

# Practicing Death Education in Elementary Schools

## Reflecting on the Implementation of a Unit Plan in a Year 3 Classroom

### Todeserziehung in der Grundschule

#### Überlegungen zur Durchführung einer Unterrichtseinheit im dritten Schuljahr

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As empirical research in the field of death education is still rather limited, this paper aims to explore some of the complexities of implementing a unit plan on loss and grief in a Year 3 classroom in Cyprus. This research is based on an Action Research study that includes the design, implementation and evaluation of a unit plan which serves death education's objectives and goals. In particular, the research and pedagogical intervention uses children's literature to introduce death issues to young children. The findings highlight some pedagogical, curricular, and social challenges of integrating the concepts of loss and grief in the elementary school curriculum. They also contribute to a better understanding of the broader value of formulating a pedagogy of loss and grief that provides opportunities for young children to study the meaning of grief and the practices that support those who grieve. The paper concludes by discussing the pedagogical and research implications for death education in elementary schools.

*Death Education, loss and grief, children and teachers, meaning-making, elementary school curriculum*

Da die empirische Forschung zur Todeserziehung (Death Education) noch relativ begrenzt ist, setzt sich diese Studie mit der komplexen Durchführung einer Lehreinheit zum Thema Verlust und Trauer im Unterricht einer 3. Klasse auf Zypern auseinander. In der Tradition der Aktionsforschung geht es um eine solche Unterrichtseinheit zur Todeserziehung und um ihre Gestaltung, Umsetzung und Bewertung. Diese pädagogische Intervention nutzt insbesondere Kinderliteratur, um jungen Schüler\*innen Konzepte von Verlust und Trauer näher zu bringen. Die Ergebnisse verdeutlichen einige der pädagogischen und sozialen Herausforderungen, die bei der Integration dieser Konzepte in den Lehrplan der Grundschule auftreten. Ferner tragen die Ergebnisse zu einer besseren Einschätzung der Bedeutung einer pädagogischen Auseinandersetzung mit Verlust und Trauer bei, welche jungen Kindern ermöglicht, sich mit der Bedeutung von Trauer auseinanderzusetzen und betroffene

Menschen zu unterstützen. Abschließend diskutiert der Artikel die pädagogischen und forschungsbezogenen Konsequenzen für die Todeserziehung an Grundschulen.

*Todeserziehung, Unterricht, Tod, Verlust, Trauer, Grundschule, Pädagogik*

## Introduction

Although the idea of introducing death education in schools is already half a century old, empirical research in the field is still very limited (i. e., Stylianou/Zembylas 2018a: 240ff., 2018b: 446ff.). The importance of integrating the concepts of loss and grief in schools, beginning from elementary education, has been theoretically justified for some time now (see Ashpole 2018; Meagher/Balk 2013). However, the emphasis of pedagogical and curricular interventions has been placed mostly on ad hoc efforts that help children respond to specific events (disasters, death of a relative, death of a member of the school community) rather than on educating children about death issues (Ashpole 2018). As we have been arguing throughout our research in this area, though, engaging pedagogically with issues of death, loss, and grief in the classroom requires a much more careful and strategic effort that needs to take into consideration the multiple epistemological, affective, and socio-political dimensions of death education (Stylianou/Zembylas 2020: 54ff.).<sup>1</sup>

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, death education seems to have gained considerable attention both in the research literature and, more generally, in public discourses around the world (see Amy/Doka 2021; Smilie 2021). Its role in developing ›death literacy‹ (Noonan et al. 2018) and comprehending both human mortality and the diverse social and cultural influences of death and loss (DeSpelder/Strickland 2013) is, once again, emerging. The value of death education in schools is to enable children to recognise and cope with the event as well as the consequences of grief, to become more aware of their mortality, and to fully embrace their lives (Leviton 1977). death education provides children with opportunities to explore the subject of death and loss both epistemologically and affectively, to examine how culture and diversity affect understandings of death and loss, and to delve into the moral, religious, spiritual, and ethical issues involved in death and loss (Cupid 2013). Although some research

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1 It is beyond the scope of this chapter to provide a detailed discussion of the arguments for and against Death Education (for such a discussion see Papadatou et al. 2002; Stylianou/Zembylas 2020). Here it is sufficient to say that the arguments against the introduction of Death Education in schools are rooted in a variety of reasons ranging from developmental (e.g. the children are not ready to discuss these issues), pedagogical (e.g. the teachers do not have the knowledge and skills to do this) to moral/cultural/social ones (e.g. children should be protected from discussing these issues).

findings in the limited literature in this area reveal teacher's positive attitudes toward death education, teachers seem to be generally concerned about how to engage children in discussions about the concepts of death, loss, and grief (Herrero et al. 2020). Feeling uncomfortable and unprepared to facilitate relevant discussions in the classroom, teachers often ignore children's need even to talk about their personal grief experiences (Stylianou/Zembylas 2020).

