



Stepping out of the comfort zone: Perceptions and attitudes of Saudi early childhood teachers to death education

Shatha A. Alfayez^{(1)*✉}, Sabha H. Allehyani^{(2)*}

Abstract

Objectives: Early education about death is essential to raise children's level of awareness and acceptance of death. The present study aimed to explore Early Childhood (EC) teachers' perceptions and attitudes to the integration of the concept of death and dying in early years educational settings. **Method:** This study is based on descriptive design and two scales; a modified death profile scale and teachers' perceptions of teaching children about the concept of death scale were distributed to female EC teachers (n = 617) who were selected randomly from EC schools in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. **Results:** The results revealed that there is a significant relationship between teachers' qualifications and their attitudes to death education. Although teachers had positive perceptions and adequate knowledge about death, they did not view death education as beneficial for children. Teachers believed the topic should first be addressed at home before being introduced in school. Most teachers were self-educated about the subject of death and dying. **Conclusion:** These results provide new direction toward supporting children to understand the concept of death, to increase their preparation and learning about real life experience, which promotes their wellbeing.

Keywords: attitudes, concept of death, children, teachers, professional training

(1) Assistant professor, King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. salfayez@ksu.edu.sa

(2) Professor, Umm Al-qura University, Mecca, Saudi Arabia. shrlehyani@uqu.edu.sa

* Department of Early Childhood Education, College of Education.

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الخروج من منطقة الراحة: وجهات نظر معلمات الطفولة المبكرة واتجاهاتهم نحو علم الموت

شذى عبد الله الفايز^{(1)*}، سبحة حاكم اللحاني^{(2)*}

ملخص

الأهداف: التثقيف المبكر حول الموت أمر ضروري لرفع مستوى وعي الأطفال وتقبلهم للموت. هدفت الدراسة الحالية إلى استكشاف مواقف معلمات مرحلة الطفولة المبكرة وتصوراتهم تجاه دمج مفهوم الموت والوفاة في تدريس الأطفال في السنوات المبكرة. **المنهج:** اعتمدت الدراسة على المنهج الوصفي، حيث طبق المقياس المعدل لملف تعريف الموت ومقياس إدراك المعلمات تجاه تعليم الأطفال حول مفهوم الموت على 617 معلمة في مدارس الطفولة المبكرة، اللاتي تم اختيارهن عشوائياً من مدارس رياض الأطفال في المملكة العربية السعودية. **النتائج:** أظهرت النتائج أن هناك علاقة ذات دلالة إحصائية بين مؤهلات المعلمات واتجاهاتهن نحو تعليم مفهوم الموت. وعلى الرغم من أن المعلمات لديهن إدراك إيجابي ومعرفة كافية عن الموت، إلا إنهن ينظرون إلى تعليم الموت على أنه مفيد للأطفال. تعتقد المعلمات أنه يجب تدريس الموضوع وشرحه للأطفال في المنزل قبل أن يتعلموا عنه في المدرسة. وأظهرت النتائج بأن معظم المعلمات تعلموا وتثقفوا ذاتياً حول موضوع الموت. **الخاتمة:** توفر هذه النتائج اتجاهًا جديدًا نحو دعم تعليم الأطفال مفهوم الموت، لزيادة استعدادهم للتعلم عن تجربة الحياة الحقيقية، مما يعزز رفاهيتهم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: اتجاهات، مفهوم الموت، الأطفال، المعلمات، التدريب المهني

(1) أستاذ مساعد، جامعة الملك سعود، الرياض، المملكة العربية السعودية. salfayez@ksu.edu.sa

(2) أستاذ، جامعة أم القرى، مكة المكرمة، المملكة العربية السعودية. shrlheyani@uqu.edu.sa

* قسم الطفولة المبكرة، كلية التربية.

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Introduction

Human death is a natural phenomenon that can be an overwhelming experience for people. Death, as a central part of the lifecycle of all creatures, causes bereavement and emotions like grief and sorrow (Krepia et al., 2017). Death is often considered a taboo subject because individuals are frightened and cannot understand what lies beyond it (King-McKenzie, 2011; Ramos-Pla et al., 2023). Adults, such as parents, caregivers, and educators, may be reluctant to speak about death and bereavement with children (Grigoropoulos, 2024; Schonfeld et al., 2024). Schonfeld et al. (2024) asserted that, to provide appropriate support for children after experiencing a loved one's death, it is necessary to determine the level of academic functioning that seems appropriate and achievable at a given time in the recovery process. As death is inevitable, it is omnipresent and continues to reshape individuals' experiences in the world (Varga et al., 2021).

