

How do School Counsellors Perceive Death Education? A Qualitative Study¹

¿Cómo perciben las orientadoras una educación que incluya la muerte? Un estudio cualitativo

DOI: 10.4438/1988-592X-RE-2022-396-537

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Abstract

School counsellors' perceptions of death education have not yet been studied in Death Pedagogy, although death is a phenomenon that is inherent in life itself and, in circumstances such as the current pandemic and post-pandemic, can be ubiquitous in everyday experience, both individual and collective. Thus the objective of this study was to ascertain school counsellors' perceptions of death education. The study design was qualitative and descriptive. Six counsellors working in Spanish state schools at early childhood, primary, secondary and sixth-form levels participated. A content analysis of topics and semantics was performed using the Jaccard index. Some notable views expressed by participants were: (1) death was associated with violence, prurience and dehumanization in the media, social media and some videogames, and hence the current social image of the topic was not suited to educational purposes; (2) death education was associated mainly with tutorial intervention in counselling for bereaved

¹ "Funded by R+D+i call 'Retos de la Sociedad' 2017, reference: EDU2017-85296-R (AEI/FEDER, UE)."

students, although its educational value in curriculum subjects, cross-curricular topics and tutorial action plans was also acknowledged; (3) death education was necessary, though problematic and controversial; (4) a shift of approach was needed, moving from health and psychological intervention towards education and pedagogy; (5) the leading role in counselling and guidance should be taken by tutors; (6) schools should design and implement not only death education but also bereavement counselling plans, adaptable to the student, as a part of the school educational project. The main conclusion was that in order to take advantage of the potential of Death Pedagogy in both organisational and didactic terms, specific training was required for school counsellors, teachers and parents.

Key words: Death Pedagogy, death education, school counsellors, curriculum, schools

Resumen

Desde la Pedagogía de la muerte no se ha estudiado la percepción de los orientadores educativos hacia una educación que incluya la muerte, aunque se trate de un fenómeno y de un tema inherente a la vida que, en circunstancias como la actual de pandemia y post pandemia, sature la cotidianeidad y las vidas individuales y colectiva. El objetivo del estudio es conocer las percepciones de los orientadores sobre una educación que incluya la muerte. El diseño es cualitativo descriptivo. Participaron seis orientadoras de centros públicos de educación infantil, primaria, secundaria obligatoria y bachillerato del contexto español. Se realizaron análisis de contenido temático y semántico, apoyado en el índice de Jaccard. Algunos resultados destacados, desde la perspectiva de las orientadoras, fueron: (1) La muerte está asociada a morbo, violencia y deshumanización, por los medios, redes sociales, películas y algunos videojuegos; los conocimientos de partida para la educación son inadecuados. (2) La educación que incluye la muerte se asocia, primariamente, al acompañamiento en el duelo desde la tutoría; reconocen su valor didáctico desde asignaturas, temas transversales y plan de acción tutorial. (3) La educación que incluye la muerte es necesaria, controvertida y difícil. (4) Se requiere un cambio de perspectiva epistémica: de la salud o intervención psicológica, a la educativa o pedagógica. (5) Se precisa asumir que el protagonismo orientador es de los tutores. (6) La escuela debe diseñar y desarrollar, tanto una enseñanza que incluya la muerte, como planes de acompañamiento educativo en situaciones de duelo, adaptables a los alumnos, como parte del proyecto educativo del centro. La conclusión más relevante es que el aprovechamiento del potencial orientador de la Pedagogía de la muerte, tanto organizativo como didáctico, requiere la formación específica de orientadores, profesores y padres.

Palabras clave: Pedagogía de la muerte, educación que incluye la muerte, orientadores, currículo, escuela

Introduction

Although Dewey (1902) had already recognised the importance of curricula in education, theoretical study of the topic began with Bobbit's work (1912, 1918). From the outset, efficiency-based and progressive outlooks clashed. Aside from attempts to balance these two approaches (Apple, 1993; Franklin, 1986; Kliebard, 1986; Tanner, 1991), up to now the predominant tendency has been functionalist, centred on developing skills and abilities, since this has responded better to professional, economic and social needs. The reconstructionist approach (Pinar, 2003) enriched both analysis and educational development, as it embraced a critical and democratic citizenship perspective. But none of these views identified the need for an education that addresses the issue of death.

