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Conversations about Death that are Provoked by Literature

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Conversations about Death that are Provoked by Literature

Cover Page Footnote

I am grateful to Celia Genishi for the insights mentioned in the paper and permission to share them. I am also grateful to the students who pushed me to have these conversations.

Conversations About Death That Are Provoked by Literature

Cara E. Furman

In an article on nurturing caring relationships in the literacy classroom, Mary Amanda Stewart (2016) writes, “In my office I have a picture that reminds me the priority is the people we teach—not content, assessments, or compliance” (p. 22). She reminds teachers that as we teach content such as literacy, it is the meaning that students take from this content, the opportunities the skills afford, and the quality of the experience that matter most. In this paper, I take up one small element of what it means to nurture caring relationships in the classroom and to put the student’s humanity first: namely, having difficult and unplanned conversations about death.

Story and Sense-Making

It is something of a truism that stories help people make sense of and cope with life and therefore, are an important part of early childhood education (Dyson & Genishi, 1994; Engel, 1995; Meier, 2009). Stories help people to learn about others and support the development of empathy (Nussbaum, 1997), construct and reinforce identities (Bruner, 1986; Engel, 1995), determine how to act in difficult situations (Nussbaum, 1992), and work through emotional experiences, including trauma (Bettelheim, 1989; Koplrow, Dean, & Blachley, 2018; Paley, 2005). Therefore, picture books as a popular form of sharing stories with children are powerful teaching tools for social-emotional learning (Burke & Copenhaver, 2004; Handy, 2017; Husbye et al., 2019; Mankiw & Strasser, 2013).

Sometimes an adult chooses a particular book to introduce or address a difficult topic. Yet, in my experience as an elementary school teacher and teacher educator, difficult and meaningful conversations about death tend to be unplanned and sparked unintentionally. This paper investigates these unplanned conversations with an eye towards supporting teachers.

Phenomenological Inquiry

Phenomenology is a mode of human science research that accounts for the nuances and complexities of lived experience (van Manen, 2016). Unlike an ethnographic study that might collect extensive data to make claims about how a culture handles a particular issue, in phenomenological qualitative research, one focuses narrowly on the particular. The nuances and details of the particular then reveal truths. Truth is measured by assessing whether the data offers resonant insights into the human condition. Validity is determined insofar as the revelations support practice. In phenomenological research, one revisits what was done in the service of doing better in the future.

One mode of inquiry is to analyze anecdotes for themes (van Manen, 2016). In this paper, I turn to a series of anecdotes (which I refer to as events) that feature conversations on death that arose unexpectedly after reading a piece of literature. Events 1 and 3 are drawn from detailed journal accounts taken at the time; 2 and 4 are from memory; and 5 is scaffolded by notes in my plan book. Van Manen (2016) writes, “we are less concerned with the factual accuracy of an account than with the plausibility of an account—whether it is true to our living sense of it” (p. 65). As such, I have described each event in depth—trying to capture how it influenced my instruction. Names and identifying details have been changed.¹

1 I am grateful to the students throughout my career who have persisted in making these conversations part of the curriculum.

Monologues about Death in Response to Children's Literature

I begin with a failed conversation.

Event 1

As a new teacher, I was trying to read Faith Ringgold's *My Dream of Martin Luther King* (1995) with Tanisha, a six-year-old who seemed distracted until we came to the page that depicts King in a casket. When she saw it, Tanisha kept repeating, "that Martin Luther King—he dead." In response, I tried to draw her attention to what I saw as Ringgold's message: King's philosophy and good works—his life, not his death. Tanisha was not interested in that agenda. She started to dance around the room with the book, pointing and singing, "dead, dead, dead." Only after I wrote about the situation in my journal that night did I begin to hear a child with something important to say about King and became aware that I had missed it. I had missed something important about the book's meaning and, more importantly, about what was meaningful to Tanisha.

