

MEANING AND EXPERIENCE OF DEATH AMONG SELECTED SOUTH AFRICAN PRIMARY SCHOOL LEARNERS

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Abstract

This study explored primary school learner's meaning and experience of death. Although a few international studies explore this issue, it was deemed useful to evaluate the perceptions of South African children. The participants of the current study were between the ages of seven and twelve years. Individual, structured interviews were conducted on this cross-sectional population. The interviews contained questions adapted from Koocher's (2000) research in this area, and responses were analysed by means of traditional content analysis. It was found that children had a basic understanding of death concepts by the age of approximately seven years old and that the youngest age group of children possess an awareness of death, but tend to view it as reversible and not final. An understanding of the finality of death does eventually emerge. In general, the participants' responses showed a close relationship between stages of cognitive development and how learners reason about death.

Keywords: Death, dying, grief, bereavement, programme implementation

Introduction

Death in any family can be devastating, and sometimes it could have a severe impact especially on inexperienced children who are still in early stages of development. From birth, children experience changes involving separation and loss as part of their normal development process. Some of these changes are inherent in all human beings and may be anticipated, while others occur unexpectedly and may be overwhelming. In many cases, it depends on the child's developmental stage, especially if the child is well prepared and allowed to participate in preparing themselves for the eventuality (Hallam & Vine, 1996).

Perry (2000) and Sherner (2015) discuss children's inability to understand sudden, unexpected loss when they find themselves in a traumatising situation and while children may find such losses difficult to comprehend, Hallam and Vine (1996) postulate that adults who experience sudden losses associated with traumatic events may find it difficult to accept and have trouble discussing these with children. In many societies, people do not like to talk about death and find themselves part of "the club no-one wants to join" (Schuurman, 2004). Usually since there are, myths and misconceptions associated with death (Marta, 2003), that is until the loved one dies. In such cases, families may be overwhelmed by great emotional distress and they may be rendered helpless. This could prove difficult for the children who have no concept to understand the finality of death (Neimeyer, 1994; Willis, 2002).

Children who lost loved ones early in their lives have adaptation problems; they also experience various emotional, behavioural and cognitive disturbances (Dick, Roye, Buschman, Kutscher, Rubinstein, & Forstenzer, 1998; Kuban, 2011). The death of a loved one is one of the most stressful events for some children, even many years after the death has taken place (Cook, 1996; Kuban, 2011). For other children it is traumatic or sudden and the end of life as they have always known. The way children cope and survive depends on many factors including, their natural ability, resilience and how they coped with previous loss, but they still need time to mourn. Perry (2000) mentions that the child will need to reshape their world and this could be emotionally, physically, spiritually and otherwise.

Mourning children may have difficulties with their ability to concentrate on their responsibilities that will advance their future development including their education. According to Smith and Pennells (1995), a difficulty that children in mourning experience at schools is concentration, which inevitably increases the myriad of problems the child is trying to deal with. Kuban (2011) and McGloughlin (2019) reinforces the idea that learners in mourning struggle to concentrate in class and emphasize that there is also a loss of recently acquired skills (both in the classroom and on the sports field) (Kuban, 2011) and a drop in academic results. The feelings and

reactions children experience when faced with death are varied and reflect their environment and cultural background.

The research study attempted to answer the following questions:

- How do learners understand death as a phenomenon and how does it influence their scholastic performance?
- How do learners experience death in their respective families and school?
- What role does the school play in helping learners cope with their loss?

Literature Review

The literature states the need to assess the child's grieving process independently from that of adults, for the following reasons, the timeframe and grief process in children is distinctly different to that of adults, as they are at a different developmental stage in cognitive ability and psychological processes (Thompson & Rudolph, 2000; Willis, 2002; Howarth, 2011). Furthermore, as the child grows and matures, his or her earlier ways of thinking about death will change. It is essential for the adult to have a sense of how children conceptualize death at different ages so that when the time comes to talk about death, whether of a pet or a loved one, the adult can respond in a manner appropriate to the child's developmental age.

Observations by Thompson and Rudolph (2000) on children's phenomenological understanding of death revealed that despite methodological differences, children tend to have an awareness of death very early in life and there was a positive association between age and conceptual development. Their conceptions of death tend to reflect those of the society in which they are raised and age nine is seen as the cognitive turning point at which death is seen as being universal. By the age of ten children have a mature understanding of the components of irreversibility, universality, finality, personal mortality and causality of death.

An overview on the understanding of the concept of death provided in this study gives examples of how the concept of death develops in children. A common trait of the explanations offered is the effort to describe the concept of death by children from the adult's point of view. In order to be available to children in these ways, it is essential for adults to be aware of the realities of death-related events in the lives of children and to appreciate the many ways in which coping with tasks arising from death and bereavement can interact with coping with normative developmental tasks.

