

SCHOOL'S ROLE ON DEALING WITH LOSS AND MOURNING OF CHILDREN: PROPOSALS IN GREEK EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

Family and school are primary child socialization institutions. They constitute social places where children learn to communicate, develop relationships and cultivate skills useful in the course of their lives. The concepts of "loss", "death" and "mourning" are demanding and sensitivethat is why handling these issues is becoming one of the most important skills in life. Loss is part of life and a child experiences it from an early age, when, for example, he/she loses his/her favorite toy or a puppy or when a person's relative is seriously ill and even when he/she daily lives with one of the two parents as a result of business responsibilities, divorce or death. Therefore, it is important that parents and teachers gradually contribute to the development of this skill by preschoolers as it will allow them to recognize process and express their emotions through realizing the loss and seeking for the supportive network. This paper is a literature review of researchers in which we attempt to outline children's psychosocial consequences of loss and mourning according to their age, to give insights into the teachers' role in such a difficult issue in children's lives, to strengthen cooperation between family and school, and to present basic guidelines about the way we address children who experience a loss. Finally, we present sample educational material that could be used in the classroom to help students understand and develop relevant skills to contribute to shaping a positive attitude to teachers' involvement in children's mourning and promote the implementation of death-focused preventive educational programmed.

KEYWORDS: *Loss, Mourning, Children's Treatment, Class Management*

INTRODUCTION

People's attitudes and perceptions towards life and death are influenced by a series of social, economic, cultural, historical factors, in accordance with the socio-cultural and spatial-temporal context in which they live. Factors related to the emergence of wars, poverty, demographic mobility, diseases' spreading or treatment, nutritional needs' satisfaction or not, urbanization, medical science, and technology evolution, etc. play a key role in shaping these perceptions and attitudes (Vovel, 2000). Contemporary western culture's focus on youth highlights death issues as directly related to aging and its accompanying problems, turning it into a silently forbidden subject (Alexias, 2008).

Death is one of the most stressful events in a person's life, in which, grieving process is a basic prerequisite for accepting the loss. Losses are a friend's betrayal or loss, a pet, a loving object, a resettlement, a divorce, work loss, a family member's stay in a different home, a different residence on business purposes, an accident, a serious

illness, sense of security, an intimate person's death (Chatzinikolaou, 2008). Grieving refers to personal emotional responses to loss, while mourning refers to social habits, burial habits and customs, the socially defined time following the event of death (Bowlby, 1980). A normal reaction to loss expressed by grieving is a feeling that attracts the person who grieves to something or someone missing, as a result of the consciousness of the contradiction between the world "as it should be" and the world "as it is". Grieving is the means that contribute to reality acceptance by the person whose life has changed due to death (Parkes, 1993).

The silence about the subject of death is seen as a generalized social practice, in people's effort to protect themselves and their relatives from unpleasant feelings such as sadness, anxiety, anger, self-search, despair, protest, confusion, disappointment. But what if children are asked to learn about death?

Debate avoidance on death and loss is often identified as a modern Western civilization construct. They are issues that cause pain and unpleasant feelings to children, so the majority of adult community considers them totally incompatible with their childhood. They are trying to protect them through silence about death or even discussing this concept (Nielsen et al., 1999). However, children deal with life and death on a daily basis. This happens through watching the news, seeing images of car accidents, natural disasters or warfare, watching TV series or the animated series. It also happens in everyday life, watching dry leaves drop, seeing a dead insect or even the death of a house pet. Due to these experiences for children, if the adult community wishes to protect them, then they need to speak clearly and honestly about death. They need to help them understand this concept in order to deal with this stressful experience in a successful way (Goodman, 2001). Since adult community, of the so-called Western world, claims to approach children as tomorrow's society citizens, 'capital to invest' in the future, as active social subjects and active shapers of their lives (Karakatsani & Pliogou, 2016), adults should show a similar attitude towards death as a concept clarification as well as towards children's cultivation of emotional development, emotional maturity and expression.

CHILDREN'S UNDERSTANDING OF DEATH

Children's understanding of death and their reaction to such a fact depends on a number of factors, such as their developmental stage, their age, their cognitive level, their previous related experiences, their social environment, their relatives' experiences and attitudes towards the fact of death, the family's educational level and their members' religious beliefs, their ability to externalize their feelings (Loumakou & Bruskelis, 2010).

