

# Death and bereavement in Early Childhood Education institutions

The challenges in the pedagogical and curricular proposal

## Morte e lutto nelle istituzioni educative per la prima infanzia

Le sfide nella proposta pedagogica e curricolare

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**ABSTRACT:** La morte e il lutto sono presenti nella vita quotidiana delle istituzioni educative per la prima infanzia in modi diversi, ma non sempre vengono affrontati con i bambini nello stesso modo in cui vengono trattati altri argomenti nel curriculum dei nidi e delle scuole dell'infanzia. Il modo in cui la società affronta la morte e il lutto e le lacune nella formazione dei professionisti dell'educazione della prima infanzia su questo tema hanno un impatto sul modo in cui questi contenuti vengono compresi e discussi nella gestione quotidiana delle istituzioni educative per la prima infanzia. La ricerca di conoscenze e di strumenti adeguati per affrontare la morte e il lutto nelle scuole è un'esigenza etica, politica e pedagogica per tutti i soggetti coinvolti. Nel caso in cui si affrontino questi temi con i bambini, è essenziale utilizzare linguaggi che permettano loro di esprimere i propri punti di vista e di accogliere i propri sentimenti ed emozioni, compreso il gioco drammatico. Si spera che questo articolo possa apportare un contributo significativo al dibattito sulla morte e sul lutto nel campo dell'educazione, alla formazione degli insegnanti e a un ri-posizionamento dei temi della morte e del lutto nella proposta pedagogica e curricolare dell'educazione alla prima infanzia.

**KEY-WORDS:** morte, lutto, bambini, istituzione educativa per la prima infanzia.

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**ABSTRACT:** Death and bereavement are present in the daily life of early childhood education institutions in different ways, but they are not always addressed with children in the same way as other subjects in the curriculum of nurseries and pre-schools. The way in which society deals with death and mourning and the gaps in the training of Early Childhood Education professionals on this subject have an impact on the way in which this content is understood and dealt with in the day-to-day running of Early Childhood Education institutions. The search for knowledge and appropriate devices for dealing with death and bereavement in schools is an ethical, political and pedagogical requirement for all those involved. In the case of addressing these issues with children, it is essential to use languages that allow them to express their points of view and embrace their feelings and emotions, including dramatic play. It is hoped that this text will make significant contributions to the debate on death and bereavement in the field of education, to teacher training and to resizing the place of the theme of death and bereavement in the pedagogical and curricular proposal for Early Childhood Education.

**KEY-WORDS:** death, mourning, children, early childhood education institution.

## **1. Initial words**

Death and bereavement are not always seen as relevant topics by society to integrate into the pedagogical and curricular proposal of Early Childhood Education. Many people and education professionals still consider them taboo subjects and therefore avoid talking to children about them.

And when adults decide to talk to them about death and bereavement, either because they recognize the relevance of the topic, or because of the specific demands of a child, a group of children or situations arising from natural disasters or humanitarian crises, it is possible that the approach is not the best or most appropriate, making the challenges inherent in the topic itself even more complex. There are still many gaps in the discussions on these issues in the field of education and this lack of knowledge can, to a certain extent, influence the lack of words and appropriate approaches when dealing with this issue with children in the daily life of early childhood education institutions.

Because they are constitutive dimensions of the human development cycle, death and mourning are present in children's lives, even if they sometimes go unnoticed by adults. Human beings experience situations of loss all the time and it's no different for children. These situations can be experienced in everyday circumstances, in childhood experiences, as well as in cases of permanent loss, such as death.

Working with the themes of death and bereavement in training processes for early childhood education professionals and in the curriculum of nurseries and pre-schools creates better conditions for listening to children and helping them in situations involving temporary or permanent loss. The school can equip itself with various devices to support children, recognizing that they have different ways of expressing their feelings. The use of various languages, including dramatic play, can be a way of helping the institution to deal with children and their feelings in contexts of death and bereavement. Children who experience the death and bereavement of a loved one or strangers can experience uncomfortable situations and having the opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings is a way of welcoming and respecting them in their experience.

When children are faced with the need to elaborate on what they have lost, they ask for more attention, acceptance and affection. The school is one of the best places to listen to and respect what the child feels, creating an environment where they feel free to talk about different subjects, including those considered taboo in the adult's assessment. The Early Childhood Education institution, due to its socio-political and pedagogical function, educates and cares for children in all their dimensions (Brasil, 2009a). Therefore, it cannot neglect what the child experiences and brings to school. Leaving this or that topic out of the curriculum, from an adult-centric perspective and justification, is also denying the child with their thoughts, feelings and expressions.