Some societies believe that death has less impact on the lives of adults than younger children because adults are more mature and able to deal with the concepts and consequences of death. Individuals have different perceptions, awareness, and acceptance of 'the end', be that from religious, cultural, or scientific perspectives. Krepia et al. (2017) describe death as a multifaceted concept because it involves several variables, including intense emotions, social beliefs, inherited cultural values, biological and cognitive development, and individuals' previous experiences of death. Factors such as religious beliefs and age play a significant role in the way people approach the phenomenon of death (Menendez et al., 2020). Menendez et al. (2020) found that religion brings comfort in individuals' lives relate to the uncertainty about death. By the age of seven, children show well-developed understanding related to the concept of death and

dying (Menendez et al., 2020). From a cultural perspective, there are other complex factors that may interfere with people's perceptions of death. Although several studies have shown the impact of cultural backgrounds on individuals' understanding of death (Okechi, 2017), beliefs and attitudes about death and dying are subject to an individual's experiences, environment, and culture.

Paul (2019) suggested that it is perhaps best for educational institutions to understand the human ambivalence about death. Several scholars perceive death as a sensitive subject in social studies, and therefore, educators need to be aware of situations or opportunities that can be employed to spark students' thinking about death (Varga et al., 2021). Moreover, speaking, sharing, and thinking out loud about death-related topics with students reinforce important life skills that foster students' emotional and intellectual development and contribute to an understanding of themselves and others (Bradley, 2020; Helmsing & van Kessel, 2020). Accordingly, it is important to incorporate this topic into the school curriculum, as well as into teacher training programs.

In the light of our review of previous literature, it is very important to investigate Early Childhood (EC) teachers' perceptions and attitudes to teaching about death in schools as part of curricula. As discussed earlier, this general issue has not been overlooked in the existing literature, but the present study tackles the gap in the field about death education in schools. Stylianou and Zembylas (2021) recommend that future educational research should deal with the subject both from an educational perspective, in terms of teachers' professional development, and from the perspective of shedding more light on teachers' socioemotional experiences in relation to teaching about difficult issues like death, loss, and grief.

Death as a natural phenomenon is usually seen through a religious lens in Saudi Arabia. Individuals' attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions about death are shaped by their religious values and emotional strength (Kortes-Miller, 2018; Sharma et al., 2015). Death education is not part of Saudi schooling; there is no curriculum item about it. Besides, there is a general scarcity of literature in the Arab world regarding teaching about death to young schoolchildren, which means our investigation has real value. The ambivalence surrounding death in the educational system, where it is a topic particularly avoided in teaching children, guided our current investigation. In response to this gap in knowledge, the present study proposes to explore the knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs of EC teachers in Saudi Arabia regarding teaching children about the concept of death, using a validated scale and a large sample. Our research questions aim to gain a deeper understanding of the integration of the concept of death and dying into early years educational settings, as a subject that needs to be discussed further in the EC field particularly. These questions are as follows:

- 1 - What are teachers' perceptions and attitudes about death education?
- 2 - How do teachers' educational qualification differences impact on their training about death?
- 3 - How do teachers' perceptions of death affect their attitudes to teaching children about death?

Literature Review

Death Education

There are many studies that discuss the definition of death education. Wass (2004) described it as a set of educational activities organized by specific institutions with the purpose of facilitating individuals' understanding of death and bereavement. Teaching the

concept of death to school students has been found to contribute to developing and raising their level of awareness about death (Levkovich & Elyoseph, 2021; Shah et al., 2020). The most widely used definition of death associates it educationally with providing learners with a diversity of (formal and informal) educational activities that incorporate various elements, including the meanings of death, processes of dying and bereavement, and attitudes toward death, as well as care services provided for people affected by death and loss (Stylianou & Zembylas, 2021).

The debate over whether or not children can truly understand or accept the concepts of death and grief at an early age is controversial. A contemporary study by Steinberg (2022) clarifies that as children grow older, they become more aware of the inevitability of death as a key phenomenon in the lifecycle of all creatures. However, based on Piaget's developmental theories, the thinking of young children between three and six years old is dominated by "magical thinking". Many adults would consider it inappropriate to open a conversation around death with young children. This is because the subject of death is closely linked to the feelings of fear, anxiety, and avoidance, which often foster misunderstanding (Friesen et al., 2020) and lack of acceptance of the details of death. Stylianou and Zembylas (2021) assert that awareness of death will raise teachers' capabilities to deal with potentially "difficult" issues like death and dying, loss, and grief in sensitive, productive, and strategic educational practices. Empirical research by Puskás et al. (2023) showed that preschool teachers consider it important to teach about death in EC education because it is an essential part of life in everyday reality, and that they believe their task is to comfort children experiencing grief and provide them with proper care. Nevertheless, they often avoid teaching children about death from a biological point of view, but

instead they use extemporaneous, child-responsive teaching aimed at calming and comforting them (Puskás et al., 2023).

