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### ABSTRACT

Early childhood education, an essential stage for human development, enables the establishment of socio-affective relationships and bonds beyond the family environment, favoring the construction of the notion of individual and social identity, a process in which the child must be respected as a person in formation in its integrality. However, the

character of the inseparability of aspects of human development has only been considered in recent decades in the educational process and by the guiding documents of Brazilian education. The BNCC, in addition to reaffirming the link between educating and caring, arranged among the general competencies to be developed throughout basic education, the socio-emotional ones. Jean Piaget (1896-1980) in his broad trajectory of studies about child development, researched how the child constructs reality, considering the social, cognitive, physical, and affective aspects. In a constant process of assimilation and accommodation to the world, the child experiences unbalanced situations and can use the symbolic game as a means of compensating and/or settling conflicts, including dealing with one of the most challenging experiences that human beings can experience, the death of a loved one. In this article, we will present a case report addressing a situation of affective loss experienced by a 5-year-old child in the context of early childhood education, and how she re-elaborated and expressed her feelings through symbolic play. The theme has great relevance, especially in the pandemic context, in which educators have been challenged to welcome and assist students in the elaboration of their emotions and feelings.

**Keywords:** Symbolic Game, Socio-emotional competencies, Death and mourning.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The National Common Curricular Base (BRASIL, 2017), which aims to establish knowledge, competencies, and skills developed by all students during basic education, safeguarding regional specificities, establishes general and specific competencies for the different areas of knowledge and respective curricular components.

The idea of working on emotional skills in the school environment is not recent, however, because it has a normative character, the BNCC brings up the need to think and formulate educational actions whose attention is focused on these competencies.

The basic document of Education understands Socio-emotional Competencies the set of skills and procedures necessary for the individual to develop self-knowledge, and capacities to mediate conflicts and solve everyday problems. They run through BNCC as a whole:

[...] getting to know themselves, appreciating themselves and taking care of their physical and emotional health, understanding themselves in human diversity and recognizing their emotions and those of others, with self-criticism and the ability to deal with them; act personally and collectively with autonomy, responsibility, flexibility, resilience, and determination, making decisions based on ethical, democratic, inclusive, sustainable and solidary principles (BRASIL, 2018, p. 10).

Among the topics that call for such skills, death and mourning are among the most complex and fraught with anguish and taboo. Due to the experiences of pain and loss that are usually associated with the experiences of people who go through this type of experience, this theme can often go unnoticed, or even be avoided and ignored in school routines.

Kübler-Ross (1987), the author who popularized the studies on death and the stages of mourning in the classic work "on death and Dying" in 1969, already said that the more science advances, the more one fears and denies death itself. According to her, these manifestations can be expressed in several ways, pointing out some examples, such as the dead person being seen to be pointed out only as at rest of sleep, as if he were just sleeping. Another important example pointed out by the author concerns when the truth about death is denied to the children, keeping them away from experiencing grief with other family members, asking them to withdraw and preventing the manifestation of sadness and anxiety of the moment, and also losing the chances that perceive other manifestations of the little ones before the context of death.

Torres (1999) points to grief as a process that begins with an initial shock reaction, followed by despair until reaching recovery and reconstitution. In this course of elaboration, feelings occur that oscillate between anger and sadness, followed by manifestations of crying, hostility, and depression.

In an attempt not to confront their difficulties about death, adults sometimes opt for silence when faced with bereaved children, accompanied by mistaken arguments that children are not able to understand this phenomenon.

However, studies by Torres (1979; 1999) and Delval and Vila (2008) point out that children understand much more than is imagined by adults, who when using this avoidance strategy, end up inhibiting children, who interpret this avoidance and silencing as a warning that they should not express their feelings and not even touch the subject or clarify their questions through questions (TORRES, 1999).

In an attempt to demystify death for adults who accompany bereaved children, Torres (1999) advises that allowing them to express themselves to welcome them is more assertive so that in this

way, the experience is elaborated and also that it is avoided unexpressed fears act on the imagination to further increase their suffering.

In addition, the author highlights that the best possibilities for welcoming and clarifying answers are those that can be taken from the experiences of the children themselves, seeking to respect their cognitive level and the characteristics of their development (TORRES, 1999).

Delval and Vila (2008), when studying the conceptions about death in children, approached this conception in its aspect of divinity, that is, in addition to researching what the little ones understand about death, they also verified what they understand and think about the existence of an afterlife, and what happens after death. To this end, they applied to children an interview focused on three fundamental points: "What is death and what happens when someone dies?", "What is the soul?", "What happens to animals and plants when they die?". After the analysis of the authors, the existence of 3 major levels of understanding about these researched subjects was pointed out.

