"You have to be mentally prepared for that moment": Attitudes of the adolescent population to death and their educational implications

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This article deals with the opinions and attitudes of the adolescent population towards death and its possible treatment in formal education at a public secondary school in Spain. To do so, we use a mixed methodology - DEA-S scale (n=366) and three focus groups (n=23), using descriptive statistical analysis, cluster analysis and qualitative thematic analysis. As in other studies, these students show moderately positive attitudes towards the inclusion of death education at their school, but their position is not unanimous, and above all, they admit its inclusion with certain reservations and conditions that reveal a limited conception of the educational potential of death education: they do not consider it appropriate at all educational stages and are critical of the way in which similar topics are usually dealt with at school. The analysis provides important didactic guidelines for the promotion of death awareness in secondary education.

Keywords: Attitudes towards death, death education, adolescents, mixed methods

Introduction

In the last two centuries, developed societies have undergone profound transformations that have modified the living conditions of their members and their experiences of dying and death. Thus, the medicalisation of death, secularisation and scientific or technical advances, have given rise to the social exclusion of death and its displacement to the private sphere (Aries, 2000; Mellor & Shilling, 1993). This privatisation of dying and death has a particular impact on children and adolescents in Western countries living in societies that do not socialise death or socialise it poorly. (Coombs, 2017; McGovern and Barry, 2000). On the one hand, for protection (Holt, 1975), in the family environment they are kept away from death experiences or their impact is minimised when they occur (Coombs, 2014; DeCicco & Stroink, 2007). On the other hand, the presence of death in the mass-media and Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), to which they are very exposed to, is constant, but it is a presence that is not

always real as most of the time death appears either glorified or trivialised (Wass, 2004) or morbid and traumatic (Selfridge & Mitchell, 2021). In this way, the adolescent population, elaborate their own perceptions of death and the meaning of life (Coombs, 2014) without many valid references and with the feelings of incomprehension, uncertainty and anguish typical of that age group.

For all these reasons, teaching about death is an obvious need in the educational system so that it can accompany and help the adolescent population in coping with death and loss, and above all in their personal construction of the meaning of life.

Teaching about death

Education in a broad sense is or should be preparation for life. The Western education system recognises this role in the laws that govern and in the values that inspire them. However, modern education systems are also guided by other principles, and are heavily influenced by social, political and economic pressures, to name a few. This has led to highly bureaucratised and pragmatic education systems, which increasingly focus on technical skills, human capital, and the ranking of individuals according to their educational attainment (Perrenoud, 2012; Ordine, 2013). In this context, the key issues of a student's integral development, such as acquiring death consciousness, are usually omitted from the curricular content and school timetables (Lowton & Higginson, 2003). This is despite the fact that many authors argue its interest or utility as part of a comprehensive learning process (Rodríguez et al, 2019; Wass, 2004; Yalom, 1980; Feifel, 1977. Some studies show that children and adolescents (Herran et al, 2021; Sally, 2019; Combs, 2014), as well as parents and teachers (Serrrano et al, 2023; McGovern and Barry, 2000), do have an interest in and concern about death, since death is present in their lives and at the schools they attend (Tillman, 2018; Harrison & Harrinton, 2001; Silverman, 2000:3). On the other hand, numerous studies have

revealed the existential discomfort that the COVID-19 pandemic has left among people, which in turn have led to an increase in suicidal ideation and attempts, especially among the young (Hughes & Jones, 2022).

The inclusion in formal education of death education could respond to these concerns and other educational needs. Death education undoubtedly has, in the form of consolation and accompaniment, a palliative function in the face of death and loss, but it also has much to teach about life (Corr, 2016). In this sense, in addition to this palliative function, the literature on death education attributes at least two other functions to it. A *cultural* and *cognitive function* (Wass, 2004), which provides students with information about the experiences of death and dying or about cultural differences in social coping, and, more importantly, an *axiological function* (Corr et al, 2000) insofar as taking death into account always involves a radical reflection on the values that guide life (Rodríguez et al, 2019).

