Language Re-Discovered: a Death Education Intervention in the Net Between Kindergarten, Family and Territory

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Abstract: The article presents the positive results of a *death education* experience, realized owing to a collaboration between school, family and territory. The project, with the scope of reflecting on topics of death and spirituality, included 46 children of 5 from kindergarten and 50 parents, and then mobilizing the entire community. Social services and public administration had a special role in this, aiming to guarantee the necessary support for the families in the existential reflections. The experience was monitored with participatory observation, via interviews and questionnaires. The children answered questions regarding death and spirituality during an open and sincere conversation with the teachers. The parents, who at home talked about certain pre-defined teams with the children, were asked to give their informed consent and were given a questionnaire with open questions ex-ante/ ex-post. All data were processed via qualitative analysis of the texts. The results are truly positive, showing that children are capable of facing the problem of death and are able to acquire a certain representation of the spiritual dimension. The parents, who in the beginning demonstrated some anxiety, eventually were greatly satisfied and expressed their willingness to continue to search for the connection between death and transcendence.

Keywords: death education, spirituality and transcendence, relationship between school-family-territory, social service

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Introduction

Any expression of death is a social event, always affected by a hostile will of the person who is to be reabsorbed from the group, through collective processes, promoting mutual understanding in front of the incomprehensible (Walter, 2015). Since death belongs to a symbolic dimension, for it is common to everyone and present in everybody's life, thus the biological fact keeps transforming itself in culture and search of meaning (Harrington, 2017; Testoni, I., Sansonetto, et al., 2017). Important questions regarding communal and private management of dying cannot be kept banished in silence anymore, as it has been happening in the Western World for some decades. Since WWII until today the new achievements of medicine have systematically removed the supervision of the borders between life and death from nature. The phenomenon has been accompanied by externalizing the process of dying, removing it from the family and handing it over to public health care institutions. As a result, until the present day, at least five generations have grown up in 'death free families', ie. without giving direct support for the dying family members, unlike before them up to the middle of the last century. Completely alienated from family life, this existential dimension has been given away to the only representation that mass media may provide, and thus left without the possibility of any conscious elaboration of the impacts (Fonseca & Testoni, 2011; McBride, & Simms, 2001; Sanders, 2008; Testoni, 2016; Testoni, Facco & Perelda, 2017).

In order to remove all that which literature in palliative care described as the marginalization and isolation of death inside hospitals (Facco et al., 2018; Yamamoto et al., 2018) and which defined as the most original censorship of modern times (Chapple et al, 2017; Lagutina, 2017; Murtagh, & Miller, 2011; Testoni et al., 2018), it is necessary to reset the social competencies regarding the last phase of life, which until the end of the 19th century characterized family and community relationships (Corr, Corr & Doka, 2018). The need to face openly these themes have been seen from more sides, together with the need to redefine an appropriate language which can again become a common symbolic and experiential heritage (Testoni, 2016).

According to the sociological and psycho-social literature (Jacobsen, & Davies, 2011; Shubha, 2007), being aware of mortality could teach us to live our lives with strategies to love life, freer from the spectrum of death, which, actually, as not dealt with on a socio-cultural level, acts freely upon individuals on an unconscious level, thus bringing on unconscious and regressive reactive behaviour. In psycho-social environment, this idea has widely been confirmed empirically via the researches of the Management Theory (Solomon, Testoni & Bianco, 2017), revealing that the unconscious terror of death conditions the actions of people's everyday life without them having a control of this influ-

