

Proposed Lesson Plan

**For integrating the Concepts of Loss and Grief in Primary Education through the children's book
"Words on Waves", by Elena Pericleous**

By Dr. Polyxeni Stylianou, Cyprus Pedagogical Institute

and Elena Pericleous, author of the book

Cyprus Pedagogical Institute 2019

Introduction

"Words on Waves" is a children's book and the result of a collaboration between author Elena Pericleous, Dr Polyxeni Stylianou from the Cyprus Pedagogical Institute and illustrator Iris Samartzi. The primary objective of this book is to be used as a tool by Primary School Teachers, enabling them to approach the meaning of loss and grief in discussions with children. It is aimed at children between the ages of 9 – 13 but is not, however, limited to these ages, since both the experiences and maturity of the children play a key role in the way they perceive the meaning of death, loss of a loved one and grief, entailed in this whole experience.

The necessity of open and honest communication between adults and children about the loss of a loved one is a researched datum derived from a series of studies which have shown that such communication has been linked positively to high self-esteem levels in children and to their ability of coming to terms with loss (Field, Tzadikario, Pel, & Ret, 2014; Hurd, 1999). On the other hand, the absence of communication provokes feelings of anxiety, depression and stress for children (Ellis, Dowrick, & Lloyd-Williams, 2013; Raveis, Siegel, & Karus, 1999; Wallin, Steineck, Nyberg, & Kreicbergs, 2016). A recent study by Martinčeková, Jiang, Adams, Menendez, Hernandez, Barber and Rosengren (in press) has in fact demonstrated that children who were less "protected" from the information on the death, were able to better adjust to the process of dealing with the loss, both as children and also as adults. The same research showed that the participants would have preferred adults (parents and teachers) to have had provided more information, more guidance and more support when, as children, they were dealing with the loss of a loved one. More specifically, guidance refers to the expression of the emotions involved in grieving and the need to confirm that their emotional response was normal.

Research studies have revealed that Death Education has led to a much better understanding of the meaning of death and grieving (Lee, Lee & Moon, 2009; Stylianou & Zembylas, 2018). Children who participated in an educational intervention which dealt with the subjects of loss and grief felt less anxiety when discussing death (Stylianou & Zembylas, 2018a), and were more prepared to support grieving children of their own age (Stylianou & Zembylas, 2018b). In addition to this, children who are grieving emphasized the role of a supportive teacher upon their return to school and the significance of them being able to consult and talk openly about the loss to an understanding teacher (Holland, 2008; Lytje, in press). However, teachers often feel they do not possess the necessary knowledge and skills to support a child who is grieving (Dyregrov, Dyregrov, & Idsoe, 2013; Holland, 2003; Papadatou, Metallinou, Hadjichristou, & Pavlidi, 2002). As it has been shown from educational conferences organized by the Cyprus Pedagogical Institute, the absence of suitable teaching material is an additional obstacle for teachers who wish to introduce such a lesson.

The book “Words on waves” is written in order to contribute to this particular need for such material and the focus of its objectives is twofold: **a.** the acquaintance of children with the phases of grief, which are considered to be typical reactions after a significant loss; and **b.** discussions on the importance of memories both as a way of managing grief and in giving a meaning to the experience and continuing the relationship with the physical absence of their loved one.

The following educational approach has been proposed by the creators of the book, and it follows a particular structure through which, in our view, the discussion around the meaning of death, loss and grief surfaces effortlessly through the children themselves. However, each teacher may choose, according to his or her specific class, the way in which he or she will approach the subject. This is the reason why we recommend that you read the book first and record your initial thoughts regarding the manner in which YOU would approach the subject in your class, before you continue reading our proposal.

It is important to be noted that such a sensitive matter, because of its very nature, requires a good association between the group of children in the class, both amongst themselves and with the teacher, along with a sense of mutual trust. Thus, it is recommended that such classes take place three months after the beginning of the school year. The beginning of the school year is also essential for gaining the trust of the children’s parents as the objective is to have them take part in the discussion (Stylianou & Zembylas, 2018a; Wass, 2004).

A few words about the book

The book comprises three letters sent by the main character, a boy 8-12 years old, to his grandfather who has recently died. The three letters are, in a sense, correlated with the three phases of grief¹, and within these phases the emotions of the main character are outlined with a childish naivety which allows for the children to follow the story effortlessly and without difficulty. Memories of moments spent with his grandfather are scattered throughout the letters, moments which our protagonist shared with his grandfather, life-circles which have come to an end, and life-circles which unexpectedly, did not. The book’s illustrations enhance the story and at the same time are themselves a series of other stories which the children can “read”, each one in their own way, according to his or her age, maturity and experience in identifying.

