

REFLECTIONS ON EDUCATION FOR DEATH IN THE SCHOOL CONTEXT: AN INTEGRATIVE LITERATURE REVIEW



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ABSTRACT

Although it is universally inevitable, death is one of the most avoided topics in most cultures today and thus has become a forbidden subject and distanced from the nature with which it should be treated. Within this context, the school has a fundamental role in demystifying the subject and opening dialogue with students and teachers on the subject, promoting the integral development of human beings in formation. The initial idea of this work is to explore authors who debate the theme, seeking the historical part that precedes the common sense of mystifying the subject, arriving at results that reveal the current school scenario and its role in changing the reference. The initial research was carried out using an integrative literature review, using analysis of research and studies on the educational aspects of death and mourning and which allowed to identify the theme in scientific publications and specific literature in the last five years (2019-2023), as well as to analyze future trends in the educational field for this subject. For this purpose, the electronic databases Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), Capes and Scielo Journals were used, using an integrated method with the following descriptors: child mourning, education for death, mourning at school, school and mourning, in English and Portuguese. From the data collection, 347 articles were found, 21 of which were used to study this theme. However, it was observed that there are still few studies on the theme of education for death, especially in Brazil.

Keywords: Child Grief. Education for Death. Mourning at School. School and Mourning.

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INTRODUCTION

Death is a universal certainty and going through it, facing it is an inevitable process at some point. What changes is the way each person deals with it, and this process will vary considerably. Although it is a biological event, it also carries social, cultural, historical, religious, legal, psychological, ethical, and human development aspects and most of the time they are all interconnected (PAPALIA; RUTH; FELDMAN, [s.d.]).

But which death to talk about? How can the subject be approached in different societies and cultures? Even knowing that it is one of the great certainties of existence, (LUCIEUDO; DA SILVA; RUIZ, [n.d.]) state that "death is one of the phenomena that generate the most questions in the entire history of man on Earth. Philosophers, anthropologists, social scientists, various thinkers have made countless lucubrations about death and the mystery by which it is involved.

So, taking into account that death is as certain as life and that every day, since one is born, is one less day in existence, and that one dies a little daily, either by physical death or death by not living life correctly, thinking and talking about death should be as natural as talking about life, since both complement each other.

Since death is something natural and present, a process that everyone goes through or will go through, whether due to the loss of someone close to them, or death itself, why the generalized fear of touching on this subject? Why is dialogue about death avoided? How important could education for death be and how much would be learned about it? And what is the importance of talking about this subject in the school environment? Quoted by (KOVÁCS, 2005) the statement that "education for death is a study on the possibility of personal development in a more integral way" receives a fuller meaning since through this skill it is possible to live in a more interesting way, including in the process of valuing life and contrary to the silencing of the school in relation to the theme, stating that educators are also given the role of dialoguing on the subject.

During the Middle Ages, death took place in the domestic environment, inside the home itself and in the presence of family members who witnessed the farewell of the convalescent, which happened naturally among adults, children, friends and neighbors (ARIÈS, 1981). Everything was organized in advance and all the pending issues that the individual had were resolved so that death was awaited at home and in the presence of loved ones.

However, with the advancement of science and medical resources, as well as the discoveries of new ways to treat diseases and take care of health, thinking about death has undergone a major transformation with a bias that is not only historical, but also cultural and social. (ARIÈS, 1981) attributes to the twentieth century what we call "inverted death", a term that gives death something to be. This is largely due to the fact that a good part of the general population stopped dying at home and started dying in hospitals, and there, at the time of death, screens are often placed around the patient so that death is not witnessed.

Currently, however, death is addressed in different areas of study and knowledge, citing as examples philosophy, thanatology, various sciences and religion. Philosophers address the issues raised by dying and this involves values, culture, way of thinking and even within this science it is possible that many different readings are made for the same episode.

Whenever a death happens, the period after it is known as mourning. This moment is necessary for those affected by the loss to be able to elaborate it and this happens when there is some bond between the person who died. This moment raises reflections and reactions that differ greatly from one person to another. Usually the feeling of emptiness and powerlessness in the face of what happened, inserts those who have lost a loved one in a moment of anguish and suffering.

