Abstract

If death is an issue inherent to life, why is it still out of education systems? Death -and its didactics- is an ignored area, pushed into the background or covered up by society, including school. With few exceptions, teachers are not sure if they should do something about it at schools. And if so, it is necessary for them knowing what to do and how to proceed. The former was demonstrated by the data collected in the Teacher Training School from the University of the Basque Country (Spain). Students of that university (people studying to be teachers at the pre-school and primary school levels) were asked about different aspects related to the didactics of death, as well as their own attitudes towards the topic. Results point out the need of training students for the aforementioned subject. These students, who will be teachers of children between 0 and 12 years within 3-4 years, are totally lost in relation to the topic of death, both in general terms (how to talk about it with the kids) and in response to specific events (disasters, death of a relative, death of a child in the class, ... ). Therefore, it seems clear that two changes are necessary in relation to this topic. Firstly, a better formation or training for students who are going to be these children’s teachers is necessary. And, secondly, it is also necessary the creation and implementation of educational resources to tackle this issue from both aforementioned points of view (preventive and reactive).

1. Introduction

Although death is a natural thing and inherent to life itself, the fact is that it still remains as an issue that can be considered a social and educational taboo. It is a topic constantly banned and avoided. It is negative, distasteful. Dead person is boxed, glazed, covered and camouflaged with flowers and odors so significant that we hardly can forget them. These same attitudes are found among education professionals, which, sooner or later, will have to talk

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to children about the subject of death and dying: for several reasons (own fears, ignorance about children’s ability or not to understand an issue so complicated for ourselves, not knowing how to help them canalize their feelings, etc.), the inclusion of this topic in schools still remains as a topic boxed, glazed and camouflaged with flowers and smells of bias (Bowie, 2000). It seems that we live in a culture that overestimates joy and shies away suffering, although the latter is also part of life and although we normally need more help just when the latter occurs.

As it happens outside, inside the classroom (both the preschool and the primary one), the subject of death is often left cornered. There are several reasons why teachers try to avoid treating it with children. First, there is a belief among many teachers that death is a subject that neither interests nor concerns children, so it is better not to mention it -because if it is mentioned, the only thing we get is to generate fears that did not previously exist and that, in any case, are unnecessary at certain ages-. Secondly, there are teachers who, even believing that is an issue to be addressed in school, find it too difficult for them -not knowing how to treat it, due to their own attitudes and fears towards death-, so prefer not to do it. Last but not least, is the belief that this is an issue that worries children, but it must be treated at home and according to the beliefs of each family. Thus, thinking that talking about death they may be contradicting family beliefs -either because they speak in biological terms and family is religious, or the way around-, the fact is that ultimately the issue is not being treated, either from the biological or from the religious point of view (Bowie, 2000).

It can be said that nowadays death is a taboo as sex used to be at a time. The taboo of sex seems to have been overcome with time and is currently a topic covered in most school settings -at least in a biological way-, even if it is not an issue so universal as death. There are numerous events related to the theme that human beings have to live sooner or later -in some cases, during childhood:- the death of a grandparent, a classmate, a parent ... even the death of a pet can generate in the child a series of questions, uncertainties and fears that as adults close to him, we should know how to manage in the case such circumstances happen -especially if we are professionals of the education-. Going a step further, many authors stress the importance of such a work in a preventive way (Bowie, 2000), without waiting for such events to happen, either treating the subject in classroom when children ask questions about it, or including it in the curriculum as a cross-over subject related to education for life, or at least having reflected and having being trained for it, so that we know how to treat it and what our attitude will be if necessary. Thus, the situation that, unfortunately, is the most common would be avoided: the teachers are surprised by the issue -either due to some event related to it or because of the questions children make to them-and, not knowing how to handle it, avoid it.

If that is the reality, even a more preventive work can be done, starting back in time. If teachers do not know how to respond to such situations, it may be because during their formation they have never been taught anything about it or, even worse, because they have not even had a chance to reflect on it. Taking a look at the subjects that these future teachers learn during their four years of training, it certainly is not one that is called Didactics of Death or Pedagogy of Death or something similar. This is an issue that could fit into several of the subjects along the Grade, especially those relating to psychology, but it seems that today is not being included in them.