Aiming at investigating some of the complexities of integrating the concepts of loss and grief in the primary school curriculum of Cyprus, we (a primary school teacher and a university teacher educator) designed a unit plan on loss and grief, which serves the objectives and goals of death education. Then we implemented this plan in a Year 3 classroom in Cyprus, after which we reflected on its implementation. The process we followed was essentially Action Research because we wanted to ensure that the research followed a systematic cycle of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting (Kemmis/McTaggart 2000). The research and pedagogical intervention uses children's literature to introduce concepts of loss and grief to young children. The findings show some pedagogical, curricular, and social challenges of integrating death issues into the elementary school curriculum. They also contribute to a better understanding of the broader value of formulating a pedagogy of loss and grief that provides opportunities for young children to study the meaning of grief and the practices that support grievers. The paper concludes by discussing the pedagogical and research implications for death education in elementary schools.

## **Research Context and Methodology**

This Action Research study emerged as a response to a discussion that arose in a Year 3 classroom at an urban elementary school in Cyprus when a child unexpectedly shared her experience of losing her dog. It was November 2020, at the heart of the Covid-19 pandemic. Most children of this class seized the opportunity to share personal stories of loss and grief and to express their emotions very intensively, bursting into tears. Observing children's need to express themselves but lacking the knowledge to understand and respond to grieving experiences, we (the classroom teacher and the university educator) decided to design an educational intervention aiming to integrate the concepts of loss and grief more systematically in the class.

This is not the first educational intervention we designed. Our previous efforts included exploring children's perceptions, emotions and behaviour towards grief and grieving (Stylianou/Zembylas 2018a), as well as analysing children's views about peer support for bereaved children (Stylianou/Zembylas 2018b). Having implemented an action research intervention before in a fifth-

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grade classroom, we found that the intervention had a constructive impact on children's understandings of grief and grieving. It enabled them to better define emotional responses to loss and grief and to overcome their anxiety when talking about grief and their personal experiences. Taking into consideration this study's implications for curriculum development, pedagogical practice, and teacher training on death education, we implemented another action research study, this time involving several teachers who attended a training on death education and volunteered to implement a lesson plan that integrated loss and grief in their classrooms (Stylianou/Zembylas 2020). That study examined what led teachers to participate in the training, described their concerns and dilemmas of engaging with issues of death, loss, and grief in their teaching, and explored their reflections on their pedagogical efforts to design and implement a lesson plan on issues of loss and grief. The current study builds on our previous efforts and is designed to further explore some of the complexities of introducing the concepts of loss and grief in discussion with younger children aged 8 to 9.

Even though death education as such is not included in the national curriculum for elementary schools in Cyprus, the concepts of loss and grief are included in the school subjects of Health Education and Religion Education in Year 3. Seeing an opening, then, to justify our pedagogical and curricular intervention on the concepts of loss and grief while also integrating this effort into the school's participation (at the time) in an Erasmus project,<sup>2</sup> we decided to design an interdisciplinary unit that included the school subjects of Health Education, (Greek) Language, and Art.

### *Focus and Aims*

The main aim of the study was to explore the impact of an interventional unit plan, designed to integrate concepts of loss and grief in the school curriculum, implemented in Year 3. The unit was based on children's literature to introduce the concepts of loss and grief and included activities that asked children to write narratives that entailed these concepts. We focused on whether and how children would include these concepts in their written narratives before and after the intervention. Specifically, we examined:

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2 The project was entitled *DSusuallyDS: Diverse Stories we Usually Don't Say. The Role of the School in Informing and Sensitizing Children to the Different (Different Cultures, Vulnerable Groups)* and focused on empowering teachers by introducing new teaching methods and creative approaches, as well as by acquiring the specific knowledge required to enable stories that are usually not meant to arrive in classrooms. The goal was to foster the acceptance of the 'different' through a profitable, creative, and enjoyable experience.

- the extent to which children acknowledged loss in their stories,
- how the grievors were presented – in particular, which emotions were reported by children, and
- the type of support towards grievors that children identified.

### *Participants*

The study was conducted in a third-grade classroom of 19 children (6 boys and 13 girls), all 8 to 9 years old, in an urban public primary school in Cyprus, where the first author (Stylianou) was the classroom teacher. Two children (child 18 and child 19) were immigrants and experienced difficulties writing in Greek. Concerning the children's previous experiences, all of them reported the direct death experience of a pet. However, some of them seemed somewhat sensitive when they discussed their losses (more details on this will follow later in the paper). The second author's (Zembylas) role was that of a 'critical friend' as described in Merriam (1998), that is, to facilitate the discussion of research questions, interpretations, and analyses of the data with Stylianou.

### *The Procedure*

The nature of the research questions led us to decide Action Research to be our research method. We wanted to address the problem we identified concerning children's difficulties in dealing with issues of loss and grief in their lives. Action Research, as a systematic inquiry by the teacher-researcher, allows the introduction of changes in one's practice (in this case, pedagogical practice) as a result of an identified problem. In particular, action research gathers evidence on student learning to better understand and improve one's teaching practices (Stylianou/Zembylas 2018c). Following the Action Research cycle, the research study was divided into four parts.

