

EDUCATION FOR DEATH IN SCHOOLS: A POSSIBLE DIALOGUE?

EDUCAÇÃO PARA MORTE NAS ESCOLAS: UM DIÁLOGO POSSÍVEL?

EDUCACIÓN SOBRE LA MUERTE EN LAS ESCUELAS: ¿ UN POSIBLE DIÁLOGO?

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ABSTRACT

Schools, as a fundamental space for comprehensive education and strengthening social ties, face significant challenges in addressing death. Death is inseparable from human development and manifests itself from childhood onwards and accompanies the entire life cycle. This theoretical essay aims to discuss the importance of education about death in the school environment. The methodology used was a theoretical essay, which enabled the construction of a critical analysis based on an argumentative and reflective exposition. It was noted that there is a shortage of scientific production on this topic. We conclude that, although children and adolescents have the capacity to deal with the topic, the school environment remains unprepared to promote open discussions about death. By recognizing and embracing its role as a space for comprehensive education, schools can become agents of transformation, preparing young people not only for life, but also for the acceptance of finitude as an inherent part of the human condition.

Keywords: *Death; Education; Childhood.*

RESUMO

A escola, enquanto espaço fundamental de formação integral e fortalecimento dos laços sociais, enfrenta desafios significativos na abordagem da morte. Inseparável do desenvolvimento humano, a morte se manifesta desde a infância e acompanha todo o ciclo vital. Este ensaio teórico visa discutir a importância da educação sobre a morte no ambiente escolar. Como metodologia utilizou-se o ensaio teórico, que propiciou a construção de uma análise crítica, a partir de uma exposição argumentativa e reflexiva. Notou-se que há uma escassez na produção científica desse tema. Concluímos que, embora crianças e adolescentes possuam capacidade para lidar com a temática, o ambiente escolar permanece, ainda, despreparado para promover discussões abertas sobre a morte. Ao reconhecer e abraçar seu papel como espaço de formação integral, a escola pode se tornar um agente transformador, preparando jovens não apenas para a vida, mas também para a aceitação da finitude como parte inerente da condição humana.

Descritores: *Morte; Educação; Infância.*

RESUMEN


La escuela, como espacio fundamental para la formación integral y el fortalecimiento de los vínculos sociales, enfrenta importantes desafíos en el abordaje de la muerte. Inseparable del desarrollo humano, la muerte se manifiesta desde la infancia y acompaña todo el ciclo vital. Este ensayo teórico tiene como objetivo discutir la importancia de la educación sobre la muerte en el ambiente escolar. Se utilizó como metodología el ensayo teórico, que permitió la construcción de un análisis crítico, a partir de una exposición argumentativa y reflexiva. Se observó que existe escasez de producción científica sobre este tema. Concluimos que, aunque niños y adolescentes tienen capacidad para abordar el tema, el ambiente escolar aún no está preparado para promover discusiones abiertas sobre la muerte. Al reconocer y abrazar su papel como espacio de formación integral, la escuela puede convertirse en un agente transformador, preparando a los jóvenes no sólo para la vida, sino también para la aceptación de la finitud como parte inherente de la condición humana.

Descriptorios: *Muerte; Educación; Infancia.*

INTRODUCTION

Although the twentieth century tried to silence death, making it a taboo subject, the development of telecommunications in this period and at the beginning of the twenty-first century brought it back into people's daily lives¹. Therefore, at the same

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time that one avoids talking about this topic, maintaining silence in order to avoid suffering, one lives by his side on a daily basis. Thus, in the midst of a daily bombardment of images of violence, accidents, diseases and death, children and adolescents experience a paradox: the reality of death present in their lives contrasts with the silence that surrounds it, in an attempt to spare them from the suffering that the discussion can generate.

Breaking the silence imposed by modern society, the need to rethink the role of the school in the integral formation of the individual emerges. If, on the one hand, the family is the first space for socialization, the school is configured as a second essential environment in this process. Often described as a place of safety and affection for the child, the school plays a fundamental role in mediating the information of reality². In this sense, this formative space occupies a significant part of the individual's time, and the way interactions occur among its members can facilitate or hinder the elaboration of various development processes, including the experience of grief. Therefore, considering grief as an experience resulting from the rupture of bonds³, what is the importance of analyzing this theme within the school environment?

The discussion of this topic in schools is essential, but, according to Kovács⁴, it is often neglected due to the lack of preparation of educators. An example to deal with this gap is the partnership between the schools and the Institute of Psychology of the University of São Paulo, through the Laboratory of Studies on Death, in order to propose pedagogical activities, training spaces, bibliography to support teacher training, among others⁴. In addition, in a study carried out by Zucco *et al*⁵, through an integrative review, it was shown that scientific production on education for death in schools is scarce, with studies at the undergraduate level predominating, more specifically for Medicine and Nursing courses.

