

A DESCRIPTION OF KINDERGARTEN THROUGH FOURTH  
GRADE STUDENTS' CONCEPTIONS OF DEATH

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## CHAPTER I

### PRESENTATION OF THE PROBLEM

#### Introduction

Countless times each week, if not each day, everyone encounters death. These encounters may be with the death of a loved one or a friend, but may be the death of a family pet or may be the death of a plant. Perhaps the encounter is nothing more than reading the obituaries in the local newspaper or hearing of death on the news on the radio or television or possible witnessing "deaths" in a Western or murder movie. Even with the many encounters with death, people are not prepared to talk about or deal with the inevitability of their own death.

#### Rationale for the Study

In many instances death is still regarded as a taboo subject. The fact that many adults refuse to consider their own death is evidenced by the large number of people who die each year without making a will. In many cases, no preparations for the funeral have been discussed and no provisions have been made for the remaining family members. The frequent use of euphemisms for death, for example, passed away, gone to sleep, expired, gone to Heaven, and crossed over, show the reluctance



to use the words dead or death even when referring to another's death. Vernon (44, p. 10) notes the taboo nature of death when he writes that death is in the "same conversational category as sex was a generation or so ago. It is not considered a proper subject for extensive discussion." Kubler-Ross (24, p. 44) very bluntly illustrates the forbidden nature of death when she states:

. . . we treat those who are terminally ill as if they had a social disease. We shut them up in special places called hospitals, whisper about them behind their backs and assign doctors and nurses the task of caring for them during their final hours. Furthermore, we deprive them in their last days of all the pleasures that once made their lives rich: children, friends, music, good food, home. Because we are embarrassed by death, we force our loved ones to die among strangers, wrapped in silence in antiseptic hospital rooms.

The fear of death may be a result of the taboo nature of death or, perhaps, it may be that the taboo arises as a result of the fear of death. In either situation, however, one fact remains and that is that death is feared by many. The fear of death may be caused in part by the lack of knowledge concerning death. It may be that much of the fear of death can be attributed to the fear of dying. Fulton (10) found that the fear of dying was greater than the fear of death. Several factors can be attributed to the cause of fear of dying. Some factors are fear of sudden death, fear of intense pain, and fear of separation. Mitchell (29, p. 100) claims that perhaps "the most persistent of fears associated with death is that of separation-- and the one which is most likely to be basic, independent of cultural, religious, or social background."

Since death is such a certainty, people should learn to cope with the fears of death. Vernon (44) claims that since adults are frequently unwilling to talk to other adults about death, that it is not surprising that adults tend to avoid talking to children about death. Because of this unwillingness of adults to talk to children about death, the children in the United States have very limited opportunities to learn about adult interpretations of death. This is unfortunate since as McDonald (27, p. 19) claims "learning about death is a task every child inevitably faces because death is an inescapable reality of life." Many adults try to shield children from information about death. They rationalize their actions by claiming that death is too difficult to understand or too painful for a young child to confront. McDonald (27) and Hair (15) both agree that children cannot be shielded from seeing death, nor should they be.

Vernon (44, p. 272) says that the child's "early conceptions of death will not correspond with any degree of accuracy to those of his adults." If this is true, then what are the children's conceptions of death? Sometime during the course of development, many people develop fear about death. It is quite possible that if children were taught about death, they could face death with less uncertainty in later years. Grollman (13, p. 3) claims that children and adults "differ more widely in their reactions to death than to any other human phenomenon." Grollman (13) further states that in attempting to help children see death as an inevitable human experience, parents may be able to diminish in the process their own bewilderment and distress.

Hair (15, p. 414) claims that even the most sensitive child can be helped to meet situations involving death without too great a strain. Again, teaching the child about death can be of much benefit. Hair (15) has given four reasons why it is important to make studies leading toward increased understanding of death and why death should be included in the school curriculum.

1. An understanding of the life cycle is not complete without an understanding of the characteristics, role, and necessity of death.
2. An understanding of the nature and the significance of death is important to conservation and to ecological and health concepts.
3. An understanding of the scientific facts is needed to eliminate or prevent debilitating superstitions and fears in situations involving death.
4. Understanding and appreciation of life and living are increased and sharpened by conscious contrasts and comparisons to death and dying.

Kubler-Ross (24) claims that during childhood, people should be educated to cope with dying. In order to be able to educate children to cope with death it is necessary to understand children's conceptions of death.

#### Statement of Problem and Purpose

The problem of this study was children's conceptions of death. The purpose was to describe the conceptions of death held by children in kindergarten through fourth grades (or approximately from ages five- through ten-years-old.) Description, in this study refers to the responses given by children to questions concerning the death of an elderly woman.

The questions were based on a short story that was told to the children. Three conservation tasks were also presented to each child to determine the child's level of cognitive development.

#### Definition of Terms

The term children, in this study shall refer to students in the "normal" classroom in the public schools. Only kindergarten through fourth grade students were used in the study.

Conservation is the conceptualization that the amount or quantity of matter stays the same regardless of any changes in shape or position (46).

#### Scope of the Study

It is hoped that the following questions may be answered by this study:

1. In what grade (at what age) do children realize that death is irrevocable?
2. In what grade (at what age) do children realize that death is the cessation of the functions of the corporeal life?
3. In what grade (at what age) do children realize that death is universal?
4. In what grade (at what age) do children have a concept of life after death?

Two versions of the story about the elderly woman who died were used. In one version the woman was a nice and likeable person. In the other version she was unkind person who yelled at children. The responses to the questions for the two versions

of the story will be compared to determine if the perception of the personality of the character that died has an effect on the conceptions of what happens at death.

The level of cognitive development attained and the conceptions of death held by the child will be compared to determine the relationship, if any, between the two variables. It was felt that perhaps it would be somewhat presumptuous to expect children to have an understanding of death if they have not reached a certain point in cognitive development. Koocher (21) showed (in a study concerned with concepts of death different than those in this study) that certain concepts of death are related to the child's level of cognitive development.

Responses will be compared to see if there is a difference in conceptions of males and females. Such a comparison could be used to determine if there was a difference in the rate of development of conceptions of death for boys and girls. Bolduc (6) in a study of the relationship between experience of death and development of the concept of death found no significant difference in concept of death for boys and girls between the ages of nine through fourteen.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

#### Introduction

Maria Nagy (30, p. 3) began her 1948 article in the following manner:

The last fifty years have seen various research endeavors carried on by workers in the field of child psychology. As a result, practically all phases of the child's life have been explored and commented upon. One is struck, however, by the slim, almost neglected, attention given to the child's conception of death. This is all the more surprising since it is in childhood that the adult's outlook concerning death begins to take on basic form.

Unfortunately, in the nearly thirty years since Nagy made the above statement, very little additional research has been concerned with children's conceptions of death.

The format of this chapter consists of a description of different authors' findings of children's conceptions of death at different age levels. It should be kept in mind that even though characteristics for each age group will be given, individual differences do exist and any given individual may be above or below the concept level of his age group. In addition to the literature dealing with children's conceptions of death, literature dealing with explaining death to children, funerals, and reactions to death is discussed.

