



REVIEW

<https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-025-06204-w>

OPEN

 Check for updates

“Sometimes I feel like I’m not supposed to think about death, but I do anyway” - exploring the topic of death with children in schools to help them find meaning and foster their wellbeing

Catherine Malboeuf-Hurtubise¹✉, David Lefrançois², Marc-André Éthier³,
Jonathan Smith⁴, Kevin Péloquin³ & Zach Dylan Fry⁵

The quest to give a meaning to life has spanned centuries, from Plato to the existentialist philosophers and psychologists in the 20th century. Among existential questions that are quasi-universal, those around death occupy a large place. Children, just like adults, strive to allocate and question the meaning of life—and death. In this review and commentary, we will outline how acknowledging and exploring children’s existential questions about death can help them find meaning in life and foster their wellbeing. Anchoring our discussion in existential psychology and discussing how founding principles of this approach can be translated into a pedagogy of death, we aim to show how navigating difficult and potentially distressing questions and emotions related to death with children can have beneficial impacts on their mental health, notably in schools. Specifically, we will reflect on and offer recommendations for how we can talk about death with children in school settings.

Background

The quest to understand and give a meaning to life has spanned centuries, from Plato to the existentialist philosophers and psychologists in the 20th century (e.g., Frankl, 1967; Plato, 1986; Sartre, 1943). Among existential questions that are quasi-universal, those around end of life (or death) occupy a large place. Recent threats to peace (wars in Ukraine and in the Middle East, with apprehension towards these wars escalating) and security (climatic and ecological disruptions, climate/war migrants or refugees) widely covered in the media are subject to raise such existential questions. Children are aware of such events, which have given rise to significant existential questions. And children, just like adults, strive to allocate and question the meaning of life—and death (Demers and Sinclair, 2015). Simultaneously, such occurrences can also hinder children’s capacity to foster (radical) hope for their future (Malboeuf-Hurtubise et al., 2024).

Thinking about existential threats—and death especially—can cause psychological distress, especially if these thoughts are repressed or eluded (Becker, 1972). Existential psychology has

¹Université Laval, Québec, QC, Canada. ²Université du Québec en Outaouais, Saint-Jérôme, QC, Canada. ³Université de Montréal, Montreal, QC, Canada.
⁴Université de Sherbrooke, Sherbrooke, QC, Canada. ⁵University of Wollongong, Wollongong, Australia. ✉email: catherine.malboeuf-hurtubise@psy.ulaval.ca

been developed to help individuals openly and consciously explore existential questions such as death in a therapeutic context. However, this approach was originally developed for adults—and solely within a therapeutic context. It was not designed or adapted for use with children, especially not in schools. In this review and commentary, we will outline how acknowledging and exploring children's existential questions about death can help them find meaning in life and foster their wellbeing. Anchoring our comment in existential psychology and discussing how founding principles of this approach can be translated into a pedagogy of death, we aim to show how navigating difficult and potentially distressing questions and emotions related to death with children can have beneficial impacts on their mental health, notably in schools. Specifically, we will reflect on and offer recommendations for how we can talk about death with children in school settings.

Children's understanding of death

What children know and understand about death has been studied by psychologists for decades, with notable early works on this topic done by Piaget. In a case study (1929), he suggested that children become loosely aware of a concept of death around the age of two years in the pre-operational stage of child development. Obviously, the accuracy of these early ideas is questionable, and they are likely to evolve as they progress in their development. As they enter the subsequent stage of *concrete operations* at age 7, Piaget proposed that children develop an intermediate understanding of death. At this stage, their approach towards death can be considered as curiosity, whereupon they strive to learn more about it through inquiry (Piaget, 1929). Much of what they know about death is therefore grounded in what is communicated to them. As they enter the formal operations stage at age 13+ (i.e., the final stage of cognitive development), Piaget (1929) contended that children's understanding of death becomes more holistic and mature, despite viewing death as a distant event only to occur in the future. Children at this stage nonetheless feel more inclined to seek adult support in coping with the emotional distress that death often causes.

Although his work led to the advancement of literature studying children's understanding of death, it's been shown that Piaget underestimated their capacity to learn about death from a younger age. In more recent years, studies (Longbottom and Slaughter, 2018; Norero, 2018) have indicated that children seek to formally learn about death at a significantly younger age—typically starting from age three or four—and a matured understanding can be fully grasped between eight and twelve years of age. Researchers have also uncovered the specificity of what aspects of death are learned during these ages. Such conceptualizations typically start with the understanding of *irreversibility* (i.e., the dead cannot come back to life), whereas the understanding of *causality* (i.e., all deaths are necessitated by a cause) are among the latest developed concepts of death (Longbottom and Slaughter, 2018). Notably, although research has shown since Piaget's (1929) work that children as young as three years old understand some basic principles about death, the Piagetian view persists, which hinders adults', school professionals' and public deciders' willingness to discuss death with children in school settings (Talwar et al., 2011). Learning these aspects of death is likely contingent on one's stage of cognitive development. However, additional concepts of death can be learned independently of cognitive development, influenced instead by external factors.

Aside from learning according to the stages of cognitive development, children also learn about death through their environment (Chachar et al., 2021) and life experiences (Başyigit

and Arslan, 2024). In these cases, children come to understand death's *universality* (i.e., death's "all-inclusive" nature towards living things), their own *personal mortality* (i.e., the recognition that they are personally implicated in death's all-inclusiveness), *biological cessation*, all while also speculating on *non-corporeal continuation* (i.e., afterlife considerations) sporadically between the ages of 3 and 8 years (Harris and Gimenez, 2005; Kenyon, 2001; Slaughter and Griffiths, 2007). Although children can learn through first-hand exposure to death (Astuti, 2011), they are more likely to acquire this knowledge through what is communicated to them (Renaud et al., 2014). Although direct and clear communication with adults (e.g., parents and/or teachers) is one of the most accurate ways for children to learn about death (Longbottom and Slaughter, 2018), adults report feeling uncomfortable and unqualified to facilitate such dialogues (Cullen et al., 2017; Meyers et al., 2009). As such, children may instead learn through what is indirectly communicated to them, such as through media portrayals (e.g., Disney movies), and consequently may be susceptible to developing misconceptions about death (Cox et al., 2005; Graham et al., 2018). What therefore distinguishes one child from the next largely depends *not* on their cognitive development, but rather, their environment and life experiences. It is thus of critical importance that children develop healthy conceptualizations provided by the right channels of guidance.

