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A pedagogy of death in times of COVID-19

ABSTRACT

The global pandemic situation caused by COVID-19 has generated, according to WHO, more than 247,000 deaths worldwide to date. Death has become a daily news in the opening headlines of news, if not a fact that thousands of families are going through. One might wonder how children are coping in a pandemic situation. In our chapter we treat child grief as an element that reconstructs the life of the person who has suffered the loss or questions about it. It is a relationship that the child establishes with the emptiness that such loss has left, with the aim of knowing and reflecting on its importance and working on the frustration and suffering that has created it in the best possible way.

KEYWORDS: Death education, Pedagogy of death, Curriculum, Spanish education system, COVID-19

1. *Introduction*

The health crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has brought about a social and economic impact due to the high mortality rate resulting from it, especially among the elderly. Nearly 500,000 people died worldwide, according to the WHO, and 28,325 in Spain, according to the Ministry of Health. These figures, always surrounded by controversy on a media level, show the fragility of the human race and the opposite side of its life: death. Confinement as a measure to prevent the spread of COVID-19 has meant that family members could not be visited when they were ill in hospital and that has prevented the normal wake and burial of the deceased. Thus complicating direct contact with death itself and, above all, making the mourning process more difficult, especially for minors, as they would not have been able to understand what had happened.

This chapter addresses the phenomenon of death. This is a phenomenon

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that we believe should be present at the curricular level in education systems since it is a natural event with an important social and cultural component. We advocate a pedagogy of death that educates children in the life cycle of people and keeps them away from myths, falsehoods and concealment that have traditionally prevented them from knowing and assuming, from their own level of maturity, this phenomenon³. For Herrán-Gascón and Cortina-Selva⁴, dealing with death in the classroom prevents the creation of children's fears and their fixation; it teaches children to create and develop strategies to overcome their fears autonomously and reduce them, thus avoiding experiences of induced terror. Another factor that makes educational intervention on death necessary is the feeling of guilt that the child usually displays. The aim is to work on the stages of mourning. Grief, as Gabaldón-Fraile⁵, points out, is somewhat different from that of an adult, since children do not have the necessary notions to fully understand death and it is important to teach them what they are and also to work on them in order to promote their acquisition and understanding.

2. *Death*

2.1. *Definition*

The concept of death has changed throughout history. In the past, people died when they stopped breathing and their heart stopped beating. But in today's society, due to technological advances, this concept must be reconsidered since a person can be kept alive through artificial means such as respirators, pacemakers, artificial blood, etc. The concept of death, according to the Royal Spanish Academy (Real Academia Española)⁶, is derived from the Latin word *mors, mortis*. It is defined as the end of the living organism, that is, when a living being stops functioning in its totality, all vital signs are reduced to zero and brain inactivity is produced. The concept is also conceived as the end of life caused by the body's own inability to maintain the homeostatic process.

In short, we can define death as the process that causes the total shutdown of the organic system caused by various factors such as loss of brain activity,

³ P. RODRÍGUEZ HERRERO, A. DE LA HERRÁN GASCÓN, V. DE MIGUEL YUBERO, *The inclusion of death in the curriculum of the Spanish Regions*, in «Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education», 2020, pp. 1–19, <doi:10.1080/03057925.2020.173219> (Last accessed on October 1, 2020).

⁴ A. HERRÁN GASCÓN Y M. CORTINA SELVA, *Introducción a la pedagogía de la muerte. Educación para la vida-muerte*, in «Educación y futuro. Revista de investigación aplicada y experiencias educativas», n. 17, 2007, pp. 131-148.

⁵ S. GABALDÓN FRAILE, *El duelo en el niño*, in «Formación Médica continuada en atención primaria», n. 13, 2006, vol.7, pp. 344-348, <<http://guixa.es/pdf/El-duelo-en-el%20nino.pdf>> (Last accessed on October 1, 2020).

⁶ REAL ACADEMIA ESPAÑOLA, *Diccionario*, Real Academia Española, Madrid, 2014.

cardio-respiratory arrest or any other situation that may cause the functional collapse of the systems.

2.2. *The social impact of death*

The lifestyle of different civilizations is influenced by and revolves around the vision they have of death, leading, over time, to the construction of various beliefs and practices necessary to understand and manage this natural and inevitable event. Thus, we have to conceive the concept of death in continuous evolution as culture manifests it in art, traditions and rites.

Nowadays, with the existing scientific and technological advances, people seek to die without pain and with their families close by, although in the hospital they are often not aware of the proximity to death, avoiding the psychological suffering that such a situation can cause. This leads to the patient creating false hopes for him or herself and prevents him or her from preparing for the end of his or her life, from arranging it and from becoming aware of it. But there is a growing initiative in which palliative care is beginning to be carried out at home.

Even in the funerary culture, changes have taken place: wakes are no longer held at home, the bodies being removed from the home so that they can be handled by professionals; mourning has become obsolete or a thing of the past; funerals are usually short and cold; and, finally, visits to cemeteries have decreased. Even so, according to Mejía and Valderrama⁷, there is a growing awareness of this issue: more and more people feel that death is neither negative nor a negative event, since dying is the final phase of life and is irremediable, natural and universal.