When the audience for this discussion is children, the theme worsens, because the collective thought is that this is not a subject to be dealt with with them, and the intention is always to spare them from suffering. In addition, it is common for adults to believe and defend that the subject causes fear in children, including the fear of dying itself. Kovács (2010) evaluates that when children are approached about the theme and the concept of death, the way to talk to them about this theme can be using words and experiences that the infants understand. This does not mean that the topic should be avoided, but when it is brought up, it should be done taking as a starting point its stage of cognitive development. Thus, it is essential that family members and teachers have an understanding of child development, as well as the processes of human development, so that such discussion can be introduced in a compatible and appropriate way, respecting the phases of understanding death.

Kovács (1992) and Paiva (2011) argue that the theme needs to be discussed and the best way to approach the subject with children is to do it openly, sincerely and always

with the willingness to answer their questions, but especially not avoiding the theme, opening space for discussions both in the family and at school, which are the two main social bonds of children.

The lack of education for death can result in several problems, both individual and collective. Many societies consider it a taboo subject and, consequently, feel unprepared when faced with it. This lack of preparation can lead to paralyzing fear, denial of one's own mortality, and difficulties in dealing with grief and the feelings after it. When mapping the scientific literature on the theme of death and the development of projects to deal with the theme in the school environment, as well as on child grief, it is possible to verify that there are few articles that offer information and discussions with a child focus, which points to the lack of dialogue on the issue of death in school (KOVÁCS, 2010). Because it is considered a particular subject, few studies can be found and thus evaluated (SCHILLING, 2002).

In addition, the absence of education for death can also generate a disconnection with the finitude of life and an excessive valuation of immediacy and material consumption. Contributing to this perspective, the media expose the theme exhaustively, and children are increasingly exposed to death and violence in a banal and daily way, which creates in infants the feeling of continuity and lack of seriousness both for issues involving death, as well as with regard to dealing with the feelings it provokes (ENDO, 2005). Contemporary society often emphasizes the cult of youth, beauty and success, leaving aside the reflection on the transience of existence and on deeper and more existential issues, failing to discuss themes relevant to the understanding of death and the finitude of life (TORRES, 1999 and PAIVA, 2011). Basic components for this understanding of death, such as irreversibility, non-functionality and universality, are often treated in a commonplace and superficial way.

Thus, in order for there to be a complete acquisition of the concept of death and the feasibility of dealing with the subject with children, the understanding that the physical body cannot live after death is understood as irreversibility; non-functionality, the understanding that all functions that comprise being alive cease with death; and universality, understanding that everything that is alive (animals, plants, human beings) can one day die.

In this context, education for death emerges as a fundamental proposal to promote a healthier and more conscious approach to life and death. It aims to provide emotional, psychological, and philosophical tools to deal with human finitude, enabling a calmer and more reflective coping with this inevitable event. However, it is notable that the school

curriculum, which is the way the school organizes and structures the activities that will be developed throughout the school year, thus defining a standard way of functioning its activities, does not have incorporated into its matrix the theme of death, mourning and its dealings.

Santos (2009) states that issues not discussed at home will have their immediate reflection at school. If the subject of death and grief is not discussed and worked intentionally with students respecting their development, the problems will be felt at school, in the interaction with teachers and classmates, and it is not uncommon for both teachers and parents to be unable to observe and detect the behavioral changes and problems evidenced by them and thus offer support to children and adolescents who are facing the adversity of death. Since it is part of existence, it is essential to address the topic with children, since at some point they may lose someone important with whom they have an affinity and an emotional and affective connection. Evidently, what is not discussed and explored for subjective reasons can cause doubts and be characterized as a "heavy", "sad" and "inappropriate" subject to be dealt with with children (THOMAZ, 2020).

Kübler-Ross (1999) states that many reasons can be identified to avoid contact and discussion about death, and the main one is due to the fact that dying is very sad, lonely, mechanical and inhumane. However, hiding this subject from children, assuming that they are too young to understand the meaning of dying, is not the most appropriate way, since this does not relieve suffering, pain and does not change the child's reality, on the contrary, it can contribute to them feeling confused and helpless, with no one to open up to talk about the subject and thus clarify their doubts.

