

# Supporting Children and Youth in Coping with Loss at School

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## Abstract

*The aim of this study was to examine the communication of loss and grief in Croatia's primary schools. The study was conducted on a sample of 213 teachers and school counsellors who filled out the survey "Loss and grief in school communities". The results show that 96.7 % of surveyees have encountered a student who has experienced some kind of loss. Only 7.6 % stated that there was a procedure for the school staff to follow when handling a student coping with loss. Most of the surveyees (68.3 %) somewhat or completely agree that they would be willing to participate in education about teaching students about death and other losses. While handling a student coping with loss, most teachers react by reducing the severity of the loss, and most school counsellors react by allowing the expression of thoughts and feelings. Results indicate that education about children and youth grief for teachers and school counsellors would be useful so that they can provide more efficient and professional support.*

**Keywords:** *grief and bereavement in child and youth; primary school; school staff perception; support in the bereavement process.*

## Introduction

The experience of complicated grief during childhood and adolescence can lead to difficulties in creating close relationships (Worden, 2005). Moreover, "according to the estimates of some psychiatrists, 10-17 % of people who seek help in mental health clinics or outpatient psychiatric institutions have the so-called unresolved losses at the root of their mental difficulties"(Worden, 2002, acc. to Arambašić, 2008, p. 30). This data confirms the importance of successfully going through the grieving process. Social support is an important factor that facilitates this process (Arambašić, 2008).

In this context, schools play a significant role because children and young people spend a considerable amount of their time there (Lytje & Dyregrov, 2021). Teachers

and school counsellors are in a unique position that is suitable for providing support for grieving students. The school could help in a variety of ways: by providing facts about death, by teaching about emotional aspects of death, by developing social skills that would help them receive support, and by providing direct help and support (Kuterovac, 1992). The study about grieving children after the death of a parent shows that teachers have a significant role to play in overcoming grief (Dimers & Templeton, 2021). On the other hand, Reid and Dixon (1999) showed that school staff are most often not educated in how to behave while handling a student coping with loss. Furthermore, numerous studies show the lack of a sense of competence in teachers when it comes to providing support to grieving students (Cunningham & Hare, 1989; Alisic, 2011, acc. to Dyregrov et al., 2013; Case et al., 2020; Devlin-Friend, 2006, acc. to Lytje & Dyregrov, 2021). In Croatia, these topics are not part of the focus of the profession's curriculum for school teachers and school counsellors. They are graduates of the Education Faculty, the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences and the Educational-Rehabilitation Faculty, and they all form a heterogeneous group of people with regard to the competencies they acquire within education. Accordingly, their work roles differ.

Most school employees are not formally educated on the grieving process. Therefore, public health projects in the school environment have a valuable role in preserving the mental health of children and youth (Ždero, 2016). The goal of one such project – ‘PoMoZiDa’ is “to support the development of a standardized national educational program to educate school teachers in the field of children’s and youth’s mental health, early detection of depression difficulties or disorders, and related problems with psychological first-aid and support ”(Muslić et al., p. 149, 2018). The research conducted within the mentioned project showed that it is necessary to develop health literacy in the field of mental health among educators (Muslić et al., p. 146, 2018). In addition to the project, the introduction of school prevention programs and the health education curriculum can be seen as an indicator of the growing recognition of the need for school inclusion in activities aimed at promoting and preserving mental health, which includes support in situations of loss (Ždero, 2016).

In order to provide good support, school staff need to recognize and respond to common signs of grief that their students may show: crying, withdrawal, difficulty concentrating, aggression, preoccupation with loss, sleep and appetite issues, various physical symptoms, and more (Finn, 2003). However, school staff are generally not educated on how to behave when they notice such behaviours. In such situations, school staff usually have no choice but to act on their intuition. There are two problems here: the first is that people rarely talk about loss, which makes it difficult for them to acquire useful information, and the second is that people who act intuitively often act wrong, even though they have the best intention of helping the person facing a loss (Arambašić, 2008). Seeing another person grieving is an unpleasant experience that often prompts people to try to change the situation by comforting and cheering

them up. In this way, they get the feeling that they are doing something useful and diminish their own feelings of helplessness, and in fact, they encourage the grieving person to stop expressing pain. Although it is a natural human reaction, it is not the most favourable in the process of providing support. The most useful support for a person facing loss in their grief and other unpleasant feelings is considered to be without trying to “fix” those feelings and make the person happy, but by acknowledging the significance of the experience, which also shows respect for the person (Wolfelt, 2001). When it comes to children and youth, it is also important to know how the way of thinking and feeling at a certain developmental stage affects reactions to loss.

Teachers who are more educated feel more comfortable in death-related situations and accordingly, more often deal with death questions posed by their students (Pratt et al., 1987, acc. to Reid & Dixon, 1999). The perception of one’s own ability to provide support for children facing loss is associated with offering support (Reid & Dixon, 1999). McManus and Paul (2019) showed that short education on losses and grief can increase awareness of the importance of this topic, but also the confidence of school staff to respond adequately to the needs of grieving children.

Researches that have addressed the issue of the quality of support in schools show different results. Thus, research by Hogan and others (1994) shows an almost complete lack of support for students after loss, as confirmed by some other researches (Patterson & Ranganathan, 2010). On the other hand, some research testifies to a high percentage, i.e. 76% of affected students who perceive school support as appropriate (Broberg et al., 2005, acc. to Dyregrov et al., 2013). In the same study, it was shown that in a different school in the same city this estimate differed greatly and was only 20 %. Research conducted on a sample of young people who have experienced loss caused by suicide has shown that they feel under increased pressure and misunderstood by teachers and other students, and that they lack the needed support from the school (Dyregrov, 2009).

There are studies (Alisic, 2011, acc. to Dyregrov et al., 2013; Dyregrov et al., 2013) that argue that teachers are insecure about where their work ends and where the work of a social worker or psychologist begins. On the other hand, some research has shown that school staff consider providing support to grieving students important (Levkovich & Elyoseph, 2021; acc. to Lytje & Dyregrov, 2021) and part of their role (Rodríguez Herrero et al., 2022; McManus & Paul, 2019).

In addition to the problems mentioned so far, a key difficulty in everyday work at school is to establish a satisfactory balance between paying attention to students who are in the process of grieving and other students who often have slightly different needs.

Eftoda (2021) points out that in order to support grieving children, schools need teachers educated in the field of grief and death and school counsellors educated in the field of play therapy. Also, Liu et al. (2022) emphasize that children often need additional educational support, given that the experience of grief is often accompanied by a drop in grades.

We can conclude that there are variations in different schools and among different teachers in how they deal with student grief. Contemporary literature emphasizes that interventions aimed at improving health literacy in the field of mental health need to be adapted and integrated within schools (Kutcher et al., 2016, acc. to Muslić et al., p. 149, 2018).