An educator who has written extensively on addressing trauma with young children, Elizabeth Dutro (2008), shares a moment from the student perspective. Dutro describes reading Karl Shapiro's poem, *Auto Wreck*, in high school soon after her younger brother had died:

I heard the word *ambulance*; I saw it on the page in front of me, the stark black print beginning to waver, along with the words that followed—*stretchers, mangled, hospital*. A slight tremble in my fingers spread quickly to a more general quaking. Just a few lines of verse and I was unable to hold my pencil, unable to focus on the page or my classmates' faces, each blurring into the other. At the poem's ninth line I bolted from the classroom, unsure how I had managed to will my trembling limbs to move, and only slightly aware of the pause in my teacher's reading. I ran, to some deserted locker-lined corridor, to escape the words that had too soon spoken my experience back to me. (p. 423)

Dutro then draws on trauma theory to encourage teachers to bear witness to children's traumas in the classroom. She characterizes witnessing as a multi-part process in which one makes space for student's testimony, and welcomes this testimony by first hearing and then offering testimony of one's own. In doing so, she considers how she might "re-vision [her own] classroom as a space of testimony and witness" in order to honor and care for the students (p. 424).

A conversation demands a back and forth between two people around a shared subject (Furman, 2019a). Dutro's call for witnessing in response to testimony can be characterized as conversation. Within this frame, my moment with Tanisha was a failure to engage in conversation.

Difficult Conversations About Death

In contrast, I offer the following events as examples of conversations—rather than monologues.

Event 2

My high school was the kind of place where had I been escaping to the hall to cry, I'd likely be asked for a hall pass. A place where, to return to the opening quote, "content, assessments, or compliance" generally took precedent over humanity (Stewart, 2016, p. 22). From this sterile setting, I remember little. One period of English has travelled with me, though. We were reading Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*. We were typically asked to respond to books by filling out summaries or answering multiple-choice questions, largely about

the plot but sometimes about literary conventions. I do not know what we typically spoke about in class. I also do not know who or what started the conversation that day but what I am sure of is that we suddenly veered away from Charles Dickens. People shared personal stories about death and cried. I didn't share but I had recently lost my grandfather and I remember feeling disoriented by the conversation (was this really happening in my impersonal school?) but also appreciative. After the conversation had gone on for some time, it came to a natural close. The teacher then turned the class over to the student teacher. From the open second-floor window, we could smell cigarette smoke. We had often seen our teacher smoking between classes. But I was both bemused and understanding when I smelled the smoke—recognizing that this conversation had moved her just as it had us.

Event 3

It was early September in my first- and second-grade classroom. I had read Patricia Polacco's (1988) *The Keeping Quilt* to launch a writing activity. Children had been asked to describe a family memento for homework and to use this memento to launch personal narratives in writer's workshop. The scene unfolds as excerpted from my teaching journal:

We talked about death for half an hour. I read them *The Keeping Quilt* to talk about family stories and ways of keeping track of stories. I showed them my ring and said it came from my grandfather when my grandmother died and it helps me remember her. I ask the kids if they have something from their family that is special and has a story. Sol has a blanket. Someone's mom has a ring that she got from her mother. Israel asks, "Why do people have to die? I hate death." I am stopped in my tracks. Decide that I will not ignore the comment and say, "Well it's a part of life. It's a sad thing but it's okay. We miss people but it's okay." Hands go up and I decide to see what the class wants to talk about.

Over the course of the next half hour, the children gave testimony and witnessed in response to Israel's comment. Stories of dead pets sat beside those about relatives. Humor was mixed in with tears.

The experience made me nervous. I wrote, "I worry all day. What have I done? What have I let happen?" I talk to the principal about whether I should send home a note to parents. I draft one but ultimately do not send it because, as I wrote, "They [my students] seem settled at the end of the day. Isa tells her mom [about our discussion] and tells her I have had a hard day."

