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# Expanding the Education on Death, Loss, and Grief in Early Childhood Education

Pedagogical Materials for Educators

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The purpose of this functional thesis is to address the lack of education surrounding the topics of death, loss, and grief by introducing a set of pedagogical materials for educators in early childhood education facilities in Finland. These materials, intended for children aged four to five, serve as a preventative approach for coping with such sensitive subjects at this formative age.

Utilising theoretical background pertaining to our research question in order to guide our collection of data, we partnered with an early childhood education facility in Finland to gain access to conduct semi-structured interviews with their educators and survey the guardians.

We then evaluated our data alongside the theoretical background to create a functional set of pedagogical materials for educators in our partnering facility regarding educating the children on the matters of death, loss, and grief. These materials consist of varying literature pieces, complimentary visual art activities, and supporting dialogues which promote discussion between participants to facilitate learning.

The finalized materials were sent back to our partnering early childhood facility from where we received feedback. The conclusion of our study established an apparent lack of education on death, loss, and grief in Finland's early childhood education curriculum. Therefore, we can determine that the pedagogical materials created as a result of this thesis could be used in early childhood education centres throughout Finland for the purpose of introducing the subject matter of death, loss, and grief to children from the age of four to five.

Keywords: death, loss, grief, children, early childhood education, emotional support, preventative approach

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Tämä toiminnallinen opinnäytetyö puuttuu kuoleman, menetyksen ja surun käsittelyyn liittyvän koulutuksen puutteeseen esittelemällä kokoelman pedagogisia materiaaleja Suomen varhaiskasvattajille. Nämä 4–5-vuotiaille lapsille tarkoitetut materiaalit toimivat ennaltaehkäisevänä tapana selviytyä haastavista aiheista herkässä iässä.

Aloitimme hyödyntämällä tutkimuskysymykseemme liittyvää teoreettista taustaa. Teimme myös yhteistyötä suomalaisen päiväkodin kanssa, jossa keräsimme tietoa teettämällä huoltajille kyselyitä ja haastatteleamalla päiväkodin kasvattajia.

Arvioimme keräämämme tiedon sekä teoreettisen taustan luodaksemme toimivan kokoelman pedagogisia materiaaleja yhteistyöpäiväkotiimme kasvattajille, joita voidaan hyödyntää kuolemaan, menetykseen ja suruun liittyvissä asioissa lasten kanssa. Materiaalit koostuvat kirjallisuudesta, kuvataideaktiviteeteista ja dialogeista, jotka edistävät osallistujien välistä keskustelua oppimisen helpottamiseksi.

Valmiit materiaalit lähetimme takaisin yhteistyöpäiväkotiimme, josta saimme palautetta. Tutkimuksemme osoitti, että Suomen varhaiskasvatussuunnitelmassa on selkeä puute kuoleman, menetyksen ja surun käsittelyyn liittyen. Näin ollen voidaan todeta, että tämän opinnäytetyön tuloksena syntyneitä pedagogisia aineistoja voidaan hyödyntää varhaiskasvatuksessa eri puolilla Suomea kuoleman, menetyksen ja surun käsittelyssä 4–5-vuotiaiden lasten kanssa.

Avainsanat: kuolema, menetys, suru, lapset, varhaiskasvatus, emotionaalinen tuki, ennaltaehkäisevä lähestymistapa

## Contents

1	Introduction	1
2	Early Childhood Education and Care in Finland	2
3	Death, Loss, and Grief	4
3.1	Cognitive Development Stages: Jean Piaget	5
3.2	Piaget's Approach to Children's Conceptions of Death	6
3.3	Criticisms of Piaget's Approach	7
3.4	Emotional Approach	7
4	Social Pedagogical theories	8
4.1	Dialogue	9
4.2	Animation	10
4.3	Haltung	12
5	Development task	13
5.1	Implementation methods	13
5.2	Ethical Considerations	14
5.3	Data collection	15
6	Thematic analysis	15
7	Quantitative analysis	17
8	Pedagogical materials for teachers	20
8.1	Narrative play	20
8.2	Visual arts	21
9	Discussion and conclusion	23
	References	25
	Appendices	28
	Appendix A: Pedagogical Materials for Teachers	28

# 1 Introduction

The topic of death in westernized societies (Finnish society in particular) is observed as a taboo and often avoided. Though adults in our society are fully aware of the inevitability of death, the subject can be painful, confusing, and frightening to think about. As children we often inherit the values of our primary care givers, and in Finnish society it is typical to shield children from death, loss, and grief as much as possible until a child seems ready to learn and absorb this information. Despite this, it has been proven that at as early as 4 years old a child can already begin grasping the immutability of death depending on their cognitive development stage. If the child was not given sufficient information regarding death in age-appropriate language by the time they are bereaved, it can lead them to expand on their misguided guilt about the death. (Chan, 2019)

We believe teaching about death and loss at a young age is vital for a child's development. A research study conducted by S. Kailaheimo-Lönnqvist and J. Erola in the University of Turku, concluded that seven percent of children in Finland lose a parent before the age of 24. Their data set, analysed by the Finnish Growth Environment Panel (FinGEP) from 1989 to 2014, indicates that children who experienced parental death during childhood had a weaker education attainment at age 24 compared to individuals who had not experienced parental death. Their findings suggest a direct correlation between a child's future and their experience with death at a young age; the younger an individual was when they experienced parental death, the more negative impact there was to their proceeding education career. (S. Kailaheimo-Lönnqvist, J. Erola, 2020) Here we can see a direct correlation to a child's future and their experience with death at a young age.

The driving force of this functional thesis is to address the lack of education surrounding the topics of death, loss, and grief by introducing a set of pedagogical materials for educators in Early Childhood Education facilities within Finland. The materials, intended for children ages 4 to 5, will serve as a preventative approach to coping with loss at a young age. The goal of this dissertation is to dive into child development theory pertaining to death and loss, discover what our system lacks in the education on these subjects, and create a useful set of materials for educators to expand their practices to incorporate death, loss, and grief.

To achieve this, we chose to partner with an early childhood education centre located in Finland. The reason behind which is to gain knowledge and input that will be useful in the creation of the activities that will benefit both educators and children. This specific centre is part of a chain consisting of over a hundred other daycares scattered throughout Finland which speaks volumes to its competence as well as the effectiveness of the methods used.

## **2 Early Childhood Education and Care in Finland**

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) is part of the Finnish education system and an important stage on the child's path of growing and learning. The objective of ECEC is to support a child's prerequisites for learning and to promote lifelong learning and the realisation of equality in education in line with the principles of inclusion. These principles include equal rights for all children, equality, equity, non-discrimination, appreciation of diversity as well as social participation and togetherness. (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2022, p.4).

ECEC services are provided in institutions such as early education centres, family daycares and open activities by municipal providers, joint municipal authorities, or private service providers, meaning, the structure of the ECEC centre differs according to the type of institute as well as its provider. For example, one institute may divide its children into groups according to their ages while another does so based on the individuals need for support.

Early childhood education and care is a voluntary service constructed for children under the age of seven. The municipalities are responsible for arranging the service and a price is calculated depending on the family's income and the number of children within the family.

In Finland, ECEC is guided by the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care and the National core curriculum for ECEC. In addition, other agreements and legislations such as the local core curriculums must be abided by according to the location of the institution.

The purpose of the national steering of ECEC is to create equal preconditions for the holistic growth, development and learning of the children participating in early childhood

education and care. (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2022, p.4). Due to this, an individual ECEC plan is made for each child in ECEC centres and family daycares. Within this plan, the child's background (such as language, culture, and worldview) must be considered when setting objectives along with the necessary measures to fulfil them. The plan is created in collaboration with personnel involved in the child's development. Examples include guardians, health care professionals and special education teachers.