The purpose of this research is to examine the opinions and experiences of teachers and school counsellors related to professional experience in the field of loss and grief among students in Zagreb's primary schools<sup>1</sup>.

## Method

### Participants

Participants were chosen using convenience sampling. The sample included a total of 213 school staff members. The age range of participants was 25–69 years, with an average age of 46 years ( $M = 45.56$ ;  $SD = 11.59$ ). The range of years in service is from 0.5 to 42 years, with an average of 20 years in service ( $M = 20.05$ ;  $SD = 11.79$ ).

For the purposes of the research, 46 principals were contacted to obtain permission to participate, but only 13 primary school principals from the city of Zagreb and the surrounding area agreed to have their school staff members participate in the study.

Table 1  
Overview of the sample structure (primary school staff,  $N = 213$ )

|            |  | <i>N</i> | %     |
|------------|--|----------|-------|
| Gender     | Men  | 15       | 7.04  |
|            | Women  | 198      | 92.96 |
| Occupation | Teachers from 1 <sup>st</sup> to 4 <sup>th</sup> grade         | 83       | 38.97 |
|            | Subject teachers from 5 <sup>th</sup> to 8 <sup>th</sup> grade | 113      | 53.05 |
|            | School counsellors:  | 17       | 7.98  |
|            | Pedagogues   | 8        | 3.75  |
|            | Psychologists  | 5        | 2.35  |
|            | Rehabilitators   | 4        | 1.88  |

A total of 442 copies of the questionnaire and survey were distributed, and 213 (48.19 %) were returned. The task of the participants was to fill out two questionnaires and a survey taking a total of approximately 40 minutes to complete, and then put them in an empty box. This paper will present and analyze the results of the survey, which took approximately 10 minutes to complete.

### Measuring instrument

For the purpose of conducting the research, a survey entitled “Losses and grief in primary schools” was constructed. It included the questions that the authors found useful for an insight into the current situation and the assessment of the need to

<sup>1</sup> In Croatia, primary school educates children and adolescents aged 7 to 14.

introduce education about losses and grief in the primary school context. The survey was preliminarily applied to five participants. Two versions were constructed - for teachers and for school counsellors. The version intended for school counsellors was created by removing two parts related to the work of teaching in a classroom. The survey consists of 7 items in the teacher's version and 5 in the school counsellors' version. Results are analyzed at a descriptive level.

## Results

Below are the questions from the survey and the obtained answers.

1) Please circle the losses in a student's life you have encountered so far in your work at school.

Figure 1 shows the possible answers to this question and the results expressed in the frequencies of participants. Two participants circled the answer marked with letter j and added "death of a student" and "death of an uncle". According to the results, only 3.3 % of participants did not encounter any students coping with loss in their work.

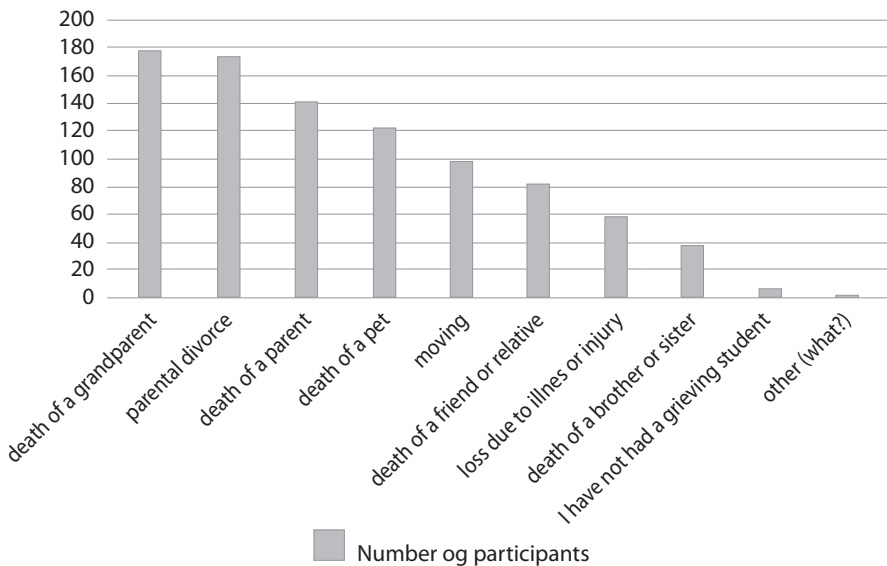


Figure 1. Review of the answers to the question about teachers and school counsellors encountering certain types of losses among their students expressed in the number of participants who chose isolated answers (N = 212)

2) Did you feel the need to adjust the content or presentation of the material with regard to the student facing a loss? If you adapted the teaching, what did you do?

This question was a part of the survey form for teachers. The majority of teachers (N = 183; 93.37 %) answered the question, and 111 of them (60.7 %) chose the answer „YES“ and 72 (39.3 %) the answer „NO“. A large proportion (75.68 %) of those who answered 'YES' further clarified how they did so. Approximately half of them (44.38 %)

avoid topics related to the death of family members that a student has lost or anything that they think the student would associate with the loss. Examples of such responses are: “I avoided conversation and topics related to the loss of a loved one” and “I do not process texts from literature about a mother or father if there is a student in the class who has lost a parent”. Of the 44 teachers, five (11.36 %) wrote that they avoided loss-related content only in interaction with the student who experienced the loss, while the remaining 39 (88.63 %) adjusted the content or presentation of the material to the entire class. In contrast, 15 participants (17.86 %) wrote that they further discuss losses and grief in the classroom. An example of such an answer is: “I emphasized that all families are equal and that divorced parents love their children regardless of the fact that they can no longer live together”. Furthermore, 16 teachers (19.05 %) wrote that they make adjustments related to the evaluation of knowledge by offering more time and lower criteria to students who have recently experienced a loss. An example of such an answer is: “I reduced the scope of the material and announced every knowledge evaluation”. The remaining 9 teachers (10.71 %) gave a general answer that could not be classified into any of the above groups of answers. An example of such an answer is: “Allow the child to grieve”.

3) *Is there a predetermined procedure in the school you work at when a child or young person is facing loss?*

Table 2 shows the possible answers and results expressed in frequencies and percentages.

Table 2

Answers to the question about the existence of a predetermined procedure for dealing with students facing losses expressed in frequencies and percentages of teachers (N = 193) and school counsellors (N = 17)

| Possible answers                         | f        | %        | f                  | %                  |
|--|----------|----------|--------------------|--------------------|
|  | Teachers | Teachers | School counsellors | School counsellors |
| Yes (procedure exists)                   | 13       | 6.74     | 3                  | 17.65              |
| No (procedure does not exist)            | 84       | 43.52    | 12                 | 70.59              |
| I don't know (I don't know if it exists) | 96       | 49.74    | 2                  | 11.76              |

4) *I would participate in the training about teaching primary school students about death and other losses.*

Table 3 shows the offered answers and results expressed in frequencies and percentages.