Existential psychology and death anxiety

Existential psychology aims to explore existential questions (Jacobsen, 2007). It explores the relation to and significance of existence, through life's "big" existential questions such as those pertaining to the meaning of life, death and love (Bernaud, 2018). Existential psychology has deep roots in philosophy and advocates for the open exploration of existential issues such as death. However, this position is somewhat controversial, as it contradicts society's refusal of exploring this issue, especially with children.

Parents and teachers are often taken aback by children's questions on death and can feel like they lack adequate tools to answer adequately children's questions (Malboeuf-Hurtubise, et al., 2025, 2024b; Zanetti, 2020). Their reaction can even involuntarily invalidate children's questioning about death and send a message that it is wrong or strange to think about this (Koole and Tschacher, 2016). There is thus a risk that children come to associate thinking about death to being abnormal, which can lead them to avoid thinking about it. This, in turn, can create psychological distress, which can curb children's ability and willingness to explore the normal thoughts and emotions about death that all humans are confronted with. Indeed, it has been shown that exploring—and not avoiding—life's big existential questions such as those pertaining to death can alleviate psychological distress and existential anxiety in children (Malboeuf-Hurtubise et al., 2024). It is thus important that we create safe spaces in which children can openly explore the topic of death, notably in schools.

It is essential to recognize that thinking about and discussing death can cause anxiety in both adults and children (Talwar et al., 2011). This emotional reaction has been coined as death anxiety, and has been a topic of interest for psychologists, sociologists and anthropologists for decades. In Becker's (1972) famous *The Denial of Death*, he outlined how death anxiety leads humans to act heroically to ensure their immortality. Terror Management Theory, which stems from Becker's work, stipulates that social and cultural norms to which individuals adhere serve a protecting role in appeasing death anxiety and giving meaning to their lives (Greenberg and Arndt, 2012). This adherence to social and

cultural norms, in turn, reinforces self-esteem and beliefs of immortality. Tillich (1952) defined anxiety as being derived from the acute consciousness of death. Throughout history, existential philosophy and psychology have examined various forms of death anxiety/anguish. The categorization of these forms is based on the theoretical framework employed to define and critically analyze them. Examples of these frameworks include the works of Camus, Heidegger, Kierkegaard, and Sartre. A thorough examination of the distinction between fear and anxiety/anguish in Kierkegaard's argument would require extensive development due to the depth of his analysis of anxiety/anguish confronted with the indeterminate. According to Heidegger, this anxiety/anguish stems from a sense of apprehension regarding "being-in-the-world," or, as he terms it, "being-toward-death." This apprehension manifests within a state of "nothing and nowhere." However, the scope of our classroom discussions with children does not currently extend to these issues. In sum, whether death anxiety in children stems from the uncertainty of the death event itself (i.e., what happens when we die) or from an existential search for meaning, it should be attended by engaging in open and frank discussions about death with them.

Menzies and colleagues (2019) have theorized that death anxiety influences the emergence of psychological disorders, and that there is a correlation between the intensity of death anxiety and that of psychological symptoms (Zuccala and Menzies, 2022). When death anxiety is accompanied with existential questions on the meaning of life, it also plays a role in the emergence of depression, both in children and in adults (Webb, 2008). Moreover, it has been linked with the experience of despair (Koole et al., 2006). Indeed, all three have in common to confront children with their own finitude, which can fuel feelings of helplessness (Gee and Loewenthal, 2013). In existential psychology, despair has been defined as a loss of hope and a feeling of being stuck in an unalterable and uncontrollable situation, in which one has no self-determination to overcome life's obstacles (Frankl, 1973). Despair is an emotion that is linked to significant psychological distress, as any form of future seems unattainable and unimaginable.

Existential philosophers have written extensively about despair, and this has informed existential and clinical psychologists in how to prevent or act to decrease despair, including with children. For example, Kierkegaard wrote that despair breaks you, and that meaning in life can only be found after we have been broken by it (Huber, 2023). Sartre (1987) wrote that life begins on the other side of despair, whereas Freire (2021) contended that hope can only be nourished through the analysis of one's suffering. These concepts echo Nietzsche's active nihilism, in which exploring one's despair is required to find meaning in life (Nietzsche, 1901).

Our research team's own work shows that children question the meaning of life and death, that they experience despair and that they express the need to talk openly about these issues in school, with their teachers and peers (Malboeuf-Hurtubise et al., 2024). In a study conducted by de la Herrán Gascón and colleagues (2021), adolescents reported a similar need to discuss death openly in school, recognizing in it an inherent educational value. Girls especially espoused this view—while, simultaneously showing higher death anxiety than boys. This suggests that having negative emotions related to death does not annul the necessity to discuss it openly. In essence, adolescents who were provided the opportunity to discuss death in an open, frank conversation with their teachers and peers expressed gratitude for being provided the opportunity to do so (Rodríguez Herrero et al., 2024). As such, we contend that it is our responsibility to work towards adapting the school curriculum to make space for death—and despair—to be explored with children and

adolescents. One way to do so is to work on developing the field of pedagogy of death.

