

School's position on death and childhood: (de)construction of silent walls

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ABSTRACT

The school is a space to mediate reality, influencing the elaboration of experiences for the student's development, such as grieving real and symbolic losses. This article consists of a descriptive exploratory qualitative research with seven teachers of four public elementary schools from the inland of Rio Grande do Sul State, seeking to understand how these professionals perceive the theme of death in schools and the challenges with students, especially children. The content analysis was performed and all ethical principles were respected. School and teachers assume important roles in the emotional development of the child and in supporting them in times of crisis. The existing barrier in schools in terms of addressing death shows the fear of not having the answers and crossing the line when it is the family role. These teachers seek, through possible openings for approaching death and playfulness, to work on the students' grief and fears, so they can be a support throughout this experience.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

school; childhood; death; mourning; losses.

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A ESCOLA ANTE A MORTE E A INFÂNCIA: (DES)CONSTRUÇÃO DOS MUROS DO SILÊNCIO

RESUMO

A escola é um espaço de mediação da realidade, influenciando na elaboração das vivências do desenvolvimento do aluno, como no luto de perdas reais e simbólicas. O artigo apresenta uma pesquisa qualitativa, de caráter descritivo e exploratório, com sete professoras de quatro escolas públicas do ensino fundamental do interior do Rio Grande do Sul e busca compreender como entendem a temática da morte nas escolas e os desafios com os alunos, em especial na infância. Realizou-se a análise de conteúdo, e todos os princípios éticos foram respeitados. Escola e professores assumem papéis importantes na formação emocional da criança e em seu acolhimento em momentos de crise. A barreira presente nas escolas diante da abordagem da morte denuncia o temor de a instituição não deter as respostas e transpor os limites do que é próprio da família. As docentes buscam, por meio de aberturas possíveis de abordagem sobre a morte e do lúdico, trabalhar o luto e os medos dos alunos, de modo que possam ser um amparo nessa vivência.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

escola; infância; morte; luto; perdas.

LA ESCUELA FRENTE A LA MUERTE Y A LA NIÑEZ: (DES)CONSTRUCCIÓN DE LOS MUROS DEL SILENCIO

RESUMEN

La escuela es un espacio de mediación de la realidad, influenciado en la elaboración de las vivencias del desarrollo del alumno, como en el luto de las pérdidas reales y simbólicas. El artículo presenta una investigación cualitativa, de carácter descriptivo y exploratorio, con siete profesoras de cuatro escuelas públicas de la enseñanza fundamental del interior del Rio Grande do Sul y pretende comprender como entienden la temática de la muerte en las escuelas y los desafíos con los alumnos, en especial en la niñez. Se realizó el análisis del contenido y todos los principios éticos fueron respetados. La escuela y los profesores asumen roles importantes en la formación emocional del niño y en el acogimiento de este en momentos de crisis. La barrera presente en las escuelas con relación al tratamiento de la muerte denuncia el temor de no retener las respuestas y transponer los límites de lo que es propio de la familia. Los docentes buscan, por medio de la apertura de enfoque sobre la muerte y del lúdico, trabajar el luto y los miedos de los alumnos, para que puedan ser un apoyo en esta vivencia.

PALABRAS CLAVE

escuela; infancia; muerte; duelo; pérdidas.

INTRODUCTION

DEATH IN THE CHILDREN'S UNIVERSE

Death is the only certainty in life and a part of the development of human beings. However, paradoxically, we ignore its existence (Sengik and Ramos, 2013). This phenomenon exposes the unknown character of death, over which the individual has no control. It intrudes on life suddenly, with no permission, and, often, without letting us prepare to face it, thus subjecting the individual to countless fears and uncertainties, inducing feelings of helplessness (Casellato, 2015; Kovács, 2003). Hence, society, which can do nothing against death, postpones and avoids the subject, so as not to address it anymore.