### Birth to Four Years Old

Gesell and Ilg (12) claimed that children between the ages of one year and three years have very little or no concept of death. Jackson (18) agreed that a child two or three years old has little comprehension of the meaning of death. Furthermore, Jackson stated that a "child from birth to three or four can sense loss but cannot conceptualize death" (p. 59). Gesell and Ilg (12) and Ilg and Ames (17) maintained that four-year-olds have a concept of death that is very limited. Mitchell (29) said that before the age of four or five, immobility is almost synonymous with death. The child under four years of age has, at most, a very limited concept or understanding of death.

### Five to Ten Years Old

Starting at age five and to age nine, Gesell and Ilg (12) gave a year-by-year description of children's conceptions of death. Ilg and Ames (17) gave a yearly description for ages five through ten. The following is a summary of their descriptions.

Five-year-olds have developed more recognition of the finality of death and they recognize the immobility of the dead. The importance of the concept of the immobility of the dead is evidenced by children's play. If you are playing dead, then you must lie still. If you get up, then you are alive again. Mitchell (29, p. 56) claimed that in children's dramatic activities, immobility of the dead is so significant that if a child who has been 'killed' moves a limb or even an eyelid, "he

incurs the wrath of his fellows and on some occasions is 'killed' again, this time with a show of violence." Ilg and Ames (17) claimed that some children at the age of five and a half believe in the reversibility of death and that this notion that death is reversible is very strong at age six. In watching children play, this author has witnessed this concept of reversibility. Children playing cops and robbers, no more fall to the ground 'dead' than they are back on their feet 'killing' and 're-killing' each other many times. Also, at the age of six there is the beginning of an emotional response to the idea of death. The six-year-old worries that his mother may die and leave him but he does not believe that he himself will die.

The average seven-year-old has a reasonably clear notion of death. He is interested more in the causes of death and those things associated with death such as the coffin, funeral, hearse, and cemeteries. The average eight-year-old can, without too much emotion, accept the idea that everyone, including himself, will eventually die. Nine- and ten-year-olds are ready to deal realistically with death.

Childers and Wimmer (7) studied children from the age of three through the age of ten to determine if the attainment of the concepts of universality of death and irrevocability of death were independent of age. They found that the understanding of death as being irrevocable has not developed systematically through ten years of age. There was a wide variety of responses to the question concerning universality of death for the different ages. A marked change in the



responses occurred between the six- and seven-year-olds and the universality of death was almost unanimously upheld by nine- and ten-year-old children.

Schilder and Wechsler (41, p. 418) studied a group of children between five and fifteen years old including children who were hyperkinetic, epileptic, mentally defective, and children who had been classified as behavior problems. They gave a list of twenty-six findings and stated that the first major impression one gets when discussing the problem of death with young people is that "these children deal with death and its paraphernalia in an utter matter-of-fact and realistic way."

Jackson (18) took a different approach in his description of children's attitudes towards death. Jackson (18) stated that from the ages of four through seven, the interest in death will be from the biological aspects of death. From the ages of eight through twelve the meaning of death will acquire a social dimension, and the concern for the consequences of death on the lives of the living will be paramount. From thirteen years old through the years of adolescence, the main effort will be to seek for a psychological, spiritual, or religious meaning for death.

Nagy's (30) findings concerning the meaning of death to children from ages three to ten years can be categorized into three major developmental stages. In the first stage, from age three to five, children do not know death as such. Children usually do not recognize death as an irreversible fact and attribute life and consciousness to the dead. In the second stage, children between the ages of five and nine, personify

death. The third stage is for children of age nine or older. Children of this age group recognize that death is the cessation of corporeal life. When the child reaches the point where he understands death is a natural process operating within us, he is then able to recognize its universal nature. Yudkin (48) concurred with Nagy's findings.

Perhaps one of the most comprehensive investigations has been conducted by Sylvia Anthony (3) in pre-war (World War II) England. She studied children between three and thirteen years of age. The techniques used in the investigations included home records, that is parents' written accounts of their children's spontaneous interest in death, and for the children, a story-completion test and an intelligence test involving material pertaining to death. Anthony (3) was able to classify the responses to the word 'dead' into the following five categories:

- A. Apparent ignorance of the meaning of the word "dead"
- B. Interest in word or fact combined with limited or erroneous concept
- C. No evidence of non-comprehension of the meaning of "dead," but definition by reference to (a) associated phenomena not biologically or logically essential, or (b) humanity specifically
- D. Correct, essential but limited reference
- E. General, logical, or biological definition or description

Most of the children under age five fell in category B while most children of five years of age answered in category B or category C. The majority of six- through nine-year-olds gave a category C answer with some of the six-year-olds answering in categories A and B while some of the eight- and nine-year-olds answered in categories D and E. The ten- and eleven-year-olds had a fairly even distribution across categories C, D, and E.

Melear (28) said concepts expressed by children from age three to twelve years can be classified into four categories:

- A. Relative ignorance of the meaning of death.
- B. Death is a temporary state.
- C. Death is final, but the dead function biologically.
- D. Death is final with the cessation of all biological functioning.

Children between the ages of three and four were classified into category A. Children ranging in age from four to seven were placed in category B. Category C consisted of children from five to ten years old and these children seemed to realize that the dead cannot return to life but still believed the dead could see, hear, and feel. Children from four to twelve were found to fit into category D.

In summary, most children by age five have developed some concepts and understanding of death. Many children by age nine to eleven have developed a fairly accurate understanding of death.

### Related Topics

Parents and adults are often at a loss as to what to tell a child when someone he knows dies. Too often the child is not told anything or is told the wrong thing. Kastenbaum and Aisenberg (19, p. 15) claimed that

exposure to death can contribute, directly or indirectly, to emotional and behavioral disturbances in early childhood (and that) ambiguities in adult language and thought are apt to confuse the young child as he attempts to make sense out of death.

Zeligs (50, p. 14) suggested that a child should not be told that "death means going to sleep and never waking up. He must know that sleep and death are two separate things. Otherwise he may be afraid to go to asleep." Mitchell (29) also warned against explaining death as sleep. Grollman (13, p. 12) maintained that "one must be careful to explain the difference between sleep and death; otherwise, he runs the risk of causing a pathological dread of bedtime."

Grollman (13) also gave a list of other "explanations" that should not be given to children. He stated that parents should not explain death with fiction that they someday will have to reject as false. To tell a child a deceased person has gone on a long journey may cause the child to be afraid of being left alone. Also, the child's experience has always been that the person who has gone away has returned, so the child may expect the deceased to return. Grollman (13) and Kubler-Ross (25) agreed that if the child is told that God took the deceased away because He loves them, the child may develop

fear and resentment toward God. If the child has been taught that God loves everyone, he may fear that his loved ones or even himself will be taken by God. Grollman (13, p. 12) claimed that a child should not be told a person died because of sickness. People survive many sicknesses and the "comparison of sickness to death only prolongs and intensifies the fear of death."