The Act on Early Childhood Education and Care puts emphasis on the significance of pedagogy and the pedagogic responsibility of teachers and special education teachers. The teachers bear the overall responsibility for planning the activities for groups of children, implementation of activities with a goal-oriented and systematic approach and evaluating and developing the activities. Teachers and special education teachers, social pedagogues, child carers and other ECEC personnel plan and implement activities together. (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2022, p.15-16).

The National core curriculum for early childhood education and care specifies five learning areas which describe the fundamental objectives of pedagogical activities while simultaneously guiding the professionals in their planning and implementation processes. The learning stages are as follows:

- Rich world of languages, which refers to a child's linguistic skills and capacity as well as their linguistic identities. (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2022, p.40).
- Diverse forms of expression. For example, musical, visual, crafts as well as verbal and physical expressions. (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2022, p.41).
- Me and our community. This topic is approached from the perspectives of ethical thinking, worldviews, the past, present and future of the local community as well as the media. (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2022, p.43).
- Exploring and interacting with my environment. This involves the natural and synthetic surroundings that both stimulates an individual's curiosity and triggers learning.

- I grow, move, and develop. This includes objectives related to physical activity, food education, health, and safety. (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2022, p.47)

### **3 Death, Loss, and Grief**

In today's society, death and loss are abstract concepts that even adults cannot fully conceptualize. Most adults understand that death is a certainty for all living things, thereby recognizing that death will happen to everyone including all of their loved ones eventually. However, processing death when it takes place is entirely different. One can mentally prepare for the death of a loved one, but when it actually occurs, one's body can react in a way their mind may not have anticipated, experiencing grief.

Grief can be described as an overwhelming and powerful emotion which is most often caused by the death of a loved one, or by a terminal diagnosis for themselves or a loved one. Grief is experienced differently by every individual and is a natural reaction to loss. It's essentially a feeling of numbness, sadness, loneliness, confusion, or a combination of all. Evidence suggests that to cope with these feelings, one can learn about why they are grieving. (Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research, 2016) If we can talk about grief and death openly with others, we can gain insight as to why we are suffering these feelings and how it can help us to heal and cope in daily life as we bear this weight. There is no comprehensive approach to learning about death, accepting death, or coping after losing a loved one. But there are ways we can and should learn about death, loss, and grief, to enable ourselves to face this inevitability. We believe this process should begin already in early childhood education.

While we know it is a difficult concept for adults, death is much harder for young children to grasp. We must understand how children learn about death in order to support a child who is bereaved. The way a bereaved child will grieve is entirely dependent on their understanding of death at the time of bereavement. (Cohen & Phillis, 2014) Preschool aged children will be able to recognize their parents or primary care giver's fear of death and often internalize their care giver's view of death based on their values, beliefs, and outlook of the topic. (Stanford Medicine Children's Health, 2021)

Early childhood aged children likely understand death through media portrayals as temporary or reversible, as it is shown this way in their favourite cartoons or stories.



Most children this age who have not received proper education on the topic do not recognize that if something is dead it does not eat, sleep, or revive at any point. (Stanford Medicine Children's Health, 2021) Despite this, the permanence of death is a concept which a pre-schooler has the capacity to understand. (Strum, 1986) Examples of this can be when a bug is stepped on, the child sees that it has died and does not anticipate it coming back to life. Flowers wither and die in front of their eyes, and they can make audible observations as to its death. To children, older adults appear analogous to flowers; they can see and understand that their bodies are less capable of things middle aged adults are. Especially if a child has grandparents or elderly role models in their life, it's plausible that the adults in their life have communicated that their death may be nearing and have explained what that may mean. (Strum, 1986) These real-life representations of death are useful for children to interpret the subject apart from an abstract concept. However, a child's comprehension on death when reaching the ages of 5 to 7 will largely depend on that individual child's cognitive development stage.

### 3.1 Cognitive Development Stages: Jean Piaget

Jean Piaget, a pioneer in cognitive psychology in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, created a cognitive development theory which categorizes a child's cognitive development as they age from birth to adolescence. Piaget references cognitive psychology as the way our brain processes and interprets information, particularly sensory events such as perception, storing and retrieving memories, learning from experiences, and adding onto previous knowledge to interpret images, symbols, and concepts. (Beckett & Taylor, 2016) Piaget's theory is largely based around assimilation, accommodation, and equilibrium. These three concepts work together in a child's brain to decipher and understand their original schemas. The child will create an original schema in their head, assimilate it to similar things, then after observation use accommodation to modify it, creating equilibrium of the two. When equilibrium is taking place, a child experiences more complex thoughts about the world around them. However, the child would never have the chance to understand that idea unless foundational thoughts had taken place. No amount of information could be absorbed from a child unless they were at the stage where they are able to grasp it. This process of building information upon itself is known as constructivism, and it works through the stages of cognitive development Piaget created. (Beckett & Taylor, 2016)

Piaget's Cognitive Development theory is made up of four stages a child moves through in their cognitive learning. (Cherry, 2022)

- The Sensorimotor Stage is the earliest stage of development from birth to two years of age, where infants and toddlers acquire knowledge through sensory experiences.
- The Preoperational Stage follows from ages two to five, where the foundations of language development have settled, and a child begins thinking symbolically and using words to represent feelings, objects, and experiences.
- The Concrete Operational Stage between five and 11 years old, where a child is concrete in their literal thinking and begins using logic.
- The Formal Operational Stage following children ages 12 and up, is where logic, deductive reasoning, and abstract thought is present in the child's cognitive function.

### 3.2 Piaget's Approach to Children's Conceptions of Death

Piaget's cognitive approach was then applied to children's conceptions of death in a master's dissertation done by Janice Symons-Bradbury on a Child's Perception of Death: Piagetian Perspective. In regard to relevance for this study, the focus will surround the preoperational stage and concrete operational stage.

In the preoperational stage, a child develops egocentric characteristics of thinking, meaning that children can believe their own thoughts can influence objects and people around them. It is stated here that this is essential in understanding children's comprehension of death in this stage of development, as a bereaved child could feel immense guilt or pain if they once wished death upon their lost loved one. (Symons-Bradbury, 2006)

In the concrete operational stage, children will likely abandon this way of thinking as they develop the understanding of the physical laws which objects and events adhere to and begin to understand other's viewpoints as they overcome egocentrism and develop social competence. Logic-based thinking begins to take form, and the concrete operational child is likely to begin comprehending the cause and effect of death and its finality. While a preoperational child may ask, "why do people die?", a concrete operational child's curiosity focus is likely "what is death?". (Symons-Bradbury, 2006)

### 3.3 Criticisms of Piaget's Approach

While this theory by Piaget offers relevant knowledge on a child's understanding of death, there is room for scrutiny which should be noted. In a doctoral dissertation by Miharu Sagara at the University of California titled *The Meanings for Life and Death for Children in Japan*, Sagara criticizes the Piagetian approach to children's conceptions of death, claiming that Piaget himself has not described children's notions of death and has failed to connect children's death conceptions to their cognitive development. Piaget has only mentioned that children ages 5, 6, and 7 may have difficulties with grasping the phenomenon of death. (Sagara, 2009) This begs the question, why do numerous researchers use Piagetian cognitive theory as the foundations for their research of a child's notion of death? Sagara believes one possibility lies in Piaget's theoretical analysis of children's animism which was linked with a child's conception of life. Therefore, these researchers may assume that a child's conception of life is similar or applicable to their conception of death. (Sagara, 2009)

### 3.4 Emotional Approach

When discussing the concepts of death, loss and grief, there are strong feelings that are perceived in different ways according to the individual, therefore it is important to shed light on the emotional aspects of the topic. The aim of this dissertation is to help children understand these topics better by providing their teachers with concrete tools and materials. However, before getting into the practical steps that can be implemented, we first need to internalize the emotional turmoil that is experienced.

