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DEATH EDUCATION: KNOWLEDGE, ATTITUDES, AND PERSPECTIVES OF IRISH PARENTS AND TEACHERS

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This article reports on a cross-sectional survey of the knowledge, attitudes and perspectives of Irish parents and school teachers concerning children's grief and the concept of death education. The sample comprised 119 parents and 142 teachers of Irish Primary-school children (5–12 years of age) who completed a self-administered questionnaire. Both parents and teachers reported high levels of understanding of the nature of children's grief and strongly supported the view that death should be discussed with children before they encounter it. Although discussions of death were reported in the classroom and in the home, both teachers and parents, particularly men, reported being uncomfortable talking to children about death. There was general support for the inclusion of death education in the school curriculum, with both teachers and parents supporting the need for further teacher training to undertake its delivery. There were few significant differences between the expressed attitudes of parents and teachers. However, teachers were more likely than parents to agree that death education would take away from parental responsibility. The implications of the findings for further work in this area are considered.

This article examines the attitudes of parents and teachers concerning death education and childhood grief in an Irish context. Once described by O'hEithir (1986) as “. . . one of the most funeral conscious countries in the world” (p. 152), the social dimension of coping with death has been valued highly in Irish culture. Traditional wakes in the family home offered an important opportunity for sharing with children an understanding of the passage between life and death. However, with our changing social and economic

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climate, the Irish social rituals surrounding death and grieving are also changing. The traditional house wakes are being replaced with a more clinical approach to death, allowing little participation for children in death rituals. Increasingly, schools are being asked to provide educational and counseling support to students experiencing situations involving death, suicide, or grief trauma. A number of handbooks and support materials for schools in dealing with adult and child bereavement have been circulated by statutory and voluntary agencies. Placing death education on the Irish educational agenda requires that the perspectives of both teachers and parents be explored fully. However, to date there have been few published empirical studies on attitudes to death education in an Irish setting.

Existing studies on death education in a North American context have underscored the critical role of parental and teacher attitudes to the development and success of children's death education programs (Crase & Crase, 1982; Jones, Hodges, & Slate, 1995). While the majority of studies suggest that parents and teachers are supportive of death education programs in theory, it appears that personal attitudes and anxieties concerning death and dying significantly influence their level of support. Jones et al. (1995) report that greater knowledge of death and grief has been found to relate to greater support for death education. They also suggest that increasing parental knowledge will, therefore, help to increase parental support.

In a study exploring the perceptions of parents toward early childhood death education, Crase and Crase (1982) explored parental anxieties concerning children being scared by the concept of death being explained to them. Concerns were also expressed regarding teachers' philosophical and religious values about death being conveyed to their children. McNeill (1983) investigated parental concerns around discussing the topic of death with their children and reported that while the majority of women had discussed death within their families, they reported great unease in doing so. In one of the few European studies available, Kuterovac-Jagodic (1996), in a study carried out in Croatia, also reports that while a majority of parents do want their children to be taught about death in school, they expressed reservations that this might scare children.

Clearly this research points to parental concerns around where the primary responsibility for death education should lie, highlighting the need for cooperative efforts between the home and school. The role of teachers' attitudes has also been highlighted and Cullinan (1990) points to the need for teacher training in death education in order that the necessary skills to deal with grieving students may be acquired. The focus of the present article is concerned with parents' and teachers' knowledge, attitudes, and perspectives concerning death education and childhood grief in an Irish context. With this aim in mind, a cross-sectional survey was carried out on the views of parents and teachers of 5- to 12-year-old children currently attending Irish primary schools.

Method

Participants

The study population consisted of 142 teachers and 119 parents of primary school children from the Republic of Ireland. A random sample of 200 teachers was selected from the current list of members of the National Teachers Organization, which is the representative body for 21,000 primary school teachers in Ireland. From the 200 questionnaires sent by post, a response rate of 71% was achieved. The teacher sample comprised of 102 women and 40 men ranging in age from 20–59 years (mean = 38 years). Of the sample, 35% taught 4- to 7-year-old children, 35% taught 8–10 year olds and 16% were involved with 11–13 year olds. With an average Irish class size of approximately 30 pupils, the teachers in this study were in contact with approximately 4,260 children.

The sample of parents was recruited from delegate members of the Irish National Parents Council while attending their Annual National Conference. The National Parents Council–Primary, is a representative body of parents from the various Primary School Parents' Councils throughout Ireland. It supports parents in their role as partners in their children's education and meets annually to discuss issues surrounding the management and educational systems in schools. At this Conference (attended by approximately

370 delegates) participants were invited to fill out a research questionnaire. With a response rate of 59.5%, the parent sample included 109 women and 17 men, ranging in age from 20–59 years (mean = 41 years) with an equal representation of rural and urban dwellers. The mean number of children per adult was 2.1 (39% of whom were in the 4- to 7-year-old age group, and 61% were in the 8- to 12-year-old age group).

