

Pedagogical and emotional care practices developed in Early Childhood Education with children in the process of bereavement

ARTICLE

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Abstract

The experience of bereavement is part of life, yet it is little discussed in educational practices. The aim of this study was to understand the experience of bereavement at school, especially in nursery classes. Likewise, it discusses the development of possible measures for implementing pedagogical actions for emotional acceptance, in order to move towards the quality of the child's integral development. It is based on legal documents in the field of Early Childhood Education (Brazil, 1996; 2010) and authors such as Fujisaka (2022) and Lustosa (2016) who research bereavement. The methodology used was a literature review on bereavement in early childhood education and a case study in a public institution in Piauí. The conclusion is that bereavement, in the post-pandemic period, has caused various problems faced by children and other professionals in early childhood education, so that many of these complications are not yet possible to measure accurately. The school and its professionals must articulate actions to be worked on in this context, considering the possibilities of the institution, in order to take care of children's emotions in this regard.

Keywords: Grief. Early childhood education. Teaching practice.

Práticas pedagógicas e de apoio emocional desenvolvidas na Educação de Infância com crianças em processo de luto

Resumo

A vivência do luto faz parte da vida, no entanto, é pouco discutida nas práticas educativas. O presente trabalho teve como objetivo compreender a vivência do luto na escola em turmas de Educação Infantil. Da mesma forma, discute a elaboração de possíveis medidas para a implementação de ações pedagógicas de acolhimento emocional, para caminhar em direção à qualidade do desenvolvimento integral da criança. Com base nos documentos legais da Educação Infantil (Brasil, 1996; 2010) e em autores como Fujisaka (2022) e Lustosa (2016) que pesquisam sobre o luto. Utilizou-se como metodologia uma revisão de literatura sobre o luto na educação infantil e um estudo de caso em uma instituição pública do Piauí. Conclui-se que o

luto, no momento de uma pós-pandemia, ocasionou diversos problemas enfrentados pelas crianças e demais profissionais da Educação Infantil, de modo que muitas dessas complicações ainda não são possíveis de serem mensuradas com precisão. No entanto, a escola e seus profissionais devem articular ações a serem trabalhadas nesse contexto, considerando as possibilidades da instituição, com o objetivo de cuidar das emoções das crianças nesse sentido.

Palavras-chave: Luto; Educação de infância; Prática pedagógica.

1 Introduction

Bereavement is one of the adverse experiences that human beings may experience during the course of their lives. The loss of someone who means something can result in psychological illness. Experiencing this in childhood requires a reparative basis for the "emotionally wounded child"¹ (CYRULNIK, 2004). Socio-emotional education is therefore necessary so that children can feel welcomed and protected in their various needs.

Resilience in the bereavement process can be understood as a coping strategy. It occurs through interaction and contact with adversity, and is influenced by a complex correlation of factors: both internal and external to the individual. This condition of overcoming is sometimes associated with an unexpected event. This is initially the result of a remarkable experience, followed by the way in which the individual interprets it (SEQUEIRA, 2009).

In the school context, the approach to bereavement is still a subject that is little discussed, especially with very young children². This is because, in order to protect the child, adults often try to hide unpleasant emotions and avoid nostalgic subjects. Some studies have turned their attention to issues involving mourning and the individual process experienced by each person (MAEDA, 2022; FUJISAKA, 2022; OLIVEIRA, [n.d.]).

In the last three years, the subject of bereavement has invaded educational spaces,

¹ The term wounded child, according to Boris, refers to the "inner child who has suffered trauma and manifests a variety of attitudes, emotions and personal approaches that interact with a person's identity and mental well-being" (CYRULNIK, 2004)

² The National Common Curricular Base defines very young children, in the age range 19 months to 3 years and 11 months).

as humanity has been surprised by the mass proliferation of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. This, in turn, caused many deaths and changed the school routine, including in early childhood education institutions. They were drastically affected for a long period, with their activities suspended in order to comply with the safety measures proposed by the World Health Organization (WHO).