Scholars have discussed external factors that interfere with a child's mental abilities in processing the reality of death, such as the environment in which they grew up, the opinions and attitudes of teachers and parents, and their religious and cultural background (Levkovich & Elyoseph, 2021; Shah et al., 2020; Steinberg, 2022). Several scholars found that there are four basic elements associated with the concept of death: irreversibility, universality, non-functionality, and causation (Akgül & Seydooğullari, 2023; Bond et al., 2024). The first critical step in the mourning process is the individual's understanding and acceptance of death as a permanent loss. The second step is that adults should help themselves first and then help children to understand the physical cause of death in a nutshell, using simple, developmentally appropriate language. Sherner (2015) stated that children are incapable of comprehending sudden unexpected loss in traumatic situations. Thus, the integration of the concept of death into school curricula is still hindered by being an unpleasant topic colored by sadness and grief, and because there is fear and anxiety among teachers that, sooner or later, they will have to talk to children about death.

Several theoretical approaches touch on the notion of death for children. From the perspective of Piaget (1929), who puts forward a cognitive-development-focused biological model, children recognize death in association with their understanding of biology. Although Piaget's theory of cognitive development offers a useful framework for exploring children's perception of death, it is vital that teachers be aware of children's actual levels of cognitive and emotional understanding and not make assumptions based on Piaget's

theoretical model, which can underestimate children's understanding of this critical concept. More recent empirical research has clarified how children recognize death within their broader perception of biology (Joy et al., 2024). Irreversibility means children recognizing that death is not something that can be resolved or fixed, which they often believe (Bond et al., 2024; Joy et al., 2024). Younger children present lower knowledge of death's conceptual subcomponents of inevitability and irreversibility but record higher scores for depression and anxiety (Bond et al., 2024). Finality refers to the fact that death is an irreversible, permanent condition. As children start to mature, the concept of time and permanence develop further, and finality becomes meaningful to them (Bond et al., 2024).

Most children in their EC period have not yet experienced the lifecycle long enough to understand that death is a natural, inevitable process for all living things (Akdağ, 2024; Willis, 2002). The concept of causal relationships between creatures and nature that cause death is difficult for young children to comprehend, that is, that some things just happen spontaneously because of natural factors over which they have no control or power to resist (Akdağ, 2024; Willis, 2002). Children construct their own theories, interpretations, and knowledge about death over time during their own life experiences, which play a vital role in this cognitive construction (Galende, 2015). Accordingly, exploring the concept of death in EC education needs to take into consideration the appropriateness of its presentation to children, based on their cognitive abilities as well as their willingness to learn about this sensitive issue, before incorporating it into curricula.

EC Teachers' Perceptions and Attitudes to Death Education

Death and grief are always difficult processes, whether for children or adults. Teachers' personal experiences of loss may make it difficult for them to discuss this topic with children. Despite the curiosity of young children, some adults are uncertain about the appropriateness of discussing death with their children (Fernández-Alcántara, 2021; Flahault et al., 2018). There are three principles in teaching children about the concept of death: (a) helping children feel safe while acknowledging the reality of death; (b) creating an environment that makes it easier for children to talk about their feelings; and (c) creating appropriate learning opportunities aimed at educating children about the nature of death (Kartselou, 2024).

Previous studies have emphasized the effective role of EC educators in alleviating critical life situations that their students may face, such as death (Grigoropoulos, 2024). Children need adults to understand the stage of grief they are going through according to their abilities and age. In addition, having an adult at school who empathizes with their feelings may support them in forming healthy and positive thoughts and attitudes (Galende, 2015). However, teachers avoid bringing up the issue of death in discussion, and it is considered a challenging task because children may ask sensitive questions that teachers do not know how to answer or deal with (Galende, 2015). Despite these challenges, death education is important in schools (Engarhos, 2013). A recent study by Puskás et al. (2023) reported on preschool teachers disclosing their belief that a soul or spirit endures away from physical existence. They repeatedly and collectively stated that they cannot know what occurs after death. Accordingly, in the school environment, providing a constant and caring atmosphere by re-establishing routine in proportion to the

event can offer productive opportunities for teachers to easily discuss with children what has happened.

Moreover, it is important to explore teachers' own feelings about loss and acceptance before they start teaching about death. There are several reasons used to justify educators' attitudes to speaking about death to children, which include private concerns, ignorance of the ability of children to understand the very complex issue of death, lack of knowledge about addressing death with students, and feelings of being unprepared for it in the classroom (Case et al., 2020; Grigoropoulos, 2024; Levkovich & Elyoseph, 2021). Furthermore, recent studies have shown that adults in Saudi Arabia prefer not to talk about death with children to protect them from sadness or due to inadequate skills, which can lead to children bottling up their emotions (Al Ghalayini, 2023). In line with this, the results of a recent study found that preschool teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and knowledge about death as an existential question were closely associated with how the concept is handled in EC education (Puskás et al., 2023). Al Ghalayini (2023) argued that there is an unmet demand in Saudi Arabia for children's picture books to facilitate beneficial conversations about childhood bereavement and loss in the Saudi cultural context. Hence, death education should be integrated into EC education curricula in schools by preparing teachers professionally and psychologically, with the help of specialists in children's mental health care.