Table 3

Answers of teachers (N = 191) and school counsellors (N = 17) to the question on the degree of agreement with the statement of the intent to participate in the education on teaching primary school students about death and other losses expressed in frequencies and percentages

| Possible answers     | f        | %        | f                  | %                  |
|----------------------|----------|----------|--------------------|--------------------|
|                      | Teachers | Teachers | School counsellors | School counsellors |
| I don't agree at all | 30       | 15.71    | 0                  | 0                  |
| I somewhat disagree  | 36       | 18.85    | 2                  | 11.76              |
| I somewhat agree     | 88       | 46.07    | 4                  | 23.53              |
| I totally agree      | 54       | 28.27    | 11                 | 64.71              |

## 5) Has anyone from your school attended education on child / youth loss and grief?

Table 4 shows the possible answers and results expressed in frequencies and percentages.

Table 4

Answers expressed in frequencies and percentages of teachers (N = 194) and school counsellors (N = 17) to the question about the existence of an employee in the primary school where they work, and who attended education about children/youth loss and grief

| Possible answers | f        | %        | f                  | %                  |
|------------------|----------|----------|--------------------|--------------------|
|                  | Teachers | Teachers | School counsellors | School counsellors |
| Yes              | 7        | 3.61     | 4                  | 23.53              |
| Not              | 33       | 17.01    | 4                  | 23.53              |
| I do not know    | 171      | 88.14    | 9                  | 52.94              |

## 6) Do you deal with the topic of loss and the grieving process within the school curriculum?

If yes, indicate within which subject and teaching unit.

Only teachers were asked this question. Figure 2 shows the possible answers and results expressed in frequencies.

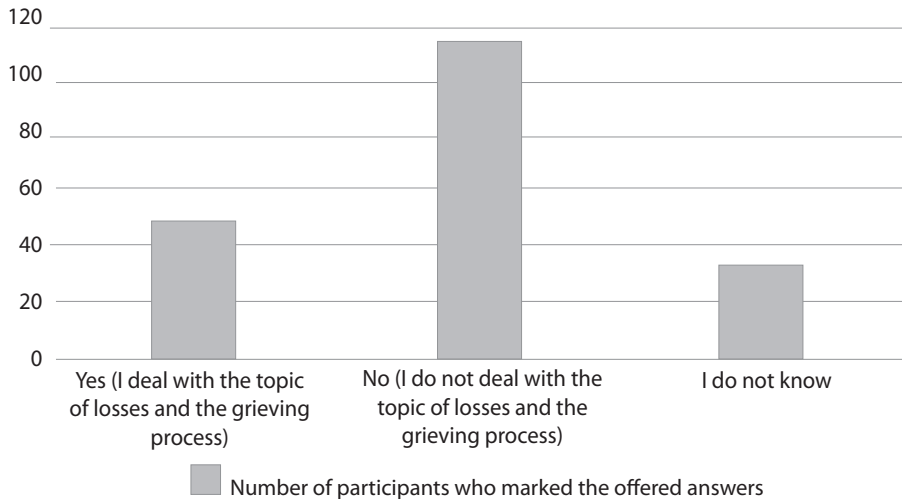


Figure 2. Answers to the question on dealing with the topic of losses and grieving processes within the school program expressed in frequencies of teachers who marked the offered answers (N = 193)

Of the 48 teachers who answered affirmatively to the sixth question, 23 (47.92 %) wrote that they deal with this topic within the subject Croatian Language, 16 (33.33 %) wrote that they deal with this topic as part of the Form Teacher Class, 13 (27.08 %) within Nature and Society and 8 (16.67 %) within Religion. Some participants cited multiple school subjects.

## 7) Write what you tell a 10-year-old student after you find out that his / her grandfather has died.

This question was answered by 156 school employees (73.2 %). Their responses were manually categorized into five categories created by the authors: 'reducing the

significance of a loss', 'allowing the expression of thoughts and feelings', 'encouraging the suppression of unpleasant emotions and thoughts', 'expressing condolences', and 'unable to generalize'. Some categories partly overlap so we notice that reducing the significance of the loss is a way to encourage the suppression of unpleasant emotions and thoughts. However, due to the relatively large percentage in the responses, we wanted to highlight 'reducing the significance of a loss' as a separate category. Table 5 shows the obtained results expressed in frequencies and percentages of responses classified into categories and examples of responses.

Table 5

Five categories of answers to the question about the reactions of teachers and school counsellors to the situation in which the death of a student's grandfather happens, expressed in frequencies and percentages of teachers (N = 140) and school counsellors (N = 16)

| Categories  | Examples of answers  |
|---|--|
| <p>Reducing the significance of a loss</p> <p><i>The teachers</i><br/>f=56 (40.00 %)</p> <p><i>School counsellors</i><br/>f=1 (6.25 %)</p>                  | <p><i>"I say he must have had beautiful memories of him and that's a reason to be happy."</i></p> <p><i>"I say I sympathize with them, but his grandfather must have been old and sick. By the way, I say that I did not meet any grandparents at all because they had already died when I was born."</i></p> <p><i>"I would say he is asleep and resting."</i></p>  |
| <p>Allowing the expression of thoughts and feelings</p> <p><i>The teachers</i><br/>f=34 (24.29 %)</p> <p><i>School counsellors</i><br/>f=14 (87.5 %)</p>    | <p><i>"I understand that it is difficult for you now and I am very sorry that you are sad, but you should know that it is okay for you to feel that way. Some things in life are not beautiful, but sadness passes. For everything you need to ask or want to tell me, I am here for you."</i></p> <p><i>"I ask him how he feels, I say it's OK to feel that way, I say it's going to take a while for him to feel better and that that's OK too."</i></p> |
| <p>Encouraging the suppression of unpleasant emotions and thoughts</p> <p><i>The teachers</i><br/>f=9 (6.43 %)</p> <p><i>School counsellors</i><br/>f=0</p> | <p><i>"I express my condolences and say that life is like that and that death is a part of life, and that his grandfather would surely be sad if he knew that he was sad because of his departure."</i></p> <p><i>"That you have to be tough."</i></p>   |
| Categories  | Examples of answers  |
| <p>Expressing condolences</p> <p><i>The teachers</i><br/>f=31 (22.14 %)</p> <p><i>Professional associates</i><br/>f=0</p>                                   | <p><i>"I'm sorry for your loss."</i></p> <p><i>"I express my condolences."</i></p>   |
| <p>Unable to generalize</p> <p><i>The teachers</i><br/>f=10* (7.14 %)</p> <p><i>School counsellors</i><br/>f=1 (6.25 %)</p>                                 | <p><i>"It's individual."</i></p> <p><i>"I don't have a general sentence!"</i></p>  |



## **Discussion**

According to the answers to the survey questions, it is clear that almost all school employees meet grieving children and youth in their work. A small part (3.3 %) of participants have not met grieving students in their work so far, and this can be explained by the short work experience of these participants, with an average of one year in service.