Objectives of the lesson

The children must be capable of:

- Actively taking part in the discussion in relation to grief after the loss or death of a loved one. **Their involvement need not be verbal.**
- Describing emotions (phases) which may define grief.
- Identifying elements of nonverbal communication in a person who is grieving.
- Comparing the different ways in which one goes through and expresses grief.
- Supporting the diversity in the way’s loss is expressed².

¹ Phases of grief: **1. Avoidance or early mourning:** initial shock, numbness, anxiety, denial and hyperactivity as a form of denial. **2. Coming to terms or intense mourning:** intense feeling of sorrow, yearning, sadness, anger, guilt, shame, desperation and disorganisation. **3. Reintegration:** the reactions caused by grief subside and the person who is grieving begins to reintegrate into his/her daily life. During these phases children who are grieving move in and out, back and forth within themselves, in other words **they do not** follow a steady path between the first and second phases and then on to the third.

² Supporting the diversity in which one chooses to express his/her grief is expected to be acknowledged through the discussion and the children’s testimonials. The teacher underlines the fact that there is no right or wrong ways, “must” and “must not”. Each person expresses themselves in their own way, and this is fully

- Referring to the importance of memories as a continuation of their relationship with their deceased loved one.
- Propose ways in which to support people experiencing grief, taking into consideration the uniqueness of the grieving person in relation to themselves.

Time Frame: Based on the proposed plan, the time required to complete this lesson is two 80' sessions.

Working Tools

1. Book «Word on Waves»
2. Individual writing board and marker for each child
3. Power point presentation of the book
4. Six Thinking Hats of De Bono (white, yellow, black, red, green, blue)³
5. Questions on large paperboard –Annex:
 - Why can't the hero of the book «believe for one second» that his grandfather has died?
 - Does the fountain of youth truly exist?
 - Should the young boy have gone to the funeral?
 - When would it have been "ok" for his grandfather to have died?
 - Can the grandfather travel with the sailing boat that his grandson built for him?
6. Red and green cards – One of each colour for each child in the class.
7. Six still image envelopes containing clarifying questions – Annex
8. A large wooden box- the memories box
9. Grandfather's belongings: a straw hat, a fishing rod, a book of stories (Mermaid, Alexander the Great, Constantine Palaeologus)
10. Blue cloth
11. Paper boats – one for each child
12. Work sheet "Dear diary..." Annex"

Suggested course – Activities:

1st 80min Class

- One first acquaintance with the book – Beginning from the cover, the title and the pages preceding each one of the boy's letters.

Suggested Questions: What could the boy be writing to his grandfather? Why doesn't he call him on the phone? Why won't he tell him in person? What do the waves (water) have to do with the story?

This activity is mainly of a diagnostic nature and the teacher's goal is to obtain a clear picture of his/her group of students and the way the children approach the subject – if the children actually talk about death or not and how comfortable they feel discussing the subject. This may allow for

respected. An intervention is warranted when the grieving person inflicts harm upon him/herself or on to others.

³ The process will be based a lot on the use of De Bono's six thinking hats (2006). Details on the use of hats can be found on the website of the Pedagogical Institute under section Conferences and Workshops, "Loss, grief and child" - Educational material (alternatively <https://goo.gl/tW8FLh>). Children should become acquainted with the hats beforehand, to avoid interruption of the process. However, hats are designed to help! The teacher can process the story without the hats.

the first sharing of experiences with children who have experienced grief and the loss of their own grandfather. The questions are expected to be raised openly. An analysis of the question or the teacher's opinion in the matter is not recommended. The duration of this part should not exceed 5 minutes.

- Reading of the entire book by the teacher **without the use** of images. Each child has a writing board⁴ and a marker in front of them. They are asked to write down their thoughts freely, which they will be able to refer to, if they so wish, once the story is completed. A helpful question would be for them to mention which image in the book, as they imagined it, made the greatest impression on them. Each child could also note down their emotions while listening to the story or the emotions of the story's main character.

Reading the entire book from beginning to end is done intentionally and deliberately, so that children can travel through the three phases of grief and get the sense of closure, giving way to the sense of consolation to shield the gloomy mood which would be created in any case. This activity should not exceed 15 minutes. Processing will follow while reading each letter separately.

Letter 1: The teacher reads the boy's first letter while at the same time showing the class the book's images.

One student – or the whole class – puts on the **white hat** and briefly refers to the context of the first letter of the child – hero of the story.

The **cards with the questions** are in the middle of the classroom and each child chooses a question upon which to state their position. This can be done either with the whole class or within a group (one question) and then the presentation to the whole class will follow. The children who agree with the position stated raise the green card. Those who disagree, raise the red one.