There are many explanations for why teachers avoid discussing death with children (Galende, 2015). Firstly, they believe that death is a topic that does not concern children, so it is better not to talk about it to avoid creating unnecessary fears in children, particularly at this critical age. Secondly, they find the concept very difficult to address or deal with at school because of their own inner fears regarding death, so they prefer not to mention it (Galende, 2015). Finally, teachers

have a belief that although this issue worries children, it must be dealt with at home and according to the beliefs of each family (Galende, 2015). In supporting these perspectives, previous scholars have found that teachers generally feel uncomfortable bringing up the subject of death in their classrooms for several reasons: lack of confidence in how to handle such sensitive issues, fear of negative parental reactions, and lack of professional development about how to teach such a difficult subject (Stylianou & Zembylas, 2018a, 2018b). Thus, in these situations, educators may be psychologically unprepared and unequipped with the basic knowledge and proper resources to deal with death in schools.

Teachers' Professional Training in Death Education

Developing teachers' professional and personal skills regarding death is very much needed. Prior to introducing the topic of death to children, educators should be well prepared with courses or counselling on death education and be able to at least ease children's grief and provide appropriate responses to the fears and needs of children who experience death at home (Eshbaugh, 2013). Children are naturally inclined to choose someone they can trust and feel close with to talk about their traumatic moments of losing loved ones, and class teachers are often the best at supporting children through this critical situation (Sonbul & Çelik, 2023). However, teachers who have not had any training on how to support students in these situations do not feel like they are fit or comfortable enough to help children to overcome this issue (Stylianou & Zembylas, 2021).

Teacher training should offer opportunities for self-reflection and experimentation, to construct conceptual frameworks and produce effective ideas (Helmsing, 2014). The absence of death education in teacher training curricula for primary or continuing education leads

to insufficient expertise and knowledge in pedagogical approaches related to death, and a lack of appropriate resources to address this vital topic in schools (Ramos-Pla et al., 2023). All of this suggests the importance of including the subject of death education in teachers' training programs (Hilliker, 2013).

Stylianou and Zembylas (2021) found that teachers who had attended short seminars specific to education about death articulated the need for more training programs and constructive guidance on this subject, and also for focusing more on self-reflection than death education itself. A study by Rodríguez Herrero et al. (2022) found that although the topic of death is almost completely absent from teacher training and preparation, teachers do develop a positive attitude towards its inclusion in education, both in the curriculum and in their willingness to tackle bereavement situations that require active education and appropriate guidance for students who experience loss. Rodríguez Herrero et al. (2022) suggested that it is also necessary for teachers and educational counsellors, who are well trained in death education, to work together to design appropriate teaching strategies or cooperative planning programs to support students who experience bereavement.

Additionally, teachers' professional development in relation to death education has a significant impact on children's perceptions of death. There is a positive influence in creating a productive environment for teacher professional development to share their loss and grief challenges, and teaching outcomes and efforts in teaching about death in the classroom, but this depends on these teachers' willingness to take risks when dealing with such a sensitive topic (Stylianou & Zembylas, 2018a, 2018b). Puskás et al. (2023) found that preschool teachers lacked adequate training and knowledge

related to death. Moreover, teachers do believe that it is important to teach about death and have expressed their willingness to work with these issues in their daily practice (Puskás et al., 2023). At the same time, the topic under study is heavily influenced by their own experiences and beliefs (Puskás et al., 2023). In a similar context, Kulp et al. (2021) identified the need and desire of university students to study death and dying courses that facilitate their own reflections in this area from an academic perspective. If teachers are not prepared to teach about death prior to professional practice, it is essential to structure initial training programs for teachers to help them incorporate it into school practices (Ramos-Pla et al., 2023).

Nevertheless, Stylianou and Zembylas (2021) argue that the lack of empirical studies on death education means we cannot claim great certainty about the elements of teacher training that will contribute to supporting children and teachers to respond positively on this topic. All of the points discussed above confirm and support Galende's (2015) perspective that death education should be included in teacher training before starting work in schools, to avoid a repetition of what currently occurs, that is, avoidance of death as a subject because teachers cannot deal with it or are not eager to. Stylianou and Zembylas (2021) claim that there is no straight line for teachers to move smoothly from the zone of discomfort to one of comfort and achieve effective professional practice regarding death education. They acknowledge that pedagogical involvement in the study of issues of death, loss, and grief in the classroom involves a complex network of epistemological and affective issues that need to be recognized wisely and sensitively in a safe, positive, and professional environment.

