



Research Article

Teaching death in Türkiye: The theme of death in illustrated children's books

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The aim of this study is to determine how the theme of death in preschool children's literature is perceived by preschool teachers. For this purpose, four children's books were examined by nine preschool teachers and their opinions were recorded. The research was carried out with a qualitative approach in accordance with the phenomenological research design. The examined books were evaluated in terms of the treatment of the mourning process, the treatment of the concept of death and formal characteristics. The results showed that the preschool teacher's personal perceptions, prejudices, feelings and thoughts, apart from the scientific criteria, play a significant role in the handling of the books on the subject of death. On the other hand, it was seen that there is no consensus on the transfer of taboo topics such as death by the preschool teachers with correct and scientifically valid methods. For this reason, experimental studies can be planned and effective teaching methods can be developed on the teaching of taboo subjects, especially death, to preschool children. It can be argued that more research is needed to identify the sources of perceptions of teachers who play a leading role in teaching taboo topics to children, and according to the results of this study, they should receive more professional training on teaching taboo topics.

Keywords: Death, children literature, teachers' opinions, death education, perception of death

1. Introduction

Death, which dissolves all human bonds built during life, is a frightening concept for many people. Therefore, the question of whether it is right to explain this concept to children, and if so, in what contexts and with what expressions, is a very important question for adults (Agrawal, 2019). Talking to children about death has been a source of concern for the past 200 years. In the works of Charles Dickens and his contemporaries in the 1800s, this topic was overlooked and naturalised (Moss, 1972). Research on this topic intensified in the early 1900s. Today, the question of how death and similar taboo topics should be applied to children has become an interdisciplinary area of research that is seriously debated.

Explaining the concept of death to children has come to the fore with psychological research's recognition that a child's mental health is more fragile than adults'. Bildik (2013) stated that psychopathology can occur when an individual loses a loved one and enters a complex grieving process. In addition, children's perception of death is affected by many factors such as culture, visual media, religion and morality. This makes it a sensitive topic to tell children about death. (Duval, 2018; Tümlü, 2013). For example, while children raised in Eastern cultures perceive death as more natural and causal, children raised in Western cultures tend to perceive death as supernatural (Lee et al., 2014; Panagiotaki et al., 2015). At the same time, many factors such as gender (Raveis et al., 1999), socio-economic level (Panagiotaki et al., 2018), cognitive development level (Koocher, 1973), having lost a loved one, type of the missing being, and socio-emotional factors (Kenyon, 2001) affect the child's perception of death. In Türkiye, there are very limited studies on the perception of death by preschool children (Sezer & Saya, 2009; Tahta et al., 2015), and there is no clear information about the perception of Turkish children in these studies.

However, considering the results of the research on the Turkish people's perspective on death, limited inferences can be made for preschool children. For example, it is stated that Turkish people's view of death is based on Islamic teachings (Pehlivan, 2022) and that they have a perception between fear and hope due to the dominant belief in life after death (Koçin, 2003). For the same point of view, death is associated with mystery, pain and loneliness among Czechs dominated by western culture. In this respect, it can be said that Turkish culture has some unique features. Therefore, while explaining the concept of death to the child, it will be useful to consider the individual and social factors mentioned above. Therefore, while explaining the concept of death to the child, it would be useful to consider the individual and social factors mentioned above. Otherwise, misinterpretations and unwanted psychopathological problems can occur (Aytekin, 2008).

A rational perspective on how to explain death to children begun to emerge with the progress in the field of psychology. In this context, experts state that children should be approached with an understandable language, without covering up the facts, giving importance to understanding and listening to their feelings, without putting pressure on them, so that they can get through this difficult experience faster (Moore & Moore, 2010). Because Hennefield et al., (2019) reported that young children associate death with curiosity and anxiety rather than sadness, mourning or violence. Although these views are increasingly accepted, the boundaries at which age death can be comprehended are not drawn with definite limits (Austin et al., 2014; Kenyon, 2001; Panagiotaki et al., 2018; Speece & Brent, 1984). The common point that experts meet is that this awareness should be gained in the preschool period. Therefore, it can be said that the way death is shown and explained in preschool children's literature works is important.

As with many other subjects, the preschool period has a crucial importance for children to grasp the subject of death. In the 1950s, many parents did not allow their children to face the realities of death, saying that they are "too young to understand" (Swenson, 1979). This overprotective attitude, which emerged with the improvement of living conditions and the increase in the level of education, prevented them from comprehending death both mentally and emotionally and turned this issue into a taboo (Williams, 2018). However, nowadays, the opinion that children should face death instead of avoiding it has gained popularity (Paul, 2019). Martinčeková et al. (2018) found that children who believe they will not be approached in an overprotective manner by their parents about death-related issues are better able to cope with death. Psychological counsellors explain that reading books on topics such as death to young children at school and having discussions after the reading of the story help them learn how to cope with these sensitive issues (Nicholson & Pearson, 2003). At this point, it is also important to explain death to the child and the question of who will tell it. It is known that it is beneficial for parents to read death-themed books to their children (Poling & Hupp, 2008). However, the teacher can also play an active role in reading these works to the child. The fact that it has an important place among the people who support the child in the mourning process, if not in narrating the death, suggests that it may be the right choice for the teacher to undertake this reading task (Özkan, 2015). Holmgren (2021) stated that although the child who has lost a relative is affected by the problem in her home life, she perceives school life as a different world and sees school as a place that will help life return to normal. For this reason, it can be said that the views that death education should begin in school (Markell, 2010) are justified. Studies show that children's ability to convey their thoughts about death increases with age (Gutiérrez et al., 2020). For example, a four-year-old may think that he or someone else is guilty of death. However, a nine-year-old can better grasp that death is a natural event and that it cannot be anyone's fault. Stylianou and Zembylas (2018) reported that children who received support were better able to express themselves. All of these developments support the belief that reading children's books focusing on death helps children better understand death and improve coping skills (Austin et al., 2014; Delisle & Woods, 1976; Wiseman, 2013). At this point it is important how the subject of death is communicated to them. In this regard, (Wang, 2022) drew attention to the importance of including the theme of death in children's literature. According to Schrank (1982), the character in bibliotherapeutic works should make qualified

