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[Ines Testoni](#) * , [Lorenza Palazzo](#) , [Erika Iacona](#) , Ottavia Segalla , Laura Pizzolato , [Lea Ferrari](#)

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Article

Exploring Emotions Related to the COVID-19 Pandemic through Death Education: A Qualitative Study in Italian Primary Schools

Ines Testoni ^{1,2}, Lorenza Palazzo ¹, Erika Iacona ¹, Ottavia Segalla ¹, Laura Pizzolato ¹
and Lea Ferrari ¹

¹ Department of Philosophy, Sociology, Pedagogy and Applied psychology (FISPPA), University of Padova, 35139 Padova, Italy. E-mails: ines.testoni@unipd.it; lorenza.palazzo@unipd.it; erika.iacona@unipd.it; ottavia.segalla@studenti.unipd.it; laura.pizzolato.1@studenti.unipd.it; lea.ferrari@unipd.it

² Emili Sagol Creative Arts Therapies Research Center, University of Haifa, 3498838 Haifa, Israel; ines.testoni@unipd.it

* Correspondence: ines.testoni@unipd.it

Abstract: Background: The Covid-19 pandemic has globally impacted the lives of individuals, families, and children. In Italy, measures such as lockdowns and distance learning were implemented in schools, which affected the mental health of children and families. Methods: This article employs qualitative methodology to explore the experiences of children, parents, and teachers during the pandemic and lockdown, as well as the implementation of a death education project aimed at primary school children to help them process emotions and losses experienced during this period. Results: Distance learning posed challenges to the learning process and exacerbated social inequalities. Children suffered from limited social contact with friends and experienced negative emotions, including anger, fear, and concern for the health of their loved ones. The death education project provided a safe space for emotional expression and facilitated the acquisition of coping strategies. Open communication between adults and children about illness and death proved effective in mitigating the psychological impacts of loss and preventing traumatic bereavement. Conclusions: The findings highlight the utility of death education in enhancing children's ability to express their emotions and approach the topic of death more frankly.

Keywords: COVID-19; death education; children; primary school; spirituality

1. Introduction

The global spread of Covid-19 has had far-reaching consequences on people's daily lives and mental health. Restrictive measures such as lockdowns have resulted in significant changes in sleep patterns, eating habits, and technology usage [1,2]. While the pandemic's impact on psychological well-being has affected the entire population, it has been particularly challenging for vulnerable groups such as individuals with pre-existing mental disorders, frontline healthcare workers, socioeconomically disadvantaged individuals, the elderly, and especially young children [3].

Although minors may not have experienced the direct health repercussions of Covid-19, their lives have been deeply affected by social restrictions, resulting in psychological and social challenges [4]. The complete closure of schools during the health emergency, which lasted for two months in Italy and recurred in 2021, significantly impacted young children [5]. Schools had to adapt by implementing distance learning, which posed challenges for teachers who required professional development to address students' needs [6–8].

Particularly, minors from disadvantaged backgrounds have been disproportionately impacted by political decisions and the pandemic situation [9]. Studies have shown that over the past three years, they have experienced a lack of peer contact, anxiety, depressive symptoms, sleep problems, anger, and concerns about the present and future [5,10,11]. Social stimuli were reduced, resulting in

boredom and emotional states influenced by the fears and worries of adults regarding contagion, illness, disruptions in work life, anxiety about distant loved ones, and the fear of loss [12–15].

Additionally, the pandemic has exposed people to issues such as hospitalizations and the deaths of family members, friends, and community members. This has brought the topics of death and dying to the forefront, challenging the previous societal trend of avoiding these discussions. Death education programs in schools can play a crucial role in supporting children during this pandemic by providing a space for reflection, age-appropriate information, and discussions on fear, anxiety, and suffering related to death and dying [16]. Death education not only equips children with tools to manage anxiety but also fosters emotional attitudes and a critical understanding of death, its universality, irreversibility, and causality [17,18].

The opportunity to discuss death and illness does not increase anxiety levels; instead, it reduces them. This is because engaging in these discussions allows individuals to become aware of how culture and society handle these issues and can bring forth answers that are not readily apparent in everyday life [17]. Every day, families are bombarded with media information that leads young children to develop a distorted and violent perception of death. Through death education and reflection on spirituality, children can approach the subject of death with less anxiety [19,20].

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Aims

The present study aimed to investigate the emotional and loss experiences associated with the Covid-19 pandemic among primary school children and assess the effectiveness of a death education project in facilitating the processing of these experiences. Furthermore, we sought to explore the perspectives and experiences of parents and teachers regarding how children responded to the pandemic and examine whether and how the death education project facilitated the processing of emotions linked to the Covid-19 experience and the subsequent losses they encountered.

2.2. Participants

The study comprised three participant groups: children who participated in the death education project, some of their parents, and certain teachers from the involved classes.

For the group of children, snowball sampling was used, starting with a few schools with which the researchers were already in contact and based on the willingness of the school heads, teachers and parents of the children to participate in the death education project and the research. The group of teachers and parents was selected by non-probabilistic convenience sampling based on the voluntary participation of interested parents and teachers.