Therefore, we consider it necessary, from an early age, to help children understand and make them aware of the process of death and to prevent them from feeling that it is something non-existent, imaginary. Death exists, it is part of our lives, religions, cultures, artistic representations, festivities... and as much as we do not want to, at some point we must face it: the pain, the suffering that this loss causes. And as it has been done throughout the history of humanity, we must give children instruments and/or means to know, accept and assimilate that a loved one has died and will no longer be physically with them, even if he or she remains in their memory.

3. *Grief*

Before we talk about child grief, it is necessary to introduce the meaning of grief in general and the types of grief that exist, as well as the purpose of it, so that we can then focus on the grief of children.

⁷ A. MEJÍA, A. VALDERRAMA, *La muerte en la sociedad moderna*, in «Dharma», no. 3, 1986, pp. 1-4, <<http://www.revistadharmacom.com/potala3.htm>> (Last accessed on October 1, 2020).

3.1. *Definition of grief*

«Grief» can be defined as «una reacción adaptativa natural ante cualquier tipo de pérdida, aunque suele ser más intenso tras el fallecimiento de un ser querido»⁸. Bucay in his book *El camino de las lágrimas* («The path of tears»)⁹ considers that «el duelo es el doloroso proceso normal de elaboración de una pérdida, tendiente a la adaptación y armonización de nuestra situación interna y externa frente a una nueva realidad»¹⁰. This means that the person comes into contact with the void left by the loss, knows and reflects on its importance and addresses the frustration and suffering that this void has created, in the best possible way. But... what is loss? A loss is to be deprived of what one has had, to lose what one has been caring for and which one values. It is any reduction of the personal, material and/or symbolic resources to which a person is emotionally attached or any experience that a person lives and feels as a loss: losing a valuable object, a hobby, a dream, some skill... In general, we can talk about loss as any traumatic or critical event that leads the person to a mourning process that does not necessarily have to be death.

Due to the number of losses that can be found, different types of grief can be identified¹¹. The first of these is 'grief for the loss of a loved one', whether it be the death of a family member, friends, pets... It tends to be one of the most painful losses that a person experiences in his or her life due to the bond that exists with the deceased. It is a dramatic and unavoidable experience of life where support is needed, especially that of the family, in order to be able to overcome the grief. It is a situation that is very difficult to surmount if you are away from home or alone. Another kind of grief is the loss of a partner (widowhood). In this case, the person loses the meaning of life, its order, balance and even identity. Therefore, he/she might feel overwhelmed by emotions because he/she is experiencing a void by the loss. The 'broken heart syndrome' appears, in which the death of the couple induces the death of the other. Grief ends when the person who has experienced the loss is able to create, realize and get involved in new projects as well as to love again (family, friends, new partners...). Finally, grief occurs when the loss of a child occurs. It is the most extreme type of loss of a loved one that can happen to a person. By the law of life, it is the elderly, parents and grandparents, who die first due to the health problems that arise with age or because of age itself. The difficulty of overcom-

⁸ C. LÓPEZ DE AYALA GARCÍA, T. GALEA MARTÍN, R. CAMPOS MÉNDEZ, *Guía Clínica seguimiento del duelo*, in «Observatorio Regional de Cuidados Paliativos de Extremadura», 2010, p. 28, <<http://www.psicofundacion.es/uploads/pdf/Guia%20clinica%20seguimiento%20del%20duelo.pdf>> (Last accessed on June 20, 2020). Personal translation: «the natural adaptive response as a result of a loss, somewhat deeper after the death of a loved one».

⁹ J. BUCAY, *El camino de las lágrimas*, Grijalbo, Barcelona, 2001, p. 72.

¹⁰ Personal translation: «grief is the painful natural process after experiencing a loss that helps our own internal and external adaptation and integration to face the new reality».

¹¹ BUCAY, *El camino de las lágrimas*, *op. cit.*

ing grief and stress is such that it can lead to psychological, biological and/or neurological problems.

3.2. *Stages of grief*

After knowing what death, grief and loss are, we see the need to identify which are the stages of grief that all people go through when someone close to them dies. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross¹², a Swiss-American psychiatrist, explains in her book *On death and dying* five stages of grief in order to understand the evolution of the person, from loss to overcoming. She points out that sometimes not all the stages take place and they can even be in a different order to the one established in her book, although there have always been at least two of the stages indicated. Its sequence is called «Elisabeth Kübler Ross' model» and is organized in the following stages:

1. *Denial stage*

Denying the true reality that a loved one is no longer with us helps the person cover up and displace the pain that comes with knowing about the person's death. Denial works as a buffer after unexpected and shocking news, thus giving the person time to adjust to what has happened. It is considered as a provisional defence, in which the person tries to repress all his/her pain, until it is replaced by a partial acceptance (not yet fully accepted).

2. *Anger stage*

Anger and rage are caused by the frustration of not being able to do anything to prevent the death of the loved one, which causes the person's feelings to collapse. Death is perceived as the result of a cause for which culprits are sought, but when they are not found, the sensation of anger appears, which is then projected in all directions towards objects, animals and people (family, friends...).