Many strong emotions are felt by an individual in the beginning stages of grief ranging from sadness, fear, guilt and anger to numbness after some time, most of which are labelled as negative due to the way they make a person feel. On the other hand, there are also positives within the process of grief that need to be taught and made aware of. For example, by openly talking about the topic, one is normalizing the feelings that are associated with loss while simultaneously helping children understand and express said feelings. Another positive is the sense of character development that is felt as the experience provides children with a safe environment to work through painful experiences and then discover new perspectives of the experiences as well as in their thought processes.

The intended purpose of equipping educators with the pedagogical activities produced by this dissertation is to help young people lay the groundwork for Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) by generating as many new explanations or alternative perspectives about a situation as possible. This is accomplished by helping children to brainstorm new thinking patterns. Children can be assisted to do this through discovering new ways to play, to remember, to express closure, and to think about themselves. (Sorensen & Ahmed, 2008)

Although the initial emotions experienced during the process of grief are heavy and disheartening, it is important to convey the light at the end of the tunnel. At times, a person may feel sad when they think back to what or whom they have lost, even as time progresses. However, the weight and intensity of this feeling will decrease. Adults usually fail to commemorate the traits that children have, specifically how resilient they are. In most cases, children just want to be seen, heard, and supported by their caregivers to overcome the challenges that they face.

## **4 Social Pedagogical theories**

The social pedagogical concepts and methods of this dissertation are derived from Juha Hämäläinen, a Finnish professor at University of Eastern Finland who created a theory of social pedagogy based on open communication across theoretical perspectives. (Hämäläinen, 1999) Social pedagogical theory is purposed as an educational tool which uses various concepts and methods to promote the integration of people into society with the hope to eliminate social exclusion. (Hämäläinen, 2015) In this context, social pedagogy in Finland consists of two major pillars. The first is concerning human growth and development through the point of view as an individual's place in society, while the second focuses on social constructs in society such as social exclusion, marginalization, social integration, and social and psychological issues. Social pedagogy by Hämäläinen is seen as a many-sided body of knowledge and action taking place in social and educational fields where interpretations, opinions, and activities have a place in theory and practice. (Hämäläinen, 1999) His theory will be reviewed against other social pedagogical theories to define the best use of each concept and method. For the dissertation we have chosen to focus on three social pedagogical concepts: dialogue, animation and haltung.

## 4.1 Dialogue

Dialogue as a social pedagogical concept was described by Juha Hämäläinen in 1999 as open conversations with a purpose, the key components being listening to understand, suspending judgement, respecting all, and speaking your own voice. Most forms of communication involve a power dynamic which can interfere with absorbing and understanding the topic at hand. A dialogue needs to have a balance of inquiry and advocacy, meaning one is listening to understand the other persons point of view while also feeling heard and listened to in one's own points.

In educational practices, dialogue as a pedagogical method creates an environment which facilitates learning for children. In a scholarly article written by Eugene Matusov on dialogic pedagogy, he mentions the benefits of using dialogue in education. Matusov describes instrumental dialogue methods used by educators which allow the student to participate as a member of the conversation, increasing the likelihood of retention, motivation, engagement, and higher learning outcomes which may not have occurred in "non-dialogic educational means". Matusov defines non-dialogic educational means as "present circular endpoints at which students have to arrive." (Matusov, 2014)

Knowing these benefits of dialogue in pedagogical situation, we incorporated the uses of dialogue into our functional pedagogical materials. When having a dialogue with children (or facilitating one between several children) we have found it is important to focus on empowerment of the subject at hand. Dialogue works to exercise complex cognitive skills such as planning, problem solving, self-regulation, and emotional competence, making it a valuable learning tool for assisting children in their comprehension of a topic. Wendy Ostroff is a developmental and cognitive psychologist who speaks about the empowerment of dialogue with children. Ostroff mentions how children are often living in the present and not bogged down by the narratives in life as adults are, and being open and present in a dialogue is essential for retaining the information. (Ostroff, 2020) In addition to this, children are excellent at asking questions. In a pedagogical dialogue all parties need a voice, and with children especially, it is important to give them the opportunity to be the leaders of their education. By asking questions, they guide the dialogue and have more freedom in expanding their area of learning while simultaneously solving problems and facilitating comprehension alongside their peers. (Ostroff, 2020)

As a facilitator one is guiding the conversation around a topic while simultaneously maintaining a respectful flow of conversation and should be well-rounded in the subject matter. Therefore, when introducing a dialogue surrounding a difficult topic such as death, loss, or grief, the facilitator of the dialogue must have a solid understanding of cognitive and emotional development. When children are involved in a dialogue, the adult serving as the facilitator should be well-versed in classroom management, have a decent relationship with the children to ensure comfort, and must be able to decipher age-appropriate conversation.

The adult's roles and responsibilities in a dialogue concerning death are compiled into a list found in a dissertation by Teresa Clare Olin titled "Discussing Death with Young Children". This is meant to serve as baseline which an adult should maintain before entering a dialogue with children about death and is only used once that adult has an accurate understanding of how a child's development impacts their understanding of death. (Olin, 2016) The list is summarized as follows:

- Reflect on one's own attitude toward death.
- Be honest with the children.
- Be an emotional role model.
- Be attentive and responsive to the children's feelings.
- Create a predictable and caring environment.
- Include the children in the process.

## 4.2 Animation

Animation is method that is aimed towards bringing people together by promoting participation and self-help. It is divided into three subheadings. Creative animation, socio-cultural animation, and leisure time animation. With creative animation, the client is encouraged to express themselves with different forms of art. While in socio-cultural animation, animators work with individuals or groups to manage the community, they live in and, finally, leisure time animation involves the organizing and running of leisure activities during free time.

In this dissertation, we will focus more on creative animation which is similar to one of the learning areas mentioned previously (diverse forms of expression). Examples of these forms include music, visual arts, physical activity, and narrative play. All of which can be used as outlets for children to express themselves and the emotions they might not know they are harbouring.

Music is a unique means to modulate one's mood, create and strengthen community identity, communicate besides verbal communication, experience quality time, process impressions and develop personally, and to perhaps experience transcendence. (Dartsch, Stavrou, & Piispanen, 2022)

Visual arts education has two approaches, instrumentally focused and art focused. In the instrumentally focused visual arts education approach, the kindergarten teacher's role is to ensure that children can practise their motor skills. Whereas in the art-focused visual arts education approach the child's feeling of success can be achieved through promoting his/her own activity, playfulness, and experimentation. Here, the educator's enthusiasm and openness to children's initiatives are vital, with a key task being to maintain an inspiring and meaningful setting. (Rusanen, Pusa, & Mäenpää, 2015)

The development of a physically active lifestyle in early childhood is very important: research shows that the lifestyle adopted as early as at the age of three tends to remain. Daily physical activity is a prerequisite for the child's normal physical and holistic development. Participation in guided physical activity has been shown to predict a physically active lifestyle both in youth and in adulthood (Sääkslahti & Korhonen, 2016)

The main function of narrative play activity is to support the development of personal narrative voice and personal self in young children. (Bredikyte, Brandisauskiene, Hakkarainen, & Skeryte-Kazlauskiene, 2017). Drama and storytelling are one of the most common methods used when teaching children new topics and strengthening their self-awareness whether it be at an ECEC centre, home or even family day-care. This method is essential in promoting language development by exposing children to different terms and phrases through books, scripts, puppet shows etc. It also has the potential to develop an individual's empathy skills by evoking various emotions that children experience by placing themselves in someone else shoes.

