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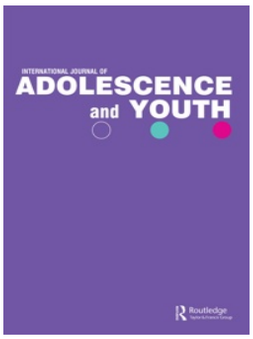

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'It means you can't see all the children': analysing school staff's experiences of tackling pupil loneliness through an ecological systems lens

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ABSTRACT

Over the past three or four years, loneliness has been highlighted as a significant problem in Swedish schools. While staff-pupil relationships have been identified as important in dealing with such experiences, relatively little attention has been paid to the capacity of staff to do so. In this study I analyse the experiences of staff in dealing with student loneliness in schools. The discussions are based on 11 interviews with 16 school staff and their experiences were analysed using Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory of ecological systems. The findings highlight two main concerns of staff working with loneliness: (1) the potential of relationships, including the importance of caring relationships at the micro- and mesosystem levels of the school, and (2) the ways in which working with caring relationships can be overridden by exo-, macro- and chronosystem issues, such as staff shortages, staff workload and demands on pupils' academic performance. Key implications are discussed.

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Introduction

Over the past three or four years, loneliness has been highlighted as a significant problem in Swedish primary schools, and pupils in Swedish schools have reported experiencing involuntary loneliness at school (Friends, 2021, 2022, 2023). In addition to the ongoing problem of bullying in schools (Waseem & Nickerson, 2023), the Swedish anti-bullying organization Friends highlights in its 2023 report that 26% of girls and 22% of boys in grades F-3 (6–9 years) said that they usually worry about being left alone during breaks at school. Seven per cent of respondents in the middle school age group (i.e. 10–12 years) said that they lacked the opportunity to have someone to spend time with during breaks if they wanted to (Friends, 2023, p. 9). Schools, in turn, have been identified as the most important context for addressing and mitigating students' experiences of involuntary loneliness (Schnepf et al., 2023).

Pupils' experiences of loneliness have often been shown to be closely related to bullying or to occur as a more or less direct consequence of bullying (e.g. Berguno et al., 2004; Newman et al., 2006; Strindberg, 2022), and it has also been proposed that

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the experience of loneliness is similar to relational or indirect bullying in terms of social exclusion practices (Olweus, 1997; Rosen et al., 2017). However, loneliness is also a distinct experience that can be defined in any context as the unpleasant feeling that occurs when one's network of social relationships is deficient in some important way, either quantitatively or qualitatively (Perlman & Peplau, 1981). In the context of schooling, the experience of loneliness and isolation can be understood as the lack of a sense of belonging (Krause-Parello, 2008) and thus as the counterpart of belonging (i.e. the feeling of being accepted, valued, encouraged and welcomed by others in school) (Arslan, 2021). Experiences of loneliness are associated with a range of negative outcomes for children and young people, including an increased risk of long-term school absenteeism (Gren Landell, 2021; Krause-Parello, 2008), poorer academic outcomes (Gren Landell, 2021), an increased likelihood of being bullied (Acquah et al., 2015; Berguno et al., 2004), and general negative effects on the well-being and mental health of children and adolescents (Hemberg et al., 2022; Korzhina et al., 2022; Rokach & Neto, 2000).

