

Winter 3-2024

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<https://doi.org/10.15760/honors.1552>

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Death, Grief, and Loss Through the Eyes of Child: The Importance of Teaching Children About
Death using Children's Literature

by

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An undergraduate honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Science

in

University Honors

and

English

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Portland State University

2024

ABSTRACT

This thesis will explore how we view death as a death-denying society, along with the importance of teaching children about death and grief early on in their lives. When talking to children about death it is critical to refrain from abstract language and instead use death-specific language. Children need to understand that death is a universal experience, that death is irreversible, and that the body ceases all life functions at the time of death. This thesis will also discuss avenues for teaching children about death and argues that picture books are a fantastic way of introducing children to death. It will evaluate four picture books on their usage of death-specific language, what it teaches children, and how relatable they are. Furthermore, it will clarify what death education is and why it is so important to include in our classrooms.

INTRODUCTION

Although death is an irreversible, unavoidable event that everyone will experience in their lifetime, Americans are generally fearful of the idea of death and thus avoid conversations around the topic (Gould 4). This fear around death leads parents attempting to “protect” their children from the inevitability of death by deflecting questions children may have, shutting down attempts at conversations, or by using vague language to describe the death of someone they know (Danielson and Colman 1; Xu 1). Although they have good intentions, this attitude is harmful for children as an air of secrecy and denial about death are keeping children uneducated about it. Furthermore, using vague explanations of death (e.g., “she is sleeping” or “she has left”) can be damaging for children as it makes it difficult to understand what exactly death is (Danielson and Colman 8). It will be harder to understand that death is irreversible, as they may be waiting for the deceased to simply “wake up” and rejoin their life. In order to stop this confusion, children need to be taught explicitly about death and its basic concepts: death is irreversible, all life functions cease at the time of death, there are true causes as to why living things die, and that death is inevitable (Schonfeld and Kappelman 2).

By exposing children to death and teaching them about how to cope with it, they are able to grieve the deceased in a healthy manner. Avoiding conversations of death with children can make them feel alone in their grief, forcing them to repress their emotions because they feel they cannot talk about it (Maguth et al. 83). In order to promote communication between children and trusted adults, conversations around death need to be brought up continuously (Stylianou and Zembylas 57; Durant 91). This will help them understand grief and learn to expect these strong emotions when dealing with the death of a loved one, along with providing them with a safe environment and community to process that grief in (Durant 91).

One powerful tool that will help begin these conversations are picture books that deal with topics of death and grief. These texts can teach children about death from an outsider perspective, allowing them to see how others may feel during or after the death of a loved one and giving them a point of reference for any events that will happen in their life (Maguth et al. 83). Texts such as Charlotte Moudlic's *The Scar* and Alan Durant's *Always and Forever* focus on the importance of one's memories and the fear a child might feel of forgetting their memories with their dead loved one. However, they also depict how a child can properly begin their healing process by grieving the deceased and starting to look happily back on those memories, learning to treasure the love that they received (Xu 19). Other texts like Pat Thomas' *I Miss You: A First Look at Death* explain to children that death is a natural process that happens to everyone, and that it will be an experience full of strong emotions for them. It clarifies that the child did nothing to cause the death, while offering up questions that parents can ask to their children to start a conversation: "After someone dies it is normal to feel sad, angry, guilty, afraid, and even happy. What are you feeling?" (Thomas 19) Picture books can be used to introduce and normalize death for children while simultaneously providing a safe space for them to ask questions in.

In order to normalize death for children and make it less of a taboo topic, death education needs to be introduced into classrooms. Stylianou and Zembylas state that "the main aim of death education is to improve communication among those whose death is imminent and their loved ones, help students to understand the process of grieving, and acknowledge grief as an expected reaction to a significant loss" (57). By bringing death education into elementary classrooms teachers can teach their students the basic fundamentals of death, and how to help themselves and others grieve the loss of a loved one properly through positive coping techniques (Schonfeld

and Kappelman 4). Maguth et al. discusses the story of a classroom pet, Milton, who passed away during his ninth birthday party, and how their teacher addressed the death and worked to create a conversation around death and loss using children's literature. She had them read *The Tenth Good Thing about Barney*, a book about a young boy working through the loss of his pet cat, and then write a reflective journal entry on the story, allowing them space to process both the book and Milton's death. The connection between the loss of Barney in the book and the students' loss of Milton helped prompt discussion about their own experiences and feelings, and allowed the students a safe environment to process their grief and memories of Milton in (Maguth et al. 84). By bringing death education into classrooms students have the opportunity to discuss death with a trusted teacher and their peers, which then allows them to connect with each other by sharing their own experiences and thoughts on the topic.