suggestions to solve the problem. Therefore, it can be said that dealing with the topic of death in school, as long as it does not contain elements that are contrary to cognitive development, will have help to understand the theme of death for children (Kwaśniewska-Paszta, 2022). However, for teaching on this topic to be successful, it is important to determine the feelings and thoughts of preschool teachers regarding this subject, and this is the focus of this study. Death, along with God, is one of the taboo topics that preschool children ask the most questions (Sak, 2020). As a matter of fact, teachers who will teach the subject of death in the preschool period should be competent in the subject (Öztürk, 2022). However, at this point, the content and quality of the education to be given on death should be taken into consideration. There are signs that educators are worried in studies conducted on death education in different parts of the world. For example, while teachers in South Korea are anxious and reluctant to teach death to children (Kim, 2002), there is a more positive attitude in Spain, where it is discussed whether or not death education should be included in the curriculum (Rodríguez Herrero et al., 2022). In Türkiye, there are some studies based on the opinions of teachers reporting that it is beneficial to give death education in the primary school age, even if it is not in the pre-school period. However, it does not seem possible to come across a country where there are educators who have no reservations about death education and consider this education completely natural. In Türkiye, there is no practice in force in educational institutions on the teaching of death. However, there are some preliminary studies advocating that education should be given on death and this should be done systematically (Tanhan & Arı İnci, 2009). However, with the increase in research findings showing the benefits of death education, it can be predicted that the inclusion of death education in the curriculum in Türkiye will be open to discussion.

As stated above, it has been determined that teaching the theme of death in schools will be beneficial and will increase the level of children's understanding of death. However, it is important that neither the teachers who will provide this education nor the children receiving the education feel uncomfortable about this education and that they should not see this education as a source of uneasiness. Because individuals cannot be motivated by facts they do not believe in, nor can they motivate others. Therefore, it is important to determine the feelings and thoughts of preschool teachers about teaching the theme of death. For this reason, in this study, it was tried to determine the thoughts of preschool teachers about the teaching of death in schools. It is thought that the results to be obtained will contribute to the training programs to be prepared, studies on bibliotherapy applications and researchers working on death.

2. Method

2.1. Research Design

This qualitative study is a phenomenological study, developed to find out how people perceive concepts, objects, and events (Fraenkel et al., 2012). When it comes to experiences related to a particular phenomenon, phenomenology is considered a useful design by experts (Creswell, 2007).

2.2. Sample

Nine preschool teachers between the ages of 28 and 39 participated in this study. Seven of the participants are female and two are male (Figure 1). Each of the participant is a permanent member of the Ministry of National Education (MoNE) and their professional experience ranges from six to 11 years (Figure 2). According to the 2020-2021 statistics on the gender distribution of preschool teachers in Türkiye, the proportion of male teachers is 6.93%, whereas in this study, the proportion is 22.22%. It was found that there is a difference of 15.29% between the statistics of Türkiye and the rates in this sample (MoNE, 2021).

Figure 1

Gender of participants

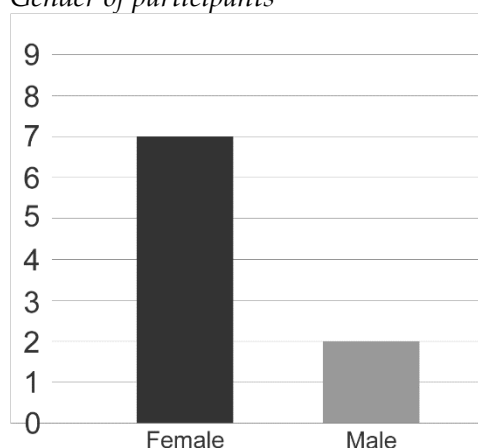
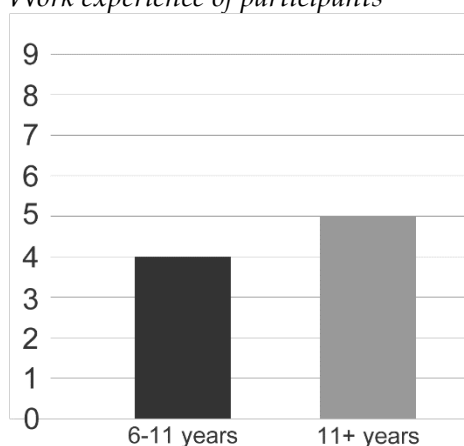


Figure 2

Work experience of participants



2.3. Instruments

Three semi-structured questions addressed to the teachers were used in the study. The opinions of three different experts, one in psychology, one in children's literature and one in measurement and evaluation were taken. The validity and reliability of the questions were ensured by the triangulation method (Neuman, 2011). These questions attempted to determine the teachers' feelings and thoughts after reading the books:

- Is the concept of death structured in a qualified way?
- Has the grieving process after death been adequately addressed?
- Is the book appropriate for the age group in terms of format features?

2.4. Procedure

In the study, in addition to the translated children's books titled *I Remember* (2008) by Jennifer Moore-Mallinos, and *My Old Pal, Oscar* (2018) by Amy Hest, which were recommended by Sevinç (2019) for bibliotherapy, the native works *I Miss My Grandfather* (2015) by Gülçin Alpöge and *The Old Elephant and the Lyrebird* (2016) by Mahmut Yılmaz were selected by seeking expert opinion. The suitability of the selected works was reviewed by a child psychologist, and the scientific suitability of the applications was documented with the approval of the Ethics Committee of Artvin Çoruh University dated 04.02.2020 and numbered E.1708. In addition, the families of the children were informed about the application and written consent was obtained. The teachers conducted the reading activity with the children and following the story, the book was discussed. After the application, the appropriate research questions were addressed by the researchers to the teachers, and the answers were recorded verbally and in writing. Prior to the study, the participants were not aware of the grieving process at an academic level, the formal characteristics of the works, and the child's appropriation of the concept of death. In this way, the opinion of teachers in evaluating the works about death will be determined.

