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REVIEW ARTICLE

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HOW CAN TEACHERS ACT IN SITUATIONS OF DEATH AND CHILD AND TEENAGER'S GRIEF? A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

The situation in which we find ourselves immersed in the global pandemic of COVID-19 has resulted in a large number of deaths, and although death continues to be taboo in western society in the 21st century, it is necessary and urgent that educational centres resume the challenge of approaching death pedagogically. In this study, a meta-analysis of the current state of death pedagogy is carried out, providing practical and functional tools and strategies for schools and high schools. To find all the strategies mentioned, a continuous and systematic bibliographic search of the last 7 years was carried out. Guidelines are offered to carry out useful and effective empathic accompaniment, as well as a follow-up of the understanding of death that children and adolescents have according to their ages. In addition, psycho-pedagogical orientations are also offered for more serious situations, as well as actions to be taken into account depending on the casuistry that we may find in educational centres. In conclusion, education professionals are encouraged to take charge of the great challenge of carrying out a pedagogy of death in a formal education classroom.

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INTRODUCTION

The current global health crisis caused by COVID-19 (WHO, 2020; Ying, Gayle, Wilder-Smith & Rocklöv, 2020; Zunyou & McGoogan, 2020), forces us to rethink the need for a pedagogy of death in schools (McAfee *et al.*, 2020; Rodríguez Herrero *et al.*, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic proclaimed in February 2020 (WHO, 2020) is resulting in a large number of infections with the virus, as well as a multitude of deaths in all countries (Marchena&Fensterseifer, 2020). For this reason, this article provides a meta-analysis of the existing literature of the last 7 years in relation to the pedagogy of death with the aim of providing practical and functional tools and strategies for education professionals.

MATERIALS Y METHODS

The main objective of this research is to analyse the current state of the need for the pedagogy of death, both nationally and internationally. This literature review began in 2017 and will be completed in January 2021. The method used to obtain the literature cited in this study on the need for a pedagogy of death was obtained from various national databases (Dialnet, RESH, Psicodoc, REDINED and institutional repositories of Spanish universities) and international databases (Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, IRESIE, Latindex, WorldCat, Sudoc and Scielo).

Taking the above into account, a systematic follow-up and analysis of the publications made in the last 7 years was carried out. However, authors from previous years appear, given their relevance in the scientific field of pedagogy of death. A qualitative research was carried out (Ruiz, 2009), analysing the contents of 62 documents, although repeated ones were eliminated (Parga, 2018). The selected documents were organised and structured into a total of 8 categories (corresponding to the different sub-sections of this study):

The taboo of death

- Death: an educational reality
- Actions in situations of death and bereavement in children and youngsters.
- Pedagogy of death from 2 to 3 years of age
- Pedagogy of death from 3 to 6 years of age
- Pedagogy of death from 6 to 9 years of age.
- Pedagogy of death in pre-adolescents and adolescents

It should be borne in mind that criteria such as the importance of authorship (with emphasis on pioneering authors in the subject and those who laid the foundations for it), scientific quality and suitability with preventive or pre-death pedagogy were used. This last criterion is of great importance because, although scientific production on the subject is becoming more and more widespread, it still remains a

social and pedagogical taboo, a fact that hinders the number of articles analysed.

RESULTS

The taboo of death: Death can (and should) be addressed at all educational levels. From the age of 3 years onwards is an optimal period for including the didactic treatment of death in the curriculum (Ramos-Pla, 2020). However, there is no curriculum that considers death as an educational area. The 19th century taboo, sex, was gradually integrated into the curriculum. On the contrary, the opposite has happened with death, resulting in the current conception that the school curriculum has of living beings (Serra Llanas, 2014; Rodríguez Herrero, Herrán & Cortina, 2015; Herrán, 2017; Pagano, 2018; Fornasari, 2019; Rodríguez Herrero, Herrán & Yubero, 2020), but, above all, of humans: we are born, we grow and we reproduce. In this sense, educational centres are a clear reflection of our society, resulting in the professional taboo of death (Rodríguez Herrero, Herrán & Cortina, 2015; Colomo & Cívico, 2018; Martínez-Heredia & Bedmar, 2020). Preparing for death is an aspect that is absent from the didactic intentions of current schools (Selfa, Fraga & Berengué, 2014; Rungduin, Acopio & Rungduin, 2020). A transformation towards curricular maturity and the training of education professionals is needed (Herrán, 2019). Several authors have already developed an extensive line of research in this area (Herrán & Cortina, 2006), who have provided us with various methodological lines and resources to address a pedagogy of death: film and video forums, children's and young people's literature, music, humour, dialogue about doubt, role-playing games, small research projects, educational projects, interviews with experts, workshops, service-learning, etc.