Of all the teachers who have come across students dealing with loss, 60.7 % feel the need to adjust the content of the material and/or the manner of the presentation in the presence of students facing loss, and most of them (52.38 %) do so by avoiding loss-related topics. If we interpret this data in the context of the teachers' education backgrounds not focusing on the topic of loss, it is reasonable to assume that most behave this way because they do not know how to properly discuss loss. In addition, it is a common misconception in society that talking about loss will make coping with loss more difficult (Schoen et al., 2004).

Teachers and school counsellors generally do not address the issue of loss and grief while teaching, which is in line with research conducted in other countries (e.g., Rodríguez Herrero et al., 2022). Also, they are mostly left on their own in assessing grieving students' needs. This is proved by the fact that only 7.6 % of participants stated that there is a predetermined procedure for dealing with such situations in their school. Compared to school counsellors, teachers more often answered that they did not know whether such a procedure existed, which can be explained by differences in work roles. School counsellors answered with greater certainty because if the procedure existed in the school, it would probably involve their participation. Potts (2013) and Tracey and Holland (2008) also showed that most primary schools do not have a protocol designed for situations where a student faces loss, while numerous other studies have shown that teachers would be happy to adopt such a document that could help them meet the needs of students (DeMuth et al., 2020; Levkovich & Elyoseph, 2021, acc. to Lytje & Dyregrov, 2021).

In regards to the contact with grieving students, it is easy to see the difference in the described reactions of teachers and school counsellors, which is again connected with the differences in the competencies they acquire through formal education and the work roles they have. Teachers usually respond by comforting students and reducing the significance of the student's loss, while almost all school counsellors respond by allowing the student to express their thoughts and feelings. Sentences such as "He was already very old" as a reaction to experiencing the death of a grandfather are most often addressed with the best of intentions, but they are not useful because they reduce the severity of the loss, which does not help and can even be harmful. A more effective way to provide support is to listen to the students' needs, act on them, and listen to thoughts and feelings caused by loss without trying to "silence" unpleasant emotions. The responses of school counsellors are more similar to such reactions. However, it should be taken into account that these are self-statements in which they are asked to briefly describe what they say in such situations. The question arises as to how valid

such a way of collecting data can be. It is possible that the answers are at least to some extent distorted by the socially desirable responding. When interpreting the answers, it should be borne in mind that this is only one question for which the participants could write a maximum of a few sentences. So, for example, although many have written that they tell students they are available for conversation, this research did not gather information on how and to what extent teachers and school counsellors would actually talk about death and other losses with students.

Only 5.21 % of participants stated that one of the employees from their school attended education on loss and grief among children and youth, which is in line with the research by Reid and Dixon (1999) and Bowie (2000) who showed that teachers are mostly not educated on these topics. It should be emphasized here that this data was collected in 2017, before the coronavirus pandemic and the earthquakes in Croatia, which resulted in increased involvement of support professions in mental health care, who organized numerous workshops and lectures on this topic. It would be interesting to collect the same data in 2022 and compare it with the data presented in this paper. Regardless, formal teacher and school counsellor education does not include education on the grieving process of children and youth, although it is clear that almost everyone will encounter such situations at work. On the positive side, school employees show a willingness to learn, with as many as 68.3 % somewhat or completely agreeing with the statement that they would participate in education.

### ***Practical implications and methodological shortcomings***

Half of the possible participants (51.81 %) withdrew from participation so it is reasonable to conclude that we obtained results that show a distorted picture. It is possible that participants in this study differed in some characteristics from the school employees who refused to participate.

A careful approach should be taken when interpreting the differences in the responses of teachers and school counsellors because the sample includes 17 school counsellors. Therefore, generalization in the population of school counsellors is not possible. It would be interesting to further investigate the existence of differences between these groups of the quota sample collection.

Deficiencies related to the procedure entail the absence of researchers during the completion of the surveys. Participants could not seek further clarification on the issue in case of doubt. On the other hand, due to the sensitivity of the examined topic, the absence of researchers can be viewed as an advantage because the participants were more free to honestly fill out the survey without fear of tacit condemnation of the researchers. They could pause the survey for a certain amount of time, which we can also interpret as an advantage because for some participants, going through all the parts is too much effort, or they don't have that much time to complete the survey in one sitting.

We can conclude that when considering the results, one should keep in mind the stated methodological shortcomings and that the generalization should be performed

with a certain dose of caution. Despite the limitations, this research offers important information that can improve the understanding of the reactions among elementary school staff members when encountering loss-related topics. Certainly, the acquired knowledge encourages further study of this rather unexplored area.

## Conclusion

This research attempted to examine the situation related to the practice and experiences of primary school staff members in talking to students about death and other losses and in contact with students facing loss. The results show that, despite the frequency of contact with students who have experienced significant losses, most teachers and school counsellors have never participated in education about the grieving process in children and youth. Still, most say they are willing to engage in such education. The information obtained from this research can help experts in the field of providing support in designing training for school staff members.

Teachers and school counsellors come across students facing loss and their reactions to the experienced loss. They encounter questions, ambiguities and misconceptions about death and other losses among their students. It is important that they know how to react in a truly helping manner and recognize the signs of grief. It is also important that they know how to recognize when a child or young person needs professional help. Such knowledge could be acquired through education, and with the appropriate and timely reactions of school staff members, the prevention of major difficulties that may occur after experiencing loss could be improved.

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# Podrška djeci i mladima u suočavanju s gubitcima u školskom kontekstu

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## Sažetak

*Cilj je istraživanja ispitati stanje vezano uz komunikaciju o gubitcima i tugovanju djece i mladih u školskom kontekstu u Hrvatskoj. Prigodan uzorak sudionika sastojao se od 213 prosvjetnih djelatnika koji su ispunjavali anketu Gubitci i tugovanje u osnovnim školama. Rezultati pokazuju kako se 96,7 % sudionika susrelo s učenicom/ učenicom koji/a se suočava s gubitkom. Samo 7,6 % izjavilo je kako u njihovoj školi postoji unaprijed određena procedura postupanja kad je u razred uključeno dijete koje se suočava s gubitkom, a 68,3 % se donekle ili u potpunosti slaže s tvrdnjom da bi se priključili edukaciji o poučavanju učenika o smrti i drugim gubitcima. Pri kontaktu s učenicima koji se suočavaju s gubitkom većina učitelja reagira umanjivanjem težine gubitka, a većina stručnih suradnika dopuštanjem izražavanja misli i osjećaja. Rezultati upućuju na zaključak da bi prosvjetnim djelatnicima bilo korisno osigurati edukaciju o gubitcima i tugovanju djece i mladih kako bi mogli djelotvornije i stručnije pružiti podršku.*

**Ključne riječi:** osnovna škola; percepcija odgojno-obrazovnih djelatnika; pružanje podrške u procesu tugovanja; tugovanje djece i mladih.