2.5. Data Analysis

The data obtained from the interviews were analysed and coded independently by three different researchers. The codes are labelled with specific concepts. Consequently, these three analyses were compared with each other and a validity and reliability study was carried out. For the calculation of the coding reliability, "The number of agreements / (The number of agreements + The number of disagreements) X 100" formula was employed (Kazdin, 2011). The initial reliability of the four books analysed in this study was calculated as 80% (range = 76-92). The researchers discussed about the arising disagreements until 100% agreement was reached. In this way, the opinion of teachers in evaluating the works about death was determined. In the results section, preschool

teachers' views on the books they read on the topic of death were coded (partially, sufficient, insufficient) and examples with high representativeness from these views were reported.

3. Results

In this section, preschool teachers' views on the books they read on the topic of death were coded, divided into themes, and examples with high representativeness from these views were reported. For a better understanding of the results, brief explanations of each book and its author are provided below each title.

3.1. The Old Elephant and the Lyrebird

Mahmut Yılmaz, the author of *The Old Elephant and the Lyrebird*, which is about the friendship between a bird and an old elephant, has written many works for children. Over time, one of these two friends becomes old and feels that he has reached the end of his life: "I feel in my heart that my life will soon be over." "Will you die, then?" asks the Lyrebird in reply. He gets very upset when he receives the answer "Yes!". The elephant comforts his friend: "You do not have to worry. I know that my family, you and my friends in distant lands will remember me. Everyone dies at the end of their life". Then, they embark on a kind of farewell journey, where they fondly reminisce about their first meeting. When they part, the elephant says: "This is where elephants come at the end of their lives. I will leave you here. We played very merry games, sang songs and had a lot of fun together. Thank you very much." Before they leave, they sing a long, beautiful song. The elephant then collapses to the ground, closes his eyes, and lies motionless. The events are sometimes told in the form of dialogue and sometimes in the third person. After the death of the elephant, the reader encounters the following statement: "The elephant is dead and will never come back". The lyrebird leaves a daisy and goes back to the other elephants. They too realise that their friend is dead and play a game they used to love. They fill their hoses with water and spray it in the air to commemorate their friends. Later, the lyrebird and the elephants migrate back to warm lands, and life takes its natural course.

3.1.1. Mourning process

Table 1 presents the teachers' views on the mourning process.

Table 1

Does the book "The Old Elephant and the Lyrebird" adequately address the mourning process in a healthy way?

<i>Opinion</i>	<i>Participants</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Partially	B, A	2	22.22 %
Sufficiently	C, G	2	22.22 %
Insufficient	D, E, F, H, I	5	55.55 %

While five of the teachers described the work as totally insufficient in this regard due to shortcomings and some problems related to the mourning process, two of them said it was partially sufficient and two of them said it was totally sufficient. The criticism of the participants who found the work insufficient is directed at the fact that the time after the death of the hero is not processed. For instance, participant D said:

The work emphasises that the elephant is old and tries to explain death as a normal situation. However, she considers that the lyrebird's reaction to his friend's death, that he was only sorry, was not adequately addressed and the mourning process was insufficient.

The remarks of participant A, who considered the work partly sufficient from this regard, are quite remarkable:

It is very nice to have the support of his friends. I really liked that it ended in a way that gave hope for the future. But I do not know if it was healthy for the development to go to the place where he was going to die, to die in front of the bird. Fainting, and sleeping looks same as dying. No living being can say "I am going to die" and then close his/her eyes and die.

Participant G, who commented positively on the work, did not give a detailed evaluation: The child's coping with death, with positive moments, was adequately discussed so that it would not negatively affect the child's development.

3.1.2. Concept of death

Table 2 presents the teachers' views on the concept of death.

Table 2

Is the book "The Old Elephant and the Lyrebird" sufficient to explain the concept of death to the age group?

<i>Opinion</i>	<i>Participants</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Insufficient	A, C, D, F, H, I	6	66.66 %
Partially	E	1	11.11 %
Sufficient	B, G	2	22.22 %

The concern and hesitation of the teachers who consider the book inadequate are related to the words describing death, to the fact that death takes place in front of the lyrebird, occupies a very limited space in the book, and is associated only with old age. Some of the participants who were concerned about death being associated with old age expressed their concerns about the negative effects of children regarding the elderly. For example, the thoughts of one of these teachers, participant A, are as follows: Children who internalise this situation can develop paranoia especially toward the older people they love. I can change that part. Other than that, the explanation is good. Another participant, C, concluded that I will not read this book to my students. Contrary to the above two views, participant G said:

The fact that the child does not forget the deceased, rather than questioning death at an early age, can prevent the formation of pessimistic feelings in the child. Thus, children can develop a healthy view of death at an early age.

He stated that the book has succeeded in understanding death by explaining that it is an irreversible process and advising to keep the deceased alive in good memories.

3.1.3. Formatting

Table 3 presents the teachers' views on the formatting of the books.

Table 3

Is the book "The Old Elephant and the Lyrebird" adequate in terms of the suitability of the format features?

<i>Opinion</i>	<i>Participants</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Successful	A, B, G, I	4	44.44 %
Partially successful	C, F	2	22.22 %
Unsuccessful	D, E, H	3	33.33 %

Participant A commented positively on the format features of the book: The pictures of the work are very beautiful. They warm the heart. The elephant feels complete. The font and size are nice. Participant D, who commented negatively by saying that the book was short and clear, said:

It is not suitable for children to read, the pictures are drawn very intricately and there is too much detail in the drawings of the animals. There is some inconsistency in the use of colours. At the end of the work, I do not think it is appropriate for the dead elephant to stay where it died. What happened to the elephant when the piece was read? I think it will cause children to ask questions like this.