In exploring the reasons why pupils may be socially excluded or left alone at school, explanations range from focusing on individual characteristics of pupils (such as the perceived importance of a neuropsychiatric diagnosis), to aspects related to social relations with peers (such as peer acceptance and perceived social difference), to aspects of the social environment and context of schools (such as the potential difficulties for staff to sufficiently identify potentially lonely pupils during the school day). For example, some have highlighted how children may refrain from social interactions with their peers due to low motivation to interact with others (e.g. unsociability) or due to fear and anxiety (e.g. shyness) (Coplan et al., 2014). Others have highlighted the importance of social relationships and peer social status, suggesting that students with neuropsychiatric disorders are more likely to be isolated by their peers (Humphrey & Hebron, 2014). As suggested, this may be due to the difficulties that children with such diagnoses may experience in social interactions with peers (Humphrey & Hebron, 2014), their perceived low status (Humphrey & Hebron, 2014), or the perceived social 'difference' that students may be perceived to represent (Grinker, 2020). Still others have shown that classroom organization can be particularly challenging for pupils with a neuropsychiatric diagnosis in school, and that such factors may also be important when considering pupils' experiences of loneliness and non-belonging (Jones et al., 2023). However, as has also been shown, there is often an overlap between individual challenges and those related to the social and contextual aspects of schooling (Jones et al., 2023).

In addition to exploring potential reasons for loneliness, studies have tended to focus on pupils' own experiences of loneliness (Berguno et al., 2004; Hemberg et al., 2022; Newman et al., 2006; Strindberg, 2022), their suggestions for what staff and adults should do to tackle different forms of bullying (Bjereld et al., 2021), and the more general experiences of staff involved in bullying prevention in schools (Beckman & Hagquist, 2015; Oldenburg et al., 2016; van Verseveld et al., 2021). However, while staff-student relationships have been found to be important in addressing aspects such as bullying (Thornberg et al., 2018) and loneliness (Jefferson et al., 2023), there has been relatively little consideration of the capacity of school staff to do so, and the organizational and institutional aspects that may influence such work (Horton et al., 2023). With this in mind, and given that schools have been identified as important contexts for addressing and alleviating students' experiences of involuntary loneliness (Jefferson et al., 2023; Schnepf

et al., 2023), there is a need for more knowledge about the experiences of school staff involved in tackling loneliness. Therefore, the aim of this study was to explore the experiences of staff working with student loneliness in schools and the perceived opportunities and challenges of doing so. The following questions guided the work:

(1) What do school staff consider to be important in preventing, identifying and responding to loneliness?
(2) What do school staff consider to be barriers to their work in preventing, identifying and managing loneliness?
(3) What do the experiences of school staff suggest is important to further improve efforts to prevent, detect and manage loneliness among school pupils?

In this study, I draw on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model to analyse the experiences of school staff working with pupils on school loneliness.

Social relationships, school loneliness and possible constraints: a systems theoretical lens

Bronfenbrenner's ecological model highlights how different levels of systems (i.e. the micro, meso, exo, macro and chrono systems) influence what happens in schools, for example between school staff and pupils and between pupils. While the microsystems of schools can be understood as the direct relationships between pupils and between pupils and teachers, the mesosystem of a school can be understood as the interaction between different microsystems (e.g. the relationship between home and school). The exosystem level refers to settings that don't directly involve the individual but still affect him or her (e.g. school board decisions, school policies on bullying, or school resources such as staffing and training). Finally, the macrosystemic and chronosystemic levels highlight the importance of cultural values and social structures that influence schools, such as policies about what the main mission of schools should be.

Looking at the micro- and mesosystem levels of loneliness, for example, how staff deal with pupils' experiences at school when they report it has been found to be significant, for example, in terms of pupils' willingness to report ongoing bullying, such as potential loneliness, to adults and staff at school (Bjereld, 2018; Bjereld et al., 2021). It has also been shown that bullying and harassment are reduced in classrooms where there is a high degree of warmth and caring between teachers and pupils, both at classroom level (Thornberg et al., 2018) and at school level (Söderström, 2013). However, it has also been shown that school staff may consider relational forms of bullying, such as social isolation of pupils, to be less serious than physical and verbal forms, such as hitting or teasing (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006; Jacobsen & Bauman, 2007; Yoon et al., 2016). Staff may also face challenges in identifying socially isolated pupils, as pupils move between different microsystems during the school day (e.g. from the classroom to the playground and between different peer groups or parts of the playground) (Lago & Elvstrand, 2019). Therefore, pupils who are lonely and isolated may fall under the radar of staff (Lago & Elvstrand, 2019).