ence. Moreover, researches on the quality of life in '*end-of-life*' have growing influence on health care practice, showing the necessity, on the one hand, that the dying should be cared for at home, and, on the other hand, that a diffused maturity should be acquired in the competencies when selecting the place of where to die in a responsible way, towards oneself as much as towards the beloved ones, even after an unfavourable diagnosis and prognosis. In educational environment, if properly structured, these requirements could be met, as it has already been claimed in the Anglo-Saxon world, where the efficiency of *death education* practices has already been diffused (Moss, 2000). Nowadays, *death education* occurs more and more frequently in higher and elementary schools as well. A number of curricula on death and dying and didactic materials have been developed to educate students on death, dying, and bereavement (Doka, 2015; Fonseca & Testoni, 2011). These distinct curricular efforts are supplemented by other disciplines where themes of death could be present. The importance of removing the censorship of death and dying derives from three factors. The first factor involves changing demographic and epidemiological social conditions, derived by the increase of proportion of the elderly and by the chronicization of severe illnesses, which increase the number of people who live a long and debilitating last phase of life, which causes a significant change in family habits. The second factor is linked to the media information, which bombard everyday life with news which emphasizes wars, terrorism, natural disasters and mortal accidents. All these narrations and descriptions require critical elaboration and deepening. The third factor is associated with the apparent rise in death awareness which requires openness toward death and sharing with the dying, especially with regard newer forms of care for the dying emerging in our technological era (Doka, 2015).

Indeed, parents are ambivalent about confronting children with fundamental themes of life, such as birth and death, at a young age; on the one hand, because they hope that teachers would do that, on the other hand, because they fear that it would cause the children psychological problems. The most common opinion is that children are defenseless in front of death, thus talking about it would cause them irreparable damage. However, according to some researches, the less clearly the idea of death is understood the bigger the fear of it grows; whereas, on the contrary, if it is dealt with in a mature way, within significant social relations, less anxiety is provoked (Slaughter & Griffiths, 2007).

According to developmental psychology the process of creating a mature concept of death must be subordinated to maturing consciousness of the following essential concepts: universality, irreversibility, ceasing of vital functions, casuality and inevitability (Corr, Corr & Doka, 2018; Testoni, 2016). According to the researches, adults cannot avoid the argument if they want to allow children to acquire the competences. If the main impending fear of

parents and teachers regarding this task is to harm the listeners, and it results in ignoring the natural curiosity of the child and his unexpected questions, (Testoni, 2016), in reality the actual impediment originates from their feeling incapable of facing the search of meaning when contemplating on death.

Death education allows to reset this lost language, by placing school in the centre of the community and by including mainly families during a path with reflections on such themes, reviving thus the search around transcendence (Shatz, 2002). The objectives moving into this direction are: providing information about death, in, specifically, offering an appropriate vocabulary; presenting diverse cultural prospectives developed on a social level, with different rituals; allowing the elaboration of eventual losses and offering help to manage grief, elaboration of media contents; reflecting upon the elements of funeral rites in order to introduce the themes of transcendence and spirituality (Testoni, 2016; Testoni et al., 2016).

Unfortunately, there are, at present, still few studies that indicates how effective such education is or even what is being offered at this level. Our community intervention/research was aimed at showing how such a form of education can be useful in the development of social relationships and maturation social processes.

The research

A *death education* experience was realized between October, 2013 and June, 2014 in a kindergarten in the north of Italy, with a close cooperation of the teachers and families, including social services and the public administration, investigating the experience of children and parents. The community within which the school has operated is located in the hinterland of a large city, within which an intense industrial production has developed. The migration phenomenon was therefore very intense in the last decades, as in other suburban cities in Northern Italy, which have reached percentages of up to 30% of the immigrant population. In this area, the lower schools are the only active ones. The cultural initiatives of the territory are also very scarce and the only opportunities offered to the population are linked to school or Catholic church meetings.