Methodology

Study Design

The current study adopted a descriptive design.

Participants

The participants were female EC teachers ($n = 617$) from public early childhood schools in Riyadh who were selected randomly. The majority of participants had a bachelor's degree in ECE (71%), whereas few EC teachers indicated that they had a master's degree in ECE (11.8%).

Ethical Procedures

Prior to the data collection process, the researchers obtained ethical approval from the Ethical Research Department at King Saud University, in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The scales, research questions, and methodology were submitted to the committee in both Arabic (the mother tongue of the local community) and English to be ethically evaluated and examined by academics specializing in information technology and early childhood. In the next stage, the evaluations and recommendations of two experts on the Higher Committee for Scientific Research Ethics were considered in the final version of the scales. After obtaining final approval from the university Ethics Committee (Ref. No. KSU-HR-23-323), the researchers contacted Early Childhood Education (ECE) departments to obtain permission to distribute the scales to participants.

The scales were validated before the study with a pilot study. The translated Arabic scale was piloted before data collection process began for clarity and average time for completion. The respondents of ($n=150$) in the pilot testing were excluded from the study. The study scales were created by using Microsoft Forms and

were distributed to teachers via EC schools' official email and social networking sites such as WhatsApp.

The researchers ensured that participants understood the purposes of the study and that their private information would be confidential. The researchers ensured that all participants contributed to the purposes of the study, while maintaining the confidentiality of their personal information. The researchers also informed the participants that their participation was entirely voluntary.

Scales

Demographic Information

Demographic information was gathered using two sub-questions focusing on participants' demographic information (experience of death of a loved one, and have you received any specific training in death education? With yes or no answer, and the type of professional training with multiple choices consists of short courses, seminars, self-education, and others) as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Frequencies and Percentages of Variables Regarding EC Teachers' Demographic Information and Experience of Teaching Death

Variables	Frequency	%
<i>Qualification</i>		
Master's	73	11.8
Bachelor's	438	71.0
Higher Diploma	106	17.2
<i>Have you experienced any deaths of loved ones?</i>		
No	517	83.8
Yes	100	16.2
Total	617	100.0

Cont. Table 1

Frequencies and Percentages of Variables Regarding EC Teachers' Demographic Information and Experience of Teaching Death

Variables	Frequency	%
<i>Have you ever integrated the subject of death and dying into classroom teaching?</i>		
No	423	68.6
Yes	194	31.4
<i>Training types related to death and dying</i>		
Short courses	16	2.6
Seminars	104	16.9
Self-education	369	59.8
Other – please specify	128	20.7

As shown in Table 1, the majority of teachers 83.8% did not experience any deaths amongst their loved ones, with very few answering Yes 16.2%.

The majority of EC teachers 68.6% answered that they did not incorporate the subject of death and dying into classroom activities. Few teachers 31.4% indicated that they did. Most EC teachers 59.8% reported that they had self-education training experience relating to death and dying. Very few teachers 2.6% indicated that they had attended short courses on the subject of death and dying.

Death Attitude Profile-Revised Scale

The scale was prepared by Willis (2002) and translated to Arabic by a group of faculty members of the Ethics Committee at King Saud University in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The cultural adaptation of an instrument in Arabic countries was used and validated earlier in Jordanian context by Abu-Hasheesh et al. (2013). This study used the original scale, which consists of 32 items divided into five

subscales. The five subscales to determine respondents' feelings of (a) fear of death negative thoughts and feelings about death, (b) death avoidance, avoidance of thoughts of death as much as possible, (c) neutral acceptance death is neither welcomed nor feared, (d) approach acceptance death is viewed as a passageway to happy afterlife, and (e) escape acceptance death is viewed as an escape from a painful existence. The answers are based on a seven-point Likert scale.

However, the current study used the revised version of the scale used previously in early childhood context such as Grigoropoulos' study (2024), which consists of seventeen items that measure early childhood educators' perceptions toward death. The answers are based on a five-point Likert scale (agree to start - agree - neutral - disagree - disagree), and the grades are (5 - 4 - 3 - 2 -1). The scale was validated by measuring the Pearson correlations between items and the total score as shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Pearson Correlations of the Death Attitude Profile-Revised Scale

No.	Items	Correlation
1	The prospect of my own death arouses anxiety in me.	.835**
2	I avoid death thoughts at all costs.	.818**
3	I believe that I will be in heaven after I die.	.575**
4	Death should be viewed as a natural, undeniable, and unavoidable event.	.615**
5	Whenever the thought of death enters my mind, I try to push it away.	.834**
6	Death is deliverance from pain and suffering.	.747**
7	I believe that heaven will be a much better place than this world.	.521**
8	Death is a union with God and eternal bliss.	.540**
9	Death brings a promise of a new and glorious life.	.565**
10	I would neither fear death nor welcome it.	.697**

