‘There is no right or wrong answer’: Swedish preschool teachers’ reflections on the didactics of death

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Abstract

This study is part of a larger project with the general aim of developing the ability of preschool teachers to reflect critically on questions, topics and theories related to different understandings of death(s). The article is based on three focus-group interviews with a focus on how preschool teachers reflect on what, how, why and when they teach about death and death-related issues. The results show that preschool teachers consider that it is important in early childhood education to teach about death because death is a fundamental aspect of life in daily reality, and they consider it to be their task to comfort a child in grief, as well as care for the well-being of the group. However, much of the time, they avoid teaching about biological death relative to concrete goals that the children are to achieve in understanding what death implies. Instead, they use child-responsive, improvisational teaching that is intended to calm and comfort the children. The content of the teaching arises at the intersection of expert knowledge in talking about death as an irreversible outcome of natural processes and the preschool teachers’ own beliefs and ideas about death, dying and an afterlife. As a consequence, the biological conceptions of death coexist with the teachers’ own beliefs in an afterlife, reflecting a dualistic thinking within which culturally constructed beliefs coexist with biological views.

Keywords

death didactics, preschool, early childhood education, teachers’ beliefs

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Questions related to death and dying are sensitive, and are treated in some circumstances as an educational taboo (Bowie, 2000; Galende, 2015). One of the explanations for this is that, in a shared norm of western societies, death is a sensitive issue. The topic itself may cause offence and uncertainty or discomfort among adults (Bowie, 2000). At the same time, the idea of death or being dead is a fundamental question of life that children are often concerned with (Löfdahl, 2005). Hence, preschool teachers are frequently the ones who must answer children's questions about death and dying. Consequently, the beliefs, attitudes and knowledge of preschool teachers relating to death as an existential question are highly relevant for early childhood education.

Over the past hundred years, the Swedish education system has been transformed from a system with a strong connection between schooling and Christianity to non-confessional education. However, while it is claimed that education in Swedish preschools is non-confessional, Swedish society is grounded in Lutheran Christianity (Berglund, 2013), and children continue to be socialized in a discourse that is dominated by elements from Swedish/western secular and Christian heritage (Puskás and Andersson, 2019). Nevertheless, Swedish preschools are cultural and social venues where children with various backgrounds, experiences and beliefs meet. Around 25% of the children have a foreign background, and the children in any given preschool may have very different experiences and perceptions of death. They may be preoccupied by different questions about what it entails. At the same time, the Swedish preschool curriculum and preschool teachers are given the task of providing each child with the conditions to develop 'the ability to discover, reflect on and work out their position on different ethical dilemmas and fundamental questions of life in daily reality' (Skolverket, 2018: 13). Thus, preschool teachers are expected to be able to guide children's learning about issues related to existential questions such as death. This engagement, which enables teachers to develop the ability to reflect critically on questions, topics and theories related to different understandings of death(s), has been described as the 'didactics of death' (Galende, 2015).

State of the art

Previous research on how teachers in Swedish educational institutions reflect on existential questions indicates that while children like to discuss such questions, their teachers feel uncertain of how to approach them (Hartman, 1986; Löfstedt, 2011; Pramling and Johansson, 1995). Teachers may deal with their uncertainty by soliciting the opinions and knowledge of the children, in line with the principles that underly the curriculum, which envisage children as competent (Puolimatka and Solasaari, 2006; Puskás and Andersson, 2017). Teachers often experience uncertainty about how to treat children's questions and experiences related to death. They fear that talking about death will 'generate fears that did not previously exist' (Galende, 2015: 92). At the same time, teachers often feel that they lack sufficient training and knowledge in dealing with issues related to death, and do not know how to deal with their own attitudes and fears (Bowie, 2000; Galende, 2015; Pratt, 1987). Teachers also believe that issues related to death are best treated within the home sphere, in accordance with the cultural norms (including religious beliefs) of each family (Galende, 2015). This allows the response to children's concerns about death to be shaped by the cultural, religious or spiritual context they are born into (Talwar, 2011).

