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The Value of Literature in the Process of Preparing a Child for the Death of a Close Relative in the Context of Edith Grotberg's Concept of Resilience

Wartość literatury w procesie przygotowywania dziecka na odejście bliskiej osoby w kontekście koncepcji odporności psychicznej Edith Grotberg

KEYWORDS ABSTRACT

bereavement, death, children's literature, resilience, teacher, educator, content analysis

The purpose of the study presented in this article was to learn about the ways death is depicted in children's literature. Content analysis of twenty books that are available in Poland and describe the death of a close person in the life of a child indicates the phenomenon of familiarization with the meaning of death in children's literature. A characteristic feature of the analysed books is the presentation of

passing away as a natural stage in the life cycle. The books illustrate the relationship with the dying person and with the child's significant adults as values. The results of the study were interpreted considering Edith Grotberg's concept of resilience. The results demonstrate that the books can be used to strengthen the resilience of children experiencing bereavement in all three dimensions: "I have," "I am" and "I can." Death is embedded in the context of illness and the places to which the dead people go take different forms, such as heaven, a secret island, and the hearts of relatives. Reading the books that were analysed may contribute to the development of children's competence to recognize and communicate their own emotions. The factor that influences children's resilience, which is present in almost all of the analysed books, is the relationship with an adult caregiver.

SŁOWA KLUCZE ABSTRAKT

żałoba, śmierć,
literatura dziecięca,
rodzice, resilience,
odporność
psychiczna,
nauczyciel, pedagog,
analiza treści

Celem badania zaprezentowanego w artykule było poznanie sposobów przedstawienia śmierci w literaturze dziecięcej. Przeprowadzono analizę treści dwudziestu dostępnych na polskim rynku wydawniczym książek o problematyce śmierci bliskiej osoby w życiu dziecka. Wyniki badań wskazują na zjawisko „detabuizacji” śmierci w literaturze dziecięcej. Cechą charakterystyczną przeanalizowanych książek jest przedstawianie odchodzenia jako naturalnego etapu życia oraz eksponowanie relacji z osobą umierającą i ze znaczącymi dla dziecka dorosłymi jako wartości. Wyniki badania zostały zinterpretowane w świetle koncepcji odporności psychicznej Edith Grotberg. Pozwalają wnioskować, że analizowane książki mogą być wykorzystywane jako środki kształtujące odporność psychiczną dzieci doświadczających żałoby we wszystkich trzech wymiarach: „Ja mam”, „Ja jestem”, „Ja potrafię”. Śmierć w książkach jest w analizowanej literaturze wpisana w kontekst choroby, a miejsca, do których udają się zmarli, przybierają różne formy, np. niebo, tajemnicza wyspa, serca bliskich. Lektura książek może przyczynić się przede wszystkim do rozwijania kompetencji rozpoznawania i komunikowania przez dzieci własnych stanów emocjonalnych. Czynnikiem wpływającym na odporność psychiczną, obecnym niemal we wszystkich przeanalizowanych książkach, jest relacja z dorosłym opiekunem.

Introduction

The aim of the research presented in this article was to explore the ways in which death is presented in children's literature. The team research project was conducted in 2022 at the Institute of Pedagogy of the Jagiellonian University, when the issue

of death of loved ones was emerging in the public debate in the context of children's wartime experiences. For the research team this issue was a motivation to search for strategies of supporting children who lost their loved ones not only during the war. The scientific background to which the results refer is the theory of psychological resilience as defined by Edith Grotberg, who understands resilience as "the universal capacity that enables a person, group or community to prevent, minimise or overcome the harmful effects of experienced misfortune" (Grotberg, 2000, p.14). This concept formed the basis of the study for two reasons. First, psychological resilience is a quality that enables one to overcome difficult situations, such as the death of a loved one, in an optimum way. Second, the concept has a practical dimension: it provides information that make it possible to properly direct preventive and intervention actions offered to children.

Theoretical assumptions

Specific Features of Mourning by Children in Different Age Groups

Mourning is "a set of feelings and psychological processes experienced by a human being after losing a loved person" (Makselon, 1985, p. 487). The intensity and the way it is experienced changes with the time between the loss and the stage of the child's cognitive development (Leist, 2009).