3. *Bargaining stage*

The anger is left behind, but the fantasy of being in control of the situation appears: one fantasizes about being able to reverse the process and one even looks for strategies so that death isn't irrevocable (resurrection). From here arises the negotiation with supernatural and divine entities, almost always with God, who are asked to go back in time so that death does not occur in exchange for a reformulation of life and good behaviour.

4. *Depression stage*

At this stage, the person stops imagining non-existent realities and has a sense of emptiness because the deceased loved one is no longer with them. An

¹² E. KÜBLER ROSS, *On death and dying*, Routledge, New York, USA, 2006.

existential crisis occurs because the sadness and pain cannot be alleviated through fantasies, shields (denial) and excuses (anger). It is characterized as a stage of isolation and psychological and physical exhaustion due to the whole situation in which the grieving person finds him/herself.

5. *Acceptance stage*

For Gala-León, Lupiani-Jiménez, Hernández, Guillén-Gestoso, González-Infante, Villaverde-Gutiérrez and Sánchez, «si se van superando las fases poco a poco surge el afrontamiento y se reorganiza la propia existencia»¹³. This phase occurs after the previous stages have been completed. It is the moment in which, after a period of adaptation, the death of that person is accepted. The pain and sadness gradually disappear and the balance is rebuilt by adapting to the absence.

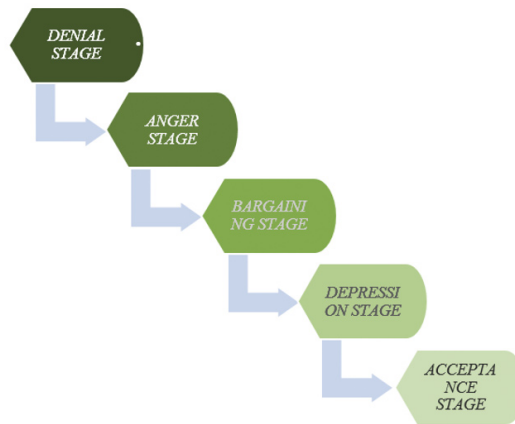


Figure 1. *Evolution of the grieving process.*
Source: *Own elaboration*

Everyone, after a loss, often has a time when they are not psychologically the same as they were before the event. They tend to be more negative and aggressive about everything that happens around them. This is because of the stage in which they are and it is logical that upon the loss of a loved one they are somewhat defensive since they protect themselves from any minimal damage that an action, event, etc. may cause them.

¹³ F.J., GALA LEÓN, M. LUPIANI JIMÉNEZ, R. RAJA HERNÁNDEZ, C. GUILLÉN GESTOSO, J.M. GONZÁLEZ, F. INFANTE, M^a C. VILLAVÉR DE GUTIÉRREZ, I.A. SÁNCHEZ, *Actitudes psicológicas ante la muerte y el duelo. Una revisión conceptual (Psychological attitudes toward death and bereavement. One conceptual review)*, in «Cuadernos de medicina forense», 2002, pp. 39-50, <http://scielo.isciii.es/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1135-76062002000400004> (Last accessed on October 1, 2020), p. 39. Personal Translation: «if you overcome the phases step by step, you will manage the loss and you will be able to reorganize your life».

3.3. *Grief in children*

Children, like adults, experience grief because, even though they are young, they participate in the same experience as the rest of their relatives. In fact, the loss of a family member has an impact on the whole family, causing a disorganization of the roles that each one played until the loss. The relationships between them and their environment are deeply affected. For example, the death of a grandfather whom the family visited every Sunday to spend some time together. Children can also be disturbed by the loss because the family turmoil can cause them to change their behaviour, routines, habits... such as those mentioned that directly affect them, having to adapt to the new situation. Poch and Herrero¹⁴, after carrying out their research on death and grief in the educational context, developed a matrix where they compare a series of myths that society has created about grief in children linked to the reality they live in:

MYTHS	RESEARCH AND CLINICAL PRACTICE
Children do not realize what happens after a loss.	They realize that something different has happened and not talking to them is turning them into "spies" on something they may not even understand.
Children and adolescents do not elaborate on grief.	They do elaborate on grief.
Children and adolescents do not attach meaning to events.	Not only do they attribute meaning to the events, but they need to do so.
Adults must protect them as much as possible from pain and suffering, so it is better not to include them in rituals. (Protection understood as "exclusion" and experienced by the child as "abandonment" and "loneliness")	We protect them best if we involve them in the family process, and we involve them as far as their age is appropriate (protection understood as "inclusion/incorporation" and experienced by the child as "being part of" and "companionship").
They don't understand the rituals, so it's best that they don't attend them.	We can help them understand (at least minimally) the rituals and allow them to participate in them as much as possible.