Pedagogy of death and curricular studies

The notion of implementing death studies into school curricula has been explored for decades. Indeed, there have been multiple calls for action (e.g., Aspinall, 1996; de la Herrán Gascón et al., 2021; Friesen et al., 2020; Stylianou and Zembla, 2021) throughout the years to include a pedagogy of death—also referred to death education or didactics of death—in the school curriculum. Yet, death remains a marginal and taboo topic both in elementary and high schools worldwide. For example, in the province of Quebec (where our team is located) there is only one occurrence of the topic of death in the Culture and Citizenship in Québec program for elementary school, scheduled to be taught in the third grade. Specifically:

As students are introduced to certain existential questions, they understand that spirituality can be embedded in practices and beliefs, whether or not they are religious, that offer insights into the meaning of life. They examine different understandings of the cycles and stages of life, from birth until death and understand that there are a variety of beliefs on this subject." (Ministère de l'Éducation du Québec, 2024a, p. 38).

In the high school program, the topic of death is only scheduled during its last—and fifth year (which corresponds to grade 11), in which the meaning of life and death are explored (Ministère de l'Éducation du Québec, 2024b).

The existing research divides death education initiatives in two broad categories: a prevention/universal, or before-bereavement approach, in which all children are exposed to the topic of death in regular courses (de la Herrán Gascón et al., 2021), and an after-the-fact death education, in which interventions are tailored around bereavement (e.g., when a student or teacher has died). Our team takes a strong stance in favor of the before-bereavement, universal prevention approach, which aligns with the state of knowledge on children's quasi-universal need to explore, discuss and make sense of death regardless of lived experience with bereavement or loss. Indeed, the pedagogy of death proposes to include the topic of death in regular school curricula, which, in turn, can help children emotionally prepare for the inevitable experiences of loss and bereavement. This inclusion also provides spaces to reflect on personal values, moral issues, social and cultural norms pertaining to death, along with openness and empathy for others (de la Herrán and Cortina, 2008; Testoni et al., 2020). In doing so, combining knowledge from education and psychology to develop and implement such curricula helps fulfill children's need in this regard.

Developing death studies curricula also allows to ensure that the correct words are used to discuss this topic with children (e.g., instead of using metaphors, which can be muddled with multiple interpretations; Aspinall, 1996). Discussing death openly can also serve to destigmatize it, namely by emphasizing that it is a natural, normal process that happens to us all. Discussing the normalcy of death and destigmatizing it have also been shown to contribute to children thinking about death in more realistic, less romanticized ways, which, in turn, may help prevent suicide during adolescence (Eddy et al., 1983; Jones et al., 1995). Further research has also shown that being adequately prepared to face death facilitates the grieving process and that this facilitation persists throughout the lifespan (Martinčeková et al., 2020). As such, being adequately prepared to face death fosters healthy coping, which may serve as a protective factor for future psychological difficulties (e.g., complex grieving, depression, trauma; Friesen et al., 2020). For example, in countries where medically assisted death is legal, normalizing discussions around death in

elementary schools may serve to prepare children to a reality they may encounter if members of their family (e.g., grandparents) formulate such a request. In our own past studies, children who had a grandparent proceed with medically assisted dying expressed how openly discussing death in school had helped them reframe death as a “relief” rather than a bad thing (Fry et al., 2025). However, we wish to highlight the fact that seeing death as a loss rather than a relief would be normal and legitimate for children, and we ensure that both visions can be freely expressed and explored in class. In Canada, for example, statistics from 2022 show that 4.1% of all deaths were attributed to medically assisted procedures and that the rate was established at 6.8% for the province of Quebec, where our research team is based (Health Canada, 2022). This represents many deaths which may, consequently, have a high probability of affecting children in schools province- and country-wide.

While the topic of death may appear universal, the ways in which it is experienced, represented, and addressed in schools remain deeply embedded in specific cultural, social, and historical contexts. In this sense, educational approaches to death reveal not only what is said, but also what is usually silenced, what societies prefer to defer, displace, or naturalize. Furthermore, adopting such an approach to death can also serve to adequately prepare children who, inevitably, will have to face the death of someone they know at some point in their lives. For example, statistics show that it is common for children to experience death (e.g., of another child, teacher, school professional, parent or grandparent) each year (Case et al., 2020). Such events do more than cause grief: they reveal a structural tension between the promise of collective rational mastery over life events and the individual unpredictability of loss. Indeed, while some of these deaths are expected, many will be sudden and unexpected. When faced with such events, many schools will arrange for grief counselors to come to the school for a week or two. However, the questions that children have about death may not surface before many weeks have passed. The ideal person to be helpful at that point becomes the child’s teacher, who will be around to answer their questions when they emerge—weeks or months down the road. Yet, navigating between schools’ and teachers’ responsibilities to discuss death and respecting bereaved families’ choices can be a delicate and difficult task.

Nevertheless, this approach to death can create a modest yet significant transitional space. In this space, children’s questions often highlight the vulnerability of established norms. These questions are often more profound than adults anticipate, emphasizing the potential for fairer and more compassionate approaches to care and understanding. Importantly, such situations are both emotionally charged and socially structured. Children’s experiences of death and their expressions of grief are shaped by their position within a system of dispositions and expectations, the social conditions that give rise to their emotional and symbolic repertoires. While these conditions vary, no society is structurally immune to the politicization of death, whether through violence, war or human/natural disaster. Although such events may appear random, their occurrence and impact are socially determined and shaped by the unequal distribution of risks, protections, and narratives of legitimacy. From this standpoint, educational interventions on death need not be limited to individual existential breakthroughs or internal transformations. They can also be conceived of as situated practices, shaped by (and potentially shedding light on) the implicit hierarchies of cultural legitimacy, authority and recognition that operate within schools. In this sense, a pedagogy of death does not seek to transcend social structures in the name of authenticity or inner truth, as some idealist traditions might suggest. Instead, it aims to engage critically with these structures by acknowledging

the uneven distribution of resources, meanings and voices. As such, implementing a before-bereavement approach may help to prepare children – as well as their teachers - for these inevitable deaths, while normalizing discussions on this topic.