In early childhood education, face-to-face activities are fundamental, as children experience different spaces and environments, providing rich sensory, social, cultural and emotional experiences, in which the process of socialization and appropriation of cultural artefacts takes place. At this point, the teacher's role is to mediate and research children's interests.

Therefore, schools, especially those responsible for educating and caring for children, must recognize their role as a space for education, care and attention to children's emotions, as recommended by the official documents for Early Childhood Education (BRASIL, 1996, 2021).

Promoting initiatives for children who have experienced bereavement at school, especially in nursery classes, can help children to understand and communicate their experience, enabling new experiences of encountering adversity (SEQUEIRA, 2009). Therefore, exploring the experiences of bereaved children at school broadens our understanding of the role of the school institution, allowing us to identify aspects that are part of day-to-day school life and child development. This theme offers an essential contribution to childhood pedagogy, allowing an analysis of the interaction between teaching practices, school management and the impact of these relationships on children's daily lives, making it a valuable contribution to the educational field.

This article is the result of research carried out at a nursery school in the city of Picos-PI, which led us to reflect on the importance of the school in supporting bereaved children. The aim of the research was to investigate which pedagogical and emotional support strategies are implemented in Early Childhood Education for children who are going through a bereavement process. Based on this research experience, we address the concept of bereavement in childhood and discuss the experience of bereavement in the

school context, especially in the post-pandemic scenario of Covid-19, with the aim of identifying directions for potential interventions in groups of children in Early Childhood Education.

2 Methodology

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This study is configured as a qualitative research that is developed in two distinct strands: i) a literature review that addresses the theme of bereavement in early childhood education and ii) a field study carried out in an early childhood education institution located in the city of Picos, Piauí.

In order to delve deeper into the subject, a literature review was carried out, with the aim of analyzing the content produced by other authors and related to the theme of child bereavement. A literature review is mandatory and necessary, as it allows the researcher to get to know a wide range of aspects about the phenomena under investigation, which goes beyond the possibilities allowed by direct research alone (GIL, 2008). It has the capacity to provide a comprehensive view of bereavement in Early Childhood Education, a verification indicated when the research requires greater depth, i.e. when it requires greater visibility of the object to be studied, in its different social, political and cultural aspects (BRITO; OLIVEIRA; SILVA, 2021).

Thus, for the development of the research, we analyzed some works on legislation and pedagogical practices for Early Childhood Education, documents that guide educational practices in Brazil, such as: the Law of guidelines and bases of education - LDB (BRASIL, 1996), the National Common Curriculum Base - BNCC (BRASIL, 2018), the National Curriculum Framework for Early Childhood Education - RCNEI (BRASIL, 1998) and the National Curriculum Guidelines for Early Childhood Education - DCNEI (BRASIL, 2010). We also searched for articles and texts on bereavement in Early Childhood Education in the post-pandemic period, such as Sartori (2018), Kohan (2010), Fujisaka (2022) and Lustosa (2016).

The field research included observing the children's routine in the school space. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the school's professionals. This data collection technique allows for dialog, which is essential if the participants are to be able to contribute freely about their experiences and opinions on the subject, which will be in line with the researcher's previous vision, who may already have pre-established ideas, concepts and theories about the object of study (FUJISAKA, 2009).

The main objective was to analyze the elements that permeate the pedagogy adopted in Early Childhood Education and its interaction with the experience of bereavement within the school environment. The qualitative field study enables data collection and provides the researcher with in-depth information about the object of study. Therefore, the researcher studying social phenomena must aim for criticality and theoretical and empirical scientificity (ORSOLINI; OLIVEIRA, [n.d.]).

The interviews were carried out in a school located in the municipality of Picos-Piauí, in May 2022. We interviewed two individuals directly involved with the subject of the research: a teacher and the school coordinator. The teacher, Ana (fictitious name), is 29 years old and has a degree in Languages/Portuguese. She has three years' experience in nursery classes and currently works in a nursery class. The coordinator, Fátima (fictitious name), 58, has a degree in Biology, but has worked in teaching for 25 years. She is currently the coordinator at the school.