The first part focused on assessing children's prior knowledge of the concepts of loss and grief and whether they were familiar with those concepts. For this reason, we asked them to continue the story of a snowman who started to melt because of the summer. The story, an excerpt from a fairy tale book by the Greek writer Eugene Trivizas included in Year 3 language textbook, is about a girl who makes a snowman who promises her never to melt. In this excerpt, emphasis is given to the friendship between the snowman and the girl, as well as their concern about the snowman's meltdown because of the summer. The research goal was to detect the extent to which children's endings to the short story would acknowledge and accept loss, the types of emotions and reactions in general children would report, and the extent to which they would identify ways of supporting the girl grieving for the snowman's meltdown.

Secondly, considering children's responses, an educational intervention was planned and implemented based on four children's books and a film. The intervention plan served the main aims of death education, which are to enhance children's understandings of grief and grieving (Leviton 1977: 41ff.). Moreover, it was assumed that if children learned about loss and grief and how to discuss those issues, they would be enabled to provide more specific support to grievors and respect the individuality of the grieving experience (a detailed description of the intervention is provided next in the paper).

The third part of the study involved narrative writing by children. The teacher asked the children to write their stories based on the idea that emerged from the phrase »but every story has its upsets«, found in the book *The Fantastic Flying Books of Mr. Morris Lessmore* by William Joyce (2012). An analysis of children's writings in this last phase of the study showed the different ways children acknowledged grief in their stories. We also examined whether and how children shared their experiences, anxieties, fears, and beliefs about loss and grief in their stories.

Having analysed children's post-stories, we then changed the intervention by considering the knowledge and emotions children gained in relation to grief and grieving support. An extra activity was added to ensure that we acknowledged children's understandings and feelings on those concepts. In particular, an excerpt from the book *The Fall of Freddie the Leaf* by Leo Buscaglia (1972) was read in class and children were asked to respond to the following questions:

- How might Freddie have felt looking at his friends falling from the tree? How might he have expressed his emotions?
- If you were Freddie's friend, how would you support him?

No classroom discussion preceded the children's responses, as this activity aimed to evaluate their responses regarding their knowledge and feelings about loss and grief after the intervention.

The cycle of Action Research closed with the teacher-researcher's reflections on the implementation of the unit plan, the findings of the research, and the implications drawn from the study.

### *The Pedagogical Intervention*

Death Education should be developmental and systematic, beginning when the child, verbally or nonverbally, indicates an interest (Leviton 1977: 41ff.) Based on children's interests and focusing on loss and grief experience, the pedagogical intervention needs to be focused on gently removing the taboo aspect of

death language so students can read and discuss death rationally without becoming anxious and understanding the dynamics of grief and reactions of differing (age) groups to the death (ibid.).

As stated earlier, the pedagogical intervention designed in the case of this Year 3 classroom in Cyprus was based on four children's books and a film. It was divided into five phases, as shown below, each of which was addressed in one session per week (each session lasted 80 minutes) from February 2021 to March 2021:

- (1) *Supporting a grieving friend* – Based on the book entitled *The Rabbit Listened* by Cori Doerrfeld (2018), which is about how to comfort and heal grieving people in our lives by taking the time to listen carefully, lovingly, and patiently.<sup>3</sup> The main aim of the lesson was to understand the importance of empathy and how it can be practically achieved. Emphasis was given to active listening and non-verbal support.
- (2) *Grieving 1* – The book *Goodbye Mousie* by Robin Harris (2001) very clearly presents the emotions a child goes through after the death of their pet;<sup>4</sup> denial, anger, sadness, and acceptance. Saying goodbye, support, and the role of memories in grief were thoroughly and openly discussed. The lesson aimed to enable children to describe emotions that may define grief, identify non-verbal communication of a griever, and discuss supporting someone grieving, taking into consideration the uniqueness of each person and their relationship with him/her.
- (3) *Grieving 2* – Through the awarded book entitled *The Rough Patch* by Brian Lies (2018), it was expected that children would explore love, loss, hope, and the healing power of friendship and nature.<sup>5</sup> Emphasis was given to the

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3 The story is about the grief of a young boy named Taylor. Having a significant loss, the animals, aiming to help him, offer their support in the way they believe they would have made him feel better. The chicken wants to talk it out, but Taylor doesn't feel like chatting. The bear thinks Taylor should get angry, but that's not quite right either. One by one, the animals try to tell Taylor how to act, and one by one they fail to offer comfort. Then the rabbit arrives. All the rabbit does is listen, which is just what Taylor needs.

4 In the story, one morning a child finds that his/her pet, Mousie, won't wake up. The truth is that Mousie has died. At first the child doesn't believe it. He/she gets very mad at Mousie for dying, and then he/she feels very sad. But talking about Mousie, burying Mousie in a special box, and saying good-bye helps this child to acknowledge his/her loss.

5 The book is about Evan and his dog, who do everything together, from eating ice cream to caring for their prize-winning garden, which grows big and beautiful. One day Evan's dog dies. Heartbroken, Evan destroys the garden and everything in it. The ground becomes overgrown with prickly weeds and thorns, and Evan embraces the chaos. However, beauty grows in the darkest of places, and when a twisting vine turns into an immense pumpkin,

inevitability of experiencing grief, the meaning-making of a significant loss, and the discussion on replacing a lost pet.

