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EXPERIENCING THE DEATH OF FELLOW STUDENTS IN DELTA STATE PUBLIC SECONDARY SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT AND ITS IMPACT ON ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

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ABSTRACT

The study examined experiencing the death of fellow students in Delta State public secondary school environment and its impact on academic performance. The death of a fellow student is a significant public health concern that requires robust support systems and interventions to mitigate its impact on students' academic performance and well-being. Most of the deaths in the schooling environment could be attributed to negligence, absence of due diligence, self-harm, disaster or ill-health, etc.. Two research questions were raised in the study. This study adopted a case study research methodology. Case study methodology is found to be the most appropriate for this topic of enquiry, among others. A case study is a type of research method that is used to develop a comprehensive, multifaceted comprehension of a difficult topic in its actual context. The purpose of a case study is to provide a comprehensive, multidimensional understanding of a complex matter in its true context. The sample was 100 participants for the study area and simple random sampling technique was employed. Thematic analysis was adopted in the study. Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method used to identify, analyze and interpret patterns and themes in such as interviews and observation. The findings show that after such experiences, there are no interventions to allay the fears and trauma of the students. In conclusion, there is an urgent need to address identified gaps and adopt evidence-based practices, educational institutions can better support students navigating the complex emotions of peer loss, ultimately fostering resilience and preventing further harm. The study therefore recommended that educational stakeholders should integrate death education into school curricula from an early age to normalize discussions and build resilience. Engage all stakeholders—students, parents, teachers, management and community resources in comprehensive support systems to foster a culture of care.

Keywords: *Death, Students, Environment, Academic Performance, Nigeria*

INTRODUCTION

Grief can be understood as the emotional response to the loss of a loved one, which encompasses a range of physical, social, psychological, cognitive, and behavioral reactions (Shrullerr, 2021). The way individuals cope with the death of a loved one is influenced by their personal background and past experiences. Generally, these reactions are adaptive and can vary in terms of their intensity and duration (Fernández, Pérez, Catena, & Cruz, 2017). However, the loss of a fellow student may present a distinct emotional response compared to conditions like depression or posttraumatic stress disorder (Spuij, Prinzie, & Boelen, 2022). This type of loss can have various significant effects on students, potentially increasing the likelihood of mental health diagnoses due to the diverse range of symptoms experienced (Quinn, 2021).

Furthermore, such tragic events can negatively impact students' academic performance, leading to heightened externalizing (disruptive behaviors) or internalizing (anxiety, depression, guilt) issues, along with increased feelings of isolation and social withdrawal both at home and among peers (Gerhardt et al., 2022; Heath & Cole, 2022). According to Spuij, Prinzie, and Boelen (2022) children and adolescents may process grief in a more comprehensive manner than adults, often unable to distinguish between their emotions, thoughts, and feelings following a loss. The death of a peer in a secondary school setting can significantly affect a student's academic performance and overall well-being, resulting in challenges with concentration, memory, and emotional regulation (Anewalt, 2020). Grieving students may struggle academically, facing issues like distractibility and difficulties retaining new information, which can undermine their ability to succeed in school (Luiz, 2020). The grieving process in children and adolescents is influenced by various factors, including personal characteristics, their understanding of death, past trauma, the circumstances of the death, and their social surroundings (Gerhardt et al., 2022; Lane,

Rowland, & Beinart, 2024). Unlike adults, children may lack external social networks to provide support beyond their family and school. Consequently, the role of teachers is vital; they can create opportunities for discussions about death, helping to break down stigmas and equipping children with resources to cope with losses—thus minimizing emotional distress (Dyregrov, Dyregrov, & Idsoe, 2023). In this context, how teachers handle discussions about death can position them as role models for children and adolescents dealing with grief (Anewalt, 2020).

The death of a peer, especially when linked to a specific cause like obesity, can significantly shape students' perceptions and emotions. Some may develop fears or misconceptions, such as associating being overweight with mortality (Paulson, 2020). If a peer passes away due to health issues related to albinism, students might have questions or concerns about albinism, health, or mortality. Research by Oltjenbruns (2021) indicates that students coping with a classmate's suicide may experience complicated emotions, such as profound grief, guilt over their perceived inability to prevent the tragedy, worries about their mental health and that of others, and difficulty discussing these topics due to societal stigma.

