

Parents and children in death education – a Kashubian context

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This article discusses the role of parents in death education through exposure to death in the broader environment and in the context of Kashubian (a Baltic west-Slavic tribe) death rites. Home education seems to be significant, considering the critical situations embedded in every life. Understanding the reality of death is a lifelong process, thus, education about death should start early, avoiding didactic discourse and misleading concepts. The objective of this paper is to present children as competent forgers of meaning while participating in death rites, so gaining a better understanding of finality.

KEYWORDS: social studies, death education, Kashubian culture, wake, participation.

A recommended and well-known guide to explanation of loss of a loved one to children, states:

Youngsters' feelings and perspectives are too often overlooked – an understandable response in our still death-denying, death-defying culture [...] Most parents today are convinced that they should be honest in discussing the biological process of birth, but when it comes to life's end they may fall strangely silent [...]. When you avoid children's reactions, you magnify their fears and replace reality with fantasy and psychological defences. (Grollman, 1990, p. IX).

Maria Nagy (1948) states that the major factors affecting child concept of death are: child's age, cognitive ability and exposure to death in the environment. Children need to acquire each of four components to

understand the concept of death: irreversibility, non-functionality, universality and inevitability. Irreversibility is an understanding that once a living thing dies, it cannot become alive again. Non-functionality refers to the fact that when something is dead its biological function ends. Universality means that all living creatures must die (Speece and Brent, 1984). Another component, inevitability is an understanding that there is nothing one can do to avoid death (Candy-Gibbs, Sharp and Petrun, 1984–1985). All these factors and components are salient to child development and adjustment to death discourse. Nonetheless, there should be one more aspect worthy of study in death education, namely, the role of parental communication with children about death (Hunter and Smith, 2008). How parents (mothers in the research) convey the message about someone's death does not in general seem significantly to

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influence children's perspective of the death concept. However, taking communication as a broader concept – as a means for sharing reality, creating a friendly and open environment for children to reflect on their surroundings and participate in death rituals – parents may greatly influence development of the death concept as contributing to the enrichment of a child's experience, countering their imagination's denial of reality.

Utopia embedded in euphemisms and separation

Parents want and need to protect their children: keeping them in a world of fantasy and predictable routines. Learning tools are provided to deal with the changing world, but to face challenges "later". The concept of "later" often causes misconception of reality, forcing children to unlearn what they have been taught at home. The education children receive should be reliable, helpful and most of all, avoid misconceptions. There is no question about education itself: "Of the many ways of dealing with death, the most surely doomed to failure is the attempt to ignore it" (Grollman, 1990, p. 1). In the discourse on death education, both fantasy and ignorance may confuse children. Death, still often a taboo subject, is not discussed at home. Older family members are ignored and tend to remain silent when death is mentioned. Everyone seems to feel discomfort. The community, in the discourse of death, tends to employ avoidance, ignorance or euphemism, in order to escape from the worries and challenges which postmodern freedom serves us. We become preoccupied in a fantasy of a world that will remain immortal, a daydream of a regular, predictable world with no accidents.

In fact there is nothing more regular and predictable than the inevitability of death. Still the notion of a secure world drives parents to act or refrain from discussing it.

Firstly, a parent's approach could be the careful selection of vocabulary when discussing death with children. Euphemisms or infantile language, when talking about death, create a utopia. As for Thomas More – such a world is nothing but a dream: an overwhelming aspiration to clean the world – the society and the individuals embedded in the structure – from fear and feelings of insecurity. Society craves for "nor a poker-faced world" but a reliable, trusty and a secure world "[...] he called that blueprint «utopia», hinting simultaneously on two Greek words: eutopia, that is, «good society», and outopia, which meant «nowhere»" (Bauman, 2005, pp. 1, 2).