Death: an Educational Reality: As we grow older, we accept that we do not have any kind of omnipotent power, that we cannot make the impossible possible, and, moreover, the fear of blaming ourselves for the death of our loved ones diminishes. This fear is maintained in a tenuous form as long as it is not excessively provoked. Along these lines, Esquerda & Agustí (2010), Fernández Hurtado (2013), Ramos Álvarez (2010) and Rodríguez Herrero, Herrán & Cortina (2019) affirm that children elaborate the idea of death according to the evolutionary process congruent with the development of their intelligence, their emotions and the influence of the socio-cultural environment that favours their maturation. We should add that other factors such as religion, culture, education and the surrounding society (Ramos-Pla, Gairín & Camats, 2018), are also elements that influence the understanding of grief and the relevant manifestations. For this reason, each child's grief will be unique and different from the rest, given that each person as a being is unrepeatable.

Actions in situations of death and bereavement of children and young people: Turner (1998), Kroen (1996), Guerra *et al.* (2018) and Rodríguez-Herrero *et al.* (2020) argue that the child should express him or herself with the teacher or counsellor to give small hints of how they could help. As an example, they suggest that they build a memory box together or make a book with poems, diaries, drawings, letters, photographs, etc., that can remind them of the missing person. A very functional tool to work on death and grief is literature and stories, making use of bibliotherapy (Carreras Saura & Hidalgo, 2017). Colomo (2016), Gorosabel-Odrizola & León-Mejía (2016), Campillo Ruiz & Ruiz Arriaza (2017), Herrán, Rodríguez Herrero & Yubero (2019) justify their use in improving the understanding of reality and, in addition, provide answers and examples to solve everyday problems. At the same time, a period of time should be left in silence and comments should be made after the story has been explained. It is good to let the children think, reflect and relate the content of the death to their own personal experiences. However, attention should be paid to stories that have an end of eternal life of the protagonists, as they can create false illusions (Ramos-Pla, Gairín & Camats, 2020). In relation to working on death through stories, a very positive experience in Early Childhood Education (Selfa, Fraga & Berengué, 2014) was to intervene based on a dialogue plan in which the literal understanding of the text and its interpretation were

worked on. Through bibliotherapy it is possible to deal with very significant events, such as death, in a very satisfactory way. In addition, the same authors add that through stories it is possible to work in a meaningful and functional way on the preventive pedagogy of death (Ramos-Pla & Gairín, 2020; Ramos-Pla, 2020) and thus carry out a grieving process (Pedrero-García, 2020) that is as normalised as possible.

Pedagogy of death from 2 to 3 years of age: From 2 or 3 years old they have a certain idea (their own) of death. From a very young age, they ask questions aimed at understanding what death is and what it is to be dead. Starting from here, is it not necessary to teach about death? Herrán & Cortina (2006) state that the educational development of a hypothetical education for death should continue throughout life, through family education (Herrán, Rodríguez Herrero & Serrano, 2020), primary, secondary and university education. Children construct the meaning of death based on their experiences and, in this sense, the information they receive from adults plays a very important role (Ramos-Pla, Gairín, Camats, 2020). If an overprotective attitude is adopted, infants will grow up in a parallel, unreal and fictitious reality, in which they will avoid suffering and death. In these cases, the child may be disoriented and, consequently, not know how to respond in conflictive situations. For this reason, we are in line with Santamaría (2010) who opposes child overprotection. On the contrary, we agree with Herrán & Cortina (2011), Herrán (2013), Serra Llanas (2014), Yang & Park, (2017), Colomo & Cívico (2018), in supporting the introduction of the pedagogy of death in the school curriculum as a cross-cutting theme and, without being a specific area, given that it is a spiral or radical theme in all areas of knowledge (Rodríguez Herrero, Herrán & Cortina, 2015; Herrán, 2017; Rodríguez Herrero, Herrán & Yubero, 2020). Although they have concrete and literal thinking, with linear causality and magical thinking components, they ask questions and explore different aspects of the world around them (Esquerda & Agustí, 2010). They can talk about death spontaneously and do not usually associate it with negative feelings and experiences. Children do not understand that death is irreversible and definitive. At the same time, given that infants tend to have this linear, magical and egocentric thinking, it should be taken into account that they can relate the death of their loved ones to events that the child has done, even though they had nothing to do with it (Gabarró, 2016). In this sense, it is very important to quickly reassure them that the death was not their fault, that they had nothing to do with it and, therefore, could not have caused it.