When thinking about death, we consider both real and symbolic losses, pervaded by the individual's frustrations and afflictions. In this sense, in addition to the loss of a bond with someone, some experiences and events in the course of human development are analogous to the idea of death, such as separations, loss of objects, neglect, illnesses, and situations that, somehow, portray estrangement. Thus, death is present at emotional, social, and somatic levels throughout human development, leaving its marks in the life cycle (Kovács, 2005; Kübler-Ross, 2008).

This understanding that death has been part of human development in different ways since an early age (Sengik and Ramos, 2013) suggests that this phenomenon and its impacts — through losses — are present in the daily lives of all individuals, reaching all age groups and demanding each one to confront and interpret the situation. This unique experience, influenced by the cultural context, assumes peculiarities in contemporary Western culture (Ariès, 2017).

In the Middle Ages, death was considered a family event, which required preparation, and even children were allowed and encouraged to participate; in the 19th century, death became something to be feared, and children were removed from the mourning rituals (Ariès, 2017). Currently, the process consists of a hyper-individualization of the phenomenon of death, portraying the loss of symbolic networks that surround dying as well as mourning, leaving the initiative to create meanings and elaborate losses to each individual (Giacomin, Santos and Firmo, 2013). In that order, adults do not talk about death, preventing the approach of this issue with children and making it a forbidden subject (Paiva, 2011).

The current conception of childhood involves contemplating only positive aspects, joy and life, without considering losses as a process belonging to children. However, throughout their development, the child faces several losses, which can arise from the death of a pet or an important person, as well as from events, such as separation of family members and the need to deal with frustrations. Such losses result in suffering and sometimes lead to significant changes and reformulations in the child's life (Fronza *et al.*, 2015; Paiva, 2009).

It is emphasized that the elaboration of mourning during childhood requires the support of significant figures, considering their need to obtain information about what happened. Therefore, it is important to highlight the influence that the mourning of these individuals has on the recognition and experience of childhood

mourning. In addition, due to the child's cognitive and emotional processes being under construction, conversations about issues related to dying must take into account their stage of development (Bolwby, 2001).

When the child is in contact with the social environment, they capture reality and build their thoughts and perceptions about it according to their understanding. Thus, talking about death with children does not mean creating or intensifying pain, but looking at this existing pain and assisting with the process of loss so as to help them understand the life cycle (Paiva, 2011). To that end, the quality of the relationships established, the personality of each individual, and the social support network stand out as important protective factors for the family environment.

THE SCHOOL CONTEXT AND THE THEME OF DEATH

At birth, the child becomes a member of a social group since their physical and emotional needs are linked to other individuals. The child is progressively introduced to everything that has occurred in the course of history and to forms of relationships established in society through certain social agents, such as family and teachers. Therefore, the interactions between child and society, as well as their own way of seeing the world, are influenced by the action of these social actors combined with specific aspects of this individual in development (Salvador *et al.*, 1999).

As the child's second socialization environment, after the family one, school has the role of educating for life and is often characterized as a safe and warm space for the child by mediating information about reality (Moreira, 2015). From a very early age, children start attending the school environment and spending a large part of their time there. In this sense, the approach used by members of this group can help or hinder the experience and elaboration of different development processes, such as mourning (Fronza *et al.*, 2015; Paiva, 2011; Stokes, Reid and Cook, 2009).

In this context, the figure of the teacher tends to assume an emotional reference role for the child, as a continuity of the relationship established by the child with their parents, which can portray security and a fundamental link in their growth (Maeda, 2017). Learning how to coexist is a challenge in this relationship since school is a space where friendships are made, joys and individual and professional progress are shared, as well as moments of pain and loss (Mascia and Silva, 2014). Thus, school must prepare to deal with the different emotions that permeate the student's universe (Domingos and Maluf, 2003).