### 4.3 Haltung

In the German perspective of social pedagogy, Hämäläinen states 19<sup>th</sup> century German soldiers Karl Mager and Adolph Diesterweg were essentially the pioneers. The German example is vital to consider as they maintain a leading position in the creation of these theories and hold social pedagogy extremely high in their educational and social values. Haltung is a social pedagogical concept originating from the German language which loosely translates to one's ethos, mindset, or attitude. Hämäläinen uses this social pedagogical concept as it centres around how one guides their everyday actions based on their inherent beliefs and moral convictions. (Hämäläinen, 2015) Haltung is a concept addressing the authenticity of working professionals in their field. The 'Haltung' of social pedagogues should in the forefront be based on respect for human dignity and social emotional connections. (Eichsteller, 2010)

Based on these notions, it is crucial to learn and understand the different religious views on death as it impacts how a child perceives and internalizes them. The major religious communities are Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Those who follow Christianity, Judaism, and Islam (which are grouped together and known as the Abrahamic religions) believe in the similar proceedings that occur after one's death. It is said that once a soul is removed from a body, it is judged based on the actions during its lifetime and then taken to either heaven or hell. On the other hand, those that follow Hinduism and Buddhism believe that once a person passes away, they are reincarnated into another form. In addition to these, there are also other views that need to be considered as it affects a child's view on death, loss and how to process grief.

A social pedagogues 'Haltung' can be structured in two pillars: comprehending and regarding. Comprehending refers to understanding the way of life of an individual and using empathy and dialogue as guiding one's 'Haltung' towards this. Regarding refers to the acceptance of another individual's uniqueness which differs from our own. As humans we often connect with others based on what we see of ourselves in them rather than accepting and appreciating the otherness in people whom we don't necessarily relate to. Using the pillar of 'regarding' in Haltung can eliminate ourselves from reducing them to only what we are familiar with. These pillars are meant to be oscillated between each other during professional practice. (Eichsteller, 2010)



## 5 Development task

Our pedagogical materials for teachers are based on expanding the education on death, loss, and grief for children in early childhood institutions within Finland. We will accomplish this by creating practical materials for teachers to use with the children in their care. The materials will consist of different tips and tricks that aims to facilitate discussion and hence offer support as well as guidance for children. The target group is four to five-year-old children and the partnering centre who we will be collaborating with to attain the viewpoint of the current educators and parents in order to gain insight on the matter to make the best possible product.

The theory used to support our study includes Jean Piaget's development theory and three social pedagogical concepts (dialogue, animation and haltung). We decided to use Piaget's theory because of the way he divided the stages of cognitive development and to justify why we should teach children about this sensitive topic at this age. On the other hand, the social pedagogical concepts are used more to explain the reason behind the methods we will be introducing in materials given to the educators. For example, dialogue helps us understand where a child is mentally as well as emotionally so that the educator can support them. Conversely, haltung focuses on each child as a holistic being so that they are guided in a way that is specific to them. Finally, we are using animation to consider different forms of expression that children could use as outlets.

### 5.1 Implementation methods

The implementation for this functional thesis began with utilizing the theoretical background pertaining to answering our research question: how can we ethically produce pedagogical materials to fill the gap in education on death, loss, and grief in the ECEC curriculum? With the theoretical knowledge as our foundation, we began collecting data of our own through surveys and interviews with our partnering early education facility's educators and clients. Once the data is collected and stored properly, we evaluated the research and began creating the pedagogical activities. The materials will serve as a tool for educators to teach children ages four to five about death, loss, and grief and use as a preventative measure to sustain one's emotional wellbeing following a bereavement or loss.

## 5.2 Ethical Considerations

For the ethical considerations of this study, we analysed the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the research process. By pinpointing these targets in the study, we guided our goal towards answering our research question as well as to recognize and prevent the possible weaknesses and threats in conducting the research to remain ethically sound.

The strengths of our study are the relevant theoretical resources used to create the research question and the foundation of the development idea. By sustaining integrity in accurate sources as well as following a strict policy on private data collection, we ethically produced this developmental idea into a working functional thesis. Our weaknesses in the study could be our limited resources for interviewing employees and patients as we do not have the time or the outreach to obtain higher numbers of participants.

The opportunities in our research process relate to the developmental idea we hope to create for our partnering ECEC facility. We can create a set of pedagogical materials which could eventually help the young clients in the facility to recognize how loss impacts individuals and prevent them from sustaining a grief-stricken childhood. The threats that lie in this development idea surround the child's well-being, as each individual child is going to respond differently to our materials. We intend to create a foundational set of tools with room for adjustment according to the educator's discretion of the children individually.

Once arriving at an ethical research process, we then must evaluate the creation and implementation of this set of materials for our clients to ensure the ethical considerations are taken seriously. Death, loss, and grief are difficult emotional topics which need to be approached in a sensitive manner. The ethical considerations will be analysed to prevent our clients from experiencing harmful outcomes from our pedagogical materials when addressing these topics. By using our knowledge on emotional regulation in tandem with social pedagogical concepts, we believe we can facilitate a healthy learning experience for the children.

### 5.3 Data collection

We will be collecting data through qualitative and quantitative research methods. Qualitative data is observed through singular semi-structured interviews with the educators, in which we have pre-planned several potential themes that we discussed during our encounters. However, the questions and order will vary according to the individuals. The underlying purpose of the interviews was to evaluate each educator's perception on death, loss, and grief, and assess which tools they would benefit most from receiving in the pedagogical materials we create. This type of data collection is thematically analysed. Each educator has signed a data collection contract which pertains to our ethical considerations for obtaining and storing the data.

Quantitative data is gathered through surveys that were sent to the guardians of our partnering centre. The survey consists of a short introduction to the thesis, a consent affirmation, and five to ten multiple choice questions. Designed succinctly to maximise responses, our survey's purpose is to discover how local guardians view death, loss, and grief, and how their own familial variables (siblings, only children, religion, beliefs, values, etc) affect this. This data is then temporarily stored in a secure database for evaluation to be used in creating the pedagogical activities.

## 6 Thematic analysis

A thematic interview is a type of interview that lies between unstructured and structured interviews. Much like the structured interviews, it consists of fixed themes and ready-made questions corresponding with each one. Although every theme must be discussed within each interview, the questions and their order may vary. It is not mandatory to go through every question, as the answers to them may be embedded in a response to a previous question.

As part of this dissertation, we conducted five interviews which were thematically analysed according to our aim of expanding the education on death, loss, and grief for children in early childhood institutions within Finland by providing pedagogical materials for educators. While analysing the results of these interviews we recognized four common themes: the teacher's presumptions on the subjects of death, loss, and grief,

neglect of these subjects, teacher's approach to teaching the subjects, and teacher's wishes for our pedagogical materials.

Each educator's personal perception on the concepts of death, loss, and grief surrounded the idea that life is a component of death and an inevitable outcome for every living entity. The topics of religion, their own experiences with death, and the need for teaching loss in ECEC were all discussed in this dialogue with the educators. The importance of understanding the educator's own relationship with death and loss is vital to our development project because one's preconceived thoughts and understanding about a topic can unintentionally seep into one's delivery while teaching.

Following this, the question 'do you teach about death, loss, and grief?' was posed to everyone within the interviews and the response was unanimously "No". It is clear that the topic is one that is discarded within the early childhood institutions. With the lack of information and neglect surrounding the topic of death in early childhood education institutes, it is difficult for teachers to educate and support those under their care that are, have, or may experience it in the future. Most have expressed that they would like more knowledge on how to approach and teach this complex topic to simpler minds.