Honesty about death is needed, as well as, consideration for the child's feelings and intellect when discussing death. When someone dies he is dead. Death is death. It is not a game, long trip or a nap. Common euphemisms employed are: pass on, pass away, perish, expire, go away, depart, fall asleep or be lost. One anecdote gives an example of a misconception caused by such language: when a school nurse died, a teacher informed the class: "I'm sorry to tell you, but we lost Mrs. Thompson". A student replied: "Don't worry. We'll find her." (Grollman, 1990, p. 39). All the same, Bauman (2005, p. 2) claims that life without utopia is not worth living and a society without utopia is not liveable. Analysing the etymology of the word "cemetery" from Greek *koimeterion*, a similar notion might be detected. Cemetery is defined as "sleeping place, dormitory" (Online Etymology Dictionary). Moreover, Thanatos (death) in the Greek mythology is also believed to be the son of Nyx (night) and twin brother of Hypnos (sleep). There seems to be a vibrant need in the language corpora to attenuate the reality of death by referring to its liminality, where death is only a transition to the afterlife.

A second dimension to the parental approach, an "attempt to ignore it" (Grollman, 1990, p. 1), is the attitude of refraining

from explanation of anything and to separate children from the community. Research conducted about children's concept of death in Madagascar, where parents were asked how they explained what it meant to die and what happened with the body and spirit after death, showed that parents believed that children lacked wisdom, and in consequence, they were unable to understand their explanations. Additionally, children were considered not to be interested in the subject: "several adults remarked children are only interested in eating, playing and sleeping" (Astuti, 2014, p. 4). Another explanation given by parents interviewed was the need to protect children from the unwelcome intrusion of ancestors. Being disturbed by the idea of ancestors' spirits, children might have bad dreams, become ill or even die. Starting the process of death education from a simple but honest, truthful point, will sequentially build the scaffolding for the death concept. Death education begins when life begins, as an understanding it is a lifelong process. Obviously there are more ways to "ignore the reality of death", such as to deny the fact itself, trivialize the event or substitute it with something novel. Indisputably, the parental contribution from the very out-start is crucial but should not be overwhelming, dominating or misleading.

Observing and listening – first steps towards death education

What are the dimensions of death education? According to Jan Amos Comenius, the father of modern education from the XVII century – the best way to learn is to experience. Education is most effective when a person learns: "everything by direct observation, as everyone believes himself more than others, everything from an independent input as everyone follows his own will rather easier than someone else's, everything with his own might, his own attempts and experience [...]"

(Komeński, 1973, p. 30). However, death education, as a lifelong process, should correspond to several perspectives.

Age and cognitive abilities

Children learn through the senses: touch, taste, smell, hearing and sight. Learning is a lifelong, daily, ubiquitous process; while walking, children continue to observe nature, the changing seasons, people and different events. When a funeral advances towards the cemetery, educators cannot ignore it. When artefacts related to grief and mourning appear in the house, street or the neighbourhood (Grollman, 1990), they become a part of reflection.

Some cultural variations (Madagascar, Israel) demonstrate how reflexive listening itself influences understanding of death. Examples show how children, being involved with family life, consciously or unconsciously, more effectively master the concept of death. One child, Briko, being asked about how he acquired his knowledge about the end of life, claimed that he secretly listened to adults (parents and grandparents) talking about someone's death, ghosts and beliefs. Children by overhearing adult conversation, construct their own internal understanding using snippets of information. He claimed: "there was no teaching about death whatsoever" (Astuti, 2014, pp. 5–6). All the same, the process of building a representation of death and afterlife seem far more complex. Similarly, the study on Israeli kibbutz children, conducted by Mahon and her colleagues (Goldberg and Washington, 1999) indicated that children, exposed to regular family discussions about death, as fathers were involved in Army Reserves in Israel, could already master all the four subcomponents needed for an understanding of death at the age of six. Hunter's and Smith's (2008) research pointed to an average age of six years and three months. Other studies reported an age rather over nine

(i.e., Candy-Gibbs et al., 1984–1985; Childers and Wimmer, 1971). Age has relevance to the understanding of death, but it is not defining.

Another study about the influence of parental communication on children's understanding of death showed that older children were more likely to comprehend the sub-concepts of finality, universality and non-functionality. Nonetheless, age did not signify an association in children's understanding with the inevitability of death. Moreover, research into cognitive abilities, findings based on three of Piaget's tasks: conservation of liquid, multiple classification, and seriation, link children's ability for self-conservation to their understanding of death's inevitability. Significant relationships have also been shown between children's ability to seriate and their understanding of the three necessary sub-concepts: inevitability, universality and finality (Hunter and Smith, pp. 148, 154, 157).