I was left unsettled, concluding the entry:

The day weighs on me. I tell the story again and again [to friends and colleagues], making it humorous but Christopher's sobs and the sad faces weigh on me. I can't fix it. All I can do is distract. They are distractible though. Maybe that's life. All we can do is distract.

Flouting Conventions of Literacy Instruction

A phenomenological approach has the researcher analyze for themes that will improve practice going forward. To this end, I look at what happened (and didn't happen) in the events I've described to better understand how teachers might facilitate conversations about death.

I want to begin by framing the issue. I am an experienced and confident teacher and I find having these conversations incredibly hard. Dutro (2008) stresses that typically conversations about death are unplanned. Thus, the teacher is challenged both by the content and by the lack of preparation. Dutro describes a child's

repeated, and initially missed, attempt to discuss her experiences of loss in a book group. Dutro (2008) writes of crying as she later listened to the transcript of that discussion:

[M]y tears were for the stories that were eventually told and those left untold. I wept also for the long minutes that passed before Chrissie found her witnesses. Reading through the transcripts of that conversation, Chrissie's initial silencing is deafening. In the first half of our conversation she repeatedly tried to gain the floor and was repeatedly ignored. (p. 429)

Dutro is an experienced teacher who, because of her research, commitments, and personal experiences is especially alert to and prepared for conversations about death. Yet, even for her, the spontaneity and challenge of the topic led to difficulty responding.

John Dewey (2007) holds that we are shaped by our experiences. Over time, we habituate responses based on daily conduct. In analyzing these three events, I find that having the difficult conversation required going against three ingrained habits in contemporary literacy instruction: close reading, staying on task, and appropriate school talk.

Close Reading

Contemporary reading instruction emphasizes close reading, a task in which one focuses only on the text to locate meaning (Corson, 2019; Eppley, 2019). As characterized by Karen Eppley (2019), the Common Core Teaching Standards actually equate reading with close reading. Teachers are admonished to make sure interpretation stays within the “four corners of the text” (Coleman & Pimentel, 2012, p. 4; Eppley, 2019, p. 343). A Common Core Unit on the Gettysburg Address mandates that questions that might place the text historically are “misleading” and can “rob precious class time for students and teachers” (Coleman & Pimentel, 2012, p. 19; Eppley, 2019, p. 343). Personal responses, characterized as “opinions, appraisals, or interpretations,” are seen as distracting the student from the text (Coleman & Pimentel, 2012, p. 10; Eppley, 2019, p. 343).

An emphasis on staying within the confines of the text is neither unique to the Common Core nor new. Offering a more comprehensive approach, Louise Rosenblatt (1994) argues that reading is a transaction between the reader and the text. The text gives us certain directions about the nature of the transaction but background information, the reader's past experiences, values, and personality all influence the reading as well. Even within this more expansive view, much of the textual influence Rosenblatt describes comes from something akin to close reading.

I teach close reading and see it as an important avenue for listening to a text. My concern is not the practice but the overreliance on it. Each event I've described included a transaction that was not a close reading and in fact drew very loosely from textual cues.

My Dream of Martin Luther King is an optimistic story depicting a philosopher, leader, and symbol of racial integration. King's death is technically part of the book—he is shown in a casket and his death is covered in several pages of text. However, King's life and his message are the main themes of the book. *A Tale of Two Cities* is full of death but, in my read, the deaths are chiefly symbolic and don't always elicit a personal connection. *The Keeping Quilt* is a poetic description of a quilt that is passed from one generation to the next within a growing family. Amidst births and celebrations, death is mentioned on just one page. Yet each of these texts provoked a desire to talk about death.