Now that we have demonstrated the need for integrating a pedagogy of death in elementary schools, how should we proceed in doing so? In other words, how may death be taught in schools? Death studies can be incorporated in many academic disciplines in elementary school, such as language arts (using literature), history, religion/civic engagement, geography, as well as sciences, both health (e.g., biology) and natural (e.g., environmental and climate change education; Rodriguez Herrero et al., 2022; 2024; Stylianou and Zemblyas, 2021). As such, it may be best to conceive of the pedagogy of death as a cross-curricular topic that can be broached with children across various disciplines, in various teaching and learning contexts.

Educators can draw knowledge and expertise from research on teaching difficult knowledge (or sensitive topics) to help guide curricular design and their overall interventions (Britzman, 2000; Garrett, 2017; Stylianou and Zemblyas, 2021). Notably, education scholars have discussed how teaching about sensitive topics may elicit an existential fear in students, and how the acknowledgement of this fear represents a crucial step in the learning process (van Kessel et al., 2020). Proponents of a pedagogy of death have also spoken to the necessity of facing this existential fear of death (e.g., the fear of losing loved ones) to explore one’s conceptions, understanding and meaning of it (Testoni et al., 2018a; 2020). Death education can also help children better understand grieving, enrich their emotional vocabulary and decrease their death anxiety, helping them move from death denial to death acceptance (Stylianou and Zemblyas, 2018).

Including a pedagogy of death in various academic disciplines further draws upon the concept of the integrated curriculum, whose proponents propose a holistic vision of education, where knowledges across disciplines are reunited, instead of fragmented (Wineburg and Grossman, 2000). The need for an integrated curriculum appears even more important considering recent major social upheavals with which students are confronted and for which understanding requires multiples paradigms and areas of knowledge, critical thinking skills, and introspection. Finally, the notion of integrated curriculum is especially relevant for death studies as it requires the complementary integration of multiple expertise (education, clinical psychology, child development) in the design and implementation of a pedagogy of death in schools.

From an integrated curriculum perspective, using the arts have been recommended to discuss death in schools (Affifi and Christie, 2019; Talwar et al., 2011). When implemented with youth to foster their mental health, arts-based interventions can reduce psychological distress while favoring wellbeing, school perseverance and success (Eaton et al., 2007). Artistic creation can help children express, discuss and acknowledge their emotions, while promoting openness towards others’ ideas, through alternative means of communication. As such, artistic creation helps children express difficult emotions, both in a classroom and in a therapeutic context (Beebe et al., 2010). In clinical settings, arts-based interventions with children have been shown to decrease anxiety while also improving quality of life (Favara-Scacco et al., 2001). In classroom settings, our team’s own research has also shown that using the arts to explore sensitive topics facilitates discussions of existential questions, while promoting wellbeing and a better mental health (Léger-Goodees et al., 2024). They also promote the development of children’s self-determination. Testoni and colleagues (2016, 2018a, 2018b, 2019a, 2019b) have used various forms of artistic creation (e.g., bibliodrama, youth literature, photovoice, theatre) to explore death anxiety and

implement pedagogy of death curricula in schools. Their studies lend support to the usefulness of exploring death through the arts as a means of fostering personal exploration and introspection, decreasing death anxiety, and supporting mental health in adolescents and young adults.

Similarly, philosophical inquiry – which is characterized as an educational practice based on dialogue – has also been shown to support mental health, namely by raising children’s awareness on moral issues and personal values (Topping and Trickey, 2007; Vansielegem and Masschelein, 2010). Death education has also been advocated to allow for such a clarification of personal values on this topic (Wass, 2004). Given that philosophical inquiry aims to encourage children to think for and by themselves (Lipman et al., 1980), it holds the potential to be an educational intervention of choice to foster their wellbeing (Malboeuf-Hurtubise et al., 2021a, 2021b). Philosophical inquiry also allows children to face, acknowledge and overtly explore their own existential questions, such as those generated by the topic of death (Fry et al., 2025).

Research has also shown how the use of dialogue (philosophical or otherwise) is appreciated by students to explore the topic of death (Puskás et al., 2023a; Rodríguez Herrero et al., 2024). As such, in school settings and in the context of death education, philosophical inquiry can be used to connect the knowledge and practices of existential psychology with childhood. In our ongoing research, we combine the arts – providing a nonverbal means of exploration and communication—and philosophical inquiry—providing a verbal counterpart to artistic creation – to explore death with children in elementary schools. Results from this line of research has shown that children are pleased by the opportunity to discuss death openly, grasp the main concepts pertaining to it, express a certain anxiety of death, and satisfy their need to ask questions and explore the topic, which in turn supports their self-determination and mental health (Fry et al., 2025; Malboeuf-Hurtubise et al., 2021b).

Finally, spending time in nature, where the life cycle surrounds us, has also been suggested as providing opportunities to implement a pedagogy of death in schools (Affifi and Christie 2019). Aside from walking in forests, activities involving visiting cemeteries have also been used to broach the topic of death with children in nature (Puskás et al., 2023a). Results from such studies indicate that the cemetery could constitute a good primer for philosophical discussions on death and personal exploration on this topic. Discussing death openly also allows discussions about climate change (Affifi and Christie, 2019). Indeed, there are many similarities between the existential questions elicited by climate change and those elicited by death, as they share commonalities from an existential psychology perspective (through threats to one’s life).