PART ONE: OUR FEAR OF DEATH AND ITS LASTING IMPACTS

Death anxiety, or the fear and emotional distress related to thoughts of death and dying, has been a recurring theme throughout human history, and because thoughts of death or nonexistence have the power to make an individual feel powerless, lonely, or unhappy, humans try to refrain from thinking about it (Menzies and Menzies). This fear of death is a natural human fear that we will all experience at some point in our lifetimes, and it is a natural, universal experience that will happen to everything from a favorite pet to a close relative. However, because these topics are so uncomfortable to talk or think about, Americans tend to avoid discussing them and therefore lean toward a death-denying attitude when discussing topics of death (Gould 4). We are taught not to speak about death while quietly being afraid of it, and this serves to create a stigma around death, dying, and the grieving process. This stigma influences

every aspect of our world and therefore our children's world, as we want to keep our children unaware of such a frightening topic. In her paper on forming healthier relationships with death Gould writes that "With children's media, the rationale is often that by keeping children in the dark about death and dying, or using flowery language and metaphors to soften the blow, adults are protecting children from a difficult reality and smorgasbord of complicated emotion" (5). However, this denial of death results in children being uneducated about it, or simply not knowing what the implications of death are, and when they eventually are exposed to it they do not grasp the irreversibility of death. No death education is still death education, and a lack of communication or action around teaching children about death just teaches them about the silencing societal norms around death (Durant 90).

It also creates misunderstanding and confusion for children, especially if their parents are not discussing topics of death with them to "protect" youngsters from this seemingly harmful or frightening topic. However, a lot of children are exposed to death at a very young age, and in order to teach them proper coping mechanisms it is imperative that we recognize that children need to be introduced to this topic (Xu 1). In addition, research has shown that children are not only capable of understanding what death is, but that they are curious about death and have questions that could prompt a lot of learning opportunities and knowledge development (Danielson and Colman 1). There are many ways that children can be exposed to death (e.g., the death of a family member or pet, or digital media like video games or movies), but there has also been an increase in death reports in the media because of the COVID-19 pandemic, school shootings, and other recent tragedies (1). Whether a child hears about these directly from the source or through family members discussing these topics, or through their school lockdown drills or heightened security, their exposure to death and dying are becoming more prevalent and

children are becoming more aware of death in their own lives (1). It is critical that we can provide them with support through this process, whether that is through educating them about death or giving them proper guidance through the grieving process. If we neglect to explain to them what death is, or why these events matter, we are setting our children up to become adults who do not know healthy coping mechanisms or how to talk about death with their children (Gould 5).

Educating children about death means to educate them on the multiple aspects of it: that death is a universal experience and all living things die; that once a living thing dies it cannot be brought back to life, or the irreversibility of death; and that once a living thing dies it no longer experiences anything, or nonfunctionality (Danielson and Colman 2; Durant 92). Children begin understanding these ideas of death as early as three or four years old with universality being one of the first concepts understood, by age five most children also understand the relationship between death and nonfunctionality, and by age six they also understand that death happens through a variety of means, not just old age (Danielson and Colman 2). Despite children's early understanding of death, adults still refrain from discussing concepts of death, dying, and grieving with them, and Danielson and Colman claim that "insufficient communication about death is the most influential situational factor that causes children to struggle to resolve feelings of grief and adjust to a loss" (2). A lack of communication between adults and children often results in the child being confused about why the person died and if they had something to do with it, or even being fearful that they themselves may die soon (2). This confusion can also be caused by adults using "flowery language" (Gould 5) to explain death, as terms like "they are sleeping" or "they've gone away" can create the expectation that the dead person will either wake back up or return from their trip (Danielson and Colman 2). In other cases, children may relate sleeping to

death and become afraid that they too will never wake back up if they go to sleep (8). Implying that a dead person may come back or revive themselves refutes the critical ideas that death is universal and irreversible, which can just confuse the child further when their relative does not come back from death. Furthermore, if the child believes that their dead relative is going to come back, it delays their grieving process and creates a larger struggle around coping with that death. Instead, we need to be using explicit language when discussing death with youngsters, as words like “death,” “dying,” and “died” will help the child understand what death is, as more abstract terms will only mislead children (3).

This all raises the question of “how can we efficiently and effectively teach children about death?” and one incredibly helpful resource is children’s literature—more specifically, picture books. Often chosen by adults to read with children, picture books allow narration in a fun, interesting manner that allows children to add illustrated context to the words that are being read. They also greatly increase children’s storytelling and communication skills, and picture books that deal with death can help children to begin to conceptualize ideas of death (Ratnasari 12; Danielson and Colman 3). Starting conversations around death can be scary, especially if the adult is uncomfortable or frightened by death or dying, but picture books can serve as a conversation starter for both adults and children. For some children, picture books can act as a mirror of what they have been going or went through, as reading about another character’s experiences with death can help them better understand their own experiences with it (Danielson and Colman 3). They can also act as a window, or as an outside look, into what death can be like if the child has yet to experience it (3). The most effective picture books for teaching children about death are ones that use explicit language to discuss death and dying, as they offer the clearest explanation on the three fundamental concepts of death (Gould 6).