However, the effectiveness of death education in fulfilling these functions seems to depend to a large degree on the teaching methodology used. Some research has shown that classical methodologies that focus on knowledge transmission are not very effective in the palliative and axiological functions (Cozzolino et al, 2004; Maglio & Robinson, 1993; Durlak & Riesenberg, 1991). These studies, as well as most experienced teachers, agree that death education only achieves its objectives if the personal dimension of the students is taken into account (Watts, 2007; Wass, 2004), or in other words if the teaching methodology used is capable of inducing students to reflect deeply and personally on death based on their experiences or on "experiential methodologies" (Kolb & Kolb, 2017) that favour an intimate awareness of death (Leckes, 2022; Cozzolino et al, 2004).

It is therefore interesting and necessary, as proposed in this article, to approach secondary school students and find out their positions and assessments in relation to death and its presence or absence in education, as well as the way in which, from their point of view, it should be dealt with.

Methods

This study is based on a mixed methodology research conducted among the students of a public secondary school (12-18 years old), located in a middle and upper-middle class neighbourhood of a medium-sized Spanish city (Valladolid, 300.000 inhabitants) oriented towards industry and services.

Data collection was carried out during 2019 as part of a larger project coordinated by the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, which aimed to analyse educational community' perceptions of death education. The research project had the approval of the Research Ethics Committee of the coordinating institution (CEI-94-1726) and the informed consent of the participants.

The analysis presented here is based on the results of an online survey conducted in April with the entire school's student body, using the 'Death Education Attitudes Scale-Students' (DEAS-S), which allows us to analyse the students' disposition towards the possible inclusion of death education in their education (Herrán et al, 2021). DEAS-S is a five-position Likert-type scale of 19 variables (1 means 'Strongly Disagree'; 5 means 'Strongly Agree'). The final sample obtained was 366 cases. Here we present the descriptive statistics of the 19 items of the scale and the cross-checking of these with a cluster analysis, which allows us to verify the diversity of students' positions on the inclusion of death education in their educational process.

Subsequently, qualitative research was carried out in order to analyse in depth and more broadly the students' perceptions and positions on death education and the

conditions for its possible implementation. For this qualitative analysis, three focus groups were established in November comprising a total of 23 students. Boys and girls participated in each of the groups. Participation in the focus groups was proposed to the students as an academic activity during tutoring hours.It is important to note that this voluntariness implies a certain favourable predisposition towards the proposed theme ('death and education'). Table 1 shows the social profile of the participants, including their sex and age and the occupations of their parents, allowing them to be classified as middle/upper-middle class.

Table 1: Social profile of the participants in the focus groups.

The focus groups were developed on the basis of a flexible script whose essential dimensions were structured as follows: general contextualisation; contextual importance of death; experience of death; meaning of life vs. awareness of death; death education; behaviour in school when having to confront death; acknowledgements and closure. The discourse of the groups was recorded, transcribed and exported to the qualitative analysis software ATLAS.ti 23. A thematic analysis was conducted, following the steps described by Braun & Clarke (2006): familiarisation with the data; generation of initial codes; conversion of the codes into categories and subcategories; review of the categories; and report writing. Following this procedure, after the first general reading of the transcripts, a first identification of codes and categories was carried out involving two members of the research team. One member of the team carried out a free coding, while the other member of the team carried out this first coding process using deductive procedures, taking into consideration some key terms identified in the literature. Subsequently, a sharing and triangulation of the interpretations was carried out.

Results

Quantitative analysis:

Table 2 shows the results of the DEAS-S Scale: the descriptive statistics for each of the variables and the crosses with the cluster analysis carried out are shown. With regard to the students as a whole, a neutral or indifferent attitude towards most of the questions posed to them is observed, as their answers are around the mid-point of the scale (3) -11 of the 19 items have an average between 2.5 and 3.5-. In 7 other items, their averages are above 3.5, which means that they are particularly sensitive to these dimensions. In this positive consensus, the majority demand for 'saying goodbye to a loved one' in the terminal phase (ítem b18, mean 4.61) stands out above all. Finally, there is an almost unanimous negative consensus on one of the questions -ítem b10-, with a mean of 1.83, thus expressing their refusal to deal with the topic of death in early childhood education.