The social services guaranteed the necessary support to the families in case of difficulty. In particular, the social assistant was available to give support, even with self-help groups and to invite the psychologist of the health care services, when requested. The pursued socio-cultural objectives were the following: understanding the concept of death, recognizing the social significance of the social rituals linked to the day of the dead; elaboration of the representation of death and of the transcendent dimension (paradise, the other world, …); the competency to connect the day of the dead with the losses of the

family. The project was defined by the subsequent dimensions: incorporating the social services and the public administration, implementing the project between school and family, involving the larger community via the final exposition. The diverse activities required the parents' active participation, they were asked to tell their children about the life and death of an acquaintance, and give them a photo of his that the children could bring to school. The stories and the photos were then shared with the classmates and teachers. After this first phase a drawing activity was carried out, the children decorated a candle that they could take back home. On the day of the dead the parents had to accompany the children and place the candle on the tomb of the person whose biography they shared. Moreover, they also had to explain them the significance of the local customs that happen around the cemetery on the 2nd Nov. This first phase was followed by an elaborative path regarding the meaning of the destination of the dead, with the description of the spaces found in different religions. These elements were demonstrated by the teachers through reading and narration. Finally, in the classroom again, working in groups, the children made colorful backgrounds onto which they could place the photos of the dead and set up an exhibition in a public space. This place was provided by the public administration of the village and then visited by the whole community.

From a didactic point of view, the path of socialisation was created from verbalising the emotions when sharing the experience with others in order that negative sentiments could be elaborated, to transforming them into positive experiences. Each reference to death was supported by reflections on spirituality, referring to one's integrity and to the vital light that the heart bears in order to enhance the meaning of transcendence.

The activities were completely guided by the kindergarten teachers, under the supervision of a *death education* expert and in close cooperation with the social services.

Participants and objectives

Two groups were involved in the survey: one with 46 children, aged 5 (girls: 67.5%, boys: 32.6%); and one with the parents, with 50 participants, out of which 28 mothers (56%) and 22 fathers (44%) (mean age: 39.4; education: 28% elementary school, 4% secondary technical school, 32% secondary school, 26% university). The fundamental objective of our research was to comprehend how children understand death and whether the references of spirituality could be absorbed by the end of the *death education* path, to reveal in particular the modes in which children discursively construct the two dimensions. A parallel objective was to examine the parents' experiences and opinions before and after the intervention.

Methods and means

The entire project respected the prospect of the qualitative research in psychology and social sciences, in which observation and theoretical elaboration go inseparably (Testoni, Ghellar, et al., 2017). This methodology is particularly appropriate in studies on death and dying (Testoni, I., Francescon, et al., 2018). The first activity realised by the teachers and the children was an open and honest dialogue to expose what these latter thought of death and dying. In the ex-post in particular the aim was to investigate how they absorbed the reflections on the soul and spirituality, concerning the idea of transcendence, ie. life after death. The narrations were registered and transcribed *verbatim*. The first phase of the analysis was the systematic reading of the texts in order to identify the hermeneutic units, for the definition of categories and codes. Afterwards the relations between the different sections were established. The acquired texts were analysed with the informatics version of 'paper and pencil', Atlas.ti.

With the parents we used a questionnaire with open questions ex-ante/ex.post, wanting to recognize what they thought of death and its aftermath, what emotions they had in this regard and how they thought of their children concerning these topics, as much as their worries regarding *death education.* The obtained texts were analysed with computer, using the Spad.ti programme (*Sisteme Portable pour l'Analise des Donnees Textuelles di Lebart-Morineau*), thanks to which it was possible to calculate the lexical correspondences out of which we could extract four primary factors. There were four work phases in the study of the texts: identifying the corpora by listing the words and examining the segments to eliminate ambiguities, poliforms and repetitions; correction of the corpora (forming equivalences and the threshold); elaborating the recognition of the characteristic words, calculating and analyzing lexical correspondences, and crossing the 4 primary factors obtained for identification in the semantically prevalent areas, ie. the thematic nodes identified by the parents.

The study followed APA Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct and the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki, furthermore it was approved by the Ethics Committee of University of Padova.