Contemporary children's literature that includes death often focuses on the influence of family relationships and friendships while a character is dying and promotes topics of empathy and emotional bonds between the dying and the people close to them, and often these stories feature a character dying of old age (Xu 6). Although this is an important facet of learning about death, it is important to provide "death diversity" in picture books to appeal to children of all backgrounds. In their study on death in picture books, Danielson and Colman gathered a total of seventy-four picture books available across the San Diego Public Library and Multnomah County Library that were marketed for ages three to eight years and that dealt with death specifically. They then examine how the book details death, the language used, the characters used, and if they include additional resources. Danielson and Colman found that out of all seventy-four books, forty-nine used human characters and twenty-four of these books contained diverse (non-white) characters. The authors noted that there is a need for more books about sibling death, as there were three that featured the death of a brother and there were none about the death of a sister. Twenty-three books did not mention how the character died, while twenty-six books depicted a character dying from old age. Only sixteen books contained at least one additional resource aside from the text itself. Forty of the seventy-four books used vague language to describe death (i.e., not using the terms "death," "dying," or "died"). This study highlights the need for more diversity within death-focused picture books, as it is important for all children to be able to relate to the books that they read. For example, old age is just one way of dying and some children may not experience that type of death, but if there are only picture books about that topic for that child they will not be able to relate their own experience to the book. Picture books are a great resource for helping children process their own grief or learn about death itself,

but in order to fully educate children about death they need to be able to learn about more than just one facet of it.

PART TWO: TEACHING CHILDREN ABOUT DEATH THROUGH PICTURE BOOKS

Not only do picture books function as an entrance toward talking about death with children, they can also function as a guide to help children work through their grief. Death can be a very scary idea for both adults and children, and picture books are a safe way of introducing this topic and how death may impact a child's thoughts and feelings. All picture books vary in the stories that they tell and support that they provide, but some strengths of death-focused picture books include using explicit language when talking about death, showcasing coping strategies that children can utilize, illustrating a wide range of emotions that a child may feel, and providing the reader with additional resources (e.g., glossaries, parent resources, coping activities, etc.) (Danielson and Colman 7). Below, I've identified four books that showcase these strengths, and I will discuss how these books can be used to help children learn about and deal with grief in their own lives.

Written from the perspective of a child, Charlotte Moundlic's *The Scar* details the journey of a young boy as he grieves the very recent loss of his mother. This book begins with the boy telling us that "Mum died this morning" (1), and at first the boy pretended not to understand what his father meant when he said "it's over" (5) and that "she's gone for ever" (6), and Moundlic uses the boy to explain that "gone" and "dead" meant the same in this context: "I knew she hadn't *gone*, she was dead and I would never see her again...I know very well that dying means you're never going to come back" (6). Moundlic then takes us through several of the boy's emotions as he begins his grieving process, including anger at his mother for leaving, sadness

that she is gone, a sense of responsibility toward taking care of their dad, and an overwhelming fear that he will forget his mother (see fig. 1).

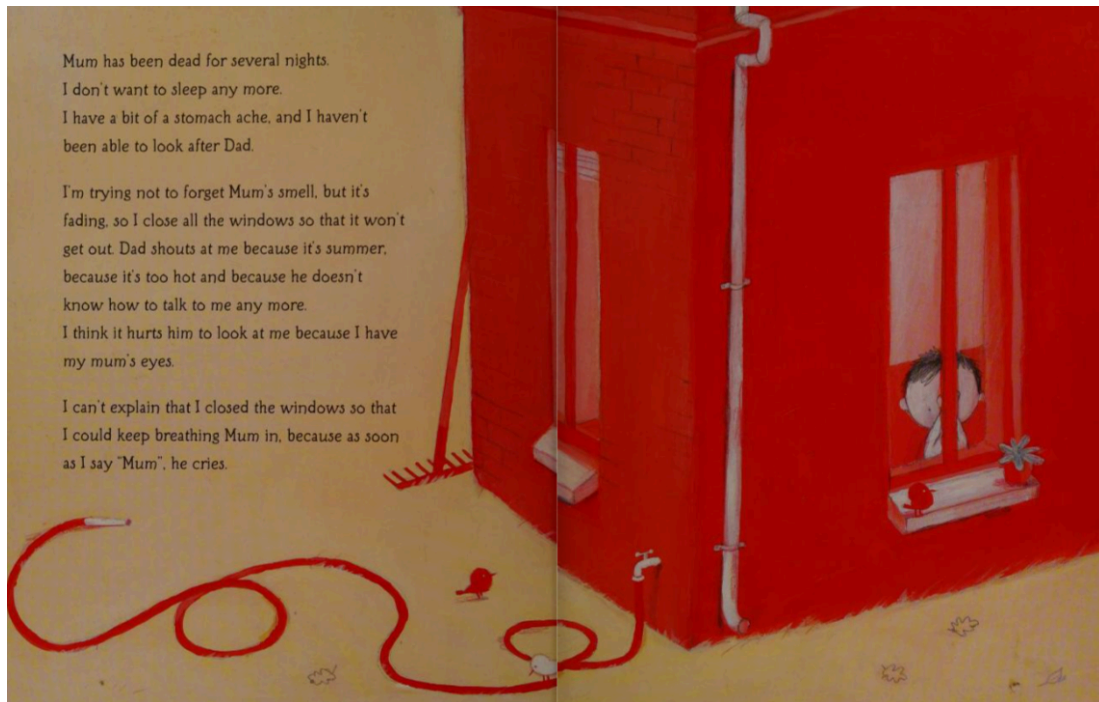


Fig. 1. The little boy and how he is dealing with his mother's death, along with the responsibility he feels, from Charlotte Moundlic and Olivier Tallec. *The Scar*. Walker Books, 2013.
<https://archive.org/details/scar0000moun/page/n1/mode/2up>.