3 Approaches and reflections on the concept of childhood in the Early Childhood Education stage

Early childhood education, the first stage of basic education, is aimed at the full development of children up to the age of five (BRASIL, 1996). The implementation of this stage initially arose as a mechanism to assist poorer families, due to the need, especially for mothers, to enter the job market. Nowadays, it is gaining more and more attention and space for debate, because nurseries and pre-schools are essential spaces for children's learning and development in their multiple dimensions and languages.

Seeking to encourage the emergence of possible knowledge and skills that are part of child development, this first stage of basic education is guided by interactions and play, as mentioned in the DCNEI (BRASIL, 2009) and the BNCC (BRASIL, 2018), two legal frameworks that guide pedagogical practices for babies, very young children and children.

Studies on childhood reveal a profound historical transformation of the concept of childhood. Throughout human history, many children were deprived of enjoying their childhood in the proper way, being subjected to moments of extreme fragility, because the people of the time were not interested in safeguarding children's purity (BARBOSA, 2007; NOGUEIRA, 2017).

According to Kohan (2005), childhood is a modern creation and its perception is a cultural variant, the result of a historical construction, despite the incidences of the feeling of childhood since Ancient Greece. In that historical period, children were seen as inferior and dependent, but also as a period in which they were being built up. The feeling of childhood, as we know it today, only began to develop in modern Europe and within the school institutions that emerged from the 15th century onwards (ARIÈS, 1891).

Childhood is understood as the social condition of being a child, and its variations are characterized as a consequence of the social and/or cultural context in which it is inserted. Today, childhood is recognized as the most important phase in the life of a human being, and through it, the child is introduced to society. When school and society go hand in hand, they provide educational quality, cultural and social development, which will be fundamental in the construction of the child's identity and autonomy, in the face of the different daily situations that may occur at different times during childhood (1891).

Mullen and Hassen (2009), when studying childhood, describe how the passage through this period has been seen as synonymous with immaturity and irrationality throughout history, generating social disregard for children, who were seen as less important members of society, receiving less care and attention. This is the opposite of today's perspective, which sees childhood as a period of fundamental human formation.

4 Children's bereavement at school: research data

The mourning process is characterized by the reaction to the loss of an object of love, a loved one (FREUD, 2013). Reacting to this process, the individual is subject to a deep internal conflict in order to deal with this situation, in which discouragement emanates and causes a loss of interest and purpose. The mourning process is slow and gradual, as it involves a painful period that gradually results in the detachment from the lost object. The difficulties and conflicts of this process are related to the memories and recollections that make the person remember the fact that there is no longer any possibility of experiencing them, reinforcing the feeling of loss and the attempt to undo the link with the object.

During the interviews with the Early Childhood Education professionals, when asked about their individual perceptions of the child's integral development in the school environment in the face of the child's bereavement phase, teacher Ana said: *“they don't know how to deal with it and most families don't have a base, they don't have support, they don't have professional guidance, they're kind of at the mercy, and then when they get to the classroom, this has a big impact on their learning.”* The coordinator, Fátima, reported that she had no knowledge of children who had lost people close to them; however, she said that there were difficulties in socializing among the children, which were the remnants of the pandemic.

It is possible to see the congruence of the statements when it comes to the socialization difficulties encountered. When they returned to face-to-face activities, the long time away from their classmates had a detrimental effect on the children's development and learning at school. In addition, issues such as the lack of identification of students who have lost loved ones can lead to a lack of support for these children.

Ramos (2016) says that bereavement can cause deep pain that weakens the individuals affected by it. For this reason, it can be analyzed based on biological, social or psychological factors.

In the case of children, this becomes even more complex, as many adults do not consider that children, due to their age, are capable of externalizing such suffering and exposing their emotions. Hillesheim and Guareschi (2007) reflect on childhood and child

development and how both are recognized by adults, stating that: "children's otherness does not therefore come to confront, shake up or disaccommodate the adult, but is assimilated in a relationship of difference, that is, of asymmetry and inequality" (p. 80). This leads us to reflect that children are not recognized by adults as peers, as subjects who think, feel and transform their surroundings. They are viewed with indifference or even placed in a position of inferiority. This thinking is reminiscent of the Middle Ages, a time when there was still no designation for this stage and children were not even recognized as such. They were seen as miniature adults, living among adults, even when they behaved shamelessly or violently (ARIÈS.1891). This reality only began to change from the 17th century onwards, when children became more prioritized and cared for, being the focus of attention within the family, which led to greater interest in their education (KOHAN, 2005).