## Uvod

Iskustvo otežanoga tugovanja u djetinjstvu i adolescenciji može dovesti do poteškoća u stvaranju bliskih odnosa u odrasloj dobi (Worden, 2005). „Prema procjenama nekih psihijatarata, između 10 i 17 % ljudi koji traže pomoć u klinikama za duševno zdravlje ili u ambulantnim psihijatrijskim ustanovama, u podlozi svojih psihičkih teškoća imaju tzv. nerazriješene ili neodtugovane gubitke” (Worden, 2002, prema Arambašić, 2008, str. 30). Prema navedenom jasno je da je vrlo važno da djeca i mladi uspješno razriješe vlastito tugovanje. Značajan čimbenik koji može biti koristan u tom procesu je socijalna podrška (Arambašić, 2008).

Škole u ovom kontekstu imaju značajnu ulogu jer djeca i mladi u njima provode poprilično veliku količinu svoga vremena (Lytje i Dyregrov, 2021). Prema tome, zaposlenici škola imaju važnu ulogu u pružanju podrške učenicima koji su doživjeli gubitak. Poučavanjem učenika o smrti i drugim gubitcima, razvijanjem njihove emocionalne



inteligencije i socijalnih vještina te pružanjem konkretne pomoći i podrške, učitelji i stručni suradnici škola mogu pridonijeti oporavku nakon gubitka (Kuterovac, 1992). Istraživanje koje se bavilo tugovanjem djece nakon smrti njihova roditelja pokazuje da upravo učitelji imaju značajnu ulogu u prevladavanju tuge (Dimery i Templeton, 2021). S druge strane, Reid i Dixon (1999) pokazali su da djelatnici škola najčešće nisu educirani o tome kako se ponašati u situacijama gubitaka. Nadalje, brojna istraživanja svjedoče o nedostatku osjećaja kompetentnosti kod učitelja kada je riječ o pristupanju tugujućim učenicima (Cunningham i Hare, 1989; Alisic, 2011, prema Dyregrov i sur., 2013; Case i sur., 2020; Devlin-Friend, 2006, prema Lytje i Dyregrov, 2021). U Hrvatskoj navedene teme također nisu u fokusu nastavnih planova i programa za zanimanja učitelja razredne i predmetne nastave i stručnih suradnika. Riječ je o diplomantima učiteljskih, filozofskih i edukacijsko-rehabilitacijskih fakulteta koji čine heterogenu skupinu ljudi s obzirom na kompetencije koje stječu unutar obrazovanja. Sukladno tome, njihove se radne uloge razlikuju. No, većina prosvjetnih djelatnika nije formalno educirana o tugovanju. Zbog toga vrijednu ulogu u očuvanju mentalnoga zdravlja djece i mladih imaju javnozdravstveni projekti u školskom okruženju (Ždero, 2016). Cilj jednoga od takvih projekata – PoMoZiDa, jest „podržati razvoj nacionalnoga standardiziranog edukativnog programa zdravstvenoga opismenjavanja odgojno-obrazovnih djelatnika osnovnih i srednjih škola u području mentalnoga zdravlja djece i mladih, ranoga prepoznavanja depresivnih poteškoća i poremećaja te s time povezanih problema uz pružanje psihološke prve pomoći i podrške” (Muslić i sur., str 149, 2018). Istraživanje provedeno u sklopu spomenutoga programa pokazalo je da je među odgojno-obrazovnim djelatnicima nužno razvijati zdravstvenu pismenost u području mentalnoga zdravlja (Muslić i sur., str. 146, 2018). Uz spomenuti projekt, uvođenje školskih preventivnih programa i Kurikuluma zdravstvenog odgoja može se promatrati kao pokazatelj rastućega prepoznavanja potrebe za inkluzijom škole u aktivnosti s ciljem promicanja i očuvanja mentalnoga zdravlja, čiji sastavni dio je pružanje podrške u situacijama gubitka (Ždero, 2016).

Da bi bili dobra podrška, nužno je da zaposlenici škola znaju prepoznati i reagirati na uobičajene znakove tugovanja koje mogu pokazivati njihovi učenici: poteškoće u pažnji i koncentraciji, ljutnju, agresivna ponašanja, plakanje, socijalnu izolaciju, poteškoće u ritmu budnosti i spavanja, poteškoće u hranjenju i brojne druge (Finn, 2003). Međutim, zaposlenici škola u pravilu nisu educirani o tome kako da se ponašaju kada primijete takva ponašanja ili znakove istih. Uz izostanak formalne edukacije o navedenoj temi, stjecanje korisnih informacija o adekvatnim reakcijama na neformalan način otežano je zbog brojnih zabluda o procesu tugovanja te pružanju podrške. Zbog istih, često se događa da ljudi, uz najbolju namjeru, postupaju na način koji ne samo da ne pomaže, nego čak može i odmoći (Arambašić, 2008). Razlog zbog kojeg učestalo dolazi do pogrešnih reakcija jest taj što je teško i nelagodno biti u kontaktu s tugujućom osobom. Prirodna reakcija ljudi je stoga najčešće usmjerena na nastojanja da se uklone nelagodni osjećaji i doživljaji tugujuće osobe pa tako okolina pokušava utješiti i razveseliti osobu

koja se nalazi u procesu tugovanja. Tako se stječe doživljaj da se radi nešto korisno i umanjuje vlastiti osjećaj bespomoćnosti, a zapravo najčešće se potiče tugujuću osobu da prestane iskazivati bol, odnosno da ga potiskuje. Najkorisnijom reakcijom smatra se upravo suprotnost navedenom – biti pokraj osobe i dopustiti joj izražavanje tuge i drugih neugodnih osjećaja bez nastojanja da se „poprave” takvi osjećaji, već potvrđivati golemu važnost koji za osobu ima tako težak događaj. Tako se iskazuje poštovanje prema osobi koja se nalazi u procesu tugovanja i prema njezinom doživljaju situacije u kojoj se nalazi (Veronika, 2020, prema Wolfelt, 2001). Za adekvatnu reakciju u slučaju kada je tugujuća osoba dijete ili adolescent, ključno je biti upoznat i s vrstom mišljenja i emocionalnim kapacitetima koji su karakteristični za pojedino razvojno razdoblje.