Implications and recommendations for implementing death studies in school settings

Although adults may shy away from discussing death with children, it is imperative that they engage in such conversations in an open, frank and developmentally appropriate manner (Cuddy-Casey and Orvaschel, 1997). Indeed, not talking about death with children does not make their questions go away—instead, children may turn to other, less desirable sources of information to construct meaning (Wildfeuer, et al., 2015). We—educators, adults, researchers—thus have a responsibility to educate children on the topic of death, and our team believes the best way of doing so is in schools. We must however recognize that in schools, some teachers may shy away from such discussions or may simply lack the time to discuss pedagogical content that is not explicitly included in the curriculum. As such, formally implementing a pedagogy of death would help children better understand death and alleviate distress that may be associated to

it, while allowing sufficient time in school to do so (Puskás et al., 2023b). In order to do so, we recommend that future work on death education explores, from a pedagogical angle, exactly *how* we should be teaching about death to children. What specific knowledge, skills, techniques, concepts, intellectual operations, analytical frameworks should be used to teach about death in elementary schools? Should students be asked to read and analyze on the theme of death? Should movies (e.g., Coco) be used to teach such content? Should they study various cultural approaches to death? This discussion is beyond the scope of the paper, but should be further explored by experts in pedagogical sciences.

Interventions that are targeted at supporting children’s introspection and critical thinking skills on the topic of death can have notable positive impacts on their wellbeing. They can also serve to highlight how death is a normal, natural process that, although having the potential of eliciting discomfort or anxiety, does not necessarily need to be scary (Hilliker, 2013). As previously mentioned, there have been calls for action from researchers to formally include the topic of death in elementary and high school education. Feifel (1982) advocated in favor of a pedagogy of death starting in the 1970s and over the span of his whole career; he also spoke to how every generation grapples with the issue of death, yet they all simultaneously also tend to avoid it. Until now, public deciders have remained reluctant to formalize any form of pedagogy of death or death education, which remains largely absent from official curricula around the world. This brings us to question what actions can be done by the scientific community to foster this much needed change? How should we proceed with ensuring that children’s voices and need for talking about death can be heard?

A first step in developing elementary school pedagogical programs on the topic of death would be to formalize training for teachers and to attach death education to existing program content, either in either in the humanities (social studies or citizenship) or philosophy courses in the sub-disciplines of metaphysics and existentialism. Although we know from the existing research that teachers and parents are globally comfortable with death being covered in school (e.g., de la Herrán Gascón et al., 2021; Jones et al., 1995; Stylianou and Zemblyas, 2020), we also know that teachers lack specific training on this topic (e.g., Hinton and Kirk, 2015; Potts, 2013). For example, in a study by Dryregrov and colleagues (2013), 90 percent of study participants (elementary school teachers) had no training on pedagogical approaches to death. Teachers have also attested to discomforts in speaking about death with children, namely due to lacking the proper vocabulary or because of fears of evoking anxiety (Case et al., 2017; Puskás et al., 2023b). Thus, given the inherent sensitivity of discussing death, a first step to incorporating a pedagogy of death in schools rests on adequate teacher training. One potential solution lies in the development of online training modules intended for teachers, which have been shown to promote openness to discussing death in the classroom, while also providing tools to do so appropriately with children (Rodríguez Herrero et al., 2022).

In designing and implementing teaching modules on the pedagogy of death, it is important that time is planned for teachers’ needs of exploring their own reactions, thoughts, and feelings towards death. Broaching a difficult topic such as death with children and welcoming their questions, emotions and thoughts can only be done adequately if the adults in charge of leading these discussions have had their own exploration beforehand. Research has indeed shown that teachers appreciate the space to explore their own conceptions and emotional reactions to death while receiving formalized training on death education for children (Stylianou and Zemblyas 2021). In sum, teachers who are more comfortable talking about death and who

have been provided the opportunity to reflect on this topic will react more adequately to children's questions, thoughts and emotions (Talwar et al., 2011). However, in designing death education curricula, the primary focus should remain on how best to meet children's needs on this matter – placing children's pedagogical voices at the center of this process (Rodríguez Herrero et al., 2024). Noteworthy, some existing resources can be useful for teachers to approach the topic of death with children (e.g., How it feels when a parent dies, by Jill Krementz's). Practical guides have also been published to help school administrators and teachers decide on a course of action when a death arises in their community (Brinich, 2019).

Awareness of the necessity of discussing death in schools should be raised with public deciders and ministries of education to formalize its place in the curriculum. We recognize that given the sensitivity of this topic, convincing school officials to implement a pedagogy of death may represent a long-term endeavour. As mentioned previously, one way to do so is to show how the topic of death is part of existing curricula (e.g., social sciences, citizenship studies). We also recognize that the responsibility for discussing death does not rest solely with schools or teachers; parents certainly have a role in this regard, if only by supporting their children's personal exploration and school-based initiatives to do so. However, this issue falls beyond the scope of this paper. In essence, ignoring children's need to discuss death will not make this need go away. Only by acknowledging it can we foster their mental health. Removing stigma and taboos around sensitive topics takes time; it nevertheless is essential to ensure children develop into flourishing, healthy and engaged citizens capable of facing one of life's universal truths.

Data availability

Not applicable. This article does not report data generation or analysis.

Received: 3 March 2025; Accepted: 31 October 2025;

Published online: 16 December 2025

References

Affifi R, Christie B (2019) Facing loss: pedagogy of death. *Environ Educ Res* 25:1143–1157. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504622.2018.1446511>

Aspinall SY (1996) Educating children to cope with death: a preventive model. *Psychol Sch* 33:341–349. [https://doi.org/10.1002/1520-6807\(199610\)33:4<341::AID-PITS2310330407>3.0.CO;2-0](https://doi.org/10.1002/1520-6807(199610)33:4<341::AID-PITS2310330407>3.0.CO;2-0)

Astuti R (2011) Death, ancestors, and the living dead: learning without teaching in Madagascar. In: Talwar V, Harris PL, Schleifer M (eds) *Children's understanding of death: from biological to supernatural conceptions*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, pp 1–18

Başyigit Ö, Arslan B (2024) Death and grief literacy in the family. *Psikiyatru Güncel Yaklaşımalar-Curr Approaches Psychiatry* 16:644–657. <https://doi.org/10.18863/pgy.1384342>