At level 1, all subjects have heard about death, but the younger ones do not express very clearly what it is, or what happens from death, despite knowing that it exists. In summary, at this stage children still do not emit complex descriptions, do not present well-defined concepts, and explanations are usually short, sometimes repeating some information that was transmitted by adults, but who still do not understand and can not explain very well (DELVAL, 2008).

At level 2 it is already possible to notice some changes in the sense of clearer reports related to death and an idea of the soul, also arising doubts about the existence of an afterlife, at this level, the child can already articulate some more structured ideas, but not yet as complex as in the next level (DELVAL, 2008).

At level 3, the subjects' explanations are much clearer and more explicit, they begin to reflect on what they were taught, face contradictions, and more elaborate doubts arise. Two groups are pointed out at this level, the conformists (who express doubts but direct their answers in the direction of what has been transmitted to them by reference adults) and the critics (who support their doubts and propose these questions even if they can solve or answer them).

Kovács (2021) mentions that the understanding of death is experienced differently by children and that the expression of the little ones is not usually limited to words. This means that they make use of resources from their childhood reality, that is, through drawings, toys, and games, which encompass the playful field. Another important aspect to be considered is that children are directed in the search for a reference adult and want to find support. They must find in this adult welcoming, recognition, and legitimation of their feelings, as well as clarification of their doubts and questions. In this way, the inner world of the child is gradually organized after the impact of the loss felt.

It would be fundamental that themes related to death were understood in the training of education professionals because many will have throughout their professional trajectory situations of death and mourning in their daily lives (KOVÁCS, 2021).

In this conjuncture, the objective of this study is inserted, to present the possibilities of compensating and/or liquidating situations, feelings, and emotions arising from the experience of death and mourning spontaneously through symbolic play. To this end, we will present a case report addressing a situation of important affective loss experienced by a 5-year-old child in the context of early childhood education, and how she re-elaborated and expressed her feelings through symbolic play.

By investigating the development, Piaget (1964) observed that children to understand reality, found the symbolic game an acceptable means to deal and interact with their conflicts. The author (PIAGET, 1978) categorized the symbolic game into 3 distinct phases, and it is in the scope of the first phase "projection of symbolic schemes on new objects", in types IIIB and IIIC that the child presents the compensatory and liquidating combinations.

During symbolic play or pretend play, free from any social pressure, regulations, and sanctions, children feel safe to experience, relive and settle unbalanced emotional situations and express their feelings and expectations.

The symbolic game is made possible by the development of the capacity of representation, a function that allows the child to re-present objects, people, and situations absent, moving mentally in time and space.

In our pedagogical practice, we had the opportunity to observe a delicate case of the development of the symbolic game with liquidating combination. In 2018, M., at the age of 5, lost her father abruptly, and in the following months, during recreation hours, she would lie down herself saying she was dead, requesting that colleagues accompany her, veil her, and offer her leaves and flowers as a tribute. In these moments, the child showed tranquility during the staging, having fun by sticking his tongue out and crossing his hands over his abdomen, remaining motionless in this position. Suddenly, just as it began, the game fell apart and he happily moved on to another activity.

## **2 METHODOLOGY**

This study is an experience report on the importance of symbolic play in the resolution of conflicts of the bereaved child, accompanied by a bibliographic review of theorists who have conducted studies on death and mourning in the light of genetic epistemology.

### **3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The subject of death is still taboo in schools. Educators have difficulties to approach the subject, even when death invades the school space (ALVES, 2012). The bibliography on the issue of death and mourning with children supported by a Piagetian theoretical framework is scarce, indicating the importance of discussions on the subject.

However, the experience report presented here shows that the symbolic game has an important collaboration in the spontaneous expression and elaboration of the child about his experiences with death and mourning.

In addition, the pedagogy professional, when attentive to the free expression of the subject in the symbolic game, can be an important resource of help for this child who manifests and expresses his anguish.

### **4 CONCLUSIONS**

Grief is a period of crisis for the child, who faces it according to family rites and culture. It is a natural and necessary process because it is the painful elaboration of the loss. This experience of the loss of close people refers the child to his death and that of his loved ones. This anguish, when not welcomed, can bring implications and problems that manifest themselves in school contexts, such as physical and psychic symptoms, anxiety, and low self-esteem.

Talking about the losses helps in coping with the fears that may arise; however, family members, educators, and professionals usually have difficulties in approaching the theme. Regarding welcoming, it is necessary to be available, to observe it in its stage of development, to share feelings and clarify doubts, a process that the symbolic game can encourage. Therefore, knowing the necessary competencies for those who work with demands of death and mourning is indispensable for the work of welcoming this theme in the school environment. It is equally important to acquire theoretical knowledge about grief and issues surrounding death in children.

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