Učitelji koji su obučeni za pružanje podrške u situacijama gubitka osjećaju se ugodnije u kontaktu s tugujućim učenicima i aktivnije se bave pitanjima i komentarima učenika o temi smrti i ostalih gubitaka (Pratt i sur., 1987, prema Reid i Dixon, 1999). Percepcija kompetentnosti za pružanje podrške djeci povezana je s nuđenjem podrške (Reid i Dixon, 1999). McManus i Paul (2019) pokazale su da se kratkom i umjerenom edukacijom o gubitcima i tugovanju može povećati svijest o važnosti ove teme, ali i samopouzdanje školskih djelatnika da adekvatno reagiraju na potrebe tugujuće djece.

Istraživanja koja su se bavila pitanjem kvalitete podrške u školama pokazuju različite rezultate. Tako istraživanje Hoganove i drugih (1994) pokazuje gotovo potpun nedostatak podrške učenicima nakon gubitka, što su potvrdila i neka druga istraživanja (Patterson i Ranganathan, 2010). S druge strane, neka istraživanja svjedoče o visokom postotku od 76 % pogođenih učenika koji su podršku dobili u školi doživjeli odgovarajućom (Broberg i sur., 2005, prema Dyregrov i sur., 2013). U istom istraživanju pokazano je da se u drugoj školi, u istom gradu, ta procjena uvelike razlikovala i iznosila je samo 20 %. Dyregrov (2009) je pokazao da adolescenti u procesu tugovanja zbog samoubojstva osjećaju stres i otuđenost. Nedostaje im razumijevanje i podrška koju bi mogli dati zaposlenici škole koju pohađaju.

Neka istraživanja (Alisic, 2011, prema Dyregrov i sur., 2013; Dyregrov i sur., 2013) spominju i da su učitelji u nedoumici vezano uz granice između njihova radnog mjesta i psihologa ili drugih stručnih suradnika. S druge strane, pojedina su istraživanja pokazala i da zaposlenici škola pružanje podrške tugujućim učenicima smatraju važnim (Levkovich i Elyoseph, 2021; prema Lytje i Dyregrov, 2021) te dijelom svoje uloge (Rodríguez Herrero i sur., 2022; McManus i Paul, 2019). Uz do sada spomenutu problematiku, ključnu poteškoću u svakodnevnom radu u školi predstavlja i uspostavljanje zadovoljavajuće ravnoteže između posvećivanja pažnje učenicima koji se nalaze u procesu tugovanja te ostalim učenicima koji nerijetko imaju nešto drugačije potrebe.

Eftoda (2021) ističe da škole trebaju učitelje koji su educirani u području tugovanja, poučavanja o smrti i emocionalnoj regulaciji te stručne suradnike koji su educirani u području terapije igrom kako bi zajedničkim snagama mogli pružati podršku tugujućoj djeci. Također, Liu i drugi (2022) naglašavaju da je djeci često potrebna i dodatna edukacijska podrška s obzirom na to da je iskustvo tugovanja nerijetko praćeno s padom ocjena.



Generalno, možemo zaključiti da postoje varijacije u različitim školama i između različitih učitelja u tome kako se nose s tugovanjem učenika. Suvremena literatura naglašava da je intervencije usmjerene na poboljšanje zdravstvene pismenosti u području mentalnoga zdravlja potrebno prilagoditi i integrirati unutar škola (Kutcher i sur., 2016, prema Muslić i sur., str. 149, 2018).

Svrha je ovoga istraživanja ispitati mišljenja i doživljaje učitelja i stručnih suradnika vezano uz profesionalno iskustvo u području gubitaka i tugovanja kod učenika/ica u zagrebačkim osnovnim školama.

## **Metoda**

### **Sudionici**

Uzorak sudionika bio je prigodan i obuhvaćao je ukupno 213 djelatnika škola. Raspon dobi sudionika je od 25 do 69 godina s prosječnom dobi od 46 godina ( $M = 45,56$ ;  $SD = 11,59$ ). Raspon godina radnoga staža je od pola do 42 godine, s prosječnim godinama radnoga staža od 20 godina ( $M = 20,05$ ;  $SD = 11,79$ ).

Za potrebe istraživanja kontaktirano je 46 ravnatelja/ica s ciljem dobivanja pristanka za sudjelovanje, no samo 13 osnovnih škola s područja grada Zagreba i uže okolice pristalo je sudjelovati.

Tablica 1.

Ukupno su podijeljena 442 primjerka upitnika i ankete, a vraćeno je njih 213 (48,19 %). Zadatak sudionika bio je ispuniti dva upitnika i anketu u ukupnom trajanju od otprilike 40 minuta i potom ih ubaciti u praznu kutiju. U ovome radu prikazat će se i analizirati rezultati ankete za čije je ispunjavanje bilo potrebno otprilike 10 minuta.

### **Mjerni instrument**

U svrhu provođenja istraživanja konstruirana je anketa *Gubitci i tugovanje u osnovnim školama*. Uvrštena su pitanja koje su autorice procijenile korisnima za uvid u aktualno stanje te procjenu postojanja potrebe za uvođenje edukacije o gubitcima i tugovanju u osnovnoškolskom kontekstu. Anketa je preliminarno primijenjena na pet sudionika.

Konstruirane su dvije verzije ankete – za učitelje i za stručne suradnike. Verzija namijenjena stručnim suradnicima nastala je izbacivanjem dviju čestica koje se odnose na rad učitelja u nastavi. Anketa se sastoji od 7 čestica u verziji za učitelje i 5 u verziji za stručne suradnike. Čestice se analiziraju na deskriptivnoj razini.

## **Rezultati**

U nastavku su navedena pitanja iz ankete i dobiveni odgovori.

1. *Molimo zaokružite gubitke u životu učenika/ice s kojima ste se do sada susreli u svojem radu u školi.*

Na Slici 1 prikazani su ponuđeni odgovori na ovo pitanje i rezultati izraženi u frekvencijama sudionika koji su zaokružili ponuđene odgovore. Dva sudionika

zaokružila su odgovor obilježen slovom *j* i nadopisali „*smrt učenika*” i „*smrt strica*”. Prema navedenim rezultatima možemo primijetiti da se samo 33 % sudionika u svojem radu nije susrelo ni s jednim gubitkom učenika/ica.

Slika 1.