Results

### *The children's ex-ante and ex-post narrations of death and spirituality*

The representation of death seen concerning the participating children confirms what literature indicates (Testoni, 2016). Actually, the descriptions related to ceasing of vital functions were particularly exploited: for Luisa and Giulia this means that 'the heart stops beating and your blood stops',

'the dead don't move anymore and stand still like statues'. To this irreversibility corresponds, as underlined by Antonio, Paola and Francesca: 'the dead don't return' because 'they go to heaven', but also because 'they go under the ground' or 'to Jesus' and 'they don't return anymore'.

The causes of death are all natural, like old age, so much that for some children only old people can die. For Claudio and Fausta 'those who die are old' or 'the person who dies has a lot of, a lot of illnesses', similarly to those who get into terrible accidents, as Claudio, Piero and Deborah put it: 'those who die were killed by a dagger', 'the car hit a woman who was crossing the street', 'you die because a wasp stings you', 'because somebody was hit by a bus'. The children, moreover, recalled specific situations of which they know, for example, 'my great-grandparents are dead', 'my uncle is dead', 'woman is dead', or of the poor they heard talking of 'because they had nothing to eat'. The presence of media messages appeared as an important element, as Pier Paolo, Tommaso and Carlo claim that 'one dies because one fights in wars', ' you die when they kill you with a spade', 'because someone takes a gun and shoots you', or 'people do harm to other people'. Sometimes these became imaginary spaces in which nocturnal fears nest, like in Luigi's case, who, integrating logic ('when somebody kills, somebody dies') and terror, feared that: 'at night comes a man and kills you with a gun'. In some cases death was also seen as a moral punishment: 'he died because he was bad', or a social condition 'you die if you are poor'. Religious figures were also present in these sceneries: ('God died', 'Jesus died a long ago'), or even imaginary ones ('angels are dead people', 'the dead become stars who are in the skies', 'skeletons are bad people who died').

Regarding the feelings and emotions related to the representation of death, different narrative expressions were found. Death first and foremost is considered as the cause of pain since it involves separation and loss, as Antonio, Paolo and Giuseppina claimed: 'it is a thing that causes grief', 'it makes me cry because I can't see my mother and my sister anymore', 'I'm afraid to lose my mother and my father'. Their other classmates, almost all of them (31 out of 42) also expressed their fears for the same reason: for Franca 'because I can't see my parents anymore', for Antonio 'because I'm afraid that my grandparents to heaven', for Anna 'because my grandparents can't come to visit me anymore'. Those who were not afraid were exactly those whose parents knew how to deal with the problem of death, as in Maria's case: 'I am not afraid because I always go to the cemetery with my parents', or Luigi, who was not afraid because 'if someone wants to kill me, there is my dad, who protects me'. However, we could also identify exceptional wisdom in the survey, that of Luigi's, according to which 'there's no death thus it means nothing', or that of Laura's, who was not afraid of death 'because I don't want to stay close to death'.