Research on how children understand death has been dominated by a cognitive perspective. According to research undertaken from a cognitive developmental perspective, children include the term 'death' in their vocabulary as early as the age of two (Carey, 1985), while a full understanding of death does not develop before the age of seven (Slaughter, 2005; Slaughter and Lyons, 2003). In order to understand what biological death entails, children need to realize that death is something

which cannot be reversed; that it is a permanent condition; that it is a natural process, unavoidable for all living things; and that it is most often caused by natural factors, over which we do not have control. However, understanding death as being a permanent condition is not easy for young children, as recognized by Bering et al. (2005). Studies on how slightly older children (above 10) and adults understand non-corporeal continuity suggest that ‘both children and adults have beliefs in the afterlife, that these beliefs increase with age, and that religious and biological conceptions of death may coexist in the minds of children and adults’ (Rosengren et al., 2014: 67). Studies on the beliefs in an afterlife among preschool teachers indicate that a belief in life after death is shared worldwide (Rosengren et al., 2014).

The results of previous research are not unanimous with regard to the age at which afterlife beliefs emerge, or the process by which this occurs (Misailidi and Kornilaki, 2015). Bering (2013) and Bering and Bjorklund (2004) suggest that afterlife beliefs emerge at preschool age because the human mind is predisposed to believe in non-corporeal continuity. In contrast, Astuti and Harris (2008) and Harris and Giménez (2005), for example, suggest that afterlife beliefs are culturally constructed and culturally specific experiences, and that narratives have a strong impact on the development of afterlife beliefs. Further, other researchers (Harris and Giménez, 2005; Legare et al., 2012; Rosengren et al., 2014) have shown that culturally constructed beliefs coexist with biological views, and that both children and adults engage in a form of dualistic thinking between cultural (often religious) and biological explanations (Renauld et al., 2015; Talwar, 2011).

Teaching about death – why, when, what and how

Teaching in Swedish preschools is goal-oriented and responsive to the child’s perspective (Pramling and Pramling Samuelsson, 2011). Our focus in this study was on how preschool teachers negotiate the content and their goal of teaching about death. We position ourselves within the research field on didactic transposition, through which we make visible how preschool teachers elaborate on the bodies of knowledge that are considered ‘teachable’ (Bosch and Gascón, 2006). Didactic transposition is based on the idea that teachers’ epistemological beliefs and knowledge are an integral part of the didactic relationship between teachers and children. In school subjects:

the taught knowledge, the concrete practices and bodies of knowledge proposed to be learned at school, originate from what is called the scholarly knowledge, generally produced at universities and other scholarly institutions, also integrating elements taken from a variety of related social practices. (Chevallard and Bosch, 2020: 214)

Applied to our own preschool context, the theory of didactic transposition helps us to highlight that what is taught in preschools originates in other institutions and is constructed in practices outside the preschool. We may assume that the knowledge about death that is put into play in the preschool is constructed based on the preschool teachers’ own ideas and notions about death, dying and an afterlife.

The didactics of death reflects the unity of theory and practice related to different ideas of teaching about death, corresponding to *why*, *when*, *what* and *how*. It has been suggested that death should be discussed only when necessary, such as when a child addresses the topic or when it becomes necessary due to, for example, a catastrophic event reported in the media (Bowie, 2000). At the same time, previous research suggests that ‘discussing death and dying in biological terms is the best way to alleviate fear of death in young children’ (Slaughter and Griffiths, 2007: 525), and

that teachers who are familiar with the didactics of death are more skilled when discussing death with young children, providing a more supportive environment for children's death play (Pratt, 1987; Willis, 2002). In addition, in a multicultural and multireligious society, teachers are expected to have knowledge about how cultural and religious socialization affects how young children understand and talk about death (Rosengren et al., 2014). Social and cultural change in terms of secularization, individualization, changes in spiritual beliefs and the effects of a highly visible media contribute to changes in individuals' religious beliefs and understanding of death (Garces-Foley, 2014).

This study is part of a larger project with the general aim of developing the ability of preschool teachers to reflect critically on questions, topics and theories related to different understandings of death(s). The focus of this substudy is on what preschool teachers consider to be teachable in relation to death, and the didactics by which teaching about death is orchestrated. Hence, the aim of this article is to explore how preschool teachers reflect on what, how, why and when they teach about death and death-related issues.

Methods

At the beginning of the project, research collaboration was initiated with three preschools with different catchment areas – urban, suburban and rural. As most preschools in Sweden have a home page, which preschools were to be contacted was decided by the research team based on an Internet search. Preschool teachers were recruited via their principals, who were contacted by email and phone. Once approval was obtained from the preschool principals, an initial meeting took place between the preschool teachers who were interested in collaborating and the research team. During these meetings, the researchers presented the research project in detail and handed out a package of nine children's books that deal with death as a biological, cultural and philosophical phenomenon. The idea with the book package was to create a shared point of reference, since death may be regarded as a challenging topic to talk about and work with in the preschool context. A shared point of reference based on such stimulus material was also intended to give a flavour of the kind of issues around which the research team wished to initiate collaboration with the preschools.