Death is not included in curricula (Herrán, Rodríguez, & Miguel, 2019; James, 2015; Stylianou & Zembylas, 2016; Rodríguez, Herrán, & Miguel, 2020a); neither is it present in national education systems, with a few exceptions such as Denmark and Australia (Lytje, 2016), countries that have developed procedures, training and guidelines on Death Pedagogy for teaching and counselling students who have lost a loved one (Hinton & Kirk, 2015; Rodríguez, Herrán, Pérez-Bonet, & Sánchez-Huete, 2020b).

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought death to the fore on a daily basis. This constant concern also involves schools and their staff. Teachers acknowledge the need for training in how to approach death in tutorial intervention with bereaved students (Rodríguez et al., 2020b). Further, the uncertainty associated with illness and death has acquired heightened importance among children and adolescents (Götz et al., 2020).

The profession's failure to call for an educational response to death is therefore incongruous and contradictory, especially bearing in mind various indicators and observations relating to both temporary and more enduring concerns: (1) We cannot educate for life, as UNESCO (2014, 2015) suggests, without including death, since death is integral to life; (2) if it is not to be incomplete and misleading, education should be concerned with what is most important to human beings, although this may not be explicitly demanded; (3) death is always present on both individual and group levels, for example in biological processes, accidents, terrorist attacks, wars, cruelty, suicide, loss of biodiversity, pandemics, etc.; (4) losses of loved ones affecting school students are common – in a recent study (Rodríguez et al., 2020b), 70.4% of a sample

of 683 teachers stated that their students had suffered losses of loved ones in the last 5 years; (5) the education community, including teachers (Rodríguez et al., 2020b) and families (Herrán, Rodríguez, & Serrano, 2020), is favourable towards the inclusion of death in formal schooling; (6) education including the awareness of death and the finite nature of life contributes to a more complete all-round education (in terms of attitudes, values, skills, etc.) for both individuals and societies.

Death Pedagogy studies teaching and education that includes death (Rodríguez et al., 2020a). The scientific development of Death Pedagogy can be based on nine epistemological dimensions. Corr, Corr, & Doka (2019) identify the cognitive, affective, behavioural and values dimensions, which can be combined in curriculum design, while Herrán et al. (2000) and Herrán & Cortina (2006) add five more: the curricular, the social, the complex, the conscious and the developmental. Since death is seen as a topic that is “transversal to the transversal” (i.e. it runs across even cross-curricular topics: Herrán et al., 2000), it does not necessarily mean adding further content or subjects, but rather a broader, more inclusive approach from the educator and a curriculum with more pedagogical depth. For if schools do not address a radically human topic such as the awareness of death, then the education they offer will necessarily be incomplete, in relation to their aim of equipping students to live a fuller life.

In Death Pedagogy, death education has been studied in relation to: (1) Education for citizenship and for a more complete, aware and critical life (Corr et al., 2019; Herrán & Cortina, 2006; Mantegazza, 2004; Petitfils, 2016); (2) curriculum design (Herrán et al., 2000; Herrán et al., 2019; James, 2015; Stylianou & Zembylas, 2016; Rodríguez et al., 2020a); (3) historical events such as the Holocaust (Lindquist, 2007; Tenzek & Nickels, 2017; Zembylas, 2011); (4) teaching methods and resources for addressing the issue of death (Herrán & Cortina 2006; Herrán et al., 2000); (5) teacher training (Herrán & Cortina 2006; Herrán et al., 2000; Stylianou & Zembylas, 2020); and (6) the education community’s perceptions (Dyregrov, Dyregrov, & Idsoe, 2013; Herrán et al., 2020; Hinton & Kirk, 2015; Potts, 2013; Rodríguez et al., 2020b).

The last-mentioned studies found that teachers and families had favourable attitudes towards the inclusion of death in education (Herrán et al., 2020; Rodríguez et al., 2020b), with significant variables such as gender (women had more favourable attitudes) and religious beliefs (atheists were also more positive). Research into the education

community's perceptions of death education has been quantitative, with some exceptions, such as case studies like that of Potts (2013) among primary-school teachers who had counselled students in situations of bereavement.