Figure 1. Ex-post: Narrations about the soul and spirituality
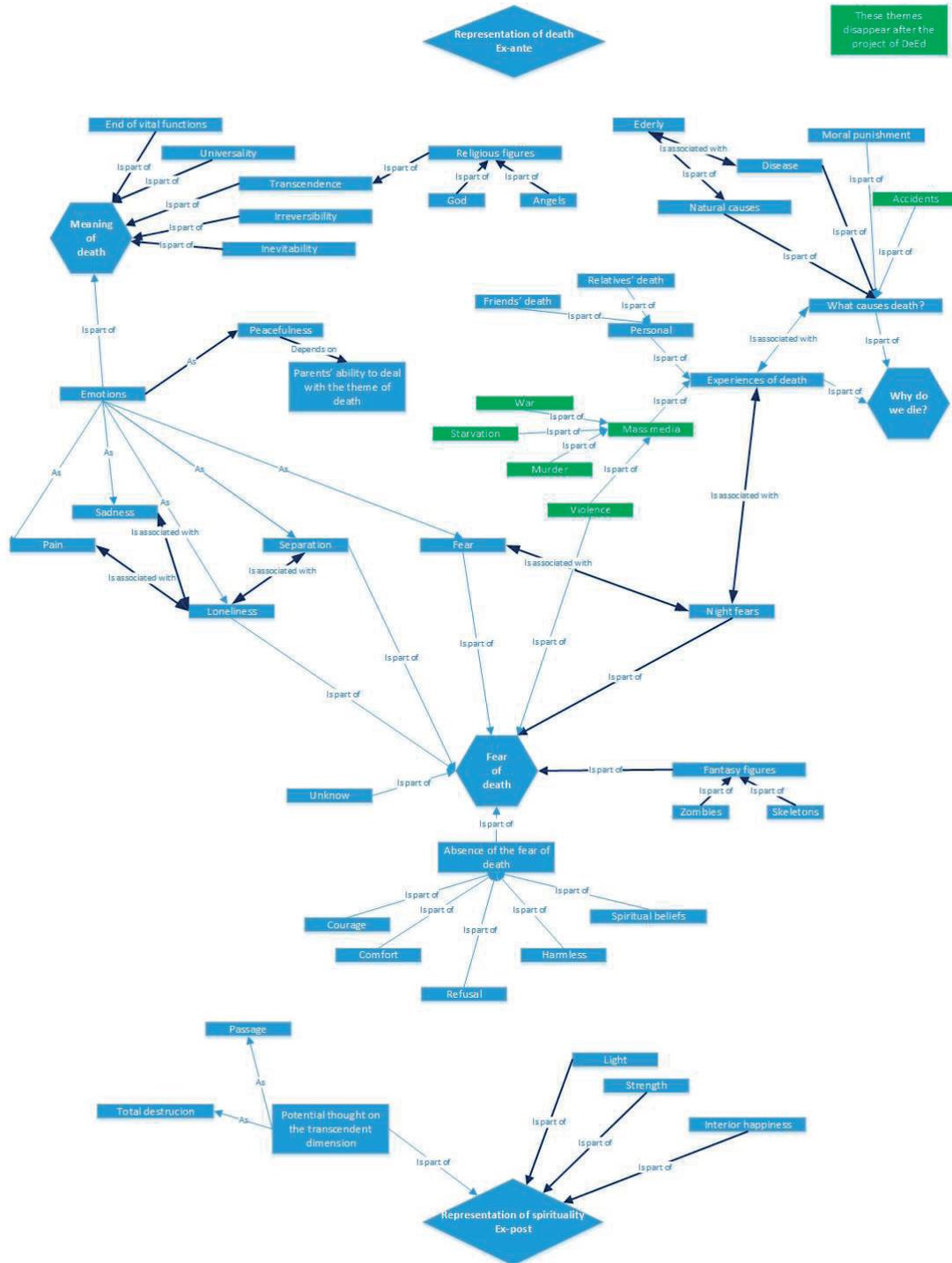
From this ex-ante survey we can see that the children at the age of 5 have already reached the consciousness regarding the primary characteristics of death, in particular irreversibility and the ceasing of vital functions. The universal dimension is also recognised, as demonstrated by Franca and Luigi: 'all people must die', 'because we are destined to die'.

At the end of the *death education* path, including the reflection on spirituality and on the meaning of life and soul, the most cruel descriptions of death, like 'suicide', disappeared and the ones that remained were related to illness and old age. Furthermore, the acquisition of a potential idea related to the transcendental dimension became evident. Giuseppine, Leandro and Enrico referred to 'a power that comes from inside', 'a light that you can see with eyes closed and feel with your heart', or 'an intimate thing that only you can feel'. It is 'an interior happiness', as Rebecca, Paola and Claudia say it, ie. 'a personal thing, it's inside me. When I become angry, it helps me remain happy', 'it's the soul that goes to heaven', just like 'the happiness that we can find inside ourselves when we cry and something makes us happy'. Finally, the division between the representation of annihilation in totality also appeared, as Claudio thought of it, who said that 'when you die you are not anymore', together with the representation of passage expressed by Rebecca, who was able to conceive the dualism of psyche and soma: 'the soul goes to heaven whereas the body remains in the coffin'. Figure 1 shows the ex-post network with children, related to the ex-ante forms of death and the ex-post forms of spirituality representations of the children.

