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The Theme/Motif of Death in Preschool Education

Extended summary

Psychological research shows that children start thinking about death, as well as developing their concepts related to it, quite early. On the other hand, there are findings indicating the ambivalent attitudes of teachers and parents when it comes to initiating conversation about death with the youngest. In this paper, we investigated the opinions of the preschool teachers about the thematization of death in preschool education and, more specifically, about the presence of literary texts with the motif of death in their work with children. A questionnaire was designed to collect the opinions of 60 preschool teachers, and the starting hypothesis was that the theme/motif of death is not present in the work with preschool children. The specific hypotheses were as follows: 1) we assume that preschool teachers do not talk with children about death, and 2) we assume that preschool teachers do not often use literary works exploring the motif of death.

The assumption that preschool teachers do not talk about death with children proved to be wrong. Three-fourths of preschool teachers talked with children about death, despite the complexity of this phenomenon and the emotions it may arouse. Death is present in the preschool groups in the form of children's experience with it: only nine preschool teachers did not have a case where a member of a child's close or extended family, or a pet, had died. More than a half of the preschool teachers who had in their groups children who had experienced the death of a close person claim that the children have shown interest in talking about death. Preschool teachers approach this topic in different ways: they talk about the death of a character in

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a book, share with children their own experience with death, talk about children's experience with the death of someone close to them; they also consider both the parents' and children's opinions as relevant. When teachers explain the phenomenon of death to children, they do not describe it as a complete end of life, and they often use religious images (angels, the heavens, God, etc.). Preschool teachers also believe that the appropriate age for talking with children about this topic is a complex question. The majority responded that the age of five is appropriate, but they frequently stressed that children's life experience, interests, and cognitive abilities should also be taken into account.

The assumption that preschool teachers do not use literary texts with a motif of death in them also proved to be wrong. More than a half of all respondents stressed that sometimes they find the motif of death in children's literature, and they listed in the separate answer a considerable number of literary works that contained this motif. When it comes to children's reaction to the motif of death, a half of the preschool teachers stated that children show an interest in this motif or show empathy for the death of their favourite character. It turned out that preschool teachers prefer fairy tales with the motif of death (Cinderella, Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, A Girl with Matches) over fables, and that the death of the main character in a text was not an obstacle for selecting the text for teaching. Preschool teachers named the key aspects of the possible interpretation of a literary work containing the motif of death, and they included the questions referring to the literary work (the emotions of the characters and the text recipients, the causes of death, what happens after death, etc.) and the life itself (children's experience of the death of a close person, their feelings about it, etc.).

The limitations of this paper are primarily related to the size and characteristics of the sample of respondents. We also noticed that work experience has an impact on the preschool teachers' approach to this topic, but due to the size of the sample this assumption should still be examined in a separate study. Also, all respondents were female, so we were not able to compare the opinions of the preschool teachers of different genders. It should be taken into account that the above answers illustrate only the preschool teachers' view of the presence of this topic in preschool education, whereas for a complete perspective it would be necessary to hear the opinions of psychologists, pedagogues, parents and, of course, children. In addition, some new research could examine the different feelings that children experience when a family member or a pet dies, as well as determine how many types of death in different literary texts (e.g. a violent death or death due to an illness) influence the selection of texts for working with children. All this research would provide a safer ground for preschool teachers - and probably for parents, primary school teachers, and psychologists - regarding the conversations about death in the educational process.

Keywords: death, child, preschool teacher, teaching literature, thanatology.

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