Nowadays, with school institutions in mind as one of the ways in which children are formed, it is important to reflect on this journey at school, a place that receives many children with different realities on a daily basis, and how it deals with the emotional formation of these children.

In the context of loss and bereavement, the school's actions are not very effective, especially today, when it is expected to be more involved in welcoming these children, especially those who have experienced bereavement more directly. At school, bereaved children may show some reactions such as lack of focus, dispersion, discouragement, lack of motivation, among others.

Although the impacts of bereavement are little explored in the educational environment, it is extremely important to discuss the role of the school in educating bereaved children. According to Oliveira and Rodrigues:

Teachers of bereaved children should be aware that they may have difficulty showing themselves in interpersonal contact, conflicts and fear of rejection. They may show fantasy control, minuteness, preoccupation with details, a need to attract attention and to be seen, to be noticed. They may also show a feeling of strong environmental pressure to achieve at school, a desire to achieve and succeed, strict control over their impulsive life, inadequate ego defenses, deep conflicts, difficulty relaxing, repression of previous stimuli. They may also reveal immaturity and dependency, and the desire to gain social approval and acceptance (OLIVEIRA; RODRIGUES, [n.d.], p.6).

In the context of bereavement, it is not only children who are affected by the death of someone close to them. Family members, neighbors, friends or teachers can also be moved by such a situation, and when this happens, they all find it difficult to give the necessary attention and support to the bereaved child, as they are dealing with their own grief. Therefore, the suggested proposal is to create a caring environment for bereaved children, involving all the teaching staff and other professionals, and it is important that they are available and understand the child's situation with respect. This implies approaching the pain of bereavement in a sensitive way, offering emotional support, understanding and empathy to children going through a period of mourning. The aim is to create a safe and welcoming environment so that these children can express their emotions and cope with the grieving process in a healthy way, within the educational context.

5. Factors promoting the reception of bereaved children at school

The school routine should be a concern for all educational agents, since having a schedule of activities is essential for organizing an adequate planning of the children's routine, as well as adapting to the fields of experience that should be part of their development. Routines prevent children from feeling anxious about daily situations, providing comfort and enabling them to build notions of organization, time and space (BARBOSA; HORN, 2007). It can thus stimulate interest, as well as the emergence of new skills and/or abilities. In this sense, Silva recognizes:

Early childhood education involves the basic care necessary for human survival. In this age group, we can identify that little ones need safety, food, hygiene, a lap, affection and attention. Thus, being attentive to the activities that require care is sharing in this childhood universe. (SILVA, 2011, p.22).

Schools have a routine with fixed times for classroom activities that are part of the children's routine. According to Silva (2011), this routine should be organized and planned in a daily and weekly sequence. For example, moments of welcome, conversation circles,

interaction and play with a previously established objective, registration activities, hygiene, snacks, assisted breaks, relaxation activities, storytelling and oral comprehension of texts, broad psychomotor stimulation, and other activities should be part of the school experience.

School and family contribute significantly to the formation of a child's personality and identity. Both collaborate with resources and ways that also aim to shape children as subjects of rights (LUSTOSA et al, 2009), but in practice, this relationship becomes an obstacle. When asked about the difficulties encountered in early childhood education during the pandemic, teacher Ana replied: "The biggest difficulty is the collaboration of the parents, who don't have it". This lack of dialog between two pillars of an individual's education is one of the factors that leads to a lack of acceptance in schools.

As a result, we can see a routine with multiple activities, leaving room for the school and its professionals to carry out activities that allow for dialog on the subject of bereavement. These activities can be carried out through dialogues, lectures, events, workshops, training projects that include the entire school community (children, parents and teachers), literature clubs, or even the screening of children's films.

The films and animations shown can get children more involved with the issue in question, piquing their interest and curiosity to reflect on or debate the subject of bereavement. Schools in general can organize pedagogical projects aimed at caring for children's emotions.