Therefore, she made her assessments on the subject with the conclusion that this part gives the impression of being incomplete.

3.2. I Remember

In the book *I Remember*, written by Jennifer Moore-Mallinos, a social worker and author of children's books, we hear the events from the mouth of a child. The book was translated into Turkish by Emine Deliorman. This book, which has both informative and narrative features, is

about the coping process of a child who has lost his pet dog: "We are all born, live and die one day. Did you know that?" (p. 4). In the story, the reader witnesses the puppy named Kıtır grow up with the child. Then Kıtır becomes old, gets sick and dies. After the dog's death, the child expresses his feelings with the following sentences: "I Remember how sad and lonely I felt when Kıtır died. I cried all the time and my heart did not want to do anything. My heart was broken. What would I do without him? Actually, on the one hand, I was very angry with Kıtır because he was my best friend. Do close friends ever leave each other? I felt better when my parents explained to me that Kıtır had no choice in the face of death" (p. 18). Then they bury Kıtır on the hill across from the farm where they lived and say their goodbyes. The boy expressed his longing for him. Later on, he begins to remember the good days he had lived with Kıtır without feeling pain and actually feels better. Later he meets a new dog friend named Çomar. He becomes a very good friend of Çomar, but he does not forget Kıtır.

3.2.1. Mourning process

Table 4 presents the teachers' views on the mourning process of the books.

Table 4

Does the book "I Remember" adequately address the mourning process in a healthy way?

<i>Opinion</i>	<i>Participants</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Partially	B	1	11.11 %
Sufficient	A, C, D, E, F, G, H, I	8	88.88 %

The participants particularly emphasised the clear expression of emotions, and the successful adjustment of the doses of pain and sadness, and they agreed that the work was carefully written so as not to harm the mental health of preschool children. Participant D said:

The grieving process was short and concise considering the audience to which the work will be read. All the stages such as our hero's sadness in the face of death, remembering his friend with good memories, and decreasing his sadness from day to day are described in the work. I think the reactions shown by our hero are both right and healthy.

Participant A said:

The grieving process was portrayed very well and accurately. The hero's expression of his feelings and his sentences expressing how much he misses him were sincere and as it should be. The hero's reactions are spot on. In a way that appeals to the pre-schooler.

Only one of the participants, B, said that the mourning process was described briefly. Some of the environmental support was evident in the story. His family tried to support the child by buying a new dog; she generally gave a negative critique of the book.

3.2.2. Concept of death

Table 5 presents the teachers' views on the concept of death.

Table 5

Is the book "I Remember" sufficient to explain the concept of death to the age group?

<i>Opinion</i>	<i>Participants</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Successful	A, B, D, E, F, G, H, I	8	88.88 %
Partially successful	C	1	11.11 %

Participant D, who spoke positively about dealing with death as part of a natural process and about the fact that the story narrates life in a clear way and step by step, expressed her hesitation at just one word as follows:

In the work, he mentions in the first pages that death is a cycle for all living beings. On the other pages of the work, the stages that a living being goes through and the changes that this living being undergoes are appropriately presented. In this way, it is emphasised that death is universal.

However, I do not think it is appropriate to constantly use words like 'we buried him, he was buried' when describing it as an irreversible process. If I were to change these words, I could read this book to children.

Another participant, F, clearly emphasised the importance of passing on information about death as follows:

As in the other two stories, there is an increase in grief, acceptance, and coping skills in the aftermath of death. The concept of death, on the other hand, is presented as an irreversible and natural process only in this story. This is more concrete information for the world of children. That is why it is so successful. We are born, we grow, we die. Short, clear and understandable. Dying is not optional. Understandable expressions.

Only participant G said that the book can help because it tells the cycle of life as it is. Although he expressed hesitation, saying he was not sure it could develop a healthy understanding, he stated that he could read this book to his students.

3.2.3. Formatting

Table 6 presents the teachers' views on the formatting of the book.

Table 6

Is the book "I Remember" adequate in terms of suitability of visual elements?

<i>Opinion</i>	<i>Participants</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Sufficient	A, B, C, D, E, F, H, I	8	88.88 %
Partially	G	1	11.11 %

Participant I said: The letters' size of the work is quite appropriate. The author has included the front and back cover images in the book. Visual integrity is assured. Another participant, E, positively expressed his thoughts by saying that the book is appropriate for pre-schoolers in terms of the font. The font size is adequate expressed. Participant C however expressed a criticism of the size of the text with the following sentences: The visuals are nice. The formal features are nice, but the font size should be a little bigger. In addition to her positive words, another participant, F, made a suggestion regarding the design of the text and image:

Visually beautiful. However, stories with a page of text next to a page of pictures are more useful and understandable in group readings (for pre-schoolers). Basically, it is the same if you take your child and read to them individually. But for individual reading, it is sufficient in terms of text, format, size, and visuals.

3.3. My Old Pal, Oscar

My Old Pal, Oscar written by Amy Hest and translated into Turkish by Sedef Özge, tells the story of a child who has lost his pet and completes the grieving process by acquiring a new pet. An important part of the story can be followed through pictures. Pastel colours with a predominance of yellow and grey dominate the entire book. The reader first sees a sad boy walking on the beach. Then a puppy comes and shows him affection. Even though the child shows interest for a short time, he does not want to go on, but the puppy does not give up. The boy finally cannot take it anymore and agrees to go for a walk together. After this moment, he begins to tell the puppy about his dog Oscar. After Oscar dies, he talks about how sorry he was and that he would not stop feeling sorry for his old friend. Meanwhile, he continues to show interest in the puppy next to him. When it begins to rain, he picks it up and takes it home. At the same time, he continues to talk about Oscar. He shows the picture he drew so as not to forget him. Meanwhile, the dog becomes sleepy from exhaustion. When he falls asleep, the child accepts this new puppy as his new friend.