Cont. Table 2

Pearson Correlations of the Death Attitude Profile-Revised Scale

No.	Items	Correlation
11	I have an intense fear of death.	.780**
12	The subject of life after death troubles me greatly.	.783**
13	The fact that death will mean the end of everything as I know it frightens me.	.803**
14	I look forward to a reunion with my loved ones after I die.	.513**
15	I view death as a relief from earthly suffering.	.662**
16	Death is neither good nor bad.	.691**
17	The uncertainty of not knowing what happens after death worries me.	.811**

Note. N= 150

As Table 2 shows, correlations between all items for the Death Attitude Profile-Revised Scale ranged between .513** and .835**.

The reliability was measured by calculating Cronbach's alpha measure as .935.

Scale of Teachers' Perceptions of Teaching Children about the Concept of Death

The scale was adapted from the teachers' survey in an earlier study by McGovern and Barry (2000). It consists of seven items about EC teachers' perceptions of teaching children about the concept of death.

The scale was validated by measuring the Pearson correlations between items, and the total score was shown in Table 3. The correlations between all items for EC teachers' perceptions of teaching children about death range between .373** and .728**.

Table 3

Variable Correlations of Teachers' Perceptions of Teaching Children about Death

No.	Items	Correlation
1	Death should be explained to children before they encounter it.	.387**
2	The inclusion of death education in school would scare children.	.716**
3	Bringing children to funerals is a good idea.	.373**
4	Death is a scary subject for children.	.731**
5	Death education is best carried out in the home.	.521**
6	It is difficult to explain death to children.	.728**
7	As a teacher I don't feel comfortable talking about death.	.652**

Note. N= 150

The reliability was measured by calculating Cronbach's alpha for items about EC teachers' perceptions of teaching children about death as .870. Cronbach's alpha for the overall values of items was .929.

Statistical Analysis

Our analysis focuses on a research gap regarding the professional training and development of EC teachers in death education, and regarding their acceptance and their willingness to teach death and dying issues to children. Data were analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS version 26). The frequencies and percentages were used to analyze data. Means (M) and standard deviations (SD) for each construct and related items were assessed. The items were then ranked in descending order according to the following scale: less than 2.33 = low, 2.34 – 3.67 = medium, and 3.68 – 5.0 = high.

Results

Regarding the first research question: “What are teachers’ perceptions and attitudes about death education?”. The analysis in Table 4 shows that some teachers indicated that they were uncertain about what would happen after death, which causes them worry, and this item had a high mean value ($M = 3.94$; $SD = 1.33$). Few teachers believed that death is deliverance from pain and suffering, with a low mean value ($M = 3.56$; $SD = 1.49$).

Table 4

EC Teachers’ Perceptions and Attitudes to Death Education

No.	Item	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Rank	Level
7	I believe that heaven will be a much better place than this world.	4.51	0.80	1	Medium
14	I look forward to a reunion with my loved ones after I die.	4.49	0.77	2	Medium
4	Death should be viewed as a natural, undeniable, and unavoidable event.	4.37	0.98	3	High
8	Death is a union with God and eternal bliss.	4.36	0.98	4	High
9	Death brings a promise of a new and glorious life.	4.26	1.03	5	High
3	I believe that I will be in heaven after I die.	4.26	0.89	5	High
5	Whenever the thought of death enters my mind, I try to push it away.	3.97	1.33	7	High
1	The prospects of my own death arouse anxiety in me.	3.97	1.34	8	High
11	I have an intense fear of death.	3.97	1.33	8	High
2	I avoid death thoughts at all costs.	3.95	1.34	8	High
17	The uncertainty of not knowing what happens after death worries me.	3.94	1.33	11	High

Cont. Table 4*EC Teachers' Perceptions and Attitudes to Death Education*

No.	Item	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Rank	Level
12	The subject of life after death troubles me greatly.	3.88	1.39	12	High
13	The fact that death will mean the end of everything as I know it frightens me.	3.83	1.41	13	High
15	I view death as a relief from earthly suffering.	3.81	1.39	14	High
10	I would neither fear death nor welcome it.	3.73	1.44	15	High
16	Death is neither good nor bad.	3.72	1.44	16	High
6	Death is deliverance from pain and suffering.	3.56	1.49	17	Medium
Overall		4.03	0.89	–	High

Note. N= 617

The overall assessment of this variable was evaluated at a mean value of $M = 4.03$; $SD = 0.89$, which represents a high level of agreement in the study sample. For the research question “How do teachers’ perceptions of death affect their attitudes to death education?”, the means and standard deviations related to EC teachers’ perceptions of death affecting their attitudes toward death education were analyzed to show the rank of the means and their significance levels according to the class interval.