2. *Jeste li osjećali potrebu za prilagođavanjem sadržaja ili načina izlaganja predviđenoga gradiva s obzirom na učenika/icu koji/a se suočava s gubitkom? Ako ste prilagođavali nastavu, što ste i na koji način činili?*

Na navedeno pitanje odgovarali su učitelji. Većina ( $N = 183$ ; 93,37 %) je odgovorila na pitanje, a njih 111 (60,7 %) zaokružilo je odgovor *DA* i 72 (39,3 %) odgovor *NE*. Veliki dio (75,68 %) onih koji su odgovorili potvrdno, dodatno su pojasnili kako su to radili. Otprilike polovica, njih 44 (52,38 %) izbjegava teme povezane sa smrću ili članom obitelji kojeg je učenik/ica izgubio/la ili bilo čime što smatraju da učenik/ica veže uz gubitak. Primjeri takvih odgovora glase: „*Izbjegavala sam razgovor i teme vezane uz gubitak bliske osobe*” i „*Ne obrađujem tekstove iz književnosti o majci ili ocu ako u razredu ima učenik koji je izgubio roditelje*”. Od tih 44 učitelja, petero (11,36 %) je napisalo kako izbjegava sadržaj povezan s gubitkom samo u interakciji s učenikom koji je doživio gubitak, dok preostalih 39 (88,63 %) prilagođava sadržaj i način izlaganja čitavom razredu. Suprotno tome, 15 sudionika (17,86 %) napisalo je kako dodatno razgovaraju o gubitcima i tugovanju u razredu. Primjer takvoga odgovora glasi: „*Naglašavala sam da su sve obitelji jednake i da oba rastavljena roditelja vole svoje dijete bez obzira na to što zajedno više ne mogu živjeti*”. Nadalje, 16 učitelja (19,05 %) napisalo je kako prilagodbu rade vezano uz vrednovanje znanja i to tako da učenicima koji su nedavno doživjeli gubitak nude više vremena i blaže kriterije. Primjer takvoga odgovora glasi: „*Smanjivala sam opseg gradiva, ispitivala po dogovoru*”. Preostalih 9 učitelja (10,71 %) dalo je općenit odgovor koji nije bilo moguće svrstati ni u jednu povije navedenu skupinu odgovora. Primjer takvoga odgovora glasi: „*Dopustili djetetov period tugovanja*”.

3. *Postoji li u školi u kojoj radite unaprijed određena procedura kad je u razred uključeno dijete ili mlada osoba koja se suočava s gubitkom?*

U Tablici 2 prikazani su ponuđeni odgovori i rezultati izraženi u frekvencijama i postotcima.

Tablica 2.

4. *Priključio/la bih se edukaciji o poučavanju učenika/ica osnovne škole o smrti i drugim gubitcima.*

U Tablici 3 prikazani su ponuđeni odgovori i rezultati izraženi u frekvencijama i postotcima.

Tablica 3.

5. Je li netko iz Vaše škole pohađao edukaciju o gubitcima kod djece/mladih i tugovanju?

U Tablici 4 prikazani su ponuđeni odgovori i rezultati izraženi u frekvencijama i postotcima.

Tablica 4.

6. Bavite li se temom gubitka i procesa tugovanja unutar školskoga programa? Ako da, navedite u sklopu kojeg predmeta i nastavne cjeline.

Na ovo pitanje odgovarali su samo učitelji. Na Slici 2 prikazani su ponuđeni odgovori i rezultati izraženi u frekvencijama.

Slika 2.

Od 48 učitelja koji su potvrdno odgovorili na šesto pitanje, 23 (47,92 %) napisalo je kako se u sklopu Hrvatskoga jezika bave navedenom temom, 16 (33,33 %) napisalo je kako se tom temom bave u sklopu sata razredne zajednice, 13 (27,08 %) u sklopu Prirode i društva te 8 (16,67 %) u sklopu Vjeronauka. Neki sudionici navodili su više školskih predmeta.

7. Napišite što kažete učeniku/ici od 10 godina nakon što saznate da mu/joj je djed umro.

Na ovo pitanje odgovorilo je 156 školskih djelatnika (73,2 %). Njihove odgovore autorice su ručno svrstale u pet kategorija: umanjivanje težine gubitka, dopuštanje izražavanja misli i osjećaja, poticanje potiskivanja neugodnih emocija i misli, izražavanje sućuti i nemogućnost generalizacije. Neke kategorije dijelom se preklapaju pa tako možemo primijetiti kako je umanjivanje težine gubitka način na koji se može poticati na potiskivanje neugodnih emocija i misli. Međutim, zbog relativno velike zastupljenosti u odgovorima htjeli smo umanjivanje težine gubitka istaknuti kao zasebnu kategoriju. U Tablici 5 prikazani su dobiveni rezultati izraženi u frekvencijama i postotcima odgovora svrstanih u kategorije te primjeri odgovora.

Tablica 5.

## Rasprava

Prema odgovorima na pitanja ankete jasno je da se gotovo svi prosvjetni djelatnici u radu susreću s djecom i mladima u procesu tugovanja. Manji dio (3,3 %) sudionika do sada se u svojem radu nije susrelo s tugujućim učenicima, a to možemo objasniti kratkim radnim stažom tih sudionika s prosjekom od jedne godine.

Od svih učitelja koji su se susreli s gubitcima njihovih učenika/ica, 60,7 % osjeća potrebu za prilagođavanjem sadržaja gradiva i/ili načina izlaganja u prisutnosti učenika/ice koji/a se suočava s gubitcima, a većina njih (52,38 %) radi to izbjegavanjem tema povezanih s gubitkom. Ako navedeni podatak interpretiramo u kontekstu studijskih programa za struke koje se zapošljavaju kao učitelji, a koje ne stavljaju fokus na ovu temu, opravdano je pretpostaviti da se većina tako ponaša zbog toga što ne znaju kako bi bilo ispravno razgovarati o gubitcima. Osim toga, u društvu je ustaljeno

netočno mišljenje o tome da će razgovor o gubitku učiniti suočavanje s gubitkom težim (Schoen i sur., 2004).

Učitelji i stručni suradnici uglavnom se ne bave temom gubitaka i tugovanja prilikom poučavanja učenika, što je u skladu s istraživanjima u drugim državama (npr. Rodríguez Herrero i sur., 2022). Također, prepušteni su sami sebi pri procjenjivanju potreba učenika. O tome svjedoči podatak da je samo 7,6 % sudionika izjavilo kako u njihovoj školi postoji unaprijed određena procedura postupanja u takvim situacijama. Učitelji su u odnosu na stručne suradnike češće odgovarali da ne znaju postoji li takva procedura, što možemo objasniti razlikama u radnim ulogama. Stručni su suradnici tako bili sigurniji pri odgovaranju, jer kad bi procedura u školi postojala, vjerojatno bi uključivala njihovo sudjelovanje. Potts (2013) te Tracey i Holland (2008) također su pokazali da većina osnovnih škola nema protokol namijenjen za situacije u kojima se učenik suočava s gubitkom, dok su brojna druga istraživanja pokazala da bi učitelji rado usvojili takav dokument koji bi im mogao pomoći da udovolje potrebama učenika (DeMuth i sur., 2020; Levkovich i Elyoseph, 2021; prema Lytje i Dyregrov, 2021).