Exposure to death in the environment

To a great extent, personal experience is a salient factor influencing the maturity of a child's conception of death. According to Reilly et al. (Reilly, Hasazi and Bond, 1983) death-experienced children were more likely to have an accurate sense of personal mortality (i.e., understand that they will not avoid their own death). If children had experienced the death of someone close or something (i.e., plant, insect or pet), they understood death better than classmates lacking such experience. Moreover, the research showed a relation between a child's experience of death in the extended family and their understanding of universality and finality. There is also "a significant relationship between experience of pet death and a child's understanding of universality" (Hunter and Smith, 2008, pp. 149, 157). Parents, therefore, should consider carefully whether isolating children from the death experience is constructive in terms of general growth. There is an indisputable

influence from the parental approach and attitudes towards the broadly understood concept of death education on children's understanding of death (sharing experience, involving children in death rituals): "parents who are reluctant to involve children in the death experience, based on their own confusion and fear or to protect children from emotional distress, may not be helping their child develop a full appreciation for life cycle adjustments" (Weber and Fournier, 1985, p. 48). In research studies, impact of violence, war, accidents shown in the media, television and computer games have not been mentioned. Thus, children exposed to such influences may differ significantly in their development of understanding for the subcomponents of death. To what extent children should be involved in death rituals depends on a few factors, such as developmental age (not fixed for a child), the nature of the death, emotional involvement and the child's will (Grollman, 1990).

Learning without teaching – being part of the community

Before resorting to theological explanations for a concept of afterlife or any alternatives parents may believe in, a first step has to be taken. Dead is dead. In the discourse of death education: "The most daunting reality is better than uncertainty" (Grollman, p. 39). The reality of loss, dealing with the reality of someone's death is also a process which occurs in several stages. Wedemeyer (1986), in the article "Transformation of family images to death", described the various ways of dealing with loss, based on the reflections of students interviewed (after experiencing the death of their closest). The first reaction might be called "winging towards heaven". Eschatological Hope for eternal life to pacify grief; as death, in this case, seems only to be transit to a better world. Another reaction is referred to as "pervasive surrounds", when

the relative was already marginalized from the family due to long-term illness and the family have taken care of them and hence fulfilled their duties and accepted the coming event of death. A third type of reaction to loss of loved ones is “empty places”, as there is a space the deceased leaves behind, their place in the family is left empty and their role not fulfilled; painful indeed but not unbearable. Then, the next stage which follows is “substitution”, when someone else is needed to compensate for the emotional and practical vacuum (grandma becoming a mother or a new partner appearing). A fifth way of dealing with loss would be the experience of a “half-person” identity, when somebody feels they have lost part of their selves with the loss of someone with whom they shared their life. The most dramatic view of death is in the “collapse or void” when a death destroys the status quo, causing emotional breakdown, chaos or unbearable family disorganization. A final approach to dealing with death is described by Wedemeyer (1986) as “death as a focusing feature”, when death actually joins and integrates the family, triggering stronger relations, love and support.

Death affects all individuals, it is unavoidable, biological and social. It is still often considered to be the most important event, understood as an announced incident that changes the entity and the world (Badiou, 2007, p. 9), integrating members of the family and the community as the person dying becomes an educator (Kubler-Ross, 1997), teaching patterns of behaviour through ritual. Death education is multifaceted, differing between cultures, a child’s developmental age and their relation to deceased. The concept of death undergoes a long process of maturation, from childhood to old age. Apparently, it is not the process of learning from the omniscient adult; parent, teacher or clergyman, but consequential treatment of a child as a member of the community, a human being, not too young to think about

the taboo words: die and death. The individual who learns with all their senses from the start of life, also learns about death. Death education or as Comenius (1973) named it, “The school of death” (p. XIII), should take place first at home, which “apart from its material and social meaning creates the cultural background for self-identity, experience and a sense of belonging.” (Ogryzko-Wiewiórkowska, 1994, p. 14). Death is a critical point in life to which everyone is vulnerable and is as equally defenceless as a child. Essayist, Emerson, after his son, Waldo’s death asserted: “Sorrow makes us all children again”, therefore, the process of education is never complete, no matter how mature the person is, he is still a susceptible learner. Rituals and community involvement may help individuals in the process of mourning, since ritual provides a way to manage a critical situation.