One of the main taboos in society, which uniquely affects the school environment, revolves around the theme of death. As a constant presence in daily life, children and young people can experience the loss of relevant individuals in their lives, see death through violence and its constant media exposure, separations in general, and changes in the school year, class, and teacher. These experiences bring a rupture to life and elicit feelings similar to those related to death (Schuck, Bruxel and Strauss, 2014). Such events can start to invade the school group, with losses occurring at the institution and with the presence of bereaved children and teachers (Fronza *et al.*, 2015).

Faced with this situation, fear, sadness, neglect, and helplessness tend to fill individuals who share a loss. The feeling of being unable to say or do anything to reduce the suffering makes death an issue that is denied and feared in these environments. However, not addressing the theme and feelings involved with death and mourning contradicts the idea that school is where the individual experiences a large part of their development in different areas, such as emotional, intellectual, and social development (Santos, 2009).

Offering support and words that can help with the pain of loss is difficult, which makes this process even more distressing. However, having a place to discuss mourning, as well as contemplate and resignify memories, is essential to deal with this pain in a healthy way (Fronza *et al.*, 2015). Talking openly with the child about death at school helps them understand and face their fears of the unknown with the support of others, constructively collaborating with the process of loss (Kovács, 2012; Sengik and Ramos, 2015; Stylianou and Zembylas, 2018a).

The figure of the teacher is important to promote spaces for sharing life experiences and enable a less lonely and healthier grieving process. In this regard, school and the relationship between teacher and student can be consolidated in an environment and a bond that would break the silence and the lack of reflections associated with losses. Thus, the present research aims to understand, from the perspective of teachers from public elementary schools, how the theme of death is integrated into the school environment and how it is handled with students, especially in childhood.

METHOD

RESEARCH DESIGN

The present study consists of qualitative, exploratory, and descriptive research. The qualitative approach makes it possible to understand representations of individuals or groups about a specific theme (Minayo, 2014). The exploratory aspect is adopted with the purpose of becoming familiar with the object to be investigated, seeking to acquire a different understanding in a given situation (Gil, 2010). Regarding the descriptive nature, it aims to describe the characteristics of a given population or a phenomenon and can establish possible relationships between variables (Gil, 2008).

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Teachers from four municipal elementary schools, in an inland city of Rio Grande do Sul, participated in this research. In total, the survey had seven participants, all of them female, due to availability and interest in talking about the subject and contributing to the research. At this number, data saturation was reached, that is, the information collected started to be repeated, and new interviews were not

justified (Turato, 2013). In order to protect the participants' identity, their names were changed to the letter E, followed by a number corresponding to the interview.

DATA COLLECTION

Teachers were invited to schedule the data collection in the schools where they work. Interviews were conducted in a room provided by the administrative department of the school.

Data were obtained through semi-structured interviews, which represent an important collection instrument, since speech might reveal structural, symbolic, and normative conditions of certain groups (Minayo, 2014). The semi-structured interviews involved guidelines elaborated to help understand the participants' different perspectives, proposing reflections and problematizations about the subject under study (Minayo, 2014; Moré, 2015). In this sense, the following guidelines were used: school stories/experiences about death; death and school subjects; preparation to deal with death in professional development; the idea of death in the childhood context; initiatives to better deal with death in school contexts.

Data collection only started after approval by the Research Ethics Committee of the University to which the research is linked under the Certificate of Presentation for Ethical Consideration (*Certificado de Apresentação para Apreciação Ética* – CAAE) No. 51499315.5.0000.5346. The research complied with all ethical principles, according to resolution no. 510/2016 of the National Health Council (*Conselho Nacional de Saúde*) (Brasil, 2016).

DATA ANALYSIS

The collected data were transcribed and subsequently assessed based on thematic content analysis, which aims to perform an interpretative analysis of the statements (Minayo, 2014). We started by skimming the statements collected, followed by categorization of the subjects that stood out in major topics, using repetition and relevance criteria (Turato, 2013). The categories presented below were constructed from these analyses.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

School is an important space for children's development and needs to address the different themes that permeate this development, including losses and death. Aspects related to how these themes are presented in the school environment and how they can be handled will be outlined in the following categories:

- the role of the teacher and the school when faced with death;
- school and its spaces for mourning: bricks in the construction of silence;
- possible approaches to death in childhood.

THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER AND THE SCHOOL WHEN FACED WITH DEATH

The relational dimension that exists in the educational context allows individuals to position themselves as participants and builders of the learning process.

This scenario demands that professional educators keep in constant reconstruction throughout their professional lives, seeking to stimulate individual changes in students, as well as to promote changes in the socioeconomic, political and cultural level (Dotta *et al.*, 2014). In this regard, it is understood that education involves individuals in all their dimensions and that the role of the teacher starts to assume complex characteristics that go beyond the act of educating and (re)producing content, as elucidated in the participant's speech:

We usually joke that a teacher is a psychologist, a mother, and a father... but we have to be. Because I'm not actually working with a machine, I'm working with lives. (E6)

As a work that encompasses different universes in the same classroom, the act of educating becomes a challenge, with teachers feeling that their roles break the limits of teaching the subjects, that is, they encompass an education for life, which permeates the experience of each student. Therefore, school becomes a source of emotional support, playing a very important role in the lives of these individuals when they need to share their feelings (Mascia and Silva, 2014).

Following this logic, since school is an important space for socialization and development for these individuals, it is natural that they seek to clarify doubts and questions while attempting to build knowledge and answers. Among the themes that emerge and raise several questions, losses stand out (Sengik and Ramos, 2015). According to Paiva (2009), many forms of loss can occur throughout life, be it a broken toy, a pet that died, changes in the household or school, changes in friends or teachers, changes in the family by parental separation, unemployment, death of a loved one, or even death itself (Schuck, Bruxel and Strauss, 2014). Therefore, several deaths occur during development, at emotional, social, and somatic levels (Kovács, 2005; Kübler-Ross, 2008).

Faced with such a scenario and in order to deal with the theme of death, it is important to understand its place in today's society. As a taboo subject, prohibited in social spaces and discussions, death has no listening space due to the intense discomfort it causes. However, paradoxically, death is daily evidenced in the reality experienced by children in the communities and through media exposure — through the news and newspapers —, being linked to images of violence and accidents. This bias exposed by the media influences the social imaginary constructed about dying, as exemplified by the report of a participant, who describes an activity she performed with her students, in which she tried to find what were their fears:

I tried to prompt them by saying: "You have other fears". They're afraid of loss related to death, but they don't know how to specify death, they're afraid of loss... like getting on the plane and an accident happening. You know, everything related to tragedy, getting on the plane, an accident, and death. Taking the elevator, and the elevator having an accident, death. Get it? Interesting. But they didn't mention the word death. (E2)

As a result, death — although not necessarily mentioned by its proper term — is an issue covered by the vast majority of the media and is part of the fears present in the children’s imagination, since the theme is considered important from an audience perspective, especially for its traumatic nature, which involves murders, catastrophes, accidents (Santos, 2009; Sengik and Ramos, 2015). Nonetheless, the media approach is mainly superficial or even sensationalist, without much depth, as narrated by one participant:

I see when the students say things like “so many died in the accident”. And then death is shown, but not how it’s handled. The theme is presented as a fact that happened, but the issue of its surroundings and circumstances is not addressed. Death is only used as news. (E5)

According to the points raised in the speech, Santos (2009) states that the theme of death is part of the universe of children and adolescents who live with it daily and that death sometimes enters not only their homes but their schools. In addition to the exposure to death through the media and the Internet, children can also have contact with it through personal experiences.