Table 2: Measures of position and dispersion on the DEAS-S scale. Item crosswalk with Clusters.

With the aim of finding out the approximate percentages of students who were more in favour of, indifferent to or against the implementation of death education at school, a cluster analysis was carried out to group students into three groups of individuals (ideal types) as homogeneous as possible. For this purpose, an analysis of the 19 dependent items of the DEAS-S was carried out using the non-hierarchical k-means technique and squared Euclidean distance. As a result, three clusters were identified, which were crossed with the 19 variables of the DEAS-S scale (Table 2).

Cluster 1 is the majority cluster and includes students who maintain a neutral or indifferent position (178 students, 48.6%). Cluster 2 is made up of students who are more proactive in all matters relating to the inclusion of death in their educational

process (106 students, 29.0%). Cluster 3, on the other hand, is made up of the 22.4%

(82 students) of students who are more reactive to the development of death education

at school and in their education.

Qualitative analysis:

The attitudes detected in the quantitative analysis were complemented with a qualitative

analysis that enabled a more in-depth study of the student's conceptions about death

education and the conditions in which its inclusion would be feasible and effective. This

approach was made through the three focus groups. All 23 participants who took part in

the focus groups had responded to the online survey and according to their attitude, they

could be placed in cluster two. Although this predisposition to the implementation of

death education at their school could lead to a biased perspective in the analysis of the

reality being studied. The richness of the discourses that were subsequently obtained

provided information that allowed this potential bias to be overcome in that the

participants referred in their discourses not only to the advantages that the development

of an education about death would bring, but also to the limitations that the students

perceive in this development. In other words, it is a student body with a positive but

critical perception of the subject.

The following is an interpretation of the discourses obtained on how they

perceive death, education about death, and the appropriateness of receiving it in their

education, how and by whom.

Death among the concerns of the students. The focus group sessions began with a

general question about the most pressing concerns of the group members at that

moment. Logically, the students declared themselves to be busy in their daily lives with

what they see as prosaic matters: "We're very basic" (G3:2[1]). They were concerned about family and peer relationships and were especially anxious about their future education and job prospects.

> Mo[2]: OK, a general question to start with. We'd like to know what your main concerns are right now. What do people of your age worry about?
> B: Honestly… I think… Well, more or less in my circle of friends, what we're going to study, what we're going to do… That pressure of wondering whether I should go to university or not? All of that…
> I: Graduating from school.
> L: Yes, that's right, we're all worried about getting to where we want to get to (G3:2).

In this context, death is something extraordinary and untimely that does not appear in their daily lives. "It's not a topic that comes up in normal conversation" (G2:5). Nonetheless, death awakens a lively interest in them. It is a veiled and feared threat.

> E: Because you can never really know when it might happen… it could be right here and now, and going out into the street anything could happen and it could all be over in a flash.
> C: You could just have a heart attack right here and it's all over. I mean it could happen anytime and to any one of us. (G1:3)

But that fear is avoided and exorcised by distancing oneself from it. On the one hand, by naturalizing the fact: "Death is the law of life" and "We all die in the end" (G3:3). And on the other by establishing a causal relation between death and age:

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[1] Group number: transcription page.

[2] Moderator

B: …right now we're not thinking about dying, 'cos obviously nobody is going to think about it when they're young. But our grandparents, at the end of the day, and they say it a lot, they themselves know that, maybe… (G3:5)

So, the students know about death, that there is something called death and what it means, but they deal with it as though for the moment it did not exist, at least for them. That is to say, they dismiss it. However, the perception of death as natural and its denial does not fully relieve the disquiet that it generates. Thus, for some, the mystery of death remains, and they would like to know more – "What will it be like? What do you feel? What comes after?" (G3:3) – which leads them to a belief in reincarnation, not so much for religious reasons but more because their conceptions do not allow them to consider that death is the end of everything, which is something that seems absurd to them: "…I also can't believe that the soul you have just disappears completely… or that there is some sort of definitive end" (G3:4).