Making room for children to participate – the Kashubian context

Being a part of the community, also implies engagement with social events, even for its smallest member. According to Alison Clark et al. (Clark, Mcquail and Moss, 2003) founders of the Mosaic Approach, participation is defined as something more than just consultation, it is an input into everyday life and some rights in the decision-making process: such as, to question and initiate. Prior to participation, adults need to create a place for children’s involvement. Children during their development of death concept cannot be seen as passive objects, but as members, actively embedded in the social event, “they become social actors who are «beings not becomings»” (Qvortrup, Bardy, Srgitta and Wintersberger, 1994, p. 2).

There are cultures which involve children in death rituals, making a place for their simple and participatory actions. For instance, in Romania, children may be given some duties. There, after somebody died, a little

girl carried water (44 buckets) each morning, immediately before sunrise, to three different houses, for neighbours or old people who could not bring water for themselves (Ghinoiu, Văduva and Pleșca, 2001). Another vibrant example, particularly for the purpose of this article can be observed in Kashubian culture.

The Kashubs – Slavic autochthons, never had a country themselves, originally from northern Poland, they settled in Pomerania, between the two rivers – the Vistula and the Oder (Rekowski, 1997). The first reference to Kashubia appeared in 1238 in The Bull of Pope Gregory IX. The Pope entitled the Prince Bogusław, duce Cassubie. Afterwards in 1249–1253 The Prince, Barnin I, added the inscription, dux Cassuborum, in his seal. Today, about 570 000 people declare their identity as Kashubian (Dołowy, 2010). Kashubian villagers, in contrast to those living in towns, present a more vivid ethnic viability: distinctive for a relict ethnic group (Labuda, 1996) and still observe some rites, such as the wake (called also Empty Evening, *Pustô Noc*, Barren Night), when the body of the deceased is displayed for viewing by the local community which gathers to pray. This usually happens at the home of the deceased. “Prayer during the wake, called *pustô noc* is the climax – second, after the agony – a closing element of the rites of passage [...]. The nightlong eve is, most of all, the collective spiritual effort [...]” (Perszon, 1999, p. 210).

The tradition of the Kashubian wake has been described as: “guard of the deceased, once lasting up to three nights, today, the last night before the funeral” (in the sixties and seventies; Sychta, 1967, p. 209)¹. The night before the funeral was the opportunity to bid a final farewell to the deceased, both for the family and the community:

[...] most funerals were community events. Funeral rituals required that before the actual ceremony, friends and neighbours drop in to pay their respect to the family and the deceased. The body was placed in the coffin or casket, which was set in a place of honour in the living room. As family and kin gathered and neighbours came by, there was a continuous coming and going [...] (Noel, 2009, p. 95).

Pleck argued that “in the nineteenth century, the middle class adhered to strict mourning rituals, and funerals were the most important rituals” (Noel, 2009, p. 94). The order of ritual can be compared with the pedagogical model. Participants need to act in socially defined frames and the interaction patterns and interpretations need to be followed (Goffman, 2012). Ritual, understood also as a performance, allows people to act in a planned manner, enabling change, which is a kind of transformation: “[...] ritualization ensures law and order in the world [...] As the effect of ritualization, no subject in its individual or social aspect remains the same [...]. Rituals thus fulfil a negotiating function and play a role as carriers of social change” (Mendel, 2011, p. 156). The social change occurs in both dimensions: in the broader social structure of the community or considering roles in the family structure. The community plays a great role in the process of “passing on” and grief. “Substitution” (Wedemeyer, 1986) is possible among the bigger families and communities (Aries, 1989, p. 571) and furthermore, death rituals such as the Kashubian, *pustô noc*, through their structured communal character prevented or minimized despair and “collapse or void” (Wedemeyer, 1986).