- (4) *Grief and Memories* – Based on the book *Words on Waves*, written by Elena Perikleous (2019) to introduce grief and the role of memories when a significant person dies,<sup>6</sup> we explored the grieving process, the individuality of expressing emotions involved in grief, and the importance of respecting and supporting griever. An additional aim of this lesson was to approach memories as a continuing bond with the deceased.
- (5) *Revisiting Loss, Grief and Memories* – The last phase of the intervention related to the film *The Lion King*<sup>7</sup> and Greg Adams' (2006) approach entitled *Lessons from Lions*. Emphasis was given to the fact that pretending that loss and grief never happened blocks the memory of the deceased loved one and eventually breaks the continuing bond with them.

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

The data of this research were collected over three months using children's written texts, drawings and crafts, and teacher's field notes taken both before, during, and after the intervention.

Data were analysed deductively by selecting categories based on the theoretical framework of the study and inductively, wherein the chosen researcher's categories emerged from available data (see Feldman et al. 2001). Specifically, the first and the second author read and coded all the data following the open coding techniques outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1994). The texts were examined multiple times, looking for evidence of inclusion of loss, expression of grief and support of griever in children's written narratives before and after the intervention.

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Evan is drawn out of his isolation and back to the county fair, where friendships – old and new – await.

- 6 The book consists of three letters that the boy writes to his dead grandfather in the form of a diary, describing how he experiences the loss and grief he goes through. Emphasis is given to the memories of the experiences they have shared. Also, throughout the text, parallels are drawn between the life and water cycles.
- 7 *The Lion King* tells the story of Simba, a young lion who, after his father's murder by his uncle Scar, is manipulated into thinking he was responsible and flees into exile. After growing up in the company of the carefree outcasts Timon and Pumbaa, Simba receives valuable perspective from his childhood friend, Nala, and his shaman, Rafiki, before returning to challenge Scar to end his tyranny and take his place in the Circle of Life as the rightful King.



The current article focuses on how children acknowledged loss and grief and how they supported grievors in their written narratives before and after the educational intervention. It does not compare the pre- and post-stories of the children in the sense of similarities and differences, as these stories relate to different content. But it pays attention to specific elements regarding grief, such as emotions, reactions, and support. The paper also stresses the teacher's perspective on the whole experience of this research. Hence, these four categories – namely, the acknowledgement of loss in children's written narratives; the presence of grief in children's written narratives; the forms of support to grievors suggested in children's written narratives; and finally, the teacher's reflection were used as the basis of our analysis and discussion that follows.

## Findings

### *The Acknowledgment of Loss in Children's Written Narratives*

Before the intervention, the teacher asked the children to continue the story of the snowman who started to melt because of the summer. Although it was an obvious loss to narrate, more than one-third of the children (eight out of 19) decided to overturn the story's ending and skip the loss, as shown in Table 1. Something happened in those eight stories that prevented the snowman's melting and transformed a rather sad story into a happy ending one. For instance, a story presents the loss and grief experience as a nightmare, which disappears when the protagonist wakes up. In other four stories, someone intervenes with an unexpected idea, primarily unrealistic, and saves the snowman.

Two interesting findings were found regarding the content of children's pre-stories. Firstly, three of the stories describe the loss experience from the snowman's point of view, emphasising his fear of melting. Secondly, eleven of the stories presented the irreversible loss of the snowman in very simple words underlying the immutable imminent end: »the snowman melt« or »the snowman melt as it should have«. One of these stories presented this loss as follows: »When children went out in their yard, they only found a small pond of melted snow and the snowman's trappings (his belongings). Nobody talked...« (child 2).

Children	Before	After		
	(Acknowledgement of loss)	Acknowledgement of loss	Type of loss	True Story
1	v	v	death of a friend	
2	v	v	death of a pet (hamster)	v
3	v	v	hearing loss	v
4	Overturn	–		
5	Overturn	v	loss of a battle	
6	Overturn	v	rainbow disease	
7	v	–		
8	Overturn	–		
9	v	N	leaving a pet	v
10	v	N	tearing of a kite	
11	v	v	losing a pet	v
12	Overturn	N	loss of a pet (parrot)	
13	Overturn	–		
14	Overturn	v	loss of an old man, who was the pet of a dog family	
15	Overturn	–		
16	v	–		
17	v	v	leaving animals	
18	v	v	death of pets	v
19	v	v	death of grandfather	v

*Table 1:* The acknowledgment of loss in children’s written narratives before and after the intervention.

In their post-intervention stories, most children acknowledged several types of loss. They mostly referred to the loss of a pet and the death of a loved one, but they also mentioned other types of loss rather than death, such as the loss of a battle, a disease, and the tearing of a kite. An interesting finding was the case of child 14, who overturned the ending of his pre-intervention story skipping over the loss but acknowledged it in his post-intervention writing. His post-story was about a dog’s family that had as a pet an old man who died. The child described loss from the dog’s point of view.