What does worry them in relation to death is suicide, something that "we're all aware of" (G2:4). In fact, the disquiet that suicide generates in them is the most intense of all the concerns that emerged in the three focus groups. They approach this subject as though it were socially much more relevant than any other form of dying, or at least more than dying from some illness or an accident, which they hardly mention.

It would seem that they assimilate death with old age and illness, which they perceive as something far away and abstract, whereas dying by suicide is seen as something close by, concrete and frightening: "I mean, I reckon that suicide, that way of dying, is much more taboo, for instance, than dying from some disease" (G1:14). They feel unprotected against it, as though it were some external force that is going to attack them and that they will be unable to stop because they are aware that they lack maturity, information and control:

> …, I think that right now we're young, I mean anybody can kill themselves at any
> age, but I think it would be really important to speak about it now because you just
> don't have total control over your feelings. So, just as you don't place any
> importance on death as such, well a lot of people do think about it and, well, the
> suicide rates are out there, they're very high and even then nobody speaks about it.
> I mean, if I were to go by information that they'd given me, I'd have no idea at all.
> (G3:9)

The unease they describe with respect to the concept of suicide, which is the result of feeling defenceless, leads them to demand, that the adolescent population be equipped with tools to know what to do when facing a suicide (prevention, empowerment, accompaniment). Tangible resources against suicide that they explicitly demand be provided at their school:

> I think it's something that should be much more normalized in the news, in the
> media in general, at school…because it's something that can happen at any time, I
> mean somebody in your family might kill themselves, or a friend, and you've got
> to be mentally prepared for a moment like that. (G1:14)

Death in the school. Although death does not figure among their daily concerns, it is present in their lives, especially in their school life. In all the groups, there are reports of episodes of death in schools: of a classmate's father or mother, of teachers and even of classmates. These are generally vague, one-off memories, many of them experienced in previous educational stages, the details of which emerge and become more concrete in the discussion, especially in those cases in which more than one participant with the same experience happens to be in the same group.

It is clear from their recollections that schools usually pay some kind of attention to these events: tributes, minutes of silence, readings or other protocol activities that leave some sort of imprint on their memories. However, it seems that such activities are insufficient from their point of view, as they leave them unsatisfied due to their

punctual, concrete and decontextualised nature in their school routines, which they then have to take up again as if nothing had happened.

> E: Me, when I was at [another school], well a kid from the first year died who was a friend of ours and they did a sort of tribute to him with photos and videos and all that, and anybody could go if they wanted to, but then you went to class and that was it, it didn't matter how you felt.
> B: Sure, they understand it the day you go to the funeral home, but the next day you've got to be just as you were, and well, no, that's not the case, you're not the same. (G3:14).

In this regard, they claim that death is not dealt with explicitly in schools. They say that they have not discussed the subject of death with teachers, and that death is not dealt with in class except in a descriptive way, in passing and because of curricular requirements. It is discussed, for example, in History with the subject of the "black plague", in Literature around some works, in Philosophy or in Religion by those who take it. And for curricular reasons:

> Mo: Has any teacher discussed death with you, even if it's only a little, for instance in biology classes?
> R: In geography, the teacher told us that a kid died on some school trip.
> S: When they're taking about birth rates and mortality rates, they'll speak about how the people died, why, in what years more people died and in what years fewer died… Then yes, it's spoken about a bit more.
> A: But the teacher admitted that it's a subject she doesn't like speaking about it much. She does it because it's in the syllabus, but if it wasn't she wouldn't talk about it.

Death education. When the question of whether death should be dealt with in schools was raised, the focus group participants were in favour and the debate quickly turned to how and where to deal with it. It was clear from the discussion that they do not consider it necessary, or even appropriate, for death education to take the form of a specific

subject. Probably conditioned by the previous discussion about which subjects deal or have dealt with death, they see it more as a crosscutting concept, as something that can be integrated into different subjects.