Regarding the children, a total of 84 participants (45 females and 39 males) between the ages of 8 and 11 ($M = 9.25$; $SD = 0.77$) attending third grade ($N = 13$), fourth grade ($N = 58$), and fifth grade ($N = 13$) from two primary schools in Northern Italy took part.

Concerning the parents, each coordinating teacher of the classes involved in the death education project informed the parents about the opportunity to participate freely and voluntarily in a semi-structured interview related to the project's theme and activities. Nine parents, specifically nine women aged between 39 and 50 ($M = 44.89$; $SD = 3.76$), chose to participate (Table 1).

Table 1. Parents' Demographic Characteristics.

Fictitious names	Age	Gender	Degree	Employment
Maria	39	F	Graduate in Nursing	Nurse
Lucia	50	F	Middle school diploma	Worker
Alice	45	F	Graduate in Advertising techniques	Partner in a theatre company
Giulia	46	F	Graduate in Law for Business Economics	Bank employee

Martina	42	F	High school diploma	Housewife
Sara	50	F	High school diploma	Employee
Anna	42	F	High school diploma	Employee
Aurora	47	F	Professional high school diploma	Employee
Paola	43	F	Accounting diploma	Employee

Similarly, all teachers of the classes involved in the project were invited to take part, and five teachers, specifically five women aged between 42 and 58 years ($M = 51$; $SD = 6.4$), decided to participate (Table 2). This included both support teachers who work with students facing difficulties and mainstream teachers who teach multiple subjects to the entire class.

Table 2. Teachers' Demographic Characteristics.

Fictitious names	Age	Gender	Teaching subjects
Patrizia	42	F	Main teacher
Federica	51	F	Main teacher
Giuseppa	58	F	Maths, movement education
Roberta	56	F	Special needs teacher
Giada	48	F	Special needs teacher

This study adhered to the ethical principles of psychologists and the code of conduct of the American Psychological Association, as well as the principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki. A comprehensive explanation of the study objectives and analytical methodology was provided to all participants. Parents were required to provide consent for their children's involvement in the death education project and the research. To ensure anonymity, unique identification codes were assigned to each child prior to administering the materials. Teachers and parents were requested to record the interviews for transcription and content analysis purposes. Prior to the interviews, all participants provided signed informed consent, with the assurance that the interview content would remain confidential. The Ethics Committee for Experimentation at the University of Padua granted approval for this study (reference: E9FCD1EA7D1706DB063EDCCA025DC09A).

2.3. Qualitative data collection and analysis

The children participated in a death education course consisting of four weekly meetings of two hours each led by research psychologists, two for each class. Each meeting dealt with a different topic accompanied by specific activities. The meetings envisaged the use of circle-time, a method designed to expose emotional experiences in a circle and in a free manner mediated by the facilitators [21]; the use of narration guided by stimulus images on the theme of the pandemic and distance from loved ones; the use of free drawing to allow the children's full emotional expression the use of the children's interview with their parents so that they too could indirectly come into contact with the themes addressed in the classroom and talk about them at home with their children; the use of guided meditation to allow the children to visualise within themselves a safe place and an inner light from which to draw strength in difficult moments. The aim of this last activity was to explore one's own spirituality in order to make this very complex concept accessible, presented as an inner strength, able to help in difficult moments and to give the energy one needs to live one's life in a positive way and to stay close to people who are no longer with us. The spirituality proposed was not linked to any particular religious belief. At the end of the activity, each child was asked to draw his or her own inner safe place with the help of some cards on which the silhouettes given by the researchers were depicted. Afterwards, a moment of sharing and final greetings was offered where the children were able to express their views on the project.

At the beginning and at the end of the death education project, the children were asked three open-ended questions before and two after the meetings to explore their opinions and emotional

experiences concerning Covid-19 and to investigate their effectiveness and enjoyment of the death education project activities in which they took part.

The parental interview was conducted subsequent to the death education project, aiming to explore the children's emotional experiences pertaining to the pandemic, the discourse surrounding the virus, familial deaths and losses. Additionally, it sought to investigate any disparities observed among the children, their level of engagement and their perspectives on death education projects during childhood. Some examples of questions were: "Has your son/daughter expressed the need to talk about the Covid-19 pandemic? Have you ever had to cope and talk to your sons/daughters about the hospitalisation of loved ones and/or their possible loss as a result of Covid-19?"; "What were your expectations when the project was presented? During and after the intervention did you notice any differences at behavioural, emotional and/or theme level reported by your son/daughter at home?

Conversely, the interview administered to the teachers examined the pandemic's impact on the children, any challenges encountered within the school setting, as well as the emotional and social experiences of both the children and their families. Moreover, it sought to gather insights from the teachers regarding the project's influence on the children's behavior and emotions, and their opinions on the efficacy and replicability of death education projects. Some examples of questions were: "During these last two years, have any particular themes emerged related to the pandemic (stress over isolation, the swabs...) or related to death and loss? How were they handled?"; "What impact do you think the project had on the class? Did you notice any differences on a behavioural, emotional and/or theme level reported by the pupils in the classroom?"