Much controversy exists as to whether or not a child should attend funerals. Perhaps, the best answer is not a definite yes or no, but rather a maybe, depending on the child. Vernon (44, p. 297) cautioned that even though "ritual participation may reduce anxiety (in children) . . . ritual participation may also produce anxiety." Jackson (18) stated that while a child should not be forced to do things he finds threatening, he should be aided in participating to the limits of his ability. If the child is highly emotional or disturbed by the death, a trip to the funeral home before the funeral may be beneficial. Jackson (18) claimed that if "a child is old enough to go to church, he is old enough to go to a funeral" (p. 157). Hendin (16, p. 146) asserted that children who choose to not attend the funeral and to remain at home may still participate in various ways in the final rites and "may derive a great deal of comfort from ritual" and even if they do not fully understand may "be affected by the sense of peace and order and the feeling that the everyday routine goes on" (p. 146). Children are part of the family and are quite sensitive to being excluded from family discussions and activities. If the child is excluded from the rituals connected with death, he may feel he is

responsible for the death. Zeligs (50, p. 13) said that "sorrow as well as happiness must be shared." If children "are out of the picture, they feel rejected, alone, unwanted, and somehow responsible for what happened" (p.13). Children experience grief and bereavement just as adults and need an outlet for such emotions.

Reactions to death will, of course, vary from individual to individual. There are, however, reactions that commonly appear in many children. Grollman (13) listed many such reactions: denial, bodily distress, hostile reactions to the deceased, guilt, hostile reactions to others, replacement, assumption of mannerisms of deceased, idealization, anxiety, and panic. Kubler-Ross (25) proposed five stages that are commonly seen in response to impending death:

1. denial and isolation -- "No, not me."
2. anger -- "Why me?"
3. bargaining -- "If only I get better, I will do these things."
4. depression -- "It is me."
5. acceptance -- "OK, it is me."

Not all people will necessarily pass through the stages in this order and not all people will go through all five stages. For example, some people will never reach the fifth stage of acceptance.

In summary, children should be told about death, but parents should exercise wisdom in how they explain death. Children should not be excluded from family activities associated with death, but whether or not a child should attend

the funeral depends on the child. There are several common reactions to death and parents should be aware of these reactions and how to cope with them.

#### Grade as an Independent Variable

In this study, grade (or its close correlate age) is used as an independent variable. Grade can be considered to serve as a surrogate for several maturational forces. Grade provides a summary of the many influences formal education has upon the child -- teachers, classmates, curricula, textbooks, school activities, and the several cultural, social, and economic facets of school. However, grade can also contain varying influences from a specified number of years of nonschool experiences (8).

In addition, grade in school is indicative of a significant level of intellectual development. Easton and Dennis (8, p. 321) contended that "society represents the standardized intellectual-development scores of young individuals by their placement at various school-grade levels." Therefore, when referring to grade-level changes in conceptions, one is in part referring to the child's arrival at various levels of intellectual maturity. Grade, therefore, is an independent variable that represents some type of transformation of a number of underlying influences that accumulate from year to year and affect the child's development.

Peck (31) reported that the child's level of concept formation about death was positively correlated with chronological age, and to a somewhat lesser degree positively

correlated with mental age. She further reported that the child's level of concept attainment was not significantly positively correlated with such factors as the social class position of the child's family, or with life experiences denoting death, separation, and illness. Bauer (4, p. 557) claimed that the

development of fears is a correlate of more general cognitive development and of growing awareness of the meaning of death in a technologically sophisticated world. As a result, fears reported at varying ages seem to parallel developmental changes observed in children's attitude to death.



## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

#### Introduction

Since the purpose of this study was to describe the conceptions of death held by children in kindergarten through fourth grade, the results of the study are presented by giving the percentage of students at each grade level who realize the irrevocability of death, the universality of death, and the cessation of corporeal life at death. The responses to the questions were analyzed at a concept level, that is, the child gave the correct response and at the understanding level, that is, the child gave valid justification for the correct response. Also, a comparison of the responses for the two versions of the story was made to determine if the perception of the personality of the character that died had an effect on the understanding of what happens at death. The responses concerning death were compared for conserver versus nonconserver. In addition, comparison of responses by sex was made for each grade level.

#### Description of Subjects

The sample for this study consisted of 170 subjects who were elementary school students in Bartlesville, Oklahoma. Students in kindergarten through fourth grade were used as

subjects. The sample consisted of 40 students from kindergarten and from first grade and 30 students from second, third, and fourth grades. Of these 170 students, 74 were males and 96 were females. In order to guard against possible confounding effects that might occur if students from only one school were used, three schools, representing a difference in socio-economic status, were chosen. A letter was sent to the parents of these students and only those students who received parental permission were used as subjects. The only biographical data concerning the child that were recorded were the child's name, birthdate, and grade in school.

The study was conducted when the school year was three-fourths completed. Therefore, many of the children had already had birthdays and would be of the age typically associated with the next higher grade level. The students in kindergarten ranged in age from 5 years 4 months to 6 years 11 months. The students in the first grade ranged in age from 6 years 5 months to 7 years 9 months. The second grade students ranged in age from 7 years 3 months to 8 years 3 months. The age range of the the third graders was 8 years 6 months to 10 years 4 months. The fourth grade students ranged in age from 9 years 5 months to 10 years 10 months.

Bartlesville, Oklahoma is an industrial city with a population of about 32,500. Bartlesville enjoys a high standard of living with the average annual spendable income near \$14,000. Educational facilities in Bartlesville include fourteen elementary schools, two junior highs, two high schools, a

parochial elementary school, a vocational-technical school, and a church sponsored liberal arts college. Blacks make up approximately three percent of the enrollment of the public schools. About seventy-five percent of the high school graduates in the Bartlesville school system go on to college. The three elementary schools used in the study represent a cross section of the socio-economic status of Bartlesville. One school was in a lower to lower-middle class area with approximately twenty-five percent of the subjects in the study from minority groups. Another school was in a middle class area with approximately five percent of the subjects in the study from minority groups. The third school was in an upper middle class neighborhood.

#### Procedure

Individual interviews were conducted with each of the 170 subjects. The students were taken one at a time from their classrooms and escorted to the testing room. The students were first presented with three conservation tasks. The administering of the tasks was done by a secondary education major. The purpose of the tasks was to determine the child's level of cognitive development. The three tasks dealt with conservation of substance, conservation of continuous quantity, and conservation of discontinuous quantity. The tasks were taken from the Concept Assessment Kit -- Conservation by Goldschmid and Bentler. In the first task, the child was presented two equal balls of play doh. The child was asked to agree that the balls had the same amount of play doh. If the child did not agree, play doh

was taken from one and added to the other until the child was satisfied of their equality. One ball was then flattened to pancake shape. The child was then asked, "Now, is there as much play doh in this one (ball) as in that one (pancake), or does one have more?" The conservation tasks for continuous substance (water) and discontinuous substance (corn) were identical in procedure. The child was presented with two large glasses filled with an equal amount of water/corn. The child was asked to agree that the two glasses had the same amount of water/corn. Again, if the child did not agree, water/corn was taken from one glass and added to the other until the child was satisfied. The water/corn in one glass was then poured into five small glasses. The child was then asked, "Now, is there as much water/corn in this one as in all of these together, or does one side have more?"