For Carvalho and Silva (2020), "film is a device that provokes emotions, activates feelings and reverberates in behavior and identification with viewers". The authors believe that children's films are beneficial for early childhood education. Since they promote an experience that allows learning to take place in front of screens, facilitating classroom conversations, they also provide teachers with the opportunity to make basic adjustments in order to think about education for all. These teachers are aware of their ability to carefully nurture this interest in visual works and what is being consumed.

When discussing early childhood education and cinema, Kalinowski (2016) argues that the implementation of this audiovisual resource at school helps to ease the difficulties

of the school routine. Through it, it is possible to escape standardization in order to avoid excessive absences or, in more serious cases, truancy, because "[...] school reinvents itself and children discover new paths, becoming increasingly curious about new discoveries [...]" (2016, p.14). Still on children's films and animations,

[...] these portray contents that sharpen children's imagination and deal with stories that provoke enchantment, and so children identify with the plots told through the screens and can recognize themselves in the characters, identify with their characteristics and even dream of having magical powers, participating in different adventures and being the superhero or the enchanted princess [...] (CARVALHO; SILVA, 2020).

Talking to the children about the films shows that the school is a welcoming place, which opens up space for active listening based on trust and respect. It can stimulate dialog and the expression of feelings and emotions in relation to the unpleasant experiences caused by bereavement.

6. Teachers' accounts of their experience with child bereavement at school

The research in question dealt with early childhood education teachers on various aspects related to child bereavement, such as: the consequences and adversities perceived in early childhood education, and the appropriate way to approach the subject with children.

When asked about the importance of specific training for teachers to deal with child bereavement in the school environment and what topics they considered crucial in this training, teacher Ana emphatically replied: "*Certainly, at least one training course, so that we can understand how to deal with these children*".

When asked about the specific content of this training, the teacher admitted that it was a challenging issue, as she had never dealt with child bereavement before. She mentioned that the focus should be on family dynamics and the experience children face after the loss of a loved one. She also emphasized the need to address how the family and the child deal with the continuity of life after this loss.

Coordinator Fátima also agreed with the importance of training and added that one of the central points should be strengthening children's self-esteem, as this would play a crucial role in balancing the emotional aspect.

The curriculum should articulate the knowledge and experiences of Early Childhood Education, with a view to respecting children and their childhoods. To do this, the school and its professionals need to break away from old methodologies and explore new possibilities for educating. By carrying out a variety of activities beyond the exclusive space of the activity room, it becomes possible to stimulate children in their various affective, cognitive, linguistic and motor aspects (CHAVES; NOGUEIRA, n.d.).

When working on aspects of death in schools, we need to understand that adults, i.e. education professionals, are also directly affected by it. They carry a personal fear, which ends up hampering their ability to deal with this reality in the school environment. We also need to understand the reality of each school, especially public institutions. In many cases, they don't have the basic resources and materials to carry out their activities. Likewise, they are not accompanied by professionals such as psychologists and social workers to meet the demands of early childhood education, so it is up to them to accommodate this grief, in addition to dealing individually with their own emotions, including the fear of Covid-19 in times of pandemic.

With this in mind, the interview included the school's difficulties in dealing with the issue of child bereavement. Ana said that: *"here we don't have a specialized professional"*. Fatima replied: *"Emotional work is important. And how do you work on your emotions? With trained professionals"*.

Both recognize the importance of psychological assessment and monitoring at this time of emotional fragility, as well as emphasizing the relevance of emotions in the school environment.

The search for "normality" has become a constant concern in educational spaces. Isolation has led to a change in many people's school and social routines. Today, there is a readaptation to these habits, which today act with a certain instability since the pandemic has not yet been fully controlled, which can generate stress, anxiety, discomfort, fear, etc.

Senhoras (2020) and Michel, Schmit and Blankenheim (2021) highlight some of the injuries caused by the pandemic, such as: the change in social habits, the mental health of children and teachers and notes on collective mourning during the pandemic, for example, negative perceptions of current education, limitations and demotivation to study, favoring the possibility of mass school dropout, in addition to a resistant refusal to talk about these deaths, and social dehumanization in the face of such a situation.