Children who experience death and mourning in their families and / or in society access information, make interpretations, elaborate on their points of view, express feelings and expect to have the space to express, in their own way and in their own time, what they want from their experience. A pedagogical and curricular proposal for Early Childhood Education that is rooted in life, in the socio-cultural context and in care as an ethic, sees the child as a whole person, emphasizes relationships, listening, participation and welcoming children in their singularity, potential and

demands (Brasil, 2009b). It is from this assumption that we aim to engender reflections on death and mourning in Early Childhood Education, highlighting the challenges inherent in addressing these issues in the pedagogical and curricular proposal and in welcoming children who demand a closer look at experiences involving death and mourning.

In order to discuss the subject in question, we have organized the text into four sections. The first – *Initial Words* – introduces the topic, presents the objective and how the text is structured. The next two sections – *Considerations on death* and *Reflective notes on bereavement* – address the conceptual dimensions of death and bereavement with an emphasis on children, and explain the challenges involved in dealing with these issues with young human beings. The third section – *Early childhood education institutions, death and bereavement* – seeks to discuss how these themes reverberate in early childhood education institutions and how different languages help children to develop experiences involving death and bereavement. Finally, the last section – *Final Considerations* – presents a summary of the content covered in the article.

## 2. Considerations on death

In societies, especially in the West, talking about death is still taboo for many reasons. However, it wasn't always like this. Death is part of the life cycle. It is a condition imposed on everyone and can therefore be addressed and discussed in different segments and instances of society.

According to Philippe Ariés (2003),

In the past, death was a familiar figure, and moralists had to make it horrifying in order to frighten people. Today, it's just a matter of saying it to provoke an emotional tension that is incompatible with the regularity of everyday life (p. 241-242).

The way death is viewed by societies has changed over time. In the West, the way we face it has changed throughout history. Ariès (2003, p. 84) says that death was something very present and familiar in the past and that, little by little, it subtly disappeared and became an “object of interdiction” and decorum. Historical and cultural aspects were fundamental to this change, especially when the position of truth is questioned

when talking about death, in other words, “truth begins to be problematic” (Ariès, 2003, p. 84). The place of death also changed: the home was given up and the hospital was chosen as an important space for death to take place in isolation.

Philippe Ariès (2003, p. 89) recalls how the arrival of death in a forbidden way happened suddenly, stating that “after a long period of several centuries, in which death was a public spectacle from which no one would think of shying away and in which what was sought happened”. The author explains that at the time there was an imperative of happiness, which camouflaged all sadness. This was a position that was born in the United States around the beginning of the 20th century, and which continues today.

According to Bianco and Costa-Moura (2020),

To the extent that death is erased from ordinary life, we can also speak of a trivialization of death and dying that is unprecedented in previous societies, even if we consider the history of all these societies to be written history with its cruel wars (p. 5).

This provokes us to reflect on how this concealment and trivialization of death impacts the way we have reacted to it over the years. This scenario reveals the challenge of reconstructing the way we face death in the face of its certainty, since it will be a fact throughout life (Bianco; Costa-Moura, 2020).

Recognizing that death is part of the life cycle opens space for it to be discussed by society in private and public spaces, including the school environment. Kovács (2021) and Nucci (2018) advocate death education. According to Kovács (2021),

Death education consists of being open to feelings on the subject and being willing to listen to the experiences of family members, patients and friends. Courses, lectures and activities that allow this openness are forms of preparation, encouraging reflection on attitudes towards death, in the personal or professional sphere. These educational tools can also reduce fear of death and enable students and professionals to feel equipped to deal with death-related situations (p. 189).

The author indicates ways and possibilities that can sensitize education professionals to work with the theme of death in school institutions.

By recognizing this perspective, the Early Childhood Education institution can offer learning situations in its daily routine that contemplate the themes of death and mourning as part of human life.