Statement of the Problem

The death of a fellow student in the secondary school environment is a traumatic event that can significantly affect the emotional well-being and academic performance of surviving students. Adolescents, navigating a critical developmental stage, may experience grief, anxiety, or a sense of vulnerability, especially those that are in the same class or are in close proximity (Like sharing the same seat), which can impair cognitive functions such as concentration, memory, and motivation, leading to declines in academic engagement, grades, and attendance. The severity of these impacts may vary based on factors such as the student's relationship with the deceased, the nature of the death (e.g., sudden, accidental, or suicide), and the availability of school-based support systems. Despite the recognized short-term academic disruptions, there is limited understanding of the long-term effects on academic performance and the effectiveness of interventions like counseling, peer support, or academic accommodations in mitigating these impacts.

Research Questions

The following research questions were raised to guide the study:

1. What are the impacts of the death of a fellow student in Delta State public secondary school environment and academic performance?
2. What are the emotional and psychological effects of the death of a fellow student in Delta State public secondary school environment and academic performance?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Impact of the Death of a fellow Student

The death of a fellow student in secondary school is a profound and often distressing experience for adolescents, who are going through a crucial stage of emotional, cognitive, and social growth. Such tragedies can disrupt the school environment, change peer relationships, and impact students' mental health, potentially leading to a drop in academic performance. Baines (2022) notes that grief and emotional turmoil can hinder cognitive abilities essential for academic success, such as attention, memory, and executive functions. Research by Paulson (2020) showed that adolescents experiencing loss often faced temporary decreases in test scores and classroom participation in the months following the death. This finding aligns with broader studies on academic stress, which indicate that significant stressors like loss can diminish academic motivation and achievement.

Liu (2021) discovered that stress among secondary school students negatively influenced their intrinsic motivation for academics, suggesting that grief could reduce students' willingness to engage in schoolwork. Bereaved students might also skip classes due to emotional distress, attending memorial services, or avoiding school as a coping strategy. Holland (2021) reports that truancy is a frequent reaction to loss among adolescents, as some students may avoid school to escape reminders of the deceased or engage in negative

behaviors, such as substance use. This absenteeism disrupts their learning and can lead to poorer grades and academic progress.

Karakartal (2022) found that adolescents dealing with loss indicated lower school participation and academic success, reinforcing the connection between grief and disengagement. The death of a peer can reshape the social dynamics within a school, impacting group cohesion and support networks among peers. Oltjenbruns (2021) points out that losing a friend may result in social withdrawal or conflicts within friendship groups, diminishing the social support vital for academic motivation. While some students may forge stronger social bonds as a way to cope, this is less common and largely depends on the school's response to the tragedy. A study on peer effects by Frontiers suggests that the academic performance of peers can affect individual outcomes, indicating that a collective decline in motivation following a peer's death could exacerbate negative academic consequences.

Emotional and psychological effects of the death of a fellow student

Adolescence is a developmental phase characterized by increased emotional sensitivity and the formation of identity, which makes the loss of a peer particularly significant. Oltjenbruns (2019) emphasizes that losing a friend during this stage can result in profound grief, as peers are essential for social support and identity development. This grief may present itself as sadness, anger, guilt, or existential anxiety, especially if the death is sudden or traumatic (such as through suicide, accidents, or violence). Holland (2021) points out that teenagers may deal with loss ineffectively, leading to issues such as truancy, substance abuse, or social withdrawal, which can worsen their academic challenges. The psychological effects of losing a peer are often intensified by adolescents' limited experience with loss and their developing coping skills.

According to Silverman and Worden (2023), how well adolescents adjust emotionally after a loss largely depends on the support systems they have in place, including family, friends, or school counselors. Without sufficient support, students may face prolonged grief, which can manifest as depression, anxiety, or posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), negatively affecting cognitive functioning and engagement in school. The death of a peer whether from suicide, accidents, illness, or other reasons—triggers a variety of emotional, psychological, and behavioral reactions among students. Research indicates that adolescents and young adults, who are often in critical stages of development, are especially vulnerable to the repercussions of such losses. Typical responses include grief, guilt, anxiety, and depression, and in some instances, suicidal thoughts or actions, particularly following a peer's suicide.

Balk (2018) estimates that between 22% and 30% of college students are grieving at any given time, with peer loss being a significant contributor to this statistic. Suicide, being the second leading cause of death among youth aged 15 to 29 worldwide, represents a particularly harrowing form of peer loss. Studies indicate that witnessing a peer's suicide can heighten the risk of suicidal thoughts and attempts among students, especially in close-knit environments like schools or dormitories. A pilot study of first-year dormitory students revealed that 1 in 5 reported experiencing suicidal thoughts, with peer loss identified as a contributing factor. Other forms of death, such as accidents or illnesses, can similarly disrupt students' feelings of safety and community, leading to prolonged or complicated grief.