Considering children’s post-stories, two critical insights emerged. Significantly, half of the stories were about a loss that children had personally experienced. They probably took the opportunity to share their personal loss and grief through their writings. The second interesting finding was that almost one-third of the children (six) did not acknowledge any type of loss. This might be because the instructions for the post-stories writing were based on the phrase »but every story has its upsets«, which did not make it clear that loss experience should be included in the children’s narratives. Notably, four of those six children had also overturned the ending of their pre-stories, skipping the experience of loss.

### *The Presence of Grief in Children’s Written Narratives*

Most children recognised the presence of grief in both their pre- and post-stories, referring to specific emotions. However, as shown in Table 2, there was a

difference between children's pre- and post-intervention stories regarding the emotions expressed in relation to grief.

In their pre-stories, the children mentioned only a few emotions. They mostly reported sadness – in eight out of 17 stories, while only four of them referred to more than one emotion. Fear, depression, pain, anger, denial, unfairness, and acceptance were only mentioned once or twice in children's stories. Fear was described by the two children, who decided to continue the story from the snowman's point of view. In those stories, fear was about the snowman's worries about losing his friends, being replaced, and facing his 'end of life': »the snowman was very much worried thinking »if I melt tomorrow, the girl will forget about me, and she would probably make another snowman... how is the feeling of melting? Will a snowblower pass over me?«.

Crying was the most popular expression of grief in children's pre-stories, which was reported by nine children. Of those children, only four added further expressions of grief, such as wondering, being silent, not feeling in the mood to play and searching for the lost snowman. In addition, one child described frustration, writing that »I will never make a snowman again to avoid that bad feeling of losing it«.

The children who acknowledged loss in their post-stories referred to more than one emotion. Although most highlighted sadness, they also mentioned denial, acceptance, sorrow, guilt, anger, desperation, loneliness, worry, fear, curiosity, disappointment, pain, bad, and brokenness. Again, most of them did not describe those emotions. However, in six cases, we noticed children's effort to give meaning to the loss and grief experience they referred to, using phrases such as: »It [a rabbit] would find its friends on the farm... I am sure they welcome it with sympathy« (child 9), »Life goes on« (child 10), »Why you left?« (child 11), and »Now it [a parrot] flies forever in the sky« (child 12). Child 2, referring to the lesson she got from his first hamster's death, characteristically wrote: »I surely take more care of my second hamster as I was responsible for my first hamster's death. I also do know now that hamsters do not live forever«. Moreover, children 18 and 19 highlighted silence and 'not finding the words to talk' when in grief. It is worth noting that these two children were immigrants who had challenges speaking the Greek language.

Concerning the actions taken by grievors identified in children's pre-stories, four children preferred the replacement of the lost snowman, two children emphasised remembering through a memory box or a picture of him, and one child highlighted forgetting about the loss by throwing away all the snowman's belongings and returning to play with her friends. There was also a child who tried to blame someone for the loss, and another attempted to overturn the loss unsuccessfully. Moreover, for two children, the actions taken by grievors in their narratives were seeking help and searching for friends' support.

Children	Before			After		
	Emotion	Expression	Actions	Emotions	Expression	Action
1	fear	cry, asking why	replacement	anger, denial, acceptance	–	going to the funeral
2	–	cry, silence	–	sadness, sorrow, guilt	meaning-making	making a funeral, replacement
3	sadness	cry, not in the mood to play	memory box	sadness, confusion	cry, asking why	problem-solving actions
4	sadness	–	–			
5	fear	–	–	anger, sadness	–	–
6	sadness, depression	–	–	sadness, desperation	–	continue living with faith and trust
7	sadness, unfairness	Cry	remembering			
8	sadness	Cry	–			
9	anger	cry, searching	–	–	meaning-making	saying goodbye
10	bad	frustration	sb to blame	–	meaning-making	–
11	sadness, pain	–	try to overturn unsuccessfully	sadness	asking why	–
12	sadness	–	–	sadness, loneliness, worry, fear	meaning-making	–
13	fear	–	seek for help			
14	–	–	–	curiosity, sadness, disappointment, anger	–	replacement
15	sadness, acceptance	–	searching for friends			
16	sadness	cry	replacement			
17	sadness	–	replacement			
18	anger, denial	cry	throw away the snowman's belongings	sadness	silence, asking why	–
19	bad	cry all-day	–	pain, fear, sadness, bad, broken	silence	–

Table 2: The presence of grief in children's written narratives before and after the intervention.

In children's post-stories, the actions taken were based on the type of loss mentioned in each story. Thus, going to the funeral and replacing the lost pet/thing were the actions which were twice referred to by the children (child 1 and child 2). Child 2, though, explained that her second hamster »would never be like the first one!«. Actions taken after the loss were also »saying goodbye« (child 9) and »continue living with faith and trust« (child 6). Child 3 interestingly developed her story about her sister's congenital hearing loss by referring to problem-solving actions. After describing how significant others (parents and grandparents) experienced their grief, the child recited the practical action taken to deal with this unexpected event.