The lack of adequate words and a welcoming environment for children facing death is not conducive to the development of experiences involving death and mourning. It is important that children are listened to and welcomed by sensitive professionals with consistent training, and that they have access to environments that are welcoming and enhance their multiple languages (Brasil, 2009a; 2009b). The silence of early childhood education professionals undermines the prospect of children bringing their curiosities and feelings to the subject (Ramos; Sengik, 2013) and the metaphors used to explain death to children, which are widely used in our society and at school, can lead to a disordered understanding of finitude and the cycle of life. Talking to children openly about the subject helps them to face the fears that can arise when faced with something they don't know (Kovács, 2012), as the prospect of loss for a child can generate anguish, incomprehension, confusion, fear and expectation.

Kovács (2021) also states that

education for death presents the possibility of personal development in a more integral way, in the sense understood by Jung (1960) as individuation, the personal inner development that occurs during life and which also presupposes preparation for death (p. 2).

The author highlights the possibility of death education as something that favors people's development as human beings and argues that this knowledge should be procedural throughout life and not just when faced with dying (Kovács, 2021). In this way, the theme of death can be part of the pedagogical and curricular proposal for Early Childhood Education as a thematic thread that asks to be studied and investigated by children in different geo-historical-cultural contexts. Diving into this mysterious universe, but one that is woven into human groups' different socio-cultural rites and practices, is a child's right. To this end, observation, storytelling, make-believe play, drawing, music, dramatic play and so many other languages and theoretical-methodological devices can be used in pedagogical work with children of different ages.

### 3. Reflective notes on bereavement

Experiencing bereavement is a unique process for each individual and the effects of losing someone affect all human beings, as bereavement is inevitable, as it will happen at some point in life. People in mourning have to relearn how to deal with the emptiness of the absence of someone who has gone. This is an individual movement that requires a collective gaze, from public policies to the singular gestures of affection given to those who are bereaved. Thinking about care for bereaved children is an ethical-political action that doesn't end with the family. The state, through intersectoral public policies, has a duty to guarantee bereaved children, especially those who have been through climatic and humanitarian crises, the socio-economic and psycho-emotional conditions to carry on with their life experiences safely and well, as the loss of one or more loved ones in their life can trigger drastic changes in their way of being, living and living. According to Bianco and Costa-Moura (2020),

The person we have lost occupied a place in the chain of relationships that is now empty. It's a matter of coming to terms, we repeat, with the fact that the whole chain is affected the moment one of the links comes loose (p. 7).

The commotion caused by the reorganization of life and each child's perspective on experiencing bereavement is challenging. A child's bereavement requires special care and the help of significant people is welcome, including their teacher.

In mourning there is something that falls apart, as Dunker (2023), states:

There is mourning whenever a love relationship breaks down due to the abandonment of one of the parties. This is why we can distinguish between mourning of *being*, whose reference is death, and mourning of *being*, which is linked to a condition of life, such as mourning the end of childhood, the end of a romance, migration or immigration, the loss of a condition of the body or health. There are bereavements linked to the limits of caring, but there are also bereavements that create transformative links and engagement of affection with other bereavements. There are also unprecedented bereavements, either because of their magnitude or because of the novelty of their occurrence (p. 19).

Therefore, there are various ways and reasons why we experience loss, both for adults and children. In the Early Childhood Education institution, as a powerful environment for relationships and experiences, griefs linked to death can appear, as well as those linked to the condition of life. Mourning involves thinking about the fate of situations involving loss (Dunker, 2023).

In the event that mourning can become complicated, maladaptive thoughts and feelings act as a barrier to the natural mourning process (Rezende, 2022). According to Dunker (2023), the World Health Organization, when pointing out the most “deleterious” human experiences for mental health, states that seven of them involve loss. This indicates the importance of taking care of these processes in a preventive and supportive way for people’s satisfactory mental health as a public policy, especially if we think about how much we are still suffering from the consequences of the covid-19 pandemic.

Experiencing bereavement is an experience that provokes many feelings in human beings of different ages and for children, who may not yet have the resources available to cope, dealing with their emotions and thoughts can become even more complex. In this sense, various feelings and fantasies are common for adults and children involved in the experience of bereavement.

Kovács (2010) states that

There are huge differences between cultures as to how, when and even if grief should be expressed, felt, communicated and understood. The Western perspective tends to value the emotional expression of grief, with implications that disregard culture (p. 31).

Considering how different cultures understand and ritualize death and bereavement is an important starting point for approaching the bereaved child and for welcoming and managing bereavement at school. In the Early Childhood Education institution, we advocate that it be a place of support for children experiencing death and bereavement, with welcoming, sensitive conduct that is referenced by the culture of the community, respecting the beliefs of each child and their family. The school can offer not only a space to provide knowledge on the subject but can also be a place that enables reflections and re-significations based on different languages, forms of expression and cultural practices.