The fact is that children have the right to being talked about death sincerely truth (Herrain & Cortina, 2006), but it seems that adults who will be in charge of their education are not being trained for it. And the fact is that the idea that children are not interested in the subject, or are not afraid of death because they do not think of it, or can not in any way understand it -ideas all present in the minds of many adults-, are all false. Children may not have the capacity to understand the issue as an adult does -even for many adults the topic is difficult-, but that does not mean they are not interested on it and, of course, does not mean it does not affect them at all. What we as adults must know for sure is the importance of knowing how to appreciate and meet their needs at all times adapting to the capabilities of each child. That is, it is important that these university students, as future teachers, know both the development of children’s ability to understand the topic, and the most appropriate response they can give in each age-period (Dennis, 2008). It would be important, therefore, to highlight the importance of Education for Death in schools (Engarhos, 2013). It is not that when working with children, teachers have to give them real death-education courses or real counseling to deal with grief -they are training to be teachers, not psychologists-. But it is important that at least they know how to give a proper response to the concerns and needs of these children (Eshbaugh, 2013). And all this highlights the importance of including this topic in teacher training schools too, as it has been pointed out by other authors earlier (Hilliker, 2013).
Another important aspect in all this are the personal experiences and attitudes of these students who will be teachers in the future. It is likely that the way in which each lived these experiences as a child, as well as the attitude towards death or fears that it generates to them, in addition to their religious beliefs, also influence how they will react in the future to the subject or the manner in which they will deal with it (Lozano & Chaskel, 2009).

That is why this study the following objectives: 1) to ascertain whether students from Teachers Training School have been or are being trained on Death Education; 2) to test their knowledge and attitudes towards the inclusion of this subject in schools; 3) to collect data about their religious beliefs, life experiences and attitudes towards death and 4) to check whether that data relate to their attitude towards inclusion of the subject in schools.

2. Method

The sample comprised 52 students from the Teacher Training School at the University of the Basque Country. They are preparing to be teachers of children aged 0-12 years old. Gender ratio was as follows: 37 were female (71.2 %) and 15 male (28.8 %). Their ages ranged from 17 to 47 (M=19.98, ST=5.95).

First of all, they answered to a questionnaire made ad hoc regarding their religious beliefs, their experience talking with an adult about death when they were children, their knowledge about children’s understanding and need of this topic in school and their own need (or not) of training at university so that they will be prepared in case they need it in their future classes. That information -some of which was collected in a qualitative way- was completed with their response to the Death Attitude Profile-Revised (DAP-R) scale).

3. Results

First of all, participants were asked about their religious beliefs. The results obtained were as follow: 17.3% of them said they considered themselves as believers, 57.7 % declared they did not believe in any God and 25 % were not really sure about their own religious beliefs.

Regarding the question about having talked about death with an adult when they were children, 71.2 % of participants declared they did. In most of cases, this conversation took place with both parents, followed by these other people: just with mother, just father, grandparents, psychologist and others.

In 40.4 % of the cases, that conversation started after a concrete event, principally after the death of a nearest relative. When told to describe with just one adjective how they felt after that conversation, participants mentioned words such as thoughtful, curious, intrigued, sad, or relaxed, among others.

When asked if anyone has given them any training related to death and dying, only 25 % answered affirmatively, although 55.8 % of them considered that training essential -30.8% were not sure about the need of training and only 13.5 % of them considered it unnecessary.

As regards to the need or not of talking about this topic with children when they start working at schools, 80.8 % of them considered it necessary. The main reason for that answer was the one highlighting the naturalness of death and dying, but participants gave many more reasons -such as the need of preparing children for dealing with things that happen outside the school, and not only for academic issues-. On the other hand, participants who saw this as unnecessary pointed out that it is something that has to be done by families -not by teachers- and that teachers should not take part in it.