> Mo: Ok, that's a one-off. Do think that's the way it should be approached, or should it be something more formally integrated in the syllabus?
> R: For me, it should be more integrated because you've got to give it its importance.
> H: Well, I don't think there should be a subject exclusively about death, but, ok, introducing the topic in different aspects of some subjects could be useful as well.
> P: Some talk or lecture about it as well, apart from what my schoolmate says, I reckon would also be good. (G3:7)

But they consider it especially appropriate to deal with the topic of death in their education through 'talks' and 'tutorials'.

Talks. In other words, the lectures or specific activities that schools organise with experts and entities from outside the centre on various topics and issues of interest in the lives of the adolescents and their education, appear in all the groups as suitable spaces or moments to deal with the subject of death.

They believe or consider that it is in these activities that education transcends purely formative and technical work. It is in these activities that pupils perceive the interest and effort made by the school to provide them with a comprehensive education, to 'prepare them for life'.

> EM: I reckon that, yes, they teach us how to all get on together and all that, which is why they have these talks.
> MG: On respect for other, on equality...
> Mo: Do you think all of that is important?
> All: Yes.
> MG: But it's as if at times they make it out to be more important than other things...

Mo: Like what?

MG: I don't know, it's just they're always about equality, about respect...

MP: Yep. They should mix it up a bit.

MG: They're always the same. (G2:10)

The groups are critical and sceptical about the suitability of the topics usually dealt with and the usefulness of these school activities in their education, as can be seen in the above discussion. They highlight their repetitive nature, as they always focus on the same clichéd topics and hackneyed formats, which is why the topic of death would be original and, if only for that reason, interesting: "Of course, there are times when you get fed up with the same topic, intolerance, which is also very important, but there are also other topics: death, suicide..." (G2:4)

Moreover, from their point of view, they argue that the way these talks are held suffers from a kind of paternalism, insofar as they tend to deal with the risks that adult society considers to be hanging over adolescents: "I think they're more about what to do and what not to do now in adolescence, rather than how to survive it as an adult". (G2:11).

On the other hand, these are issues or risks which, as raised in Group 3, affect, or may affect, only some of the young people. In comparison, other issues, such as death or sexuality which they give as examples, are universal in that they refer to situations that 'everyone' has to face in their transition to adulthood, or in their life in general.

Mo: Do you think it [death] is a topic that it would be interesting to deal with in these talks?

R: Well, I reckon it's a topic that should be dealt with more, because at the end of the day it's a part of life. It should be dealt with like other topics are.

L: Just like they deal with… Well, there are talks on alcohol and all that, which is
something that in the end you choose to live with or not, but death is something
that affects everybody. (G3:5)

Tutorial hours. In the Spanish education system, normally each week, the class teacher
(or tutor) holds a tutorial hour (*tutoría*) with the class he/she is responsible for. A wide
variety of topics can form part of these *tutorías,* ranging from discussions about the
dangers of overexposure to social media, to the handing out of marks, to the planning of
class events, etc. It is considered the ideal space to assist in the personal development of
the student. These *tutorías* emerged in the focus groups as an optional appropriate time
to deal with the subject of death.

A: Yep. It should be in the tutorial hour.
C: They could give talks to us in the *tutorías* about death, about how to get over the
sadness when somebody close to you dies…
A: When you think we've looked at stuff like the environment or equality in the
tutorías… We've had talks about sexism and all that, I don't see why we couldn't
talk about death. (G1:8)

The *tutoría*, as a special teaching space which is not subject to curricular
discipline or the most demanding work dynamics, undoubtedly appears as the most
appropriate space to deal with this subject, taking into account, above all, as we will see
below, the type of teaching methodologies that are demanded or considered most
appropriate to deal with this subject. In their discourses, the focus groups reveal how
they are tired of passive and unidirectional didactic methodologies such as the 'standard
lecture': "Not just some talk with a power point, but actually sitting down and thinking
about how each individual experience that situation" (G3:8).