In addition, at the exosystem level, a number of factors, such as the allocation of resources to staff, have been identified as influencing the ability of staff to notice and

respond to what happens during the school day. For example, the density of teachers, the size of pupil groups, the design of playgrounds and school buildings (Horton et al., 2020, 2023), the prevalence of stress and high workloads (Rajaleid et al., 2020), the lack of collaboration between school staff (Hjalmarsson & Odenbring, 2021) and the lack of sufficient training (Oldenburg et al., 2016) have all been identified as factors that can hinder the effectiveness of staff in noticing what happens during the school day. Finally, at a macro and chronosystemic level, it has been highlighted, for example, that the increasing emphasis on efficiency, autonomy and competition in schools has implications for the work of school staff in terms of the values espoused and the way schools are managed on a daily basis (Klein & Schwanenberg, 2022), and thus for what issues should be prioritized in schools (Dahlstedt & Fejes, 2019). Such priorities may be, for example, whether to focus on the knowledge of the students or on their well-being in the first place (Strandler & Harling, 2023).

In this sense, the micro, meso, exo, macro and chronosystem levels all influence and largely structure the school context and therefore the ability of staff to work with loneliness and their thinking about such work. Indeed, as Bronfenbrenner points out:

> In ecological research, the properties of the person and of the environment, the structure of environmental settings, and the processes taking place within and between them must be viewed as interdependent and analysed in systems terms. (p. 41)

In this study, therefore, I analyse staff's reflections on pupils' loneliness as the intertwined relationship between the different systems or levels of the school context in which pupils and staff find themselves.

Method

Ethical considerations

An ethics application was submitted to the Swedish National Ethics Review Board prior to the start of the study. The study was deemed not to raise any ethical concerns or to involve the processing of personal data and was therefore not subject to further review by the Ethics Committee. Before the interviews were conducted, emails were sent to the pupil health teams at a number of schools, informing them of the study and asking their staff to participate. This email also included the headteachers of the schools, as they were considered to be gatekeepers and important to involve. Ethical principles were followed in the conduct of the study, including obtaining informed consent from all participants, with the purpose of the study clearly explained. All participants were informed that they were free to withdraw at any time without further explanation. Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants to protect their personal integrity.

Participants

The study involved 16 school staff working in Swedish primary schools. The staff interviewed included 12 school counsellors, one special education teacher, one teacher in an after-school centre (known in Sweden and in Swedish as 'lärare i fritidshem'), one class teacher and one school nurse (see Table 1 below). The participants' experience of working

Table 1. Overview of participants.

Interview #	Pseudonym	Employed as	Currently working with students aged	Experience (number of years in school)
1	Stina	Teacher in after-school centre	7–12 years	26 years
2	Greta och Lisa	School counsellor at the central student health team	7–16 years	Greta 2 years, Lisa 5 years
3	Johanna	Special education teacher	7–10 years	12 years
4	Anne	Teacher	13–16 years	38 years
5	Aisha	School counsellor	7–12 years	10 years
6	Lena	School counsellor	7–12 years	5 years
7	Pia och Therese	School counsellor	7–16 years	Not stated
8	Caroline och Linn	School counsellor at three different schools	7–16 years	Not stated
9	Elsa	School counsellor at the central student health team	7–16 years	15 years
10	Klara och Meta	School counsellor (Klara) and school nurse (Meta)	7–16 years	Not stated
11	Jenna	School counsellor	7–16 years	2 years

in Swedish schools ranged from two to 38 years, and the schools in which the respondents worked were located in the south-western and southernmost parts of Sweden. The schools were located in different catchment areas with pupils from different socio-economic backgrounds, and the age of the pupils the respondents encountered in their work ranged from seven to 16 years.