Thus, death in a certain aspect needs to be treated naturally and as something that is part of the daily life of societies, as painful as it may be, and the way to make this conduct feasible passes through the school and the classroom. Therefore, it is not recommended that it be ignored. The best thing in these cases is to talk about the subject, reflect, discuss and provide exchanges of experiences on the subject. Dialogue openly and honestly, always taking into account the culture and beliefs that permeate the classroom and students. It is important that the child has adequate time to process the loss, and when exposing the subject to them, immediate or coherent responses should not be expected, but it is essential that their behavior and the reactions they will manifest are observed and analyzed by the adults involved in the process. At any age, the child is aware of the loss of a loved one. However, it is from the age of five or six that he begins to have a notion of

what it means to die, in his own way and not in the same way as the adult. It is common for children to feel guilty in childhood and attribute to themselves or their behavior the fact that the person with whom they had a connection has died, and in this aspect it is essential that teachers and family members work to ensure that death is not the result of their actions or thoughts.

METHODOLOGY

The integrative analysis began on 11/03/2023, encompassing research in the scientific databases: CAPES PERIÓDICOS, ERIC and SCIELO. Adopting the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) methodology, according to , the process was conducted through a flowchart composed of four phases: identification, selection, eligibility and inclusion. Each of these steps was applied according to the specific requirements of the research. (MOHER et al., 2009)

2.1 SOURCES OF INFORMATION, SEARCH STRATEGIES AND SELECTED STUDIES

In order to demonstrate and organize the results obtained from the search carried out in the databases, specifying the descriptors and the number of articles found, the following table explains the result:

Table 1 - Descriptors used in the databases consulted

Database	Number of items found	Descriptors used in the search for articles
CAPES	216	"child grief" AND "education for death" AND "mourning at school" AND "school and mourning"
SCIELO	85	"child grief" AND "education for death" AND "mourning at school" AND "school and mourning"
ERIC	46	"child grief" AND "education for death" AND "mourning at school" AND "school and mourning"
Total	347	