U kontaktu s tugujućim učenicima lako se može uočiti razlika u opisanim reakcijama učitelja i stručnih suradnika što je opet opravdano povezati s razlikama u kompetencijama koje stječu formalnim obrazovanjem i radnim ulogama koje imaju. Učitelji najčešće reagiraju tješanjem učenika i to tako da umanjuju težinu učenikova gubitka, dok gotovo svi stručni suradnici reagiraju dopuštanjem učeniku/ici da izrazi svoje misli i osjećaje. Rečenice poput „Bio je već jako star” kao reakcije na doživljavanje djedove smrti najčešće su upućene s najboljom namjerom, ali nisu korisne jer se njima umanjuje težina gubitka, što često, uz izostanak pomoći, može i odmoći. Djelotvorniji je način pružanja podrške oslušivati potrebe učenika, ponašati se u skladu s njima i slušati o mislima i osjećajima uzrokovanim gubitkom bez osude ili pokušaja da se „utišaju” neugodne emocije. Odgovori stručnih suradnika sličniji su takvim reakcijama. Međutim, treba uzeti u obzir da je riječ o samoiskazima u kojima su upitani da u kratkim crtama napišu što kažu u takvim situacijama. Postavlja se pitanje koliko takav način prikupljanja podataka može biti valjan. Moguće je da su odgovori barem u nekoj mjeri iskrivljeni socijalno poželjnim odgovaranjem. Prilikom interpretacije odgovora treba imati na umu i da je riječ samo o jednom pitanju u kojemu su sudionici mogli napisati najviše nekoliko rečenica. Tako, primjerice, iako su mnogi napisali kako bi učenicima poručili da su dostupni za razgovor, ovim istraživanjem nismo prikupili informacije o tome kako i koliko bi učitelji i stručni suradnici zaista razgovarali o smrti i drugim gubitcima s učenicima.

Samo 5,21 % sudionika izjavilo je kako je netko od zaposlenika iz njihove škole pohađao edukaciju o gubitcima i tugovanju kod djece i mladih, što je u skladu s istraživanjem Reid i Dixona (1999) te Bowie (2000) koji su pokazali da učitelji većinom nisu educirani o tim temama. Ovdje valja naglasiti da su podtaci prikupljeni u 2017. godini, prije pandemije koronavirusa i potresa koji su zadesili građane Hrvatske, a koji su rezultirali povećanim angažmanom pomagačkih struka u zaštiti mentalnoga zdravlja koje su organizirale brojne radionice i predavanja o ovoj temi. Zanimljivo

bi bilo prikupiti iste podatke u 2022. godini i usporediti ih s podacima prikazanima u ovom radu. Neovisno o tome, formalno školovanje za učitelje ni za većinu struka stručnih suradnika ne uključuje edukaciju o procesu tugovanja kod djece i mladih, iako je jasno da će se gotovo svi susresti s takvim situacijama na svojem radu. Pozitivno je to što prosvjetni djelatnici pokazuju volju za učenjem te se čak 68,3 % donekle ili u potpunosti slaže s tvrdnjom da bi se priključili edukaciji.

### **Praktične implikacije i metodološki nedostaci**

Polovina mogućih sudionika (51,81 %) odustala je od sudjelovanja pa je opravdano zaključiti da smo dobili rezultate koji prikazuju iskrivljenu sliku. Moguće je da se sudionici ovoga istraživanja razlikuju u nekim osobinama od prosvjetnih djelatnika koji nisu pristali sudjelovati.

Potrebno je oprezno pristupiti interpretaciji razlika u odgovorima učitelja i stručnih suradnika zbog toga što uzorak obuhvaća 17 stručnih suradnika. Zbog toga je opravdanost generalizacije na populaciju stručnih suradnika poprilično niska. Bilo bi zanimljivo dodatno istražiti postojanje razlika između navedenih skupina prikupljanjem kvotnoga uzorka.

Nedostaci vezani uz postupak odnose se na neprisutnost istraživača tijekom ispunjavanja anketa. Sudionici nisu mogli tražiti dodatno pojašnjenje pitanja u slučaju nedoumice. S druge strane, zbog osjetljivosti ispitivane teme, neprisutnost istraživača možemo promatrati i kao prednost jer su sudionici bili slobodniji iskreno ispunjavati anketu bez straha od prešutne osude istraživača. Mogli su prekinuti ispunjavanje na određeno vrijeme, što također možemo tumačiti kao prednost zbog toga što je nekim sudionicima prolazak kroz sve čestice prevelik napor ili nemaju toliko vremena u datom trenutku.

Možemo zaključiti kako pri razmatranju rezultata treba imati na umu navedene metodološke nedostatke te da generalizacija treba biti izvršena s određenom dozom opreza. Unatoč ograničenjima, ovo istraživanje nudi važne informacije kojima se može unaprijediti razumijevanje reakcija osnovnoškolskih djelatnika pri susretanju s temama povezanima s gubitcima. Svakako, stečene spoznaje potiču na daljnje proučavanje ovoga poprilično neistraženoga područja.

## **Zaključak**

Ovim istraživanjem pokušalo se ispitati stanje vezano uz praksu i iskustva osnovnoškolskih djelatnika u razgovoru s učenicima o smrti i drugim gubitcima te u kontaktu s učenicima koji se suočavaju s gubitkom. Rezultati pokazuju da usprkos učestalosti kontakta s učenicima koji su doživjeli značajne gubitke, većina učitelja i stručnih suradnika nikada nije sudjelovala u edukaciji o procesu tugovanja kod djece i mladih. Ipak, većina izjavljuje da je voljna uključiti se u takvu edukaciju. Informacije dobivene ovim istraživanjem mogu pomoći stručnjacima u području pružanja podrške prilikom osmišljavanja edukacija namijenjenih školskim djelatnicima.

Učitelji i stručni suradnici susreću se s učenicima koji se suočavaju s gubitkom, kao i njihovim reakcijama na doživljeni gubitak. Susreću se s pitanjima, nejasnoćama i zabudama o smrti i drugim gubitcima koje njihovi učenici pokazuju. Važno je da u takvim situacijama znaju ispravno reagirati i prepoznati znakove tugovanja. Također, važno je da znaju prepoznati kada je djetetu ili mladoj osobi potrebna stručna pomoć. Takva znanja mogli bi steći edukacijom, a primjerenim i pravovremenim reakcijama školskih djelatnika mogla bi se unaprijediti prevencija većih poteškoća do kojih može doći nakon doživljavanja gubitaka.