This article is based on three focus-group interviews. The number of participating teachers in the focus-group interviews ranged from three to seven, and one to three researchers participated in the group interviews (Kitzinger, 1994). Data was collected using video and audio recordings. The participating preschool teachers were informed about the advantages and risks of the study, that participation was voluntary, and that the research data would be treated as strictly confidential (Adler et al., 2019). The information letter and form for written consent were approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority, and the consent form was signed by all of the participants. During the interviews, all of the informants were given pseudonyms to ensure their anonymity (Appendix 1). The aim of the focus-group interviews was to explore the different kinds of construals of death that preschool teachers considered to be important, teachable and suitable in a preschool context. We encouraged the teachers to describe their previous experiences of working with existential questions, and how they dealt in their everyday practice with the issues of death in relation to children's interests and inquiries. The nine books distributed in advance served as a stimulus for natural conversation between the teachers and researchers (Törrönen, 2002) because they enabled the interviewees to reflect on their own experiences of dealing with the issue of death (Farquhar and Das, 1999).

The book package selected by the research team consisted of recent children's books that deal with death and dying. During the focus-group interviews, the preschool teachers were asked to

select the books they appreciated the most and rank them based on their experiences of working with children and children's literature (Appendix 2). These activity-oriented questions (Colucci, 2007) were used to solicit the preschool teachers' reflections on and discussions about which books they liked the most and why, and how they would use them in practice. The strategy of involving activity-oriented questions also proved to be beneficial for focusing the attention of the group on the core topic of the study, as the content of the books made it easier for the participants to recall their experiences of addressing the issue of death (Leichtentritt, 2004).

The collected data material was transcribed and qualitatively processed with the help of a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis programme, MAXQDA. In the first stage, the coding was done inductively and the data was chunked into small units, which were marked by a descriptor (Leech and Onwuegbuzie, 2008; Strauss and Corbin, 1998) by one of the researchers. The themes identified were discussed with the research team and the major issues were extracted and verified by the team. As a result of the inductive coding, a pattern of themes with didactic significance was identified. Therefore, in the second stage, the coding was done deductively using the theory of didactic transposition (Bosch and Gascón, 2006) while focusing on the content, aims and methods in teaching about death (Galende, 2015). The extracts that have been included as illustrations in this article have been translated with particular consideration of the preschool teachers' own way of expressing themselves. This is why we have at times applied a non-idiomatic translation, in order to ensure that the meaning of the expression is recreated in the target language.

Findings

Our analysis focuses on how the didactic questions concerning why, when, how and what are reflected in the interviews with the preschool teachers. The questions themselves can be regarded as a didactic register that construes preschool didactics and the social context within which preschool teachers are active. While the questions often overlap, in this study they are treated as separate for analytical purposes. The answers to the *why* question are discussed in terms of the task given by the preschool curriculum and the experiences of the preschool teachers as far as children's existential questions are concerned. The questions of *why* and *when* to talk about death often go hand in hand, as they are usually addressed when the issue of death becomes relevant in everyday practice. Broadly speaking, the *how* question is answered either by situations where the preschool teachers need to act in response to a specific event or by a planned activity that focuses on existential questions with a specific pedagogical aim. In our interviews, the answers to the *what* question reflect the preschool teachers' ideas of what happens when one dies.

Why should we talk about death in Swedish preschools?

The reasons why questions about death are considered central to the preschool child's learning and development, and thus also to the mission and values of Swedish preschools, have been discussed under two overarching themes. The first reflects strategies based on the task stipulated in the curriculum, according to which the preschool 'should provide each child with the conditions to develop the ability to discover, reflect on and work out their position on different ethical dilemmas and fundamental questions of life in daily reality' (Skolverket, 2018: 13). The second theme reflects the idea that it is in the child's best interests to be given answers and explanations that are suitable for the child's age and level of maturity. In other words, the answers given by preschool teachers to the question of why we should address the issue of death materialize at the intersection of the formal assignment defined by the curriculum and the contextual demands of everyday practice.