Dying at home, following confession, surrounded by family and neighbours was always the practice for Kashubs as the fundamental element for *artes bene moriendi*. Moreover, the holistic view on the celebration of a good death was the *pustô noc* ritual. The final evening and night before

¹ In Romania the wake lasted three nights before the funeral (Perszon, 1999).

the funeral seems to be very important in the Kashubian understanding of celebration of death. The event, filled with prayers and singing, is led by a community member (leader), sometimes a family member. The atmosphere is serious, nonetheless, still informal, as *pustô noc* is celebrated at home (in the family atmosphere) without a priest or undertaker. During breaks, people eat, drink and talk. “For the older generation *pustô noc* is considered as one of the most important elements of a “proper” Catholic funeral. Together with the following church ceremonies it builds concluding phase of the funeral rite” (Perszon, 1999, p. 192).

The interior of the house is adjusted to the needs of the ritual. After death, all clocks are stopped until the funeral. The ethnic belief strongly corresponds to liminality. The deceased is suspended between two worlds – belonging nowhere, the community does not want them to stay in the world of the living, so they knock over all the stools to prevent the spirit from sitting on them. Further, inside the house, all the mirrors and today, TV sets are covered with a cloth. Kashubians believe that sight of the reflection of the deceased would lead to another person’s death (Perszon, 1999).

Pustô noc is a social event, which today, in terms of organization, is quite demanding. The tradition of the wake dates back to the 18th century. The day before the funeral, the coffin has to be brought to the house in mourning. It is placed in the biggest room and set on supports or stands. The casket is usually located at the centre, so that the viewers can stand at the feet of the deceased. A provisional altar, with the Virgin Mother or a crucifix, decorated with flowers and lighted candles is placed at the head of the coffin, where some space should be left, since Kashubs believe that the soul stands in this place during prayers and watches the community. No one should pass over the space to avoid disturbing the spirit. The coffin is

opened and the lid stands upright. The local community visits the house to pray collectively, special value is placed on the prayers which are sung. There are usually around 10–20 singers (in Poland – usually men, in Canada – men and women) using old hymnals and prayer books passed down from generation to generation. Around 20–30 hymns are sung during *pustô noc*. If *pustô noc* lasts all night, there is a meal around 2 a.m. often with alcoholic drink offered. Today, *pustô noc* is generally shorter – lasting until midnight. It is expected that people look at the deceased and talk about them. In the morning, the lid is closed and everyone having said goodbye, takes part in the funeral procession to the church (Perszon, 1999, p. 192–211). The tradition of a wake is also not unusual for other Polish communities (see Kupisiński, 2006, p. 145–167 about Radomskie district).

In Kashubian culture, children are allowed to take some part in the death ritual, for instance *pustô noc*, however, often after the rosary they are asked to leave the room and to go to sleep. “Children and adolescents, without hesitation or fear, are taken to the *pustô noc*” (Perszon, 1999, p. 203). Parents observe the children and if they are scared, the younger children should be encouraged to touch the deceased. Among Kashubs, it is recommended that children and timid adults “touch the hand of the deceased if frightened”, to tame their anxiety (Treder, 2004, p. 145). Fear of the deceased is unhealthy and therefore through touching the corpse, it can be released once and for all (Perszon, 1999). This action approves children as part of the community, competent to participate in the ritual as both passive spectators and active assistants. “Children are far more competent than usually given credit for and that they are easily able to contribute actively to everyday life, when encouraged and included in ways that are sensitive to their growing capacities” (Haynes, 2008, p. 15). Children, by participating in *pustô noc* have

the unquestionable opportunity to face the reality of death – see or even touch the deceased, observe the behaviour of adults, listen to their conversations and take an active part in prayer.