The interviews with parents and teachers lasted 45-50 minutes each and were conducted by two of the researcher-authors of this study. The interviews were semi-structured so that there was a script with indicative questions and then, as each interview progressed, themes that emerged during the dialogue were explored in an unstructured manner.

Qualitative research methodology was employed in this study due to its ability to accommodate the complexity of diverse perspectives and illuminate individual nuances following the COREQ checklist [22,23]. Specifically, thematic analysis was selected as the preferred method, as it enables identification and examination of central themes within a text, frequently employed in psychology studies focusing on health and well-being [24]. More specifically, an inductive approach to thematic analysis was employed, as it was deemed most suitable for identifying pertinent issues that emerged through dialogue [25]. The textual analysis of interview transcripts by two researchers and children's responses to open-ended questions was structured using six primary steps: (a) familiarization with the data, (b) generation of codes, (c) exploration, verification, and definition of themes, (d) coding of data, (e) comprehension of emergent data, and (f) report writing. The analysis was conducted concurrently by two researchers, who compared and consolidated their findings.

3. Results

3.1. Results concerning children

Eighty children out of the 84 participants in the death education project completed both the pre- and post-intervention questionnaires. The qualitative analysis of their responses revealed three main thematic areas: children's thoughts on Covid-19, the possibility of discussing the pandemic before the project, and the emotional processing during the project (Table 3).

Table 3. Results concerning children.

Theme	Exemplars
Children's thoughts on Covid-19	Negative thoughts about Covid-19 (use of masks, no physical contact, being separated from relatives, confinement at home, contagious)
	Feeling of being imprisoned, facing obstacles or caught in a trap

Opportunity to talk about the pandemic before the project	Positive aspects (distance learning, more time to sleep, reflect and stay with the family)
	No desire to talk about it (i.e. it was sad, bad, unpleasant)
Talking about their emotions during the project	Talk about it with friends, family and at school (i.e. it was good, useful and interesting)
	Night dreams about Covid-19
	Sense of liberation
	Sharing to understand themselves and others
	Sense of safety
	Learning new emotions
	Negative and positive experiences

3.1.1. Children's Thoughts on Covid-19

No significant differences were observed between the pre- and post-intervention responses. The children predominantly expressed negative thoughts about Covid-19 for various reasons. A summary example of these thoughts includes the following: "Covid makes us sick, keeps us indoors, makes us sad, bored, cry, and feel ugly. Covid makes us colorless."

In addition to these aspects, other responses mentioned the use of masks, the inability to have physical contact with others, being separated from relatives, confinement at home, and the highly contagious nature of Covid-19, which evokes fear. Some children's descriptions of the virus seemed to be influenced by adults or what they had heard in the media. For instance, expressions like "the cause of the pandemic was mother nature" or "it was a punishment from mother nature because I couldn't see friends, go out, and live freely" were found. Furthermore, phrases such as "it was a blight on the planet that helped us become clean and civilized people" were also present.

While most of the responses reflected the children's feelings of being "imprisoned," facing "obstacles," or being caught in a "trap," some thoughts expressed hope for the end of the pandemic and highlighted positive aspects of the period. These positive aspects included distance learning, having more time to sleep, reflect, and spend with their families, which allowed them to rediscover "the value of being together." One child stated, "It was bad at first, but then I had a lot of fun. I must say, it was beautiful. No one bothered you, and you had birds singing. What could be better? You always have to find the positive side in things!"

3.1.2. Opportunity to talk about the pandemic before the project

Many children had the opportunity and space to talk about Covid-19. Those who did not, gave reasons such as "At school we just study" or "I am a child and I want to think about play and fun". Most of the children mentioned friends, family and school as channels of communication and many mentioned them because they had direct experience of them, for example because they themselves or their family members had fallen ill. It also emerged that topics concerning Covid-19 were the subject of one child's dreams, who wanted to emphasise that his family had grown tired of this topic. Following the question on the possibility of talking about Covid-19, the pupils from both primary schools were asked to describe what feelings they had when discussing the Covid-19 pandemic prior to the start of the project meetings. A balance of positive and negative responses emerged, as some children described the moment using terms such as 'bad', 'sad', 'unpleasant', 'distressing' and 'difficult', some children also expressed that they had felt fear and worry, but others felt it was 'good', 'useful' and 'interesting'. The reasons why this experience was unpleasant related to the characteristics of the pandemic period, e.g. the fact that so many people died, "Talking about it was a bit sad for me because just the thought of it broke a little piece of my heart."

Talking about it during the project was considered a positive experience mainly because it allowed them to learn new things, listen to other people's thoughts, free themselves, better understand the situation they were living in, find a way to cope with it, and why they had to change some habitual behaviours.

