on educational attainment. Bereavement did not impact educational engagement of children belonging to families without parental divorce, psychiatric problems, or unemployment (Fristad et al., 1993). Nor did bereavement affect timely college graduation among students of mostly high SES backgrounds (Cox et al., 2016), further emphasising the protective effects of social resources and stability. Abdelnoor and Hollins (2004a) also revealed that youth with advanced self-monitoring skills could employ strategies which lead to academic resilience and even school thriving amidst bereavement. These

results indicate that certain internal personality or social traits can influence the extent to which bereavement affects education, or indeed if it affects it at all.

Disadvantaged youth

Children from poor families are at higher risk of experiencing bereavement (Paul & Vaswani, 2020), with parental death between two and five times more common among low versus high socioeconomic households and twice as common among adolescents of racial minority backgrounds (Feigelman et al., 2017). Thyden et al. (2020) found that whilst 4.2% of white youth had experienced a death in the family, in contrast, 8.3% of Blacks, 9.1% of Asians and 13.8% of Native Americans had experienced family bereavement. Furthermore, poor minority youth are more at risk of experiencing complicated grief (Jenkins et al., 2014). Prix and Erola (2017) found that paternally bereaved youth with the greatest risk of upper secondary school drop-out were those of mothers with the least socioeconomic and educational resources, revealing that bereavement "further entrenches an already existing disadvantage" (p. 177). In addition to low parental income and education, Burrell et al. (2020) and Berg et al. (2014) also found parental psychiatric illness to be a risk factor for poorer educational attainment and performance among bereaved youth, reiterating that parent/caregiver mental health problems compromises resilience and adaptation of youth (Lin et al., 2004).

Cause of death

Sudden deaths can augment the severity of child grief responses which are more likely to be compounded by fear and posttraumatic stress (Ayyash-Abdo, 2001; Dowdney, 2000). Additionally, individuals bereaved by suicide may inherit psychosocial risk factors that prime the development of mental health problems later in life (Andriessen et al., 2016; Berg et al., 2016; Rostila et al., 2016). Although sudden death may magnify the psychosocial repercussions of bereavement, the review did not reveal a similar effect for educational outcomes, finding academic grades and educational attainment to be independent of cause of death among bereaved youth (Abdelnoor & Hollins, 2004b; Høeg et al., 2019). However, as many of the studies did not define 'sudden death' and may have used varying definitions of the term, more research comparing the effect of different causes of death is needed.

Role of educational institutions in bereavement support

Importantly, the studies revealed a scarcity of institutional support describing staff as lacking empathy, schools as unprepared, and university leave policies as insensitive (Abdelnoor & Hollins, 2004a, 2004b; Pitman et al., 2018), aligning with research depicting institutional bereavement support services as "incoherent at best and invisible or unavailable at worst" (Valentine & Woodthorpe, 2020, p. 21). Studies advocated for school-based mental health support, bereavement screening programs, educational curriculum aimed at enhancing peer support for bereaved students (Abdelnoor & Hollins, 2004b; Balk, 1990; Jenkins et al.,

2014; Oosterhoff et al., 2018), a time-sensitive identification and follow-up of bereaved students, and the establishment of university-wide bereavement leave policies (Servaty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006). Despite the need for more support services, uptake is not guaranteed given that young people can be reluctant to seek help from counselling services due to stigma, self-reliance and relying on support from friends and relatives (Balk, 2001; Harrison & Harrington, 2001). These behaviours and attitudes may hamper interventions aimed at countering the effects of bereavement on education if left unaddressed.

Limitations

The included studies were heterogenous, providing broadness and diversity to the results, yet challenging accurate comparisons between study outcomes and findings. Cause of death, time since bereavement and type of relationship with the deceased person were not consistently reported across the studies. Some studies controlled for family background characteristics such as parental mental health problems and socioeconomic status, however none controlled for pre-bereavement family dynamics and communication, factors which may influence how children cope with bereavement (Biank & Werner-Lin, 2011). This review used a narrative synthesis approach, which has been criticised for lacking transparency and having potential for bias (Campbell et al., 2016; Popay et al., 2006). Overall, the quality of the studies was modest, with the qualitative studies lacking reflexivity and most quantitative studies being retrospective and relying on self-reports. The review was limited to peer-reviewed publications identified using five databases; future reviews may include grey literature and involve searches in additional databases.

Implications

The acute impact of bereavement on educational outcomes of youth stresses the need for early identification and intervention to prevent long term repercussions such as school failure, drop-out and lower educational attainment. Educational institutions must facilitate targeted services shortly after the loss to support students throughout the grieving period. School psychologists will play a critical role in providing such support and leading the efforts of educational institutions to overcome barriers to service uptake. This can include commitment to dissolving stigma surrounding bereavement and mental health support by promoting bereavement awareness to bolster the capacity of informal supports and ensuring the sensitivity and flexibility of institutional services and policies.

Crucially, educational institutions in partnership with their school psychologists must implement mechanisms to identify and prioritise disadvantaged populations who are most vulnerable to the injurious effects of bereavement, particularly students from low socioeconomic, minority and complex psychosocial backgrounds. With students of colour being significantly more likely to experience bereavement than white students, there is further weight to the responsibility of educational institutions to address policies that implicitly favour privileged strata of society who are not only less likely to experience

bereavement but are also more sheltered from its potential consequences (Thyden et al., 2020). Bereavement support should not only cater to the psychological needs of bereaved young people, but also address social adversity and family psychosocial problems (Berg et al., 2014). As parental grief and mental health problems can affect caregiving and subsequent adaptation in children, it is critical that bereavement support is extended to parents/caregivers to enable continued support of their child's education (Harris, 1991; Lin et al., 2004; Tan & Andriessen, 2021). The role of school psychologists may therefore further extend to linking students and their families to additional community supports.

Areas for further research

This review revealed multiple areas for future research These include further investigation into how the relationship with the deceased person, cause of death and age at bereavement interacts with the risk of poorer educational outcomes to enable better risk stratification and targeting of interventions. In addition, inquiry into individual psychosocial characteristics and strategies which confer resilience and allow youth to continue to thrive academically despite bereavement can inform the development of preventative approaches such as teaching psychological tools, skills and coping strategies, to equip children to better manage bereavement. Finally, more research must be targeted towards specific interventions and policy change at an institutional level, which can effectively address the social adversity intertwined with bereavement by mitigating its exaggerated impact on vulnerable populations and ultimately preventing further exacerbation of social disadvantage.

Conclusions

This review demonstrated that bereavement can negatively affect a broad range of educational outcomes. Further research may clarify how factors such as manner of death, age at bereavement, relationship with the deceased and individual characteristics negotiate the effects of bereavement on educational outcomes, thus helping to identify high risk groups and preventative approaches. Adequate institutional and community support for bereaved students and their parents/caregivers can mitigate the educational costs of bereavement. School psychologists play a key role in this support system. Research directed towards elucidating effective interventions at different education levels, particularly among youth most vulnerable to experiencing bereavement and its negative impacts would be of value.

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Declarations of interest

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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