An interesting finding was the one of immigrant child 19 who, despite her challenges speaking Greek, shared a personal story of losing her dogs while she was in her country of origin. Her reference to her mother's reaction caught our attention as it was written in direct speech: »Bury them and go play! Forget about them. Life goes on!« Child 18 used similar words and actions when continuing the story of the snowman who had melted in her pre-story; she threw his belongings and went to play as ›life goes on‹.

Finally, since not all children referred to the concepts of loss and grief in their post-intervention stories, we decided to evaluate their ability to acknowledge and discuss grief through another activity. As noted earlier, after reading an excerpt from the book *The Fall of Freddie the Leaf* by Leo Buscaglia (1972), children were asked to respond to how Freddie (the leaf) might have felt looking at his friends falling from the tree and how he might have expressed his emotions. Their responses are presented in Table 3. It is worth pointing out that all children except one used several words to describe the grieving emotions of the leaf, acknowledging how the grief experience was a complicated process involving various emotions. The language children chose to describe those emotions was mainly adopted from the intervention, particularly the children's books and the film discussed in the classroom.

Children	How might Freddie have felt looking at his friends falling from the tree, and how might he have expressed his emotions?
1	He was confused and sad, he cried a lot – he wants to fall like the others – confusion – sadness – he does not know what to do – he is bored – he is very anxious – he will think
2	Sadness, somehow happiness, sorrow, I do not know what to do, confusion, emotion, infinite sorrow, strangeness, melancholy, confusion, unpreparedness, crying, boredom, and so on
3	»I do not know what to do«, fear, pain, sadness, anxiety, confusion, agony, surprise, unprepared, bored, thinking, observing, missing, anxious
4	Agony, sadness, confusion, boredom, anxiety
5	Sadness, anger, curiosity, mess, unprepared, compassion
6	Piece by piece, his heart is breaking - insecurity, fear, as if he is missing something, anxiety, sadness, strange, »but not nice«, crap-crap-crap
7	Fear, sadness, confusion, strange, agony, mess, boredom, loneliness, anger, bad – I am afraid, sad, angry, left alone, bored
8	Sadness, sorrow, confusion, weak, pain, somewhat strange, denial, pain – cried
9	Sorrow
10	Sadness, curiosity, boredom, does not know what to do, fear, feels like he is in the trash
11	He is with his friend Daniel, »What can I do? But how do they fall? How did they fall?« – I wish I could help – unprepared, wondering, sad, anxious
12	He felt lonely, sad and felt like falling from the tree.
13	Bored, cold, sadness, grief, confusion, unprepared, loneliness
14	Sadness, anxiety, curiosity, boredom, agony, sadness
15	Unprepared, angry, sad, lonely, confused, did nothing, fear, cried, sadness, curiosity, agony
16	Freddy thought it was time for them to fall; he was left helpless.
17	Sadness, sorrow, I do not know what to do, nothing, »this is life«
18	What he felt: sadness, what he does: he cries
19	Sorrow, mess, strange, fear, boredom

Table 3: Children's responses to Freddie's emotions and their expression while experiencing the loss of his friends

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### *Types of Supporting Grievers Suggested in Children's Written Narratives*

Although children were directly asked to mention in their stories how individuals provided support to grievers, only eight of them – that is less than half – made even one comment on that. Mum was the most likely adult to appear in children's pre- and post-stories to somehow support the griever either by just being present and crying or by trying to explain the loss as well as by offering non-verbal support. In their pre-stories, the phrase »it doesn't matter« appeared in three cases of supporting and, also, in another case, people passing by the melting snowman and watching the protagonists of the story crying »laughed out loud« (Child 6). In one case, support was just mentioned – not explained (child 8) – while in another story, supporting friends offered their help to replace the snowman (child 17). An interesting response was protection from loss, rather than support, as seen in child's 16 idea that the protagonist should hide the loss to not make her friends sad.

In their post-stories, children were not directed to include grievers' support in their stories to elicit their spontaneous responses. Thus, their stories either did not have a loss or loss was the story's ending. Only five children referred to supporting the griever in their story. Interestingly, four stories were based on children's personal experiences of loss. In those stories, the family was there to support, especially mum, who explained the situation or was just present. Child's 4 short fiction story is of great interest in terms of how support is presented because the phrase »it doesn't matter« is followed by the phrase »but it did matter that time!«.

After the intervention, to better evaluate children's thoughts on supporting a griever, the teacher asked the children to respond on how they would help Freddie the leaf if they were his friends. Their responses, as presented in Table 4, mainly focused on active listening and non-verbal communication. They gave the griever the option to decide on the actions taken, even to be left alone to experience his loss, if this was what he wanted (child 2). In some cases, meaning-making of loss is presented, such as »this is life« by child 18 – this was her mother's support when she lost her dogs.

