Gravestones, zombies and dead siblings: graveyards as artefacts for children's existential questions

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ABSTRACT

This article builds on a qualitative study of interactions and negotiations with respect to existential questions in an ECEC department with children from 3 to 6 years of age, as part of a larger empirical study on the same topic. In the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research's 2017 curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), there is a stated requirement that the staff shall explore and wonder at existential questions together with the children. This article highlights how a walk through a local graveyard with its material artefacts functioning as cultural tools may open a new context for interaction and negotiation regarding death as an existential issue. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of mediated action and Bakhtin's theory of multivoicedness form the framework for the interpretation together with Wartofsky's three-level theory of artefacts. The method employed to establish the data was participated observation with a handheld video camera.

Introduction

Humans ask existential questions throughout their whole lives. Norwegian framework plan for ECEC requires that the staff shall encourage children to explore and wonder about existential questions. From the age of one, 92.8% of Norwegian children spend large parts of their day in ECEC institutions, and 97.3% from the age of three (Statistics Norway, SSB 2021). The content in ECEC is regulated by the *Framework Plan for Kindergartens, Contents and Tasks* curriculum (MoER 2017). This Plan establishes seven learning areas for children, as well as a set of overall values. One of these areas is *Ethics, Religion and Philosophy*, which is the one least dealt with in kindergartens' annual curriculums. Kindergarten leaders have reported that this aspect is the most challenging (Gulbrandsen and Eliassen 2013; MoER 2018; Østrem et al. 2009). This may be explained by increased secularity in Europe (Davie 2007; Inglehart and Welzel 2020; Schmidt 2010). Zanetti reports that both in society and in education, children lack places to explore their existential questions (Zanetti 2020, 4).

My study employed Pramling's and Johansson's definition of existential questions: 'The experience children work on, express and try to understand in relation to themselves and life as such' (1995, 126). The questions in my material are related to death, and especially the death of children, like: 'Why didn't she grow up? Was he hit by a car?' And even zombies and skeletons from computer games are associated with the graveyard and are discussed. This definition mentioned is a wide one that reflects the view of children as active agents in society, beings and not just 'becomings' or unfinished grown-ups (Bae 2007; James, Jenks, and Prout 1998; Sommer 2012). The concept of children as beings is well embedded in the 'Nordic tradition to ECEC institutions' (Bae 2007, 2009; Bennet 2010; Einarsdottir 2013; Kjørholt and Winger 2013; Korsvold 2008; Roth 2014), a social pedagogical perspective with emphasis on play, care, learning and formation ('Bildung') (Gjems, Jansen, and Tholin 2012). In accordance with this tradition, life questions have a justified place in a high-quality ECEC institution (Alvestad et al. 2009; Sommer, Samuelsson, and Hundeide 2013). Children negotiate meaning in dialogue with their peers and listening adults (Löfdahl 2004, 2005; Åberg and Taguchi 2006). According to Gjems (2009, 2011) and Hasan (2002), such dialogues are the most important arena for learning. Under the umbrella 'exploring and wondering existential questions' the primary research question of this article is

> How do graveyards function as material artefacts for the interaction and negotiation related to death as an existential question among preschool children and the staff?

To answer this research question, spontaneous situations are presented, which were observed by a handheld video camera by the author. The video recordings were taken when children and staff passed through the local graveyard on their way to a Christmas wandering in the church, as part of the ECEC institution's annual curriculum. A sociocultural perspective about the mediating role of artefacts as cultural tools will open and elaborate the material (Cole 1996; Wartofsky 1979; Wertsch 1993, 1998; Ødegaard 2012).

According to Dyregrov (2008, 15), children develop an understanding of death in parallel with their mental maturation through childhood. Children under five rarely understand that death is permanent, and that the functions of life have ceased. They have problems with understanding abstract notions of death. But young children's understanding can be affected by the encounter with death, so they can understand more than their peers (Dyregrov 2008, 18; Miller, Rosengren, and Isabel 2014, 14). From the age of five to ten, according to Dyregrov, children develop a gradual realization that death is irreversible (2008, 18).