Table 1. *Myths about child and adolescent grief and results of research and clinical practice*
Source: Poch and Herrero (2003, p. 206)

As we have seen in table 1, children are aware of loss and its consequences. They are able to grasp everything that is happening around them, even if they do not always express it, and it can be reflected in a change of behaviour and in actions, sending signals to the adult about their pain and bewilderment in the face of the loss. However, adults usually try to keep them as far away as possible by excluding them from any activity, acting 'normally' in order to protect them, but leaving them alone in the face of this grief, unable to express

¹⁴ C. POCH, O. HERRERO, *La muerte y el duelo en el contexto educativo. Reflexiones, testimonios y actividades*, Paidós, Barcelona, 2003.

themselves, show their feelings and without knowing what really happened. In fact, as indicated by Gorosabel-Odriozola and León-Mejía¹⁵, it has been shown that children benefit greatly from dealing with this subject in different conversations, where they talk mainly about the emotions and feelings that they do not fully understand and where adults help them to understand by having more experience.

With this we want to emphasize that children feel the absence of the person, they are not alien to it, especially the more they appreciated the person. It is true that they may not understand it completely, but they know that this person will no longer be in their lives and they miss him/her. They may not convey it in words, but they can 'communicate' it through drawings or other actions. It's just a matter of observation. We believe that in addition to having more contact with the child, such as doing more activities with him/her, it would be good for the parents to talk to the child and not 'buy into his/her happiness' through distracting elements, since in this way the child will not appease his/her pain, but only relieve it or set it aside for a moment.

In contrast, adolescents and pre-adolescents have one characteristic that stands out during their grieving process and is different from child grief: their maturing crisis. They tend to move away from their parents and become more independent, causing a biographical imbalance that does not occur in childhood.

«El duelo en estas edades determina, a veces, el paso de una etapa a otra, de la infancia a la adolescencia, de ésta a la edad adulta o de muchacho a hombre, de forma repentina o forzada, lo que origina cambios psíquicos diversos. También puede dar lugar a cierto detenimiento de la evolución o tendencias regresivas»¹⁶.

As we can see, at each stage of life grief is experienced differently. However, we can assert that child grief is characterized by incorporating elements common to pre-adolescent/adolescent grief (lack of maturity) and adult grief (direct influence on social relations), being a combination of both, since child grief is the most complicated and difficult to overcome because of the lack of the necessary strategies and cognitive resources and the lack of a complete understanding of the 'disappearance' of the loved one and the reason for it.

¹⁵ M. GOROSABEL ODRIOZOLA, A. LEÓN MEJÍA, *La muerte en educación infantil: algunas líneas básicas de actuación para centros escolares*, in «Psicología Educativa», no. 22, 2016, pp. 103-111. <<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1135755X16300252>> (Last accessed on October 1, 2020).

¹⁶ E. GAMO MEDINA, P. PAZOS PEZZI, *El duelo y las etapas de la vida*, in «Asociación Española de Neuropsiquiatría», no. 29, vol. 104, 2009, p. 462. Personal translation: «Sometimes grief at this age determines the passage from one stage to another, from childhood to adolescence, from the latter to adulthood or from boy to man, in a sudden or forced way, which causes diverse psychic changes. It can also give rise to a delay in evolution or even regressive tendencies».

3.4. *Characteristics of child grief*

Childhood grief is different from adult grief because the child is at a different stage of physical and psychological maturation and has a different view of the world. The child’s conception of death depends on various factors, such as the way in which the family presents it to the child, personal experiences, religion, etc. For this reason, several authors establish a relationship between the child’s age and his or her developmental characteristics in order to classify and organize the level of concept of death and mourning presented by children. Sabel Gabaldón-Fraile¹⁷, psychiatrist at the Hospital Sant Joan de Déu in Barcelona, in his article *El duelo en el niño*, analyses the phases of grief, its types and the notions that children have about death (loss), from birth to adolescence.

AGE	NOTION OF DEATH
From birth to 18 months old	The child does not have, nor understand the notion of time, so it does not allow him to locate death. Death is absence and life is presence, but without the notion of time, the concept of absence does not appear, nor does that of presence.
Between 18 months and 5 years old	The concept of time begins to be associated with concrete events. The child begins to differentiate between yesterday, today and tomorrow. He/she begins to have notion of death associating it to sleeping, immobility and as reversible phenomenon. They can have a great emotional impact on the loss of a loved one and be left with a lasting impression.
Between 5 and 10 years old	The child relates and integrates within death everything that <u>is capable of performing</u> some function: everything that moves, feeds and even the insensitive and immobile.
Around the age of 9-10	The child acquires the notion of death as a universal phenomenon and the first fears of losing someone and of his or her own death appear.
Adolescence	A new notion appears: death comes to everyone, whoever you are. Most likely the child has already had close experiences, influencing his or her experience of death with the impact it has.

Table 2. *Conceptual elaboration on death.*
 Source: Own elaboration based on Gabaldón Fraile (2006, p. 346).

¹⁷ S. GABALDÓN FRAILE, *El duelo en el niño*, in «Formación Médica continuada en atención primaria», no. 13, vol. 7, 2006, pp. 344-348, <<http://guixa.es/pdf/El-duelo-en-el%20nino.pdf>> (Last accessed on October 1, 2020).

Children, because of their dependence due to their lack of development and the influence of the environment, become more vulnerable than adults to the loss of a loved one.