3.3.1. Mourning process

Table 7 presents the teachers' views on the mourning process.

Table 7

Is the handling of the mourning process in the book My Old Pal, Oscar adequate and healthy?

<i>Opinion</i>	<i>Participants</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Excessive	A, E	2	22.22 %
Sufficient	D, I, F	3	33.33 %
Insufficient	B, E,	2	22.22 %
Partially sufficient	C, G, H	3	33.33 %

While three of the participants stated that the grieving process was adequately addressed in the book, three of them stated that the book was partially sufficient in this regard, two participants found it insufficient, and two participants found it excessive. Participant F found it sufficient:

The main theme is the process of grieving and acceptance after death. It is well expressed that he could never replace Oscar with another dog after his loss and still misses him very much. If we evaluate the reactions within the process of acceptance, it is quite natural and healthy.

Participants who felt that the process was partially sufficient emphasised that support from the environment, especially the family, was not visibly shared. Participant G said that the environmental support is weak because the existence of the people around him is not mentioned. He lives with the image of his old dog in his room. If I were in his place, I would like to get parental support. Participant B felt that the grieving process was not adequately addressed:

The time the child spent with Oscar was very little addressed, and the reason he died was not included in the story. I do not think he was supported by those around him. If he was supported, it would be easier for the child to befriend another dog.

Participant A thinks the process is exaggerated:

I do not like this book. The grieving process was overemphasised. The child could not handle death! The hero's reactions are too much, if not overdone. It is exaggerated when he acts like he cannot play with another dog, completely bitter. The book beautifully explains how not to deal with death. It is not particularly appropriate for ages 0-6. Environmental support is not addressed. If it were me, I would explain it by changing it.

3.4.2. Concept of death

Table 8 presents the teachers' views on the concept of death.

Table 8

Is the book of the "My Old Pal, Oscar" sufficient to explain the concept of death to the age group?

<i>Opinion</i>	<i>Participants</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Insufficient	E, F	2	22.22 %
Partially	A, B, C	3	33.33 %
Sufficient	D, G, H, I	4	44.44 %

Participant D, who found the work sufficient, said: He handled the effects and feelings of death on the remaining person well. Accepting that his old friend will not come back and remembering him by making pictures about him is one of the positive steps. Participant B, who found it partially sufficient, supported her opinion by saying:

So it helps partially. Understanding death... In the story, the time between the dog's life and death is not told, so children may have difficulty understanding death. It was partially implied. I do not think it hurts to read the book, but the child only partially understands death.

3.4.3. Formatting

Table 9 presents the teachers' views on the formatting of book.

Table 9

Is the book "My Old Pal, Oscar" sufficient in terms of the suitability of the visual elements?

<i>Opinion</i>	<i>Participants</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Successful	C, D, F, G, H, I	6	66.66 %
Unsuccessful	A, B, E,	3	33.33 %

H, one of the participants who expressed positive thoughts, said: The outstanding aspect of the work is its appearance. There is a good harmony between text and image. The font, size and positioning are good. Participant C said that: Its visuals are quite rich. The font is not as big as the others, this is because of the excess of images and the scarcity of text. One of the negative opinions, participant A, said that: The text is too small. The pictures are too cold. Participant E said: There is too much space for the visual dimension. There are too many pages for a pre-schooler. The font size is too small.

3.5. I Miss My Grandfather

I Miss My Grandfather was written by Gülçin Alpöge, an experienced researcher in preschool education and author of children's books. The story begins with the following sentences: "Will I never see my grandfather again?" asked Ali, "But why?" "Because we lost your grandfather," said his mother. "Your grandfather is dead, Ali!" Then his mother sat down next to Ali. "Do not worry," she said. "There is a way to keep those we lost alive inside us." "How?" "By remembering them! You must have good memories, too." "Sure," Ali said, "Maaany!". After this dialogue, the author recounts Ali's fond memories of his grandfather. At the end of the book, the following lines await the reader: "His mother was right. He would keep his grandfather alive in his memories". There is no information in the book about the time and cause of death. Only the mourning process that developed after the news of his death was communicated. This child, whose mourning process the readers witness, is also the main character of the story. In the beginning, the narration is in the third person. This beginning is in the form of dialogue, but afterwards Ali narrates most of the experiences between himself and his grandfather. His mother intervenes in a very limited way.

3.5.1. Mourning process

Table 10 presents the teachers' views on the mourning process.

Table 10

Is the book "I Miss My Grandfather" dealing with the mourning process appropriately and healthy?

<i>Opinion</i>	<i>Participants</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Sufficient	A, F, G, H, D	5	55.55 %
Insufficient	B, I	1	11.11 %
Partially	E	1	11.11 %
Uncertain	C	1	11.11 %

Participant D says: The ability to cope with the present grief and situation is well guided by the memory of the good memories of the deceased person by his environment. The words of participant F are in the same direction:

The process of coping with death, the process of coping with loss should be explained. If we look at it in this sense, it has been adequately addressed. In the story, the mother directly says, 'We lost your grandfather,' instead of using lies, distractions, and abstract concepts to explain and use as a coping method; it is good that she offers a clear option, such as remembering good memories and keeping them alive.

On the other hand, although these teachers considered the work successful, they did not fail to point out some weaknesses. For example, participant F, whose opinion is quoted above, pointed out to a missing aspect of the book:

In the story, it could be that the mother was involved while the child recalled his memories and that the memories were kept shorter. Because a child reading this story might focus on memories (such as vacations, games) and miss the main theme.