3.1.3. Talking about their emotions during the project

For some of the children, talking about the pandemic brought to mind "bad things like not going to school and not seeing relatives, friends and our grandparents any more" and for this reason they felt sadness and grief, but being able to reflect on it together during the project meetings allowed them to calm down. The responses brought out different experiences of the children that can be grouped into: (a) sense of liberation, (b) sharing to understand themselves and others, (c) sense of safety, (d) learning new emotions, (e) negative and (f) positive experiences. Many children reported how talking to the psychologists during the meetings allowed them to vent and consequently feel good, get rid of a burden and no longer think only of negative emotions related to the pandemic, "It made me feel better, I couldn't talk about it with anyone because I felt shy. But with you I was also able to get rid of the bad thoughts. You were the only ones I could express everything in my head with, if you came back I would probably be the happiest child in the world."

Other responses revealed the sharing dimension of the project's activities: the children were able to talk about their own experiences and listen to those of others, without feeling judged and in some cases finding aspects they had in common. "Talking about Cvid was interesting because I found out that my classmates thought similar things to me."

Talking about the pandemic during the four meetings allowed the children to learn and discover new things and new emotions, such as empathy. It also helped them understand how to deal with the pandemic situation. Overall, therefore, the feedback the children gave was positive: many words used to describe this experience were "nice", "fun", "enjoyable" and "interesting". Some children, however, did not like talking about this topic because it caused them to feel sorry or disinterested.

3.2. Results concerning parents

Analyses of the interviews with parents revealed three thematic areas: critical issues related to the pandemic context, children's emotional experiences and parents' views on the death education project. The names used in the following section are fictitious names (Table 4).

Table 4. Results concerning parents.

Theme	Exemplars
Critical issues related to the pandemic context	Suffering by children Lacking of physical activity Use of technology Fear of infection for parents at work
Emotional experience of children	Negative emotions (fear, confusion, anger, concern) Positive emotions (happiness for more family time, strengthening bonds)
The EDI4APP Project	Positive expectations satisfied No noticeable changes in their children Appreciation for death education projects Significance of accessible language for children about death and loss topics

3.2.1. Critical issues related to the pandemic context

According to parents, the pandemic had many negative aspects, both in terms of children's experiences and their psychosocial development. From the parents' point of view, it emerged that the children suffered, in particular, from the distance from close friends and relatives. The use of protective equipment was also a source of stress and generated discussions between parents and children aimed at clarifying the reason for their use. On this Lucia said, "As it went on we had to

remain isolated from everything and everyone and we were not used to this. This greatly affected my daughter's state of mind, because she felt lonely, not because she wasn't with us but because she couldn't interact in person with her classmates and the friends she usually hung out with. In addition, she suffered a lot from the distance from her maternal grandparents where she spends most of the day... she missed them very much."

Although the distance learning lessons in the early lockdown period were organised in such a way as to offer pupils a time to share with their classmates, according to the mothers interviewed, physical contact, being able to play together and attending school is what the children missed most during this period. This subsequently led in some children to not developing the "instinct to get close" on social occasions, such as birthday parties, and in others to the need to create relationships."

The level of physical activity within families was notably lacking. Both parents and teachers attempted to address this issue through the reorganization of daily routines and the utilization of technology. Technology became the sole means of continuing education during the lockdown. However, children found themselves in unfamiliar territory as they were unprepared for computer usage and distance learning applications. In certain households, there were insufficient devices, prompting parents to acquire additional devices to facilitate their children's studies. Despite these challenges, one mother reported that her children's enthusiasm for attending school remained intact.

The most stressful experiences for children were associated with internet connectivity issues, resulting in disrupted connections with their teachers and classmates, leading to frustration. Furthermore, one mother shared that her daughter encountered difficulties recognizing her peers through the screens, often having to ask for their identities. Parents also frequently bore the responsibility of teaching, as lessons were considerably shorter during the initial stages of the lockdown.

Although children were initially ill-equipped for extensive technology usage, they swiftly adapted to the new learning environment. Consequently, some parents now struggle to regulate their children's online activities. One mother believes that due to the pandemic and early exposure to the internet, children have entered an environment that poses potential risks for their age group. Maria shared her personal experience, stating: "As a parent, this was the most negative aspect for me. It has been challenging to restrict my son's technology usage. He quickly learned to navigate online content and is now more proficient than we are."

While the majority of adults continued working, which undoubtedly had its advantages, it also instilled fear among parents that they might contract the virus and pass it on to their children. Consequently, parents maintained a greater physical distance from their children. Although the rationale behind this behavior was understood, it caused distress for the children. Giulia provided the following testimony: "My daughter would look for me, but then she realized that there was a possibility I might bring the virus home, despite all the precautions. It was a difficult moment for both of us. I tried to maintain some distance until the situation improved."

3.2.2. Emotional experiences of children

Children experienced negative emotions during the pandemic as reported by parents. These emotions included fear, stemming from the initial confusion surrounding the situation, which led children to inquire about the potential dangers of Covid-19 for their grandparents and their own lives. Additionally, children felt anger due to the limitations imposed on their social activities. Parents also expressed their children's deep concern for the health of their grandparents and the inability to visit relatives in the event of their Covid-19 infection and hospitalization. Frequently, children posed questions like, "Mum, what if you die?"