«Viven y sienten la muerte de un ser querido, en mayor o menor intensidad, como una forma de abandono, de ahí que sea absolutamente necesario acompañarlos e incluirles en los rituales y reuniones familiares que tengan lugar. Proporcionarles la compañía de seres queridos que les den afecto y abrigo coloca a los menores en una situación de protección y de amor que les ayuda a combatir sus estados de aflicción, abandono, desconcierto y dolor»¹⁸.

The complexity of the concept of death forces us to understand and construct its meaning through the different sub-concepts that compose it. Poch and Herrero¹⁹ recommend that the first thing they must learn is the subconcept of «universality», that is, every living being dies, it is inevitable and unpredictable. At first, they will relate it to magical concepts since they think that death is selective and accepting that in fact this is not reality will bring them closer to the understanding of death. Another sub-concept you should learn is that of «irreversibility»: death is a process that cannot be reversed, that is, what is dead cannot be brought back to life. This is a difficult sub-concept for children to understand because in their daily lives, in video games and in movies, dead characters are often resurrected (reversibility). Therefore, they may believe it will happen to the people around them. The sub-concept of «non-functionality» refers to the fact that the body no longer performs its vital functions when the person has died. Likewise, children are influenced by unrealistic thoughts, making them believe that a mortally wounded person or one lacking a vital organ does not die. From this fact arise the questions that children ask us: will he be cold; will he be hungry? The sub-concept of «causality» indicates that every death has a reason or is due to something or for something. Children often relate it to magical events that can affect them negatively, as they can relate discussions (in which bad thoughts surface) as the cause of that person's death (wishing for something to happen to them). They need to understand that death is not the result of an extraordinary event but a natural one. Finally, children need to understand the sub-concept of «non-corporeal continuation», which has to do with religious aspects. The child understands

¹⁸ L. CID EGEA, *Explicame qué ha pasado. Guía para ayudar a los adultos a hablar de la muerte y el duelo con los niños*, Fundación Mario Losantos del Campo, Madrid, 2011, p. 84. Personal translation: «They live and feel the death of a loved one, to a greater or lesser extent, as a form of abandonment, hence it is absolutely necessary to accompany and include them in the rituals and family meetings. When children feel affection and shelter from their loved ones, they will feel protected and loved. Therefore, it will help them to manage grief, abandonment, bewilderment and pain».

¹⁹ POCH, HERRERO, *La muerte y el duelo en el contexto educativo. Reflexiones, testimonios y actividades*, op. cit.

that it is not an end or it is – if it has no relation to religion – and contributes with his/her own theories since it is not known what happens after death. For example, children often answer family questions making statements such as: «my grandmother is in heaven», «my grandparents look after me from above».

After analysing what loss and grief mean to people, particularly to children, we can argue that it is not advisable, in any way, to hide death from children because of fear of not knowing how to answer their questions, because it is believed that they will not understand or because of trying to protect them from pain and suffering. This could end up provoking just the opposite, making them feel more afflicted and alone in the face of grief. The important thing in these situations is not to leave the child alone and not to make the subject taboo. It is necessary to start a dialogue where children can express their feelings and emotions, where they can share their fears and theories about what happened, where their questions about it are answered in a clear and simple way.

3.5. *Addressing death in the school curriculum*

If death is considered taboo in society, it's even more so at school.

Death is part of the cycle of life: birth-growth-death, although it is a process of suffering and pain for most people. Fear of death causes people to try to get as far away as possible from that reality, which is inevitable, causing us to be living a phenomenon of a culture anesthetized towards it²⁰.

But... if it is inevitable, why can't we work to face it in the best way? As we already know, children are aware of death, even if they do not express it like adults do. Therefore, school, where they spend almost all of their time during the day, becomes a suitable environment where they can talk about it naturally, as well as to prepare them, through different educational intervention protocols, to be able to act and face such a significant event in their lives as the death of their loved ones.

3.6. *Syllabus on handling death*

Gorosabel Odriozola and León Mejía state that «a pesar de la importancia que tiene un correcto afrontamiento de la muerte en los más pequeños, esta necesidad se encuentra muy desatendida debido a que la muerte se ha convertido en un tabú social y educativo»²¹. The REAL DECRETO 1630/2006, of 29

²⁰ N. MARTÍNEZ, M. BEDMAR, M., *Impacto de la producción científica acerca de la educación para muerte. Revisión bibliométrica en Scopus y Web of Science*, in «Revista Iberoamericana de Educación», no. 82, vol. 2, 2020, pp. 65-78.

²¹ M. GOROSABEL ODRIOZOLA, A. LEÓN MEJÍA, *La muerte en educación infantil: algunas líneas básicas de actuación para centros escolares*, in «Psicología Educativa», no. 22, 2016, pp. 103-111. <<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1135755X16300252>> (Last accessed on October 1, 2020), p. 104. Personal translation: «in spite of the need of children to be able to correctly deal with death, this need is not being met due to the social and educative taboos about death».

December²², which establishes the minimum teaching requirements for the second cycle of Early Childhood Education, states that the aim is «contribuir al desarrollo físico, afectivo, social e intelectual de los niños y las niñas»²³ and that therefore a good integral, gradual and harmonious development will be sought. Curiously, there is not a single element related to death although it is one of the main causes of emotional imbalance due to the pain and suffering it causes in early childhood. The affective-social development is threatened and unbalanced, and must be reconstructed.