Material artefacts and meaning-making

Material artefacts may play a prominent role as objects for interaction and negotiation in different situations. According to Cole, a thing becomes an artefact by being used in goal-oriented activity (Afdal 2013; Cole 1996). Vygotsky emphasizes that the human acquisition of the world never happens directly, but through mediation by help of artefacts (Hedegaard 2011; Vygotsky 1978). An environment with artefacts and the activities that take place are closely interrelated in sociocultural theory and belong to the interaction (Leontiev in Hennig and Kirova 2012, 227). Wartofsky and Vygotsky use the concept artefacts for both material objects and tools, and for certain symbol, such as

language, numbers, and images (Vygotsky 1978; Wartofsky 1979). Material tools and language are objectifications of human needs and intentions (Hedegaard 2011; Wartofsky 1979). The use of artefacts may give humans access to the collective memory that is embodied in these artefacts (Säljö 2006; Wertsch 2002). Mediation processes that take place with the aid of artefacts are transformative for the humans participating in the practice, and this may also be the case for the objects (Säljö 2006; Wartofsky 1979; Wells 2000). The artefacts provide constrains and affordances (Wertsch 1998, 38–42). Material artefacts can have an impact on adult's and children's lives and may connect humans with cultural identity (Hennig and Kirova 2012). The right moment for learning is associated with one of Vygosky's most famous concepts, namely 'Zone of Proximal Development' (ZPD) which refers to the difference between what a child can achieve without help, compared to what he can achieve through supportive or encouraging help from staff or a peer with more competence (Vygotsky 1978, 84–91). The use of ZPD will affect the process, and can have an identity-forming effect, according to Wells (2000, 57).

Wartofsky (1979) explains the interplay between various levels of artefacts and the human actors, and distinguishes between three levels of artefacts made different by function, not by quality (202–209). *Primary artefacts* are objects that can be considered as extensions of the body and are directly used in production, such as knives, personal computers and cars (Säljö 2006, 91; Wartofsky 1979, 202). In the context of this article, decorations on the graves, the gravestones and the writings on the gravestones may be considered as primary artefacts. *Secondary artefacts* are tools that transmit the modes for the use of primary artefacts, including instructions, recipes, norms or rules (Wartofsky 1979, 202). In a graveyard, there are secondary artefacts in the form of rites of burial and rules for decoration on graves, for memorial stones and norms regarding how to behave at funerals or in a graveyard. *Tertiary artefacts* refer to the way in which humans can create and think to produce something new. Fantasies about death created with inspiration from the artefacts on the graveyard and virtual worlds created for computer games, can be tertiary artefacts. Today's ideas can be models for technology in the future (Säljö 2006, 93–94; Wartofsky 1979, 209).

> Wartofsky's explanation of the various functions of artefacts in connection with Vygotsky's theory of play may create new insights in the field. Vygotsky writes

> In play thought is separated from objects, and action arises from the ideas rather than from things: a piece of wood begins to be a doll and a stick become a horse. Action according to rules begins to be determined by ideas and not by objects themselves. (Vygotsky 1978, 97)

According to Hedegaard, a combination of Vygotsky's theory of play with Wartofsky's theory of tertiary artefacts 'can be seen as step toward mastering tertiary artefacts, that is, where children can experiment with the meaning in an imagined world' (Hedegaard 2011, 261). In other words, primary, secondary and tertiary forms of representation 'find their first form in children's play activity' (Hedegaard 2011, 261). According to Vygotsky, acquisition and learning first takes place by participating in social processes where artefacts are used (Vygotsky 1978). Both humans and material objects are situated in a sociocultural context (Lave and Wenger 1991), while users and tools are always parts of a wider context (Wells 2000; Wertsch 1998, 2002).

Wertsch, who also introduced Bakhtin's ideas on the subject of dialogicality to understand and expand the framework of Vygotsky (Wertsch 1993, 1998), has further developed Vygotsky's theory of mediation. Bakhtin focuses on utterance as the unit of speech communication. Even if the utterances belong to 'a particular speaking subject', nobody owns the word alone. Moreover, at least two voices are present, including the speaker and the person the utterance is directed to, as it is always directed or addressed to someone (Bakhtin 1986, 95; Wertsch 1993, 13). The utterance is always a response to previous utterances, and in that way, the bearer of past, present and future (Bakhtin 1986, 89). The meaning is created in the conversation between the children and the staff, in the space in between them. A characteristic of the utterance is the multivoicedness or the polyphony. The different voices of children and adults are equal in a holistic, democratic composition, where none of the voices dominate the others (Dysthe 2012, 61). When educators and children collaborate on the process of creating content, it is possible to call it a participatory learning process, where both children and the educator appear as subjects (Nordtømme 2006).