Participant I, who held the opposite opinion, said: I think that the mourning process after death has been overlooked. The pain experienced is not mentioned, only the good memories are mentioned. She explained that she finds the process of coping with death superficial. Participant C, who found the process uncertain, said: Since the age group is not fully specified, I cannot give detailed information about the processing of the process because there are not many details in the book.

3.5.2. Concept of death

Table 11 presents the teachers' views on the concept of death.

Table 11

Is the book "I Miss My Grandfather" sufficient to explain the concept of death to the age group?

<i>Opinion</i>	<i>Participants</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Insufficient	A, B, C, E, I	5	55.55 %
Partially	D, F, G, H	3	33.33 %
Sufficient	F	1	11.11 %

Participant B said: Children may not be able to understand death because it is explained very superficially. I do not think there is any harm in reading it, but in terms of understanding, the child will not understand death. Participant D thinks that the book is partially sufficient to understand death and that the person reading the book to the child should give some explanations. On the other hand, she thinks that the book does not prevent children from reading it, but contains the wrong choice of words. Participant H, who felt the work was partially sufficient to understand death, said: It can help the child develop an understanding of death. The supportive aspect that death is a universal and irreversible process is very weak. Participant F believes that, unlike the others, the work successfully conveys that death is an irreversible process, but that preschool children cannot understand it because they cannot think abstractly. This participant's criticism of the book was mainly in the direction of deviating from the topic. In the work, the boy recalls his experiences with his grandfather and tells about them to alleviate the grieving process. According to this participant, sharing the memories longer than necessary prevents the story from fulfilling its purpose. The teacher's sentences on this topic are as follows:

In the parts where the child is telling the memories, the memories should be shortened. For example, I also remember going to the play with my grandfather. When I could not see, he would put me on his shoulder. It could have been shorter like: Let us focus on the subject of the book and not on the memory. Because children will only remember the content that catches their attention more than the main theme.

3.5.3. Formatting

Table 12 presents the teachers' views on the formatting of the book.

Table 12

Is the book I Miss My Grandfather adequate in terms of suitability of visual elements?

<i>Opinion</i>	<i>Participants</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Sufficient	A, B, E, F, G, I	6	66.66 %
Partially	C, D	3	33.33 %
Insufficient	H	1	11.11 %

Among the participants who thought the book was appropriate for the audience it targets, participant A said:

The format and size are nice. It is nice that it is covered on separate pages from the pictures. I like the pictures. Simple and nicely coloured. There is no complexity. While expressing his thoughts as such,

participant G stated that the pictures are drawn to reflect the memories, the font and size are appropriate because of the details of the memories, and participant I argued that it is a book that is well suited for preschool in terms of picture and font size.

Participant D, who found the book partially adequate in terms of format features, emphasised that the size of the book should be slightly larger so that preschool readers can better see the details:

If it is bigger, the details in the pictures may be easier to see. The memories mentioned in the work can be reduced by one or two. It may be too long and distracting for younger students. I think the images used are gentle and harmonious.

Participant H also notes that there are problems with alignment:

There is only one image in the work where the child is in a sad state. The others are purely happy moments when he spends time with his grandparents. The text matches the pictures and I think it is sufficient. The font is okay, but I do not think its size and especially its alignment are appropriate. It would be better if there was a structure where the picture and the text are intertwined. While one side is a white page, the other side is just an image.

4. Discussion

The aim of this study was to try to determine the thoughts of preschool teachers about the teaching of death in schools. Thus, it was thought that an application-oriented proposal could be presented to experts working in the field on the transfer of the taboo theme of death to children. The first item of research for *The Old Elephant and the Lyrebird* is whether the grieving process is treated in a qualified manner. Most teachers consider that the mourning process is not sufficiently treated in the work. Behind these beliefs is the fact that the after-death period is limited to a few sentences. Moreover, apart from the sentence "The lyrebird is very sad" there is no expression of emotion. The mourning process occupies only three-four pages from nearly 40. This situation may have led teachers to believe that the process in question does not occur in the work, or only to a limited extent. It also deprives the reader of the opportunity to become aware of the struggle. In fact, according to the DABDA model developed by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, people who have lost a loved one first deny the situation, then feel anger, then enter a process of negotiation and develop strategies to hold on to life, and in the last two stages experience a state of depression and finally accept the loss (Testoni et al., 2019). When assessing the grieving process in children, age groups come to the fore. It is known that children in the age group of three to six years cannot cope with intense emotions, search for the deceased person, and are negatively affected by the disruption of their life routine (Bildik, 2013). However, it cannot be said that these steps are satisfactorily addressed in the work. In this regard, the teachers' findings regarding the grieving process seem to be correct.

Considering why processing death, which is the second item of research, is considered unsuccessful, we noted that the immobility of the old elephant during death, and death in the presence of a relative can be harmful to children. In addition, it was expressed in findings that the deceased being old can cause a negative attitude towards the elderly. Regarding the meaning of death for children, it is known that children under the age of five are far from understanding the universality of death because they tend to approach the deceased with sympathy rather than empathy (Clement, 2014). For this reason, a compassionate death narrative is preferred in children's literature (Walker & Jones, 1986). However, research shows evidence that this information may vary. For example, Panagiotaki et al. (2015) found that Muslim children between the ages of four and seven grasp the irreversibility of death earlier than Christian children. Accordingly, it can be said that the concerns about reading qualified works about death are unfounded, both because Türkiye is a country where predominantly Muslim children are educated and because the group of preschool children consists mainly of students aged five and older. Considering the results of the study, it can be argued that the teachers do not have a clear idea that death applies to all children. This is because the elephant standing still on the ground gives the child a strong idea of the nature and reality of death. In other words, it helps him to understand

the universality of death. On the other hand, it can be said that teachers' views on this issue are based on the mistaken belief (Öztürk, 2022) that creating a "sterile" literary work will protect children from all kinds of negativity. However, facing a challenge under appropriate conditions is a factor that increases the ability to struggle with this problem in the future and develop the individual (Canan, 2019; Seçkin & Hasanoğlu, 2016). Therefore, it can be argued that teachers have a perception error that it is harmful to have a death scene; as long as it is in a form that is not psychologically harmful, a death scene should be alright.