As it is a subject that is not found in any of the three areas of the Early Childhood syllabus – Self-knowledge and personal autonomy, Knowledge of the environment, Languages: Communication and Representation –, it is assumed that it must be dealt with as transversal content, that is to say, content that spans all three areas in the formation of the student's integral development and his or her integration into society. As Cortina Selva says, «una enseñanza que no tenga en cuenta la muerte, no se está dirigiendo a los seres humanos, ya que los delimita impidiendo una mirada global hacia su condición de ser vivo»²⁴. This concept should be addressed more in the area of 'self-knowledge and personal autonomy' than in the rest of the areas because it would be more focused on the way of being of the person and the development of his/her personality and, as we already know, a loss can mark the child by hurting him/her psychologically.

In order to avoid imbalance in the curricular approach of the areas, we consider it important to draw up or introduce objectives in area one so that teachers can work with students on losses, starting with elements that are not very relevant for children, such as an object or toy that means little to them, and then moving on to higher, more complex levels. In this way, the child learns emotional education content such as self-control and how to be more autonomous and not depend so much on objects as on people. In order to do this, children must be able to disassociate themselves from meaningful elements, as well as know and understand their emotions and the people around them; express their emotions and fears in the face of the loss of a family member, a pet, etc.; allow themselves to be helped and supported by the rest of their peers and teachers, who will provide them with a series of tools and strategies to promote and strengthen the child's emotional balance.

²² REAL DECRETO 1630/2006, December 29, establishing the compulsory education guidelines of the second cycle of Early Childhood Education, p. 1.

²³ Personal translation: «to play a key role in the physical, social and intellectual development of boys and girls».

²⁴ M. CORTINA SELVA, *El cine como recurso didáctico en Educación para la muerte: Implicaciones formativas para el profesorado* (tesis doctoral), Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Madrid, 2010, p. 58, <https://repositorio.uam.es/bitstream/handle/10486/4487/30079_cortina_selva_mar.pdf?sequence=1> (Last accessed on October 1, 2020). Personal translation: «if death, as a natural part of life, is not included in our education system, it will narrow our perspective of what it is to be alive as a human being».

3.7. Importance of educating about death and on death

In the classroom, we only work on the subject of death when there is a loss of someone close to the student, whether it be a pet or a family member. We intervene if the child appears to be too affected, to help him/her overcome the situation and return to the normal classroom routine. Educating about and on death is also educating about and on life as well as being key to guidance on it²⁵. All living beings are born, grow and die; it is the cycle of life. If the issue of death is not addressed or, worse, if it is silenced in the classroom, children will not be able to learn meaningfully about this cycle. While death brings the suffering of loss and the pain of not being able to see the loved one again, it can lead to fear in the knowledge that one's life will end. This fear can be transformed into other fears and, if not addressed, can have a negative impact on the child's emotions and social life, making a negative mark on them. For Herrán Gascón and Cortina Selva²⁶, dealing with death in the classroom prevents children's fears from emerging, and also provides students with cognitive strategies that will help them overcome their fears on their own and avoid experiences of induced terror. Children tend to feel that they are the cause of death of the person or animal, since they relate their thoughts or actions as those that originated the loss – such as wishing for something bad to happen to that person or doing some bad action that caused the loved one to disappear from their lives. To prevent these situations, which are very difficult for children to manage, we must encourage self-control and resilience to increase their confidence and trust, and to learn to control their emotions in extreme moments. Finally, at school we have to carefully, gently, willingly and continuously address fears to prevent that the damage and pain that can be caused by the death of someone important leaves its mark on the child and ends up causing problems in the future.

The true purpose of educating about and on death is to bring children closer to the reality of life. It is to help them to know their limitations, to overcome or reduce their fears. But, above all, to grow internally, allowing them to ask themselves questions about the meaning of existence (reflective thinking), to learn that the life of a living being is not finite (born-grow-death) and that death is a real fact, through the so-called Pedagogy of Death. This is defined by Martínez and Bedmar as «un área de conocimiento educativo emergente la cual nos permite centrarnos en una intervención para poder crear un proceso de enseñanza y aprendizaje acorde con las dimensiones del ser humano»²⁷.

²⁵ E. PEDRERO, *Educación para la Salud y pedagogía de la muerte: percepciones y demandas del profesorado universitario en España*, in «SCIFELO», 2019, <<https://www.scielosp.org/article/icse/2019.v23/e180404/>> (Last accessed on October 1, 2020).

²⁶ A. HERRÁN GASCÓN Y M. CORTINA SELVA, *Introducción a la pedagogía de la muerte. Educación para la vida-muerte*, in «Educación y futuro. Revista de investigación aplicada y experiencias educativas», n. 17, 2007, pp. 131-148.

²⁷ N. MARTÍNEZ, M. BEDMAR, *Impacto de la producción científica acerca de la educación para muerte*.

3.8. *Role of the teacher*

It is essential that the child finds a space in the classroom where he/she can express him/herself freely and channel his/her emotions through the different activities carried out. The child must feel free to express his or her feelings, as well as to acknowledge them. For their part, the teacher must be the guide, the one who serves as a reference point for the child, providing empathy and helping him/her to answer the questions that are asked and to work on his/her concerns and worries.