Pedagogy of death from 3 to 6 years of age: Before the age of 3, children do not understand what death is, but they do notice the lack of their attachment figure. That is, infants do not have an innate knowledge of what death is, but learn through experience and models learned from adults (Martins *et al.*, 2020). There is a significant finding in studies of children with terminal cancer: infants aged 3-6 years have more information about their upcoming death than those aged 7-11 years (López-Pérez, Pino-Juste & Campos, 2020). The authors justify this by arguing that it is easier for adults to explain to infants that they will die from a magical perspective (characteristic of the thinking of children aged 3-6 years), reversible and temporary. Death should be explained to children as the cessation of vital functions, but above all, differentiating it from falling asleep, going on a trip, etc. (Esquerda & Agustí, 2010; Gabarró, 2016). In short, working on death in children aged 3 to 6 years (Diez Navarro, 2011; Fernández Hurtado, 2013; Rungduin, Acopio & Rungduin, 2020) means not avoiding it, and relating it to specific events that they see. It will be necessary to link the death of a family member to the concrete cause, but helping the bereaved individual to contextualise it in time.

Pedagogy of death from 6 to 10 years of age: As for children between 6 and 9 years of age (Fernández Hurtado, 2013; Ramos-Pla, Gairín & Camats, 2018; Rungduin, Acopio & Rungduin, 2020), we must work on death being aware that at this age, death must be talked about in a truthful, clear, etc. way. They should be made aware of the excess of anguish that may involve understanding reality from their

emotional fragility (Guerra *et al.*, 2018). Moreover, sharing emotions with children is healthier than hiding them. Talking about emotions is not a sign of weakness or vulnerability; being honest about our moods helps us feel better.

Pedagogy of death in pre-adolescents and adolescents: At this stage, they perceive death as something that makes them "different". They fear that expressing their grief may be seen as a sign of weakness. Children, in particular, may refuse to cry or show that they are affected, even though they feel deep sadness. Even so, it should be stressed to them that crying is normal and positive (Gallego & Isidro, 2018). Adolescents perceive the concept of death (related to operant thinking) as adults do (Dafdar & Lester, 2019): permanent, inevitable, universal and irreversible. We must take into account that, in order to face the awareness of personal fragility in a painful way, they use mechanisms of denial, protection, rationalisation or look for other ways out (Fernández Hurtado, 2013; Kroen, 1996). In this sense, adolescents need a figure who accompanies and helps them, without judging their reactions (Rungduin, Acopio & Rungduin, 2020). If denial of the death of a loved one persists, we need to offer realistic statements about how life will be different without him or her, while at the same time setting examples that life will go on. As educational professionals, we can ask them to write about their feelings or make a list of things that worry them. In case the death was sudden or unexpected (Kroen, 1996) we can suggest that they write a letter to the missing person so that they can say goodbye in a symbolic way. It will be necessary to guarantee confidentiality and to tell them that adults also feel fear, anxiety, frustration, anger, etc., when a loved one dies. Furthermore, following Kroen's (1996) discourse, during the weeks and months following the death of a loved one, we have to encourage them to go out with their peer group. They should know that it is good to be distracted and get out of the house. When pre-teens and adolescents ask about the causes and circumstances of the death, we should respond frankly and talk to them about how the death will affect them personally. Talking openly about death, both to children and to pre-teens and adolescents, opens up a wide range of cognitive and emotional benefits for the protagonists themselves (Serra Llanas, 2014; Jaramillo, 2019):

- Increased self-esteem.
- Becoming more tolerant with oneself and with others.
- Learning to take care and to take care of oneself.
- Development of tolerance and humility.

As education professionals, we must be very alert to any signs of depression (Colomo, Gabarda & Motos, 2018; Dafdar & Lester, 2019): excessive silence, fatigue, changes in eating and sleeping habits, expressions of hopelessness, lack of interest in their favourite activities, etc. When we notice any of these signs, it is vitally important to encourage the bereaved person and, above all, to talk to him or her about his or her fears and concerns. If the warning signs persist, the child or adolescent should be referred to health specialists. Along these lines, it may be possible that the child or adolescent has pathological grief (Mahboubeh & Lester, 2019). Fernández Hurtado (2013, p.85) defines it as "grief that, due to its intensity or duration, does not evolve over time". TEA Ediciones (Ramos Álvarez, 2010) presents a programme for prevention, assessment and intervention in grief situations within the school context. The material provides a series of tools and questionnaires to act in the case of pathological grief.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In short, there is an urgent need for schools to take matters into their own hands and implement a pedagogy of death. The overwhelming reality of the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a multitude of deaths and, consequently, there will hardly be a school or institute without a bereaved student. All the tools and strategies proposed in the article can be used and adapted taking into account the context, maturity level, character and emotions of children and adolescents. In addition, providing the level of understanding of death by age group

facilitates the adaptation of activities and empathic accompaniment. Although the number of articles on the pedagogy of death is different and lower than in other fields of knowledge, the quality and practicality of these articles is remarkable. Moreover, in recent years the subject has proliferated internationally, but above all in Spain (Rodríguez Herrero, Herrán & Cortina, 2019). Finally, we encourage all education professionals to self-reflect on the need for a pedagogy of death in schools, as well as its implementation.

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