Methodology

Participants

The aim of this research study was to gain insight into the meaning and experiences of death of primary school learners on the loss of their loved ones [parent(s), sibling(s), grandparent(s) or close relative]. A school from the King Cetshwayo District, Empangeni, KwaZulu-Natal was selected for convenience and fifteen learners between the ages of seven and twelve who had recently experienced a loss were purposively selected. Qualitative research was best suited to achieve the desired outcomes of the study and address the needs of the study in terms of the ages of the participants. Qualitative research allows for flexibility of responses, which enabled the participants to share information-rich data of the lived experiences of the participants of losing a loved one. The research study followed a contextual, explorative, descriptive and phenomenological design.

Instrumentation

Semi-structured interview schedules were designed based on the literature review and then used to interview the participants. Data was collected by means of taped focus-group interviews and observational field notes were taken by the researcher. The interview techniques used were chosen to accommodate the developmental stages of primary-school children and special attention was paid to their levels of communication. The data was analysed according to Tesch's eight-step descriptive analysis method (Creswell, 1994). Measures were taken to ensure the validity and reliability of the qualitative data and all dealings with the children and their teachers were dealt with in an ethical and professional manner paying attention to consent, assent and confidentiality.

Findings

This study endeavoured to create an understanding of primary-school children's perception and experiences of the death of a loved one. The experiences of the children were framed into themes. The data from the semi-structured interviews was coded into three main themes: the primary-school child's understanding of death and associated experiences; the management of their grief in their families and school; and the primary-school

children's perceptions of what assisted them in coping with grief. The above themes were discussed in sub-themes to explore all aspects of the children's experiences of grief.

The children interviewed gave detailed accounts of their experiences and contributed information-rich data. None of the literature reviewed by the researchers cited children as their sole source of information, but it was found that the literature was, overall, accurate in its depiction of the experiences of the grieving child. There appeared to be insufficient research into the relationship and social factors affecting children's grieving process. Most of the reviewed literature (Goldman, 1994; Smith, 1999) focused on the observed difficulty children have in expressing emotion and noted behaviour changes as a result of grieving. There were also few examples of research done in the South African setting (Ndudane 1998; Matumba, 2003), giving value to the experiences voiced by this multi-racial South African sample. The participants' experiences illuminated the following with regard to grieving children:

- Grieving children experience change in many areas of their lives.
- It is traumatic to lose a loved one while still dependent on adult nurturing and provision.
- There is emotional wounding in loss.
- Adverse responses are at times experienced from their interaction with significant others.
- Confusion and stress are commonly experienced by the grieving children conversely.
- It was found that the participants experienced social support and caring from many significant people in their lives.
- They displayed resilience and courage in the face of their loss.
- Although simplistic, many of the children expressed emotional grief normally.
- The children were able to make positive suggestions to the adults who serve these children.

Discussion

The research methodology and design selected for this study proved an effective means of gaining insight into the lived experiences of primary-school learners at the loss of their loved ones. By employing the qualitative research approach, by means of focused-group interviews and self-report for learners as methods of data collection, it was possible for the researcher to study the children within their context and effectively explore their stories of how the loss of loved ones had affected them. The participants' descriptions of their experiences were reported from an insider's perspective typical of qualitative research, hence proving that the methodology selected was suited to reaching the aims of this study.

The underlying essence of their stories was their need for help in adapting to their loss. Not all the children would need professional help for example, therapeutic intervention, but they all needed help from understanding and supportive adults which was also mentioned by Shapiro, Hopewell and Kaplow (2014). They were children, and were by nature dependent and immature, needing adults to guide and care for them.

Recommendations

The study presents avenues for future intervention and research. The first intention of this study was to determine learners' understanding of death as a phenomenon and its impact on their scholastic performance; second objective was to investigate learners' experiences of death in their respective families and school and third purpose was to ascertain the role the school plays in helping learners cope with loss in their school. The recommendations are listed as follows:

- Future research needs to be undertaken into the psychological or social relationship aspects of the grieving children's lives, as there appears to be limited research in this area. Specific attention needs to be placed on the significance of the impact on grief management of the relationship with the deceased loved one.
- The following areas arising from the children's experiences are of particular concern and therefore adequate attention needs to be given to these topics in the proposed intervention programmes:

-Children's involvement in the planning and participation in the funeral should be encouraged, to enable them to benefit from commemorating the deceased's life and to comfortably say the final goodbye.

- The need for the significant others to provide the children with information on the deceased and how they died is of importance, as it creates a better self-identity, removes the possibility of self-blame and misbelief, and enables the child to develop resilience.
- The expression of grieving feelings needs to be facilitated in a healthy and child-friendly environment.
- It is evident from the children's experiences that there is a need to inform significant others of their valuable position in the children's lives and to give them the means of making a difference to them.

- **Recommended Intervention Programme**

The valuable role of the significant others could be maximised by equipping them to better assist the children. This may be achieved by creating awareness in the broader community of the experiences of the grieving primary-school children and then implementing training programmes with specific groups of role players to equip them to fulfil helpful functions in the lives of the children concerned (Horn & Govender, 2019). The helpful functions can be any function that the children will perceive as supportive and understanding.