Since children were often exposed to information through television or radio, they sought clarification from their parents. In response, parents endeavored to be truthful in their explanations, though sometimes only partially. However, some children did not express any doubts about the pandemic but displayed interest when it was mentioned on television programs. Giulia recounted her experience as follows: "I attempted to explain to her why we couldn't spend the entire day together as we did before, and she asked me questions. She inquired why she couldn't go to school

and see her classmates while I went to work. My husband, grandparents, and I tried to provide explanations, and she had many follow-up questions... She even asked technical questions, which were challenging to answer because, initially, we ourselves didn't have all the answers."

Several parents reported their happiness at having the opportunity to spend significantly more time with their families, which they wouldn't have had even during holidays. The experience of isolation due to testing positive for Covid-19 also presented an unexpected chance for one child to bond with their father. During the interview, Aurora shared her perspective: "The period when Roberto started staying at home for about a month and a half of isolation felt like a family reunion that we couldn't have achieved even during holidays because we still had to stay at home. Despite the difficulties, we discovered a positive aspect of strengthening our family bond."

3.2.3. The EDI4APP Project

The interviews uncovered that many mothers agreed that their children, to some extent, possess an understanding of the concept of death and the associated grief. This understanding may be attributed to the topics covered in catechism, school teachings, or personal experiences with animals and plants.

When the project was introduced, numerous parents expressed positive expectations. They supported the project with the aim of providing closure to the pandemic-related discussions, encouraging their children to communicate openly, and facilitating a deeper understanding for both parents and children. The project aimed to address the loss of life that children might encounter beyond death, teach them how to cope with grief individually, and foster comprehension of emotional experiences. The interviews revealed that, on the whole, these expectations were validated.

Initially, some parents had doubts and sought clarification from the teachers through meetings. An interview highlighted that this initial apprehension stemmed from the perception that death and loss are challenging topics to navigate, even on a personal level. Specifically, Martina mentioned that she initially viewed discussing issues such as isolation and detachment from society, which the children had experienced, as negative.

However, after witnessing her son's enthusiasm following the project meetings, Martina changed her perspective and recognized the project's value in promoting sharing and camaraderie among peers, "In the beginning, I had doubts about my son's participation, I must admit, but mainly because I didn't want to reopen a burdened situation for him. When the informed consent form was presented to me, I thought, 'Oh no, reinforcing this again?' Despite that, I decided to allow his participation. Later on, observing his enthusiasm and how he freely expressed and shared his emotions with his classmates during the project, my opinion changed."

Although the children reported enjoying the project and expressed satisfaction at home, many parents did not observe any noticeable changes in their children's emotional or behavioral aspects or the topics they discussed. Recognizing such changes can be challenging, particularly in children of this age group who are constantly developing. Only Lucia noticed a difference in her daughter, who, despite being naturally outgoing, began to share her thoughts more openly and express herself even in front of strangers after participating in the meetings. Lucia also observed a stronger bond forming among classmates.

"I have noticed that my daughter has become more open. Additionally, the fact that they started doing group work at school has been beneficial. Previously, the class was divided along gender lines, with boys sticking together and girls forming their own groups. There was no interaction between them. However, after my daughter participated in the project and they engaged in activities as a whole group, there was more bonding between boys and girls. Now they interact, work on assignments together, and play together. In my opinion, this marks an important step forward."

The interviews revealed that all parents perceive educational projects addressing the topics of emotions, spirituality, and loss as valuable for various reasons. These subjects are often overlooked within families, except in response to specific incidents. Thus, providing children with the opportunity to discuss these topics together can prove beneficial. By sharing their own thoughts while listening to others', children can develop a deeper understanding. Parents emphasized the

significance of psychologists using accessible language and fostering a positive environment. Alice highlighted this point by stating: "It is crucial to acknowledge the individual limitations of children when it comes to certain topics because each child is unique, possessing distinct personal and family histories. Some children may be more sensitive than others. Considering the potential risk of delving too deeply and touching upon highly sensitive issues, it is essential that those leading such activities possess the necessary skills to handle them appropriately."

According to the parents, it is vital for schools to incorporate death education courses systematically from early childhood and continue them over time. They believe that such courses could help prevent behavioral and relational problems that may arise as children grow, including instances of bullying.

3.3. Results pertaining to teachers

Analyses of the interviews conducted with the teachers revealed three main thematic areas: the period of distance learning, experiences during the return to school, and the death education project. The names used in the following section are fictitious (Table 5).

Table 5. Results concerning teachers.