The teacher must be trained to work on this subject in the classroom given its difficulty. It is a subject that continues to be taboo in society because of the fear caused by not knowing what happens after death, and therefore the answers to most of the questions raised cannot be answered. To this fear we must add the fear of pain, of suffering, which we try to avoid by distancing ourselves, our family, from everything that could harm us. In this sense, Poch and Herrero²⁸ consider that the teacher should: promote an educational action to address situations that push people to the limit; create a pedagogy of life and death; influence the values that can be created during suffering, death and the question of whether it is going to happen or not; be trained in the psychology of death and the mourning process; be able to collaborate or have the technical assistance of other knowledgeable professionals on the matter, since they can help promote the creation of materials and instruments that encourage communication and sharing of experiences. Finally, the teacher must provide his or her students with strategies and tools to be able to face death and to reflect on life, such as the use of stories, as these are educational materials that allow reflection and increase «confianza y la comprensión del fenómeno de la muerte como un proceso más de la vida»²⁹.

3.9. *Protocols*

A protocol is a document or regulation that establishes criteria of conduct, techniques and actions necessary to act in certain situations whose objective, according to Fernández-Vázquez³⁰, is to normalize social relations between governments and institutions. In this chapter we present an original intervention protocol on death in Early Childhood Education, despite the existence of two

Revisión bibliométrica en Scopus y Web of Science, in «Revista Iberoamericana de Educación», no. 82, vol. 2, 2020, p. 65. Personal translation: «an emerging area of educational knowledge which allows us to focus on an initiative to create a teaching and learning process in line with the dimensions of the human being».

²⁸ POCH, HERRERO, *La muerte y el duelo en el contexto educativo. Reflexiones, testimonios y actividades*, op. cit.

²⁹ E. COLONO, *Pedagogía de la muerte y proceso de duelo: Cuentos como recurso didáctico*, in «Revista Electrónica Iberoamericana sobre Calidad, Eficacia y Cambio en Educación», no. 14, vol. 2, 2016, p. 64, <<https://repositorio.uam.es/handle/10486/670637>> (Last accessed on October 1, 2020). Personal translation: «trust and understanding death as a natural process».

³⁰ J.J. FERNÁNDEZ-VÁZQUEZ, *Antecedentes históricos del protocolo y su influencia a través de la historia en los Estados, en la sociedad y en la política en España y Europa*, 2012.

types of protocols: the prevention protocol, which serves to prepare children for the loss of a loved one by means of tools and strategies that help them to face up to the loss; and the action protocol, also called intervention protocol, which seeks to develop tools and strategies when the loss has occurred. The aim of this type of protocol is to develop a plan for children's grief to facilitate the process and meet all the needs of the student and his or her family. For this reason, schools should be able to guide and provide all the necessary responses to the situation, which implies the participation of the members and professionals of the educational community belonging to the educational stage of the student in grief. The intervention protocol aims to provide appropriate responses to the grieving student and family members; to guide families and help teachers in the process of the student's grief; to help coordinate the different members of the teaching team to ensure the physical, social and emotional well-being of the child and to provide the necessary emotional support.

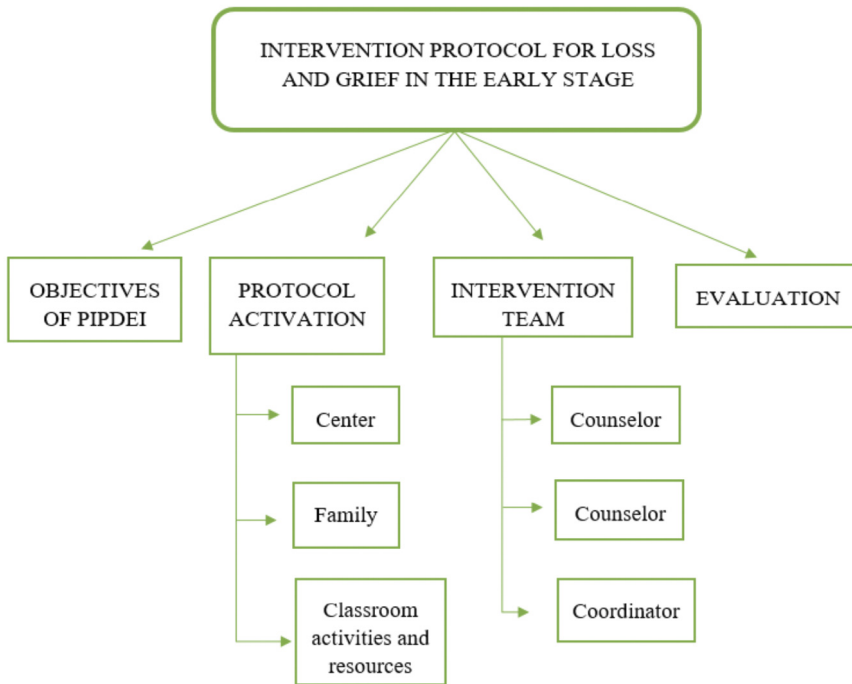


Figure 2. *Intervention Protocol for Loss and Grief in Early Childhood Stage (Protocolo de Intervención para Pérdidas y Duelos en la Etapa de Infantil, PIPDEI)*
 Source: Own Elaboration