Rita, from Preschool B (28 October 2019), emphasized that children should learn something about death at an early age because ‘death is a part of life’, whereupon her colleague, Anna, added that ‘eventually, all living things reach the end of their own lifetimes’. Gunilla, in Preschool A (23 May 2019), explained that children need to be prepared for the inevitable end of life (death) ‘because everybody dies eventually’. The preschool teachers in all three focus groups described death as something that children come into contact with in one way or another, regardless of their age or maturity. They gave diverse examples of situations in which children need to talk about death. Examples of situations in which death was seen as a relevant topic to bring up were when the preschool teachers and children found a dead hare during an excursion to a forest (Cia, Preschool C, 17 March 2020); a close relative to a child passed away (Kerstin, Preschool A); and death was presented in the media in relation to human losses as a result of war or disasters (Moa, Preschool C). There was general agreement in all of the focus groups that, given the fact that children meet the issue of death in several ways, they need to be taught and gain knowledge about death for preventive purposes. Children will be better equipped to deal with death in any form, if necessary, if they have previously learnt about it. The preschool teachers seemed to agree that hiding the obvious or shielding children from the hardships of life is not a viable path. At the same time, 12 out of the 14 respondents referred to their personal experiences when discussing why teaching about death is important – for example:

I remember when my grandfather died – we should not talk about it now – but I was not allowed to participate in his funeral because it was considered strange and dangerous for me. I wanted to join the adults and see what happened. I think it is important to talk about it with children and that they can participate. It is important to be ready [to face the issue of death] and not to be closed out without any explanation, because it is dangerous. (Cia, Preschool C)

The preschool teachers in all three preschools described children as curious, fearless and spontaneous, and that they do not avoid topics which adults may consider sensitive or difficult to talk about. Children ask straight questions when they want to know something. At the same time, 10 of the 14 interviewees expressed that preschool children have not reached the maturity required to understand what death entails. Two of the participants in Preschool C described how the media coverage of the attacks on the World Trade Center evoked both curiosity and concern about what had happened:

Elsa: I experienced a lot of anxiety among children after the attacks on the World Trade Center. There was so much talk about watching it on television all the time.

Moa: Buildings collapsed.

Elsa: Then I remember that the children were worried. We talked a lot about it – wondered how many had died. They thought it happened over and over again. Every time they turned on the television, they saw planes flying into a building. Now there’s one more; now there’s another. They thought it was happening all the time, all the time. So, it is important to talk to the children and explain things.

Reassuring children and comforting them in their grief are considered to be important reasons why questions about death should be present in everyday preschool practice. At the same time, the preschool teachers’ accounts reveal that they tried to keep a balance between caring for each individual child’s best interests in relation to their age and maturity and the children’s common

interest in learning about death as a fact of life. Thus, the question of *why* to teach about death in preschools was answered in many cases by ‘It depends on who the teaching is directed at’.

The interviewees emphasized that sensitivity to the perceptions and experiences of individual children is particularly important when subjects related to death are given a place in preschool education. This sensitivity should not only be directed towards specific events, but should also involve a general openness to children’s identity with regard to their individual beliefs. The following section shows that the beliefs held by children concerned questions about what happens with animals and people after death, and what rituals are connected with burial. In this way, the reasons why questions about death are important in everyday preschool practice are closely related to values-based pedagogy and children’s rights to freedom of thought and autonomy.

When and in what situations do preschool teachers bring up the subject of death?

In the interviews, we encountered an openness towards the didactics of death not only in spontaneous teaching opportunities, but also in planned teaching activities initiated by the preschool staff. The preschool teachers described questions of life and death as difficult questions, but not so difficult that they should not be addressed within the preschool. Nevertheless, none of the participants described any planned teaching activities. Instead, issues related to death were brought up in relation to real-life situations that required a solution. The preschool teachers in all three focus groups gave examples similar to that in the following extract:

I think it has been brought up a lot of times during the years I have worked, in most groups of children I have had, in one way or another. It has been parents who have passed away or grandmothers or cousins, and it has been friends, and it has been animals and it has been that we have seen animals, so we have talked about death continuously during all, during different periods throughout the time I have been working in a children’s group. (Rita, Preschool B)

Rita described a situation that required a solution: how to handle a child’s grieving process when a loved one had died. Hence, one may argue that the *when* question comes to the fore in situations that arise due to external factors that are beyond the control of teachers, and when they need to cope with a child’s grief. Later in the interview, one of the participants gave more details about her actions in relation to the death of a close relative of a preschool child:

Once, the mother of one of the children died, so then we worked with it a little more actively. During that period, we had a psychologist involved ... and we were supervised a little in how to handle such a situation – a child’s loss of such a close relative. So, it was not, it was not something we came up with ourselves, but we got help with it. (Paula, Preschool B)

This narrative describes a situation that required active work and expert knowledge. When situations that involve grief arise, the preschool teachers act in a caring manner and attend to the children’s social and emotional needs. They do this through easing the grieving process of a child who has lost someone, and by working with the anxiety and questions of the whole group.