After the child gave his answer to each conservation task, he was asked to tell why he gave that answer. Based on the responses to the conservation tasks the children were categorized as either conservers or nonconservers. A child was labeled a conserver if he correctly responded and justified his response to at least two of the three tasks. The conservation segment of the interview took about seven to eight minutes.

Following the presentation of the conservation tasks, the child was sent to another part of the testing room to continue the interview with this author. This portion of the interview, on the average, lasted about eight to ten minutes. A very short illustrated story was read to each child. The reading

of the story took between 1 and 1½ minutes. The illustrations for the story were selected from some of the illustrations in a children's book entitled Maxie written by Mildred Kantrowitz and illustrated by Emily McCully. In the story, an elderly woman, Mrs. Wilson, dies. In one version, Mrs. Wilson is a nice and likeable person. In the other version, Mrs. Wilson is an unkind and unlikeable person. Each version of the story was read to half of the students in each grade. The same illustrations were used for both versions of the story.

At the conclusion of reading the story, to help put the children at ease and establish rapport for asking questions about death, the children were asked if they had ever heard this story before. The children were then asked if they remembered the name of the woman in the story. If a child did not remember Mrs. Wilson's name, he was told her name and then asked to repeat it.

At first, general questions regarding the dead character were asked and then on the basis of the responses to these questions, more specific questions were asked. The general questions were of the following format:

1. Do you have any idea why Mrs. Wilson died?
2. Now that Mrs. Wilson is dead, what are some things she can do?
3. Now that Mrs. Wilson is dead, what do you think will happen to her?
4. Do you think that everybody will die someday?

The first general question was asked to emphasize to the

child that the character had died and to give the child the opportunity to react to this death. The second and third general questions were mainly used to determine the child's understanding that death is irrevocable and that bodily functions cease at death. The fourth general question was used to ascertain if the child has the concept of the universality of death.

#### Format of the Interview

Question 1A: "Do you have any idea why Mrs. Wilson died?"

- a. If the child responds because she was sick or had a disease or illness ask if the child has any idea why Mrs. Wilson was sick or had the disease or illness.

Proceed to Question 2A.

- b. If the child does not have an answer or has an answer other than one essentially the same as stated in part a, proceed to Question 2A.

Question 2A: "What are some things that Mrs. Wilson did in the story?"

- a. If the child is able to name at least one thing proceed to Question 2B.
- b. If the child is not able to name at least one thing, show the child the illustrations of the story and ask the child to tell what is happening. When the child is able to do this, proceed to Question 2B.

Question 2B: "Now that Mrs. Wilson is dead, what are some things she can do?"

- a. If the child names things Mrs. Wilson can do, proceed to Question 3A.
- b. If the child responds that Mrs. Wilson cannot do anything, ask the child to tell why. If the child's explanation is that because Mrs. Wilson is dead, then ask why dead people cannot do things. Proceed to Question 3A.
- c. If the child hesitates several seconds before answering or answers that he does not know, then add "or can she do anything?" See parts a and b.

Question 3A: "Now that Mrs. Wilson is dead, what do you think will happen to her?"

- a. If the child gives a response, ask for an explanation and proceed to Question 3B.
- b. If the child does not have an answer, proceed to Question 3B.

Question 3B: "Will Mrs. Wilson be able to come back to life?"

- a. If the child answers yes, proceed to Question 4A.
- b. If the child answers no, then ask for an explanation. If the explanation is because Mrs. Wilson is dead, then ask why dead people cannot come back to life. Proceed to Question 4A.

Question 4A: "Do you think that everybody will die someday?"

- a. If the child answers yes, then ask for an explanation.
- b. If the child answers no, then ask the child to name some people who will not die and some people who will die.

The purpose of Question 1 was to establish the fact that Mrs. Wilson was dead. The responses to this question for Version II were used to see if the cause of Mrs. Wilson's death was related to her personality or character. For example, Mrs. Wilson died because she always yelled at the children or because she never laughed.

The purpose of Question 2 was to ascertain that the child was aware of what happened in the story. This question also set the stage for asking the child to name things Mrs. Wilson can do after she is dead. The responses to Question 2 served to determine whether or not the child had the concept that at death there was a cessation of corporeal life.

The responses to Question 3 were used to determine whether or not the child had the concept of the irrevocability of death. Question 4 responses were analyzed to determine if the child had the concept of the universality of death.

Pilot studies were conducted in the grade schools of Marland and Ripley, Oklahoma. Results of these studies were used in formulating the final format for the questions to be used.

The reading difficulty levels for the two versions of the story and for Question 2B, 3B, and 4A were computed according to the Revised Spache Readability Formula for Primary Grades (1974). Both versions of the story had an estimated grade placement level of readability of second grade. The estimated grade placement for Question 2B was 2.8 grade level. Questions 3B and 4A both had estimated grade placements of 2.7 grade level. Since it is easier to understand the spoken language rather than the written, it was felt that the story and questions would be understood.



## The Story

Mrs. Wilson  
(Version I)

### Picture 1

Mrs. Wilson lives alone with her bird and her kitten. Mrs. Wilson's bird is named Perky and her kitten is named Fluffy. Perky likes to sit on Mrs. Wilson's shoulder. Fluffy likes to sit at Mrs. Wilson's feet.

### Picture 2

Each day Mrs. Wilson reads the newspaper. She likes to read the paper. Mrs. Wilson likes to read the funnies best and sometimes she laughs and laughs.

### Picture 3

Sometimes Mrs. Wilson sits and looks out the window. She lives across the street from a big school and she watches the children go to school. Mrs. Wilson always says "Hello." to all the children.

### Picture 4

One day Mrs. Wilson didn't feel well and had to stay in bed. The doctor came to see Mrs. Wilson. The doctor said that Mrs. Wilson would not get well again. The next day Mrs. Wilson died.

Mrs. Wilson  
(Version II)

Picture 1

Mrs. Wilson lives alone with her bird and her kitten. Mrs. Wilson's bird is named Perky and her kitten is named Fluffy. Sometimes Mrs. Wilson lets Fluffy chase Perky and Perky gets very scared.

Picture 2

Each day Mrs. Wilson reads the newspaper. Mrs. Wilson always reads all of the bad news. Sometimes she reads the funnies but she never laughs.

Picture 3

Sometimes Mrs. Wilson sits and looks out the window. She lives across the street from a big school and she watches the children go to school. Mrs. Wilson always yells at the children. She screams, "Be quiet." and "Stay out of my yard."