The fear that we will forget loved ones is common with death, and this fear takes hold of the boy through several pages as he closes windows in the middle of summer to try and save her smell, or deliberately picks at a scab on his knee to remember her comforting him (Xu 16). Moundlic uses the metaphor of this knee injury in relation to the boy's healing process, as he only begins to heal after his Grandma opens the window and he has an explosion of emotion leaving him drained and tired. He has a conversation with his Grandma about his fears of forgetting his mother, and only after realizing that his mother is in his heart can he begin the healing process and turn his knee scab into a scar: "I'm so afraid of forgetting Mum completely that once I know she's in my heart whenever I can, I run...And then I feel Mum beating very

hard in my chest” (25). The boy has begun his healing process and found a healthy outlet for his emotions through running, and by the end of the book he is no longer afraid of forgetting her. Along with showing children that death is irreversible, *The Scar* also shows children that having a wide range of emotions is okay and that it will get better, along with how we can find healthy outlets for getting rid of big emotions.

Another book that deals with remembering a loved one is *Always and Forever* by Alan Durant, which features three animal characters grieving Fox after he suddenly becomes ill and subsequently dies. This book starts with the death of Fox and shows how each of the other animals, Otter, Mole, and Hare neglect themselves because they are so sad about their friend being dead. The book shows the animals burying Fox under his favorite tree, and Durant uses the seasons to show how the animals’ emotions are affecting them: “A wintry sadness settled on the house in the woods. Fox’s family missed him so much. They felt lost without him” (5). The animals become increasingly sad during the winter, but once their friend Squirrel arrives and helps them begin moving past Fox’s death the spring season arrives. After reflecting on their favorite memories of Fox with Squirrel, the animals decide to create new memorials and traditions to honor their friend, and by the end of the book the land around them is in full bloom (see fig. 2). Otter, Mole, and Hare have all learned how to rejoice in the life that Fox lived and move past their grief at his absence in their life, and as they do so they learn how to be happy without him.

One weakness of this book is that they do not use explicit language to describe the death of Fox, although they do state Fox’s death in the summary of the work. However, they show several coping strategies for healthy grieving, including relying on a family member or friend for support (i.e., Squirrel), starting new traditions to celebrate the dead person's life, creating a

memorial for that person (i.e. Mole builds a bench), and celebrating that person's life through the retelling of stories and memories. They also show that even though it feels like we may be sad forever after someone close to us dies, there is a light at the end of the tunnel. Durant also emphasizes that even though the physical person is gone, their influence and impact will be with us "always and forever" (24). Similar to *The Scar*, *Always and Forever* shows the child that the deceased's memory will live on through their words and actions, and that although wallowing in grief is tempting there are healthier ways of grieving that will allow us to move on.



Fig. 2. Fox's friends learn to remember the good moments after Fox's passing and celebrate his life, from Alan Durant and Debi Gliori. *Always and Forever*. Harcourt, 2004.

<https://archive.org/details/alwaysforever00dura/page/n3/mode/2up>.

Moving toward a picture book that is a little more education-based, Pat Thomas' *I Miss You: A First Look at Death* offers a simplified look into why death occurs and the impacts that the death of a loved one may have on a child. The book starts by showing that death is a universal, natural process that happens to all living things, and specifically states that "When someone dies their body stops working - they stop breathing and their heart stops beating" (4). Thomas details that the body can't feel or think anymore, and that activities that are necessary for

us (i.e., eating and drinking) are no longer necessary for the deceased. By reinforcing the irreversible, nonfunctionality, and universal aspects of death, Thomas is making sure that children fully understand what death is and why it happens before he dives into how they may feel about it. Thomas then describes several emotions that children may experience when grieving someone close to them, but clarifies that they will eventually feel like themselves again (see fig. 3). *I Miss You* also reveals that others may treat a grieving individual differently because they want to support them, and Thomas ends his book with a few different cultural ideas on where souls go after death.

