

Taming Death.

Origin and presentation.

The research I am wishing to share with you follows from my professional experience as a nurse and trainer in palliative care. As I would lead people during the end of their lives, I was able to notice they were teachers themselves : very often they get back into harmony with their family, live the present in quality and try to solve all the problems of their lives. This movement of palliative care has permit death to become humanized in our hospitals and in some communities. But the pedagogy of palliative treatments and mourning psychiatry cannot alone face death. We know that the fright our death is not straight off pathological and that mourning is not a sickness. Nevertheless we are always afraid of death and most of us accuse directly the social or medical corporation not to have been able to cure us over this matter. Or not to have been inclined to get good response for people who have died. Apart from the practice of support (which can not be improvised), we know that teaching over death (study of the pathological mourning risk or of the pain removal) doesn't change our attitude to face the fright of dying.

Starting from experiments, articles and testimonies, I have identified the need to proceed to a trainer-research over existence with school children who deal with the reactions of a society denying death (from their conditioning and dependence). For that matter, I have put together a method permitting children between 6 and 12 to understand death before facing illness, facing dependence (drugs, nutrition imbalance,), facing mourning situations, non only from the loss of a loved one but also unemployment, divorce, scholar failure, the loss of an animal, a strongly invested situation, etc...

I think it is a paradox not to get an idea over death since it is part of life. What I have tried to bring about through this process in a school surrounding, is the possibility for children to think over death and to find answers to their questions.

It is about educational work permitting self access to children's destiny over life and death and so to inform them on the collective movement of facing death. We know very well that it is not a must to live something painful to get an idea on death and life. This research allows children and adults to overcome affectiveness.

In order to optimise the scientific point of view, I have worked gathering different methods : the existential research-training, the play and artistic expression, the target free exchange.

The laboratory CRISE.

Marie-Ange Abras is part of the laboratory in the research Center on Social Imagination and Education of the University Paris VIII¹. For the last three years, in the framework of her diploma of elaborate studies (D.E.A.), she has put together a team to work over death, having

¹ Le Centre de recherche sur l'imaginaire social et l'éducation (CRISE) est dirigé par le Professeur René Barbier et Florence Giust-Desprairies.

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rehumanisation as an aim. Death being thorough fully part of life, any person who would be educated to it would respect more the environment, others and himself, which corresponds to the concept of "Thanatoéducologie". The team of work in Thanatoéducologie (E.T.T.) has for an aim to come about with existential research-training and publishing works restoring practice on the ground.

Evaluating needs.

I have noticed during my research that an important number of teachers (notably in primary schools) do not know how to tackle death with children. Following my research, I was able to see that speaking of prevention with children inevitably brings out this subject. Here is an example : in a primary class in the region of Paris, I collaborated with a teacher who was working on road and domestic prevention. During his activities, the subject of death was regularly brought about by the children. After the evaluation of the needs facing pedagogical problematic next to death in that class, I have realised that this teacher could not actually face the children's questions. For that matter discussion groups were organised with the children.

Aim.

The aim pursued during the sessions in existential research-training with the children of this primary school class (from 6 to 7 years of age) was the :

Differentiation between mourning and dying :

- film projection and discussion over the set of problems of mourning for a child ;
- sharing emotion ;
- drawing as a mean of existential expression.

Knowledge that death factual matter for others :

- learning through nature to differentiate life from death ;
- taking into consideration small animals in the classroom to let the children become responsible in life ;
- discussing on subjects close life and death (aids, alcohol, tobacco, war, domestical and road accidents, cancer...).

Knowledge that we are mortal human beings :

- using narration to wake the imaginary existence ;
- writing a story put together by some children to put into life what is then understood during discussions over life and death.

Concrete observations.

I shall limit myself to giving qualitative and quantitative results changes were noticed among the children in this primary school class. The results were were obtained from transverse observations. It is especially about phenomenological and participating observations. The teacher studied the children's behaviour starting from previous attitudes during the existential research-training sessions. He evaluated the changes during the existential research-training and as final means an exchange between the parents, himself and trainees about those comportemental changes. As for myself, I have introduced hypothesis on the results from empirical observations

by checking them. Some obvious matters have also been reformulated by other health² and education³ professionals.

Quantitative results.

4% of the children gave in a family secret (a hidden death) ;
25% of the children acquired new skills (for example : reading) ;
42% of the children improved in their mourning process (for example : the follow up of their parents divorce, the suicide of one parent, the death of a family member, war);
67% of the children changed their behaviour (for example : an expressed violence, increased attention) ;
88% of the children participated actively to the existential research-training (listening attention).

Qualitative results.

A scientific evolution. Sociological and psychoanalytic studies on the subject of death were done among children. Some education and health professionals have hypotheses, some actions were taken, but I never saw published results concerning the changes obtained through those interventions.

A prevention action for there were mourning children in the classroom. As for an example, one child who could express his violence and his anger for he was in the denial phase (mourning step) or another in the sorrow phase expressing his pain, which allowed us to act in prevention of mourning complication.

An existential action. The teacher noticed that the children were more cheerful and more lively since we had spoken of death with them. A boy was able to define and livelihood, even though before he couldn't.

A life process. A boy having just lost his grand father, understood that he would not be back and brought to school a book on mourning so we could read it.

A intellectual and cultural evolution. A girl come to tell me after a session of existential research-training : " If we have a body, we have a soul". I noticed that the notion of the unknown towards death was regularly tackled with by the children but that it was not heard by the teacher.

A widening of knowledge for the children, for they raised questions to the teacher. From their thinking on the subject and group exchanges they obtained existential response.

An educational follow up. The children were responsible in their thinking and respected in their questioning. A boy asked to the group : " Can we be buried alive while pretending to be dead?"

² Jusqu'à la mort accompagner la vie (JALMALV). Parler de la mort avec les enfants et les adolescents. *JALMALV, Dossier d'appui à l'usage des associations*, 31 mai 1997, Paris, 19 pages.

³ Conférence de Jeannine Deunff et Marie-Ange Abras. *Dis, maîtresse, c'est quoi la mort?* JALMALV, 20 avril 1999, Troyes, France.

The children answered individually and the boy seemed calmed down as he was asking other questions.

A means of expression. The children were able to express themselves on a forbidden and full of barriers subject. They were able to expressed her anger and her feeling of injustice relating to her mother who forbids her to go see her father since they have divorced.

An acceptance towards dying. A girl could not understand the death of a frog. Is is when she hands that she understood and accepted its death.

A means of improving school work. Some of the children reached a better concentration and listening. In this way a girl improved her diction and acquired easiness at conveying her ideas, a boy started to read dewing the sessions.

A social act. Let us mention a girl who stopped hitting her school mates after the sessions in existential research-training.

Conclusion.

These sessions were concluded by the realisation and carrying out of two booklets imagined by six year old children with my supervision. One illustrates a road accident and another the side effects of alcohol and tobacco. I lift other children read this leaflet addressed to children from 7 years old on. This experience happened to definitively be profitable on an educational point of view.

The matter of death is part of our preoccupations since it is linked to prevention modes, health promotion and school education. It is about answering to the children's questions towards death for them to become better prepared in order to face existential difficulties they could meet.

Before all it is about primary prevention. Since children need to learn, it is necessary that they obtain answers on the subject of death, and thanks to the idea they will get from it, they will be able carry out a mourning process.

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