When prompted with the question of how each teacher would approach teaching about death, loss, and grief to the children of our target group, their answers were a variation of many pedagogical methods. Some swayed in the direction of literature and narrative play, expressing that they believe reading or acting out fictional stories can increase the children's interest and retention of loss being a part of life. Other educators spoke on emotional support methods to a great loss. By using pedagogical materials based on learning about emotions and normalizing them, they felt that the core to teaching about death is using a preventative approach by focusing on each child's emotional intelligence and building upon that. There was a notable division around the teachers' opinions on whether this topic would be more successfully taught in group settings or one on one with individual children. While all teachers agreed that each child has different emotional intelligence levels, their opinions on teaching it in groups using games and stories or teaching the children individually using personally tailored pedagogical methods was not unanimous. These varying opinions are significant to our research, and they offer us several different approaches to evaluate when creating our pedagogical materials.

The final conclusion from these interviews was to hear the wishes from our educators for the pedagogical materials we will be creating for them. Their answers varied, and the following ideas were gathered: emotional tools, practical tools, information and communication technology (ICT) tools, and outreach to the parent's and children's perspectives. The educator's presumptions on death, their opinions on the neglect in the education system surrounding death and loss, and their own teaching approaches for these topics were recorded and analysed for our development project. We will use these in tandem with the educators wishes to create our pedagogical materials.

## **7 Quantitative analysis**

As mentioned previously, the quantitative data was gathered via surveys that were sent to the guardians in the daycare we collaborated with in order to gain their personal perspectives that pertains to the current awareness to the topic of death loss and grief in daycares. We considered variables such as a child's religious upbringing and age because we understood that they may affect the answers given to certain questions. Overall, we had 10 participants from one daycare, which is not a big sample size and lacks diversity in accordance with the different daycare systems present within Finland. However, the responses were useful and served their purpose.

From teachers, we learned that the topic is not approached in early childhood settings so we posed certain questions to address the stigma behind these topics and see whether they're discussed at home and how children already may perceive death loss and grief. To obtain this information, we made statements in which parents had different options to choose from. An example of such a statement is 'I have had notable number of conversations with my child about death, loss and grief' and 'my child understands that a non-fictional death is finite and irreversible'.

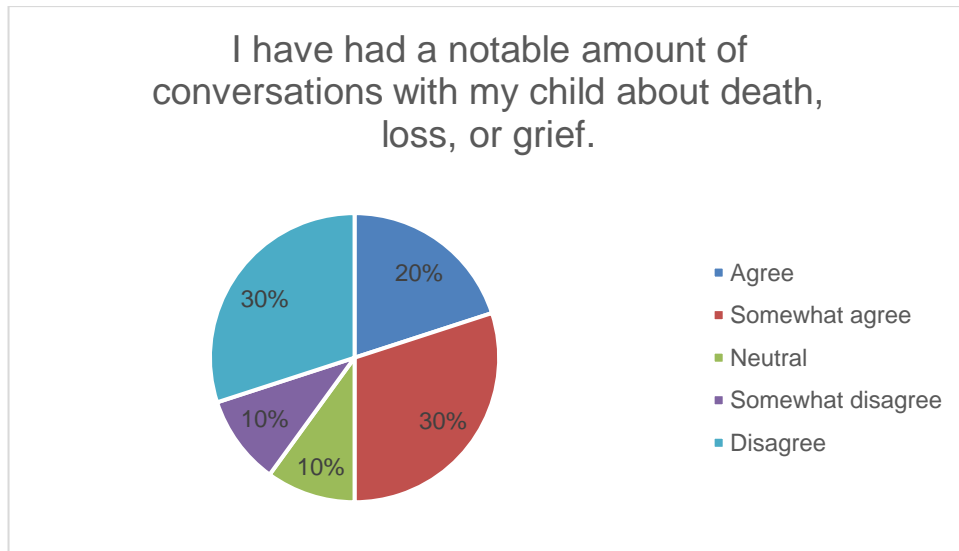


Figure 1: I have had a notable amount of conversations with my child about death, loss, or grief.

According to figure 1, the results showed that more participants agree, to some extent, that they have spoken to their child regarding the topic at hand. We feel this is relevant because it contradicts the teacher's viewpoint, that it is a neglected topic. Meaning the parents are having these difficult conversations with their children on this heavy topic with inadequate training on the matter, not knowing the effect it could have on a child's mental and emotional development.

To understand the need to shed light on the topic of death, loss, and grief we wanted to evaluate whether the children we surveyed have experienced loss in any form, such as bereavement, divorce, loss of something beloved etc. Accordingly, we posed the statements 'my child has experienced great loss' and 'my child has experienced grief'.

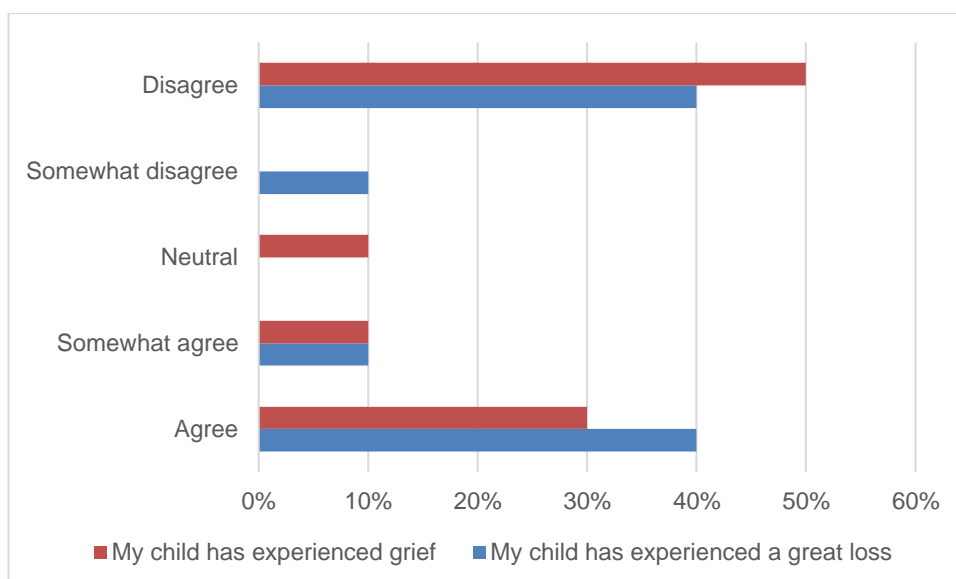


Figure 2: Comparison between my child has experienced grief and my child has experienced a great loss.

As you can see, more guardians agree with the statement that their child has experienced a great loss as opposed to experiencing grief. This could be due to the connotations surrounding the words grief and loss. Loss can mean many things such as losing an object that was important whereas grief is reserved, mostly, for the death of someone beloved to us such as a family member, friend, pet etc. Also, the data depicts 50% of the participants disagree, in some way, that their child has experienced grief and the same goes for that of great loss. We believe this to be essential because it shows that the remaining 50% have experienced grief or loss and therefore deserve the support and knowledge that could have provided by the caregivers in their lives.

In addition to the questions mentioned, the survey also consisted of a comments section where parents could leave their opinions about educating children in early childhood education facilities about death, loss, and grief. A concern that was highlighted was the varying understandings of death and afterlife. Some parents felt it could be difficult to implement death/loss into a study plan because culture and context largely define the understanding of the topic. They were apprehensive of the religious/ spiritual perspective on the matter that would be dominating in the early childhood settings their children would learn these concepts in.

On the other hand, majority of the parents seemed to agree on the notion that it is very important that early childhood education centres discuss death, loss, and grief and the

personnel of all daycare centres receive additional training on these topics so that they know how to support children in the best possible way possible. One in particular mentioned that death has become a taboo in our modern society, because there is so much that can be done to heal people, but children should be taught from a young age that death and loss are a part of life, and grief is a process every person will face sooner or later. It is crucial to focus on ways to teach children this without scaring them, because death, understandably, is a frightening thought for them.