Thus, the school becomes an environment rich in experiences for children and adolescents to build friendships, deal with losses and gains, and face the unexpected, growing and developing in this process. Why, then, is the theme of death not present in this environment? Is it possible for man, as a historical and cultural being, not to debate, question or talk about death? In this context, this theoretical essay aims to discuss the importance of education for death in the school environment, seeking to understand the challenges and possibilities of addressing this complex theme in an environment marked by silencing.

METHODS

The present reflection is elaborated as a theoretical essay, a methodological approach that stands out for its reflective and interpretative character. Unlike traditional scientific methodologies, which prioritize quantification and rationality, the essay values the qualitative aspects of the phenomena analyzed⁶. This methodological choice is justified by its ability to stimulate the reader's reflection and interpretation. As Meneghetti⁶ points out, instead of offering conclusive answers, the essay incites questions and *insights*, inviting the reader to form their own understanding. Thus, it is an invitation to deep reflection, where questions gain more importance than answers.

The methodology chosen allows for a critical reflection on education for death in schools, using the interpretive nature of the essay to deeply explore the social and emotional dynamics related to the theme. The objective is not only to understand why death is absent in pedagogical practices, but also to propose ways to integrate it in a sensitive and meaningful way. This reflection aims to inspire actions and policies that promote a welcoming and conscious learning environment capable of addressing all aspects of the human experience. By encouraging honest and empathetic dialogues, the essay seeks to break the silence about death, strengthening the formative role of the school in the development of the individual.

This proposal is based on the discussions on Education for Death, developed by Kovács⁴, the main reference in the area. Her work underlines the importance of incorporating the discussion about death in various social environments, emphasizing the relevance of starting this dialogue in the school environment, as a primary space for socialization and formation of subjects. Education for death must contain pedagogical and emotional aspects, as it is a theme that crosses everyone's life, demanding understanding and contact so that we can face it more consciously.

RESULTS

Although life and death are themes present in the childhood experience, many adults avoid addressing them, claiming to want to protect them. However, the child may perceive this concealment, manifesting symptoms such as physiological changes, difficulty in sleeping, and problems in social relationships⁴. Speece and Brent⁷ reinforce this idea when they report that most of the 7-year-olds in their research already understand fundamental aspects of death, such as irreversibility, universality, and non-functionality. The relevance of this and other studies on children's understanding of death lies in the awareness of the importance of addressing the topic with them, adapting the language and content to their ability to understand. It is not a matter of hiding or avoiding the subject, but of addressing it in a way that is understandable to the world of each child.

Unlike childhood, where relationships and experiences are more concentrated in the family nucleus, adolescence presents itself as a period of intense changes, a time of great transformations and discoveries. It is at this stage that the individual directs his energies to the construction of the world, investing in professional development, studies, and relationships, seeking his identity and place in society. However, this phase of development is also accompanied by symbolic grief that demands elaboration, such as the loss of the child's body, of the child's identity and the overcoming of the idealized image of the parents.

At the same time, paradoxically, there is a high mortality rate in this public, with suicide being among the main causes. It is during this period that the duality of life and death becomes more evident, since, in search of these transformative experiences, many young people risk their lives through the use of drugs, high-speed driving and other risky behaviors⁴.

According to data from the WHO (World Health Organization)⁸ published in the report "*Suicide worldwide in 2019*", among young people aged 15 to 29, suicide was the

fourth cause of death after traffic accidents, tuberculosis, and interpersonal violence. Another important piece of data, from a study recently published in *The Lancet Regional Health*⁹, is that in the period from 2011 to 2022, the suicide rate among young people in Brazil showed a continuous growth, with an average increase of 6% per year. In the same period, notifications of self-injury in the age group of 10 to 24 years showed an even more significant growth, with an increase of 29% per year.

In this context, some questions arise: why is death a topic avoided in conversations with children and adolescents? What would be the justifiable argument for this impasse? Who is to blame for this difficulty? Would it be the young people who do not recognize the need to face this reality, or the adults, who have also gone through the same phases of life, but have not received the proper preparation? Thus, we are faced with a dilemma comparable to the "chicken or egg" one. The reality is that death accompanies the human being from birth; However, the illusion still prevails that, by silencing it, we can magically neutralize it. This strategy, however, proves to be harmful, as it prevents young people from developing the emotional resilience necessary to deal with the losses that they will inevitably encounter throughout their lives, making it difficult to build a healthier and more realistic view of life and death.