Staying On Task

Conventional wisdom is that teachers should follow their lesson plans (Bentley & Souto-Manning, 2019). Time away from the teacher's pre-planned lesson is often billed as time wasted and a distraction from conveying the content of a lesson (Lemov, 2010). In extreme forms, staying on task means following a scripted lesson developed by someone else. In less rigid contexts, such as those in which I've taught, the norm is still to have a plan book in hand and follow it. Where adjustments occur, they tend to be small maneuvers, not total about-ships. As Dewey (1916/1944) writes, teachers typically have an end target in mind even if the route there shifts. As an experienced teacher, pre-determined plans (that sometimes account for the most minute details) are essential to the work I do. What I challenge is an over-reliance on plans that interferes with being responsive.

When Tanisha brought up King's death, my focus was on decoding and comprehension. I felt pressure to teach Tanisha to read and to stay on task. In Event 2, I believe the goal was to make sense of the plot and to analyze literary devices. We rarely went outside "the four corners" of the text. In fact this made *A Tale of Two Cities* extremely confusing because, without a background context on the French revolution, it was very hard to understand. Responding to emotional pulls of the text was definitely not part of the curriculum. Moving from the text to the personal was a dramatic and in my memory singular straying from my teacher's lesson.

With *The Keeping Quilt*, my class was supposed to focus on the passing down of the quilt to prepare to write about their own mementos. My plan to model an approach to writing and then send the children into writing workshop was interrupted by a whole morning devoted to the children's emotional needs—first with the conversation about death and then with giving them a collaborative free choice time for self-care.

Appropriate School Talk

Going off script goes beyond leaving the lesson plan behind. Teachers operate in a culture quick to label a broad range of topics, including trauma, as too much information (TMI) (Dutro, 2017). In fact, a narrow field of conversational topics are deemed appropriate school talk (Jones, 2012).

As an example of this kind of emotional gatekeeping, even the champion of affective reading, Rosenblatt (1994) limits appropriate affective responses. Responding to a quote by the poet Auden, she is quick to assure that Auden "does not necessarily condone irresponsible emotionalism in the reading of the poet's words" (p.45). The suggestion is that for Rosenblatt, and it seems she would hope for Auden too, emotion is welcome but only when it is handled responsibly. By responsibly, Rosenblatt seems to mean constrained, explaining, "I am especially concerned to dispel the notion that insistence on the reader's contributions produces 'sheer affectivism,' a preoccupation with emotion as opposed to thought, with the affective as opposed to the cognitive" (p. 44). One may emote in response to a poem but ought not to let the emotions overly preoccupy or interfere with reason. Habituated into this orientation, Stephanie Jones (2012) argues that students might be encouraged to theorize abstractly about feelings but not to grapple with emotions publicly.

Tanisha wanted to bring death into the conversation about Martin Luther King but I tried to refocus her to a more abstract discussion of his ideals. I can't speak to how my high school teacher felt about emotion in school except to say that aside from that class, I don't remember any personal sharing. When my class of first and second graders swerved to discuss death, my notes record that "I am stopped in my tracks. Decide

that I will not ignore the comment.” In choosing to “not ignore the comment,” a topic that is often silenced is heard in my classroom. That said, I did this with hesitation, initially responding to the children with a platitude that dismissed an emotional response: “Well it’s a part of life. It’s a sad thing but it’s okay. We miss people but it’s okay.”

My students pushed pass my insistence that it was “okay” and took off, discussing death with emotion and I, reluctantly, followed their lead. At the end of the day, I was exhausted with worry that I had not handled things correctly or had overstepped into unacceptable school talk.

Confirmation

Supporting difficult conversations about death is important for teachers seeking to care for young children (Dutro, 2008, 2017; Jones, 2012). What does it mean for a teacher to violate the norms? In each of these cases, the teacher was uncomfortable, and in my case, resistant to talking about death. Dutro (2008) describes her own slow uptake when a group of children wanted to talk about death after reading about an orphan. Other teachers have reported that even after taking courses about talking about death with children or accumulating resources because they want to have the conversations, they find themselves avoiding the topic (Husbye, Buchholz, Powell, & Zanden, 2019).