There are very few studies involving school counsellors. While there does exist some research analysing the impact of death education on the training of counsellors in the mental health field (Doughty & Hoskins, 2011; Harrawood, Doughty, & Wilde, 2011; Servaty-Seib & Tedrick, 2014), we found no studies of their perceptions in schools. This lack of research among school counsellors is striking, given the professional importance of the role. Since the functions of school counsellors are in assessment, student development and teacher training and innovation, these specialists are potentially important as initiators of projects, programmes and actions in training and in updating methodology. More specifically, the functions of the educational counsellor can be essential in fostering the inclusion of death in school curricula and the design of procedures and guidelines for tutors dealing with student bereavement (Cortina & Herrán, 2011; Doughty & Hoskins, 2011). Both the current absence of research and the importance of the figure of the counsellor in the Pedagogy of Death argue in favour of undertaking studies that will lead to the production of knowledge and its transference to pre- and in-service counsellor training encompassing death education.

In the light of all the above, a qualitative study was devised to answer the following research question: What perceptions and attitudes do primary, secondary and sixth-form school counsellors have towards death education?

Method

Study design

The study was qualitative, with a descriptive design. This assumes that the knowledge produced comes from participants' own views, experiences and perceptions; hence we strove to apprehend participants' discourses from their own point of view. The study thus centred on describing and understanding their experiences (Marshall & Rossman, 2016) of both death education in general and in specific terms in schools.

The study was approved by the ethical committee of the coordinating body.

Participants and procedure

The population studied was that of school counsellors in Spanish state schools at early childhood, primary, secondary and sixth form levels. An intentional sampling method was used, taking the variable of “professional school counsellors” as the criterion of inclusion. The sample comprised 6 counsellors, and this was deemed appropriate in terms of the objectives and methodological design of the study (Table I). It should be noted that in the Spanish context a single counsellor works as a consultant in three or four different schools at early childhood and primary level, whereas in secondary education every school has a counsellor. All participants were women, thus conforming approximately to the overall socio-demographic status of the population studied (Navarro & Casero, 2012).

School counsellors from rural and urban schools known to the researcher team were invited to take part. Participants were chosen and contacted in accordance with information and confidentiality procedures and informed consent was obtained. The interviews were carried out in offices in the participants’ schools. A relaxed, friendly atmosphere was created, and the interviews were recorded in audio format for subsequent transcription.

TABLE I. Sample socio-demographic data

Initial training	Experience as school counsellor	Type of School	Setting
Primary School Teaching and Pedagogy	25 years	Early Childhood and Primary School (ages 3-12)	Urban
Educational Psychology	18 years	Early Childhood and Primary School (ages 3-12)	Rural
Educational Psychology	17 years	Early Childhood and Primary School (ages 3-12)	Rural
Psychology	6 years	Early Childhood and Primary School (ages 3-12)	Urban
Primary School Teaching and Psychology	23 years	High School (ages 12-18)	Urban
Pedagogy	3 years	High School (ages 12-18)	Rural

Instrument

A semi-structured instrument was designed and validated by a panel of 8 experts in the Pedagogy of death. It was submitted to an inter-rater concordance, being assessed firstly individually, and then combining the experts' opinions in order to develop the definitive version.

The script of questions was divided into four sections: (1) Participant characteristics (training, years of experience, school, etc.); (2) questions on the place of death in society; (3) questions on how to educate people on the topic of death and the role of school counsellors; and (4) questions on the inclusion of death in the curriculum.

Data analysis method and rationale

The data were analysed following Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña 's (2013) procedure, namely a content analysis in three stages or steps:

- Step 1: Topic content analysis. With no prior coding, phenomenological reality was directly addressed, identifying participants' discursive positions.
- Step 2: Semantic content analysis. After an initial categorization and coding of the discourses, the data were filtered, and categories and subcategories that were codified only marginally or not at all were eliminated or included in other categories. In this way information saturation was sought. The Jaccard index (I_j) was used for similarity of coding, since it is a coefficient yielding knowledge of the strength of relationships among elements and clusters.
- Step 3: The results were interpreted and the conclusions verified.

The main categories had to do with the views, and the reasoning behind these, that the counsellors had regarding death education and the various actors affecting education: society, families, teachers, counsellors, schools and students.

The NVIVO 12 qualitative data analysis program was used.

Results

The first topic analysis of the counsellors' views determined the frequencies (n) and percentages (%) of the most important ideas defining their perspectives. Their first 20 terms with a length of five or more letters were taken as the criterion for counting the frequencies and percentages.

Length was estimated by taking into account the semantic field of death education, identified and validated in prior studies (Rodríguez et al., 2020a). The list was revised on one occasion, leaving aside "word stops" and "empty words" that did not add content to the analysis.

