Grappling with Death and Loss through Children’s Literature in the Social Studies

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All too often tragedy and disaster strike the world around us, and when they do, people often are left speechless and powerless. In schools, there is no subject as uniquely situated to helping children develop an understanding of social events as the social studies; as history is filled with instances of loss, tragedy, and death (i.e. war, conflict, natural disasters, etc.). During these difficult times, teachers often encounter important questions from inquisitive children on these challenging topics. This manuscript discusses how an elementary social studies teacher leveraged the assets of children’s literature to assist her students in learning to grapple with the death of their beloved classroom pet. Parents and educators are provided literary resources and strategies to assist students in grappling with the concepts of loss or death.

Key words: social studies, death, loss, tragedy, children’s literature, controversial issues, classroom pet, elementary

“Real heroes don’t wear capes. They work in America’s schools.”
Nelba Marquez-Greene, A Sandy Hook Parent’s Letter to Teachers, (2013)

Childhood should be filled with innocence, peace, comfort, and tranquility. After all, this critical period of development centers on youth needing to feel loved and secure at home and at school (Pizzolongo & Hunter, 2015). Far too many educators, however, know the safe confines of the classroom and a teacher’s love cannot prevent disaster and tragedy. Tragedy strikes communities, households, and yes, even classrooms. Historical documents, as well as the current news, are filled with examples of how communities, households, and citizens have been struck by tragedy. We think of the EF5 tornado in 2013 that ripped through Plaza Towers Elementary School in Moore, Oklahoma. This devastating storm killed 24 people (including seven elementary school students), injured more than 370, and destroyed over 13,000 houses. The courageous story of a pregnant teacher, Jennifer Doan, who leveraged her body to shield and protect her students from flying debris, still moves us. When disasters and tragedy strike a community, its people are often left speechless and may feel powerless. This manuscript explores how one elementary school teacher used children’s literature to help children cope and grapple with the death and loss of their class pet.

We argue there is no subject as uniquely situated and qualified to helping children develop an understanding of social events, society, and people as the social studies. A
meaningful social studies program provides students with a safe place to study, discuss, share, and advocate on behalf of people, events, and issues. The mission of the social studies is predicated on promoting good citizens that are knowledgeable, engaged, and concerned about the fate of their community and its people (National Council for the Social Studies, n.d.). Through a strong elementary social studies experience, students may develop a feeling of kinship to human beings everywhere (i.e. the human family) and may be encouraged to discover meaningful ways to contribute to their communities (Parker, 2012). The study of history is filled with sensitive topics that involve loss, tragedy, and death (i.e. war, conflict, natural disasters, etc.), so teachers often encounter difficult questions from inquisitive children on these challenging topics. This manuscript chronicles one teacher’s approach to these sensitive subject matters. We, thus, believe teachers should understand appropriate boundaries when implementing these strategies. This in no way diminishes the role of a licensed counselor, psychologist, or parent.

Times of Tragedy and Loss: Milton

Mrs. Muenz is a third grade teacher who prioritizes meeting the socio-emotional needs of her students, and believes a high quality social studies curriculum is essential in meeting this goal. Mrs. Muenz always has introduced Milton, the classroom’s pet rabbit to her students early on in the school year as she believes the use of a classroom pet encourages positive relationships, responsibility, empathy, and care amongst students. She has noticed children often develop strong human-animal bonds with Milton, and these relationships strengthen children’s social skills and academic performance. Children are eager to play with, and take care of Milton before, during, and after school. It is quite common to hear third graders sharing secrets with and talking to Milton.