With this in mind, the current school scenario must take into account the fragility of teachers' and children's mental health and recognize the link between emotions and the learning process. According to Cosenza and Guerra (2011) "[...] neuroscience has shown that cognitive and emotional processes are deeply intertwined in the functioning of the brain" (apud BORTOLI; TERUYA, 2017, p.17). Therefore, the shock to mental health caused by the sudden changes resulting from the adversities of the pandemic period cannot be overlooked, as it directly affects learning, given that emotions influence the recall of learned information (DOMINGUES, 2007 apud BORTOLI; TERUYA, 2017).

The damage to children's learning and development caused by the pandemic is still real. Therefore, it is necessary to think about a school reorganization for the return of activities, including considering mourning in Early Childhood Education classes, as well as the actions to be developed.

The school and the teachers were not prepared to meet the needs of children who had gone through the bereavement process, so there was disagreement among the interviewees. In short, no projects or activities were developed to work on the issue in question, since it was also an objective of the research to find out whether the school implemented initiatives to support bereaved children during their return to school activities and what these actions would be.

Professor Ana said: "*No, not particularly, because there was no project, there was nothing passed on to us that focused on this issue, you know?*", The coordinator says: "*Yes, because these teachers, most of them had already been in remote classes, and with their return they were all prepared to face all these problems caused by the pandemic.*"

Even acknowledging the impacts faced after the pandemic, there was no initiative

on the part of the school to develop a plan that promoted acceptance and worked on themes such as the death of loved ones, as part of life, since these were not detailed by the respective education professionals. School staff blame other sectors for neglecting the issue of bereavement at this time.

Maeda (2017), when talking about school pedagogy, emphasizes the need for an "Education about Death", as part of the knowledge that should be provided to children and professionals at school, considering this knowledge as necessary for an integral education, as stated later:

From these studies, we can infer that in schools based on comprehensive education that encompasses cognitive, emotional and social aspects, there is room for mourning, as it is not dissociated from school life, since it is part of human development and death is for life (MAEDA; 2017, p.41)..

Maeda (2017) argues that school practices are still predominantly centered on the cognitivist approach and lack the inclusion of a discussion on child bereavement in education. It is therefore necessary for school practices to move towards a more comprehensive and sensitive approach to the emotional needs of each individual.

5 Final considerations

This study aimed to address the organization of early childhood education institutions and their role in welcoming and training children who are dealing with the grieving process. We suggest the possibility of introducing measures that encourage welcoming and empathy towards children, as well as the adoption of an educational model that includes addressing issues related to loss, bereavement and their complexities in early childhood classrooms.

Our aim was also to contribute to the support and education of children during the bereavement period, pointing out possibilities for implementing actions that promote acceptance and empathy for children, proposing an education that works with themes about loss and bereavement and their adversities in nursery classes.

The school environment needs to discuss ways of managing the conflicts that children face, combining intersectoral services: education, social assistance and family support to offer the necessary assistance and care that can ease the tensions caused by the death of a loved one. There are some variables in bereavement that can become possible complicating factors, such as: the characteristics of the bereaved person, including age (children), personality, and their previous experiences with bereavement, the relationship that the bereaved person had with the deceased, the type of death and the eventuality of the loss, social factors that include financial difficulties and family or community support (FUJISAKA, 2009).

Based on this discussion, it is believed that the negative effects of the pandemic will not be overcome immediately, only in the long term. This process requires the school and other professionals to carry out a prior analysis of the Early Childhood Education classes in order to reflect with family members and guardians on the planning of activities. It is essential to get to know the reality of the children who are currently entering this space, with the intention of thinking about what activities can be developed and thus meet, within the possibilities, the demands presented by the guardians, since this fact directly influences the children's school day.

Children are not exempt from suffering from the loss of family members, so it is pertinent to understand grief as something that also exists in the school environment, as well as questioning the role of the school in the education of these children. Given that, even though it is a phase of life, bereavement can cause possible disorders or learning difficulties, which can compromise the school development of children who suffer from the absence of close people.

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