Procedure

A total of 11 interviews were conducted, including six individual interviews and five pair interviews. Whether the interviews were conducted in pairs or individually was entirely up to the participants' wishes, e.g. if they preferred to be interviewed together with the colleague they worked with on a daily basis. The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide, which is defined as 'a schematic presentation of questions or topics to be explored by the interviewer' (Jamshed, 2014, p. 87). More specifically, in order to explore and answer the three questions posed in the study, an interview guide was formulated based on the same structure. Participants were asked what they considered to be important in preventing, identifying and responding to loneliness and what they considered to be barriers in their work in preventing, identifying and responding to loneliness. I also asked more general questions about loneliness in Swedish schools and in which aspects or levels of the school system such challenges or barriers could be identified. The interviews were conducted in an open and exploratory manner, with the aim of establishing a genuine sense of curiosity on my part about the interviewees' reflections. At times, I encouraged the interviewees to elaborate further on their reflections (Rapley, 2013). All interviews were conducted remotely via Zoom and lasted between 41 and 78 minutes, with an average duration of 59 minutes.

Analysis

In the analysis of the data, all interviews were transcribed in their original language, with the Swedish interviews translated into English. The transcripts were analysed inductively

and deductively. Inspired by the constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014), the analysis included familiarizing myself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes and defining and naming themes. In doing so, I preliminarily coded different words and segments of the data, naming and sorting the data with different labels in terms of their perceived fit and relevance (Thornberg, 2012), but with a particular focus on what appeared to be the main concern(s) (Charmaz, 2014) of the participating staff in relation to student loneliness in school.

In the final stage of analysis, I also drew on theoretical coding (i.e. conceptually integrating and elevating the analysis to a more abstract theoretical level in the final stage of coding through the use of theory and theoretical concepts) (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014) to better understand the experiences of the interviewees and the proposed relationships between the two themes. I used Bronfenbrenner's framework as a theoretical lens through which to view the data and the interviewees' reflections on the different systems or levels of the school system (i.e. micro, meso, exo, macro, chrono). The analysis and structuring of the data were therefore guided by the research question as well as the theoretical framework and its focus on the interconnectedness of different systems or levels as proposed by Bronfenbrenner. I also drew on my previous and parallel reading on the importance of relationships and organizational aspects of staff prevention work in schools. In this sense, and very much in line with what Thornberg (2012) suggests about being theoretically informed during analysis, I used this prior knowledge as a way of thinking reflexively about the data, while continuing to structure and analyse the data in an open but theoretically informed way.

In exploring the suggested concerns of the school staff interviewed, two overarching experiences emerged as particularly relevant to the staff interviewed and closely related to their experiences of working with pupil loneliness in schools, namely (1) the perceived potential of caring relationships at the micro- and mesosystem levels of the school and (2) organizational and institutional factors emanating from the exo-, macro- and chronosystem levels (such as staffing levels, staff workloads and prioritization of pupil academic outcomes) which they felt made it difficult to establish and maintain caring relationships. As the participants suggested, these two concerns were highly contradictory but important to their work. The following section of the findings discusses these two concerns in more detail.

Findings

The perceived importance of caring relationships with pupils at school micro and meso system levels

In the interviews about their experiences of working with pupil loneliness in schools, the interviewees recalled a variety of forms of isolation and loneliness as issues that they constantly struggle with and need to address in school. Interviewees such as Anne and Aisha referred to involuntary pupil loneliness as a common phenomenon in schools. While several aspects were identified by the interviewees as possibilities, such as communication with and to pupils' parents, all interviewees identified the perceived importance of caring relationships with pupils as a key factor in addressing pupils' involuntary loneliness at school. For example, Klara and Meta elaborated on the importance of caring

relationships and building relationships with students, with Klara explaining that relationships with students were 'absolutely the most fundamental thing'. Similarly, Lena emphasized the importance of nurturing caring relationships with pupils. As Lena explained:

> The environment you spend all day in is crucial. That's why relationships are so important! The atmosphere at school is also important. You should be seen, greeted, and greet back. This creates respect between pupils, pupils and teachers, and teachers and pupils. It is crucial! That's why it's essential to create and maintain positive relationships between children and adults in school!