To answer the second research question “How do teachers’ educational qualification differences impact on their training about death?”, Table 5 shows that the cross-tabulation analysis was undertaken to examine the impact of educational qualification differences on training by asking EC teachers the question “Did you attend education on death and dying?”.

Table 5

The Impact of Qualifications on Training Related to Death Education: Cross Tabulation

Qualification		Short course	Seminars	Self-education	Other
Master's	Count	10	10	32	21
	% within Qualification	13.70%	13.70%	43.80%	28.80%
Bachelor's	Count	6	92	233	107
	% within Qualification	1.40%	21.00%	53.20%	24.40%
Higher Diploma	Count	0	2	104	0
	% within Qualification	0.00%	1.90%	98.10%	0.00%

Chi² = 118.432; df = 6; sig. = 0.001

The subsequent analyses of the data after applying the chi-square test (as shown in Table 5) confirmed that there are statistically significant links between educational qualifications and the types of training which EC teachers attended ($df=6$; $p=0.000$; $\chi^2=118.432$), which means that there is a relationship between EC teachers' educational qualifications and the type of training they have had about death and dying. This result confirmed that there is a positive influence of EC teachers' educational qualifications on their desire and willingness to further their professional development in death education.

Further analyses were conducted to answer the third research question: "How do teachers' perceptions of death affect their attitudes to teaching children about death?". Based on the data analysis in Table 5, most EC teachers who participated in this study revealed that

they had positive perceptions and attitudes that accepted death and dying as natural phenomena. In particular, the results showed that the majority of EC teachers believe that heaven will be a much better place than this world, and this belief recorded a high mean value ($M = 4.51$; $SD = 0.80$). As shown in Table 6, EC teachers' perceptions of death affect their attitudes to teaching about death in EC settings. Results indicated that EC teachers think that it is better to discuss death and dying with children in the home, where children can be well educated about it by their parents. This belief recorded a high mean value ($M = 4.37$; $SD = 0.92$).

Table 6

Teachers' Perceptions and Attitudes to Teaching Children about Death

No.	Item	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Rank	Level
5	Death education is best carried out in the home.	4.37	0.92	1	High
1	Death should be explained to children before they encounter it.	3.89	1.34	2	High
6	It is difficult to explain death to children.	3.88	1.31	3	High
4	Death is a scary subject for children.	3.82	1.35	4	High
3	Bringing children to funerals is a good idea.	3.80	1.41	5	High
2	The inclusion of death education in school would scare children.	3.66	1.47	6	Medium
7	As a teacher I do not feel comfortable talking about death.	3.65	1.45	7	Medium
Overall		3.87	0.79	–	High

Note. $N = 617$

Further analysis showed that teachers believe that death and dying should be introduced and explained to young children before they encounter it in their lives, and this belief had a high mean value ($M = 3.89$; $SD = 1.34$). Interestingly, teachers reported not feeling

comfortable talking about death with children, and this item scored a low mean value ($M = 3.65$; $SD = 1.45$). The overall assessment of this variable gave a mean value of $M = 3.87$ and $SD = 0.79$, suggesting a high level of agreement in the study sample.

Discussion

The present study is guided by three main research questions related to the teachers' perceptions and attitudes about death education, teachers' educational qualification differences, and its impact on their training about death, and how teachers' perceptions of death affect their attitudes to teaching children about death. The variety of teachers' attitudes such as acceptance, rejection, and denial is found very common amongst the different reactions toward death and dying. Arguably, accepting death can free individuals from anxiety and give them positive energy to live a healthy life. The present study aimed to closely investigate the beliefs and attitudes of Saudi EC teachers about death and dying, and to examine their perceptions of integrating this topic into ECE curricula.

This study embraces the introduction of the topic of death into school subjects so as to educate children at an early age about death before they confront it. The commentary study yields three main valuable and unique contributions related to the field of death education, which is rarely investigated anywhere in the world and has been ignored in Saudi Arabian ECE curricula. Our first significant finding and contribution regards the lack of formal training by the Ministry of Education about the area of death for EC teachers. Nevertheless, all the EC teachers who took part in this study acknowledged that they had experienced various types of informal training. Interestingly, most teachers stated that this training was self-education, which confirmed that Saudi EC teachers

had adequate knowledge related to death education. This finding contradicted the earlier result by Puskás et al. (2023), who found that preschool teachers lacked adequate training and knowledge about death education. This finding may indicate that religious factors have guided Saudis towards believing and accepting death as a natural and unavoidable part of the human lifecycle.