It has been noted that the number of those who consider the work successful in terms of its stylistic features and those who are conflicted on this issue are quite close. Those who considered it inadequate stated that the drawings in the book were too complex, details such as the fact that the deceased elephant was not removed and left where it died were inappropriate, while those who considered it successful emphasised that the writing style, the size, and the drawings in the book were sufficient to express what was meant. Looking closely at the teachers' comments, it can be seen that the negative comments about the format were actually related to the content of the book. In the case of the comments that relate directly to the format of the book, it can be seen that the work is successful. The physical features include the size of the book, the letters, the paper, the cover, the pictures, the page layout, the information in the masthead, and the spelling features (Çolaklar, 2019). However, the comments that focus on the message rather than the way the picture is presented in the design features include an objection to the content. This is because pictures in preschool books must complement and explain the written text. If the two are not connected, the picture is meaningless to the child (Körükçü, 2012). It can be concluded that the importance teachers attach to the content outweighs the stylistic features when evaluating a children's book. The results that emerged from the findings related to the aforementioned work show that this work was considered sufficient by teachers in terms of all three characteristics.

For the second book discussed here, *I Remember*, the participants argued that the clear, unambiguous expression of the main character's grief over death makes the reader empathise with him. The main character is comforted by receiving social support from his family. The participants found the book successful because it goes through the process by remembering good memories. Both the steps of the grieving process (Testoni et al., 2019) and the emphasis on social support (Bildik, 2013; Karasu & Yalçınkaya Alkar, 2020; Kırçalı, 2020) show that teachers' opinions of the work and the results of research overlap.

The reason for the work's success in dealing with death is that, according to the teachers, it clearly shows death as a natural process. One participant stated that he found the phrase "we buried" disturbing and that it did not belong in the book. However, when we look at the book, we find that there is no picture of the dog's death. In other words, death is only dealt with at the level of conveying the child's feelings after the death of his dog. For this reason, participants may have perceived dealing with death as less harmful only at the level of personal thoughts. Poling and Hupp (2008) note that as children get older, their understanding of the causality of death increases. Sadler (1991) notes that educating children about death helps them take better control of their lives. In this context, it seems controversial that statements that offer the possibility of explaining the causality of death harm children. In the work, it is told that the child successfully continues his life after the death of his dog, so this can be interpreted as a protective attitude. It can be argued that their contribution to increasing psychological resilience will be limited. On the other hand, it can be said that the development of the concept of death is beneficial because it encompasses the dimensions of irreversibility, non-functionality, and universality (Speece & Brent, 1984).

The commonalities in preschool teachers' perceptions of a successful book can be expressed in the fact that it is predominantly pictorial in terms of the balance of pictures and writing, and that children's drawings of cute characters are preferred. Başaran et al. (2021) emphasised that there should be a balance between pictures and text and the size and quantity of fonts. Although the character drawings in this work were made by professional illustrators for the age characteristics and aesthetic sensibilities of children, death was conveyed to the reader through intuition rather than being overtly shown. The fact that death, which is a disturbing situation, was not overtly

shown may have been perceived as more successful because it did not take teachers out of their intellectual comfort zone and did not require an explanation of problematic issues. On the other hand, the fact that the event in the work is based on the child's personal experience, even if not visual, is effective in terms of content and prevents the formation of false schemata about death in the mind (Koocher, 1973). However, it would be useful to determine the extent of this effect through further research.

The work entitled *My Old Pal, Oscar* was partially successful in terms of the grieving process, with some question marks, and completely successful in terms of presenting the concept of death and its formal features. It is believed that social support is not emphasised in the grieving process and that the work is incomplete in this regard. Parallel to these thoughts, some studies point out the importance of social support in the grieving process (Bildik, 2013; Dillon & Brassard, 1999; Karasu & Yalçinkaya Alkar, 2020; Kırçalı, 2020). Social support contributes to the psychological resilience of the individual as well as the grieving process (Erzen & Ozacaci, 2023). In the work, the protagonist's longing for his dog Oscar after losing him is expressed. The sadness of losing the dog is conveyed to the reader through the longing for the past. From this point of view, it can be said that to hold on to life, he emphasises the good days of the past and deals with the negotiation process and the acceptance processes. He has internalised that the dog cannot come back. The reason for the participants' desire to make a statement about the lack of social support in this work may be that the death occurred during an unspecified period and that a direct transition was made to post-death feelings without including an explanation about the death in the book. In other words, the lack of explanation on how to deal with the feeling of death in detail in the book might have led the reader to fill this gap.

On the topic of transferring death to children, starting from the statement that the deceased will not come back, the participants emphasised that children can easily perceive death through this book. From the lonely boy's speeches, it is clear that he used to have a favourite dog and that the dog died. In other words, by the time we learned of its death, the event had long since passed. There is no detailed description or picture of this event left behind. This seems to contradict the teachers' appreciation of this book. Although it is claimed that proper understanding of verbal expressions and pictures about death in children's books help to teach the child about death (Wiseman, 2013), researchers note that even when death is clearly explained in appropriate language, there can be problems with comprehension. For example, (Agrawal, 2019) found that only a small proportion of preschool children can perceive the concept of death according to the steps indicated in the literature, but even though they are five years old, the majority of children have only three steps in understanding the concept of death (universality, irreversibility, non-functionality). Panagiotaki et al. (2015) also found that children as young as four years old can grasp the basic features of death. Therefore, it can be argued that behind the participants' finding that the work is successful in this regard is the impulse to escape the tension rather than highlighting the plot that supports the mental structure that can create a real understanding of death. The fact that death is almost absent from a work that describes the taboo subject of death may have been a relief to the reader.