Lena, as well as other interviewees, associated caring relationships with being welcomed as a pupil and stated that this was important not only for pupils' wellbeing at school but also for shaping the wider social climate of a school. Similarly, in discussing the importance of fostering caring relationships with pupils, Stina also raised the importance of creating an environment across the different micro-systems in a school (e.g. between classes and peer groups) where differences are not seen as negative but as assets. Otherwise, as Stina explained, there could be a potential for negative comparisons between pupils, which might explain why pupils are socially isolated from their peers. As Stina pointed out:

> It is crucial to emphasise the importance of relationships in the classroom. Pupils must understand that everyone is good in their own way and that everyone has bad days. It is important to highlight that just because a child can read at preschool . . . It should not mean they are being 'raised' by others. Instead, it may be those who are good at building Lego! It is essential to encourage pupils to recognise everyone's abilities and to celebrate the fact that everyone is good at something!

Stina identified a school that is often characterized by various forms of social comparison between pupils (Duncan, 2013), which can in themselves fuel various forms of inclusion and exclusion processes between pupils (Søndergaard, 2012). As she explained, negative social comparisons between pupils can in itself be a force that underpins pupils being left out by their peers.

Similar to Stina, Greta and Lisa emphasized in their interview the perceived importance of fostering a permissive school climate and reducing social hierarchies between pupils in the different microsystems of the school (such as peer groups and classes). Greta explained that fostering an accepting social climate is crucial for pupils as it allows them to 'choose' each other rather than being rejected by their peers or forced together by adults in school. As Greta and Lisa explained, adults know, or should know, that pairing children rarely leads to positive outcomes. 'They have to choose each other,' Greta explained. However, in order for pupils to choose each other in the first place, Greta and Lisa, like Stina, emphasized the perceived importance of a permissive and accepting school climate. In this sense, they all alluded to the interconnectedness of different systems and levels, where norms of social 'difference' at the macro level influence pupils' perceptions of each other at the microsystem level of the school (Forsberg & Horton, 2022; Horton et al., 2024).

In addition to the perceived importance of fostering an environment where differences are embraced and accepted, the importance of relationships and the social climate of the school was also highlighted by respondents as important in relation to pupils' potential willingness to disclose problems they may be experiencing at school, such as experiences

of involuntary school loneliness. For example, as Jenna said, fostering caring relationships with pupils was seen as even more important in enabling pupils to 'share their experiences with me as an adult or come to me if they are worried about something'. In the interview with Johanna, she summed up the emphasis on the importance of relationships with pupils by saying 'Speaking for myself, I strongly believe that good relationships with pupils are crucial. Without a positive relationship you cannot succeed! So it is of the utmost importance,' she explained. Similarly, Greta explained that experiences of involuntary exclusion from peer interactions can be particularly sensitive for pupils to disclose. As a result, fostering and maintaining caring relationships between school staff and pupils was suggested as crucial for pupils to disclose their experiences at school. Greta explained:

> Pupils who are isolated or unwillingly lonely will not admit that they are alone, even though they want company. They have some sort of defence mechanism that prevents them from admitting this because it is not something they want to acknowledge. Therefore, I believe the quality of the relationship between the pupil and the adults in school is good and trustful! It is essential that the pupil can confide in the adults and that they can give an accurate account of their situation.

Being able to talk to adults about school experiences was linked to trust and the experience of being cared for, and interviewees repeatedly said that it was therefore particularly important for adults in schools to work continuously to instil this feeling in pupils. In summary, as Johanna and several interviewees such as Aisha and Jenna made clear, the basic premise for staff to identify and address loneliness was seen as inherently dependent on the nature of the relationship between staff and pupils and the ability of staff to create and maintain such a relationship. However, a number of issues were also raised by interviewees as potentially hindering school staff in establishing and maintaining positive and caring relationships with pupils. These are discussed in more detail in the following section.