According to Speece & Brent (1996), children's understanding of death consists of the following concepts: universality, irreversibility, body's vital functions' cessation, causality and the afterlife. The majority of children achieve a basic understanding of the first four concepts between the ages of five and seven, while after the age of ten, a more integrated perception of death as a concept appears (Lazar & Torney-Purta, 1991). However, scientific community accepts the age between six months and adolescence as the age when children may grieve the loss of a loved one, thus highlighting a significant differentiation in the current age range (Leontari, 2006).

In particular, at the *sensory-motor stage*, infants up to 2 years of age cannot cognitively understand the concept of death, but they feel the loss, abandonment consequences, showing separation anxiety, attachment, and regression behaviors according to Swiss psychologist and cognitive learning theory founder Piaget (1955) (Kontopoulou, 2007). At *pre-logic stage* (2-7 years) children, consider death to be a temporary and reversible condition. At the stage of *specific logical thinking* (7-11 years), children realize that body functions cease, all living beings die and that death is irreversible.

It only happens to other people, not their family members. Finally, at the *stage of abstract thinking* (after 11 years) children recognize the concept of death as a universal and inevitable stage in the cycle of life (Piaget, 1955).

Psychologist Nagy (1948) considers that children perceive death much earlier than the Piaget's theory supports, pointing at three stages of understanding the concept of death. In the *first stage* (3-5 years), death is perceived as sleep continuation, it is neither universal nor personal. In the *second stage* (5-9 years), death occurs in one form, it is definitive, but not universal and personal, since children feel that some people can escape. In the *third stage* (9 years and older), children perceive death as definitive, universal and personal. In the latter two stages, the most common reactions are anger, denial, crying, problems in school performance, concern about physical health.

MOURNING STAGES

Each person mourns in his/her own way for as long as necessary. The way in which death occurred -whether it was expected or sudden- the cause of death, a significance degree of the deceased person, supportive network's existence to the mourner, his/her personality and the wider socio-cultural context are factors that affect mourning. The ability to externalize mourning is a complex skill that is gradually being built in people's lives. Adult people, having mental processing ability, can mourn and continue their lives without necessarily needing a specialist's help. However, children's mourning process completion requires emotional support from family and school (Anagnostopoulou & Chatzinikolaou, 2015).

Mourning stages for individuals facing their own death or a significant loss are five, according to the book-milestone on death 'On Death and Dying' by psychiatrist Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross published in 1969. Initially, there is the *denial stage*, during which the patient cannot believe what exactly happened to him/her, believing that he/she will overcome illness very quickly and will return to his/her previous good health. At this stage, Kübler-Ross proposed to reinforce the person to express his/her feelings and not to be pressured to accept reality. Then, there is the *stage of anger*, where the person wonders why this unfavorable incident has occurred to him/her, expressing jealousy for other people still living at their normal pace. At this stage, it is proposed to allow the individual to externalize his/her anger, while at the same time strengthening his/her morale to continue the effort to tackle this difficult situation. Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross proposes *anegotiation stage* as a third stage, during which patients and their relatives 'resort to religious shelters' or alternative therapies in their effort to save time with the help of God or doctors. In the fourth *stage of depression*, it seems that there is no hope anymore and the patient resigns, while in the fifth *stage of acceptance* the patient approaches the imminent loss with peace of mind. However, it is clarified that all patients do not experience the same stages in the same way, nor in the same order, as there is no typical reaction to loss and there is no typical loss.

A theoretical approach regarding the "grieving cycle", i.e. grieving process in which children experience loss, was supported by the writer Bill Dodds (2001) and it unfolds in four stages, without being a strictly structured model. In the first stage, *shock, and denial*, children refuse to accept that a familiar person's death has occurred, they are confused and do not remember parts of that period. In the second stage, *anger, and guilt*, children are angry with the deceased person who left them, with God, with the doctors, with other people in their family. They often feel guilty that they have a share in the responsibility for this unpleasant incident and consider insignificant other people's concerns. In the third stage of *depression*, children realize that there are no complete, satisfactory answers for the incident and for this reason they feel exhaustion and loneliness. In the fourth stage, *adaptation, and acceptance*, attempts are done for children to return back to

their previous routines.