The parents' ex-ante and ex-post answers

The answers to the questionnaire, before and after the *death education* path, were analysed to identify the most characteristic expressions in which death was conceived and the principal factors contributing to this representation. The analysis of the first administration revealed that the category most frequently used regarding death was 'fear' (41 occurrences), due to a first hand experience or, especially concerning the fear that children can also feel it. The most significant characteristics of death were its necessity, its inevitability and its unknown quality: Maria declared 'I know I have to die, but I have fears because I don't know what's expecting me', while Paola said 'I'm afraid of the nil afterwards', Gualtiero claimed 'I'm terrorized because of not being able to know when I have to die', Anna stated that 'when I think of it, I feel deep sadness, great void and a deep sensation of impotence. I ask myself whether it'll arrive soon or just later'. Moreover, it became clear how many of the children's representations were also shared by the parents (for example: 'after death you become an angel', 'I know when you die you go up to heaven and that is your new home'), and also that the children's need to know what dying means would appear in the family conversations, as

confirmed by Carla, 'he keeps asking me why the grandparents are gone and I answer him that God wanted them next to Him because He felt alone and needed some angels'. Among the most characteristic words we could make a clear distinction of those relevant to the opposition and continuity of 'between life and death' (18), the hope to live well and be able to 'face properly' (11) 'also death' (eg. 'I hope I can face it in the best possible way'). The last dimension, shared with the children was the 'sensation of loss' (11), caused by 'not being able to see anymore' (15) 'my beloved ones' (20) from which 'sadness' (13) and 'pain' (12) derive. This experience was firmly underlined by some claims: 'I am not afraid of death itself, I am afraid to leave my family', 'if I think of my own death, I feel bad because I think that my daughters should grow up without my support, my love, thus so much pain', ' I feel great terror of not being able to see the person who is missing', 'I am terrified by the deep sensation of loss that death conveys, the loss of who survives and the loss of who must leave'.

Some phrases confirmed what is found in literature (Testoni, 2016), according to which a lot of parents presume that children cannot either conceive or comprehend death: 'they haven't understood it yet' (12); 'I don't think he thinks about it' (6), 'my son is not capable of understanding it', or 'my daughter seems fairly calm, I don't think she has understood the meaning of the word *death* yet'. In reality, it became evident that the problem was mainly that of the parents, who had difficulties, since they hadn't been able to comprehend the 'meaning of death' (16) and for them the easiest solution seemed to 'not ask myself' (8), 'the most frequent and spontaneous question is: why one dies, sincerely I am truly defeated, it is a very difficult and delicate argument', just as 'he asks me why children also die and I don't know what to answer' (12), ' I can't ask myself questions because I don't have answers' (4).

Even though the ex-ante scenery was full of anxiety and fear, the ex-post could show the evidence of the importance of the spiritual and religious dimension, able to alleviate the anxiety caused by the idea of death. A lot of parents did indeed confirm their faith 'in God' (21). What helped them overcome the deadlock was the religious content, which, furthermore, also supported the motivation and positive valorisation/ evaluation of the *death education* course: 'it is important to help them become conscious of the fact that death is part of life', 'I think it is a good pedagogical instrument to strengthen and prepare them for the potential difficulties they may encounter', 'spirituality helps me face life in a better way', 'it is hope that cannot end when life on earth ends', 'spirituality is very important because it helps us conduct a better life, it gives you the power to overcome the difficulties and hardships of life'. If at the beginning of the research we could identify a strong sense of anxiety, at its end the willingness to keep searching form