Asked about the way they would do it, most of them recognized that, even if they consider it important, they do not know how to treat the topic of death with children. However, they mentioned the need of knowing didactical tools to use in class, as well as personal skills to feel comfortable to deal with it if needed -learning to talk about feelings with children, and so on.

Regarding the moment at which it can be good to start working on the topic at class, some of them pointed out children’s ages, which ranged from 3 to 12 years old. But others focused not on the age, but on events which would made that work necessary -specially, when it comes to the death of someone or when the own child asks for information. Very few participants thought that any time can be a good time for including the topic in class.
When asked if they considered themselves to be capable of treating the topic in class, only 13.46% of them thought they were. The rest of participants underlined the need of a better training so that they could feel capable and comfortable, as well as the need to overcome their own fears and doubts about death.

They were asked too if they thought that children show interest and concern about the topic and, if so, when did they thing that interest and concern started. In this case, answers varied enormously, from participants who thought that children show both of them, to others considering that they show neither of them if adults do not tell them anything. Regarding the ages, the range was large too -from 3 to 12 years-.

To finish with this qualitative data collecting, they were asked if they thought that death training should be included in schools even if children did not asked for information or doubts. 36.4% said yes, giving no reasons or mentioning things like "it is something they will have to deal with during life, sooner or later", "better if they are prepared for that, because it will happen to them without doubt" or "they have to be prepared for life". The 25.1% that considered that this topic does not have to be mentioned before children talk about it, mentioned reasons such as "if they do not ask for the information, better not talking about it, they would scare", "they would not understand" or "parents should do that, not teachers", among others. The rest of participants were not sure about their answer.

After that first approaching to the topic, they were given 6 questions to give their opinion in a Likert scale which oscillated from 1 (total disagree) to 5 (total agree). These questions were based on the ones used in a previous study (McGoven & Barry, 2000). The results can be seen in Table 1.

Finally, participants completed the Death Attitude Profile-Revised questionnaire (Willis, 2002). The results for each of its 32 items -1 being strongly disagree, 2 moderately disagree, 3 undecided, 4 moderately agree and 5 strongly agree- are shown in Table 2.
Death is deliverance from pain and suffering. 38.2%  23.5%  23.5%  11.8%  2.9%
I always try not to think about death. 21.2%  27.3%  12.1%  30.3%  9.1%
I believe that heaven will be a much better place than this world. 55.9%  8.8%  32.4%  2.9%
Death is a natural aspect of life. 2.9%  2.9%  20.6%  73.5%
Death is a union with God and eternal bliss. 55.9%  14.7%  29.4%
Death brings a promise of a new and glorious life. 58.8%  8.8%  29.4%  2.9%
I would neither fear death nor welcome it. 38.2%  14.7%  11.8%  17.6%  17.6%
I have an intense fear of death. 26.5%  26.5%  17.6%  17.6%  11.8%
I avoid thinking about death altogether. 23.5%  26.5%  23.5%  23.5%  2.9%
The subject of life after death troubles me greatly. 23.5%  32.4%  26.5%  17.6%
The fact that death will mean the end of everything as I know it frightens me. 14.7%  11.8%  20.6%  41.2%  11.8%
I look forward to a reunion with my loved ones after I die. 24.2%  9.1%  24.1%  21.2%  21.2%
I view death as a relief from earthly suffering. 50%  23.5%  23.5%  2.9%
Death is simply a part of the process of life. 2.9%  2.9%  38.2%  55.9%
I see death as a passage to an eternal and blessed place. 47.1%  11.8%  38.2%  2.9%
I try to have nothing to do with the subject of death. 15.2%  24.2%  18.2%  36.4%  6.1%
Death offers a wonderful release of the soul. 50%  14.7%  35.3%
One thing that gives me comfort in facing death is my belief in the afterlife. 41.2%  20.6%  26.5%  11.8%
I see death as a relief from the burden of this life. 50%  29.4%  17.6%  2.9%
Death is neither good nor bad. 2.9%  14.7%  23.5%  26.5%  32.4%
I look forward to life after death. 17.6%  11.8%  29.4%  26.5%  14.7%
The uncertainty of not knowing what happens after death worries me. 11.8%  11.8%  14.7%  44.1%  17.6%