However, often this reintegration behavior can also give children feelings of betrayal and lack of devotion to the deceased.

Another important theoretical approach to people's reactions due to a significant loss concerns young children's separation anxiety when their mother dies. It shows similarities with stages in adult grieving, according to British psychologist and psychoanalyst John Bowlby (1960, 1961, and 1980). In particular, the first stage is *numbness (apathy)* in the announcement of unpleasant information, which is approached as incredible, paralleling that reaction with the infant who does not believe that his/her mother is not alive. The second phase concerns the *search* of the deceased with the aim of bringing him/her back, because of the infant's longing for reconnection with his/her mother. The third stage is *disorganization, desperation and despair*, in which the future seems completely indifferent and uncertain. The final stage is a *reorganization*, in which there is acceptance of the condition and desire for life reset. However, it is underlined that the mourning process does not have to follow certain stages and that mourning may involve unexpected developments, stage omissions or repetitions (Leontari, 2006).

CHILDREN'S ADJUSTMENT AND REACTIONS TO LOSS

Children's adjustment to loss and death of a loved one, especially when it comes to their parents, depends on many factors, according to Dr. William Worden (1996) and The Institute for Trauma and Stress at the NYU Child Study Center (2002). The factors could be categorized into ten categories. These are the so-called mediating factors that influence the course of adjustment and its effects on the loss.

In particular, these are the remaining parent and family members emotional and physical functioning, the child's adjustment to new data, his/her personality and temperament, the existence of pre-existing risk factors such as mental illness, societal problems, etc. The family's consistency and socio-economic level, the unexpectedness of the condition, the type of relationship between the deceased and the child, the deceased parent's gender and the child's gender, the age of the deceased parent, the remaining parent and the child, the availability of support networks or not, the existence of a new partner in the parent's life, the new partner's timing and how he/she is presented, causing symptoms of insecurity and anxiety in the children (Worden, 1996; The Institute for Trauma and Stress at the NYU Child Study Center, 2002).

Children experience a variety of reactions during mourning and after the announcement of death, as in the case of adults. These are extreme reactions or seemingly indifferent (Worden, 2009). Children's reactions are greatly influenced by the reactions of the remaining parent. Children in infancy express their sorrow through play, paintings, and nutritional changes or in specific behaviors. Often, they regress in previous developmental stages, exhibit bodily reactions such as sleep disorders, enuresis, headaches, and high sensitivity to physical disorders, etc. Older children often show anger when they realize that death is uncontrollable or feel guilty because of unconscious aggression towards the late parent. However, the greatest risk is depression and suicidal tendencies' in pre-adolescent and teenage age, while performance and relationships with educators and classmates are common problems in school (Herbert, 2004).

Qualitative research findings (Pliogou, 2008) with semi-structured interviews of parents experiencing their spouse's death highlight the effect of parental death on children's reactions.

A mother with a second-grade child –who was forced to work after her husband's death to meet her financial needs- shares her experiences of her first years of widowhood and death's impact on the child's school performance, as well as living within their family environment.

"I went to work and left Sonia alone and... my soul was bleeding literally! Literally! When my child stayed home and was cold' outdoors it was freezing and there was no heating at home and she was afrailsitting here all alone on this sofa to be next to the door and have all the lights of the house lit and call me: "Mama, are you coming?" (...) Let me just tell you something to understand. Do you believe that we do not remember anything, neither me nor my daughter! Nothing! Maybe now that I'm thinking about it, I can tell you only that she was going to school alone, because the school was close and she stayed alone at home so there was no one to help her with her homework. I do not know what was happening with the child's schooling. She still makes a lot of spelling mistakes, but... what can we say now? on which ground should the child continue? That is, we were discussing the other day with my daughter and she said to me: "I cannot remember anything about those two first years after dad's death. I do not even remember if I had a male or female teacher. I'm trying to think, some moments and suddenly I'm in the second grade with Mrs Anatoli (her teacher's name), then suddenly I'm on the fifth grade with Mrs. Ritza (her teacher's name). What happened to the other two years? ".