Talking about dead animals found during outdoor activities was another occasion for discussing issues related to death. The following extracts describe examples of situations in which children encountered the death of an animal and the rituals of burial:

On Wednesday or Thursday, we found a hare up on the hill where we are now – in the sandbox. Then, there was a little trouble with that poor hare. But we could not bury anything there, so we went to the playground and, while we were there, the hare disappeared. ... So, when we got back, we talked to the kids about the hare was probably sick and that's why she died. (Moa, Preschool C)

Once we found a dead bird that we buried; another time, ladybird Adam died and had to be buried. (Ella, Preschool A)

We found a dead mouse and we had to find a box to put it in. And then we buried it. And then we had to sing. And we sang. The children decided what we were supposed to do ... and then we had to look for flowers to put on the grave, and finally the children also made a cross that they put on the grave. (Paula, Preschool B)

These narratives highlight that the children were familiar with specific burial rituals and practised them with a great deal of empathy. According to the preschool teachers, the children's major focus after finding a dead animal was on the importance of burying it. While the preschool teachers had experience of children playing burial games, and some of them had also participated in rituals staged by the children, they recalled few instances where the children had asked spontaneous questions about what happens when one dies. The following was an exception:

Once, I got an exciting question. Two girls came, and one of them said: 'My mother says that when you die you go to heaven, but her mother says that when you die you end up in the earth and then it's over. Who is right?' It was a bit difficult. I had to think. It was an exciting question. (Elsa, Preschool C)

How Elsa handled this situation is discussed in the section below on what is taught to children. What is important here is that the children's questions and reflections in this case were not connected to a concrete situation in which they had come into contact with death in their everyday life, as is most often the case. Even though the preschool teachers considered that it was important to talk about death, they acknowledged that they rarely, if ever, took the initiative to teach any subject, let alone teach about death:

If it [the issue of death] does not come up, well, then we do not talk about it. But I think it is an important issue and that it should come up more often. (Kerstin, Preschool A)

It's an area that can feel a little difficult for oneself. You can have your own experiences, you have your own memories and your own ... you have been through it in different ways, so that it can awaken something in yourself as well. It is an area that can arouse some resistance. (Ella, Preschool A)

These two extracts show that while the preschool teachers considered teaching about death to be important, they encountered resistance as far as talking about death as a planned activity was concerned. Thus, even though all 14 participating preschool teachers had an ambition to work continuously and preventively, they tended to revert to talking about death only in situations that required a solution. This is why, as we have shown above, the topic of death is most often handled as a response to children's (re)actions when they encounter death through a dead animal or the grief of a bereaved child.

How do preschool teachers work with questions related to death?

How to approach questions of death can only be understood in relation to narratives about when and through what events such questions were raised. How preschools work with issues of death seems to be linked to the situation in which they arise, and most often concerns comforting children who are grieving and making sense of a death as a way to explain to the children in their peer group what their grieving peer is experiencing. The interviews show that when a child had lost someone or experienced trauma, the preschool teachers tended to rely on expert knowledge and book practice. Expert knowledge may come from a church educator, for example, who can tell children about the rituals of burial and funerals. In this way, the question of death is outsourced to an 'expert' who deals with dead bodies and the rituals of death in a professional role. All three preschools had conducted visits to a cemetery.