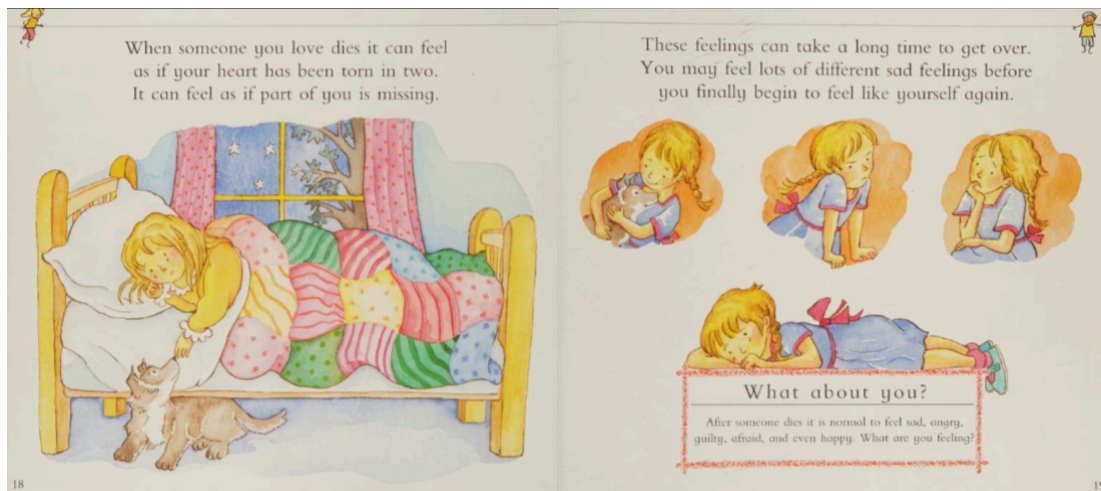


Fig. 3. A page detailing the feelings a child may experience after the death of a loved one followed by a prompt for them to consider, from Pat Thomas and Lesley Harker. *I Miss You: A First Look at Death*. Barron's Educational Series, 2001.

https://archive.org/details/imissyoufirstloo0000thom_k110/page/n7/mode/2up.

Thomas' book is a fantastic example of a death-focused picture book because it highlights the meaning and reasoning behind death, is written in a child-friendly manner, and provides resources for children and adults at the end of the book. *I Miss You* also asks the readers engaging questions throughout the book (see the bottom right of fig. 3), and validates the reader through phrases like "It is normal to miss [the deceased] very much" (9), "you may feel very

alone” (15), or “It’s not an easy idea to understand” (19). The book emphasizes very common grief-related feelings, but then supports the reader by showing them that they are not alone in that feeling. Furthermore, by highlighting the grieving process step-by-step and showing children what others are going through, this book acts as a mirror for children who are going through that process and as a window for other children to know what their peers may be feeling.

The final book I want to investigate is Margaret Wise Brown’s *The Dead Bird*, which is about a group of four children who find a dead bird and decide to hold a funeral for it. The book starts off very simply, stating “The bird was dead when the children found it” (2), and Brown writes that although the bird was warm it was stiff and had no heartbeat, which is why the children knew it was dead. The children were sad for the bird but were glad they found it so they could have a funeral “the way grown-up people did” (10), and the children trekked into the woods and made the bird a grave that they surrounded with flowers. They then sang a song for it, cried, and did the same thing every day until they forgot about the bird (see fig. 4). Although Brown frames the funeral as a sort of “play” for the children, it is clear that they understand what has happened to the bird and are sad that it has died. They go through their own process of mourning, which is bringing the gravestone flowers and singing to it, until they have forgotten, or moved on from the death of the bird. The final page shows the children playing freely again, as they have grieved for the bird and thus returned to their play (see fig. 4).

The children’s improvised funeral is one way for them to process death, as they understand that the bird has died and have moved onto the next step of the “process,” which is a funeral. They want to make sure that the bird is honored properly, which speaks to their respect for life and sensitivity to death (Xu 15). Parts of the song they sing to the dead bird acknowledges all that the bird has lost, singing that “You’ll never fly again / Way up high / With

the other birds in the sky” (16). Brown’s book teaches children about the universality of death through its depiction of the bird, its irreversibility through the children’s song and grieving that the bird is gone, and the nonfunctionality of the bird through its stiffness, lack of a heartbeat, and cooling body. It is also relatable to children because dead birds can be a common occurrence and shows them that death is naturally all around us, but the group of children use their own empathy and humanity to make sure that the bird is cared for even in death. Brown shows children that even in death we will be cared for, and that the people grieving the deceased will have the necessary support to process the death (see fig. 4, where the children are carefree again).



Fig. 4. The children moving on from their grieving of the dead bird, from: Brown, Margaret Wise, and Christian Robinson. *The Dead Bird*. HarperCollinsPublishers, 2016.

<https://archive.org/details/deadbird0000brow/page/n27/mode/2up?view=theater>.

PART THREE: THE IMPORTANCE AND INFLUENCE OF DEATH EDUCATION

If children are exposed to a sudden death in their close circle of family or friends, it is imperative that they have the resources and knowledge to understand what has happened and

why. Only after they understand that the deceased is not coming back can children begin their own grieving processes: if they do not understand nonfunctionality they may worry about the body being buried or cremated (e.g., what if they get hurt?); if they do not understand universality, they may wonder why the deceased had to die or if they might have had something to do with it; and if they do not understand irreversibility, they may wonder when they will see the dead person again (e.g., if the deceased is “sleeping” then when will they wake up?). When the child can understand these three aspects, then the grieving process can properly begin (Danielson and Colman 2). However, in order for children to learn about death, dying, and the grieving process, they need to be taught on a level that they can understand. This is where picture books come into play, as it provides a medium that children will relate to and create a space where they can ask an adult about what they read in a book. These books can act as a potential mirror into their own situation, or as a window into what a process of death and grief can look like.