The second noteworthy contribution is EC teachers' perceptions of the role of the home as a rich primary source of knowledge for young children to learn about death. This places responsibilities on parents and caregivers to equip children with appropriate death-related knowledge that meets their developmental needs and ensures their wellbeing. This result supports previous findings by Galende (2015), who indicated that preschool teachers believe that although this issue worries children, it must be dealt with at home. This belief may explain why preschool teachers generally feel uncomfortable bringing up the subject of death and dying in their classrooms, due to lack of confidence with handling such sensitive issues, fear of negative parental reactions, and lack of professional development programs to prepare and equip teachers to teach such a sensitive subject (Stylianou & Zembylas, 2018a, 2018b).

The third contribution of this study is drawing attention to the strong positive association between ECE and its influence on teachers' understanding of the importance of early death education and the role of the home as co-partner in promoting young children's knowledge and willingness to accept death if it were to suddenly occur in their lives. Further results found that activities based on the topic of death and dying were rarely implemented by EC teachers because there is no specific curriculum relating to death education in Saudi Arabia. This aligns with previous findings by Stylianou and Zembylas (2021) and Ramos-Pla et al. (2023), who argue that

there is a lack of empirical studies on death education and studies on teacher training to integrate this subject into ECE curricula, including pedagogies and resources. This type of activity is considered early intervention support for grieving children through understanding loss as a natural phenomenon and accepting pain as a normal feeling.

Study Limitations

There are some limitations to the present study. The first limitation is that this study's reliance on self-reported data may introduce bias because participants might respond in what they see as a socially desirable manner, especially on sensitive topics like death education. The second limitation of the current study is that data collection relied purely on the scales as a primary data source. Thus, we recommend using mixed methods to further explore the relationships between the attitudes, beliefs, perceptions, and qualifications of EC teachers on the subject of death. Such research will lead to the enrichment of knowledge in this field. An additional limitation of the current investigation is that it did not explore the perspectives of other parties in the educational community such as school principals and counselling staff. These limitations suggest the importance of undertaking further research that will enrich the literature in this area of ECE. Given the absence of field studies on death education, there is an urgent need to include it in EC curricula in a manner appropriate to children's ages and cultural backgrounds.

Implications and Recommendations for Future Research

Based on our significant results, we advise all specialists in the ECE field to structure initial planning and implement training programs to help EC teachers to apply appropriate approaches to teaching children about death, hopefully easing the trauma in case of sudden loss of a relative. This advice draws more attention to and

acknowledges the value of the study by Ramos-Pla et al. (2023), where the topic of death was integrated into health education for primary schoolchildren, which promoted their health and wellbeing. Our findings revealed that few EC teachers had a positive stance regarding the incorporation of the concept of death into school curricula and that they need specific training on how to handle this subject effectively. Most teachers reported a lack of knowledge and training related to teaching young school children about the concept of death. Accordingly, policymakers should plan to equip teachers with adequate knowledge and accessible resources and training so that they can integrate the topic of death into teaching. Consequently, given the sensitivity of the topic, our study recommends that integrating death education into the Saudi curriculum would be beneficial for all educators, parents, and students, not only to overcome the grief of loss, but also to understand the nature of death as part of the human lifecycle. More research is needed to explore how non-religious factors (e.g., emotional and psychological readiness) affect teachers' willingness to engage in death education. The current study indicates a need for further field research aiming to support the psychological health of both children and teachers.

Conclusions

Our study has contributed new and unique findings to the literature on teaching the concept of death to young children in Saudi Arabia in the context of a lack of research tackling this sensitive subject. Regarding teachers' fear of death, the results showed that they did not have high levels of fear which made them avoid talking about death. More precisely, it was found that most EC teachers in this study reported feeling comfortable talking about death to children. EC teachers in this study claimed that they were lacking self-empowerment and not equipped to acquire deep knowledge

and understanding of death as a subject. Moreover, these teachers rarely integrated death education into their classroom practices. To conclude, providing appropriate answers to students' questions about death is a duty of teachers, so their educational responses need to be more efficient and natural to deal with this topic (Ramos-Pla et al., 2023). In addition, teachers' own responses and reflections about death education should reinforce their acceptance of integrating it into teaching pedagogies to present this vital concept to children, so they are able to face the traumatic experience of the sudden death of a loved one.

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Shatha A. Alfayez, is an Assistant professor at the Department of Early Childhood Education, King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. She received her Ph.D. degree in Teaching Early Childhood from The Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) in Melbourne, Australia, in 2013. Her research focuses on kindergarten program planning, creative play, children's rights, behavioural guidance, teachers' professional development, and equity in early childhood education. salfayez@ksu.edu.sa

Sabha H. Allehyani, is a Professor at Umm Al-Qura University, College of Education, Department of Early Childhood. She received her Ph.D. degree in Teaching Early Childhood from Newcastle University, Australia, in 2016. Her research focuses on bilingualism, cultural diversity, creativity, teachers' professional development, and equity in early childhood education. shrlehyani@uqu.edu.sa

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