Methodology

Research design and sample

The presented qualitative study is part of a larger empirical study focusing on existential questions at the site of practices in four public ECEC institutions in departments with children ranging in age from 3 to 6 years (Fauske 2018, 2019, 2020). Half of ECEC institutions in Norway are owned by the public sector, while the other half is owned by private (Directorate of Education 2019). The Framework Plan applies to both public and private centers. The institutions selected in the empirical study were situated in two small towns in the western part of Norway. The advisers in the different municipal ministries of ECEC were appointed to the role of being 'gatekeepers' for the selection process (Jacobsen 2015, 168; Sellerberg and Fangen 2011, 53–54; Silverman 2017, 262, 298; Rudestam and Newton 2015, 130). Each department had a professional preschool teacher and two skilled workers or assistants. At the time of the observation, there were 18 children in such a kindergarten department (3–6 years of age). All the preschool teachers selected were well qualified and between the ages of 30–58. In total, 18 days were spent for observation in four departments. The time was divided between the departments for practical reasons, the observations were most often before lunch (7.30 AM–11.30 AM). The research design was exploratory, picturing the field (Jacobsen 2015; Johannessen, Tufte, and Christoffersen 2016; Marshall and Rossman 2016; Postholm 2010).

An ethnographic approach was employed to observe children and staff in their natural environment (Fettermann 2010; Rudestam and Newton 2015), guided by Creswell and Poth's list of criteria (2018, 279) of things to keep in mind. Data were established by video recording, using a handheld video camera, catching the spontaneous conversations between staff and children (Knoblauch and Schnettler 2012; Marshall and Rossman 2016). I was a participating observer, answering short if the children asked about something, but did not engage in play or other activities.

In the ECEC department referred to in this article I have had supper together with the staff where I introduced myself and where I got to know the building and interior before I

observed the children at daytime. The children were accustomed to frequent visits by special educators who came and went, so my presence did not seem to disturb them. The observer effect in relation to the preschool teacher may have been greater, though notably, it was challenging to keep discipline in this group and her attention had to be on the children all the time (Jacobsen 2015, 166). The preschool teacher had lived in the neighborhood for a long time and knew the children, their parents and their siblings very well. According to the head of the kindergarten, the parents had great confidence in her.

There are both affordances and constrains with video filming (Bae 2004, 53). Using a video camera for recording has its limitations in terms of audio recording. One must be quite close to get a sufficiently good sound, but one should not disturb the group's chores. The advantage of recording on video is the possibility to return to the material repeatedly (Andersen and Kampmann 2010; Heath, Hindmarsh, and Luff 2010; Knoblauch and Schnettler 2012). All material was 'raw-transcribed' by hand, then certain interactions were chosen to study in detail and were transcribed exactly on computer.

The ECEC center described in this article was situated in an area with a population of mixed age, and with a majority of families with children going to public kindergartens and schools. The kindergarten was situated on the edge of a coniferous forest, with a courtyard surrounded by a fence. According to the preschool teacher, the families who lived here were neither rich nor poor according to a Norwegian standard (Eriksen 2009). The staff labeled most of the parents as 'culture Christians' (Høeg 2009). They visited church in connection with baptism, confirmation and funerals, and on Christmas Eve, but were not regular church goers on Sundays. Ten of the 18 children were selected for a Christmas wandering in church from this ECEC institution this day referred to.

Role of the researcher

The role of the observer in ethnographic research is described by Adler and Adler (1994) as an intermediating role between full participation and a more non-interfering role. Efforts were made to interfere as little as possible, and to keep a certain distance from the staff so cases could be presented both from an emic and an etic perspective (Creswell and Poth 2018). Abrahamsen uses the metaphor of a 'modest guest' to describe this role (Abrahamsen 2004).

Rich material from daily life in the four different institutions was compiled, though few observations of interactions about existential questions were made, which is consistent with other researchers' results from Norwegian ECEC institutions (Amundsen 2013, 40; Løkken 2011, 226).

Ethic considerations. Validity

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities (*National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities, Forskningsetiske retningslinjer for samfunnsvitenskap, humaniora, juss og teologi*, NESH 2016). Observing children requires a higher degree of ethical sensitivity (Sommer, Samuelsson, and Hundeide 2010; Johansson 2003). There will always be aspects of power in interpersonal

relationship (Thoresen 2017, 186–189). Nordic research shows that staff's views of children to a significant degree affects the interaction (Bae 2004, 2009; Emilson and Folkesson 2006; Hundeide 2003; Johansson 2004). The fact that the preschool teacher knew the children and families well, meant that she could draw concrete examples from the children's everyday experiences (Alvestad 2012).