Becker E (1972) *The denial of death*. Free Press, New York, USA

Beebe A, Gelfand EW, Bender B (2010) A randomized trial to test the effectiveness of art therapy for children with asthma. *J Allergy Clin Immunol* 126:263–266.e261. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaci.2010.03.019>

Bernaud J-L (2018) *Introduction à la psychologie existentielle*. Dunod, Malakoff, France

Brinich PM (2019) Death and the schools: a psychological plan of action. *Psychocanal Study Child* 72:228–240

Britzman DP (2000) If the story cannot end: deferred action, idealization and difficult knowledge. In: Simon InRI, Rosenberg S, Eppert C eds *Between hope & despair: pedagogy and the remembrance of historical trauma*. Rowman & Littlefield, 27–59

Case DM, Cheah WH, Liu M (2020) "Mourning with the morning bell": an examination of secondary educators' attitudes and experiences in managing the discourse of death in the classroom. *OMEGA J Death Dying* 80:397–419. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0030222818766058>

Case A, Deaton A (2017) Mortality and morbidity in the 21st century. *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity*, pp 397–476. <https://doi.org/10.1353/eca.2017.0005>

Chachar AS, Younus S, Ali W (2021) Developmental understanding of death and grief among children during COVID-19 pandemic: application of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model. *Front Psychiatry* 12:654584. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.654584>

Cox M, Garrett E, Graham JA (2005) Death in Disney films: implications for children's understanding of death. *Omega J Death Dying* 50:267–280. <https://doi.org/10.2190/U708-43UL-8E0L-4UEV>

Cuddy-Casey M, Orvaschel H (1997) Children's understanding of death in relation to child suicidality and homicidality. *Clin Psychol Rev* 17:33–45. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0272-7358\(96\)00044-x](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0272-7358(96)00044-x)

Cullen C (2017) Difficult conversations: children, adolescents and death. In: Stevenson InRG, Cox GR eds *Children, Adolescents, And Death: Myths, Emotions, and Hard Truths*. Baywood Publishing, 67–82

Dyregrov A, Dyregrov K, Idsøe T (2013) Teachers' perceptions of their role facing children in grief. *Emot Behav Difficulties* 18:125–134. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632752.2012.754165>

Eaton LG, Doherty KL, Widrick RM (2007) A review of research and methods used to establish art therapy as an effective treatment method for traumatized children. *Arts Psychother* 34:256–262. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aip.2007.03.001>

Eddy JM, St. Pierre RW, Alles WF, Monismith SW (1983) Death education: enhancing competence across the life span. *Health Values* 7:29–32

Favara-Scacco C, Smirne G, Schilirò G, Di Cataldo A (2001) Art therapy as support for children with leukemia during painful procedures. *Med Pediatr Oncol* 36:474–480. <https://doi.org/10.1002/mpo.1112>

Feifel H (1982) Death in contemporary America. *Death Educ* 6:697174

Frankl VE (1967) Logotherapy and existentialism. *Psychother Theory Res Pract* 4:138–142. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0087982>

Frankl VE (1973) *Psychotherapy and existentialism: selected papers on logotherapy*. Simon & Schuster, New York, USA

Freire P (2021) *Pedagogy of hope*. Bloomsbury Publishing, London, UK

Friesen H, Harrison J, Peters M, Epp D, McPherson N (2020) Death education for children and young people in public schools. *Int J Palliat Nurs* 26:332–335. <https://doi.org/10.12968/ijpn.2020.26.7.332>

Fry Z, Mendrek A, Crooks J, Gilbert M, Léger-Goodees T, Lefrançois D, ... Malboeuf-Hurtubise C (2025) "What is the point of it all if we are just going to die anyway?": Exploring Heideggerian concepts of 'developing-towards-death' with children using arts-based existential therapy. *J Posit Psychol* 20:799–810. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2025.2487439>

Garrett HJ (2017) *Learning to be in the world with others*. Peter Lang, New York, United States of America

Gee J, Loewenthal D (2013) Working with despair: a phenomenological investigation. *Psychol Psychotherapy: Theory, Res Pract* 86:229–243. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8341.2012.02054.x>

Graham JA, Yuhas H, Roman JL (2018) Death and coping mechanisms in animated Disney films: a content analysis of Disney films (1937–2003) and Disney/Pixar films (2003–2016). *Soc Sci* 7:1–14. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci7100199>

Greenberg J, Arndt J (2012) Terror management theory. In: Van Lange PAM, Kruglanski AW, Higgins ET (eds) *Handbook of theories of social psychology*. Sage Publications Ltd, pp 398–415. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446249215.n20>

Harris PL, Giménez M (2005) Children's acceptance of conflicting testimony: the case of death. *J Cognition Cult* 5:143–164. <https://doi.org/10.1163/1568537050468606>

de la Herrán A, Cortina M (2009) La muerte y su enseñanza. *Diálogo Filosófico* 25(75) <https://www.dialogofilosofico.com/index.php/dialogo/article/view/292>

de la Herrán Gascón A, Herrero PR, González JJC, Aboitiz RJ (2021) Do adolescents want death to be included in their education? *Soc Psychol Educ* 24:857–876. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11218-021-09635-w>

de la Herrán Gascón A, Cortina YM (2008) La Práctica del 'Acompañamiento educativo' desde la Tutoría en Situaciones de Duelo. *Tend Pedagóg* 157–173

Hilliker L (2013) An enlightened (and relieved) death educator: The value of truth telling with children. *Illn Crisis Loss* 21:361–364. <https://doi.org/10.2190/IL21.4.e>

Hinton D, Kirk S (2015) Teachers' perspectives of supporting pupils with long-term health conditions in mainstream schools: a narrative review of the literature. *Health Soc Care Community* 33:107–120. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hsc.12208>

Huber J (2023) Hope from despair. *J Polit Philos* 31:80–101. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jopp.12227>