Nonetheless, medicalization and the disappearance of the wake ritual have limited opportunities for active participation in the process of bereavement. Young people, in particular, lack contact with the dying and the deceased (Ogryzko-Wiewórowska, 1994; Vovelle, 2008). Today also, fewer wakes are observed in Kashubia. The ritual, involving viewing of the body and singing at home, is disappearing. Nonetheless, strong reverence for dead community members is still demonstrated in artefacts and cemetery traditions such as All Saints Day. The concept of “The Holy Corners”, featured in some Kashubian homes (small altars for the family deceased), counteracts social exclusion of dead. Visual reminders, such as photos, paintings and short films made during *pustô noc* or funerals, prevent social death, but also offer solace to those in mourning. Moreover, stories and myths present in Kashubian culture keep the memory of dead community members strong and alive. Today, in the era of digital tools, images demand special attention, creating a lasting legacy. Everyone is equipped with a camera and camcorder which they can use to record ceremonies for the deceased. Not only is there active participation of the whole family in death rituals, but also the omnipresent visual imagery of the deceased, intended to educate both children and adults about death.

Research outcomes

In years 2010–2014, a qualitative study on Kashubian children’s experience of death was carried out. The presented research findings are part of a dissertation: “Place of death in postmodern life and the educational potential of Kashubian death rituals”. The

target group included adults (aged 58–86), who as children, took part in death rituals. The research covered Kashubs from Poland (Luzino, Pomieczyno, Stążki, Wejherowo) and Canada (Ontario: Wilno, Barry’s Bay) – the fifth generation of the first emigrants from 1858, who still speak Kasubian and declare Kashubian identity. Biographical method (focus and individual interviews) and visual ethnography were applied. The pictures collected, dating back to 1903 until the present, show children attending death rituals: usually surrounding the open coffin.

Respondents pointed to their active participation in the rosary, the wake, funeral and the funeral meal. Respondents recollected *pustô noc* as a community event in which everyone, including children had some responsibilities. One Canadian respondent remembered that *pustô noc* was a public event with plenty of people present [KaA]: “It was 1954, I was 11. We went to see grandma in the casket and there were so many people, we were just shoulder to shoulder”. One respondent [PoA] recalls: “I was nine when my grandfather died at home. He was lying in a separate room, four candles around the coffin. In the second room there were singers singing and praying. My grandmother insisted on me and my brother, who was eight that time, to keep on going to grandpa and sprinkle his corpse with the holy water.” The adult tried giving the task to children to tame their fear. The notion of water, similar to the Romanian example, reappears in other statements: “When I was nine my dad died, it was 1946. The rosary started at around 7–8 p.m. It was a hot June day. During *pustô noc*, every two hours, I had to carry the buckets to the well and put cold water under the coffin” [PoE].

Youngsters remember various elements of death rituals. Some point to the smell, atmosphere, relatives’ behaviour, decoration, artefacts and food: peppermints, cake. Very few mentioned being scared by the ritual:

Actually I don't even remember the casket or the body in particular, all that stays in my mind is the long table, the peppermints on the table, of course because I was six, and the singing. And it was dark, we (my younger sister and I) could not handle the singing, we found the singing very scary, like as someone mentioned: high-pitched [...]. [KaE]

Children, treated as members of the community, took part in the viewing and praying during *pustô noc* no matter what their relation to the deceased. One respondent, spending holidays in a Kashubian village, without his parents, regularly took part in rosaries during *pustô noc* at neighbours' houses. While on holiday, the respondent was treated as a regular member of the family. Taking part in *pustô noc* was a family affair, they arrived as one group and simultaneously prayed by the deceased (Perszon, 1999, p. 203–204):

I always spent holidays at uncle Joseph's farm. I remember I was seven then, one of uncle's neighbours died, we all went to view him and pray. We, kids had to take part in the rosary, not necessarily stay up late till the morning on *pustô noc*, but the first part – praying and the rosary. It was an obligation, I mean – we all knew we had to say goodbye to the deceased, no excuses, it had to be done this way. I remember a long table, covered with a white cloth, men sitting around and singing aloud from their black prayer books, terribly old and destroyed [PoF].