The study was approved by the Norwegian Social Science Data Service and informed consent was obtained from parents and staff. Anonymisation was controlled and the article was approved by the preschool teacher. To assess certain ethical considerations, the kindergarten principal was contacted to describe the episodes to her. She believed that the author's assessments were correct based on her knowledge of the children, the children's parents and the preschool teacher.

The concepts of validity are discussed in qualitative research, and different researchers emphasize different aspects. Knowledge in sociocultural theory is mainly constructed in historical and social contexts where humans act together. All these different aspects are impossible to present in a short article, but aspects such as credibility, sincerity, dependability and transferability may fit this article (Creswell and Poth 2018, 255; Tracy 2010, 839–840). Above all, this is a 'worthy topic' (Tracy 2010, 840). Although the informants of the article are so few that it is impossible to draw generalized conclusions from what is happening, the article may inform other preschool teachers in the work on existential themes.

Analysis, findings and interpretation

Thematic analysis

A qualitative interpretive analysis, more specifically a thematic analysis, was used (Braun and Clarke 2006). Theme in this context is understood as a term that captures something significant in the data in relation to the research question. According to Braun and Clarke this is a method for identifying patterns of meaning within the data (2006, 79). The framework of sociocultural theory can be compared to what Braun and Clarke call a contextualized method. This method is positioned between essentialism and constructionism and is characterized by theories. These theories address, on the one hand, the question of how individuals create meaning based on their experiences, and on the other, «the ways the broader social context impinges on those meanings» (Braun and Clarke 2006, 81). My strategy of analysis was abductive, as I went forth and back between the inductive material and sociocultural theory to elaborate the analysis and change the theory through the process (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2008, 54; 2009, 4–6; Thagaard 2011, 194, 197). A key concept for coding was to look for situations where mediation using artefacts took place.

The process of analysis

First, I read my transcriptions repeatedly. The process is both inductive and deductive. The deductive approach I entitled 'mediation using material artefacts' as a search term, as it was based on applied concepts and words in chosen theory. In the inductive approach, I tried to find repetitive patterns, representing meaningful elements in the

material (Johannessen, Tufte, and Christoffersen 2016, 171–172). I tried to identify as many artefacts, 'mediational means' (Wertsch 1998, 24) (codes) as possible, and placed them in analytic groups after their functions (Wartofsky's levels). I also made small annotations and questions to myself. It became very clear to me that the material artefacts of a graveyard represented processes of transformation for the children, such as: Transformation of people to ghosts and zombies were probably impacted from computer games. Transformation of stones, from grey stones to gravestones. Transformation of an area, from a playground to a memorial and burial site. Transformation from being alive to being dead. Through this analytical process, the children's existential questions became very vividly apparent.

Findings

I have reproduced the themes I found as headings on excerpts from the material. The names of the persons in the following presentation are anonymised. The situation which here is analysed, cannot be described as an everyday experience, but more as an atypical one, as visiting the local church happens once or twice a year with different groups. By sharing parts of my transcriptions, it is possible to make my analysis more transparent (Fettermann 2010; Rudestam and Newton 2015).

The age of the acting children is given in parenthesis, their conversations are presented in italics. The staff walking together with them is Ann, a preschool teacher with long professional experience, and an assistant, Cathy, without education, but also with extensive experience.

Excerpt A: What is a graveyard? Safe playground, zombie domain or place where the dead are buried?

Context: The kindergarten is located on the outskirts of a small town. The group has to go through the housing estate with little traffic at this time of day. The children walk on the left-hand side of the road in pairs, holding each other's hands. Ann walks together with Matthew (5, 0) and Peter (5, 11) and with another pair of children in front of them. The children are laughing and singing some rhymes and rules, changing the original content to something about 'pee' and 'poo'. The church and the graveyard appear between the houses.

Some of the children say that when they cross the road, they can run into the graveyard because there is no traffic.