Another mother of two teenage boys in the 10th and 11th High School grades describes this incident's role in their studies' continuation and their professional choices.

"It was two months after my great son had lost his father and said, " Our dad left us a name on the free market and I want to honor it (...) I will study economics and I work in the private sector "(...)' when this happened the younger son did not want to continue studying. That's because he felt his dad's job was responsible for daddy dying. That is, the fact that he was so tired, he spent too much time on working for others was negative for the younger son and he was saying, "I will not work for anybody and I will not die for anybody!" And he did not go on to take the university examinations that year!"

SCHOOL'S ROLE IN MOURNING MANAGEMENT

School's basic mission is to contribute to a person's social, psychological and academic development, according to 1566/1985 Law in Greece (Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs, 1985). Teachers' basic roles include educating, evaluating and, in recent years, consulting children. Counseling is a continuous process to help people with emotional difficulties to cope with their problems, to adjust in a social environment, such as schools, and to effectively deal with their psychological conflicts (Malikiosi-Loizos, 2011). Early Childhood and Primary Education teachers are not only concerned with teaching, but they feel that they have to serve as counselors to both students and parents. Positive correlations between teacher quality and student achievement are very important factors within the school framework explaining the academic performance. Studies have demonstrated the importance of teacher's professional development and its correlation to students' achievement (Pliogouet al., 2016).

Teachers' duty is to prepare children for the most important events of their lives-including death- so as to effectively support children who experience this condition, as school takes a large part of children's lives by playing an important role in their development. A complete education's goal is to develop skills necessary for life, such as critical thinking development, emotional intelligence, and use of dialogue and encouragement of collaboration through experiential learning (Pavlouetal., 2012).

However, a more general tendency is identified, i.e. teachers avoid developing issues related to different forms of family organization, as "forbidden" issues, which are often not seen in school textbooks (Pliogou, 2011). This may be the reason for their specific reluctance. Death was a normal event of social life in which individuals participated collectively, while it became a "special" topic in the last few decades because of urbanization sprawl in Western societies. In particular, research conducted in Greece highlights Greek teachers' tendency to believe that mourning management in schools should be done by school psychologists, doctors and specialists for effective achievement (Papadatou, et al., 2002; Chatzinikolaou, 2015). However, children seek a 'shelter' in school, a person, who will hear with his/her heart their deepest thoughts, their worries, will feel their emotional load and give them the emotional security they seek (Holland, 2001). Usually, the kindergarten teacher and the school teacher are mainly this person for young children (Reid, 2002).

A father who was experiencing widowhood and his two children were primary school pupils, shared with us the following thoughts and experiences regarding their teachers' reaction when the children were informed about their mother's death (Pliogou, 2008):

"Everyone supported me, as teachers, they all stood next to the children. That is, their behavior was excellent, they talked sweetly, took care of them during the lessons, so as the children to be able to overcome the first shock. And you know everything that is done for the first time is terrible! That is, the first birthday alone (two months after the beginning of that school year), the first Christmas alone. Unbearable pain! (...) My great son was in the fifth grade, i.e. the first year... he had a very good teacher who approached the child, brought a sense of honor, did not let him relax, did not show him regret... despite the 'wound' being still very open (...) I don't want special treatment for my children, I don't want them to be seen as orphans. Teachers should know it because a child who is with one parent has a problem de facto, there is some issue. Correct? Sometimes his/her behavior and attitudes are different from other children. If the teacher does not know this, he/she may offend the child in his/her ignorance and hurt him/her. He/she should be aware of it, not give him... graceful behavior and higher marks, but to be more careful on how to behave. I mean simple example; that is, a simple example, at first Giorgakis the previous year, often forgot to get a notebook or a book. If his teacher, turned and said to him: "Didn't your mother prepare your bag?"... -because usually mums prepare the bag -... will she hurt the child or not? The teacher knew last year that George was alone. And what she could do -and did it- was to inform me, call me. I had left my phone and my cell phone number, and I am next to my children and their schools every time. "

The school can and should support the family, promote their cooperation, help in the search for information useful for the family to overcome the difficulties it may face as a result of the living conditions' change after the death (Talwar, 2011).