## 8 Pedagogical materials for teachers

Introducing a topic like death, loss, and grief can be nerve-racking and doing so with children can intensify these feelings further. We have made these materials to make the transition easy for both children and educators. Our materials for educators consist of three pieces of literature which are intended to be used in tandem with the following visual art activities. Throughout the activities, we encourage the educators to implement dialogues as much as possible.

The pedagogical materials for educators include an outline of dialogue as a theory, as well as instructions and additional resources for ethically implementing a proper facilitation of a dialogue with children. If implemented correctly, these pedagogical materials in tandem with constant dialogues should introduce the conversation of death, loss, and grief for children in an age-appropriate manner. The finalized pedagogical materials for educators can be found in Appendix A.

### 8.1 Narrative play

We believe the simplest way to present the topic is through books as it allows the reader to be sucked into a world where they can experience new things and learn life lessons indirectly. The following three books serve this purpose and from them children can participate in activities such as those that will be mentioned in crafts.

- *The invisible string* by Patrice Karst: In this book, the author introduces the concept that people who love one another are connected by an invisible string made of love. The characters (two siblings) go on to start naming different people they love as well as distances that may be considered too far for a string, asking



their mother if they are connected. Examples include their cat, best friends, uncle in heaven etc. (Karst, P. 2001)

- *The memory box* by Joanna Rowland: The book starts with the main character losing a balloon, which then segues into the loss of someone beloved to them. The character is scared they will forget the person and so decides to make a box and fill it with memories of their time together. After this the character talks about making new memories and that the person will always be there with them. Never forgotten. (Rowland, J. 2017)
- *Why do I feel so sad?* By Tracy Lambert: The book begins with the concept of grief and listing things that cause someone to grieve. Examples are, death of a loved one, a missing pet, parents divorcing, moving away, losing friends etc. it then goes on to emphasize that different people grieve differently while providing examples. The book concludes by providing outlets to grieving. (Lambert, T. 2020)

In addition to the summaries, the pedagogical materials contain specific benefits for reading each novel as well as opening and post reading questions that the educators can use to involve the children in their learning processes. These can be found in appendix A.

## 8.2 Visual arts

Following the introduction to our topics through literature and narrative play, our pedagogical materials then include three visual art activities in which the participating children will be able to secure their learnings into concrete schemas. The National Core Curriculum for ECEC in Finland states the importance of learning through diverse forms of expression. Children who participate in organized play, visual arts, music, and movement exercises are utilizing their individual creativity which increases motivation and retention of learning. (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2022, p.41) The following activities will be used in our pedagogical materials to serve that purpose:

- Making strings: This activity is a follow up of the book *The Invisible String* by Patrice Karst. The activity is intended to be a craft session-dialogue with the educators and their students. In small groups, the educator will demonstrate

cutting heart shapes out of paper. One heart is looped around the neck with string where it should sit on their chest to represent this individual's heart. Next, the student is instructed to create more heart cut outs and write the names of their loved ones on the hearts. Students then attach strings of yarn from their "heart" to the additional hearts they made, leaving them with a "necklace" of hearts. These "hearts" which are connected to theirs can be family members, classmates, pets, favourite toys, anything they feel that their "invisible string" is attached to. Then the educators can discuss with them in an open dialogue about who/what they feel their heart is attached to. Students are left with a visual representation of their significant attachments in life which can open the discussion for gratitude and fragility towards these attachments. Additional instructions can be found in our pedagogical materials for educators in Appendix A.

- **Memory box:** This activity is also intended as a follow up of the book *The Memory Box* by Joanna Rowland. The purpose of this activity is not solely for aiding a bereaved child, but for educating children on any loss in their life and serves as a preventative measure for children to develop emotional coping skills for future losses. The activity begins with a prompt for students to think on a loss they have felt. Maybe they experienced a significant loss, like a family member passing, or it could be as simple as losing a favourite toy or longing for a significant memory from their past. With this in mind, the children then begin creating and decorating a box for this loss. The activity can be shorter, with the child creating art and crafts which represent the loss and adding it to their box. Or it can be longer, where the children can take the box home, ask their family members about items or written stories they could include in their box, and share these later with the class. Additional instructions can be found in our pedagogical materials for educators in Appendix A.
- **Drawing Grief:** This final activity is a learning tool for children to understand grief and their losses in life, created by Scholastic, a company which promotes literacy and education for millions of students, parents, and teachers. The activity essentially follows educators prompting students about their everyday routines and who they share those routines with (e.g., bedtime, brushing teeth, playground time, etc). Students can then elaborate and share their experiences and who is involved in them. Next, they are given the opportunity to reflect on one specific

routine and how it would feel if that other person was not there. Following this discussion children then are instructed to draw this time of day, and if they wish, can share to the group what this time of day means to them and how they would feel without that person there. Additional instructions can be found in our pedagogical materials for teachers in Appendix A. (Scholastic, n.d.)

## **9 Discussion and conclusion**

The driving force of this functional thesis was to address the lack of education we believed existed in early childhood education facilities throughout Finland on death, loss, and grief and create a set of materials which could be used to teach about these subjects in an age-appropriate and ethically responsible approach.

Once a lack of education in the current system was established, we created our research question: how can we ethically produce pedagogical materials to fill the gap in education on death, loss, and grief in the Finnish ECEC curriculum? The first step to creating these materials was discovering how in depth we could get about teaching these subjects to young children, and at what age would it be received well. Our theory focused on this, where we discovered the importance a child's cognitive development stage when speaking about these topics. We then acquired knowledge about the best method of teaching about sensitive subjects, where we used pedagogical concepts and methods to create our materials for educators.

To support our theoretical knowledge, we began working with our partnering ECEC facility to collect our own field data and establish their needs for this set of materials. By using thematic and quantitative analyses, we concluded that educators and parents of the students in the facility felt there was a need for these materials in their curriculum. Following this, we were able to gain first-hand knowledge on how the educators would like these methods to be implemented.

With deep consideration of the original target group, 4- to 5-year-olds, we concluded that the materials can be implemented with a wider age bracket according to a child's cognitive develop stage. We have both worked with children of various ages and considered many factors when deciding the age of the target group for the materials we were making. Although the materials would work best with 4–5-year-olds, we strongly

believe that they can be utilized with children as young as three to as old as seven depending on their level of cognitive development.

Our research shows that when dealing with any form loss children need support that is specific to them, and every child will have their own way of expressing their emotions. Some might want to have conversations where they ask questions or voicing their emotions, while others do not want to acknowledge the situation at all. A child's response may also vary according to how they were approached on the news of the loss. Regardless of the response given, we conclude that it is the professional's duty to be sensitive and knowledgeable on the matter to provide support in a way that is best tailored to the needs of the children they are working with. This is precisely the reason why our materials are made for the educators who interact and work with the children on a regular basis. When implemented with the correct ethical considerations, the weight of our evidence confirms that our pedagogical materials for educators can expand a student's knowledge on death and loss, providing them with emotional tools for coping with grief preceding or succeeding a bereavement.