In her article on grief camp and death education, Keri-Lyn Durant defines death education as “a developmental process in which dying, death, and loss-related life experiences transmit knowledge, and have profound, personal implications for those who experience them” (90). She calls attention to the fact that very few elementary school teachers introduce or deal with topics of death, and that children learn more about death and the grieving process through our inactions than through our actions (Durant 90; Schonfeld and Kappelman 1). She argues that death education needs to be utilized more in elementary classrooms, because if we teach children about the basic concepts of death (i.e., death is irreversible, all life functions cease at the time of death, there are true causes as to why living things die, and that death is inevitable), young students will be able to prepare for the loss and learn how to mourn in a healthy manner

(Schonfeld and Kappelman 2). Furthermore, by bringing conversations around death into the classroom the teacher can provide a safe space to discuss questions and increase their understanding of the topic. Teachers can take advantage of spontaneous events (e.g., a class pet dying, or finding a dead bug during recess) to create conversations around death, and the teacher should be prepared to answer students' questions honestly and to the best of their ability (Maguth et al. 83). The teacher can also shift the conversation toward positive coping methods and other pillars of support within their community in order to educate students on the resources that are available to them.

One example of death education in the classroom is in Mrs. Muenz's third grade classroom and their class pet named Milton who passed away during his ninth birthday party (Maguth et al. 81). Instead of ignoring Milton's death or trying to find a new Milton at a pet store, Mrs. Muenz addressed the death and worked to create a conversation around both Milton's death and death in general using children's literature (83). She picked a book that mirrored the experience of the classroom, titled *The Tenth Good Thing about Barney*, and by allowing students to read about someone else's loss they could write about how their own experiences and the protagonist's experiences compared (84). This allowed the class to come together and discuss their own feelings with each other, and provided them with a safe space to ask questions about death and grief. It also allows the class to be compassionate for one another, and Schonfeld and Kappelman write that "In one second-grade class, a boy began to cry during a film because he was reminded of the death of his pet dog a year earlier. When the film was stopped, the boy insisted on remaining for its conclusion and asked that it be restarted. Without any prompting, a classmate brought him a box of tissues, and another child put his [arm] around the boy's shoulder" (4). Despite the sad emotions that the boy was having his classmates rose to support

him in a caring manner, and this strength is a result of being prepared by parents and teachers with the information necessary to provide that support.

Teaching children about death both in and out of the classroom is an important step in providing them with the support they will need when they are eventually exposed to death, and when children ask questions it is important to be compassionate, kind, and honest. If the subject is quickly changed away from death when children have a question, or if they are continuously shut down by adults trying to “protect” them from the harsh truth of death, children will learn to be fearful and quiet about their own death-related emotions and thoughts (Gould 5). Instead, questions of death should be met with honest answers, as this will work to foster a better school environment and teach students that their questions (and themselves) are valued. We can also teach children how to treat other students who are grieving with compassion, as it can be hard to know what to say to someone who is mourning the loss of a loved one. Instead, we can teach children kindness and compassion for one another, and kindness toward themselves when they go through their own mourning process.

CONCLUSION

If someone is incredibly afraid of spiders they will do everything in their power to avoid any and all contact with spiders. If their children see this aversion, they may learn to feel the same way about spiders. This can be reflected in death, as our fear and aversion toward talking about it has led us to a death-denying culture. Our inaction around teaching children about the processes of death and grief has left them with insufficient support and a lack of understanding when people close to them die, and our silence around death has continued to teach youngsters that death is something to be ignored and feared (Durant 90). If we do discuss death with

children, we find ourselves using abstract language such as “she is sleeping” or “he is gone,” which can lead to children becoming confused about what exactly death is. They are unable to understand why their deceased family member isn’t coming back, and are often left trying to traverse their own grieving process by themselves.

We should instead be introducing concepts of death and grieving to young children before they have a chance to become heavily exposed to it. By explaining aspects of death using clear, explicit language (i.e., using terms like “death” or “died”) we can explain that death is a universal process that happens to every living thing. It is also an irreversible process and when someone dies their body ceases all life functions, so they will not be hungry or cold anymore. They also need to know that they were not responsible for the death of their close relative, and if children understand the reasoning behind why the individual had died they will understand that it is not their fault.