Involuntary school loneliness, caring relationships and perceived exo-, macro- and chronosystemic challenges

A number of organizational and institutional challenges at exo-macro and chronosystemic levels were identified by interviewees as integral to the actual opportunities for staff to engage with pupils and foster caring relationships. For example, in discussing the difficulties of maintaining positive relationships with pupils and being able to 'see' all pupils throughout the school day, Greta and Lisa in their interview highlighted the potential limitations of inadequate training. Without the necessary skills and knowledge, they said, staff might not be able to identify the underlying causes of loneliness in school, or even why pupils might choose to withdraw from school altogether. Lisa elaborated on this:

> We meet a lot of pupils who have a problem with neuropsychiatric diagnoses such as ADHD. And there is clearly a lack of knowledge in many schools. Headteachers and staff do not have the knowledge to meet the pupils and make the necessary adjustments.

As Lisa pointed out, while there may be a general understanding in schools about the importance of prevention and how it should be implemented, from her

perspective as a school counsellor, there is often a lack of more specific knowledge among teachers and headteachers, for example about how to respond appropriately to the different circumstances of pupils, as well as potential differences in knowledge and ability to help pupils in a particular school. In addition, the negative impact of high workload and stress was another challenge in dealing with involuntary school loneliness on a daily basis that was raised by the respondents. Lena, for example, explained that this could be the case: "Because often the teacher feels under time pressure... Something has happened during the lunch break but they don't have time to deal with it properly, they have to start the lesson and put things on hold...', thus pointing to the perceived importance of stress and how it can have a negative impact on what school staff pick up in school (Rajaleid et al., 2020).

In the interview with Caroline and Linn, Caroline asked rhetorically: 'It's a huge workload for teachers and school staff. So is it the system itself that is built in and contributes to pupils being left alone but not noticed? It is definitely something to think about', also pointing to the perceived importance of exosystemic aspects. Similarly, Greta and Lisa also highlighted in their interview the perceived negative consequences of the often demanding workload of teachers and other school staff at the exosystem level, and the risk of overlooking the wider school situation of pupils at the meso and microsystem levels. For example, Greta raised the issue of what she perceived to be problematic, pointing to 'these big classes, a lot of workload and very few resources'. However, Greta raised even more negative effects of stress and workload, pointing to the risk that teachers and school staff might even trivialize aspects of long-term loneliness, while potentially failing to adequately address the pupil's overall school situation. As Greta explained:

> As a teacher, you might find yourself leaning back a bit. You think, 'OK, no, but that's OK. He or she has chosen to be alone. And then it won't be a problem! You don't really see these things that might actually be acute and require active intervention. And then... you sort of forget about it. Maybe you even reason that 'the pupil has said he or she wants to be alone' and you protect yourself with that, sort of let it go for a while ...

Greta alluded to the seemingly interconnected exo- and micro-systems of schools. As she suggested, although school staff may have the best of intentions in recognizing and addressing pupils' involuntary school loneliness, the negative impact of stress and workload at different levels of the school system may mean that staff fail to recognize the significance of certain situations and issues and consequently fail to address them. Similarly, Stina explained her perspective on the high workload and hectic schedules of teachers and other school staff, noting that these organizational aspects at the school exosystem level could have a negative impact on preventive work and relationships with pupils at the school microsystem level. She drew a parallel between her own work experience and the situation she often saw teachers in:

> **Stina**: I am not required to write any reports, I have no parental contact and I am not responsible for managing attendance or absences. I am aware that I can rest my brain a bit when I come back from breaks or when I come home.
>
> **I**: What does this mean for the prevention of involuntary loneliness in schools, or for the ability to identify and deal with involuntary loneliness in schools?

> **Stina**: It means that you can't see all the children, that you can't. . . that you might turn a blind eye to things because you can't deal with them. Because you have 'too much' to do. . .