According to Franco and Mazorra (2007, p. 504), the experience of mourning for children is “a process of reconstruction, of reorganization in the face of death, an emotional and cognitive challenge with which they have to deal.” This concept is directly linked to death, but not only, as it can also involve some experience of loss.

Children are confronted with loss from a very early age, whether through play, everyday life, age transitions, entering school, etc. They are often worried and seek information about these issues. In the process of dealing with grief, children can process and restructure it throughout their lives, because at different times they can give meaning to what they have experienced (Franco; Mazorra, 2007). As Dunker (2023, p. 13) states, “in the work of mourning, a later loss summons a previous mourning”.

We must not, therefore, lose sight of the specific moment in the child’s development and the structuring of their personality when understanding their grief.

Regarding children who experience bereavement, Kovács (2010, p. 148) states: “they look to the adult for support, who can welcome and legitimize their feelings, answer questions, in an attempt to order the world that is shaken after significant losses.” Children will cope in a variety of ways when experiencing the grieving process. Information, knowledge, acceptance and the sharing of feelings are positive bets to help them experience bereavement.

From this perspective, children’s participation in funeral rituals is seen as a sharing action for an experience that is challenging for everyone who experiences it. This is a moment in which individual manifestations are shared in the group and in society, and therefore contributes positively to the child.

Dunker (2023), when listing some individual pathologies of bereavement, highlights the following situation:

When mourning is hurried, suspended or denied, both because of the urgency and necessity of the replacement that prevents the void and because of the impossibility of collective rites, or even because of the psychic unavailability of mourning (p. 16).

This is a situation that can often happen with childhood bereavements. It can be accelerated by the adults around the child, when they are not

given enough time to work through it. Mourning can be denied to the child when their feelings are not recognized and given the opportunity to be experienced collectively in the rites. Collective processes are linked to mourning (Dunker, 2023).

One way of easing the grieving process is through substitute bonds formed by the child (Ramos; Sengik, 2013). It is therefore essential to pay attention to the reactions to bereavement of those close to the child.

When the child is able to feel the presence of the person who has died, even in their absence, we can think of mourning as complete, as this process will help the child to establish new relationships (Kovács, 2002).

The fact is that experiencing bereavement, for both children and adults, always involves a delicate process of resignification. It involves processes of “connection and disconnection between separations, involving repairs and future transformations, not just past ones” (Dunker, 2023, p. 14). In the case of adults, these links can be reconnected with each new experience of bereavement observed throughout their personal history. Children, due to their young age, may have a smaller repertoire of this type of experience and what is experienced and how it is experienced at this stage of life will influence new experiences of loss in the future. This indicates that these processes need to be taken care of from the earliest moments of life, since the experience of mourning will be permeated by processes of absence and resignification. In this sense, the Early Childhood Education institution plays an important role, as we will see below.

#### **4. Early childhood education institutions, death and bereavement**

The themes of death and bereavement can enter the gates of early childhood education institutions either directly or indirectly. When we talk about death and bereavement in the context of the Early Childhood Education institution in a direct way, we consider situations in which death has removed people from the school community (children, family members, teachers and other education professionals) from their daily lives. In the case of the presence of death and mourning indirectly, we considered situations in which the phenomenon of death occurred with people who have no connection with the Early Childhood Education institution, but the news of the death affected and had repercussions on the daily

life of the Early Childhood Education institution. Regardless of how the topics of death and bereavement arrive at the school, the way in which they are dealt with in the pedagogical proposal and curriculum requires evaluation, planning, ethics, knowledge and sensitivity on the part of the school's professionals.

As this is an educational institution that caters for children, the complexity of handling these issues is even greater, given people's very common understanding that children should be "spared" information about death and the fear that this information could cause pain and suffering (Kovács, 2010). These two aspects constitute a barrier to the topics of death and bereavement being seen as important in the child's upbringing and being approached in a way that respects the child's time and uniqueness.

When early childhood education institutions decide to ignore the themes of death and bereavement, they fail to offer a formative experience for children, education professionals and the entire school community. When the institution works with lives, it also works with death, since both are associated (Naletto, 2005) and are part of the human life cycle.