Jacobsen B (2007) Authenticity and our basic existential dilemmas: foundational concepts of existential psychology and therapy. *Existent Anal* 18:288–296

Jones CH, Hodges M, Slate JR (1995) Parental support for death education programs in the schools. *Sch Couns* 42:370–376. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23901011>

Kenyon BL (2001) Current research in children's conceptions of death: a critical review. *OMEGA J Death Dying* 43:63–91. <https://doi.org/10.2190/0X2B-B1N9-A579-DVK1>

Koole SL, Tschacher W (2016) Synchrony in psychotherapy: A review and an integrative framework for the therapeutic alliance. *Front Psychol* 7:191242. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.00862>

Koole SL, Greenberg J, Pyszczynski T (2006) Introducing science to the psychology of the soul: Experimental existential psychology. *Curr Dir Psychol Sci* 15:212–216. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0963-7214.2006.00439.x>

Krementz J (1983) How it feels when a parent dies. Knopf, New York

Léger-Goodes T, Herba CM, Moula Z, Mendrek A, Hurtubise K, Piché J, Gilbert M, Bernier M, Simons K, Bélanger N, Smith J, Malboeuf-Hurtubise C (2024) Feasibility, acceptability, and perceived benefits of a creative arts intervention for elementary school children living with speech, language, and communication disorders. *Front Child Adolesc Psychiatry* 3:1322860. <https://doi.org/10.3389/frch.2024.1322860>

Lipman M, Sharp AM, Oscanyon F (1980) Philosophy in the classroom. Temple University Press, Philadelphia, USA

Longbottom S, Slaughter V (2018) Sources of children's knowledge about death and dying. *Philos Trans R Soc Lond B Biol Sci.* 373. <https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2017.0267>

Malboeuf-Hurtubise C, Lefrançois D, Éthier M-A, Smith J, Léger-Goodes T, Herba CM (2024) Exploring children's despair in the face of climate change. *Commun Psychol* 2:78. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s44271-024-00130-4>

Malboeuf-Hurtubise C, Di Tomaso C, Lefrançois D, Mageau GA, Taylor G, Éthier M-A, Gagnon M, Léger-Goodes T (2021b) Existential therapy for children: Impact of a philosophy for children intervention on positive and negative indicators of mental health in elementary school children. *Int J Environ Res Public Health* 18:12332. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph182312332>

Malboeuf-Hurtubise C, Léger-Goodes T, Mageau GA, Joussemel M, Herba C, Chadi N, Lefrançois D, Camden C, Bussières ÉL, Taylor G, Éthier MA, Gagnon M (2021a) Philosophy for children and mindfulness during COVID-19: Results from a randomized cluster trial and impact on mental health in elementary school students. *Prog Neuro-Psychopharmacol Biol Psychiatry* 107:110260. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pnpbp.2021.110260>

Malboeuf-Hurtubise C, Léger-Goodes T, Dave H, Hoath L, Lefrançois D, Éthier M-A, Smith J, Fillion C, McLean E, Fry Z, Pélquin K, Herba MC (2025) Climate Change-Based Art and Philosophy Intervention and Mental Health in Children. *JAMA Network Open* 8(9) e2531298 <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2025.31298>

Martinčeková L, Jiang MJ, Adams JD, Menendez D, Hernandez IG, Barber G, Rosengren KS (2020) Do you remember being told what happened to grandma? The role of early socialization on later coping with death. *Death Stud* 44:78–88. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2018.1522386>

Menzies RE, Sharpe L, Dar-Nimrod I (2019) The relationship between death anxiety and severity of mental illnesses. *Br J Clin Psychol* 58:452–467. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjcp.12219>

Demers S, Sinclair F (2015) Apprentissage et développement humain. In: Éthier M-A, Demers S, Lefrançois D (eds) *Les fondements de l'éducation: perspectives critiques*. Éditions MultiMondes, pp 299–335

Meyers K, Golden RN, Peterson F (2009) *The truth about death and dying*. Infobase Publishing, New York, USA

Ministère de l'Éducation du Québec (2024a) Programme de formation de l'école québécoise - Culture et citoyenneté québécoise (PFEQ-CCQ-primaire). Gouvernement du Québec. <https://cdn-contenu.quebec.ca/cdn-contenu/education/pfq/primaire/programmes/PFEQ-CCQ-primaire-AN.pdf>

Ministère de l'Éducation du Québec (2024b) Programme de formation de l'école québécoise—Culture et citoyenneté québécoise (PFEQ-CCQ-Secondeaire). Gouvernement du Québec. https://www.education.gouv.qc.ca/fileadmin/site_web/documents/education/jeunes/pfq/PFEQ-culture-citoyennete-quebecoise-Secondeaire.pdf

Nietzsche F (1901) *The will to power*. Vintage Books, New York, USA

Norero VC (2018) La maduración cerebral en el niño: El caso de la adquisición del concepto de muerte y su evolución [Brain development in childhood: acquisition and evolution of children's understanding of death]. *Rev Chil de Pediatr* 89:137–142. <https://doi.org/10.4067/S0370-41062018000100137>

Piaget J (1929) *The child's conception of the world*. Routledge & Kegan Paul. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315006215>

Plato P (1986) *Phaedrus*. Aris & Phillips, Liverpool, UK

Potts S (2013) Least said, soonest mended? Responses of primary school teachers to the perceived support needs of bereaved children. *J Early Child Res* 11:95–107. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1476718X12466201>

Puskás T, Jeppsson F, Andersson A (2023b) 'There is no right or wrong answer': Swedish preschool teachers' reflections on the didactics of death. *Contemp Issues Early Child* 24:438–452. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14639491211992573>

Puskás T, Andersson A, Jeppsson F, Slaughter V (2023a) Living in heaven and buried in the earth? Teaching young children about death. *Eur Early Child Educ Res J* 31:900–913. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2023.2221002>