As can be seen in the above exchange, the students demand more active and
participative teaching methodologies in which the question of death in all its different

dimensions can be approached, especially from a reflective and emotional perspective, and in which there is space to share experiences, concerns and own reflections, beyond the 'canned' knowledge (power point presentation) of the experts.

> C: Let the tutor just bring it up for example. There's no need for anyone to come and give us a talk just because it's an important topic, if you know what I mean... For example, for us to speak about feminism somebody always has to come in first and give us a talk, the same with death... It's just not necessary, the class tutor can just say "Ok, do you want to do an activity in relation to death or some other topic?".
> D: You could even just leave it some student to get involved in some way or other.
> C: For instance, they could make... they could prepare and make some sort of presentation about it... (G1:9)

Educational functions. Finally, although the three focus groups were in favour of including death in education, to at least the same extent as other topics, and were clear about when and how it should be introduced, the functionality of death education is only partially perceived. In the absence, as we can see, of comprehensively dealing with the topic, the usefulness and interest shown by students in death education is largely focused on its palliative function, being perceived only as a help or support to overcome the moments of grief associated to its occurrence.

> Just like life is an important topic so too is death, and I think they should tell us more about the process. I don't mean about what death is exactly, but more about the suffering process, about how you suffer when somebody you know dies or, for instance, when they've found some illness and there's a possibility that the person will die from it. ... Well, things like that too, to be happy in the time you've got left or have the positivity to overcome the sadness (G1:9).

On the other hand, the cognitive function and, above all, the axiological function of death education is diluted by the hegemony of the palliative function in the students' discourse. Indeed, while the cognitive function can sometimes be identified in what they

are taught in the subjects they take, the potential of death education to generate a deep and serene reflection on the meaning of life and the values that should guide it does not appear in the discourse of the groups.

Discussion and conclusions

Although there are, as we have seen, some works that confirm the interest that death education generates among the educational community, our study shows that this predisposition towards death education among the students is lukewarm and not unanimous, as can be concluded from the cluster analysis carried out. This result is undoubtedly more coherent in the context of a modern society that has relegated death and dying to the private space or the drift towards specialised institutions. In practice, it does not appear as an explicit demand among students neither teaching about death is contemplated in the education system, preoccupied as it is with more prosaic issues. In this sense, our study again confirms, as other studies have done (Rodríguez et al, 2019; Jonas-Simpson et al, 2015; Sally, 2019; Coombs, 2014), that there is no education about death in schools even though educational laws and curricula provide spaces and opportunities for its inclusion. In this regard, it can be thought that although the so-called death taboo thesis in modern societies is currently difficult to sustain (Walter, 2019), it can plausibly be applied to the education of children and adolescents (Sánchez and Herran 2021; Sally, 2019), which would confirm Walter's (1991) idea of the 'limited taboo'.

Our result is also consistent with the terror management theory (Greenberg et al, 1992), according to which human beings are driven to develop action strategies that allow them to control anxiety in the face of death. One such strategy is undoubtedly to ignore it, to pretend it does not exist, hence the attitude against its consideration in education by more than a fifth of the students surveyed and a practically unanimous

rejection when asked about the possibility of death education at the earliest educational stages. On the other hand, however, our study shows that death and the unease it generates is present in the lives of the young people surveyed and in the school where they study, as other studies have found. Indeed, more than a third of our respondents were clearly concerned and interested in questions related to death and its educational treatment. Hence the importance of the contributions of this article. The research carried out reveals a genuine concern among a significant proportion of adolescents about death, as well as their habitual practices of avoiding the topic and the conditions and limits they place on its treatment in education.