The complexity of discussing death and bereavement is a challenging fact, just as it is challenging when children call on us to adopt an ethical stance, an attitude of openness, study and flexibility towards the themes of death and bereavement, because they emerge in everyday school life at any time, without asking permission.

Early childhood education institutions must be considered in terms of their social, geographical and community aspects so that the experiences lived within them can be understood and make more sense to the children and the professionals who work there. Buccolo (2019), when discussing the role of the early childhood education teacher, advocates a professional approach that takes into account the child's personal history, what they experience in their family and their expectations of the educational service.

From this perspective, an educator must be attentive to the child's needs, even when the child is going through processes of death and mourning, which calls for a dialog that is closer to what is experienced in the Early Childhood Education institution and in the family environment. In addition, the author advocates a teacher who is attentive to the processes that involve the overall development of children in their cognitive, affective-motivational and socio-relational aspects, favoring an integral understanding of the child.

When thinking about tools for the teacher's work in the Early Childhood Education institution, we can rely on Porto and Kafrouni (2013) when they argue that

Make-believe games, role-playing and dramatic play enable the subject to take on different social roles. These activities are based on experience through language, thus creating imaginary situations that allow them to experience countless situations (p. 577).

Therefore, if we consider that children can express themselves through multiple languages, whether through drawings, words, games or their bodies, schools must be attentive to these different forms of expression in order to be able to welcome bereaved children. The themes of death and mourning can be expressed in silence, in make-believe games, in drawings or in any other experience the child has. They may be alone, with their peers or with an adult from the institution. Listening to children is the responsibility of all education professionals at school. According to Santos (2022),

Listening is an intentional political-pedagogical act that involves choices, power relations, knowledge and can have positive or negative repercussions on a child's life and school career (p. 90).

Listening to children at school is a fundamental principle of the pedagogical and curricular proposal for early childhood education. In the case of bereaved children, by listening to them, the institution must prepare itself to welcome them and, therefore, can equip itself with playful, aesthetic, artistic and cultural devices, such as dramatic games, to help them elaborate their emotions and facilitate the management of their emotions. Theatrical language helps children to elaborate on what they are experiencing and which they can't always externalize, as can happen with children who are facing negative feelings, as in the case of bereavement.

In addition to dramatic play, a very common practice in nursery schools, the use of children's literature is also a rich and powerful way of connecting children with their experiences and with different subjects, including situations of death and mourning. One positive aspect is when the child identifies with the story and is able to connect with the emotions of the characters, making connections with their feelings and expressing what

they are feeling because of reading the book. Children's literature and dramatic play, using careful and effective techniques, can further encourage children to express their emotions, especially those that are more painful and delicate when it involves the loss of someone. Early childhood education institutions can help children along this expressive path, respecting their time and their grief processes, as well as listening to them and helping them to understand the feelings involved in experiencing death and bereavement, so that they can move on with their lives with well-being, protection, affection and joy.

## **5. Final considerations**

The place of death and mourning in the pedagogical and curricular proposal for early childhood education has not yet been secured. Talking about death and bereavement in society is taboo and the training processes for early childhood education professionals take little account of the subject discussed here as relevant to being part of teacher training curricula. Forging a discussion on death and bereavement in the field of education is a great responsibility, as this is a subject crossed by psycho-emotional, socio-cultural, political-economic and pedagogical biases that increase the complexity of the subject, beyond what the experience of death and bereavement already brings.

This text argues that the themes of death and mourning should be present in the pedagogical and curricular proposal for Early Childhood Education and that children should be listened to and welcomed in their experiences of death and mourning. Feelings seen as negative in our society, such as sadness, anger, revolt, among others, can be present in children's reactions to death, but the challenge arises and intensifies when children have to deal with them in isolation. As an essential space for the integral and healthy development of children, early childhood education institutions can and should become a strategic place for supporting children and families who are experiencing death and bereavement, as well as being a channel for open, fluid and respectful dialog with the aim of guaranteeing children's well-being and integral development.

The expression of feelings is a fundamental and important point in the child's process of mourning. It is through the pedagogical and curricular

proposal of the Early Childhood Education institution that rich and welcoming experiences can be provided to children in the context of death and mourning, but also at other times in their formative trajectory.

Recognizing that children are historical subjects with rights, that they are attentive to the world and the things that happen in it, producing culture and theories, including about death and mourning, through their multiple languages, is a basic prerequisite for listening to children and for weaving an ethical relationship between the Early Childhood Education institution and its professionals and children and their experiences.

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