In this sense, creating a space for questions and dialog becomes crucial, as the next participant shows in her speech about the death of a school employee:

They really needed to hear something from us [about death]. An explanation, something... They really wanted to hear, wanted to talk about what they were feeling. That’s what we worked on... letting them talk as much as they wanted and express their feelings. (E5)

School fulfills the role of promoting an active place for listening to the voices and afflictions of its students, becoming a space that can break the “walls of non-communication” (Poch and Vicente, 2010). In short, if mourning someone’s death or losing something meaningful to the individual is part of life, school should not be closed to the resonances that this emotional experience reverberates within its environment. In this way, education can be a field that connects the ethical, experiential, political, and emotional dimensions that compose the individual. Therefore, in a moment of loss, in which the family may be experiencing great pain without having the psychological conditions to provide support to children and adolescents, school becomes an essential place, allowing them to deal with the loss by sharing experiences and feelings with the support of significant figures (Stokes, Reid and Cook, 2009).

The way the school supports the bereaved student affects how they handle their grieving process (Stokes, Reid and Cook, 2009). Given these assumptions, school is not only a center for teaching and learning but also a mediating space for information about reality (Moreira, 2015).

Thus, since the research was carried out at public schools on the outskirts of the city, their reality has some peculiarities, which lead to children being constantly exposed to death. This situation is evident in the following statement:

[...] they start saying that their neighbor died in a robbery, the thug entered the other's house, and they saw the thug killing the guy. They live surrounded by death on a daily basis, they live where there are thugs and gunshots on the street, and they hear gunshots all night. The reality of death is always present; the subject they talk about is death; death is always present [...]. (E2)

According to Jucá *et al.* (2007), we can conclude that, in some contexts, the subject cannot be banned; death is a wide-open issue, with which children have very close and daily contact. This context is found, for example, in neighborhoods with constant drug trafficking violence. The point is that, in such environments, death is not a rare episode. It happens daily, and, on many occasions, children are directly exposed to it, a situation that raises the need to think about its particularities when approaching the issue with children in schools in a context of violence and vulnerability (Maeda, 2017).

However, despite being a direct part of the individuals' lives, death is still not addressed or handled in most schools. Santos (2009) brings three factors that may cause this problem: precarious training of educators throughout college on how to approach the topic; the massification of education, which ends up not providing spaces for reflection; finally, the dynamics of children's homes, which tend to avoid the subject. This last aspect is related to the hazy limits of what should be worked on at home by parents, or at school by teachers, as presented in the following statement:

[...] Suddenly you will talk about death and the child arrives home and says: "Mom, the teacher talked about death". Then the mother comes to school and sues us. I think many colleagues have this fear. To what extent do we have the right to talk about death if the family does not talk about it at home? [...] We are authority in the classroom until a certain extent. (E2)

The fear of crossing the line about what should be handled at school and what pertains to the family is added to the difficulty that is imposed when working on the theme of death with the different children that compose the classrooms. That being said, in order to think about how to approach this theme with children, it is important to consider that their understanding of the concept of death depends on various aspects, such as social, psychological, intellectual, and life experience issues (Paiva, 2009).

Losses in general — including death — are part of the school context, as school is one of the social systems; consequently, they must address this theme. This can be done by creating spaces for dialog, not only between teachers and students but including the entire school community in order to bring the student's support network closer, since solving doubts and talking about death makes it less distressing and allows the children to have a healthier grieving process.

SCHOOL AND ITS SPACES FOR MOURNING: BRICKS IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF SILENCE

Society makes death a taboo (Ariès, 2017), which has a unique effect on schools, as not talking about death leads to the non-acceptance and pain of the bereaved (Martins, 1983). When losing a loved one, many people are faced with fear and the unexpected, so death is felt like a betrayal of a promise of happiness and long life (Ariès, 2017). These aspects are evident in the statements of the teachers when asked about the communication regarding death in their schools:

It's something that we don't address, not because it isn't important. There's a taboo, and there's still prejudice against the theme of death. (E4)

It isn't rejection, it's fear. Fear of facing reality. The word alone is scary. (E2)

In this sense, the very approach to death requires that the individuals involved to face a reality that is often never experienced and that imposes fear and anguish. According to the interviewees, there is a difficult contact with the topic of death, since the subject is discriminated and hardly worked at school. Surrounded by fear and the unknown, death causes dread and, in some way, paralyzes the individual. This is confirmed when the teacher recants the fact of mentioning the word "death":