Ann:	*You know, actually, you are not supposed to run and jump into the graveyard.*
Matthew:	(Serious.) *You know why?*
Ann:	(Interesting.): *No?*
Matthew:	*You can wake some zombies there.*
Ann:	*No, I don't think there are any zombies.*
Matthew:	(Very convincing, almost annoyed.) *Yes.* (Eager.) *You know why? You become one, you become one of those skeletons, and then it becomes zombies. Isn't that true, Peter!*
Peter:	*No.*
Ann:	*No, I do not think so either.*

Interpretation and discussion excerpt A

The surroundings provide a social, material and historical background for what children and staff pay attention to (Nordtømme 2006; Vygotsky 1978). Most of the children are looking for places for action and play, embodied interaction (Hilppö et al. 2017). Computer games can be seen as a primary artefact, an extension of the arm, and the imaginary worlds they create as tertiary artefacts (Wartofsky 1979, 202, 207). Questions about death had not been a theme in circle time in this department. Some of the children had asked the preschool teacher how her life will be after death, but she had replied that no one knows, not even her. Although she had not observed any mention of zombies, she had observed the children busy talking about the computer game Minecraft, which was a recurring theme. In this play, there are zombies and skeletons, and the players fight against the zombies. However, the boundaries between fiction and fact can become a floating limit in modern media, and children's virtual worlds will evolve in ways that have consequences for their social world (Frønes 2018).

According to Wartofsky (1979), society can be thought of as different activity systems overlapping each other (Wells 2000, 54–55). Who a child becomes as a person depends on the activity systems they participate in when growing up and the support and assistance they have received from other members of the community (Lave and Wenger 1991). Excerpt A shows both past living, through the representation of the gravestones, as well as informing the present through the boys' conversations and perceptions of reality (Wells 2000, 55–56; Wertsch 2002). Central here, however, is the graveyard as a secondary artefact where the children become aware that a burial site with its material artefacts has rules for cultural behavior. In this way, this excerpt also illustrates one of the other recurring themes, this time related to the adults' perspective: How to behave on a graveyard.

The virtual world created in computer games may represent a tertiary artefact. For five-year-olds, this is most often a game, which represents a virtual world. A representation is something in itself. In this example, it is a computer game, but it also stands for something else, in this example a fantasy world. The graveyard may be the world Matthew has met in computer games (Dahle et al. 2021; Kvello 2008; Letnes, Sando, and Hardersen 2016; Nyjordet 2018).

According to Rogoff (2003) and Lave and Wenger (1991), norms are passed on to younger generations by their participation in the culture. Some families still have the idea that children should be shielded from death, and they also exclude them from rituals surrounding death (Miller, Rosengren, and Isabel 2014). Miller's source is from mainstream America, but this is also the case in Norway (Wyller 1994). Well-known psychologists recommend that children should be allowed to attend in relatives' funerals (Dyregrov 2008). Perhaps Matthew's grandparents are still alive, and he has probably not been to a funeral. For Matthew, the world where zombies and skeletons are present is so real that he is willing to change his natural behavior and not shout and run in order not to wake the zombies. According to Magnusson and Pramling (2016), the development of children's symbolic skills appears to occur gradually. Consequently, the visit to the graveyard may be important for how Matthew perceives parts of reality in the future.

Why do people die? Is anyone I know buried here? How to behave by the grave of a sibling. Negotiations on the grave of Peter's sister

When walking through the graveyard, they pass a memorial stone where the boys want to climb, but the preschool teacher suggests something else.

Excerpt B: the grave of a sibling

Ann (turning to Peter):	*But Peter, let me hear: Your little sister, Thea, is she buried here?*
Peter:	*She is lying there, on that heart-shaped stone.* (Points across the graveyard to the other side.)
Ann:	*Shall we go and look?*
Ann (to the other children):	*We are going to look at Thea's grave.*
Another boy:	*Thea?*
	Peter is running to the gravestone shaped as a heart and stands behind the stone as to take care of it.
Peter (to some children):	*But you must not hang on the stone, then she gets very sad. You must not hang over the stone. It is very loose, and then it may fall over.*
Ann (looking at the stone):	*Yes, this is Peter's sister. It is very beautiful here.*
Matthew:	*Is this the sister of Peter?* Tries to look at the inscription. *Is this Mary?* The name of another of Peter's sisters.
Cathy (who has arrived together with some other children):	*No, this is not Mary. It is some years since this happened.*
Cathy:	Ann is moving to keep track of some boys. *(…) And on the heart it is written: 'Thinking of you.' That means that Peter and the others are thinking of their sister. She is buried here.*
Mary (one of the smaller girls in the group), who sits down:	*The big one?*
Cathy:	*Yes, the big Peter, yes. He is her big-brother. She was ill.*
Mary:	*Why?*
Cathy:	*Because she was not healthy.*
Mary:	*But why didn't she grow up?*
Cathy:	*It was like that. She was so ill.*