Picture 4

One day Mrs. Wilson didn't feel well and had to stay in bed. The doctor came to see Mrs. Wilson. The doctor said that Mrs. Wilson would not get well again. The next day Mrs. Wilson died.

### Content Analysis

All of the responses to the questions were recorded on a tape recorder and the direct answers to the questions were then written down for permanent record. This author conducted the interviews and analyzed the responses to the questions. A doctoral student in educational psychology with a master's degree in child development also analyzed the responses for concurrence on the analysis. Analysis was done by comparing the answers to the lists of acceptable responses for each of the concepts. Points of disagreement between the author and the second judge were resolved in discussion between the two.

Since the responses to the questions were analyzed at two levels, namely, having the concepts of death and understanding the concepts of death, two sets of criteria for analysis were needed. At the lower level, if the child gave the correct "yes" or "no" response to the question, regardless of the justification of the response, it was assumed that the child had that particular concept of death. In some instances the child gave an "incorrect" response but the justification of that response indicated that the child had an understanding of the concept and therefore was credited with having the concept, despite the "incorrect" response. For example, if the child answered affirmatively that Mrs. Wilson would come back to life but then indicated that she would be alive in Heaven, the child was assumed to have the concept of irrevocability. It was assumed that the child had the concept of universality of death

even if he answered that not all people would die if he indicated that only God and Jesus would not die.

At the higher level of analysis, that is, the understanding level, the child had to also give a valid justification for the correct response. In order for the justification to be termed valid, the justification had to be cognitively correct. For example, if a child answered that everyone will die someday and then justified his answer by saying that he studied it in Sunday school, the justification would not be termed valid, even though the justification was not "incorrect." Valid justification had to indicate that the child had some understanding of the concept. A list of acceptable answers was prepared in advance, however, not all acceptable answers were anticipated. The following is a listing of the most commonly given acceptable answers.

Acceptable responses for the question concerning irrevocability of death included: "No, Mrs. Wilson will not be able to come back because . . ."

- a. you have only one life
- b. she (Mrs. Wilson) is dead and death comes after life
- c. she is in Heaven
- d. she is buried or she is in her grave
- e. her heart has stopped functioning

Acceptable responses for the question concerning the cessation of functions of the corporeal life at death included: "Mrs. Wilson will not be able to do anything now because . . ."

- a. she cannot move

- b. she is buried or she is in her grave
- c. her heart has stopped functioning
- d. her brain has stopped functioning
- e. she has stopped breathing
- f. the body disintegrates

Responses that were accepted as correct for the question concerning universality included: "Everyone will die someday because . . ."

- a. people get sick
- b. people get old
- c. God planned it that way
- d. no one can live forever
- e. if people did not die, there would be too many people on the earth
- f. you have to die so you can go to Heaven

The response of "I don't know." was considered as an incorrect response for all three questions. If the child did not respond to the question, the question was repeated. If the child still did not respond, he was credited with an incorrect response. It should be noted that inferring no response or a response of "I don't know." as an incorrect response was a limitation of this study. However, it was felt that since introductory questions were asked that allowed the student to tell about the story he had just heard and develop rapport with the interviewer, that in almost all cases the "I don't know." response was a sincere response and not simply a refusal to answer the question.

## CHAPTER IV

### ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

#### Introduction

Presented in this chapter are the results and the statistical analyses of the hypotheses and questions which were of interest in this study. For the purpose of analysis, a distinction was made between knowing or having a concept and understanding the concept. If the child gave the correct response, it was assumed he had the concept. If the child gave the correct response and valid justification, it was assumed he had an understanding of death. The percentage of students in each grade that knew the concepts of death and the percentage that had an understanding of death will be given. A comparison of the responses for the two versions will be presented. Also, comparison by conserver versus nonconserver and by sex will be given. In addition, the responses for irrevocability will be compared to the responses for cessation to determine if there is a relationship between these two concepts. The percentage of students in each grade that expressed a concept of life after death will also be presented.

### Concepts of Death

As expected, a much larger percentage of students possessed the concepts of irrevocability of death, cessation of corporeal life at death, and universality of death, than the percentage of students that had an understanding of irrevocability, cessation, and universality. As can be seen from the data presented in Table I, more than half of the students in each grade, beginning with kindergarten, possessed each of the three concepts. With the exception of the students in kindergarten, at least two-thirds of all students in the study possessed each of the three concepts. The concept of universality of death was the most commonly possessed concept with 65% of the kindergarten students and 96.67% of the fourth grade students possessing the concept. The percentage of students that had the concept of irrevocability, the concept of cessation, and the concept of universality are presented in Table II, Table III, and Table IV, respectively.

The hypothesis that a child's response was independent of the version of the story he heard was tested using the chi square test for independence. Tests were conducted for each of the three concepts of interest at each grade level and for all grade levels combined. For all grade levels combined, the responses to the questions were independent of the version. Considering each grade level separately, the responses to the questions about irrevocability and cessation were independent of the version. With respect to the concept of universality,

TABLE I

A COMPARISON OF THE PERCENT OF STUDENTS THAT  
POSSESS THE CONCEPT AND THE PERCENT OF  
STUDENTS THAT UNDERSTAND THE CONCEPT

Grade	IRREVOCABILITY		CESSATION		UNIVERSALITY	
	Possess	Understand	Possess	Understand	Possess	Understand
K	55.00	17.50	57.50	15.00	65.00	35.00
1	82.50	22.50	80.00	32.50	82.50	37.50
2	80.00	30.00	70.00	20.00	86.67	66.67
3	86.67	40.00	66.67	36.67	86.67	60.00
4	86.67	40.00	73.33	43.33	96.67	73.33

TABLE II

PERCENT OF STUDENTS THAT HAVE THE CONCEPT OF  
IRREVOCABILITY OF DEATH

Grade	Version I	Version II	Total
K	50.00	60.00	55.00
1	85.00	80.00	82.50
2	86.67	73.33	80.00
3	80.00	93.33	86.67
4	86.67	86.67	86.67



TABLE III

PERCENT OF STUDENTS THAT HAVE THE CONCEPT OF  
CESSATION OF CORPOREAL LIFE AT DEATH

Grade	Version I	Version II	Total
K	50.00	65.00	57.50
1	85.00	75.00	80.00
2	73.33	66.67	70.00
3	73.33	60.00	66.67
4	80.00	66.67	73.33

TABLE IV

PERCENT OF STUDENTS THAT HAVE THE CONCEPT OF  
UNIVERSALITY OF DEATH

Grade	Version I	Version II	Total
K	55.00	75.00	65.00
1	80.00	85.00	82.50
2	86.67	86.67	86.67
3	73.00	100.00	86.67
4	100.00	93.33	96.67

only the responses of the third graders depended on the version.  
(It should be noted, however, that a change of response of only

one student would yield a nonsignificant chi square value.) The calculated values of the chi square statistics for each of the tests is presented in Table V. Based on these tests, it can be concluded that a child's concepts of irrevocability, cessation, and universality of death are independent of the personality of the character that died, that is, independent of the two versions.