Theme	Exemplars
The period of distance learning	Difficulties (technological skills; extend work hours; maintaining relational and socialization opportunities)
	Knowledge gaps and frustration
	Costant parents presence
	Fruitful collaborations between school and families
Returning to school	Difficulties to address children's needs
	Positive emotions
	Stress and anxiety for safety measures
	Importance of contact with peers and teachers
The EDI4APP Project	Concern about risk of contagion
	Opportunity to talk about death and loss
	Positive and satisfied expectations
	Enthusiasm for the project

3.3.1. The period of distance learning

Several teachers reported encountering difficulties during the distance learning period, primarily due to their lack of necessary technological skills. Consequently, they were compelled to extend their working hours, even working on weekends. Giuseppa and Federica shared their experiences: "As a teacher, I faced numerous challenges. I felt thrown into a demand for technological skills that I didn't possess, which forced me to invest extra hours. There were no longer any holidays; instead, every day became a working day in order to organize everything as best as possible, so as not to further burden these children.", "I felt the need to see and interact with my students even before the start of the school day. I longed for contact because I felt disconnected from them. This desire to reconnect allowed me to embrace the computer not as a constraint but as an opportunity. And together, we made it work; overall, it went quite well from a human and relational perspective."

For the teachers, the most challenging aspect was maintaining relational and socialization opportunities. Whenever feasible, they provided students with avenues to express their emotions. However, the online activities remained primarily focused on content delivery, lacking the workshop approach and the ability to share physical spaces and materials. Due to the physical distance and associated challenges, feedback that teachers typically receive when proposing activities or new topics was limited. Even today, according to the teachers, the students continue to carry knowledge gaps that the school has not been able to address in subsequent years. Consequently, this period was exceedingly frustrating for the teachers, despite their years of teaching experience. Federica shared her experience:

"We prioritized content delivery, and it's evident that we were also expected to fulfill certain didactic and content-related tasks. However, it's true that children require empathy, contact, and the presence of a person. So, everything was significantly limited. The most obvious consequence of this academic cycle is that, for the first time, I won't be able to graduate a fifth grader who can write in cursive correctly. It may seem trivial to some, but for someone who has been teaching all their life, you realize that you're unable to make certain choices... I focused more on the content than the form, but clearly, we're paying the price for that."

While the shortcomings were more evident on the academic front, the teachers perceived that the students were "not particularly stressed by this closure" on an emotional level. This could be attributed to the fact that the students had different experiences than usual, including increased time spent with their parents and families. Initially, from the teachers' perspective, the children welcomed distance learning as if it were a game. However, as they realized that this mode of learning would continue for an extended period, the situation became less tolerable.

Some teachers noted that the constant presence of parents, in some cases, hindered effective teaching, as parents tended to "take the place of the children." Teachers often found themselves teaching both their students and their parents, and these children felt that they were not allowed to make mistakes as they would in a classroom setting. According to the teachers, constant parental assistance prevented them from identifying certain situations, such as lexical or spelling difficulties, which became apparent only upon the students' return to school. Roberta, in this regard, added, "In one instance with a child, it happened that the grandmother rushed him to do things, and he would start crying. He couldn't keep up with the activity well, which caused him anxiety because he couldn't accept being behind or making mistakes."

At times, the collaboration between the school and the family has been fruitful, such as in the cases of a boy and a girl who faced significant difficulties in following online lessons due to congenital illnesses. In these cases, support teachers, together with parents, managed to structure lessons that engaged them by using specific strategies such as cartoons, picture books, musical stimuli, and the token economy. However, there have been other instances where parents were the first to deny their children's issues, making it subsequently more challenging to address the children's needs.

3.3.2. Returning to School

The return to in-person lessons was eagerly anticipated by the children. They were thrilled to be together, happy to finally have contact with their classmates and teachers. Federica shared her experience, saying, "I will never forget the eyes of some of my students. When they returned in September, they looked even more beautiful than usual, with shining eyes. They communicated through their eyes, and it felt like they were asking for a hug."

The safety measures and the thought of returning to distance learning were sources of stress and anxiety for the children. As a result, the teachers had to directly intervene to reassure them, encouraging reflection and fostering a sense of responsibility. Federica's words serve as an example in this regard: "I always made an effort to showcase the small accomplishments we had each day, while also expressing, 'We are in each other's presence now, no longer confined to a monitor, and that itself is fortunate. We can see and interact with one another in a different manner, allowing for more spontaneity.' I consistently emphasized the positive aspects of the moment, resulting in them performing exceptionally well."

Considering they had limited opportunities for socializing outside of school, contact with peers and teachers played a crucial role in their psychosocial development. However, there was also concern about the risk of contagion during mealtimes, despite adequate spacing, as well as the fear of passing around notebooks and pens. These practices are essential for children to learn collaboration and sharing.

3.3.3. The EDI4APP project

The two schools that participated in the death education project were immediately supportive of this initiative. During regular lessons, teachers frequently attempted to engage the entire class in collective conversations, encouraging children to share their emotions and experiences. In some classes, the subject of death and bereavement had been broached due to specific situations involving the loss of certain children. While discussing the idea of death and the associated fears may be delicate, according to the teachers, it is possible to broach these topics with primary school children, provided the appropriate terminology is used. Roberta shared her perspective: "Children naturally discuss it; some may even cry while reminiscing about deceased pets or relatives like grandparents. However, they speak about it calmly without appearing distressed. Children need to grasp the concept that both life and death exist."