Children	If you were Freddie's friend, how would you support him?
1	Things will become better, my friend, do not cry. You will also fall, not only me. Everyone will fall. You know that you are my friend and I love you very much. Everyone will fall.
2	I would talk to him, to see something around us – to explain to me – to see the children – to see the elderly – to be silent – to listen to the wind. I would also leave him alone if he tells me to do so. I would ask him...
3	Freddie, what do you want us to do? I will do whatever you want. Do not be afraid. Whatever happens, we will go through it together.
4	(The child drew the tree and the leaf falling... He did not write anything.)
5	I would play with him, explain to him, remind him, help him – I do not know... I would listen to him.
6	»Speak to me freely«, »I will listen to you, buddy«, »I just do not feel well – ok then...«
7	I would listen, ask what he wants and support him.
8	I would talk to him and hug him.
9	Freddie, this is life.
10	I would caress him and touch his nose.
11	»What do you want to do?«
12	»Freddie, do not be sad. You still have time to fall. You have another five years to fall from the tree.«
13	I will listen to him!!!, I will keep him company!!! We'll talk about it!!!
14	Listen, think, let him go
15	I would leave him with his thoughts, listen to him, tell him jokes to laugh and give him courage.
16	»Do not worry, Freddie, I will keep you company, so you do not get bored.«
17	I will listen to him, and I know nothing else.
18	»Do not cry; this is life, then you will die.«
19	I would listen.

Table 4: Children's responses to supporting grieving Freddie

Our analysis, then, showed different types of supporting griever, as suggested by children in their narratives after the intervention. For example, these types of support ranged from silence to listening, talking, hugging, and being with grievers. In other words, it seemed that children were enabled to enrich their repertoire of supporting grievers, as most of the types suggested could be identified in children's books discussed in class. For example, the techniques of listening and talking to grievers were explicitly mentioned in the books *The Rabbit Listened*, *Goodbye Mousie*, and *Words on Waves*. So, it was not surprising that children eventually adopted some of these techniques after the intervention.

#### *The Teacher's Reflection*

As a teacher trainer on death education myself, I understand that actual events of loss and grief drive teachers to talk about loss and grief in their classrooms – whether a tragedy happens in the school community or the children bring a personal experience in class. Although the concepts of loss and grief are included in Cyprus Curriculum under the subject of Health Education and Religion Education, I am aware from my involvement in teacher training that teachers tend to avoid discussions of death and related concepts mostly because they are not prepared to approach these issues pedagogically. Teachers might feel uncomfortable with children's unexpected responses, ranging from silence to intense emotional reactions such as non-stop crying. In this sense, there are also a series of ethical dilemmas involved, such as, for example, whether the teachers

have the right to touch on such sensitive issues that invoke 'difficult' emotions in children. This is seen, for instance, when some children express fear of their own death due to bringing up the issue in the classroom.

In such an uncomfortable situation of having several of my students crying intensely, I found myself at the beginning of the previous school year, after a student brought up the loss of her dog in class. Although I took advantage of this opportunity to provide my students space to share their experiences of loss further, and I knew that it was expected and ok for them to cry, I felt that their reactions went out of control. Almost all the children had relevant stories they wanted to share, and time seemed not enough for all of them to tell their stories and express themselves. Also, since we had not previously approached the concepts of loss and grief in the class, I had nothing to step on to frame the discussion.

As the discussion that day ended rather awkwardly, it was more than obvious that the class – my students and I – needed to begin a more structured conversation on loss and grief. There was the option to approach death and grief strictly through the curriculum as the concepts were included in Year 3 Religion Education (RE) and Health Education (HE). However, in RE, death was presented rather monolithically and dogmatically from the Orthodox Christian perspective. It was not about the loss of a pet, which was how the issue of death and grief emerged in the class. On the other hand, the HE curriculum defined grief as another emotion to deal with, scratching only the surface of its complexity. Thus, it seemed that the only viable option was to plan a new unit under the general aims of the Year 3 Curriculum that addressed the specific children's needs. The Language Curriculum and Art Curriculum gave me ideas to adjust relevant texts and other material to the goals of this intervention, as presented earlier, according to the school timetable. My previous experience researching issues of loss and grief in elementary schools helped me focus on the main concepts I wanted to cover in the unit. Thus, children's literature, as described earlier in this paper, and one film were my educational tools to integrate the concepts of loss and grief in my classroom step by step, building on my children's needs and guided by death education's goals and objectives.

But, despite my previous experience in death education, the challenges of discussing loss and grief with children required great effort and determination. First, it was important to choose and frame the concepts for the particular groups of students I had in my class. Such an endeavour was challenging as children had their own (different) perspectives toward loss and grief based on their experiences and the way they understood the world. Tons of questions emerged while introducing and discussing these concepts with my students: Why did some children overturn the loss in the first place in their written narratives? Why did some of them (8–9 years old children!) refer to the fear of their death, despite the fact that the intervention clearly emphasised the grief emerging from the loss of the other? Were the children – or at least some of them – ready for even more in-depth discussion, which we (adults) usually avoided? Was it ethically appropriate for me to discuss children's fear of their own death and being replaced in class?

Admittedly, despite organising the unit plan in a step-by-step approach toward loss and grief, the results of the research seemed from the very beginning that they were not linear at all. Children took the initiative to engage in their own research on specific topics of their own interest – something that made me sometimes feel that I was following



rather than guiding the exploration. For example, they became very interested in silence as a response to grief and acknowledged its importance in the process of expressing grief or offering support to someone who grieves. Furthermore, their written narratives showed a 'meaning-making approach' to loss and death, which was not supposed to be observed as a long-term goal of death education. Where did this come from? How much more do children know about loss and grief that we (adults) assume they are unaware of?