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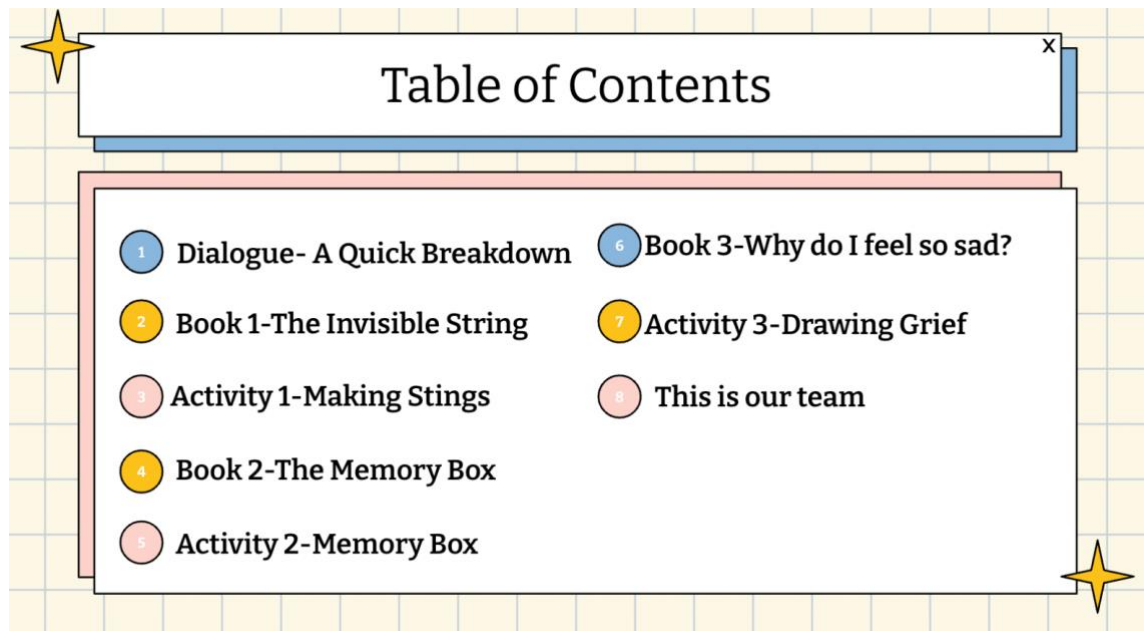
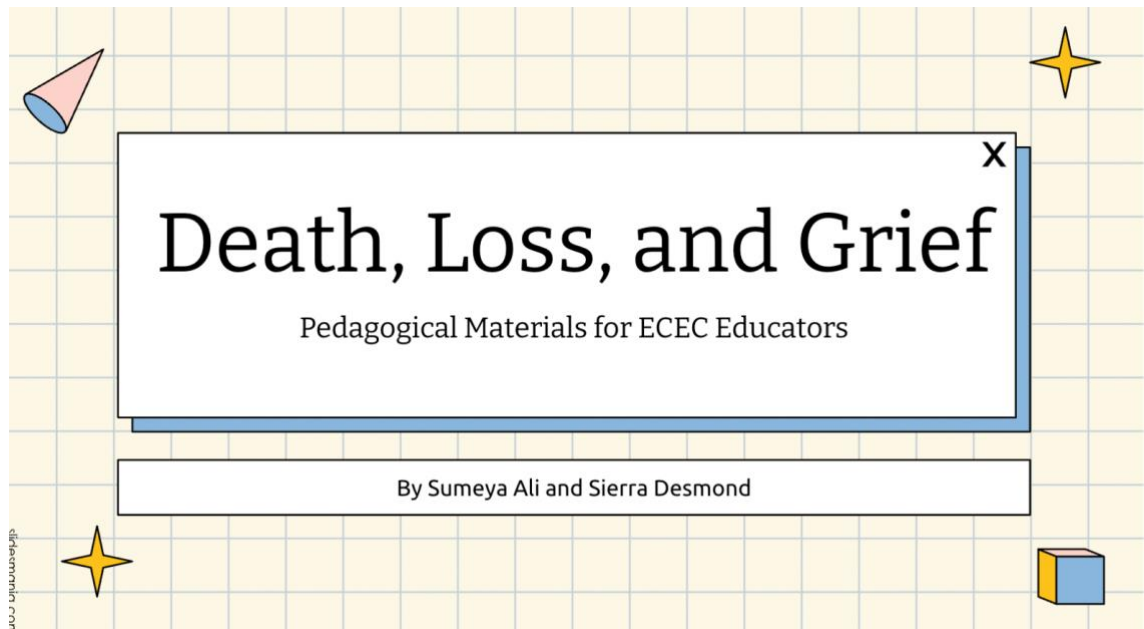
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# Appendices

## Appendix A: Pedagogical Materials for Educators









## Introduction

Welcome to our pedagogical materials for ECEC educators! In these materials you will find concrete literature and activities which can be used to teach children ages 4 to 5 on the difficult topics of death, loss, and grief.

We believe that educating children on loss at a young age is vital. These materials are intended as a preventative approach to introducing the emotional skills one needs before a significant bereavement or loss has occurred.

For additional theory and materials on death, loss, and grief, we invite you to read our published dissertation and additional materials referenced at the end of this booklet.

## Dialogue - A Quick Breakdown

### Dialogue

A dialogue with children is intended to solidify the learnings from our pedagogical activities. A dialogue can take place in group settings, in between activities, and one on one with children.

A well designed dialogue increases a child's motivation to retain information learned through pedagogical activities. Dialogues with children are used to gauge a child's enthusiasm and get them involved in their learning process. This is where we can see the children's differences in viewpoints so that they are able to learn from one another, ask questions, and feel heard.

In a pedagogical dialogue all parties need a voice, and with children especially, it is important to give them the opportunity to be the leaders of their education. By asking questions they guide the dialogue and have more freedom in expanding their area of learning in this while simultaneously solving problems and emerging comprehension alongside their peers.



### Facilitating a Dialogue

As a facilitator you are guiding the conversation around a topic while simultaneously maintaining a respectful flow of conversation and should be well rounded in the subject matter. Therefore, when introducing a dialogue surrounding a difficult topic such as death, loss, or grief, the facilitator of the dialogue must have a solid understanding of cognitive and emotional development. When children are involved in a dialogue, the adult serving as the facilitator should be well versed in classroom management, have a decent relationship with the children to ensure comfort, and must be able to decipher age-appropriate conversation.

The adult's roles and responsibilities in a dialogue surrounding death are compiled into a list found in a dissertation by Teresa Clare Olin titled *Discussing Death with Young Children*. This is meant to serve as baseline which an adult should maintain before entering a dialogue with children about death and is only meant to be used once that adult has an accurate understanding of how a child's development impacts their understanding of death. (Olin, 2016) The list is summarized as follows:

- Reflect on one's own attitude toward death.
- Be honest with the children.
- Be an emotional role model.
- Be attentive and responsive to the children's feelings.
- Create a predictable and caring environment.
- Include the children in the process.

Additional information on Teresa's method can be found in the references.

## Book 1 - The Invisible String by Patrice Karst

### Introduction

All discussions should be short as children tend to have short attention spans and lose focus easily.

**Opening questions:**

- What do you think is an invisible string?
- What/ who do you love and what connects you?

**Short description:**

The author introduces the concept that people who love one another are connected by an invisible string made of love. The characters (two siblings) begin to name different people they love as well as distances that may be considered too far to connect via a string, asking their mother if they are connected. Examples include, their cat, best friends, uncle in heaven etc.

**Benefits of the material**

The themes discussed in this book are not too heavy or focused on death, loss, or grief so anyone can relate in some form.

### Post-reading

- What happened?
- How did the story make you feel?
- Introduce activity 1

## Activity 1 - Making Strings

### Intro dialogue


This activity is a follow up of the book *The Invisible String* by Patrice Karst. The activity is intended to be a craft session-dialogue with the educators and their students.

Before beginning the activity, have your students reflect out loud or to themselves about who (or what) they feel their invisible string is attached to in life. This could be, for example, family members, classmates, pets, favourite toys, etc. Anything they feel connected to.