Measures

The questionnaire for both the parents and teachers was adapted from existing measures (Crase & Crase, 1982; McNeill, 1983; Cullinan, 1990; Jones et al., 1995; Kutervac-Jagodic, 1996). The questionnaire consisted of 37 statements concerning knowledge, attitudes, and perspectives of death education and childhood grief with which the respondent could agree or disagree using a five point Likert-type scale. General information was also requested concerning respondents' demographic details and their personal experiences of loss and bereavement. The questionnaires for the parents and teachers were identical apart from the more specific classroom information requested from the teachers. An open-ended section for written comments was also included at the end of the questionnaire.

Results

Classroom experiences of children coping with the death or loss of someone close were quite high. Some 35% of teachers reported dealing with the death of a child's parent, 23% with the death of a pupil, and 86% with the death of someone close to the child over the previous five years. Other losses reported included: moving to a new house, changing schools and the most frequent one, loss from separation or divorce in the family (83%). Encouragingly, 64% of teachers reported that they had discussed the subject of death in the classroom, while 72% of parents reported that they had dealt with the effects of loss or bereavement on their children. The personal experience of bereavement was considered by both teachers

(62%) and parents (55%) as the most salient influence on their own personal attitudes to death.

The responses to the questionnaire items by both teachers and parents are displayed in Table 1. Overall, parents and teachers exhibited reasonably high levels of knowledge concerning the nature and possible effects of children's grief. There was high awareness by both groups that Irish schools have practically no bereavement support groups. On communicating with children about death, there was generally strong agreement from parents (80%) and teachers (63%) that the concept of death should be discussed with children before they encounter it. However, roughly half the overall sample did agree that it is difficult to explain death to children and 71% of parents and teachers reported they do not feel comfortable talking about loss or death.

Views on the inclusion of death education in the school's curriculum were very positive with 72% of parents and 70% of teachers agreeing that it would be an acceptable subject on a lifeskills program. Only 11% of parents and 21% of teachers were of the view that death education programs would scare children. However, 62% of teachers and 50% of parents agreed that death education was best carried out in the home. The majority of respondents disagreed that death education in schools would interfere with parental responsibilities, with only 23% of parents and 40% of teachers being of the opinion that it would interfere with the parental role. Of the total sample, 90% collectively agreed that further training for teachers would be desirable to undertake the teaching of death education.

Analysis of the influence of demographic variables revealed that in comparison to their male counterparts, both female teachers ($t = 3.0, p < .01$) and female parents ($t = 2.55, p < .01$) were less likely to agree that helping a child to get over loss quickly is the best way to help with grieving. Female teachers ($t = 2.15, p < .05$) and female parents ($t = 3.24, p < .01$) in comparison to their respective male counterparts, also perceived themselves as being more comfortable talking about death or loss. Overall, age was not found to significantly influence attitudes. However, younger teachers (i.e., under 40 years of age) were more likely than their older colleagues to agree that children can internalize blame for a death ($t = 3.17, p < .01$) and that they can suffer as much from

TABLE 1 Questionnaire Item Analysis for Teachers' and Parents' Responses

	Teachers (N = 142)			Parents (N = 119)		
	Mean	SD	% who agree/ strongly agree	Mean	SD	% who agree/ strongly agree
<i>Knowledge</i>						
**Children suffer as much from grief as adults do	2.04	1.05	72.5	1.46	0.72	94.1
Children express less emotion than adults after a death	2.86	1.27	48.6	3.30	1.72	38.7
Children can blame themselves for the occurrence of a death	2.33	1.00	62.7	2.34	1.30	63.1
Children's unresolved grief can lead to problems as adults	1.73	0.75	85.9	1.64	0.81	86.6
**Children's grief can last a shorter time than adults' grief	2.91	1.12	39.4	3.47	1.43	28.6
*Most schools have bereavement support groups	1.62	1.04	88.0	1.61	0.82	87.4
*Children's age does not dictate their grief response	2.50	1.17	58.0	3.97	1.66	63.1
<i>Attitude</i>						
Death should be explained to children before they encounter it	2.32	1.13	63.4	2.03	1.31	79.9
The inclusion of death educ. in school would scare children	3.44	1.11	21.1	3.61	1.10	10.9
Bringing children to funerals is a good idea	2.34	0.88	66.2	2.17	1.11	69.7
Death education is best carried out in the home	2.47	0.97	62.0	2.74	1.43	49.5
It is difficult to explain death to children	2.87	1.27	50.7	2.90	1.37	53.8
*Helping a child get over a loss quickly is the best way	3.53	1.10	16.2	2.52	1.37	15.1
As a parent I don't feel comfortable talking about death	2.40	1.29	71.1	2.34	1.52	70.6
Divorce and separation loss is similar to that of death	2.26	1.08	71.1	2.54	1.67	68.1
<i>Perspectives</i>						
Death education is a widely known subject	4.14	0.93	7.7	4.08	1.12	10.9
Death education would be an acceptable 'life-skills' subject	2.27	0.85	69.7	2.18	1.14	72.3
Death educ. should be taught to children over 8 yrs. of age	2.62	0.99	50.7	2.65	1.50	52.9
**Death educ. in schools would take away from parental resp.	3.20	1.21	40.0	3.85	1.52	23.0
Death educ. prog. would require further training for teachers	1.62	0.86	90.1	1.83	1.42	90.8

* Item scored in reverse ** Significant differences between teachers and parents $p < .05$.