A variety of experiences supported my willingness to follow the children’s lead in Event 3, but I was influenced by the memory of my high school teacher stopping class to have the difficult conversation. I was also influenced by my realization that I had missed an opportunity to be in conversation with Tanisha. Even after facilitating the conversation in Event 3 in which there was both testimony and witness, I concluded that an appropriate response was something entirely different from what we had done, commenting that “all we can do is distract.”

Educational philosopher Nel Noddings (1986) speaks to the importance of confirmation in education: having one person notice and affirm important aspects of another. She writes:

As we work, talk, and debate together, we begin to perceive the ethical ideals that each of us strives toward. Then we are in a position to confirm—to help the other to actualize that best image. (p. 502)

Like witnessing, confirmation demands that we both listen and then respond to another person. Noddings argues that when we provide confirmation, we not only help people to have their experience acknowledged but to also grow into the “best image” of themselves.

In my remaining two events, I highlight confirmation and share ideas for helping other teachers prepare for the challenge of difficult conversations about death in response to children’s literature.

Event 4

I included the journal entry about the *The Keeping Quilt* in my dissertation. Arguing that storytelling provides a useful convention for talking about the complexity of teaching practice, I used the entry as an example of a teacher story. One of my thesis readers, Celia Genishi,² is an early childhood educator. She is a careful, attentive, reader—one who largely stayed within the bounds of my text. Yet, at the end of the defense, she commented on the power of the journal entry and said, “You may not be able to answer this yet, but I

2 My gratitude to Celia for her comments and permission to share this story.

wonder how you will use this entry in your work with future teachers.” As she predicted, I did not have an answer at the time but it is one of the only comments I recall from my defense. I take the comment as a suggestion that I must use this entry somehow with future teachers, and so I do.

After processing Genishi’s comments, my feelings about Event 3 shifted. I lost some of my anxiety about whether talking about death with my students was appropriate. I was bolstered by her suggestion that not only was it appropriate, but it is also something I should model for future teachers. Genishi gave me permission to talk about death in school.

All of which leads me to the most recent event.

Event 5

We were midway through the semester and my students, pre-service teachers, had just read a packet of stories dictated by toddlers to their teachers, who wrote them down. We were working on a close study of a story—first acting it out (inspired by Vivian Paley, 2005) and then describing the writing line by line (Furman, 2019b). My goal was to showcase how much can be learned about a piece of writing through close study of the text. The students began by identifying conventions such as the word “he repeats” and noting word choices such as “then.” My usually detailed notes then conclude abruptly with the word “dead.”

The rest of the class is seared in memory. One student, Jane, commented that the children’s stories seemed fixated on death. I dismissed the comment as off-task because it was not descriptive. I suggested that sometimes children write about violent experiences without any experience of violence (Roosevelt, 1998) and encouraged the class not to psychoanalyze. I tried to direct them back to descriptions of the writing. A few students followed my lead. Then Jane asked, “How do we address trauma in the classroom?” Her classmates followed her lead. I saw that this topic mattered to many of them and I gave in (albeit reluctantly). The remainder of the period was taken up with a circuitous and emotionally driven conversation about working with children who’ve experienced trauma, the student’s fears of mass shootings, and difficult conversations in general.

Again, I was uncomfortable, worrying that some students would be bored or annoyed with the fact that we had gone terribly off topic. Yet, as I scanned their faces and body language, I saw that everyone was riveted. I worried, just as I did with my first- and second-grade students, about not having good enough responses and that students would feel worse from our discussion.

Dutro (2008) argues that if students are to feel comfortable sharing their experiences with death, teachers must create invitations in the form of testimony in their curriculum. Testimony includes personal stories (such as telling about my grandmother’s ring in Event 3), published stories like *The Keeping Quilt*, and welcoming with witnessing the stories of students when they emerge. The effect is cyclical—the more stories there are, the more will come forth. Invited by the children’s stories they read, my pre-service teaching students gave testimony and I witnessed, and encouraged witnessing.