Figure 1. Milton posing for the camera

“Milton is celebrating his 9th birthday next week, and we’re going to have a party for him”, Mrs. Muenz announced to her students in February of 2011. Her class immediately began organizing and planning a memorable and exciting birthday party for Milton. Cindy, a third grader and best friend to Milton, yelled, “This is going to be the best birthday party ever!” After a careful week of planning, Milton’s birthday party was scheduled for a Friday. On the day of the event, her classroom was filled with decorations, cake, and students’ handwritten happy birthday cards. Jimmy’s happy birthday card read, “You are the best rabbit in the whole world and I love you.” Two hours after his birthday celebration, the class noticed Milton was acting very weird and lethargic. Shortly after noticing his strange activity, one of the students saw
Milton was unresponsive. Cindy, immediately yelled out, “Mrs. Muenz, is Milton ok?” Mrs. Muenz walked over to his cage and replied, “No dear, unfortunately, Milton doesn’t seem to be ok.”

Upon noticing Milton’s condition, Mrs. Muenz assembled the class and calmly informed her students Milton was not doing well. She then released her class for recess to better investigate Milton’s health. She noticed Milton was motionless, and was not breathing. Milton had passed away. While the students were at recess, Mrs. Muenz gently placed him in a box and hid it in a storage closet, out of sight from her students. Mrs. Muenz was deeply depressed at losing her beloved pet, but knew she needed to keep her composure. She prepared to break the sad news upon the children’s return from recess. Mrs. Muenz walked to the guidance counselor’s office to discuss the best way to break the news to the children. When the students returned to the classroom, Mrs. Muenz, in the presence of the school counselor, announced Milton had passed away.

This was a difficult experience for Mrs. Muenz and her students, as they both had a rich and meaningful relationship with Milton. Many of her students had questions about Milton’s passing such as, “Why did he die?”, “How come he had to die”, and “Will I be able to see and play with him again?” As a longtime classroom teacher, Mrs. Muenz has witnessed firsthand the different types of losses children experience, including the passing of pets at home and school the sickness or hospitalization of a loved one, divorce, and the incarceration of a family member. Yet, Mrs. Muenz felt ill prepared and equipped to answer those questions. Her quandary led her to explore instructional methods and resources for helping her students better understand and cope with death, loss, and tragedy.

**Teaching About Death and Loss in the Social Studies**

Immediately after Milton’s death Mrs. Muenz sent a letter to the students’ parents informing them of Milton’s passing, and that their child may ask questions pertaining to the topics of death and loss. Mrs. Muenz continued discussions with the school guidance counselors and administrators about ways to help her students cope with the passing of their classroom pet. Based upon these conversations, she learned social workers and child life specialists recommend a number of resources, including the use of stories (Ratini, 2013; Grollman, 2006) when having difficult conversations about loss, death, and tragedy with students. Children often fail to immediately understand the profoundness or permanence of the situation. During this period, it is important that loved ones, including teachers, make themselves available and are supportive. While adolescents respond to tragedy differently, there are some important guidelines when broaching these conversations. These include understanding that children struggle with their feelings, and may confuse fantasy and reality (i.e. death is only temporary and reversible). During these difficult times, it is important for children to have supportive conversations with adults to share their feelings, to ask questions, to discuss their fears or frustrations, and to grieve (Grollman & Johnson, 2006; Kubler-Ross, 1997).
Tragedy, death, and loss are often taboo topics in the classroom (Ayers, 2014). Some teachers are afraid to approach these topics for various reasons. While it is important to allow children to grieve as they and their parents or guardians see fit, avoiding any discussions of tragedy, loss, and death only serves to isolate and repress the emotions, thoughts, and understandings of children. Teachers, like other adults in the lives of the child, should be available, attentive, sympathetic, and nonjudgmental. The social studies, a subject riddled with human and societal stories of loss, tragedy, and death can play an important role in creating a safe and deliberate space for students to share and discuss their thoughts and feelings with adults. In particular, we believe children’s literature is conduit through which children can examine and discuss these concepts.