Phase 1: Psychological Intervention

Psychologists can offer direct services to the grieving child and their family, and empower other role-players, through training programmes and by creating awareness of the children's experiences on the loss of a loved one, to intervene and in doing so, impact the grieving children and their families in helpful ways. The different functions of the psychologists are suggested as follows:

- **Individual counselling** services to the children who have lost a loved one. This can be implemented by exploring their experiences, acknowledging their situation and gaining understanding of their loss, in order to facilitate healthy grieving and resilience. The need for therapy was further supported by Koblenz (2016).
- **Support groups** for grieving children in the schools. The psychologist's function is not only to facilitate peer-support groups, but also to train support-group leaders and to provide supervision for them, so as to reap the described benefit of peer support and understanding. Stylianou and Zembylas (2018) expound on the importance of peer support for bereaved children and that learning about grief, with structured support, is good for young people not just for themselves but also to provide support for peers within the school and community.
- **Family therapy** with the families who have lost a loved one. The psychologist needs to empower the families to adjust to their grief and to find the strengths needed to adapt to the changes in the family structure.
- **Creating public awareness** of the experiences of grieving children. The community needs to be empowered with practical means to assist and support these children.
- **Training of role players**, like teachers, religious leaders, parents and families. These role players need specific training and also need to know when to refer children of families for professional counselling (McManus & Paul, 2019).

Phase 2: Community intervention

The significant role players listed below could be empowered and facilitated by the psychologists to implement their own individual interventions to assist the grieving child and his/her family. Their roles and functions are listed below as a means of directing their training needs, and defining their functions to create awareness in the community of the different roles played by the community in offering assistance to the grieving child and his/her family.

- **Surviving parent and family of the child**

- Provide support and understanding to the child. Families of the grieving child can do this by creating opportunities to discuss grieving issues, or merely by spending time with the child, even being silent or playing. The memory of the deceased loved one can be upheld by reminiscing about the deceased loved one and this is also reinforced by Koblenz (2016). This provides a sense of identity and heritage and tends to build self-esteem in the child. The families can implement the suggestions voiced by the grieving children of this study:
- Refer the child for counselling if needed, or attend as a family.
- Join support groups with other families/parents who have suffered loss.
- Look for programmes offered by NGO's or CBOs (Clute & Kobayashi, 2013) who suggest bereavement camps

- **Teachers**

-Support and be understanding of individual children who have lost a loved one. This can be achieved by creating an environment in the classroom that understanding of grieving children and their behaviours. Teachers must assist the children with their studies, accommodating the grieving behaviours outside of the children's control, like concentration problems or crying. Teachers are often best able to access those children needing to be referred for professional counselling:

- Facilitate or assist with support groups.

- Guide peer friendships to be understanding and supportive of the grieving children in the class.

But teachers have no professional training in issues related to death, dying, grief and bereavement and McGloughlin (2017) in research conducted in Ireland that teachers are often unable to cope with a grieving child in their classroom. Some of the recommendations that McGloughlin (2017) suggest as part of whole-school development include – policy changes, classroom management, curriculum planning and professional development.

- **Ministers of religion and spiritual leaders**

- Facilitate the rituals and ceremonies of the death rites and include the children's planning and participation in the ceremonies.

- Provide spiritual training and support to the families of a deceased loved one. Their role would be to reinforce the belief of choice and to provide spiritual support in the children and families' questioning and uncertainty. The pastors/spiritual leaders are able to initiate community support for the child and the family and Rowling (2008) mentions that spiritual leaders in the community have an important role to play in terms of supporting children emotionally.

- Facilitate the initial bereavement-counselling needs of the family. Often these leaders are the first outsiders to the family to be called after a death. They provide valuable counselling, but need to refer the families, or the children, for professional counselling if grief is complicated.

- McGloughlin (2017) also mentions that teachers are sensitive to children's multicultural backgrounds which is another reason why spiritual leaders play a very important role.

- **Health professionals**

- Provide support and understanding to the child by acknowledging his/her grief.

- Provide services to the child in a professional and caring manner within their discipline.

- Create community awareness of the child's experiences noted in this study.

The proposed programme is multidisciplinary and involves a holistic approach to addressing the problems associated with children who have lost a loved one. The underlying premise of this study is that grief is a natural consequence to loss, and, that children and adults are all able to progress through the grieving process to a point of acceptance of their loss. Unfortunately, children have difficulty with this process because of their stage of development at which they may find themselves in and the complications of an often-unsympathetic society. The aim of the study is to find interventions and to activate resources from within communities around grieving children to help them process their grief.

Conclusion

The children discussed their lived experiences and painted a verbal picture of how it felt to lose someone they loved. By listening, the researchers gained valuable insight into aspects that the children considered important. The information gathered was particularly important since limited studies have been conducted in South Africa concerning experiences of children who have experienced death in their families. These insights will be of value to professionals who work with children, as well as parents and guardians of children who have lost a loved one. While the study showed that children often do not have the support and understanding they need to adapt to their grief, it also showed the tremendous resilience and strength the children displayed when facing confusion and instability. Through further research and the implementation of relevant intervention programmes, it may be possible to supplement the natural resilience and empower learners to cope more effectively with experiences of death and related challenges, in a functional and positive manner.

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