The qualitative study digs deeper into this concern by showing that usual avoidance strategies (their naturalisation and displacement towards other age groups) are not very effective in the specific case of death by suicide, as this type of death is perceived to be close and threatening. This is an important finding, since in addition to confirming, as other studies carried out in the field of mental health point out, the current emotional distress suffered by young people, it shows how death education is a particularly propitious field for this distress and its most extreme expression, suicide. Introducing death education could be a strategy to address this distress among young people (Testoni et al, 2020; Testoni et al, 2021; Wass, 2004), especially in the field of what is known as 'primary prevention' (Fagnani, 2022).

At the same time, the analysis reveals dissatisfaction with the way death is treated in schools. Firstly, the students remarked on the insufficiency of the mourning practices carried out by the school when a death occurs, insofar as they take the form of one-off, decontextualised activities in their school routines. This points inductively to the need for schools to develop more elaborate bereavement protocols and programmes along the lines indicated in other studies (Jonas-Simpson et al, 2015; Tilman & Prazak,

2018; Dyregror et al, 1999; Cupit et al, 2022). But above all, the qualitative analysis allowed us to consider the conditions in which an education about death among adolescents would be possible and effective. The students made clear their rejection of external interventions by experts and teaching methods based on the simple transmission of information. They explained how they were tired of the way in which other issues of interest in the lives of adolescents, such as bullying, gender violence or certain risky behaviours, are usually dealt with in schools, while at the same time demanding didactic methodologies and experiential teaching dynamics (Kolb & Kolb, 2017) in which spaces of trust and reflection are generated, spaces in which the concerns and feelings that death provokes in them can be shared and expressed. Such approaches undoubtedly support and are consistent with research (Was, 2004) that warns of the need for death education to take into account and reach the personal dimension of students. In addition, there is a risk that, if this is not the case, its effects may be counterproductive and even increase anxiety or discomfort about death, as highlighted by Durlak and Riesenberg (1991) and Maglio and Robinson (1993) in their meta-analysis of the effects of death education courses in relation to the teaching methodologies employed.

Finally, the students' discourses on death show that, in the absence of a comprehensive education on death in schools, they tend to perceive the education on death that they receive only in terms of its cognitive and above all palliative function (education aimed solely at dealing with death). Thus, on the one hand, they miss out on this education as a "primary preventive factor", for example against existential distress or more specifically suicide, it is important to acquire a mature awareness of death and to understand that life must be protected and valued (Testoni et al, 2020). On the other

hand, the educational potential that it has on the meaning and values that guide or should guide a 'good' life escapes students, or they fail to see it.

It should be acknowledged that our study has some important limitations due to its focus on a single educational centre and the fact that only three mixed groups (male and female) were carried out, with a middle/upper-middle class sociological profile. This has not allowed for the detection of gender- and age-related differences at a stage of life in which one is immersed in an intense process of evolutionary development. There is also an evident need to analyse the positions and discourse of students belonging to other social groups as well as that of less motivated students or those with a more pragmatic and functional perception of education.

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Table 1:

SOCIAL PROFILE OF DE PARTICIPANTS IN THE FOCUS GROUPS

Participants	Age (years)	Father's occupation	Mother's occupation
Group 1 - 3rd year of CSE			
1. Female	14	IT salesman	Property manager
2. Male	14	Works in a publishing house	School teacher
3. Male	14	Web and software programmer	Pharmacist
4. Male	14	Agricultural foreman	Human resources
5. Male	14	Policeman	School teacher
6. Female	14	Mechanic	School teacher
7. Female	14	Policeman	Housewife
8. Female	14	Driver	Supermarket cashier
Group 2 - 2nd year of CSE			
1. Female	13	Engineer	Unemployed (childcare)
2. Male	13	Serving in the military	Mechanic
3. Female	13	Self-employed kitchen salesman	Self-employed kitchen salesman
4. Female	14	Petrol station attendant	Unemployed (cleaning sector)
5. Male	14	Worker in the industrial sector	Clerk
6. Male	13	Scientist (physicist)	Telephone operator
7. Female	13	Construction worker	Shop assistant
Group 3 - 2nd year of USE			
1. Female	17	Construction worker	Waitress
2. Female	17	--	Teacher
3. Male	17	Mechanic	Housewife
4. Female	17	Policeman	Clerk
5. Male	17	Journalist	Telephone operator
6. Male	18	Engineer	Social worker
7. Male	18	Company manager	Clerk
8. Male	18	Computer engineer	School teacher