**Use of Children’s Literature Within the Social Studies to Grapple Death and Loss**

Mrs. Muenz decided to use children’s literature in her classroom to help her third graders cope with the recent loss of Milton. Quality children’s literature that includes themes of loss and death offers many personal benefits to children (Roberts & Crawford, 2008). First, literature serves as a point of reference so children can better understand their life experiences. Second, literature offers insights into universal human behaviors, emotions, and moral dilemmas. Literature also stimulates children’s curiosity and encourages them to develop problem-solving skills to address challenging situations. Books that have a storyline through pictures and words are effective for children in learning to grasp the concept of emotions and events. Finally, the use of children’s literature that explores the human condition has a rich history in the teaching and learning of elementary social studies, as evidenced in the annual publication by The National Council for the Social Studies of its *Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People*.

Social studies concepts, issues, and characters can be brought to life for students when grounded within the context of trade books. The use of children’s literature can help children visualize the past, better connect the past, present, and future, and promote a deeper and more meaningful analysis of current and historic and social issues (Almerico, 2013; Kray, 1998; Shiveley, 2003). In particular, current children’s books tackle tough social issues such as aging, sickness, death, and the stages of grief (Killingsworth & Crawford, 2008). Parents and teachers can draw on this growing body of literature to help children understand the concepts of loss or death and to experience the grieving process (Killingsworth & Crawford).
Following Milton’s death, Mrs. Muenz had her students read *The Tenth Good Thing about Barney* by Judith Viorst (1987) as a class. The story portrays a boy grieving over the death of his cat. While reading the book, students completed a reflective journaling activity. This activity, inspired by the work of author Kate Dreffin (1998), provided her students with a significant outlet to share questions and emotions on the recent passing of Milton as they were reading the book. In their journals, the third graders reflected on the good experiences they shared with Milton, their favorite “Milton Memories”, and questions they had pertaining to Milton’s death. One tough question led to more challenging questions, as students asked “Is Milton in heaven?” Another asked, “Why do pets and people die?” At times this experience was difficult and tough for everyone, as our thoughts of Milton incited tears of laughter and sorrow. Reading *The Tenth Good Thing about Barney*, a story about someone else’s loss, and in journaling about how the characters’ challenging experiences intersected with their own, made everyone more comfortable and willing to discuss their feelings towards the loss of Milton.

**Discussion and Implications**

Mrs. Muenz learned that books can be wonderful tools to use with children who have experienced difficult times. Reading (or being read to), talking, and journaling with adults can help children understand and cope with their feelings in developmentally appropriate ways. Age-appropriate books allow children to identify with characters in similar situations and to learn ways of thinking and talking about death and grief. The act of reading also offers a way to spend time with children, reinforce a sense of normalcy and security, and connect with them, all of which are important to recovery from a traumatic experience. Reading together provides an opportunity for the teacher and children to share their feelings about loss. Stories describing the experiences of characters confused by, struggling with, and trying to cope with death, loss, and tragedy can be shared in a variety of different ways such as via small groups, one-to-one instruction, and whole class instruction. When using books or having these difficult discussions, we recommend teachers inform parents and administrators in advance to ensure clear communication and to gain consent. Teachers may want to invite parents and families to class where they can participate in small groups with their children to discuss the book and its themes of loss, tragedy, and death.

Three relevant criteria when using picture books to help children deal with death are discussed by M. L. Mercurio and A. McNamee (2006). They stipulate stories must meet: children’s intellectual needs (Is the book accurate and age-appropriate?), social needs (Does the book indicate through its characters that others shared the child’s experience?) and emotional needs (Does the book validate, through its characters, the child’s feelings?). Using these criteria allows teachers to selects books that encourage children to identify with the main characters and to be moved emotionally by the character’s struggles and triumphs.

In the section that follows, we briefly review children’s books that are valuable in supporting the development of children’s understanding of death, loss, and tragedy. The books identified and reviewed below do not serve as a comprehensive listing, but were selected based upon their alignment to the criteria established by Mercurio and McNamee (2006). The descriptions are meant to aid educators and parents as they work to locate resources to support a grieving and inquisitive child.