Book practice is another way for preschool teachers to deal with questions related to death and can be used as a supplement to events linked to specific situations. All three preschools used *Goodbye, Mr Muffin* (Nilsson and Tidholm, 2002), a picture book for children aged three to six. This book was included in the mourning boxes at all three preschools. A mourning box is kept in readiness for events and situations that may cause sadness or grief. It is used when a tragic event occurs and a child or the group needs comfort, understanding or explanations. The mourning boxes in all three preschools included a candlestick and a candle, a white tablecloth, song lyrics that dealt with death and grief, and the picture book about Mr Muffin. Mr Muffin is a guinea pig who looks back on his life and contemplates it. Then, one morning, he gets sick, and eventually he dies. However, the story does not end with his death. It continues with death rituals and the question of an afterlife. Two of the preschool teachers praised the book as follows:

I like this book [*Goodbye, Mr Muffin*] because there are two perspectives presented in it. You have to follow the guinea pig that is old and is going to die, and then you have to follow the grieving family as well. (Paula, Preschool B)

It [the book] shows what happens, that it is natural; that there is nothing strange or dangerous about it [death]. It is a natural part of life that we are born and die, and everyone does. It takes it up in a very natural way, I think. (Elsa, Preschool C)

The book about Mr Muffin helped the preschool teachers to put into words things that seem difficult to talk about – namely, that death is irreversible and permanent. In the following extract from the Preschool B interview, the teachers describe how they made use of expert knowledge when it was important for a grieving child to understand that once a person or animal dies, its physical body cannot be made alive again:

Anna: We have seen that, once, a parent passed away and they did not want to talk about it at home. The child was told that her father was just lying there and resting. They said that he was very tired. Then it became difficult, because there is Facebook, so other children knew and said to this child: 'Your father is dead.' So, 'No, he is not!' It became huge ... Then we chose to work in smaller groups and we read books so that this child would get the opportunity to talk, if she wanted to. But we did not force anyone to talk about it, but we wanted her on her own initiative to choose to say and do, and that we would meet her there and then.

Pia: There was something they emphasized on the child trauma unit. They said that it was very important that we did not say that he was only asleep, but that we actually expressed what had really happened.

Maja: It's important.

Mia: Important to be clear that he was dead, and not that he had just gone away.

Pia: They said we would use the word 'dead'.

Several participants: Yes. Mmmmm.

Mia: If you go away, you will come back.

This excerpt shows that the preschool teachers in Preschool B agreed that it was important to make it clear for the children that death means that the physical body cannot come back to life. They also agreed that the fact of biological irreversibility is separate from the belief in a spiritual afterlife.

What do preschool teachers talk about when they teach about death?

The interviews show that the preschool teachers felt insecure about what was right or wrong to say to the children about what happens after death. The narrative that we saw in the above section on when issues of death are discussed also illustrates the problem of what to teach:

Once, I got an exciting question. Two girls came, and one of them said: 'My mother says that when you die you go to heaven, but her mother says that when you die you end up in the earth and then it's over. Who is right?' It was a bit difficult. I had to think. It was an exciting question ... I answered that I did not know – that no one has been dead, so I could not say what happens, and one can believe what one wants ... I did not want to put a value on it, that someone was wrong and someone right. I think, actually, that nobody knows. I have not been dead, so I cannot say what it is like [to be dead]. (Elsa, Preschool C)

This extract is an example of a situation where the preschool teacher did not want to decide who was right: the child who had been told that death is irreversible or the one who had been told that there is continuity after death. Elsa did not want to make a stand for either of the two options, and justified her non-answer by saying that what one thinks about death is a matter of values. Thus, the children's existential question was treated as a question about beliefs. She linked the argument that nobody knows what happens after death to two explanations: that we do not know because nobody who has been dead has come back and told us what is on the other side, and that what one believes about what happens after death is a matter of personal conviction. In this way, the preschool teacher equated biological and philosophical/religious explanations. The standpoint that there is no right or wrong answer to the question about what happens after death was widespread – it came up in all of the interviews, and none of the 14 participants questioned its validity. In Preschool A, the question was discussed as follows:

Interviewer: Do your personal beliefs play a role in what you answer to children's questions about what happens after death?

Kerstin: But you cannot answer that.

Gunilla: We do not actually know.

Kerstin: One does not know. There is no right or wrong.

Gunilla: Once, I said that when my father died, a bird came in and sat on the window ... Then I felt that my father's thoughts were in that bird, but I cannot really know if it was so, but I felt it was so ... I think you should be honest with what you feel ... but others can think in other ways because it is not wrong to be personal.

Kerstin: No, you just do not go in and say it is so or so.

Lena: Exactly.

Kerstin: You can believe but you do not know.

All 14 of the participating preschool teachers agreed that 'You cannot know what happens after death'. At the same time, their other statements, paradoxically, demonstrated a shared belief in some sort of afterlife and that they had taken a stance on whether a person's spirit endures independently of corporal existence. This is probably why they preferred to talk about what happens after one dies, instead of talking about what happens when one dies.