TABLE V  
CHI SQUARE VALUES FOR TESTS OF INDEPENDENCE BETWEEN  
CONCEPTS OF DEATH AND VERSION OF STORY

Grade	Irrevocability	Cessation	Universality
K	.404	.921	1.758
1	.173	.625	.173
2	.833	.159	0
3	1.154	.600	4.615*
4	0	.682	1.034
ALL	.033	.443	2.590

\* significant at  $p < .05$ .

The responses for the two versions were combined and the hypothesis that whether or not a child had the concept was independent of his grade level was tested for each of the three concepts. The responses for the concept of irrevocability ( $X^2 = 14.91$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and the responses for the concept of

universality of death ( $X^2 = 13.27$ ,  $p = .01$ ) depended on the grade level. The responses for the concept of cessation of corporeal life at death were independent of grade level ( $X^2 = 5.11$ ). A possible explanation why the responses for cessation were independent of grade level is that fewer of the students had the concept of cessation. Of the kindergarten students, 57.5% had the concept while the largest percentage at any grade level was 80%. For both irrevocability and cessation a large increase in the percentage of students having the concepts occurred between kindergarten and the first grade.

#### Understanding of Death

Some of the students in each of the grades, of course, had an understanding of irrevocability, cessation, and universality. For each of these three concepts there was an increasing percentage of students by grade that had an understanding. However, irrevocability of death and cessation of corporeal life at death are not understood by even half of the fourth grade students. Only 40% of the fourth graders had an understanding of irrevocability and only 43.33% of the fourth graders had an understanding of cessation. Universality of death was easier to grasp, with nearly three-fourths of the fourth graders exhibiting an understanding that death is universal. The percentage of students that had an understanding of irrevocability, cessation, and universality are presented in Table VI, Table VII, and Table VIII, respectively.

TABLE VI

PERCENT OF STUDENTS THAT HAVE AN UNDERSTANDING OF  
IRREVOCABILITY OF DEATH

Grade	Version I	Version II	Total
K	20.00	15.00	17.50
1	25.00	20.00	22.50
2	33.33	26.67	30.00
3	33.33	46.67	40.00
4	26.67	53.33	40.00

TABLE VII

PERCENT OF STUDENTS THAT HAVE AN UNDERSTANDING OF  
CESSATION OF CORPOREAL LIFE AT DEATH

Grade	Version I	Version II	Total
K	5.00	25.00	15.00
1	30.00	35.00	32.50
2	20.00	20.00	20.00
3	46.67	26.67	36.67
4	40.00	46.67	43.33

TABLE VIII  
 PERCENT OF STUDENTS THAT HAVE AN UNDERSTANDING OF  
 UNIVERSALITY OF DEATH

Grade	Version I	Version II	Total
K	35.00	35.00	35.00
1	25.00	50.00	37.50
2	60.00	73.33	66.67
3	46.67	73.33	60.00
4	73.33	73.33	73.33

The same hypotheses as those tested at the concept level were also tested at the understanding level. Hypotheses that the understanding of irrevocability, cessation, and universality was independent of the version of the story heard were tested at each grade level and for all grade levels combined. Again the chi square test for independence was employed. Whether or not a child had an understanding of these concepts was independent of the version of the story for any grade level and for all grades combined. The calculated values of the chi square statistics for each of the tests are presented in Table IX. Based on these tests, it can be concluded that a child's understanding of irrevocability of death, cessation of corporeal life at death, and universality of death are independent of the version and therefore independent of the personality of the character that died.

TABLE IX  
CHI SQUARE VALUES FOR TEST OF INDEPENDENCE BETWEEN  
UNDERSTANDING OF DEATH AND VERSION OF STORY

Grade	Irrevocability	Cessation	Universality
K	.173	3.137	0
1	.143	.114	2.667
2	.159	0	.600
3	.556	1.292	2.222
4	2.222	.136	0
ALL	.258	.258	2.853

The responses for the two versions were combined and the hypothesis that whether or not a child had an understanding of death was independent of his grade level was tested for each of these three concepts. The responses for irrevocability ( $X^2 = 6.0$ ) and the responses for cessation ( $X^2 = 9.11$ ) were independent of the child's grade level. A possible explanation why the understanding of irrevocability and cessation did not depend on grade level is the small percent of students that had an understanding of these concepts even at the fourth grade level.

A significant relationship between understanding universality of death and grade level ( $X^2 = 15.52$ ,  $p < .01$ ) was found to exist. A sizable increase in the percent of students understanding universality occurred between the first and second grade. Less than 40% of the students in kindergarten and the

first grade had an understanding of universality, while 60% or more of the students in the second, third, or fourth grades had an understanding of universality of death.

### Conservers' Versus Nonconservers'

#### Understanding of Death

Table X gives the percentage of students in each grade that were found to be conservers as defined in this study. Wadsworth (46) in his book about Piaget's theory of cognitive development states that structures permitting conservation of substance were typically acquired around the ages of seven to eight. The majority of students in the second grade, or age range of seven to eight years of age, were conservers.

The responses to the questions about death were compared for conserver versus nonconserver to see if the understanding of death was related to the level of cognitive development. The chi square test for independence was used to test the hypothesis that whether or not a child has an understanding of death is independent of his level of cognitive development. Separate tests for each of the three concepts of interest were conducted. It was found that the understanding of irrevocability ( $X^2 = 2.64$ ) and of cessation ( $X^2 = 1.61$ ) were independent of the level of cognitive development. However, whether or not a child had an understanding of the universality of death depended on the child's level of cognitive development ( $X^2 = 8.62$ ,  $p < .005$ ). Table XI gives the percentage of conservers and nonconservers that did or did not have an understanding of irrevocability, cessation, and universality.

TABLE X  
PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS THAT WERE CONSERVERS OR NONCONSERVERS

Grade	CONSERVER		NONCONSERVER	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
K	3	7.50	37	92.50
1	18	45.00	22	55.00
2	19	66.67	11	33.33
3	18	81.82	4	18.18
4	23	85.19	4	4.81

TABLE XI  
PERCENT CONSERVERS AND NONCONSERVERS UNDERSTANDING  
IRREVOCABILITY, CESSATION, AND UNIVERSALITY

	IRREVOCABILITY		CESSATION		UNIVERSALITY	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Conserver	33.33	66.67	32.10	67.90	61.73	38.27
Nonconserver	21.79	78.21	23.08	76.92	38.46	61.54

#### Males' Versus Females'

#### Understanding of Death

Table XII contains the percent of males and females in each grade that had an understanding of irrevocability, cessation, and universality. Since only students who received parental



permission were used in the study, there was no control over the number of males and females in the study. The number of male and female subjects in each grade was, therefore, quite disproportionate. In the kindergarten there 17 boys and 23 girls; in the first grade there 24 boys and 16 girls; in the second grade there were 12 boys and 18 girls; in the third grade there were 10 boys and 20 girls; and in the fourth grade there were 11 boys and 19 girls.

