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***Who Needs a Methodological Course about Death
in the Poetry for Children and Youth?
Students' Motivation for This Course, Their Concepts,
and Experiences Related to Death***

Extended summary

Psychological studies have indicated that children begin to think about death early on and have prompted the consideration of the possible inclusion of death education in their curriculum. In alignment with this, the Faculty of Education in Belgrade initiated a course titled Methodical Approach to the Topic of Death in Poetry for Children and YA, which was successfully conducted on three occasions. A brief description of this course is provided in the first part of this work. Specifically, this course lasts for one semester and is an elective course chosen by fourth-year students specializing in teaching and education. The goal of the course is to prepare students for: 1) Selecting appropriate poetic texts containing the theme of death for work with children/students. 2) Analysing selected texts and methodically shaping that analysis. In the course realization, particular emphasis has been placed on establishing and maintaining effective communication channels between the instructor and students, the dialogical nature of teaching, and the multidimensionality of assessments.

The text then focuses on the research conducted within the framework of the aforementioned course, aiming to describe: 1) the motivation of students in choosing the course, and 2) students' expectations regarding its content. Furthermore, considering the importance of tailoring material presentation, the following aspects were explored among course participants: 3) conceptualization of death; 4) experiences related to death; 5) opinions on discussing death with children; 6) familiarity with literary texts for children that address the theme of death.

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Data collection employed verbal and visual association methods and a questionnaire. The sample for this study comprised 75 questionnaires and drawings collected over three years of course implementation (2020–2022). The participants were students majoring in preschool and primary school education at the Faculty of Education in Belgrade. The respondents included 43 preschool education students and 32 primary school education students. The gender distribution of the sample reflected the student demographics: 74 respondents were female, and only one was male. The majority of the respondents were between 21 and 23 years old (93.3%). The responses of the participants were analysed qualitatively and thematically.

Regarding students' motivation for choosing the course, a transparent course title formulation was found to be crucial. Expectations of students regarding the course content related to children's perspectives on death, the thematic portrayal of death in children's literature, and a general understanding of the concept of death. The various verbal and visual associations of death revealed that students conceptualize death in diverse ways, from its physical concreteness to common emotional responses and even metaphorical and anthropomorphic interpretations. Most participants had experienced the death of a family member, friend, or pet. Almost two-thirds of the participants had encountered a child who faced death; nearly half of them believed that children expressed a desire to discuss death, and slightly more than a third had engaged in such conversations. Students believe that age, prior exposure to death, children's interests, and cognitive maturity are factors to consider in these conversations. When supporting discussions on death-themed literature, participants cited reasons such as understanding the phenomenon of death, children's experiences and interests, the purpose of discussing death, and the nature of the experience of death in literary texts. Participants were more familiar with prose than poetic texts for children that address death; many were not acquainted with the tradition of writing about death in Serbian poetry for children and YA.

All of the findings have practical implications: the reasons for choosing the course and student expectations can serve as significant guidelines for shaping university syllabi. Understanding the conceptualization of death among course participants calls for a discussion about different representations of death among adults and children and the necessary encounter of these concepts in the educational process. Findings related to students' experiences with death can help the instructor adapt course content and presentation methods. Additionally, providing feedback to students about these experiences shows that they are not alone, which can positively impact their willingness to engage in discussions. Insights into students' experiences related to discussing death with children and their opinions on the appropriate age and factors influencing it can also serve as a basis for acquiring new knowledge. Information about students' familiarity with texts for children featuring death as a theme justifies the course centered on poetry for children and suggests offering diverse poetic material for interpretation in educational settings.

In conclusion, it is necessary to acknowledge the limitations of this research, which can act as a catalyst for further studies in the field of death education, a scientific and educational discipline that is still in its early stages in our country.

Keywords: death education, bibliotherapy, thanatology, speech development methodology, Serbian language and literature teaching methodology

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