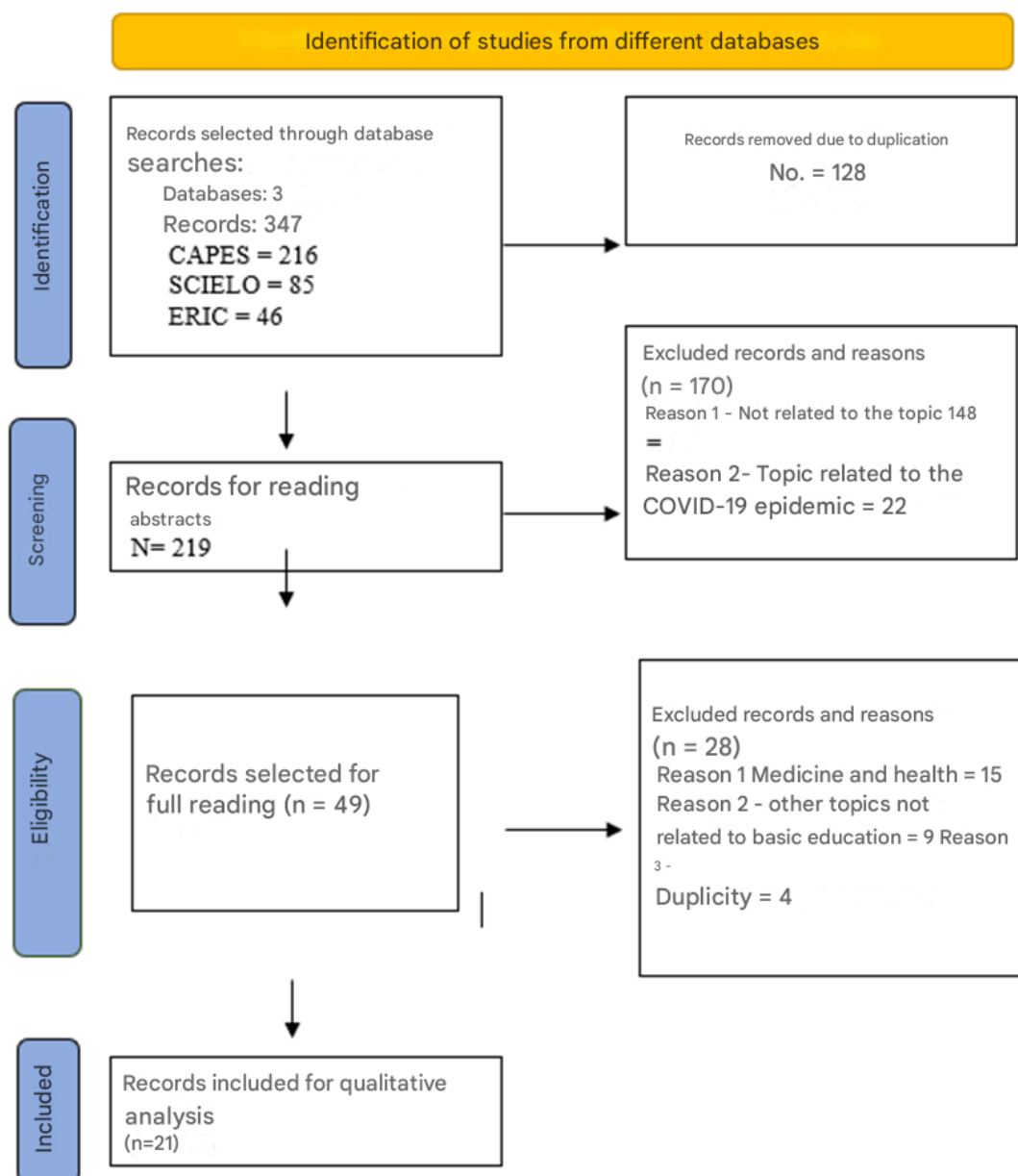
Source: prepared by the author

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

During the selection phase of the studies, 347 articles were located in the CAPES Periodicals, Scielo and ERIC databases. These results were entered into a reference management software (MENDELEY), where 128 duplicate articles were removed. The search strategy involved the use of descriptors such as "child mourning", "education for death", "mourning at school" and "school and mourning" in different fields in the respective databases, which resulted in 216 articles in CAPES, 85 in Scielo and 46 in ERIC, totaling

the 347 found. The subsequent stages of analysis for the exclusion of articles were conducted according to the PRISMA methodology, following the guidelines for the presentation of results of a systematic review outlined by Moher et al. (2009, 2010), and the details can be found in Figure 1.

Figure 1 – PRISM



From: Page MJ, McKenzie JE, Bossuyt PM, Boutron I, Hoffmann TC, Mulrow CD, et al. The PRISMA 2020 statement: an updated guideline for reporting systematic reviews. *BMJ* 2021; 372:n71. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n71

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE STUDIES

In the initial phase of the review of the abstracts of 219 articles, 148 studies were discarded that, although recovered in the search in the databases, did not address the

specific theme in question, which is grief in the school environment and all its related nuances. Another 22 studies were excluded because they dealt exclusively with topics related to the COVID-19 epidemic and general aspects associated with the theme. After the exclusion of 170 articles, the remaining 49 were read in full, resulting in 28 more exclusions, which included topics related exclusively to clinical practice and medical practices, various approaches not linked to basic education, and 4 more duplicate articles. Thus, 21 articles remained, and Chart 2 presents the main characteristics of these articles selected for qualitative analysis. Some studies included adolescents in the sample, but were maintained in the analysis, as they also involved children, and were discussed with a focus on school-age children, specifically at the elementary level - final years. Although most of the studies were conducted in Brazil, some were conducted in other countries, such as Nigeria and Turkey.

Most of the studies and articles analyzed used a qualitative approach, with the semi-structured interview being the most used tool for data collection, followed by a literature review. Phenomenological studies, reflective analyses and open interviews were also found. None of the studies presented a quantitative focus.

In one of the studies analyzed, the application of the Grief Scale was used as a method; Five-Dimensional Well-Being Scale for Adolescents (EPOCH); Social Support Assessment Scale for Children and Adolescents (CASSS and Personal Information Form), all validated and applied in a study produced in Turkey.