As Stina suggested, exosystem factors, such as demanding workloads, as well as interactions between different microsystems, such as frequent interactions with pupils' parents, could have a detrimental effect on teachers' ability to observe and follow up on interactions between pupils throughout the school day. In this sense, Stina's experience highlighted the importance of taking seriously the interdependence of different levels of the school system when considering the opportunities or challenges that staff may face when working with pupils' school loneliness.

Indeed, in focusing more on the macro- and chorosystem levels, another challenge identified by the interviewees in this study was the perceived primary focus of the Swedish school system on grades and assessment. As interviewees such as Aisha, Elsa, Pia and Therese explained, the notorious focus on grades and pupil assessment is problematic, not least because it often overshadows work on caring relationships with pupils. Reflecting on her experience of trying to manage and integrate different considerations and logics in school, she explained

> There are many other things that come before these issues! In some classes it might even be suggested by the teachers that we need to work on building community and relationships between the pupils in the class. But then this is often ignored by the headteachers. . . I mean, teachers are under pressure from both headteachers and parents. Their pupils have to get good grades, so they see pupils in groups! But how do schools deal with pupils' health? How do they follow up? Schools compete to get good results and grades from their students, but what about bullying or harassment? It does not seem to be in the spotlight! Schools and sometimes parents need to change the focus from 'who and how many have passed' to 'who is this person's friend', 'what do their breaks look like'. Is there anyone who asks and longs for this child?

As Aisha suggested, while schools and headteachers may recognize the importance of fostering caring relationships with pupils, this work may be cannibalized by macro and chronosystemic priorities, such as the perceived importance of assessing and marking pupils, or by teachers and school staff prioritizing the achievement of targets. In this sense, she seemed to suggest that chronosystem and macrosystem priorities could trickle down and negatively influence the actual capabilities of staff at exo, meso and microsystem levels in the school.

In summary, although relationships were recognized by the staff interviewed as important to pupil wellbeing and loneliness, a number of issues at different levels of the school system may negatively impact on the ability of staff to prevent, identify and address loneliness in schools. Such findings point to the importance of viewing pupils' experiences of loneliness, as well as staff's work to prevent and address it, as interrelated at different levels of the school system. These findings, in turn, have a number of implications for policy and practice. I outline these in more detail in the following section.

Discussion and implications for policy and practice

In this study, I analysed the experiences of staff working with pupils' school loneliness and the perceived opportunities and challenges of doing so. I did this using Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework. As suggested by the participating staff, and in line with the findings

of Friends (2023) for example, pupil loneliness at school was seen as a common problem in Swedish schools and an issue that they were constantly struggling to identify, prevent and deal with on a daily basis in school. However, rather than not prioritizing or taking seriously pupils' experiences, such as potentially relational forms of bullying, as has sometimes been suggested (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006; Jacobsen & Bauman, 2007; Yoon et al., 2016), the importance of caring relationships and the ability of school staff to 'see' each pupil was identified as a key concern for staff. However, rather than not prioritizing or taking students' experiences seriously, such as potentially relational forms of bullying, as has sometimes been suggested (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006; Jacobsen & Bauman, 2007; Yoon et al., 2016), the importance of caring relationships and the ability of school staff to 'see' each student was identified as a key concern for staff. Indeed, as suggested, while staff take loneliness seriously, a number of barriers at the exo-, macro- and chronosystemic levels of the school may prevent staff from adequately preventing, identifying and addressing loneliness.