The use of the red and green cards is done, firstly, in order to give the children the opportunity to state their position, even without a verbal statement, on each question.

Freeze frame: The image of the grandfather on the sailboat is shown once more, and the children are asked to make it come to life, using their bodies. Each group takes over a role: the grandfather, the grandson, the sea, the sailboat, the wind and the mermaid. The frame freezes and comes to life again, bit by bit, and it talks. In order to assist the children find the words to express themselves, an envelope is given to the children, a different one for each part of the frame, which contains recommended questions (Annex). Alternatively, each group (of 6 children) takes on the task of creating their own frame. Therefore, the content of the envelopes must be photocopied, once for each one of the groups.

It is expected that a dialogue will begin between the boy and his grandfather, or perhaps between other elements in the frame or even a monologue. It is noted that, according to Cooper (1998) and Zitzlsperger (1999), wind and water are used symbolically in fairytales. The wind symbolizes a moving force, which guides the heroes across the world on a lost voyage. Reality and human life rise over the water. It is the element that symbolizes freeing the spirit from death.

⁴ The child's personal board could be a piece of A4 cardboard in a transparent pocket. The writings on the transparent pocket can be erased with a kitchen sponge.

The Others: The father, the mother, the teacher, George, Anna, the coach and the audience. The lesson ends with the acting out of roles. The children are asked, when they are given the role, either individually or in a group and while wearing the Green Hat to have a discussion about the behavior of the story's hero.

The basic aim of this activity is that the child has a clear understanding of his or her behavior as the expected reaction to his or her grief, and the way in which to respect how individual persons grieve. It is also important to discuss the ways in which the others can support their classmate, student, son, athlete... but taking into account at the same time the relationship they have with the grieving child while respecting at the same time his or her choices. A general rule as to how one deals with one's grief is that all ways are accepted, as long as they do not harm themselves or those around them.

Box of memories: The children place items that belong to grandfather one by one in the box of memories while saying a phrase e.g. your straw hat which shielded you from the sun... There follows a discussion about the usefulness of the box- the box of memories and children are asked to write, draw or place an article which, for them, symbolizes a memory which they would like to place in their own box of memories. This activity can take place the following day if the children are asked to bring in an object from home with their own memory and to tell a sentence, a few words, or even nothing, about their own loss⁵. This gives the opportunity to those who have experienced loss to share their experience with their classmates.

No child should be forced to participate in this activity, to tell or to do anything which will not come out naturally and willingly.

2nd 80 minute Class

- **Letter 2:** The teacher reads the second letter written by the child showing at the same time to the class the book images.

Memories: The activities in which the child and the grandfather were engaged in are written down, with reference to the information given in Letter 1. This can be made on each child's cardboard and the work can be individual or a group work (in pairs).

The Yellow Hat will help children approach these memories in an optimistic and positive way. Through memories, especially when shared, the relationship with the lost person continues to exist in another form – with no physical presence.

One of the children wears the Black Hat and tells what the boy did in his anger and immense sorrow, and the other child puts on the Yellow Hat and changes that position into a positive one. For example:

Black Hat: I stopped playing football. Nobody takes any notice of my progress anymore.

Yellow Hat: I am getting on with my football. Each time I play I remember grandpas' advice.

The same motive continues with the remainder of the activities which the boy has stopped doing.

Emotions: A discussion is carried out on the change in the child's emotions between the first and the second letter. These emotions are recorded on the classroom board.

⁵ This extension of the activity was recommended by colleague Anastasia Spyrou.

It is expected that a reference will be made on the emotion of absence, the hero's emotion of emptiness and anger. The images are of particular usefulness both for discussion purposes and body language. The Red Hat is the one undertaking its role in this approach.

The second letter is clearly shorter than the first and the third. This observation may be brought up by the children themselves. That phase of grief with intense emotions of pain, when nobody acknowledges his loss is, normally, a phase where words are of no use. This is probably the reason why the boy in our story is not writing much...While living through this emptiness, every person is in search of his own meaning of the experience he or she is going through.

- **Letter 3:** The teacher reads the boy's third letter and at the same time, shows the book's images to the class.

Water – sea: The discussion on what kind of relation there may exist between the water, the letters and our story was carried out from the very beginning of the first lesson. At this point, the teacher and the students discuss the symbolism of water. Does the fountain of youth really exist? What is the symbolism here?

Water – Sea: The children write down on their cardboard many and different ways in which water appears in the story (fountain of youth, sea, water in the flower vase, I will drown in the oceans of my tears, swimming etc.) Writing on the cardboard is done before the discussion which follows.

Why so much reference to the water?

Discussion on the fountain of youth. What does he mean when he says: "I finally found the fountain of youth and I brought it to you"? Memories, as long as they exist, the grandfather does not die, nor does the water in its endless circle and the life it gives to all organisms, can be considered as immortal.