The chi square test for independence was used to see whether the understanding of the concepts of death was independent of sex. It was found that only the understanding of irrevocability was independent of sex ( $X^2 = 1.57$ ). More males than females had an understanding of cessation ( $X^2 = 5.19$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and an understanding of universality ( $X^2 = 5.05$ ,  $p < .01$ ). A possible explanation for this can be seen in the nature of children's play. Death is much more a part of play for males than females. Traditionally, play for boys consisted of cops and robbers, cowboys and Indians, and soldiers, while play for girls consisted of house and dolls.

#### Irrevocability and Cessation of Corporeal Life

The hypothesis that the understanding of the irrevocability of death is independent of the understanding of the cessation of corporeal life at death was also tested for each grade level. The hypothesis was not rejected at any grade level. A possible explanation as to why the hypothesis was not rejected for

kindergarten, first, and second grades is that the majority of the students in these grades had neither of the concepts.

TABLE XII  
PERCENTAGE OF MALES AND FEMALES UNDERSTANDING  
IRREVOCABILITY, CESSATION, AND UNIVERSALITY

Grade	IRREVOCABILITY		CESSATION		UNIVERSALITY	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
K	29.41	8.70	23.53	8.70	52.94	21.74
1	25.00	18.75	37.50	25.00	41.67	31.25
2	41.67	22.22	25.00	16.67	83.33	55.56
3	40.00	40.00	50.00	30.00	80.00	50.00
4	45.45	36.84	63.64	31.58	81.81	68.42

#### Life After Death

Table XIII contains the percentage of students in each grade that expressed a concept of life after death. No direct questions about life after death were asked, however, several children responded to the question "Now that Mrs. Wilson is dead, what will happen to her?" by referring to Heaven, hell, or to being with God and Jesus. At least 30% of school aged children have a concept of life after death.

TABLE XIII  
PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS EXPRESSING A CONCEPT  
OF LIFE AFTER DEATH

Grade	Number	YES		NO	
		Number	Percent	Number	Percent
K	12		30.00	28	70.00
1	15		37.50	25	62.50
2	17		56.67	13	43.33
3	17		56.67	13	43.33
4	12		40.00	18	60.00

## CHAPTER V

### SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Introduction

Four questions were of major importance in this study. The questions were in what grade or at what age do children 1) realize death is irrevocable; 2) realize death is the cessation of the functions of the corporeal life; 3) realize the universality of death; and 4) have a concept of life after death. Two levels of realization were distinguished: having a concept and understanding a concept. For the purpose of analysis and discussion, understanding a concept was differentiated from having a concept in that understanding involved being able to provide justification for the concept. Also of interest in the study was the relationship between the level of cognitive development and conceptions of death and the effect that the perception of the personality of the person that dies has upon a child's understanding of what happens at death.

#### Summary and Conclusions

A large majority of children in the first grade (age range between six and seven) have the concept that death is irrevocable and the concept that death is universal. The hypothesis that having the concept of irrevocability and having the concept of

universality is independent of grade level were rejected. There were, however, no significant differences between the number of students in kindergarten through fourth grade that had the concept that at death there is cessation of corporeal life. This finding regarding irrevocability agrees with those findings of Nagy (30) and Grollman (13) that children under five do not recognize death as irrevocable. Mitchell (29) found that children under age six do not think of death as irrevocable, and Melear (28) found that children under age seven do not view death as irrevocable. The finding concerning cessation of corporeal life at death is in agreement with Nagy's (30) finding that children under nine years of age do not recognize the cessation of life at death. Melear (28) found that some children up to age ten attributed biological functions to the dead. The finding in this study that the majority of children in the first grade have the concept of universality of death disagrees with Nagy's (30) finding that children under age nine do not recognize the universality of death. However, Gesell and Ilg (12) and Ilg and Ames (17) found that by age eight, the average child can accept the notion of universality of death.

The majority of children in the fourth grade had not yet developed an understanding of death as irrevocable or an understanding that at death there is a cessation of the corporeal life. Childers and Wimmer (7) also found that the understanding of death as being irrevocable has not developed systematically through ten years of age. It was found that the understanding

of the universality of death was related to grade level. The majority of children from the second grade and beyond had an understanding of death as universal. Again, Childers and Wimmer (7) found a marked increase in the number of seven-year-olds over six-year-olds that had an understanding of the universality of death. Before the ages of seven to eight, children were not able to give a justification for universality of death and were not able to give a justification for irrevocability and cessation by age ten.

This age range in which children were able to give a justification for universality of death is the same age range Piaget found that children were first able to give justification. Piaget (33), referring to the child's conception of causality, stated that before the age of seven or eight, no genuinely physical explanation could be given of natural phenomena. In referring to the language and thought of the child, Piaget (34) stated that seldom before the age of seven to eight does a child give justification for his remarks. Only after the age of seven to eight do the terms "because" and "since" make frequent appearances in the conversation of children. Piaget and Inhelder (36) claimed that after the ages of seven to eight, the child is at the level of logical thought that he becomes able to reason in a way that is not dependent on immediate perceptual and motor reactions. Therefore, not until the age of seven or eight, should a child be able to have an understanding of death.

During the time the child is developing an understanding of death as universal, he is also moving from being egocentric, that is, unable to take into account the viewpoint of others as different than his own, into a socialized being. During the course of social interaction with one's peers, a child is increasingly forced to reexamine his own concepts in the light of those of others. Piaget (34) stated that between the ages of seven to eight, children manifest the desire to work with others and at this age, egocentric talk loses some of its importance. When the child is becoming aware of the viewpoints of other people, he is also developing an understanding that death comes to himself and to all other people.

Also of interest in this study was the effect the two personalities of the character that died would have. The responses to the questions concerning the nice woman who died and the responses to the questions concerning the unkind woman who died did not differ significantly at the concept level or at the understanding level. Therefore, the perception of the personality of the character that died does not effect a child's concepts or understanding of what happens at death.

Related to this concept of personality of the character that died, Singer and Singer (42) cited the naturalistic view of misfortune which holds that children think if a person has an accident or some misfortune after doing something wrong, that he is being punished. In this study, nineteen of the children who heard the story about the unkind woman attributed the cause of her death to some unkind act she committed. For instance,

some children claimed she died because she yelled at the school children and some because she would never laugh. Still others claimed she died because she allowed the cat to chase the bird. Of the children who heard the story about the nice woman, only one attributed her death to her actions, claiming she died because she laughed too much. Therefore, in this study about 12% of the subjects made a moral judgment in accord with the naturalistic view of misfortune. It is worthy of noting that even though the perception of the personality of the character that died did not effect children's conceptions or understanding of what happens at death, that it did effect children's conceptions of what causes death.

