

Research Note

Teachers' Attitudes and Experiences Regarding Death Education in the Classroom

Paraskevi Engarhos¹, Victoria Talwar¹, Michael Schleifer², Sarah-Jane Renaud¹

McGill University¹, Université du Québec à Montréal²

Today, young children are exposed to death through various forms of media in their communities, schools, and home environments (Aspinall, 1996). With this inevitability of exposure, there is a need for death education in order to inform and support today's youth when facing the subject of death. Death is said to be one of the most emotional and complex matters an individual can experience during childhood (Slaughter & Griffiths, 2007).

While the discussion of death is often a conversation that happens in the home, there may be times when bereaved families are absorbed by their own grief and are therefore unable to provide the emotional support children may need (Papadatou, Metallinou, Hatzichristou, & Pavlidi, 2002). Relatedly, it has been shown that the type of support provided to children during a period of mourning has a significant effect on their bereavement experience, which emphasizes the importance of providing developmentally appropriate bereavement support and death education to children (Papadatou et al., 2002). Past research has also found that when children's reactions to grief are not adequately addressed at school, their relationships with their teachers and peers may be negatively affected and can contribute to poor academic performance and behaviour problems in the classroom (Papadatou et al., 2002). Therefore, the school can play a significant role in helping bereaved children by providing them with appropriate support and guidance. However, when teachers are asked their opinions about death education in the classroom, they often report feeling discomfort when talking to children about death, express anxiety about discussing such a sensitive topic, and feel inadequately prepared for the task in terms of training (McGovern & Barry, 2000; Papadatou et al., 2002).

The current research report is part of an on-going study exploring educators' experiences and concerns regarding discussing death in the classroom, their self-perceived ability to approach the topic of death with children, and their attitudes regarding death education in school. As the study is on-going, the current paper discusses the results of preliminary analyses conducted with the responses of the 59 teachers who have participated thus far.

Teachers from Quebec and Ontario were recruited through social media announcements that described the study's purpose and provided a link to an online survey. Participants were asked demographic information, if they have ever spoken about death with student(s), details about the conversation, and their comfort level while talking to children about death. Finally,

teachers' perception of children's understanding of death and the role of death education in the classroom were explored. On average, it took participants between 15 and 20 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

All participants agreed that it is "good" to discuss death with students regardless of their age (4 to 18 years old), that children need help to understand death, and that it is natural for children of all ages to have questions about death. The majority of teachers (71%) had some experience speaking to a child about death in the past. The majority of these conversations were initiated by the child, with most conversations relating to the death of a person the child knew, most often a grandparent. Fewer teachers reported having the experience of speaking to a group of children about death (37%). The main reason reported for not discussing death with a student was that, to the teacher's awareness, a death had not yet occurred and as result the teacher did not feel the need to address the topic (87.5%). For those who had spoken to a child or group of children about death, the majority recorded feeling comfortable throughout the discussion ($n_{\text{individual}} = 23$ [60.5%]; $n_{\text{group}} = 12$ [60%]), followed by slightly uncomfortable ($n_{\text{individual}} = 12$ [31.6%]; $n_{\text{group}} = 6$ [30%]), and few reported feeling uncomfortable ($n_{\text{individual}} = 3$ [7.9%]; $n_{\text{group}} = 2$ [10%]).

When asked how they would prepare for future conversations about death with children, the majority reported that they would talk to other professionals (58%) or read information on children's understanding of death (50%). Overall, only 53.7% reported that they felt qualified to discuss death with children. When considering the method by which to provide death-related information to children, teachers reportedly preferred a question-and-answer discussion format (74%) compared to direct teaching (44%) or death education through the use of literature (48%).

Teachers indicated that they thought parents were the best individuals to discuss death with children (95.8%), followed by teachers (66.7%), and counsellors (63.5%). Finally, teachers reported that the best time to have death education is during the elementary school years (77.6%) and that death education should be included in a variety of areas of education, including: health class (57.4%), science class (40.7%) and through the services of guidance counsellors or school psychologists (50%).

There was a significant relationship between teachers' self-perception of their professional experience with death education and how qualified they feel they are to discuss death with children, $r(58) = -.360$, $p < .001$. Thus, the current sample indicates that the more experience teachers have with death education, the more qualified they feel in approaching the subject with children. Analyses of their written comments revealed several themes. A recurring theme among teachers was the feeling of being unqualified and unprepared to discuss death. Many expressed the importance of letting such conversations be "student-directed" to allow for the expression of different views and the sharing of experiences. The teachers who had had some specific training about how to talk to children about death indicated that they felt more prepared and comfortable discussing these topics, which they attributed to their training.

Overall, the teachers in our study reported feelings of uncertainty in discussing death with students. They indicated that the topic is important but expressed a lack of confidence in initiating or participating in such discussions. The need for further training and guidance on the topic was identified by most teachers as the main reason for these feelings. These results suggest a need and desire for teacher support in providing death education to students. Such support may promote further death education in schools and help children be better prepared to deal with death in the future.

References

- Aspinall, S. Y. (1996). Educating children to cope with death: A preventive model. *Psychology in the Schools, 33*(4), 341–349. doi:10.1002/(SICI)1520-6807(199610)33:4<341::AID-PITS9>3.0.CO;2-P
- McGovern, M., & Barry, M. (2000). Death education: Knowledge, attitudes, and perspectives of Irish parents and teachers. *Death Studies, 24*(4), 325–333. doi:10.1080/074811800200487
- Papadatou, D., Metallinou, O., Hatzichristou, C., & Pavlidi, L. (2002). Supporting the bereaved child: Teacher's perceptions and experiences in Greece. *Mortality, 7*, 324–339. doi:10.1080/1357627021000025478
- Slaughter, V., & Griffiths, M. (2007). Death understanding and fear of death in young children. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 12*(4), 525–538. doi:10.1177/1359104507080980

Paraskevi Engarhos is a doctoral student in the School and Applied Child Psychology program in the Department of Educational Psychology at McGill University.

Dr. Victoria Talwar is an associate professor in the School and Applied Child Psychology program and Human Development program at McGill University.

Dr. Michael Schleifer is a professor emeritus in the Faculty of Education at the Université du Québec à Montréal (Sections Foundations, Epistemology, and Educational Psychology).

Sarah-Jane Renaud is completing her doctorate in the School and Applied Child Psychology program in McGill University's Education and Counselling Psychology Department.

Correspondence concerning this Research Note should be addressed to:
Paraskevi Engarhos, Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, McGill University,
Montreal, Quebec, H3A 1Y2
E-mail: paraskevi.engarhos@mail.mcgill.ca