Renaud SJ, Engarhos P, Schleifer M, Talwar V (2014) Children's earliest experiences with death: Circumstances, conversations, explanations, and parental satisfaction. *Infant Child Dev* 24:157–174. <https://doi.org/10.1002/icd.1889>

Rodríguez Herrero P, de la Herrán Gascón A, García Sempre P (2022) Impact of a teacher-training MOOC on the pedagogy of death during the pandemic. *Death Stud* 47:804–813. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2022.2132549>

Rodríguez Herrero P, Serrano Manzano BF, de la Herrán Gascón A (2024) Death livens you up: Death education through the eyes of adolescents. *Pedagog, Cult Soc* 32:1535–1548. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2023.2230965>

Santé Canada (2022) Rapport annuel sur l'aide médicale à mourir. Government of Canada, <https://www.canada.ca/fr/sante-canada/services/publications/systeme-et-services-sante/rapport-annuel-aide-medicale-mourir-2022.html>

Sartre J-P (1943) *L'Être et le Néant*. Gallimard, Paris, France

Sartre J-P (1987) *Huis clos*. Psychology Press, Paris, France

Slaughter V, Griffiths M (2007) Death understanding and fear of death in young children. *Clin Child Psychol Psychiatry* 12:525–535. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359104507080980>

Stylianou P, Zembylas M (2018) Dealing with the concepts of "grief" and "grieving" in the classroom: children's perceptions, emotions, and behavior. *OMEGA J Death Dying* 77:240–266. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0030222815626717>

Stylianou P, Zembylas M (2021) Engaging with issues of death, loss, and grief in elementary school: teachers' perceptions and affective experiences of an in-service training program on death education in Cyprus. *Theory Res Soc Educ* 49(1):54–77. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00933104.2020.1841700>

Talwar V, Harris PL, Schleifer M (eds) (2011) *Children's understanding of death: from biological to religious conceptions*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511852077>

Testoni I, Palazzo L, De Vincenzo C, Wieser MA (2020) Enhancing existential thinking through death education: a qualitative study among high school students. *Behav Sci* 10:113. <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs10070113>

Testoni I, Biancalani G, Ronconi L, Varani S (2021) Let's start with the end: Bibliodrama in an Italian death education course on managing fear of death, fantasy-proneness, and alexithymia with a mixed-method analysis. *OMEGA J Death Dying* 83:729–759. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0030222819863613>

Testoni I, Cichellero S, Kirk K, Cappelletti V, Cecchini C (2019a) When death enters the theater of psychodrama: perspectives and strategies of psychodramatists. *J Loss Trauma* 24:516–532. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15325024.2018.1548996>

Testoni I, Ronconi L, Palazzo L, Galgani M, Stizzi A, Kirk K (2018a) Psychodrama and moviemaking in a death education course to work through a case of suicide among high school students in Italy. *Front Psychol* 9:441. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.00441>

Testoni I, Sansonetto G, Ronconi L, Rodelli M, Baracco G, Grassi L (2018b) Meaning of life, representation of death, and their association with psychological distress. *Palliat Supportive Care* 16:511–519. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1478951517000669>

Testoni I, Piscitello M, Ronconi L, Zsa KÉ, Iacona E, Zamperini A (2019b) Death education and the management of fear of death via photo-voice: an experience among undergraduate students. *J Loss Trauma* 24:387–399. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15325024.2018.1507469>

Testoni I, Parisi G, Zamperini A, Visintin EP, Tomiolo E, Vicentini S, De Leo D (2016) The "sick-lit" question and the death education answer. Papageno versus Werther effects in adolescent suicide prevention. *Hum Aff* 26:153–166. <https://doi.org/10.1515/humaff-2016-0016>

Tillich P (1952) *The courage to be*. Yale University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0030222818769258>

Topping KJ, Trickey S (2007) Collaborative philosophical enquiry for school children: cognitive effects at 10–12 years. *Br J Educ Psychol* 77:271–288. <https://doi.org/10.1348/00070906X105328>

van Kessel C, Den Heyer K, Schimel J (2020) Terror management theory and the educational situation. *J Curric Stud* 52:428–442. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2019.1659416>

Vansieleghem N, Masschlein J (2010) Creativity or passion? What is at stake in philosophy with children? *Teoria de la educación* 22(2):131–149

Wass H (2004) A perspective on the current state of death education. *Death Stud* 28:289–308. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07481180490432315>

Webb, JT (2008). Dabrowski's theory and existential depression in gifted children and adults. In 18th International Congress of the Institute for Positive Disintegration in Human Development, pp 7–9

Wildfeuer J, Schnell MW, Schulz C (2015) Talking about dying and death: On new discursive constructions of a formerly postulated taboo. *Discourse Soc* 26:366–390. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926514564739>

Wineburg S, Grossman P (2000) Interdisciplinary curriculum: challenges to implementation. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED450727>

Zanetti L (2020) Why am I here? The challenges of exploring children's existential questions in the community of inquiry. *Child Philos* 16:233–245. <https://doi.org/10.12957/childphilosophy.2020.47050>

Zuccala M, Menzies RE (2022) Fears of death and their relationship to mental health. In: *Existential concerns and cognitive-behavioral procedures*. Springer, pp 57–73. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-81834-5_4

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the students and teachers from previous studies who courageously discussed death with us, guiding us toward insights on how to better navigate these difficult conversations in school settings.

Author contributions

CMH wrote the main manuscript text, with help from ZDF. DL, MAE, KP, and JS extensively reviewed the manuscript.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethical approval

Ethical approval was not required since the article did not involve human participants and no original research data.

Informed consent

Informed consent was not required since the article did not involve human participants and no original research data.

Additional information

Correspondence and requests for materials should be addressed to Catherine Malboeuf-Hurtubise.

Reprints and permission information is available at <http://www.nature.com/reprints>

Publisher's note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

© The Author(s) 2025