In the last item examined in the paper, it was reported that the work was successful due to elements such as the size of the images and the amount of writing. Güleç ve Gönen (1997) suggest that there should be $\frac{3}{4}$ pictures and $\frac{1}{4}$ writing in children's books for pre-schoolers. In the examination of the present study, it can be seen that these criteria are met. The artistic qualities of the drawings stand out as another feature of the work. Considering the fact that the work meets the preschool standards in the range of 18-22 points (Çolaklar, 2019) in terms of font type and size, it can be said that it is an expected result that the work is perceived as problem-free/successful by the participants.

According to the results obtained from the findings related to the work titled *I Miss My Grandfather*, participants clearly did not find the format of the work successful in conveying death, but found the grieving process sufficient in terms of processing and form features. Opinions on the transmission of death to the reader emphasise that the work focuses on the aftermath of death

rather than the dying process. The opinions of the participants on this issue are noteworthy. This is because in this work, the same method was used in terms of conveying death as in the works *My Old Pal*, *Oscar* and *I Remember*. In all three books there is no death scene and the emphasis is on the memories of the past. But what sets this book apart is that it deals with the death of a human being rather than an animal. Nicholson and Pearson (2003) stated that animals can be a good choice to explain death to children and that books about people can be considered for older children. Although no age group is given at this point, it can be said that books about animals are more appropriate for children under the age of five. Considering the cognitive developmental stages (Dunn, 2011; Weisberg & Richert, 2022), five types of death are mentioned in children's literature; these are the deaths of parents, animals, friends, siblings, and great-grandparents. These deaths are a part of life, and when they face this problem in children's literature, they can cope with this real-life event more easily and find the possibility to live life better. However, most adults find it unacceptable or disturbing to see the topic of death in children's literature (Gibson & Zaidman, 1991). While in the past death was a subject that was much more a part of life and that anyone could easily come into contact with it, it can be argued that in today's more comfortable environment it is somewhat more isolated from daily life. A century ago, when the laws, the diseases, the daily living conditions, and the safety precautions were much worse, the death or murder of someone in a home was more common and more difficult to hide from children. Nowadays, one is inclined to believe that it is uncomfortable for children to see the subject of death, even in books where a much safer environment than in the past can be provided. Although there is no serious reaction to the death of an animal, even though we walk the same path, this could be one of the explanations for the reactionary attitude towards the death of a human being. Ninon (1993) also emphasised this situation, stating that the factor that makes topics such as violence, which are disturbing in today's children's literature, more controversial than in the past is the context in which we live today. Although the participants noted that the three basic processes of the concept of death did not come to the fore in the work regarding the inability to convey death, the fact that they did not give the same responses to other works with similar qualities suggests that the difference is due to the content.

The work titled *I Miss My Grandfather*, was described as successful in addressing the grieving process, which is the second factor examined in the work. Almost all participants stated that the social support the child received from his mother made the work successful in terms of dealing with the grieving process. As mentioned earlier, scientific studies coincide with participants' views on social support. Moreover, social support acts as a buffer for the individual in the face of challenging events (Janicki Deverts et al., 2017). It has been found in various studies to have a positive effect on coping with stressful events and to make the individual feel good (Cohen & Wills, 1985). In this context, it should be emphasised that participants' emphasis on social support is important.

Participants largely agreed that the form features of the work were successful. Brookshire et al. (2002) state that it is easier for children to understand and store the work in long-term memory when the images in the work are well processed. In this regard, the participants who were critical of the work expressed the opinion that it was not appropriate to place the picture and the text on separate pages. However, considering the findings (Jalongo et al., 2002) that children's books without text, composed entirely of pictures, are also very conducive to children's intellectual worlds, it can be said that the advantages of the "one-page text - one-page picture" technique preferred in this work are open to debate. This is because, when creating such works, publishers are usually concerned with allowing parents to read the story by presenting the child with the page of text and the page of the picture. Of course, this point of view has both positive and negative aspects. For example, the child who listens to the story only by looking at the pictures may be deprived of the opportunity to become familiar with the letters.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, it was found that teachers' views on works of children's literature that have death as a theme were consistent with some scientific criteria and diverged from others. It was found that teachers tend to make decisions based on their judgments and feelings when it comes to issues of dissociation. Therefore, it can be argued that more research is needed to identify the sources of perceptions of teachers who play a leading role in teaching taboo topics to children, and according to the results of this study, they should receive more professional training on teaching taboo topics. On the other hand, it is seen that there is no consensus on the transfer of taboo topics such as death by the preschool teachers with correct and scientifically valid methods. For this reason, experimental studies can be planned and effective teaching methods can be developed on the teaching of taboo subjects, especially death, to preschool children. With the results to be obtained from these studies, applications for teaching taboos within the scope of child psychology course can be produced.

6. Limitations

This study has some limitations. For example, one of these limitations is the cross-sectional nature of the study's data. The concept of death varies according to worldviews in perception, perception, thinking and understanding (Durmuşoğlu & Ataman, 2018). Since all these features may change over time, there is a possibility that the validity level of the findings valid during the study period will decrease in the future. For this reason, conducting longitudinal studies in the future could address this issue. Another limitation of the study is the number of teachers participating in the study, namely nine. Studies with more participants from regions with more difficult living conditions, where death may be perceived more negatively, could help to increase the degree of analytic generalisation of the results. Another limitation of the study is its validity and reliability. In qualitative research, the meanings in subjective interpretations are based on instead of statistical analysis of numerical values. For this reason, the data revealed in this study may have real validity and reliability concerns. In order to overcome this, triangulation method with three different encoders was used and the consistency of the coding was tried to be determined (Neuman, 2011). However, the presence of more coders could have contributed to obtaining more valid and reliable results.

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