Interpretation and discussion, excerpt B

The kindergarten teacher knows both boys and their families well. She probably uses the visit to Peter's sister's grave as a diversionary maneuver to avoid conflict, and an encouragement to Peter to show the others this grave. However, the opinion of what happens from the point of view of the author of this article, is that she also uses the boy's Zone of Proximal Development (Wells 2000, 57). His sister's grave site is probably the most sacred place in Peter's family, something Peter's behavior may indicate. In this context Peter surprises the others by taking the role of a more-experienced person (Rogoff et al. 2003), probably learned his role through 'intent participation'. According to Bakhtin, humans are in dialogue with each other and with their entire culture and history when using the language. Meaning arises in the interaction between the speaker and the receiver (Bakhtin 1986, 119–120; Wertsch

1993, 13). Peter is transformed from a noisy boy to become the guardian of his sister's grave. He has received – or taken – a new position in the group, showing the others some of his personal experiences and let his voice be heard, where 'voice' is defined as 'the speaking personality, the speaking consciousness' (Holquist and Emerson in Wertsch 1993, 12). The voice of an adult caregiver becomes audible in Peter's depiction of the headstone as a primary artefact: 'It is very loose, and then it may fall over.' In Peter's voice, it is possible to hear the admonitions of the adults as he uses the stone as a secondary artefact, highlighting the norms for gravestones: 'But you must not hang on the stone', and as a tertiary artefact in a caring remark and legitimation of the norms, in a mix between immanence and transcendence: 'then she gets very sad'. Here he identifies himself with his sister and became a voice of her feelings in afterlife. He has probably experienced sadness in his family in connection to the death of his sister, and those voices may be mixed together with his own feelings. It is difficult to know if the boy is thinking of a transcendent world as heaven. In Testoni et al.'s empirical study of a death education intervention (2019), the five-year-old children expressed the transcendent dimension in this way: 'a power that comes from inside', 'a light that you can see with eyes closed and feel with your heart' or 'an intimate thing you can feel' (339). Neither God nor heaven is mentioned in the conversation. Peter acts as his family's representative in the graveyard, and he represents people who are both dead and alive as he interacts with his peers.

The last scene in excerpt B shows how an assistant's circle-answers make new questions for a little girl, trying to understand the big questions of life. The assistant does probably not feel comfortable in the situation, and she is unsure of how to respond. The girl does not get any supporting scaffolding to get further help with her wondering.

Children may also die. Negotiations on death of children

The preschool teacher at last leads the children to the grave site of a boy who was playing in the street and was hit by a car. There is a photo of the boy and some of his drawings on the headstone. The preschool teacher creates a small narrative for the children. They can hear the boy's name and look at the photo and the drawings, and their teacher told them about what caused his death. Death is an inevitable event that may happen unexpected. The girl, referred to in the previous paragraph, shows her empathy by patting the photo. Children's acquisition of social competence is learned in their interactions with adults who are well-known to them (Rogoff 2003; Wells 2000). The cultural tool used by their teacher is a narrative, and narratives as cultural tools are used in both familiar and institutional settings to convey important happenings (Wertsch 2002, 55–57).

Summary and conclusion

The situation they experienced that day in the graveyard functions well as a backdrop for later conversations about existential questions in circle time. The graveyard provided a natural context for interacting and negotiating questions about death and functions as a material artefact, which makes the narratives present, and leads to new negotiations (Fauske 2018, 2019; Testoni et al. 2019; Zanetti 2020). The material artefacts function as tools on primary, second and third level by providing the narratives that open up the collective memory through information and narratives. Memories from the past are brought forward (Bruner 1986, 1990; Wertsch 2002).

Death cannot be ignored in education, and a Norwegian preschool teacher 'shall explore and wonder at existential, ethical, religious, spiritual and philosophical questions together with the children' (MoER 2017). This preschool teacher facilitates this by daring a close encounter with the grave site together with the children. 'Death is not a stranger to children. It is a part of their live experiences, figures into games they play, stories they hear, movies they watch, television programs beamed into their homes' (Bluebond-Langner and Schwallie 2009, 240).

The conclusion of this study is that graveyards with its material artefacts open up for negotiations and interaction related to life and death, and that the children correspond as very keen learners. One of the children surprises the others as an experienced user of the grave site, which is his family's memorial place. The interest and empathy children express through this walk across the graveyard, should give ECEC teachers inspiration to dare to take the children to a graveyard near their ECEC center, and facilitate the talk through the artefacts. This last year, we have also had the Corona Pandemic, which naturally raises existential questions, including questions about death for us all.

Disclosure statement

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