meaning and growing hope became prevalent: 'I felt great anxiety at the beginning of this path, then some strong curiosity', 'I have discovered the positive emotions of research and development of human potentials', 'this experience have given me strong sentiments, reminding me of my parents' death'. At the end of the path parents could thus express satisfaction not only for their children, but also because it was also an occasion for personal development: 'I thought the argument interesting because I have never had the chance to go deep inside and it has always made me afraid'. They indeed had unexpected positive emotions, serenity, curiosity and regarding spirituality: 'now I want to understand and get closer to this topic, I feel the need to know myself better via the journey in the most beautiful place that has ever existed: inside myself'.

Analysis of lexical correspondences

In order to be able highlight better what we could already perceive with the most characteristic words, we also wanted to analyse two ex-ante and ex-post moments, through separate lexical correspondence analysis. In the ex-ante textual data, gender used as active variable (C2=1 mother; C2=2 father) and faith (C3=1 believer; C3=2 non-believer), two main factors resulted as the organisers of the association of the most frequently used words.

Figure 2. Analysis of lexical correspondences – ex-ante questionnaire for parents

The first factor focuses on the 'terror of death' and forms between two poles: avoiding the idea of death *vs* anguish. The first pole, in which mainly non-believers and fathers were found, is characterised by expressions life 'sooner or later', 'it shall arrive', 'the meaning of death', 'the furthest possible'. The second pole, in which mainly believers and mothers were to be identified, is characterised by expressions as 'fear' and 'my beloved ones'.

The second factor is related to the 'awareness of death' and is formed between two substantial meanings: the incapacity to elaborate suffering *vs* hope. In the first one still non-believers and fathers are to be found and its characteristic expressions are 'must die', 'grief', 'why do children die?', 'to suffer less', 'so much suffering'. In the pole of hope instead believers and mothers are gathered, with expressions as 'after death', 'curiosity', 'where we shall go', 'fear'.

This analysis could essentially highlight the gender differences, already known to literature (Doka & Martin, 2010), regarding the management of death: fathers seemed to be less believers than mothers and to adopt avoiding strategies. Mothers, however, were more believers, their fear of death was connected to the attachment links and seemed to be more interested to comprehend what the aftermath could be.

The analysis of correspondence related to the ex-post administration used gender as active variable (C2=1 mother; C2=2 father) and faith (C3=1 BELIEVER; C3=2 NON-BELIEVER) and showed that two factors could be identified as the organisers of the association of the most frequently used words, the gender difference and religious faith.

Figure 3. Analysis of lexical correspondences – ex-post questionnaire for parents
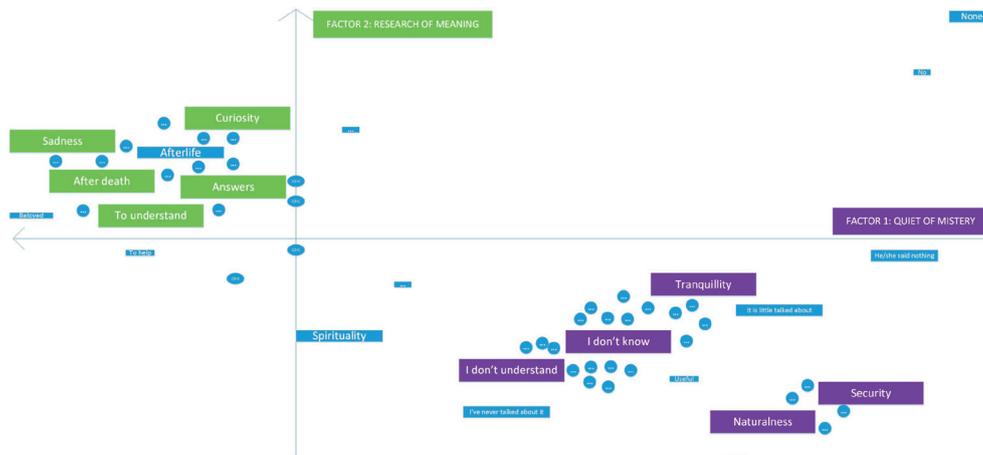
From the ex-post corpora two factors could be identified. The first one was surrounded by 'the calm of the mystery' where 'security', 'I don't know', 'I don't understand', 'tranquility' and 'naturality' were dominant. This dimension revealed the presence of a substantial serenity in front of the unknown what death is. The second factor, nonetheless, focused on the 'search for meaning', in which 'sadness' and especially 'curiosity', 'wanting to understand', wanting to find 'answers prevailed, concerning what there could be 'after death'. Two strategies of thinking could thus be juxtaposed: the first