Water symbolizes liberation of the spirit against death (Cooper, 1998). The discussion could evolve around the question whether the fountain of youth actually exists. What are people trying to answer through myth and fairytales? How could water symbolically refer to the life circle (bees, sunflowers, sea)? "Sea water is the cure for everything: sweat, tears or the sea", Karen Blixen, Dutch author.

The visit to the cemetery: Children record their thoughts and observations on the relevant picture.

The reference to the term cemetery will be a good opportunity to discuss the term "those who have "slept", instead of "the dead", used in the Christian religion. The teacher can elaborate at this point. The cemetery in the picture does not contain only crosses, but also headstones and columns which point to other religions. The purpose for such inclusion is to discuss the common destiny of humans, which does not differentiate according to religion or origin. Further reference could also be made in the way people elect to build the graves of their loved ones and the impact on the environment. It could be mentioned that in Canada there is an organization which was established in order to promote natural burials, without headstones, aiming at the protection of the natural environment (see details at: www.naturalburialassoc.ca).

Writing on their cardboard words they know about burial customs and how they have changed over the years (they remembered cremation/the pyramids/sarcophagus/Choirokoitia and stone on the chest etc.) – helps the discussion. We begin with the cemetery. How else do we call it? Why? Columns and crosses and then they recorded various burial customs in different peoples and religions which they know of through history.

Children identify the single time that grandpa actually talks, and they comment on his words (back page).

- *Commenting on his words is very useful, because it shows a grandfather who wants the boy to get on with his life, acknowledging at the same time the difficulties.*

Paper Boats: Children are given paper boats or they are asked to make them and to write on them a poem, a letter or to draw something similar to that of the book for a loved one that they have lost (a human or animal, by death or other type of separation). Words on waves. If the children don't have or do not wish to share one of their experiences through this activity, they can resume the role of the hero of the story and leave their own message to the grandpa of our story.

Professor Neimeyer (2006) refers to this activity as a therapeutic technique for both children and adults to navigate their way through the grief process.

- **Closure:** The book's interior lining (the inner side of the cover and the back cover) provide the opportunity to return to the content of the book and also to further analyze the matter beyond the text of the book.

The first image is a reference to loss – not only the loss of the grandfather but of the idea of building the treehouse, which is the result of the loss of the grandfather. The whole scene reminds us of desertion, something that was left unfinished, withered sunflowers.

In the second image, the same scene, with colors. The treehouse was built with the help of the father, who is not replacing grandfather, because nobody is replaceable. The love of the parents and friends, however, and the love of other loved ones is very essential in the grief process.

Children may continue the story of the protagonist in a short text, of the type "Dear Diary..." where the hero of the story describes the day when the treehouse was built and discusses how he is coping with the whole experience with his or her classmates and his parents. What would he have wanted to say or what did he say to them? How do emotions change and how is he, perhaps, moving in and out of his grief, worried at the same time that he may forget his grandfather as he is lost in his own emotions of pain – and whatever else the children may think of to describe. The children's texts may be used for a new lesson, constructed solely on the needs of the children.

Annex

Questions on the 1st letter

Freeze Frame – Stamps for the envelopes

Freeze Frame - Content of the envelopes

Dear Diary

Questions on the first letter

Why can't the

hero of the book

«believe for one

seconds → that his

grandfather has

died?

Does the fountain
of youth truly
exist?

should the young
boy have gone to
the funeral?

When would have
been "ok" for
grandpa to die?

can the

grandfather

travel with the

sailing boat that

his grandson built
for him?

Freeze Frame - stamps for the envelopes

Freeze Frame – Content of envelopes

grandfather

What would the grandfather have liked to say to his grandson?

Perhaps something he never had time to tell?

How does he feel now when he is on his sailboat?

How can he console him?

What should he perhaps advise him? What should he ask him?

Grandson

What could the young boy possibly want to say to his grandfather?

Perhaps something he never had time to tell?

How does he feel now that his grandfather is no longer close to him?

What is he thinking?

What is he asking him?

Sailboat

Where is the sailboat sailing to?

How many voyages has it travelled in its lifetime?

Why is this voyage different?

What emotions is it carrying from the people it is transporting and the people who are saying goodbye to them?

Mermaid

Where is the mermaid traveling to all by herself?

What is she anxious about?

What is she asking the captain?

What does she expect to hear as an answer?

The wind

Where does the wind lead the boats and the people?

Who is guiding it?

What is its purpose?

The sea

What is the water thinking while watching everything happening around it?

To what extent is the end of any significance to it?

What are its differences and similarities with people (humans)?

Dear Diary,

Today _____