Given the teachers' receptiveness to these issues, the expectations for the project were positive when it was introduced. The aim was to give children the opportunity to express their thoughts and emotions regarding death and loss through different means, uncovering unique insights beyond what the teachers observed on a daily basis. It also aimed to equip the school staff with tools to address these issues effectively. During the pandemic, the teachers primarily played a supportive role and refrained from asking children specific questions about their emotional experiences to avoid creating uncomfortable situations. This project revealed previously undisclosed situations, such as some children experiencing bereavement due to Covid-19.

Another teacher expressed her enthusiasm for participating in the project, hoping it would provide an opportunity for children to express themselves and offer a final reflection for closure. Giuseppa's opinion is as follows: "At this age, children are still very self-centered. Hence, we believed this course could be beneficial in encouraging them to reflect upon their own emotions, helping them assign names and meanings to the emotions they frequently experience."

Overall, the expectations were confirmed, as the guided meditation activity emerged as the most valued by both students and teachers. During this activity, the children were encouraged to envision a secure place, which the teachers subsequently incorporated into future lessons to foster creativity and facilitate the assimilation of new experiences such as empathy and resilience. Some children even integrated these concepts into their vocabulary. The exploration of hope, empathy, and altruism was met with great enthusiasm, as the students realized that these emotions were already a part of their own experiences. This realization of the positive and fundamental nature of these dimensions was gratifying for them. Giuseppa reported: "When the Italian teacher reads passages that touch upon the emotions discussed during our activities, the children recognize them and say, 'Ah yes, we've dealt with this matter before. We already know this word, we've encountered it, and we've experienced and expressed this emotion. We've even created artwork based on it.'"

According to some teachers, the impact of the project may not be readily observable, as the classes in both schools did not exhibit significant disturbances prior to the meetings, and there are numerous variables at play. However, all interviews contained positive references to the value of these sessions, which helped the children gain awareness and opened doors for further growth. Patrizia shared her experience: "I believe there has been a heightened sense of awareness. The children were able to identify emotions that they were experiencing but couldn't previously label."

One teacher also acknowledged the project's role in facilitating a "positive evolution from a relational and interactive standpoint" within her class during the recent period. Roberta expressed her opinion: "Unfortunately, very little emphasis is placed on these forms of expression, whereas I have seen them as crucial for many years. I see the children for who they are, and I believe we should reduce the focus on Italian or history and prioritize these types of experiences. Children require them,

even if they can't articulate it. Some children struggle with self-control and fail to regulate themselves in their interactions with others. They lack patience and often exhibit sudden outbursts."

On the parents' side, there remains some resistance towards accepting projects that address topics such as death and loss, as not everyone is inclined to confront these issues. However, by providing clear explanations regarding the context, objectives, and methodologies used in these interventions, doubts can be dispelled. Giada expressed her thoughts on this matter: "The key is to communicate effectively. This should be done prior to an activity, allowing parents a dedicated space where they can be informed about what will be done, how it will be done, and who will be involved. Familiarizing themselves with these aspects beforehand enables parents to feel more secure and engaged. Maintaining open lines of communication with families is crucial.

4. Discussion

The study focused on two primary themes: the impact of the pandemic and subsequent lockdown due to Covid-19 on children, parents, and teachers, and the implementation of a death education project aimed at primary school children. The aim of the death education project was to explore the emotional experiences and losses suffered during this challenging period. During the initial phase of the pandemic, the Italian government mandated the closure of all schools. Distance learning was proposed as a solution to continue education. However, this study revealed that distance learning posed challenges, particularly for young children, and exacerbated social inequalities related to the availability of devices and internet connection at home [26].

Many parents lacked the necessary tools to support their children's distance learning, while teachers faced difficulties due to a lack of technological skills. Consequently, teachers had to extend their working hours, even during weekends. Parents also had to take on the additional burden of teaching, which resulted in decreased earnings and limited career advancement opportunities in some cases [27].

Consistent with existing literature, the lockdown period affected children primarily by separating them from their friends [4,10]. Moreover, the lack of physical contact and reduced school attendance led some children to prefer social distancing, while others experienced a stronger need to build relationships [28]. The use of technology for educational purposes also increased the internet usage for recreational activities. Some parents struggled to regulate this uncontrolled use and expressed concerns about children being exposed to age-inappropriate content [29]. The increased time spent online for learning exposed children to potentially harmful and violent content, along with an increased risk of cyberbullying [7].

According to the study findings, children experienced prevailing negative emotions during the pandemic, including anger, fear, and worry, particularly regarding the health of their loved ones. Boredom, loneliness, irritability, anxiety, and restlessness were also observed during the lockdown, leading to increased externalizing behavior [28]. However, amidst these negative aspects, the lockdown period presented some positive aspects. It allowed children to have more sleep, teachers to acquire new digital skills, and families to spend additional time together. Parents noted that these positive aspects improved family interactions and strengthened family bonds [11]. Additionally, the collaborative bond between schools and families improved significantly during this period, which was a novel experience for many participants [7].