In order to activate the protocol properly, there must be good coordination between the teacher of the student in question, the family members and the

members of the school closest to the student. To do this, the directive staff must hold a meeting to find out the events that have caused the protocol to be activated urgently. Afterwards, the teacher and the members of the institution closest to the student, together with the director of the school, will hold a meeting with the family of the grieving child to obtain detailed information about the death of the loved one and to inform them about the intervention protocol that has been activated in the face of this event, the objectives of the same and the activities to be carried out, as well as offering them guidance, support in the face of the complicated situation they are experiencing, advice and periodic meetings to learn about and observe the evolution of the student's grief.

As indicated by Ganuza-Jimeno³¹, the teacher should be responsible for maintaining close contact with the family during the grieving process. The activities carried out in the classroom should be totally flexible and adapted to the child's emotional level. Finally, the tutor must coordinate with the counselors to plan the activities correctly. The counsellor must guide families on how to act before the situation, guide the teacher on the functioning of the activities to work on grief, establish connections and coordinate with different specialists in the school as the psychologist of the Early Care Team (if appropriate) and counsel the family to give the child the news. Finally, the intervention protocol coordinator must inform all teachers close to the student about the situation and evolution of the student, in addition to defining the guidelines to be followed when intervening with the family, the school and in the classroom.

<p>Who Preferably the parents or the closest relative. Emotionally close person. Recruiting some meaningful figure for the child.</p>
<p>When Immediately or as soon as possible.</p>
<p>Where Quiet place. Safe place (as familiar as possible for the child).</p>
<p>How Using appropriate physical contact. Avoiding the use of euphemisms. In a clear way. Without too many details or abstract explanations. Using a warm tone of voice. Sharing your emotions with the child or adolescent. Taking an interest in their feelings and thoughts about what happened and its effects. Asking about their doubts. Remembering the person who died with the child or adolescent.</p>

Table 3. *How to talk with kids about death*
 Source: Poch and Herrero (2003, p.121)

³¹ S. GANUZA JIMENO, *El duelo infantil: un protocolo de intervención en la etapa de primaria*, (bachelor thesis), Universidad Internacional de la Rioja, La Rioja, 2015, <<https://reunir.unir.net/bitstream/handle/123456789/3267/GANUZA%20JIMENO%2C%20SARA.pdf?sequence=1>> (Last accessed on October 1, 2020).

In addition to the above, we consider it important for the child concerned to be aware that the rest of his or her family members are not with him or her because they cannot at the moment or are making preparations. It is important that the child does not feel abandoned or alone in the face of the situation, but on the contrary, he/she must feel loved and supported. Finally, as a major consideration, we must ensure that children communicate their thoughts and express their emotions without fear of being judged, as this is the best way to lessen the pain and suffering that the loss is causing them.

Conclusions

In this chapter we have tried to introduce the relevance of the concept of death at a social level in the context of the health crisis caused by the COVID-19. From this explanation, we have defined the importance of working with the concept of death in Early Childhood Education, reaching the conclusion that it favours the creation of cognitive-emotional strategies to overcome difficult situations, helps to know personal limitations, overcome fears, allows the child to grow internally and reinforces the development of reflective and critical thinking about the existence of the individual. Finally, it makes it possible to understand the finiteness and irreversibility of life.

We have also analysed the different types of existing action protocols on the psycho-pedagogical approach to death through the analysis and implications of prevention and intervention protocols. Both are used to work on death, but with different purposes. The prevention protocol tries to explain death and make it understood. On the other hand, the original intervention protocol proposed has a broader and non-propaedeutic objective: it aims to explain, make people understand and help the child who is grieving to overcome or cope with the loss he or she has suffered as best as possible. It facilitates a greater understanding of the concept of death since it has a more preventive character during its starting phases so that the affected child understands what death is, before intervening and working on his or her grief. So the best protocol to work on death in the classroom is the intervention protocol as it covers a first 'preventive' moment (working on the concept of death), and then move to the moment of 'action' or 'palliative' where it's time to work on actual grief, being the classroom the protagonist or focusing more on the child in question.

We have identified that, at a curricular level, in the Early Childhood stage there is no section or mention regarding the term 'death' and its implications, so we consider that this issue should be worked on directly or indirectly because it is part of a person's life cycle. In this way, the objective that the stage should contribute to the physical, affective, social and intellectual development of the students would be fulfilled because the main element affected after suffering a loss is the emotional one, which, if not worked on, can have repercussions in

other areas. The proposed protocol has been designed in an original way, based on other action protocols, to intervene educationally in the death and grief of the affected child.

To conclude, we believe it is necessary to work on death from childhood in order to make children aware of the process, to understand it and to prevent them from feeling and perceiving it as something unreal and distant, even though it exists and, unfortunately, is inevitable. For this reason, it is unavoidable to learn to live with the suffering caused by the loss of a loved one through strategies that can help to accept and assimilate the death of that person.

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