Discussion

The preschool teachers in our study considered that it is important to teach about death in early childhood education for two reasons. First, they considered that death is a fundamental aspect of life in daily reality, and that it is one of their tasks to provide children with guidance when they need help with reasoning through their questions. Second, they considered it to be their duty to comfort a grieving child, as well as care for the well-being of the group. Children's grief has been used as a motive for working both preventively and in a caring way with the issues of death. The preschool teachers who were interviewed did not consider that questions of death belong solely to the sphere of the home, which contrasts with the results presented by Galende (2015). In her study of the ideas held by Spanish preschool teacher candidates about, and their experiences of, how issues of death are or should be handled in preschool, the participants were of the opinion that these are best handled by the child's guardians in accordance with the family's customs and beliefs. The preschool teachers in the current study, however, emphasized that life issues are something they should work with, because this is one of the tasks defined in the Swedish preschool curriculum. More concretely, the preschool teachers in our study considered that issues related to death are an integral part of what is described in the curriculum as ethical dilemmas and fundamental questions of life. Thus, the task formulated in the curriculum is part of the reason why the preschool teachers considered it important to include issues related to death in their teaching. However, while the preschool teachers' intention was to work preventively, their examples describe a reactive attitude to working with issues of death and grief. The topic of death tended to become relevant when a close family member of a child had passed away. In these situations, the teachers considered it important to make the children understand that death is irreversible and final in biological terms. At the same time, the interviews show that the preschool teachers were more comfortable when talking about an afterlife than talking about what death is in biological terms.

The preschool teachers were aware that it is important to work with life issues, including death, preventively. Much of the time, however, they avoided teaching about biological death relative to concrete goals that the children were to achieve in understanding what death implies. Instead, the preschool teachers used child-responsive, improvisational teaching that was intended to calm and comfort the children. The analysis shows that the teachables (i.e. the content of the improvised teaching) arose at the intersection of expert knowledge in talking about death as an irreversible outcome of natural processes and the preschool teachers' own beliefs and ideas about death, dying and an afterlife. The preschool teachers in our study seemed to believe that a spirit or soul endures independently of corporeal existence. They repeatedly and collectively declared that we cannot know what happens after death, yet they offered several narratives about an afterlife. These narratives implicitly comply with a Christocentric content (Cooper, 2001) in the sense that they distinguish between the body that is buried and the soul that lives on somewhere.

The preschool teachers who were interviewed in this study made an active choice to participate in a project with a specific focus on death didactics. By doing so, they showed that they were prepared to challenge their own development as professionals. The focus-group interviews analysed here represent the first step in this process. Similar to earlier work on death didactics (Bowie, 2000; Galende, 2015), we found that the preschool teachers lacked sufficient training and knowledge about issues related to death. They considered it to be important to teach about death and were willing to work with these issues in their everyday practice. At the same time, what they actually taught was strongly influenced by their own experiences and beliefs. As a consequence, the biological conceptions of death coexisted in their teaching with their own beliefs in an afterlife, reflecting a dualistic thinking within which culturally constructed beliefs coexisted with biological views (Renauld et al., 2015; Talwar, 2011).

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Supplemental material

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Appendix 1

Participants in focus-group interviews

Participant	Preschool	Date of interview
Gunilla	Preschool A	23 May 2019
Kerstin	Preschool A	23 May 2019
Lena	Preschool A	23 May 2019
Ella	Preschool A	23 May 2019
Rita	Preschool B	28 October 2019
Paula	Preschool B	28 October 2019
Anna	Preschool B	28 October 2019
Pia	Preschool B	28 October 2019
Mia	Preschool B	28 October 2019
Maja	Preschool B	28 October 2019
Eva	Preschool B	28 October 2019
Cia	Preschool C	17 March 2020
Elsa	Preschool C	17 March 2020
Moa	Preschool C	17 March 2020

Appendix 2

Questions in focus-group interviews

What experiences do you have of working with the issues related to death?

Do the children ever want to discuss death? In which situations? Children of what age ask the most?

Do the children ever ‘play’ death?

Do you work with the children’s questions about death on specific occasions? Have you had any planned activities that involve the issue of death?

How do you handle children’s grief if/when something happens?

Do your personal beliefs play a role in what you answer to children’s questions about what happens after death?

Which of the books [referring to the stimulus material] did you like and why?

Which books would you make use of in your preschool group and why?