"Death" was the most frequent term (n = 195) and also had a high percentage weighting (26.03%). This was due to the nature of the study, as death was its central topic. In second place, "children" appeared 58 times (7.74%), also logically, since they were the final target group of the study. The n = 43 times that "education" appeared (5.74%) demonstrated the relationship between death and education in the counsellors' discourses. The term "family" occurred with the same percentage (n = 38; 5.72%), in reference to the need for school-family coordination. The noticeable

presence of “bereavement/mourning” (*duelo* in Spanish; $n = 38$; 5.07%) attests to how the counsellors understood death education; i.e. as centred on palliative counselling rather than on a normalizing method or on the curriculum. The term “curriculum” did not appear in their discourses.

Below the topic analysis is discussed in greater depth using the categorization and coding of the interviews and presenting the most recurrent topics in each category (society, school, family, teachers, counsellors and children). Also we discuss the most significant relationships in the semantic content analysis, as indicated by the Jaccard index (I_j), and corresponding to the strongest ideas emerging from the analysis.

Society

The counsellors saw death as a “taboo” topic in society ($n = 7$; P_4 : “The fact that they don’t take children to funerals, burials and so on, because well ... Because of the supposed trauma they’ll have ... Well, what I think is that we’re experiencing it in that way. We’re experiencing it in terms of ignorance”) and suggested a “lack of awareness” of death among the population ($n = 7$; P_6 : “In general we all want to be ‘happy cool’ because we have this ‘happy cool’ society and things that are problems, we don’t want them. They bother us”).

Participants also thought that society gives death “negative associations” (grief, fear, etc.) ($n = 4$; P_5 : “This feeling of ‘poor little one’, ‘I’ll hold your hand’, right? With a feeling of, well, that, of pity”), and some stated that there was a generalised “indifference” around the topic ($n = 3$; P_4 : “What parents teach their kids to do is ignore death, avoid it, not to talk about these topics, it’s a taboo subject and that, to me, is worrying”). The correlation of these two first ideas (“taboo” and “lack of awareness”) was $I_j = .82$.

The view of death as taboo seemed to be linked to the feeling that death was a “non-prioritized subject” among the population, at least externally speaking ($n = 5$; $I_j .5$; P_5 : “So, as it isn’t normalized, it’s that the media, the news are really fast, really traumatic. I mean, everything is just like that and then suddenly we switch to something like a festival or whatever”).

This was also related both to the presence of death in “religion” ($n = 2$; $I_j = .66$; P_5 : “I mean, death used to be like really isolated. I mean, it’s always been prominent also because of religion”) and to the explicit “morbid curiosity and violence” with which it is presented in the media ($n = 2$; $I_j = .5$; “One influence is that we have so much violence and so much death in the media, in movies, so it’s kind of being trivialised. Like it looks like you shoot someone and then in the game they come back to life. So it’s a false death, just a temporary passing state [...] then when it really happens, that means you’ll have a bit of a problem with the experience”).

The alternative they foresaw, in terms of helping society to approach death in a more normal way in education, centred on creating “more general culture” among the population ($n = 3$; P_2 : “I think that they tackle it younger, when they’re small. They include the little ones in it. I think that we, [the non-Roma population], we usually... keep it apart from the kids”).

Schools

Although participants thought that at present the topic of death “lacks normalisation in schools” ($n = 7$), most were also of the view that “death should be included in education” ($n = 4$), with comments such as that of participant P_4 : “I don’t think I’ve known of any school that treats death as a cross-curricular issue. If only”. These ideas had a moderate correlation of $I_j = .4$. One interviewee stated that when schools included death it was done through a “religious” approach ($n = 1$; P_4 : “Those of us who aren’t religious or who don’t bring religion to our kids, it’s a bit more difficult for us”).

Participants prioritized the treatment of death through an approach that was “palliative (centred on situations of loss)” ($n = 5$), with statements such as (P_3): “We work on mourning, because in the case of the older ones we accompany the family a bit more and by praying, maybe, a little ritual of farewell” [...]; “We did a little homage in the gardens where the kids participated with a song they’d written. So, yes, they did a ritual of farewell for their classmate”.