DISCUSSION

Death, although it is a complex, painful, and delicate topic, is inevitable and permeates several dimensions of our existence. Through learning and reflection, we can reframe experiences and build new narratives. In this sense, the implementation of preventive policies related to death becomes fundamental. It is necessary to dialogue about finitude before it presents itself as a concrete experience.

Faced with this need, the school presents itself as a strategic space. In addition to being an environment for the acquisition of formal knowledge, it is fundamental in the formation of citizenship, in the strengthening of bonds and in the promotion of meaningful experiences. So, why not integrate the theme of death into the school environment, fostering discussions between students and educators, as part of a preventive policy? By addressing death in an open and informed way, the school can contribute to the construction of a society that is better prepared to deal with finitude, promoting the integral development of students and the well-being of the school community.

Thus, the school environment, as a mediator of relationships and affections, and as a space that enhances the creation and sharing of ideas that transcend theoretical knowledge, can become a powerful ally in contact with the theme of death. By promoting open discussions about the finiteness of life, the school facilitates the elaboration of grieving processes and enables mutual support among all its members: teachers and students, students among themselves and teachers among themselves. In other words, the school can create a safe and welcoming environment where death is not a taboo, but rather a topic to be explored, understood, and accepted as an integral part of the human experience.

For this approach to be effective, Kovacs⁴ highlights that it is essential to invest in the continuing education of educators, offering in-service training spaces that address

specific topics, such as: communication with bereaved children, the integration of students with serious illnesses in school activities, and the management of delicate situations such as the suicide of a member of the school community. In addition, it is important to offer continuous advice to teachers, assisting them in the creation of pedagogical activities on the theme of death, in the management of grief situations experienced by students, in the indication of relevant bibliographies and in the use of audiovisual resources to address the topic in a sensitive and educational way.

In addition to continuing education and advice to educators, other resources can be used to enrich this education. Lopes *et al.*¹⁰ highlight the importance of creating safe spaces for dialogue, in which people share their feelings and experiences in relation to death. The use of playful activities, such as games and games, can be a way to approach the topic in a light and accessible way, especially for younger children. The promotion of debates and conversation circles about books, films and other works that address the theme of death can also be an effective strategy to stimulate reflection and the sharing of ideas.

In addition, performing artistic activities, such as creating drawings, paintings, and sculptures, can be a form of non-verbal expression that allows students to externalize their feelings about death. The combination of these different tools can contribute to the education of death adapting to the needs of each individual, allowing it to be adapted according to each person's emotional openness and level of understanding.

During the research, it became evident that some factors hinder the implementation of a preventive policy on death and its consequences in the school environment, making it "prohibited". Among them, family dynamics, which often prevent discussion of the topic with children and adolescents; the insufficient training of educators, which does not offer the necessary support to deal with the theme; and the massification of education, which prioritizes the reproduction of information to the detriment of a reflective and creative environment.

The survey also revealed a dearth of scientific studies on education for death in schools, with most publications concentrated in the areas of Medicine and Nursing. This gap demonstrates the need for more research in the areas of Education and Psychology. In addition, the importance of creating spaces for education for death is highlighted as an integral part of the training of teachers, students and other school employees⁹.

Therefore, overcoming these challenges and transforming the school into a space for open dialogue about death requires a joint and continuous effort from the entire school community, including management, teachers, other employees, students and their families. Therefore, it is necessary to deconstruct prejudices, invest in training and create an environment of trust and acceptance where death can be addressed in a natural and constructive way. By doing so, the school will not only be preparing students to deal with finitude, but also promoting the development of socio-emotional skills essential for building a meaningful life.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Education for death in schools reveals a long and winding way to go. Basic education, the foundation of theoretical knowledge and citizenship formation, is

unprepared to address death in classrooms and school relationships. The lack of this essential dialogue affects young people's ability to cope with grief, loss, and the finiteness of life. Therefore, for education for death in schools to become a tangible reality, it is imperative to promote a comprehensive psychoeducation on the subject, demystifying the taboo that surrounds it in contemporary society.

Speech brings liberation, while silence has never driven social transformations. The revolution, in this sense, begins with nonconformity against inertia and the denial of death. The fear of recognizing our finitude stems from the search for an illusory immortality, fueled by the pressure to produce and profit. It is necessary to understand, then, that human existence goes beyond this logic and that discussing death is, in essence, discussing life.

Therefore, death should not be a forbidden topic, but rather an invitation to reflection and action. By fostering open and honest discussions about finitude, we empower students to build a more meaningful future. We hope that this essay will contribute to the awakening of a new awareness about the importance of education for death in schools, encouraging research, the training of educators and the creation of spaces for dialogue and reflection on this fundamental theme, so that, together, we can build a society more prepared to deal with life in its totality.

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