The implementation of the unit plan provided my students with the opportunity to learn about and to reflect on loss and grief. It enabled them to identify, name, and describe a broad combination of emotions involved in grief. More importantly, during the intervention, none of their reactions became 'uncontrollable', like that day at the beginning of the school year when the topic had emerged in class for the first time. The two-month exploration touched on many personal and sensitive stories, yet the children did so in a calm and sensible manner. My general feeling was that these children approached grief in a surprisingly more 'mature' and sound way than we – the adults – often did. Even the exclusion of grief in some of their written narratives could lead to this interpretation. Grief was an experience that might or might not exist in stories that had their 'upsets'. Loss and grief were part of life, but children had other things to bother them, which might be even higher on their agendas. Thus, my concerns about the absence of loss and grief in their post stories might have nothing to do with the intervention. In a sense, I had to accept that what I perceived as 'loss' in their learning experience was actually their own way of responding to loss in life.

## Discussion and Implications

This article shows a case study of how a teacher can engage children in conversations about loss and grief through children's literature. In light of the findings of this study and in line with our previous research (Stylianou/Zembylas 2018a, 2018b, 2020), we draw attention to the pedagogical value of integrating the concepts of loss and grief in the elementary school curricula as teaching about these concepts through children's books provides children with opportunities to enrich their conceptual and emotion vocabulary about loss and grief. This particular curricular and pedagogical intervention seems to enable children to gain more profound knowledge about loss and grief and learn how to enact active listening and non-verbal communication when supporting grievers.

Comparing children's pre- and post- stories, it may be argued that most children choose to write a story ending with loss and grief – both before and after the intervention. Their pre-intervention stories show that although not all children at the age of 8 to 9 may be ready for such a sensitive discussion. Some are mature enough to discuss death, grief, and loss, so the point is how to find the most effective pedagogical strategies, and children's literature seems to be one of these tools. As our study shows, in the pre-intervention stories,

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children's expression of grief and the support provided to griever are limited, including »it doesn't matter« statements. In their post-intervention narratives enriched by several discussions on children's books, children seem to adjust to loss and grief in various circumstances. In many cases, they present their own personal stories of loss. Once again, supporting a griever is not something that is revealed in children's stories. This may reflect children's relevant experience, influenced by the wider social norms and relationships they observe in their social surroundings. The immigrant child's differentiated style of stories is an additional indication of the impact of the social environment on perceiving and experiencing grief. Finally, an unexpected outcome is the tendency of many children in their stories to seek a more profound meaning out of loss and grief; namely, children from an early age seem to be looking for »answers« as to why loss occurs.

This study reiterates that death education – in this case, introduced through a careful step-by-step approach using children's books – can make a valuable contribution to preparing young students to acknowledge loss and grief and to reflect critically on these concepts in a society that seems not to offer such opportunities. To move a step further, though, it seems that teachers should reconsider death education's goals so that it is not limited only to awareness but also includes meaning-making goals. Any curricular unit on issues of death, loss, and grief should be able to create opportunities that meet the participants' needs. It is impossible, for instance, to approach grief separately from death, something that has been tried in this intervention due to the taboo with death in society. Children's narratives show that a pedagogical approach to the concepts of loss and grief should be holistic and ongoing. A pedagogy of death »cannot be a »one size fits all« adjustment« (Affifi/Christie 2019: 1153), and this is one of the great challenges of death education. Teaching about issues of loss and grief in elementary schools requires that teachers become more flexible in exploring »how *each* student processes and thinks about death« (Varga/Kessel/Helmsing 2021: 81ff.).

This study entails a series of limitations, which represent further challenges and future areas of research. First, our findings are based on a very small size sample. Hence, further empirical research needs to be conducted focusing on children's meaning-making on loss and grief with more children and of different age range. Another significant limitation is the absence of in-depth personal conversations/interviews with children, which might have shed more light on how children think/feel about the concepts of loss and grief in relation to their personal experiences. Finally, another limitation is that it is impossible to »correlate« the implementation of the unit with specific results emerging from discussing a specific children's book; despite this inherent limitation of the kind of research conducted here, we can identify traces of transformation in

how children think and feel about death, loss, and grief before and after the intervention.

In conclusion, the results of our study show that it is valuable for educators to reconsider the goals and structure of interventions that integrate the concepts of loss and grief into the curriculum so that they do not exclude meaning-making issues. An important implication of practicing death education in elementary schools is to move beyond mere acknowledgement of loss and grief and introduce meaning-making activities. Many ethical dilemmas clearly arise in such an effort (e. g. should death be discussed in schools?), but excluding this possibility seems to deprive children of a unique opportunity to enrich their conceptual and emotional understanding of death and grieving as inextricable elements of life. Future research in this area should investigate children's need to engage in the meaning-making process and how to better prepare teachers for such a possibility.

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