Participants associated the inclusion of death in teaching to other contents, mentioning teachers’ “overload” ($n = 1$; P_5 : “Obviously schools

have a responsibility in education, but schools aren't responsible for everything and it's necessary to take on responsibilities"). They also related it to "school-family coordination" ($n = 4$; $I_j = .5$; P_3 : "Of course, then [including death in education or not] also depends a bit on the parents' ideas, right? If they're religious or not") and with "training for education professionals" so that they could deal with death appropriately ($n = 1$; P_3 : "There I think we're just improvising really. But it's like everything: until you have your first case, because it's all, kind of, researching it, seeing what there is about the topic, looking at what you can do in class..."). These two views were linked with a correlation of $I_j = .5$.

Families

Interviewees thought that there was a "need for training" ($n = 9$) in death education for students' families. They noted that families requested guidance from them in this area (P_5 : "They ask us, we advise them and if it's not our responsibility, we help them with managing it"). This idea correlated completely with families' "lack of resources" in death education ($n = 6$; $I_j = 1$). For example, P_4 stated: "To give you an idea, he avoided frustrating the kids to such an extent that on the day of his mother's funeral he took them to Warner [a theme park]".

Yet participants also linked the "lack of resources" and "need for training" to parents' "overprotection" ($n = 6$; $I_j = .6$, respectively) of their children (P_5 : "More that protection it's overprotection, which in the end doesn't benefit the children's development. In this way we're not equipping them to develop the necessary skills to be autonomous and have a balanced overall development"). Thus in the counsellors' view, families' "lack of resources" was associated with their "need for training" and with "overprotection".

Lacking the necessary training, families reacted as any other educator would, on the basis of what they saw as preferable, whether this was correct or not ($n = 3$; P_4 : "The mother, of course, was using her common sense. She was doing it right. What happened was she was worried because the mourning was going on a long time"). "Action on the basis of one's own experiences" was related to the "need for training" with a correlation of $I_j = .6$. Further, there were interviewees who stated that families saw the inclusion of death from a "non-religious standpoint"

(n = 1; P₂: “Regardless of whether you’re a Catholic or not, well yes you could... Well, maybe prepare them for experiencing it in a normal way”).

Most participants referred to the need for “school-family coordination” in educating children about death, in order to avoid contradictory messages that might confuse them (n = 19; P₂: “If there’s not a consistent message from everyone, saying the same... Then, well, we confuse the kids still more. That’s why you have to be in touch with the families”). This “school-family coordination” correlated with the “need for training” with a rating of I_j = .7.

Teachers

Teachers’ concept of death (according to the interviewees) embraced loss as part of life (n = 2; P₆: “I think that everyone thinks that since it’s part of life you have to take it on board in some way before it happens...”).

It was also apparent that the majority of participants saw the “palliative approach (response to bereavement)” in death education as paramount (n = 13; P₄: “When it happens, it affects people, and it affects the tutors a lot when there are situations when someone’s passed away or one of a child’s parents, or something, a grandparent [it’s typically a grandparent], since it’s the tutors who usually broach the topic with the child”). They also drew attention to the “overload” they saw teachers as having (n = 7; P₅: “Afterwards, the teachers, society is constantly sending them a different kind of message that says, as well as that, you must educate kids in values, in emotions, for bereavement, you must attend them... I mean, in the end everything ends up... [...] on the teachers’ shoulders”).

The participants considered that death bore a “relationship to the subjects” through which death education could be addressed (n = 5; P₄: “Music, art...”; P₆: “One of the topics to tackle could be this because it forms part of life. But also you can deal with it in natural sciences, history, etc. It depends. Maybe you can tackle it from everywhere, because there’s also a lot of literature for talking about it”). In addition to the curricular subjects, participants were of the opinion that the “tutorial action plan” was important for educating pupils about death (n = 12; I_j = .8; P₃: “Well, then, maybe, across the curriculum, like watching a movie, right? or reading a book on the subject, right? The tutors can do that”). Interviewees remarking this “relationship with the subjects” also thought

that death education should be dealt with in the “tutorial action pla”, with a strong correlation between the two views ($I_j = .8$).

It was also seen as “important” to include death in the teaching of some “typical cross-curricular issues” ($n = 3$; $I_j = .75$; P_1 : “These are issues you have to deal with. The same as health education. You can work on death through health education, to see it as something normal, but also so that they learn to manage their emotions”).