At about the same age that children understand that death is universal, a change in moral judgment occurs in that children apply the same rules to all players, that is, there is a universality of rules. Piaget (35) stated that around the age of seven to eight, children become concerned with winning and with rules and cooperation appears in games for the first time. There is a common awareness and observance of rules and all players make sure there is compliance with rules. So between the ages of seven and eight, a child understands that the same rules must apply to all players and that death must come to all people.

It is quite obvious that children are familiar with death before they have an understanding of death. This same developmental pattern occurs with other objects and concepts also. Kohlberg (20, p.1024) stated that the "dream is a good example



of an object or experience with which the child is familiar from an early age but which is restructured in markedly different ways in later development." Kohlberg found that the first step in the development of children's beliefs about dreams occurs about age five. This first step is the recognition that dreams are not real event. By seven years old, most children are aware that dreams are actually thoughts caused by themselves.

The relationship between level of cognitive development and understanding of death was also examined in this study. A significantly larger number of conservers than nonconservers were found to have an understanding of universality of death. There was not a significant difference in the number of conservers and nonconservers that had an understanding of irrevocability of death and cessation of corporeal life at death. The explanation for this is that the understanding of irrevocability and cessation has not developed by the fourth grade and therefore the majority of both conservers and nonconservers did not have an understanding of irrevocability and cessation of corporeal life at death.

The fourth question of interest was in what grade do children have a concept of life after death. At least 30% of students in kindergarten have some concept of life after death. In the grades above kindergarten, a larger percentage of students have an idea about life after death. The percentages found in this study may be somewhat conservative since no direct questions concerning life after death were asked.

## Recommendations

As shown in this study, many children in kindergarten through fourth grade lack an understanding of death. Since these children must deal with death countless times during their life and must someday deal with their own death, a need to learn about death is always present. Many of these children possessed concepts of death but were not able to give justification of these concepts. Since the children had the concepts of death, it is obvious that they have had encounters with death, but have not received enough information about death to be able to understand the concepts.

Grollman (14, p. 5) maintained that a "child growing up today is all too much aware of the reality of death . . . yet, it is a subject which parents usually avoid." Since parents are avoiding the subject of death, schools could greatly benefit the child by teaching about death. If a child receives sound objective teaching about death, many of his fantasies and psychological defenses about death can be replaced by a clear and accurate understanding of death. Two basic facts about death, namely, death is irrevocable and corporeal life ceases at death, are not understood by the majority of fourth grade students and therefore any teaching program about death should include these two facts. Kubler-Ross (23, p. 32) stressed the importance of teaching children about death when she said:

. . . everything depends on the way we rear our children. If we help them to face fear and show

them that through strength and sharing we can overcome even the fear of dying, then they will be better prepared to face any kind of crisis that might confront them, including the ultimate reality of death.

It is hoped that this study has revealed that there is a need for further research in the area of death and children's understanding of death. Much of the work already done in this area has been of a descriptive or developmental nature, so a need for higher levels of research exists.

Some specific proposals that are recommended for further research include how children's previous experiences with death and the explanations they received affect their present understanding of death. Also of interest would be the relationship, if one exists, between a child's understanding of death and his anxiety concerning death. Since children in rural environments are probably exposed to more actual encounters with death, a comparison of rural versus urban children's understanding of death may provide useful information.

In this study, death was associated with an elderly woman who became sick and died. Many of the children claimed the woman died because she was old or because she was sick. Therefore, two areas for further research should deal with age and cause of death. It is recommended that a comparison be made of children's conceptions of what happens to old people when they die and what happens to children or infants when they die. Also, a comparison should be made for children's conceptions of death that is a result of accident and death that is a result of natural causes.

As indicated, there is much work to be done in the area of death. Possibly what is most needed is for people to be able to talk openly about death. Perhaps Margaret Mead (40, p. 102) best illustrated this avoidance of death when she said, "When a person is born we rejoice, and when they're married we jubilate, but when they die, we try to pretend that nothing has happened."

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APPENDIX A

THE INSTRUMENT

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Grade \_\_\_\_\_ Birthdate \_\_\_\_\_ Age \_\_\_\_\_

Version I II

Conservation Task #1 a b same #2 a b same #3 a b same  
 Why? ok ok ok

1A. Do you have any idea why Mrs. Wilson died?

(a. Do you have any idea why Mrs. Wilson was sick?)

2A. What are some things that Mrs. Wilson did in the story?

B. Now that Mrs. Wilson is dead, what are some things she can do (or can she do anything?)

a. List of things she can do:

b. "She can't do anything." Tell me how you know this.

3A. Now that Mrs. Wilson is dead, what do you think will happen to her?

a. Why?

B. Will Mrs. Wilson be able to come back to life?

a. "Yes."

b. "No." Tell me why she can't.

4A. Do you think that everybody will die someday?

a. "Yes." Why?

b. "No." Who are some people who won't die?

Who are some people who will die?

irrevocability	cessation	universality	life after death
yes	no	yes	no
	yes	no	yes
	no	yes	no

APPENDIX B

SELECTED RESPONSES

Question on cessation of corporeal life at death:

"Now that Mrs. Wilson is dead, what are some things she can do?"

Selected Responses:

Kindergarten: Be with Jesus.

Stay in bed.

Eat ice cream and pudding.

Lay down in the ground.

First Grade: Go to Heaven

Look up from Heaven.

Second Grade: Go to Heaven.

Sleep.

Third Grade: Get some peace and rest.

Fourth Grade: Go to Heaven.

"Nothing because . . ."

Kindergarten: she's dead.

she's dead and dead people can't see what they are doing.

First and

Second Grade: she's dead.

dead people can't move.

she is buried.

Third and

Fourth Grade: she is buired.

her heart has stopped working.

Question on irrevocability of death:

"Will Mrs. Wilson be able to come back to life?"

Selected Responses:

Kindergarten: No, she's dead.

If they work on her a lot she might come alive someday.

First Grade: No, she's dead.

Yes, if she was good enough.

Second Grade: Yes, in Heaven.

No, she's buried.

Third Grade: Once you are dead you can't come alive again.

No, there is nothing working in the body.

Fourth Grade: No, when you are dead, you're dead.

No, you can only have one life.

Question of universality of death:

"Do you think that everybody will die someday?"

Selected Responses:

"Yes, because . . ."

Kindergarten: they get too old.

God made them to do it.

they grow up and be all the numbers.

I think burglars will shoot them.

First Grade: they get too old.

they might get killed.

there would be too many people on the earth.

Second Grade: they get too old.

Third Grade: they get old and sick.

God will destroy the world.

Fourth Grade: Jesus made it that way.

there would be too many people on earth.

people get too old.

it's just the way life is.

"No, some of the people who won't die are . . ."

Kindergarten: new people.

God and Jesus.

good people.

my brother.

my mommy and daddy.

babies.

me, if I take care of myself.

First Grade: God and Jesus.

people in Heaven.

Second Grade: God.

people in Heaven.

well people.

good people.

Third Grade: new babies.

Christians.

good people.

people who were nice when they were alive.

Fourth Grade: Jesus.

VITA

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