Since we teach the way we have learned, we must work with teachers as we hope they will work with students (Jones, 2012; Noddings, 1986). Dewey (1916/1948) argues that an educative experience is one in which we first do or undergo something and then reflect upon it. In keeping with this, Jones (2012) has students read about topics generally treated as inappropriate for school. In discussing these stories, Jones’ students both experience the value of reading these texts in class and prepare for how they will welcome more taboo topics when they are classroom teachers.

After the initial conversation in Event 5, I told my students how hard it was for me to stop class as I did and why I felt it was important. I then shared the journal entry featured in Event 3—connecting what we had done as a class to what I did with young children and again emphasizing how difficult this was for me. Finally, I offered readings that provided further resources on addressing death in schools. After this conversation, some students did independent reading on social-emotional learning, trauma, and school shootings. They learned both by undergoing an unexpected conversation about death and reflecting upon this conversation.

In stopping class with my pre-service teachers and spending extensive time on the topic, I also signaled that their students, not the content, were the priority in the classroom. In the course evaluation, a few noted the importance of that conversation, appreciating that I had stopped my lesson and, in their estimation, truly listened to what they wanted to talk about.

Changing Teaching Practice

Each event featured a spontaneous engagement with a piece of literature. The spontaneity is key, but I've also found that certain teaching practices make it more likely that such conversations will occur. In closing, I offer a few suggestions to support teachers and teacher educators to create an environment that welcomes unexpected conversations about death. Specifically, these *actionable responses* subvert the habits of close reading, staying on task, and delineating appropriate school talk.

- **Close Reading.** I welcome and invite many ways to respond to texts, including acting them out, drawing a picture of how the text makes one feel, creating a collage of a favorite character with a one-line description of what the character is doing, and conducting student-led open-ended discussions where I do not speak. Students frequently respond to the same text using a variety of prompts of their choice (see Owocki, 2001, pp. 126-127). I also devote time to students' spontaneous discussions throughout the semester. All these actions, when reflected upon, expand the kind of reading that counts in my classroom and encourages us to choose close reading as one of many approaches.
- **Staying on Task.** I write the plan on the board for every class and almost always change this plan mid-class. When I make changes, I often ask students to reflect on why a teacher would do this. Other times, I explain my reasoning. I sometimes stop activities mid-way when they aren't going as planned and explain the problems I see with continuing with the original plan. Sometimes I invite students to help me come up with an alternative plan.
- **Appropriate School Talk.** In classrooms where teachers give testimony—through their own stories and selected texts—students are more likely to feel their own stories are welcome (Dutro, 2019). I now begin the semester telling students about my own experience with cancer. I explain that this revelation is not typically something I share with people I don't know, but that I am telling them because I am sure that some people in our class are experiencing something difficult right now and I want all of us to hold space for the reality that people may be grappling with hardship and loss.

I am hard pressed to think of a class I've taught (with children or adults) where there was not at least one conversation about death. Now, however, after laying the groundwork described in this section, I find my students are better prepared to engage meaningfully with each other and I am better able to follow their lead when difficult topics emerge.

Will my pre-service teachers welcome conversations about death when they become teachers? I cannot say for sure, just as I cannot ensure that anything I teach will be picked up later. What I can say is that I now

treat spontaneous conversations about death as an official part of the curriculum, sitting alongside phonics, close reading, and letter formation. Although I do not know what day they will occur, I plan for the fact that they will occur and, when they do, I will stop, witness, and then have the class reflect upon what we have done and undergone together.

A final word for those who skeptically query whether this is really literacy instruction. These conversations about death have changed me and changed my understanding of literature. When I open any of the books I mentioned, I remember the conversations about death and know that the text is enriched for these associations. Years ago, I missed an important opportunity for a meaningful conversation with Tanisha. I hope that in sharing my story that other teachers will be better prepared when similar events arise in their own classrooms.

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About the Author



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