The counsellors were aware for the “need for training” on death education for teachers ($n = 5$; P_5 : “And the teachers, in the end, we’re people, we’re parents [...] we also soak up this social tendency to avoid this frustration and pain so that children won’t suffer. So, I think so, yes, it would be really good if we had training on the subject, yes”). Despite this, one participant was relatively “indifferent” with regard to death and its educational potential (P_2 : “Well, no. In that specific way, I wouldn’t [deal with the subject of death]”). Regarding topics to be included in such training, interviewees referred to the contents, methods and resources of death education for its “inclusion in the subject curriculum” ($n = 3$; P_2 : “Basically, training for teachers in methodology and content. Content and methodology, particularly, because methodology, in this case, is really important”), cross-curricular issues and “counselling for bereavement” ($n = 9$; $I_j = .6$; P_4 : “The psychology of grieving. I mean, how these processes happen so that you know how the person will manage their grieving, problems that can arise in managing grieving”).

Participants also stressed the need for teachers to “plan the period of mourning” ($n = 6$; P_5 : “[They ask us] ‘What do you think? I’ve done this.’ It seems great to me, I give them a few guidelines and tell them ‘If you see that this lasts a long time, tell me and we’ll monitor the situation’”) and the inclusion of such planning in the “school education project” ($n = 5$; P_2 : “It’s part of the programme and in this school we work on it”), the two views having a correlation of $I_j = .8$.

School counsellors

In this category we present the counsellors’ own concepts of death and their potential role in designing and implementing death education.

The counsellors stated that their concept of death was different to that of teachers, since in their case it was related to “partial deaths” (n

= 6; P₅: “But with grieving, with separation [from parents]... It’s like any other process”). Like teachers, however, in some cases they related it to the “life cycle” (n = 3; P₆: “It’s just another part of life. We’re all born to die [laughs]. I mean, we have to accept it as such”) and with “universal death” (n = 1; P₅: “In the same way that your pet dog dies, your cat, etc... So death is there, it’s part of everything”).

The counsellors seemed to have a positive attitude towards “death education” (n = 13; P₄: “I’m really sure of it. I mean a huge yes, really really big, underlined, in bold type and fluorescent letters. I mean yes, yes, yes. Particularly, think about it... To make up for inequality, because in the families they don’t tackle it”) and they noted, therefore, their own “need for training” (n = 12; P₁: “We deal with a lot of things, but we don’t have the tools, that’s what I see... A lot about depressions, medicines, we work on emotional intelligence... And then there are a lot of difficulties in putting it all into practice, because theory includes a lot of stuff, but then you have to think...”).

This opinion, although almost unanimous, was not shared by all participants. One mentioned her “scepticism” due to the lack of social demand, educational development (n = 4; P₂: “Well the truth is that no one’s ever considered it, neither me or any of the families... No, I’d say no...”) and “lack of understanding” of the topic (n = 4; P₂: “It’s just that death... I wouldn’t know how, to tell you the truth... From what point of view, and how... I don’t know if it would be to help them deal with death, I don’t know, I don’t know...”). At the same time, other interviewees saw the Pedagogy of death as “an educational innovation” (n = 2; P₄: “I think it would be really great if it was a topic for innovation, but well... I think so, gradually...”).

The participants’ opinion was that teachers should intervene as tutors in situations of bereavement (“palliative approach”), and they defined their own role when a student loses a loved one (n = 22; P₁: “In the Educational Psychology Department our role is to coordinate and advise, but advise in service”). Such educational action correlated completely to the “need for training” (I₁ = 1).

Interviewees also referred to their own work “overload” (n = 6; P₆: “But that, since your day-to-day work takes up all your time and you have less and less time and you go less time to each school, and so in the end we only respond to urgent problems”) and the ambiguity with which families see their role (P₃: “And me, when some parents say [because we

give a lot of guidance to parents], then they tell you, ‘No, what I mean is...’ And I say, ‘No, no’’).

In general, the counsellors showed a favourable attitude towards receiving training in the Pedagogy of death as a counselling approach, together with the rest of the education community. Thus P₂ stated: “This is happening. We want information, support, advice, what we have to do and what we can do... But not so that it’s just a hotchpotch.” This was particularly the case, in line with their view of death education outlined above, with regard to “counselling for bereavement” (n = 15; P₆: “A bit of all the stages you pass through, like any emotion, like any grieving... the stages you pass through... Because we all study that in our degree... What grieving is, right? And also looking at the bibliography”).

To a lesser extent they called for training on the “inclusion of death in the curriculum subjects and cross-curricular issues” (n = 6; P₆: “And lastly a bit of teaching materials and resources that can be... That can be used at different ages and times”).