For children as young as 2 years old, death is experienced as a disappearance, and the lack of understanding of this phenomenon causes anxiety, fear, despair and confusion often manifested by crying because of the absence of a loved one. The death of the person who was in the closest relationship with the child (usually the mother) is particularly painful.

Between the ages of 2 and 5 the child is still unable to comprehend the irreversibility of death, treating it as a temporary separation (Kielar-Turska, 2008, p. 325). Because of the loss of a close person, the child is frustrated as he/she is trying to find them. The emotions that are experienced by the child may include anxiety, irritability, crying, lack of appetite, weight loss, reduced activity, impaired speech development and immune system dysfunction. Children in this age group experiencing the loss of a parent are aware of their own difference from their peers due to the absence of the second parent. The need for his/her presence can result in both a desire for and aversion to others.

A child between the ages of 5 and 8 still does not fully understand death, although he/ she can already distinguish between death and sleep. At this time, the personification of death appears, which means that the child imagines death as a character who "comes to take a person" and whose actions can be magically protected against

(Kielar-Turska, 2008, p. 325). Children at this age believe that wishing someone death may become a reality, which leads to fears about their own fragility and that of others. The essence of conversations held with children at this time is to tame feelings of helplessness and fear of death, which, in this age group, is similar to the fear experienced in connection with various irrational events known, for example, from fairy tales (Kielar-Turska, 2008, p. 325). A child who is mourning may idealise the deceased person and want to take over their role. Also, the child may start to fear that something wrong will happen to the surviving parent. The child may relieve stress by displaying aggressive behaviour. It is also important to bear in mind the characteristic fears and feelings of helplessness caused by thinking about one's own death and health. These fears may be accompanied by lowered self-esteem, nightmares and feelings of guilt. Although children avoid talking about their own emotions, they often express them in play, replaying the situation of death or funeral. They may imitate the behaviour of adults and this is also the case in a situation of mourning. The way in which this process is experienced by the accompanying adults is therefore important (Herbert, 2005; Stachnik and Kotlińska-Lemieszek, 2018).

Children aged 7 years and more become aware of the irreversibility of death and of their own mortality. The fear of death replaces the fear of the dark at this time (Kielar-Turska, 2008, p. 326). Fear of the death of one's parents and attempts to search for external causes of death, which may include illness, accident or homicide, also appear during this period (Kielar-Turska, 2008, p. 326). Around the age of 8, children are able to identify the biological manifestations of death and understand the concepts associated with it. Behavioural manifestations following a loss experienced during this developmental period can include difficulty showing emotions, excessive control, rebellious behaviour, creating the appearance of independence, and hiding true feelings. While working with the child aged between 8 and 12 years old it is important to make them aware of the connection between their feelings and the loss of a loved one, and especially to encourage them to accept the fear which, irrespective of the person's age, is inscribed into mourning.

For young people between the ages of 12 and 18 it is possible to fully understand the irreversibility of death. This raises questions about the meaning of life. Children who experience mourning at this age are at risk of depression and suicidal thoughts. They may engage in risky behaviour which may be accompanied by aggression and self-aggression. Adolescents are at risk of parentification which includes replacing their parents in functions intended for adults (Żłobicki, 2018, p. 341). As adolescents often express a desire to talk about loss with a stranger, support from adults, not just loved ones, is crucial during this period. It is important to get professional support and to intervene when distressing conditions escalate (Herbert, 2005; Stachnik and Kotlińska-Lemieszek, 2018).

Each developmental phase is characterised by a different understanding of death and slightly different behaviours and emotions experienced after the loss. However, in all age groups, the support of accepting adults is essential for surviving the difficult period. This theme is developed, among others, within the psychological concept of resilience by Grotberg.

Relationship as a value in the light of the psychological resilience theory by E. Grotberg

Resilience is not a new concept, but it is definitely important in the context of children's mental health (Sikorska, 2016). Research on the subject has been carried out since the 1950s and it is particularly worth to mention the concepts of Emma E. Werner and Norman Garmeiz who have had a significant impact on explaining the phenomenon of psychological resilience. Edith Grotberg, a German psychologist, continued to analyse this subject. Her theory was developed in the 1990s based on research conducted in 14 countries. The aim was to find "answers to the question of what parents, caregivers and children do to support the development of resilience" (Grotberg, 2000, p. 14). The author identified 36 qualitative factors that facilitate the development of resilience, and divided them into three categories: "I have", "I am", "I can"... (Grotberg, 2000, pp. 23–24).