Conversations around death and grief can be hard for adults to initiate, though, because of our death-denying society. Instead, we can use other mediums to introduce these topics, like picture books that are specifically written to help teach children about death. Books like *The Scar* and *Always and Forever* show a detailed look into how children may feel after the death of someone they knew, but they also show healthy grieving methods and ways to try and minimize the pain and sadness that they will feel. Other books like *I Miss You: A First Look at Death* are more educational and explicitly describe the processes of death and grieving, detailing why things die and how we can celebrate the lives of the people we know. It offers questions for adults to ask their children, and these questions can act as an entryway into a space where children can ask other questions about death. Finding books that cover a diverse range of death

topics is extremely helpful in making sure a child understands the importance of healthy grieving, and can support them as they become exposed to death in their everyday lives.

It is also important for children to have support at all points in their lifetimes, including when they go to school. By promoting death education we can turn the classroom into a safe space for death-related topics and questions, and teachers can continue to provide support and guidance for their students. As students become more exposed to death and tragedy within their schools (e.g., school shootings, lockdown drills, heightened security), it is increasingly important to make sure that students know their classrooms are safe environments for them to express themselves in, even in times of mourning. Death is a natural, inevitable part of our lives that impact all of us individually, and talking about losing close family members or friends can be scary, but in order to truly prepare our children for their own exposure to death we need to teach them about these concepts early on, and children's literature is a great medium for starting that conversation.

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Danielson, Katie, and Hailey Colman. “Supporting Children Through Grief: A Content Analysis of Picturebooks About Death.” *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 27 June 2023,

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-023-01529-0>.

This study analyzes seventy-four picture books for children ages three to eight written about death and dying, and examines how they write about death, the language used, the characters used, and if they include additional resources. The authors found that out of all seventy-four books, forty-nine used human characters and twenty-four of these books contained diverse (non-white) characters. The authors noted that there is a need for more books about sibling death, as there were three that featured the death of a brother and there were none about the death of a sister. 47% of the texts were about human death. Twenty-three books did not mention how the character died, while twenty-six books depicted a character dying from old age. Only sixteen books contained at least one additional resource aside from the text itself.

Forty of the seventy-four books used vague language to describe death (i.e., not using the terms “death,” “dying,” or “died”). The authors argue that using vague language to teach children about death (e.g., “she is sleeping” or “she has left”) can be damaging for children, as it makes it difficult to understand what death is. For example, children might ask “if someone is just ‘sleeping,’ then why can’t they wake up?” Then, they may associate sleep with dying and then become

fearful of sleeping, as they might die as well. To stop this confusion and fear, the authors state that clear, explicit language needs to be used when teaching children about death.

Durant, Alan, and Debi Gliori. *Always and Forever*. Harcourt, 2004.

<https://archive.org/details/alwaysforever00dura/page/n3/mode/2up>.

Durant, Keri-Lyn. "How Grief Camp Reinforces the Need for Death Education in Elementary Schools." *Canadian Journal for New Scholars in Education*, vol. 9, no. 2, 9 Dec. 2018, pp. 90–99.

Arguing that death education needs to become a part of mainstream classroom education, Durant claims that death needs to be brought up continuously so it is not seen as something that "only need be addressed when it has already happened" (Durant 91). So, in order to normalize death and the processes around it, educators and other adults need to not "reinforce passivity" (be active) when discussing death to help children better understand and respond to death. She also argues that there are three fundamental concepts that children need to understand: "nonfunctionality (that a dead body no longer experiences anything), irreversibility (that this physical reality of death lasts forever), and universality (all living things die)" (Durant 92). Although she introduces a few ideas on how to incorporate death education into elementary classrooms, this paper is not a step-by-step guide. Rather, she uses her past experience in grief camps to advocate for the importance of death education in aiding children in understanding concepts of death and healthy grieving.

Gould, Kami Sahalie Upshaw, "CONNECTION, COMPASSION, and HONESTY: Using Picture Books to Help Build a Healthier Relationship to Death in a Death-Denying Culture"

(2021). *University Honors Theses*. Paper 1085. <https://doi.org/10.15760/honors.1112>.

In this thesis Upshaw identifies three types of death attitudes (death accepting, death fearing, and death denying) and details how most Americans have a death denying attitude. She argues that this attitude is harmful for children, as an air of secrecy and denial about the inevitability of death are keeping children uneducated about the truth of death and how they can grieve in a healthy manner. She also features pages of her own picture book and explains the choices she made on each displayed spread of pages, discussing how her book can be used for children going through the grieving process and as an introduction to death and grieving before it is experienced.

Maguth, Brad M., et al. "Grappling with Death and Loss through Children's Literature in the Social Studies." *Social Studies Research and Practice*, vol. 10, no. 3, 1 Nov. 2015, pp. 80–87, <https://doi.org/10.1108/ssrp-03-2015-b0006>.

This article argues that teachers can use the subject of social studies to create a safe and deliberate learning environment where students can learn and discuss ideas of death, loss, and tragedy with each other and adults. They follow the story of a classroom pet, Milton, who passed away during his ninth birthday party, and how their teacher, Mrs. Muenz, addressed the death and worked to create a conversation around it (and around loss in general) using children's literature. She had them read *The Tenth Good Thing about Barney* and then write a reflective

journal entry on the story, allowing them space to process both the book and Milton's death. The connection between the loss of Barney in the text and the students' loss of Milton helped prompt discussion about their own experiences and feelings, and helped the students ask questions about death and teach them about healthy grieving.