The impact of these losses is influenced by several factors, including the closeness of the relationship with the deceased, the circumstances of their death, and the individual's pre-existing mental health. For example, Hardison et al. (2020) found that college students who were grieving and experiencing insomnia and complicated grief were at a higher risk for mental health issues. Cultural and social factors, particularly stigmas surrounding discussions of death, further complicate students' ability to process their grief, especially in Western cultures where denial of death is common.

Support Systems and Interventions

Silverman and Worden (2023) classify support systems and interventions for students coping with a peer's death into universal, selective, and indicated approaches, and further categorize them into pre-intervention (preventive), intervention (during the crisis), and postvention (after the crisis) strategies. Incorporating discussions about death and dying into the curriculum can help normalize these topics and enhance emotional literacy. A scoping review by Gorosabel and León (2016) highlights various strategies such as film forums, children's literature, music, role-playing, and workshops that aim to improve death literacy, reduce stigma, and equip students to handle grief. General mental health programs that promote socio-emotional skills may also support grief processing by strengthening coping abilities.

Balk (2018) indicates that training for students, faculty, and staff to recognize distress signals and direct peers to support services is beneficial. These programs enhance knowledge, skills, and self-efficacy but show limited long-term effectiveness in decreasing suicidal behaviors. Selective interventions focus on high-risk groups, including students closely connected to the deceased or those exhibiting distress. Trained peer counselors and volunteer students can effectively raise suicide awareness and foster empathy, though they must be managed carefully to avoid inducing guilt.

Holmes et al. (2019) discovered that peer-led initiatives are more successful when facilitated by empathetic volunteers. Structured peer or faculty-led support groups can alleviate depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts. A systematic review has shown that robust social support considerably lessens psychological distress among students with mental health challenges. Counseling—both individual and in groups—often utilizing cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) or grief-focused techniques—helps students navigate their loss. A peer-support CBT intervention has notably decreased anxiety and improved social support among students.

Nonetheless, many students tend to avoid school counseling due to stigma or lack of awareness. Schools equipped with protocols for promptly addressing a student's death—including guiding distressed students to counseling or health services—demonstrate effectiveness in managing acute grief. Postvention strategies provide support to the community following a death, particularly by suicide, to avert further distress or copycat incidents. The WHO advocates for clear postvention policies, which should include memorials, communication strategies, and support mechanisms for returning students (Holland, 2021).

METHODOLOGY

Design

This study adopted a case study research methodology. Case study methodology is found to be the most appropriate for this topic of enquiry, among others. A case study is a type of research method that is used to develop a comprehensive, multifaceted comprehension of a difficult topic in its actual context. The purpose of a case study is to provide a comprehensive, multidimensional understanding of a complex matter in its true context.

Participants

The population for this study comprised all public secondary schools in Delta State. The sample was 100 participants from the study area and a simple random sampling technique was employed.

Instrument

Interview was used as an instrument to collect data from the participants in the study

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was adopted in the study. Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method used to identify, analyze and interpret patterns and themes in such as interview and observation.

RESULTS

Table 1: Thematic Analysis of Prevalence and Impact of the death of a Fellow Student

Themes: Prevalence and impact	Sub-themes	Responses
Students who experience the death of a fellow may exhibit symptoms	1. Grief	1. I grief over the death of my friend and it affects me psychologically.
	2. Trauma	2. I experience trauma over the death of my fellow student.
	3. Emotional distress	3. I experience emotional distress due to the death of my classmate.
	4. Absenteeism	4. I feel like stay back at home because whenever I come to school, I remember the death.
	5. Difficult concentrating	5. I could not concentrate due to the death of my fellow student.
		6. I believe that being overweight directly leads to death
Students who experience the death of a fellow exhibit	1. Decline in academic performance	1. I experience decline in my academic performance as a result of the death of my classmate.
	2. De-motivated	2. I was de-motivated due to the death of fellow student.

Table 1 above shows the thematic analysis of the prevalence and impact of the death of a fellow student in the secondary school environment and its impact on academic performance. 68 participants agreed that they grief over the death of their fellow and it affect them psychologically while 32 participants disagreed. 55 participants agreed that they experience trauma over the death of their fellow student while 45 participants disregard the statement. 82 participants agreed that they experience emotional distress due to the death of their classmate while 18 participants disagreed. 60 participants agreed that the fear of the death of their classmate makes them to be absent from school while 40 participants disagreed. 21 participants agreed that they could not concentrate due to the death of their fellow student while 79 participants disagreed. 73 participants agreed that being overweight directly leads to death while 27 participants disagreed. 51 participants agreed that they experience decline in my academic performance as a result of the death of their classmate while 49 participants disagreed. 28 participants agreed that they are de-motivated due to the death of fellow student while 72 participants disagreed.