At the micro- and mesosystem levels, the findings of this study point to the importance of staff developing and maintaining caring relationships with pupils. While these findings are consistent with other findings that point to the importance of staff-student relationships, for example in relation to the prevalence of bullying and harassment in the classroom (Thornberg, Wänström, Pozzoli, et al., 2017), the willingness of students and peers to help and stand up for a bullied peer (Sjögren et al., 2020; Thornberg et al., 2018; Thornberg, Wänström, Hong, et al., 2017; Thornberg, Wänström, Pozzoli, et al., 2017), and the willingness of students to report their potentially negative school experiences directly to staff (Bjereld et al., 2017, 2021), the results of this study suggest, however, that a number of aspects at different school levels can make such work difficult. Similar to what has been shown elsewhere, such concerns were related to the size of the student group (Horton et al., 2020), staff availability (Horton et al., 2020), staff stress levels and workload (Rajaleid et al., 2020), and the leadership style or priorities of the headteacher in particular schools (Söderström, 2013). While school counsellors and teachers can do their best to overcome such difficulties, as the participating staff suggested, the experiences discussed in this study point to the need for school leaders and policy makers to consider carefully the ways in which their staff can adequately manage the situation in which they find themselves.

In this sense, the findings discussed in this study suggest that, despite seemingly the best of intentions, staff may struggle or even fail to 'see' all pupils or to create and maintain a school climate that manages to be inclusive of all pupils. This, in turn, points to the importance of taking seriously the exosytem of schools and the ways in which such aspects can negatively impact on staff's ability to work with caring relationships or to sufficiently identify, address and manage pupil loneliness. Put another way, with insufficient staff and time, and ever-expanding peer groups and classes, it is perhaps not so surprising that staff do not 'see' pupils, or that pupils say that adults and staff do not do enough to prevent negative school experiences (Bjereld et al., 2021).

Similarly, at the macro- and chronosystem levels, respondents pointed out that working with relationships can also be overtaken by other priorities, such as a school system that prioritizes pupils' academic results first. According to the interviewees, such priorities risk spilling over to school leaders and their demands and priorities at the school exosystem level. In turn, such considerations, according

to the staff interviewed, could influence the priorities that staff encounter on a daily basis in the school, for example, whether or not working on relationships with pupils is a priority. In this sense, the experiences discussed in this study provide an empirically grounded picture of how macro- and chronosystem level influences, such as the increasing emphasis on efficiency, autonomy and competition between schools (Dahlstedt & Fejes, 2019), could set the stage for the actual opportunities for staff to engage with relationships with pupils. This, in turn, suggests that it is not enough to simply point out the importance of caring relationships between staff and pupils at the micro and meso levels of the school system, but that it is crucial to analyse what opportunities exist at school level for staff to do so.

In this sense, and finally, when it comes to the importance of staff establishing and maintaining caring relationships with pupils at classroom or school level, the findings of this study suggest that a more thorough discussion of the opportunities, or lack thereof, is needed. Given the many negative consequences associated with experiences of involuntary loneliness, it seems all too important that school leaders and policy makers do not prioritize pupils' academic outcomes at the expense of working with pupils' relationships. It also seems crucial that school staff are given sufficient resources to do this.

Limitations

A number of limitations can be highlighted. Firstly, in terms of generalizability, it is important to stress that the limited number of participants makes it difficult to generalize the findings to wider populations (Larsson, 2009). Secondly, in terms of representativeness, it is important to stress that the sample in this study is based on participants who were able to attend and therefore the experiences discussed in the study should not be considered representative of all schools or all staff in all school settings. Thirdly, it is also important to emphasize that most of the participants in the study worked as school counsellors and therefore can be expected to share certain approaches to loneliness, what is lacking and what is needed in such work. This is also important for the representativeness of the findings. Fourthly, it should be noted that participants' reflections and responses are inevitably influenced by the interview technique, the interview guide used, the questions asked and the focus and theoretical framework of the study. Fifthly, the experiences discussed may be influenced by the various factors of the school in which the respondents work or have worked, such as the socio-economic background of pupils and parents, the economics of their school, staffing and leadership of the headteacher. Such influences can obviously colour their experiences and the opportunities and challenges they present (Larsson, 2009). Finally, the findings discussed are also influenced by my own interpretation of the data, as described in the methods section above. Of course, these aspects are also important to consider in terms of the limitations of the findings discussed.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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