*Always and Forever* by Alan Durant. Illustrated by Debi Gliori

Four animals live together in the woods. When Fox dies, his three friends are really sad and stop doing things they used to do until they get a visit from a friend. Squirrel, a close friend, shows them that life goes on and there are things they can do that will help them always.
remember Fox and the good times they all shared. This book can be used as an opener to approach the subject of death. Most children like animals, and using an animal family that faces a tragic situation, such as death, would be an appropriate approach to this difficult subject for children. After reading this story, then expand on the subject and read a book where a child is actually facing the loss of a loved one. The child may then understand life cycles and how every living thing, (including humans) dies at some point. Such an understanding may help them cope with losing someone special to them. This book illustrates that although someone they loved died, with time, life goes on.

*I Miss You (A First Look at Death)* by Pat Thomas

This story begins by introducing the cycle of life or the birth and death of human beings. The difficult topic of death is presented in a way young children will understand. The book includes conversations about funerals, and emotions children may feel when they lose someone close to them. It also covers how others may not know how to approach those who have lost someone. Young readers are helped to understand how loved ones live in our hearts forever. This story includes several pages with questions directed to the reader or audience. These questions help students relate to the story by asking, “Has anyone you know died? How did they die? How did you feel?” If a student in the class has recently faced the death of a loved one and is having a hard time dealing with it, the teacher could read this story to the class so others can share these experiences. The reflection and dialogue ensuing would help children understand they are not alone and that everyone feels sad, confused, and angry when they lose someone close. By having this discussion, children can learn ways to cope from their classmates who may have experienced a similar situation. If a teacher has a diverse classroom, parents can be invited to come and talk about their culture’s beliefs, rituals, and traditions about death. This experience would give children the opportunity to think about death in a supportive and inclusive way.

*Lifetimes: The Beautiful Way to Explain Death to Children* by Bryan Mellonie and Robert Ingpen

This story presents the concepts of lifetimes to young readers. There is a beginning and an ending to all living things, and in between is the middle, which is the period where most people spend the greatest amount of time. The authors give examples of living things that have lifetimes: plants, fish, birds, trees, animals, and people. All living things will experience times when they are hurt or sick; at times, they do not recover. Their bodies tend to weaken with age.

The story clearly communicates that dying is a part of every life cycle and it is a natural process of life. This book is beautifully written and explains the concept of life and death in a way that children can understand and not be frightened by it. Teachers can use this book to explain the natural cycles of life. Everything has a lifespan and nothing lasts forever. Despite death, life continues on, and those who are living must continue to live while they have the time to do so.

*When Someone Dies* by Sharon Greenlee

This story illustrates memorable everyday activities you may have done with someone special that are no longer possible once that person passes away. It is written in simple terms children understand. The story touches on the feelings of sadness, anger, worry, and hurt that one may experience when someone close passes away. These feelings are portrayed as a normal part of the grieving process, and outlines ways in which people have been able to cope with these difficult feelings. This book could be used to help comfort children after losing someone special (a loved one or pet). Feelings a grieving person experiences are portrayed, and the story highlights how others may not know how to comfort a grieving person. Several activities are
discussed that may help children cope, such as crying with someone they can trust, writing a letter to the person who has died, or just simply recalling memories and shared experiences with loved ones— as Mrs. Muenz did with her students when Milton passed away.

**Conclusion**

There is no subject, discipline, book, or person that can eliminate or assuage the pain, anger, and confusion felt when a loss and tragedy strikes. In these difficult and challenging times, it is important that all adults, including family, friends, and teachers, make themselves available to serve as supportive and caring figures. In particular, we believe the social studies can play an important role in creating a safe space for children to share their thoughts and feelings on these sensitive topics. As Mrs. Muenz and her students’ experiences with Milton demonstrate, social studies teachers can leverage the assets of children’s literature to assist students in learning to cope and grapple with death, loss, and tragedy. While it is not possible to review every book written for children on the difficult topic of death, loss, and tragedy, we invite readers to contribute additional readings, resources, and insights on this topic at a wiki we have created. Please see our collection of web-based resources for additional information (Grappling with death and loss through social studies-based, children’s literature, n.d.).

**References**


**Web-based Resources**


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