I also couldn't use the word "death". "She's [school teacher] gone, but she's fine", I told them. Then I talked about the topic, very smoothly. [...] And my father left three years ago. They said: "Too old?". I replied: "No, more or less"... They associate all of it with the theme of loss, of leaving, but not with the word death itself. (E2)

Faced with the arduous task of discussing death, we attempt to soften it in its content and in how we name it by attributing ideas that still link it to life, well-being, and the continuity of existence. Thus, the individual uses euphemisms to explain to others what is beyond their own understanding. Terms like "went away", "is traveling", and "became a little star" are used, seeking to lighten the weight of the idea of finitude. Based on the exposed, we perceive a lack of knowledge on how to approach and what to say when it comes to the subject of dying.

When experiencing the sudden death of a student, teacher E7 mentions the need for providing care to the group of teachers and students at school, since such loss leads to distress and a very intense emotional burden, which has no answers, but that cannot be ignored:

[...] I couldn't go back and teach as if nothing had happened. So, a whole process was put into motion involving all of us, teachers and students from all classes. Because it's complicated since you don't know what you're going to say. (E7)

Allowing the construction of a space where one can talk about death creates the need to deal with the feeling of helplessness. Contemporary logic imposes the

idea of never losing, of always having control and answers. This logic often originates from theories and science, which promote certainties and solve all questions to individuals (Casellato, 2015). However, facing loss and death breaks the logic mentioned and denotes the absence of answers, of a consolidated knowledge that can be passed on to others and that allows security to the speaker:

I think many of these initiatives don't happen for a lack of knowledge about how to approach the subject. Knowledge about it. About how to do it with children, with adults, that's the main difficulty. When the subject is discussed in a meeting between teachers, it doesn't go beyond common sense, or the experiences I had, or how I feel. So, you need more support and knowledge to talk about it. (E5)

And we follow our sensitivity. Our sensitivity, perhaps using "guesswork", the experiences that we had, all that brings us closer, but not with specific training or specific knowledge. (E6)

According to Grollman (2000), teachers tend not to talk to their students about grief and death in order to hide their fears. Despite being trained to provide answers and certainties, they need to work on the difficulty of exposing their uncertainties and weaknesses concerning a topic that does not have concrete answers. Thus, the author argues that the school needs to provide students with time and space to grieve and express their emotions so that teachers can use their skills for empathetic and active listening:

[...] it really affects their emotions, and we have no structure without the help of psychologists. We don't know what their reactions would be. The fear of misusing a methodology. And the fear of what would come next. (E3)

The school still remembers her [a student who died], the children of that time still talk about her. It's a very complicated issue, we talk about it, but we don't get too deep into the subject... Especially because we also have no answer. (E3)

Santos (2009) reinforces the importance of approaching the theme of death in schools by stating that, since death is a taboo in our society, it is not handled in Brazilian schools, contradicting the understanding that school is where the individual will experience a large part of their development in various areas. Therefore, this topic should be addressed with children to prepare them for the loss processes that occur throughout life, contributing to building healthier and more adaptive coping mechanisms. However, this approach must respect the capacity of each child for grasping the concept, since death is more or less realistically understood according to the child's level of cognitive maturity (Sengik and Ramos, 2015). Namely, the learning process about death must be gradual, taking into account the intellectual and emotional capacities of children (Torres, 1979), as their cognitive and emotional processes are still under construction (Bolwby, 2001).

Interestingly, educators seek knowledge about education related to death, aiming to deconstruct this theme as a taboo and reconstruct it as an object of school knowledge (Melo, 2007). Santos (2009) describes some steps that can be considered fundamental when discussing the topic of death with children, including: be prepared for the subject and try to remember personal experiences on the theme; attempt to discuss death before a crisis; endeavor to answer the children's questions honestly and directly according to their level of understanding; allow the expression of feelings and doubts; in case of uncertainty or lack of any answer, state that you will learn together and seek more information.