Despite the limitations inherent to the survey carried out, it is possible to highlight some conclusions. Although there are guidelines in the field of psychology that offer guidance for dealing with child grief, research in the school environment almost unanimously points to the lack of preparation of the school and its professionals to face grief in children. Perhaps this is still seen as a taboo and, due to the discomfort generated, the most common approach is to avoid any discussion on the subject. In the school context, the idea of treating the bereaved child seems to prevail in a way that diverts the focus from the suffering he is experiencing, suggesting that the responsibility for dealing with this situation falls exclusively on the family in the domestic sphere.

Chart 2 – Articles according to authorship, journal and year of publication, study characteristics and methodology

Authors	Journal and year of publication	Considerations/ Theme	Method
LATERMAN; SZYLIT	<i>Ibero-American Journal of Studies in Education</i> , 2021	This exploratory study addresses how teachers dealt with the death of students in the Early Years of Elementary School. It demonstrates the challenges in balancing grief and school life, highlighting the importance of multidisciplinary practices to emotionally and cognitively support the class. The study focuses on the strategies adopted by teachers to create a welcoming and safe environment.	Open interview Qualitative, descriptive, exploratory
SILVA; SCORSOLINI-COMIN,	<i>Education Magazine: Theory and Practice</i> , 2022	The study presents a successful experience among elementary school students, addressing topics such as death and funeral rituals. Thirty-two students participated, conducting research and visiting a cemetery to experience ethnographic work. The project concluded with an exhibition on death, dead and dying, aiming to promote important discussions in the training of students in view of the growing relevance of the theme in education.	Experience report Qualitative of a reflective nature
OAK; VERAS DE CARVALHO	<i>Psychology in Research Journal</i> , 2020	The study examines the relationship between childhood, loss, and education through a mundane phenomenological perspective. Using animated films, a phenomenological group was conducted with children aged 11 to 12 years in Parnaíba-Piauí. The method revealed that the group provided an environment conducive to discussing experiences about death at school, highlighting the films as effective resources to address the theme educationally.	This phenomenological study with a qualitative approach.
SCOTT; AXE; SCOTT	<i>Education in question magazine</i> , 2020	The article explores the relationship between children's literature, studies on death in children's works, and analyses of children's narratives. After the shared reading of Ziraldo's book "Menina Nina, duas razões para não chorar" (Girl Nina, two reasons not to cry), 4th grade children from a public school created their own narratives on the subject, including elements of everyday life such as violence and religiosity.	Qualitative, reflective in nature
OMENA	<i>Romance</i> , 2020	Insertion of children in mortuary rituals in the region of Isola Ostia in Italy and a reflection on child socialization in the Mediterranean.	Literature review
ALENCAR et al.	<i>Bioethics Journal</i> , 2022	The article presents how hospitalized children understand the concept of death, and raises reflections on the theme of death in childhood.	Qualitative, semi-structured interview
DAYS	<i>Salus Magazine</i> , 2023	Study addresses the inevitability of death, grief and loss, which are experienced by all individuals, including children who are normally prevented from experiencing the process of death.	Reading of a manual in children's literature format
OAK; DE MORAES; DISNER	<i>Revista Foco</i> , 2022	In this article, a case of a 5-year-old child who faced an affective loss during her experience in early childhood education is described. The study explores how the child was able to rework and express his feelings through symbolic play.	Experience report and bibliographic review
BIANCHI et al.	<i>Studies and research in psychology</i> , 2020	This article presents a study on the use of Gestalt therapy to help children in the elaboration of grief.	Literature review
CALLEGARO BORSA; SARAIVA MENEZES	<i>Diversitas Journal: perspectives in psychology</i> , 2022	The study investigates risk factors for development and complications from the grief experienced by children.	Qualitative, semi-structured interview