Menzies, Rachel E., and Ross G. Menzies. "Death anxiety. The worm at the core of mental

health." *InPsych*, vol. 40, no. 6, Dec. 2018,

<https://psychology.org.au/for-members/publications/inpsych/2018/december-issue-6/death-anxiety-the-worm-at-the-core-of-mental-health#>.

Moundlic, Charlotte, and Olivier Tallec. *The Scar*. Walker Books, 2013.

<https://archive.org/details/scar0000moun/page/n1/mode/2up>.

Ratnasari, Eka Mei. "The Influence of Picture Book to the Storytelling skill of Preschool

Children." *Indonesian Journal of Early Childhood Education Studies*, vol. 9, no. 1, 9 June 2020, pp. 8–12, <https://doi.org/10.15294/ijeces.v9i1.37805>.

Schonfeld, David J., and Murray Kappelman. "Teaching Elementary Schoolers about Death: The

Toughest Lesson. (Cover Story)." *Education Digest*, vol. 58, no. 4, Dec. 1992, p. 16.

EBSCOhost,

<https://web-s-ebSCOhost-com.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=8b94d4bc-1c29-4d47-a952-60d0a615304f%40redis&bdata=JkF1dGhUeXBIPWlwLHVybCxlYWQmc2l0ZT1laG9zdC1saXZl#AN=9302040532&db=aph>.

This article emphasizes the importance of teaching children about death before they experience the death of a close friend or relative. By teaching them about the

basic concepts of death (i.e., death is irreversible, all life functions cease at the time of death, there are true causes as to why living things die, and that death is inevitable), they will be able to prepare for the loss and learn how to mourn in a healthy manner. Furthermore, by bringing conversations around death into the classroom the teacher can provide a safe space to discuss questions and increase their understanding of the topic. Teachers can take advantage of spontaneous events (e.g., a class pet dying, or finding a dead bug during recess) to create conversations around death, and the teacher should be prepared to answer students' questions honestly and to the best of their ability. The teacher can also move the conversation to positive coping methods and other pillars of support within their community.

Stylianou, Polyxeni, and Michalinos Zembylas. "Engaging with issues of death, loss, and grief in elementary school: Teachers' perceptions and affective experiences of an in-service training program on Death Education in Cyprus." *Theory & Research in Social Education*, vol. 49, no. 1, 11 Nov. 2020, pp. 54–77, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00933104.2020.1841700>.

This study argues that classrooms need to integrate death education into their curriculum while simultaneously addressing the challenges that teachers face when trying to implement this type of education. One of these challenges is to create a multidisciplinary approach that covers the wide range of beliefs, religions, and philosophies that the students and their families might have, and to encourage the teacher to reflect on their own biases and beliefs about death before approaching the topic. Another challenge is helping teachers have access to

resources that will help them to teach death education effectively and safely, and the authors suggest using children's literature as an opportunity to help students discuss topics of death from a non-threatening source.

The study followed a set of teacher training sessions in Cyprus that covered how to implement death education in the classroom. The trainings provided teachers with access to three different children's books and guidelines on how to utilize them in the classroom, along with different ways to give students opportunities to share their own thoughts in the classroom (e.g., discussion, writing, drawing, role playing, etc.). The aim of this study was to identify why teachers chose to participate in the training sessions, what concerns or issues they may have with bringing death education into their classroom, and for the teachers to self-reflect on how they developed their own lesson plan, in order for the authors to improve future trainings.

Thomas, Pat, and Lesley Harker. *I Miss You: A First Look at Death*. Barron's Educational Series, 2001. https://archive.org/details/imissyoufirstloo0000thom_k110/page/n7/mode/2up.

Xu, Jiayun. "From Avoidance to Healing: The Portrayal of Death in Contemporary Children's Literature." *Syracuse University*, Syracuse University ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2023, pp. 1–28.

This paper starts by discussing the evolution of the portrayal of death in Western children's literature from the eighteenth century to the present. In the eighteenth century, authors would create magical stories to protect children from the idea of death, and the nineteenth century continued this trend by creating stories where children could either survive death or experience an idealized version of it. The

twentieth and twenty-first centuries introduced the idea that death is inevitable for everyone, but illustrates it as a natural and peaceful process. More contemporary children's literature focuses on the importance of family, friendship, human empathy, and emotional bonds when discussing death.

Xu also discusses contemporary ways of discussing death in children's literature for children ages three to eight, citing from books like Margaret Wise Brown's *The Dead Bird* and Susan Varley's *Badger's Parting Gifts*. They focus on the importance of memories and the fear a child might feel at forgetting their memories with their dead loved one (or, the loss of memories as a "true death"). However, they also detail how a child can properly grieve the deceased and begin to look happily back on those memories and learn to treasure the love that they received. They highlight the idea that "the death of a person does not mean the end of the relationship with them" (Xu 20), and go on to create their own children's book that emphasizes this message.