Respondents were also asked, if they encouraged their children and grandchildren to take part in death rituals now. Some mentioned the agony of the family member as one of the most important family events. When the time of the agony arrives, that is – as Kashubs say – “the last battle”, the whole family is called to take part in the celebration of the last path to eternity (Perszon, 1999, p. 133). Accepting children, no matter what the circumstances, as family members, means allowing them to participate

– passively or actively – in the final and emotional moments of life. Most of the respondents shared the idea that death education, understood as any form of participation in death rituals was beneficial: “Children should become domesticated with evanescence [...] that it is a normal reality, just how things go in the circle of life” [PoD; B]. One of the women (a grandmother) described *pustô noc* prepared for her dead mother, and pointed to her children's reactions:

I talked to my kids and asked what they could remember. Their grandmother died here and grandfather in the hospital. Their grandmother was weaker and weaker every day, we saw the death coming. Grandmother was fading away, we could participate in that, whereas when grandfather died in hospital, we could not imagine how it happened. It seemed abnormal [PoG].

Children very often just observed and listened. When they felt ready, they tried to imitate the adult gestures: “I was six on my mum's uncle's *pustô noc*, it was the mid 50's and it was in Wilno [Canada]. I saw people do that [touch the deceased/say goodbye] so sometimes I did the same because I saw the others do this [...]” [KaC]. Participation in *pustô noc* might also inspire or motivate children to ask question about death and the afterlife: “They had their own questions about what was happening and we explained [...]” [KaD].

All of the respondents claimed their children and grandchildren were encouraged to take part in death rituals. Some would reduce their participation to the funeral and a funeral meal only. One of the woman pointed to the fact that she would be too busy to prepare everything, take care of the viewers and singers, organize everything, therefore, she would prefer to concentrate on that, rather than babysitting. Another respondent mentioned individual aspects of child development: “Children should learn about life, including passing away. Although I, myself, remember being afraid [...] I still think

children should take part in the celebration, experience when someone is dying. Maybe if a child is sensitive, mentally weak [...] but if no one frightens them, there should be no problem" [PoB; C]. Children usually did not take part in the night-long singing of *pustô noc* and could not help with washing and dressing the deceased.

The respondents, even though admitting their participation in *pustô noc* was challenging, claimed it had built their first representation of death and most of all, saw how other people (adults) may react. Death seemed to be more real after they experienced the ritual. No one tried to claim the occasion was easy, but rather emphasized that it might assist with acceptance of the irreversibility of death [KaA; E; B].

Conclusions

Children's experience seems very powerful in terms of death education, if consequentially obtained through observation of nature, listening to adult discussion, playing, reading and participating in rituals. Indisputably, involving youngsters in the death rituals happening around them, has a great impact on the development of their conception of death. Seeing children as researchers and understanding research as: "a way of thinking about approaching life, of negotiating, of documenting" (Rinaldi, 2006, p. 192) means treating children as competent forgers of meaning. Their participation means more than observation, it reflects into their action, embedded into practice. As parents respecting the life long process of death education, it is salient not to confuse children with simplified misconceptions of death; considering not only their age, cognitive abilities, but also their sensitivity, relation with the deceased, past experience and mostly, their will to be involved or to avoid participation in death rituals. When facing loss, guided parental education is needed to prevent unreliable

sources or distortions of their imagination. Children sharing death rituals with adults see their parents and relatives as role models, thus the concept of "learning without teaching" is manifest. Artefacts and legacies can help with education, stimulate questions about dying and moreover sustain the grieving. A parent's task in the process of death education is to create a supportive environment, open to a child's philosophy but also with affection. It also requires noticing and having consideration for the life around us, in all its stages and finally assisting children while gathering their experience, without ever ignoring the subject of death.

In conclusion, Kushner (1993, p. 1) offered the following thoughts addressing all death educators:

At a time of great loss and sadness, children, like all of us, need consolation more than they need explanations. They need someone to hug them and hold their hand, not to confuse them with complicated medical explanations. They need validation, the reassurance that they have the right to cry and feel bad, that anyone in their situation would respond the same way. They need to be encouraged to talk, without revealing their soul in all its naked vulnerability. And more than anything else, they need to know that what you do with a tragedy is not explain it or justify it but survive it and draw from those around you the strength to want to go on living.

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