Table 2: Thematic Analysis of Emotional and psychological effects of the death of a fellow student

Themes: Emotional and psychological effects	Sub-themes	Responses
Students may experience intense emotional distress	1. Feeling of sadness	1. I feel sad over the death of my fellow student.
	2. Anxiety	

	3. Depression	2. I was afraid and filled anxiety over the death of my classmate
		3. I experience depression due to the death of my school peer.
Students may withdraw from social interaction	1. Social interaction with peers	1. I reduce interaction with my friends as a result of the death of my classmate.
	2. Social interaction with teachers	2. I became scared because of the death of my fellow students that I no longer communicate with my teachers.

Table 2 above shows the thematic analysis of the emotional and psychological effects of the death of a fellow student in the secondary school environment and academic performance. 68 participants agreed that they feel sad over the death of their fellow student while 32 participants disagreed. 43 participants agreed that became afraid and filled anxiety over the death of their classmate while 57 participants disagreed. 64 participants agreed that they experience depression due to the death of their school peer while 36 participants disagreed. 38 participants agreed that they reduce interaction with their friends as a result of the death of their classmate while 72 participants disagreed. 65 participants agreed that they became scared because of the death of their fellow student that they no longer communicate with their teachers.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The outcome of the analysis showed the prevalence and impact of the death of a fellow student in the secondary school environment and academic performance. The study revealed that students who experience the death of a fellow may exhibit symptoms such as trauma, emotional distress, absent from school. Students experience decline in academic performance and de-motivated as a result of the death of their classmate. This is in line with Baines (2022) and Paulson (2020) who noted that grief and emotional distress can impair cognitive functions critical for academic success, including attention, memory, and executive functioning. Also, bereavement in adolescents was associated with temporary declines in test scores and classroom engagement, particularly in the months following the loss. This aligns with broader research on academic-related stress, which indicates that severe stressors, such as loss, reduce academic motivation and achievement. The death of a fellow student, particularly if it is related to a specific cause like obesity; can indeed have a profound impact on students' perception and emotion. Some students might develop misconceptions or fear, such as believing that being overweight directly leads to death. School management and parents may take it for granted that their wards are fine after experiencing the death of a fellow student without proper interventions.

The study also revealed the emotional and psychological effects of the death of a fellow student in the secondary school environment and academic performance. The study showed the emotional and psychological effects of students who experience the death of their fellow such as feeling of sadness, anxiety, depression. It can result to social withdrawal such as interaction with peers and teachers. This is in line with Oltjenbruns (2019) who asserted that adolescence is a developmental stage marked by heightened emotional sensitivity and identity formation, making the death of a peer particularly impactful. The death of a friend during adolescence can lead to intense grief, as peers play a central role in social support and identity development. This grief may manifest as sadness, anger, guilt, or existential anxiety, particularly if the death is sudden or traumatic (e.g., suicide, accident, or violence). Holland (2021) notes that teenagers may cope with loss in maladaptive ways, such as truancy, substance abuse, or withdrawal, which can further exacerbate academic challenges. School

management and parents may attribute their wards behaviour to other factors while neglecting the root cause.

Conclusion

The death of a fellow student is a significant public health concern that requires robust support systems and interventions to mitigate its impact on students' academic performance and well-being. While support and interventions show promise, their efficacy is limited by methodological weaknesses, lack of focus on diverse populations, and insufficient long-term evaluation. Death education such as coping strategies and interventions, peer support and counseling services offer valuable tools, but their implementation must be tailored to specific contexts. Therefore, there is urgent need to address identified gaps and adopting evidence-based practices, educational institutions can better support students navigating the complex emotions of peer loss, ultimately fostering resilience and preventing further harm.

Recommendations

The study therefore recommended that educational stakeholders should integrate death education into school curricula from an early age to normalize discussions and build resilience. Pilot programs should be rigorously evaluated in diverse settings. Develop and test interventions for vulnerable populations- Schools should establish clear postvention policies, including communication strategies, memorial guidelines, and support for affected students, to prevent further distress. Develop training programs for teachers and school personnel to address grief and loss, drawing on models like gatekeeper training. Engage all stakeholders—students, parents, teachers, management, and community resources in comprehensive support systems to foster a culture of care.

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