### Creating your "heart"

In small groups, instruct the students to cut out a paper heart and loop string through the top of it into the form of a necklace, so that the heart they made sits above their anatomical heart when they wear the necklace. Students can then decorate the heart as they would view their own heart to be.

Discuss with your students about their heart. Why is it this color? How have they decorated it, and what does it mean to them?




### Creating the hearts of your loved ones

Repeating the previous step, now instruct the children to create heart cut outs of a few loved ones who they believe their invisible string is attached to. Allow them to decorate this heart as that loved one's heart would be in their mind. Remind them that this loved one can also be something or someone whom they lost!

Discuss with your students about the hearts of their loved ones. What do they represent? Why did they add the decorations that they did? Are these people/objects still in their life?

### Creating your invisible strings

Now it's time to connect those hearts to theirs with an "invisible" string. Instruct students to take a string and loop it through the heart they made which represents themselves and connect it to the hearts they made of their loved ones. Now your students heart should be connected to their loved ones hearts, and wearable as a "necklace"



### Closing dialogue

The purpose of this being necklace is so students can wear this during the circle time dialogue, take it home, and expand on it if they want to. The purpose of this activity was to visually represent to the student how their attachments in life affect them.

When the necklaces are done, allow students to bring them to the discussion, and open the floor for a show and tell for anyone who wants to share. Ask leading questions and expand on the themes from the book. Allow space for questions.

## Book 2 - The Memory Box by Joanna Rowland

### Introducing

All discussions should be short as children tend to have short attention spans and lose focus easily.

**Opening questions:**

- What are things that make you sad?
- How do you overcome your sadness? Or what do you do when you feel sad

**Short description:**

The book starts with the main character losing a balloon, which then segways into the loss of someone beloved to them. The character is scared they will forget the person and so decides to make a box and fill it with memories of their time together. After this the character talks about making new memories and that the person will always be there with them. Never forgotten.

**Benefits of the material**

Unlike the previous reading material, this book focuses on losing a loved one. The method used are very simple and can easily be transferred in an early childhood setting.

### Post-reading

- What happened?
- How did the story make you feel?
- What can you do when your sad?
- Introduce activity 2

## Activity 2 - Memory box

### Intro dialogue

This activity is a follow up of the book The memory box by Joanna Rowland. The purpose of this activity is not solely for aiding a bereaved child, but for educating children on any loss in their life and serves as a preventative measure for children to develop emotional coping skills for future losses.

The activity begins with a prompt for students to think on a loss they have felt. Maybe they experienced a significant loss like a family member passing, or it could be as simple as losing a favourite toy or longing for a significant memory from their past.

### Decide on the subject of your box

The subject of one's box is entirely up to the child. Finding a loss in their life can make them feel vulnerable and possibly even bring up grief. Students can discuss in a group, individually with the educator, or decide privately to themselves which memory, bereavement, or loss they chose.

If a student cannot decide on a subject for their box, try providing leading questions such as:

Have you ever lost a toy which was important to you?

What was your absolute favorite trip with your family, and why? Do you miss that memory?

Have you ever lost a friend? Maybe they moved away, or moved schools?

### Choose the box which feels right for you

Once the student has decided on a subject for their memory box, they should be able to choose a box from a selection of boxes of different colors, shapes, and sizes. Boxes for this activity can be found for free or inexpensive at markets, recyclings centers, craft stores, being recycled away from vendors, etc.

The facilitator of this activity should have several boxes to choose from of varying sizes, shapes, and colors. When a student has chosen their box, prompt them with questions if they want to share. For example: why did they choose this box? Is this color significant? Do they feel it represents their box's subject?

### Decorate and fill your box

Children will then be instructed to take their box of choice and begin decorating the outside of it with art which they feels represents their subject of loss.

Once the outside is decorated, children can create objects to place in the box which remind them of this loss, take it home and fill it will objects from home, and even extend the conversation to their loved ones who share in this loss for input on what to add to the box.

### Closing dialogue

Finally, children should have the option to share this box with their classmates and their educator should they want to.

In a closing dialogue, allow space for sharing, and open a discussion about how memories serve purposes in our life and how they last within us. Extend the dialogue back to the book's major themes and relate them to the box which the students made themselves.

X

## Book 3 - Why do I feel so sad? By Tracy Lambert

X

### Introducing

All discussions should be short as children tend to have short attention spans and lose focus easily.

**Opening questions:**

- Have you ever lost anything or anyone?
- How did you feel?
- What did you do when you found out?

**Short description:**

The book begins with the concept of grief and listing things that cause someone to grieve. Examples are, death of a loved one, a missing pet, parents divorcing, moving away, losing friends etc. it then goes on to emphasize that different people grieve differently while providing examples. The book concludes by providing outlets to grieving.

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**Benefits of the material**

This book discussed various forms loss and grief. It emphasises the different ways of coping with it while point out that people process it subjectively. Meaning everyone is unique.

X

### Post-reading

- What did you learn?
- How did the story make you feel?
- Have you experienced anything that was mentioned?
- Introduce activity 3

X

## Activity 3 - Drawing Grief

### Intro Dialogue

This activity is intended as a follow up of the book Why do I feel so sad? By Tracy Lambert. This activity is a learning tool for children to understand grief and their losses in life created by Scholastic, a company which promotes literacy and education for millions of students, parents, and teachers.

The opening dialogue stated by Scholastic is as follows: In a group, ask students what types of situations make them sad. Record the reasons on the board. Probable responses will be the loss of a pet or possibly a grandparent or a family member who has been forced to move away. Younger children may not yet have experienced death.

Then introduce grief as a concept and discuss what grief means to them, use the book "Why do I feel so sad?" as a starting point.

### The Activity

Once the discussion reaches a resolving point, begin the activity. Start by distributing sheets of paper and pencils.

Ask students to think about important moments they share with their parents. If they have trouble coming up with ideas, talk about mealtime, brushing their teeth, or bedtime. Ask them to think about special times with their grandparents. If they have trouble coming up with ideas, talk about holidays, family trips, or family get-togethers.

Allow time for group discussion and sharing for those who wish to, before moving on.

### Drawing their grief scene

Then ask the students how they think it would feel if they had a parent, grandparent, or another family member who was missing from those moments in their lives.

Once the discussion is complete, ask the children to draw an important time of day, a holiday, or an event that would be difficult without a parent, grandparent, or other relative.

Once everyone is finished drawing or an adequate amount of time has passed, move onto the reflection dialogue.

Remember to gauge the focus level of the student and provide time for brain breaks if necessary!

### Reflection dialogue

Now in a group or individually children can share how this experience would feel to them if they were missing that significant person. If students do not feel comfortable sharing their drawings with the class, offer them the option of sharing them with only you.

For younger students, challenge them to relate colors and temperatures to the emotions they drew. Ask them if the emotions they drew are closer to heat or coldness. Does their grief make them think of purple, red, black, gray, or some other color?

For more information on this activity, feel free to visit our references at the end of this booklet.

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**References and additional materials on death, loss and grief for children:**

**Literature:**  
Dialogue: Olin, Teresa C. "Discussing Death With Young Children." *California State University*, 2016, p. 134.  
Book 1: Karst, P. (2001). *The Invisible String*. DeVorss.  
Book 2: Rowland, J., & Baker, T. (2017). *The memory box: a book about grief* (First edition.). Sparkhouse Family.  
Book 3: Lambert, T. (2020). *Why Do I Feel So Sad?*. Rockridge Press  
Activity 3: "Grades K-5: Grief Drawing Activity." *Grades K-5: Grief Drawing Activity | Scholastic.Com*, [www.scholastic.com/snp/childrenandgrief-9.htm](http://www.scholastic.com/snp/childrenandgrief-9.htm).

**Additional resources:**  
Omitted for privacy regulations.