The first of those element refers to the people who surround the child, their unconditional love, acceptance and support. The child who is aware of the fact that he/she is surrounded by adults whom he/she can trust; who knows the structures and principles valid at home; who is aware of social roles and encouraged to independence; has more opportunities to gain psychological resilience than his/her peer who fails to experience it. It is also important to be aware of external resources, such as school or hospital staff, which are represented by employees of schools or hospitals. The second component of psychological resilience: "I am", focuses on the child's inner qualities and how he/she perceives himself/ herself. The child's feelings and beliefs are important. According to the author, a resilient child will see himself/herself as a person who is loved, loving, proud of himself/herself, independent and responsible, and full of hope and trust. The last component: "I can" draws attention to the child's social competence acquired in relationships with others. The theory assumes that a resilient child can communicate, solve problems, deal with one's feelings, knows his/her own temperament, and is able to turn to an appropriate adult for help when needed (Grotberg, 2000, pp. 25–27).

The combination of the above components is the source of a child's resilience in difficult situations. Given the importance of adult support highlighted by Grotberg, the importance of relationships in shaping and supporting children's psychological resilience cannot be overstated (Sikorska et al., 2019).

Opportunities to use literature in supporting children's resilience

The role of adults in supporting children's psychological resilience stems from the existence of the three above-mentioned factors that shape this trait. As Grotberg points out, it is not only the sources of support found in the child's immediate environment that play an important role, but also his/her environments outside the family. Particularly relevant in this context are the educational institutions where children spend a significant part of their day: kindergartens and schools, including the pedagogues and teachers who work in them (Nieroba et al., 2010).

The support that a school can provide to a pupil who lost a loved one is usually of an ad-hoc nature, but preventive support also deserves attention in the context of our research. It is important that "illness, suffering and death constitute an obligatory block of the content of lessons with the class teacher. This is because, most often, classes on these topics only appear when the school community is affected by the tragedy, but then such occasional attention becomes humiliating, especially for those directly involved" (Nieroba et al., 2010, pp. 252). This postulate is in line with the observations of psychiatrists who emphasise the importance of prevention of traumatic situations before they occur (Cohen et al., 2004). Thus, earlier preparation of children for difficult situations may include both reinforcing their resources and direct discussion of topics related to possible occurrence of traumatic situations (Cohen et al., 2004).

In both ad hoc and preventive support of children's mental resilience, literature plays a significant role (Dmitruk-Sierocińska, 2017; Gwadera, 2008; Sztobryn-Bochomska 2020). Books in which the theme of dying is present are nowadays available to both parents and teachers wishing to take intervention or preventive action. As Małgorzata Gwadera notes, "the motif of death in literature for children and young people is not an unknown phenomenon, but undoubtedly a new one in its contemporary image" (Gwadera 2008, p. 113). The contemporary image of death in children's literature became the subject of this research project.

Methodology of the research

The research was carried out in 2022 by participants and the leader of the course: "Analysis and interpretation of qualitative data". Its aim was to explore ways of depicting death in children's literature. The method used was content analysis of 20 children's books available on the contemporary Polish publishing market. The criteria for their selection were: accessibility of information about the books in the internet, as well as availability of the books in bookshops and libraries. The choice of the above criteria made it possible to select the most popular works. In the process of analysis,

not only the text layer was taken into account but also the illustrations, which, in the opinion of the researchers, are as important as the text (Table 1).