Children

The school counsellors were of the opinion that children “were not interested” in death (n = 5), unless they had had “close experiences” (n = 11) (P₅: “Well, interest in the subject, no. When there’s an event, yes. When there’s an event”). They stated that in early childhood education (ages 3 to 6) death was treated in an educationally normal way (n = 5; P₅: “I think that in early childhood, more naturally. It’s what they come up with most spontaneously, ‘My pet, my little doggy’. I mean, in early childhood we work much more on emotions and the kids have this spontaneity”).

They noted that blocking feelings in relation to death appeared among children at primary school age. Due to their cognitive development they began to associate death with fear and uncertainty (n = 6; P₃: “The topic of death yes, from the age I told you of around 6... I think that it’s a bit because they’re afraid. I mean, that the idea of ‘Are you going to die? And what will happen?’ frightens them”). Also they were of the opinion that those children who were able to integrate death into their education relatively naturally could be “educational models for others” (n = 7; P₅: “Well, you think about it, or any project we work on together... Obviously, fine, but then... and then the kids are ahead of us”).

Table II shows the strength of the associations among participants' perceptions of death education according to the Jaccard index (I_j). It should be read as follows: those who referred to "code A" also systematically referred to "code B".

TABLE II. Correlations between codes

Category	Code A	Code B	I_j
Society	Taboo	Lack of awareness	.82
	Taboo	Not a priority issue	.5
	Taboo	Religion	.66
		Violence and prurience	.5
Schools	Not normalized	Yes, it is important	.4
	Yes, it is important	School-family coordination	.5
	School-family coordination	Training for education professionals	.5
Family	Lack of knowledge	Need for training	1
	Lack of knowledge	Overprotection	.6
	Overprotection	Need for training for families	.6
	Educational potential	Need for training for families	.6
	School-family coordination	Need for training for families	.7
Teachers	Relationship with subject areas	Tutorial action	.8
	Yes, it is important	Classical cross-curricular issues	.75
	Need for training	Support and guidance for bereavement	.6
	Planning the period of mourning	School education project, tutorial action plan	.8
Counsellors	Palliative (centred on bereavement)	Need for training	1

As we can see from the Table II, the counsellors related the condition of death being a social "taboo" to the lack of applied awareness ($I_j = .82$), its lack of social importance ($I_j = .5$), its links with religion ($I_j = .66$) and violent or morbid images in the mass media, social media, films and some video games ($I_j = .5$).

Regarding schools, the counsellors linked the importance of death education to the need for educational coordination between families and schools ($I_j = .5$). They saw this coordination as needing to be based, essentially, on training for educational professionals ($I_j = .5$) and families ($I_j = .7$).

Training for families on their role in educating their children around death was associated with overprotection ($I_j = .7$), the lack of related knowledge and skills ($I_j = 1$) and the educational potential of death ($I_j = .6$).

Regarding how teachers could approach death education, interviewees indicated its inclusion in the curriculum subjects and tutorial action ($I_j = .8$), and through classical cross-curricular issues ($I_j = .75$).

Teacher training was called for in order to help students in situations of loss ($I_j = .6$). Also there was a unanimous call for such training for school counsellors ($I_j = 1$).

Participants were also of the opinion that death education should be included in school planning documents such as the education project, the tutorial action plan and the planning of the mourning period ($I_j = .8$).

Discussion

The qualitative approach enabled us to observe participants' attitudes, openings, blockages, difficulties and experiences around death education in schools. The following discussion of the results is divided into three topics: (1) Society, death and children. (2) The objectives and scope of the Pedagogy of death; and (3) the practice of death education in schools.

With regard to (1) death in society, the school counsellors observed that death is a socially-conditioned taboo topic that affects their students. This perception is shared by the whole education community, from teachers (Rodríguez et al., 2020b) to families (Herrán et al., 2020). The taboo status of death perhaps has to do with the way that society treats it. A trivialising, dehumanized image of death prevails, promoted by the mass media, social media (Selfridge & Mitchell, 2020) and certain videogames (Maté, 2018); and all of this has an impact on children's and adolescents' perceptions. It would seem that the discourse around death and its normalization encounters more difficulty outside the religious sphere, as some participants stated. Thus they asserted that children

were not interested in death, unless they had had “related experiences”. In Herrán et al. (2000) and in Herrán & Cortina (2006), however, it was found that children aged 3 to 6 incorporate death in their speech and play in a natural way, and that primary and secondary school pupils are undoubtedly interested in it, in a different way, going beyond solely bereavement.