As the own instrument indicates, the 32 items can be separated into these 5 dimensions (mean and standard deviation in this study for each of them can be seen in brackets): Fear of Death (M=3.04, ST=.96), Death Avoidance (M=2.75, ST=1.17), Neutral Acceptance (M=3.97, ST=.64), Approach Acceptance (M=2.17, ST=.84) and Escape Acceptance (M=1.69, ST=.67).

Finally, a Student t test was carried out to ascertain whether significant differences existed in these 5 dimensions according sex and religiosity. In the first case, there were differences in the dimension Death Avoidance, t(51)=.812, p<.005, women scoring higher (M=2.86, ST=1.32) than men (M=2.5, ST=.70). No significant difference was found in the other 4 dimensions according to sex. On the other hand, no difference was found in any of the 5 dimensions according to religiosity. It could be interesting too to find out if there were differences according to age. In this last case, as the variety of ages was not too big, it was impossible to group participants, so bivariate correlations were carried out between age and each of the 5 dimensions. The only correlation which was statistically significant was the one relating age and avoidance of death (r=-.42, p<.05).
4. Discussion

The data collected in this study highlight the importance of training future teachers to deal with the topic of death properly. Most of the participants declared that no one has given them formation related to the topic, even if they consider it necessary, because it is a natural part of life. Nevertheless, some of them still think that this is a topic to be treated at home, more than at schools. This last, together with the recognition that they do not see themselves as capable and well trained to deal with this topic in future, supports the idea of a better formation needed at university.

The second finding is that these students are lost regarding children’s understanding of death and the age at which they start understanding it. Children construct their own theories about death over time, and the explanations and information they have received in the course of their lives play a vital role in this construction. But many of the participants in this study think they do not. They also think that children do not understand this topic until the age of ten, but the truth is that they start understanding it -at least in a primitive way- already at 3 years old (Dennis, 2008). These all are aspects that should be taken into account at university, at least for giving them correct information about the topic, as well as for training them to deal with it properly.

Another interesting finding is that students show a medium-high score in fear of death, which could be affecting their own attitude towards the topic in future. If they are not able to think or talk about death because of their own fears, they will be hardly able to treat the theme with children. It would be interesting to include a brief formation related to it at university -specially in the subjects related to psychology- or, at least, some general guidelines to act with children in the future, highlighting the importance of avoiding euphemisms, honouring children’s responses, being honest or modelling healthy emotional behaviour for children, allowing them to laugh, cry and talk when they need it (Dennis, 2008). Related to fear of death, it can be found death avoidance. This score was not so high, but was significantly higher in girls. This finding is coherent with some previous research (Willis, 2002).

All the aspects cited above support the idea of death education needed to be included in teachers training, so that when they start working at schools they do not repeat what is being done until now -that is, avoiding the topic of death because they do not know how to deal with it. If they are going to be children’s educators, it is important that they give them the opportunity to share their doubts, fears, or feelings. And for doing it properly, they themselves need to be prepared for it and overcome their own fears and doubts. In like manner, it would be interesting and necessary to help them overcome some myths related to children and death, such as: children do not suffer; grief in children does not cause such a profound suffering as to adults; children have luck, because they are so young they do not understand death; children must be protected from the pain and suffering that death brings to maintain their childlike innocence; given their youth and resilience, children easily forget the dead person, resolving grief quickly and going on with their lives (Wong, Reker & Gesser, 1994). If they come to understand that these are only myths, and know the truth about each of them, they may realize how important death education can be.

Grieving will always be a difficult process, not only for children, but also for adults. But if at least they have the opportunity to understand that process according to their capacities and age, or know that there is an adult in school who is empathic with their feelings and thoughts, we may be helping them to develop in a healthier and a happier way.

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