Azevedo (2003) declares that, when discussing death with children, we should not raise complex abstract and ideological speculations or get into thorough and frightening details. Talking about death simply involves putting the subject on the agenda, making it symbolically present in children's lives through images and texts. No longer ignoring the subject does not mean bringing depression, hopelessness, or morbidity, but making it visible as an important reference for the construction of meaning and significance for life:

So, whenever they needed to talk, we talked to them. And I said that too because I was in the classroom and in the coordination, and I said to the girls [teachers] whenever there is a need, let them talk. (E6)

We emphasize the importance of the school being a space to question and expose anxieties as well as find support in another colleague and teacher. Thus, broadening the dialog network helps in the joint construction of narrative and meaning for the theme of death and the pain of the bereaved.

POSSIBLE APPROACHES TO DEATH IN CHILDHOOD

This category brings suggestions given by the participants on how to approach the theme of death at schools. This issue is important because, as discussed previously, school is a construction environment for students, and teachers are seen as crucial emotional figures in this development.

School, an institution responsible for the transmission of knowledge, must also pay attention to the social and emotional needs of its students, such as the experience of mourning (Domingos and Maluf, 2003; Sengik and Ramos, 2015). In the interviews, the participants suggested some approaches involving continuing education for teachers, which consisted of working together to seek more effective ways of handling the theme of death with children. Such planning becomes essential, as the educators willing to listen and prepare for this moment can offer support to bereaved students (Marques and Demartini, 2011). In this sense, the participants put forward the idea of a progressive approach to the theme of death, working on the various losses present throughout development:

Starting with meetings to learn more about the issue of loss with children, which is a very strong aspect. Start working with the pet issue that we deal with in the first grades, then suddenly we can start talking about the death of pets

or even the death of someone in the family. There has to be a starting point because otherwise, nobody will talk about death. Nobody will speak of their own free will. And this dialog can also take place outside school. (E4)

With teachers, mainly, you have to start provoking the teachers so they can realize that this subject is part of our lives. And that, perhaps, we don't work on it because it's seen as taboo. (E4)

Avoiding the subject of loss can have negative consequences, as shown in the research conducted by Domingos and Maluf (2003) with students who had losses related to death. The authors report that the indifference of the school community left the students emotionally unsupported. According to another research carried out with teachers, the participants affirm they need to prepare to approach the theme of death and grief, using personal experience as an important tool; they cite lectures, readings, and movies as facilitators. They also mention the relevance of expert guidance on how to prepare emotionally, talk to the children, face conflicts, and deal with family (Kovács, 2012).

According to Domingos and Maluf (2003), social institutions, especially family and school, must be prepared to handle situations that involve strong emotions, such as mourning. In general, by not allowing the expression of affections, these spaces tend not to favor the experience of the grieving process. Ideally, family and school would work together (Kovács, 2012), seeking, through dialog, to share the responsibility for finding appropriate ways to approach death and losses with children (Maeda, 2017). The support provided by the school, in partnership with parents, contributes to attributing meaning to death and loss, preventing suffering (Kovács, 2012).

The study participants point out the importance of creating spaces where students feel comfortable talking. This entails encouraging the notion that teachers do not necessarily have all the answers — as there are no recipes for dealing with suffering —, but that they promote the opportunity for discussing losses and death with their students:

Openness is always essential. We need to listen to the students' questions, their doubts. This is the space where we can offer, and this is the space that produces results in the perspective of an extended conversation. Saving a space within the classes for when that moment arises, or for any questions that could lead to addressing the subject. (E6)

This perspective is in line with that indicated by Lobato and Quadros (2018), when they state that creating a dialogical space in the classroom opens up the opportunity to discuss the different cultural perspectives on the subject. This space allows both teachers and students to become aware of the limitations of their conceptions and to seek the construction of new interpretations about the discussed phenomena. Thus, this space must respect the differences and the pain of each individual:

It is a collective work. In collective activities, the rule is to respect the opinion, emotions, and feelings of others. They feel very safe when talking. They know that no one will laugh and that no one will think that crying is silly. Before proposing the activity or when I see that something is gonna happen, I talk about respect, respecting pain, respecting loss. (E5)

When dealing with losses, we empathetically assume the role of mediator, working on the subjects brought up by the students through their perspectives and providing a space meant for construction. This scenario allows a closeness to the theme of death according to the students' demands (Kovács, 2012), leading to a bond between student and teacher and the exchange of affection to support the loss process. According to participant E7, this construction of a proper place for exchanges is a daily effort:

But we don't use any teaching material or any specific material. In general, this construction of affections is made day by day. Because I believe that as you affect your students in the sense of liking you and feeling good about you, they will share their anxieties, say what they think and what they don't think. (E7)

The participants also point out different ways of handling these themes, including books, movies, group dynamics, or plays, all of them involving playful aspects. Such activities enable a process of reflection and association within the limits of each child:

Maybe a theater play, which is more concise and talks about it for a set amount of time. I think that theater is a good way to work on these issues. (E3)

There was an activity with a movie. I asked the students to share their fears. The movie involved fear... humor, anger, it was all about emotions. And then the fear appeared, the students' fears of losing their parents. They read, wrote, and expressed themselves as well. It is the minimum dialog you have with them. These are means of expression. (E5)

This finding is in accordance with that by Maeda (2017), who declares that the use of movies and videos contributes to broadening the perspectives on death. In addition, through literary works, for example, death can be symbolically represented, promoting the construction of its meanings. Fictional situations can contribute to anticipating or assisting the understanding of experienced events (Sengik and Ramos, 2015). As a result, including the theme of death in the school curriculum allows children to build coping mechanisms and support themselves and others (Stylianou and Zembylas, 2018b).

As school is one of the main social institutions responsible for the development of children, it needs, along with other support networks, to work on possible ways of addressing issues as relevant and delicate as loss and death. There are no formulas or protocols for handling these issues with children and, based on the participants' reports — which corroborate the literature —, the most appropriate

ways involve the creation of spaces for dialog and playful activities. Moreover, we need to pay attention to the capacity of each child to understand the subject, with a careful look at the uniqueness of each student.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Educating is a challenge that goes beyond teaching school subjects; it demands handling themes that permeate the experience of each student. School, as an important space for socialization and development of individuals, is a source of emotional support, where students seek to clarify doubts and build knowledge. The students' questions include losses, which occur in different ways throughout life and in death itself.

At the same time that death is a taboo in society, it is brutally exposed in the news and in the reality of communities, contributing to the construction of fantasies about dying. This presence, natural or imposed, of the theme of loss and death in the lives of children creates the need to address the topic in schools as an important issue related to education for life. However, teachers often have fears, be it by their insecurity in how to approach the subject and the lack of answers to the questions that may arise, or their worry of crossing the line between what is supposed to be their role and the family role.

Ideally, family and school would work together in the task of dealing with this topic with children, providing the necessary support and affection for them. The study participants suggest discussing the subject in meetings between teachers and between teachers and parents, seeking to think about ways to handle grief jointly. They point out the importance of a progressive approach to the theme, using playful tools, such as books, movies, or plays. Thus, promoting processes of reflection, association, and construction of adaptive coping mechanisms in the face of loss and death becomes possible, within the limits of each child.

As this research was held in public elementary schools on the outskirts of the city, it reveals a specific outline of this reality, exposing a limitation of the study with respect to understanding the demands of other schools and regions. Nevertheless, the research demonstrates the potential to promote a space for listening and a foundation for teachers in the construction of resources that strengthen their practices and bonds with students when faced with the reality of loss. We also stress the need for further research to debate and integrate the meanings that children attribute to death when it happens.

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