Note. Scale points: 1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree.

grief as adults do ($t = 2.05, p < .05$). Younger teachers were also significantly more likely to disagree that children express less emotion than adults ($t = 2.17, p < .05$) and that their grief lasts a shorter time than adults ($t = 2.98, p < .01$). Personal experience of bereavement was also found to influence expressed views. Parents who had experienced a personal bereavement in the last two years reported being more comfortable talking about death in comparison to those who had not ($t = 2.03, p < .05$). Likewise, for teachers who had experienced a recent bereavement, they were less likely than their colleagues who did not have such an experience to agree that children express less emotions than adults do after a death ($t = 2.07, p < .05$).

There were few statistically significant differences between the parent and teacher samples in their responses. With regard to knowledge, parents were more likely than teachers to agree that children suffer as much from grief as adults ($\chi^2 = 10.95, p < .01$) while teachers were more likely to agree that children's grief lasts a shorter time than adults ($\chi^2 = 5.33, p < .05$). Interestingly, concerning death education in schools, teachers were more likely than parents to agree that death education would take away from parental responsibility ($\chi^2 = 6.68, p < .01$). For the remainder of the knowledge, attitude and perspective items, no significant differences between the two groups were found.

Discussion

The findings suggest that the attitudes of the teachers and parents in the present study are generally positive and compare favorably with those reported in previous North American studies. It is clear that both teachers and parents are dealing with children's loss and grief on a regular basis. Both parents and teachers report high levels of understanding of the possibility of children's unresolved grief leading to problems in adulthood. However, in keeping with previous findings, both parents and teachers, particularly men, report being uncomfortable discussing the topic of death with children. The results indicate that parents express quite positive views concerning death education programs. In contrast to Crase and Crase's (1982) study, the same parental concerns with regard

to interference with parental values and responsibilities do not emerge from the present study. However, the multicultural context of Crase and Crase's study must be borne in mind in contrast to the more homogeneous nature of Irish society with regard to religion and school education policy.

In keeping with that reported by Cullinan (1990), the present sample of teachers report relatively high rates of classroom experiences of death and are strongly in agreement that further training of teachers would be needed to undertake death education in schools. In the present study, teachers were found to be more likely than parents to agree that parental responsibility would be taken away if death education was to become a feature in the curriculum of Irish Primary schools. However, it is difficult to determine to what extent teachers' reactions represent a reservation about usurping parental responsibility or reflect a sense of caution about taking on yet another topic onto an already crowded curriculum. Further exploration of this issue is needed.

The present study provides an interesting insight into the views of Irish parents and teachers on their understandings of children's grief and their attitudes to death education. However, a number of limitations in the study should be noted. Comparisons with previous studies is somewhat limited due to the different sampling procedures used and measures adopted. The generalizability of the findings from the parents sample, in particular, needs to be considered. As delegate members of the Irish National Parents Council, the parents sample may be regarded as being more aware and articulate regarding their children's education and of having a greater interest in the whole area of curriculum and educational matters. As self-selected respondents, the extent to which they represent the views of the wider population of parents is questioned. Different studies have employed different attitude measures, some items from which have been replicated in this study. Use of a standardized attitude scale would permit more valid comparisons to be made between parent and teacher groups across different cultural settings. In this respect, the development of a reliable and valid measure of the salient dimensions underlying attitudes to death education and childhood grief is needed in order that cross-cultural comparisons between groups may be explored. In addition to standardized scales, qualitative techniques may also prove useful in

exploring in greater detail the nature of parental and teacher concerns and expectations concerning death education programs.

In conclusion, the findings regarding parents' and teachers' attitudes towards death education and childhood grief are largely positive. However, while attitudes are supportive of the general concept of death education, views on specific program content have not been examined. The handling of death and grieving in Irish society is in a state of transition and schools are playing an increasingly important role in dealing with these issues. Although the justification for death education in schools is strong, death education programs remain beyond the boundaries of traditional Irish school curricula. The areas of health education and health promotion have developed rapidly over the past decade in Irish schools (Dineen & Kelleher, 1995). However, there still appears to be no overall coordinated approach and to date death education has not featured on the national initiatives. In moving the concept of death education and childhood grief onto the Irish educational agenda, gaining the support of parents and teachers is a vitally important consideration. In surveying the views of teachers and parents, this study marks a first step in this direction. The findings provide a useful base from which to develop further research work and to open discussion concerning death education and childhood grief in the Irish school setting.

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