On the object and scope of the Pedagogy of death (2), the discourses of the counsellors associated death education particularly with tutors’ responses to loss among their students (Corr et al., 2019; Herrán et al., 2000). It was assumed that schools should plan procedures and educational counselling and support actions for cases of bereavement, and that these should be flexible and adaptable to the needs of children and adolescents (Akerman & Statham, 2014; Herrán & Cortina, 2011). Further, the value of teaching death in curricular subjects, cross-curricular issues and tutorial action plans was recognised. Other educational possibilities, for example through plans for attention to diversity or methodologies such as ‘significant moments’, ‘partial deaths’ (Dennis, 2009; Herrán et al., 2000) and ‘teachable moments’ (Eyzaguirre, 2006; Corr et al., 2019) did not appear in participants’ views. Participants were unanimous in recognising the scope and potential of the Pedagogy of death, both didactic and organizational. There was agreement that training was necessary for all members of the education community (the counsellors themselves, teachers and families). This concurrence coincides with that found in other studies (Dyregrov et al., 2013; Herrán et al., 2020; Hinton & Kirk, 2015; Potts, 2013; Rodríguez et al., 2020b). When interviewees were asked about the contents of such training they stressed its applied character: procedures, resources and methodologies. Without denying the importance of the practical side, however, Herrán & Cortina (2006) argue that the Pedagogy of death requires appropriate awareness-based theoretical self-training, since it is a deep, radical topic.

With regard to the practice of death education in schools (3), the counsellors observed that death is not integrated in education in schools due to its status as a social taboo. This perception also coincides with prior studies (Herrán et al., 2000; Herrán et al., 2020; Potts, 2013; Rodríguez et al., 2020b). They saw this as complex, controversial and challenging (Simon, 2011; Zembylas, 2014). The concept of “difficult knowledge” (Garret, 2017), applied to education, is thus relevant to their situation. Another type of difficulty stemmed from the belief that the

inclusion of death in the curriculum would lead to educational overload. The normalisation of death, however, does not involve more subject knowledge but greater depth and more universal content. For example, Herrán et al. (2019) demonstrated that it was pedagogically incongruent to include the Holocaust in the secondary school curriculum and not genocide, since the former is only one of many in history.

Another issue of great pedagogical interest has to do with two of the counsellors' own possible difficulties. The first was in defining educational guidance from a pedagogical perspective rather than from that of psychology or health. The second was due to their awareness that their role was secondary to that of the tutors (Herrán & Cortina, 2006; Herrán et al., 2000), both in the educational approach (prior to the event of loss) and in the palliative. School counsellors would thus take on a supporting role, except in the case of difficult bereavements (Kroen, 1996), in which they could intervene or refer the case for more specialised treatment.

Conclusions and limitations

In the light of the results and the above discussion, the following conclusions were drawn. (1) The view of the school counsellors taking part in the study was that the issue of death was currently characterised by a "lack of normalization in schools". They saw it as a taboo topic in society and education, trivialized and associated with tragedy, violence and morbidity. Hence an attitude frequently found among participants was to help students to deal with death. (2) Compared with the scope of current theory on the topic, participants' notions of death education were limited, mainly centred on bereavement and helping students cope with death. These perceptions situate death still further from education. (3) The psychologization and lack of a clearly defined role of educational psychology make it difficult to discern clearly and pedagogically the organisational and didactic implications of death education, both for the normalising approach and the palliative. (4) Pedagogical training on death education is necessary for counsellors, teachers and families. (5) Comparison of our results and prior research enable us to enhance our understanding of the deficiencies and potentials of death education in education for living with more awareness. (6) The inclusion in education

and the curriculum of a radical topic such as death allows us to glimpse a path towards a possible evolution of both the curriculum and education as a whole (Herrán & Cortina, 2006).

Lastly, certain limitations of this study should be acknowledged. A wider sample, more representative of the different regions of Spain, would have allowed the comparison of counsellors at different levels of education and in different contexts. Further studies with a larger sample and taking a phenomenological perspective will be able to explore in greater depth the issues touched on in this study, which we see as preliminary, due to the lack of research in the topic. Also, the role of psychological guidance on death education could have been assessed from the perspective of other actors in the education community. These limitations point to future research possibilities in a fruitful discipline, i.e., the Pedagogy of Death, in the hope of contributing to a more complete education of human beings, to the science of pedagogy, and within in, the field educational counselling.

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