The study also explored the effectiveness and impact of a death education course designed specifically to help children process emotional experiences and losses during the pandemic, irrespective of whether they experienced actual bereavement. Children often worry more when they are uninformed about events around them, which can manifest in externalizing behaviors. Therefore, it is crucial to acknowledge and validate children's thoughts, feelings, and reactions while providing appropriate emotional support. Honest communication, reassurance, and explanation of the situation while considering their developmental level are essential [9].

The findings of this study indicate that a majority of the children had prior opportunities to discuss pandemic-related matters before the project meetings. Meeting with their peers was perceived as a positive and highly valued experience, enabling them to acquire new knowledge,

listen to differing perspectives, express themselves freely, gain a deeper understanding of their circumstances, and find ways to cope with the situation. Additionally, the theme of death and dying naturally emerged throughout the pandemic period, as children encountered images on television, heard stories from their families, or experienced the illness or loss of loved ones due to the virus [30].

The results highlight that both teachers and parents believe that their students and children possess some level of comprehension regarding loss and its implications. Even from an early age, children gradually develop an understanding of death, initially perceiving it as abandonment, then comprehending its irreversibility, and finally recognizing their own mortality [31]. The adults who participated in this study attempted to normalize death by describing it as a natural phenomenon, distinct from the portrayal in video games. Existing literature suggests that communication between adults and children about illness and death has the potential to alleviate the psychological effects of both short- and long-term loss and prevent traumatic bereavement [20,32]. Therefore, incorporating death education becomes crucial to enhance the ability of children to articulate their emotions, reduce outward-oriented thinking and alexithymia, foster attentiveness to internal dimensions, and facilitate conversations about these sensitive topics [33,34].

Moreover, according to many parents and teachers, the project demonstrated positive aspects, despite not leading to specific changes in their behaviour. This observation can be attributed, on the one hand, to the likelihood that the participating classes were already accustomed to discussing emotions (albeit not related to loss) and, on the other hand, to the limited number of meetings within a short timeframe. The interviews revealed that some parents still exhibit reluctance when addressing issues of death and loss within the family. These outcomes align with the Terror Management Theory (TMT), which elucidates how the proximity to death elicits both a fear of death and a need to deny its significance by adopting various cultural constructs associated with immortality [35,36].

However, this study confirms the possibility of organizing interventions on these topics without compromising the well-being of the participants. It was crucial to establish a welcoming environment concerning these issues. The teachers showed immediate support for implementing the project within their lessons and expressed the view that these activities were beneficial for students of all ages, ranging from the early years of primary school to secondary school. School staff often lack sufficient training on the subjects of death and illness, highlighting the importance of schools collaborating with external experts who can provide the necessary tools for prevention [37].

One of the most popular activities that allowed children ample room for exploration was meditation for spiritual exploration. In today's society, young people struggle to find educational paths that foster awareness of their spirituality. In the realm of death education, it is crucial to distinguish between religiosity and spirituality, enabling individuals to develop their transcendental dimension while benefiting from mindfulness, resilience, and a non-fearful approach to the topic of death, regardless of religious beliefs [17,35].

Numerous studies conducted during the pandemic period have highlighted the significance of embracing the spiritual dimension as a vital tool to cope with illness, promote well-being, and provide compassion and empathy during periods of heightened stress, distress, and anxiety [38–40]. Meditation has been proven to calm the mind, enhance awareness, and create optimal conditions for reflection and generative thinking [41]. It equips children with better physiological and psychological coping mechanisms to navigate the pressures of modern life, fosters concentration and awareness, and improves mental health throughout their academic journey [42].

Exploring one's spiritual and transcendental dimension from an early age not only allows individuals to form their own understanding and representation of death but also empowers children to face challenging moments such as those caused by the pandemic [15].

5. Conclusions

The Covid-19 pandemic has presented children, parents, and teachers with unprecedented challenges that caught everyone off guard. However, it has also offered opportunities to enhance the relationships between families and school staff members. The implementation of the death education project discussed in this study has proven to be a positive experience for both children and teachers,

although some parents still exhibit reluctance in addressing issues related to death and loss. In line with the TMT, the fear of death often compels individuals to avoid confronting this topic directly, perpetuating a self-perpetuating cycle. Therefore, it is crucial to raise awareness about the significance of discussing death and loss, which can be accomplished through the promotion of death education projects.

As a final note, we would like to point out that, while there is a positive attitude within schools towards introducing death education courses, it is important to note that the majority of teachers have never received training on this topic. Given that death education inevitably affects schools and students, it is crucial to address this gap in teacher education [37].

One limitation of this research pertains to the participants, as only female parents were interviewed. It would have been valuable to include the perspectives of fathers as well, which would have provided a more comprehensive understanding of family dynamics. As noted by the interviewees, the number of meetings conducted during the project was insufficient to produce observable effects on the children. Therefore, introducing similar projects in a structured manner may yield outcomes more comparable to those achieved in literacy education, particularly in terms of emotional management and processing. Moreover, the timeframe between the meetings and data collection was relatively short, preventing a comprehensive assessment of the project's long-term effects.

Finally, future studies could increase the research to also include a quantitative survey by proposing a mixed-method methodology to measure change in variables of interest.

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