was dominated by an adaptation to something that remains incomprehensible, while the other one put emphasis on the search for meaning to define what death could mean, thus entering in contact with the inner self.

Discussion

The results confirmed the expectations that had motivated the entire project, ie. the possibility to comprehend the emotions related to death, to recognise them and name them so that they could be communicated to others and that this competency could be developed inside the family and the larger community. Through the *death education* experience we could significantly decrease the violent representations that enter through the media into the everyday life of a family. The children's representations of death are complex, but also complete: death was seen in connection with the ceasing of vital functions due to old age and illness rather than as a result of homicide. Furthermore, reflecting on spirituality allowed children to face the universality of death with less anxiety, thus the fact that their parents also die, eliciting the thought that there is a reality 'over the one that you can see'. The belief that after death one arrives at another level of reality helped create the representation of an existence after death and moreover the dual concept of a subjective identity, as already indicated in literature, regarding this phase of development (Harris & Gimenez, 2005). The children could therefore reach a way of thinking in which the living body is a biological system, which stops functioning after death, whereas the psychological conditions of non-physical nature do not stop to function. The most important sensations of pain and fear were linked to the fear of losing one's parents and could be relieved with the parents' reassuring intervention. This fact confirmed the significance to always organise the curriculum of *death education* together with the families when dedicated to children.

The results obtained with the parents confirmed the facts already familiar from literature, namely that they tend to underestimate the children's capacity to elaborate and manage the topic of death (Testoni, 2016). Indeed, the parents before the project preferred not to discuss the argument with the children, believing to be able to protect them from pain this way. In the end, the parents gave a very positive evaluation of the entire project, reaching the conclusion that it helped them manage a topic for them inaccessible and created interest towards the fundamental questions of life.

Conclusions

The entire path of death education showed that a good integrative process between the territory, school and family can allow children and parents

to face the most painful topic that they can imagine: the death of a beloved person. The final ex-ante and ex-post results demonstrated that the parents' positive participation reassured the children, thus allowing them to acquire an appropriate language regarding death, its reasons and its aftermath. While initially the parents' attitudes reflected a tendency to see their own children as little and defenceless and thus not yet ready to comprehend the problem, subsequently, these attitudes became substituted by the availability to speak about it and share important thoughts and emotions. The parents were able to understand the absurdity to leave these topics in the hands of the mass media, which enter their lives via the television and computer games. Owing to their active participation in the project, they could thus grow aware of the importance of the contact with the inner self, following an interrupted path about fundamentally essential themes, like for example, the problem of the other world or what happens after death. This re-actualisation enhanced their conviction to discuss them also with their children, to help them discover their own spiritual dimensions, perhaps even starting with the news pouring from the media.

Finally, it is important to underline that the participatory observation allowed to reveal how the internal work phases could be characterised by serenity and entertainment. Facing all that which is usually kept unsaid, the children through the activities inside the territory, could be introduced in an entertaining way to the symbolic meaning of 'festivity' as a ritual and social direction of a transcendental dimension, uniting the community.

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