Note: CSE =Compulsory secondary education; USE = Upper secondary education

TABLA 2:

MEASURES OF POSITION AND DISPERSION IN THE DEAS-S SCALE. ITEM CROSSWALK WITH CLUSTERS

Cross-tabulation of the DEAS-S Scale items with Clusters										Total		
	Below average			On average			Above average					
	Mean	N	SD	Mean	N	SD	Mean	N	SD	Mean	N	SD
b1. Dealing with the topic of death in education will contribute to a more mature society	2,67	82	1,055	3,71	178	,832	4,64	106	,572	3,75	366	1,081
b2. Knowing that life has a beginning and an end in time can improve my education.	2,40	82	1,285	3,12	178	1,106	4,42	106	,754	3,33	366	1,296
b3. Death should be included as a topic in the contents of our subjects	1,68	82	,941	3,12	178	1,043	4,27	106	,811	3,13	366	1,328
b4. Addressing the subject of death in education will help pupils to become happier people.	1,85	82	1,044	2,57	178	,938	3,85	106	,913	2,78	366	1,206
b5. It is appropriate to deal with the subject of death in compulsory secondary education. (12-16 years old)	2,22	82	1,054	3,53	178	,909	4,59	106	,565	3,54	366	1,206
b6. It is appropriate to deal with the issue of death in the education of expectant families before the baby is born.	1,95	82	1,053	3,20	178	1,096	3,99	106	1,056	3,15	366	1,296
b7. I would like my teachers to be trained on the subject of death.	2,30	82	1,130	3,53	178	,831	4,52	106	,771	3,54	366	1,188
b8. I would like my parents to receive training on the subject of death	2,11	82	1,066	3,44	178	,920	4,43	106	,731	3,43	366	1,225
b9. It is appropriate to deal with the topic of death in primary education	1,50	82	,774	2,44	178	1,008	3,80	106	1,082	2,62	366	1,291

	Below average			On average			Above average			Total		
	Mean	N	SD	Mean	N	SD	Mean	N	SD	Mean	N	SD
b10. It is appropriate to deal with the subject of death in early childhood education.	1,26	82	,663	1,60	178	,904	2,67	106	1,432	1,83	366	1,178
b11. Death should be included among the issues we deal with in the tutorial hour	2,10	82	1,096	3,36	178	1,097	4,25	106	,993	3,33	366	1,311
b12. Knowing that one someday I'm going to die influences my appreciation of everyday life.	2,18	82	1,287	3,25	178	1,310	3,95	106	1,312	3,22	366	1,447
b13. Knowing that someday I am going to die can help me know better what I want to do in the future	2,01	82	1,171	3,09	178	1,263	3,79	106	1,285	3,05	366	1,399
b14. I believe that living through the death of someone close to me can help me to see death as something natural.	2,60	82	1,332	2,87	178	1,212	3,92	106	1,075	3,11	366	1,311
b15. I feel able to reflect on death	3,16	82	1,401	3,80	178	1,047	4,39	106	,868	3,83	366	1,173
b16. Knowing that someday I'm going to die can help me be a better person.	1,67	82	,876	2,92	178	1,092	3,65	106	1,302	2,85	366	1,318
b17. Any teacher should know how to accompany me in the event of bereavement.	3,37	82	1,436	3,99	178	1,152	4,16	106	1,212	3,90	366	1,270
b18. When a loved one is terminally ill (dying), we should have the option to say goodbye to them.	4,13	82	1,331	4,63	178	,778	4,92	106	,357	4,61	366	,896
b19. It is appropriate to deal with the subject of death Baccalaureate (16-18 years old)	2,74	82	1,163	4,01	178	,857	4,74	106	,574	3,94	366	1,122