YATEGASHI; ANTUNES; LIRA	<i>Notandum Magazine, 2019</i>	This study investigates the social representations of education professionals in relation to child grief and its possible connection with the learning difficulties observed in elementary school children.	Qualitative, semi-structured interview
MELLO; FILE; MUD	<i>Saber Digital Magazine, 2021</i>	The article reviewed the knowledge about child grief, analyzing how children deal with loss, identifying processes of elaboration of grief in childhood, based on the Brazilian literature.	Narrative review
PLEASE WRITE	<i>BU Journal of Graduate Studies in Education, 2021</i>	The article reveals how the lack of teacher training in death education can impact children's grieving process, and affect learning and mental health.	Literature review
OPPONENT et.al.		The article aims to analyze the concept of unrecognized grief in elementary school students due to loss of relationships by offering strategies for school counselors to deal with it, including individual or group interventions.	Literature review and interview
Today; Ajkapanyov	<i>Anatolian Journal of Education, 2019</i>	This study investigated the grief reactions and coping strategies of adolescents in school facing the loss of parents in Ilorin, Nigeria.	Survey and Questionnaire
ÇAKAR	<i>International Education Studies, 2020</i>	In this study, we tested a model developed to examine the role of social support in the relationship between the level of loss, grief and well-being of adolescents.	Qualitative semi-structured interview
FEROW	<i>The European Journal of Educational, 2019</i>	The article discusses the impact that loss and grief have on children, whether due to the death of loved ones or even separation from parents, and the need for professional support to assist in the elaboration of such losses.	Literature review
SUNDAY; MALUF	<i>Psychology Journal: Reflection and Criticism, 2003</i>	The study examines the experiences of loss and grief in students who have lost loved ones, identifying five main categories through content analysis: situations of loss, reactions to loss, the bereaved adolescent's relationship with family and school, and the grieving adolescent's emotional expression.	Qualitative semi-structured interview
GIARETTON et al.	<i>Brazilian Journal of Education, 2020</i>	Research carried out with elementary school teachers and addresses how schools deal with the theme of death, especially in childhood, and the challenges that arise with students.	Qualitative Descriptive and exploratory
FERREIRA FILHO	<i>Brazilian Journal of Medical Education, 2019</i>	The editorial addresses the persistence of the fear of death and highlights changes in the way health professionals deal with death. It explores the complexity of the concept of death in different age groups, from lack of understanding in childhood to increased fear in midlife	Literature review
BROOK; MARTINS	<i>Terra Roxa and other lands magazine, 2020</i>	In this essay, the novel "Corda Bamba", by Lygia Bojunga, is explored, focusing on the process of mourning, maturation and discovery of the protagonist. The analysis was conducted based on studies on death and mourning, as well as theories and criticisms of children's and youth literature.	Literary analysis

Source: prepared by the author

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The purpose of this research was to investigate the number of studies on Education for Death using the Integrative Literature Review approach and to make a qualitative

evaluation of the studies that fit the inclusion criteria previously outlined. By mapping the studies available in three databases (CAPES, SCIELO and ERIC Journals), referring to the last 5 years, we initially identified 347 articles. However, only 49 remained for full reading after the elimination of duplicate studies or those that were not aligned with the proposed theme. After the complete analysis of these 49 studies, only 21 met the inclusion criteria and were then chosen for further qualitative analysis.

In view of the above, it becomes clear that the influence of death is discerned by children, even when we choose not to discuss the topic directly. It is in the serene spaces of the home, in the notorious absence at the table during meals, in festive occasions that lose their meaning, and in the absence noticed in the classroom, that these references arouse anxiety and expectations. When we observe the conduct of those closest to us, in their silence and melancholy, we find that death is experienced, although it is not always openly addressed. Contrary to a widespread belief, addressing the topic will not amplify suffering; on the contrary, it will provide the child with a deeper understanding of his own feelings, helping him to deal more effectively with the different phases of grief.

In this context, it is crucial to devote in-depth attention to the pressing need to implement effective strategies to address childhood grief within the school environment. This imperative demand suggests that educators should be provided with continuous and adequately directed training, providing them with substantial knowledge on the subject in question. This training, in turn, will not only provide them with practical skills, but will also allow them to intricately understand the process of child grief, as well as the various feelings that surround this experience, thus enabling them to create a welcoming and supportive school environment for bereaved children.

It is undeniable that the theoretical development around this theme becomes a fundamental and indispensable piece. This theoretical construction not only provides a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of death and mourning, but also establishes a solid methodological basis that guides the effective approach to these sensitive issues in the school context. In this sense, promoting a substantial theoretical understanding of this topic is a crucial step in enhancing the capacity of educational institutions to deal with grief situations, providing a more understanding, compassionate, and prepared environment to support children in these delicate moments.

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