However, training programs' planning and implementation on death and mourning management will play a very important role in achieving these goals. Death Education appeared in America in the mid-1950s and evolved into three periods: exploration period (1928-1957), development of 'death treatment' period (1958-1967) and 'publicity' period (1967-1977). Death Education objectives are: prevention, namely individuals' preparation for death management, intervention to help and support those who have to deal with loss and death. Another goal is post-crisis recovery after clarifying the elements that constitute a crisis in order to make children able to manage similar conditions in the future (Warren, 1981).

Consequently, it is imperative to implement training programs aiming at training teachers to manage children's mourning, supporting their families, managing the rest of the class in relation to children's behavior towards the child experiencing loss and mourning (Sandoval, 2013). However, the difficulties of teacher training programs' successful implementation are related to external difficulties, related to the selection of appropriate educational material, finding relevant references and exploitation of expert counseling for teachers. They are also related to internal difficulties, such as teachers' personal reluctance to address a relevant issue, since they themselves are virtually unable to manage their own difficulty in accepting their own people's death or find it difficult to manage children and their families' reactions (Holland, 2008).

Loss and mourning management is one of the most important skills in people's lives, so it is necessary that teachers and parents contribute to this skill's development from pre-school age. Emotions' recognition, processing and externalizing, understanding of loss, communicating with familial people and seeking support are key-points in this direction. For this reason and with regard to the educational material choice for the loss and familiarity with the concepts of death, grieving and mourning, teachers should take into account that loss is an inevitable part of people's lives, and consequently they should not be approached after an incident but in advance, so that children are prepared to deal with an unpleasant event. They should also accept that school can play a key role in communicating and treating mourning without the presence of specialists. Also, teachers should speak to children with honesty and clarity, without obscuring events and no devaluation or overestimation of children's emotional reactions. It is important to refer to such concepts at the first opportunity in a lesson or a daily occurrence that highlights the concepts of life and death (Anagnostopoulou&Chatzinikolaou, 2015).

Finally, a series of activities on Death Education is presented indicatively and briefly, mainly for pre-school and primary school-age children. Teachers often start a related educational program with the game "Guess how I feel". This game is performed through dramatization, with the aim of perceiving emotions such as jealousy, anger, fear, joy, love, etc., which children rank in "good" and "bad" so as to learn how to manage their feelings. The activity can be completed through visual expression and dialogue or a greater ability to express many, varying and different in intensity emotions with the use of a pillow or emotion cards or musical pieces or the construction of a "memory box" in which children can keep various memories of a person who has died. Another activity is "life cycle" with the aim of understanding the cycle of life, through the succession of day and night, the seasons, the alternation of sunshine and clouds, moon phases, life of a butterfly. In this activity, children express by painting on white papers, dividing them into phases/parts, trying to understand the concept of reversibility or exchangeability. "Brainstorming" is a known method of spontaneous expression through which a series of words are recorded on a blackboard, regarding the children's first thoughts when hearing of loss which are children's first thoughts at hearing loss, death or and mourning. Thus, children are given the chance to express themselves spontaneously, having the assurance from the teacher that all opinions are respected and accepted. Another way that the teacher can achieve understanding for these concepts, as well as the children's emotional expression, is through the use of works of art and especially the paintings with relevant subjects, such as Munch's "Scream". In addition, children's literature such as *"If You Love It Comes Back"* by Vassiliki Nevrokopli (2007), *"The Leaf's Fall named Freddy"* by Leo Buskalia (1991), *"Goodbye Freddy"* by Sophia Chatzinikolaou (2007), *"What on earth Do You Do, When You Lose Someone You Love"* by Trevor Romein (2005) etc, which deal with relevant concepts, can be a springboard for debate and children's emotional externalization (Chatzinikolaou, 2008; Anagnostopoulou&Chatzinikolaou, 2015).

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, it is underlined that every child who mourns needs support from family, school, peers and the wider social environment. Each age group has its own particularities of understanding loss, death, and reactions to such an event. However, it remains necessary to ensure that every child is able to express his/her self, to process his/her mourning, to accept the attempt to understand loss, but also to respect the way he/she manages mourning and externalizes his/her intimate feelings. Only in this way, every child will recognize the 'pieces of the puzzle' of his/her own individual identity in every aspect of life.

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