Table. 1. Books that have been analysed

Title	Author	Illustrator	Suggested age of the reader in years
45 naprawdę niezwykłych słoni	Marta Zaremba	Agnieszka Żelewska	+ 4
Brune	Håkon Øvreås	Øyvind Torseter	6-12
Chusta babci	Åsa Lind	Joanna Høllgren	+ 3
Cudowna wyspa dziadka	Benji Davies	Benji Davies	+ 3
Czas czarodziej	Isabela Minhos Martins, Magdalena Matoso	Magdalena Matoso	3-6
Czy umiesz gwizdać, Joanno?	Ulf Stark	Anna Höglund	6-12
Długa wędrówka	Martin Widmark	Emilia Dziubak	3-6
Dziewczynka z parku	Barbara Kosmowska	Emilia Dziubak	7-14
Kiedy kiedyś, czyli Kasia, Panian i Pangór	Jarosław Mikołajewski	Dorota Łoskot-Cichocka	+ 8
Mała książka o śmierci	Pernilla Stalfelt	Pernilla Stalfelt	6-12
Mój dziadek był drzewem czereśniowym	Angela Nanetti	Anastazja Stefiurak	8-12
Ostatni dżem babci	Alicja Dyrda	Ola Woldańska-Płocińska	4-8
Pan Stanisław odlatuje	Justyna Bednarek	Paweł Pawlak	3-6
Ścisłe tajne	Paweł Beresewicz	Maciej Szymanowicz	+ 7
Śnieżna siostra	Maja Lunde	Lisa Aisato	+ 9
Tkaczka chmur	Katarzyna Jackowska-Enemuo	Marianna Sztyma	+ 5
Wdzięczny kwiat	Sarolta Szuljovszky, Luca Morandini	Sarolta Szuljovszky	6-9
Wszędzie i we wszystkim	Sarolta Szulj	Sassafras De Bruyn	+ 6
Za siódmą górą	Magda Małkowska	Hanna Kmiec	+ 4
Żegnaj niedźwiadku	Jane Chapman	Jane Chapman	4-6

*Information on the suggested age of the leader come from the publishing houses' websites

Source: the author's own work.

Thematic coding was used according to the author's book analysis form developed in the Microsoft Forms application. Open thematic coding (Gibbs, 2015; Saldaña, 2009) referred to the text and illustrations based on the adopted criteria extracted from the following research questions:

1. In which context the motif of death of a loved person appears?
2. How is the way of existing of the deceased described in the book?
3. What emotions related to death are presented in the book?
4. What aspects of the process of dying are presented in the books?

5. In which way the idea of resilience by E. Grotberg may be reinforced with the use of the analysed literary texts?

Research results

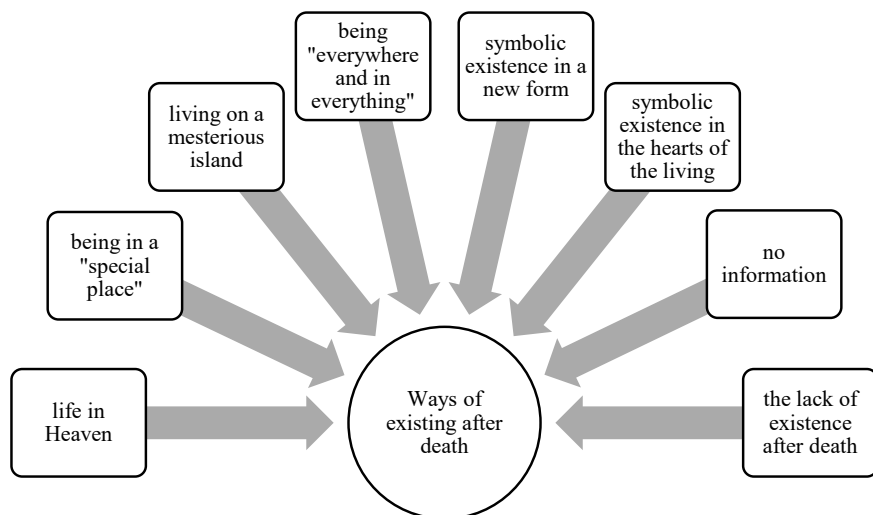
The context in which the motif of death of a loved person appears in the books

The deaths of loved ones in the texts analysed refers to situations that can actually happen in children's lives. The protagonists of the vast majority of the books are people, with the exception of a publication whose protagonists are other characters (forest animals). In most publications, the people who pass away are family members: a grandfather, a grandmother, one of the parents or siblings. Publications in which the reason for the death of one of the characters is known link the death situation to an unspecified illness. The books we analysed do not deal with the theme of passing away as a result of, for example, an accident or any other unexpected situation. This may reflect the authors' intentions to make children familiar with death by presenting it as one of the natural stages in the life cycle.

The existence of the loved ones after their death

In the books analysed, the way in which a loved one exists after death is portrayed in various ways, with heaven being the most common place of departure for the dying person. In some books there were also explanations suggesting that, after death, a person reaches a mysterious "special place" that no one has yet recognised or named. The mysteriousness of this space is the reason for the excitement expressed by the following statement of the departing protagonist: "What pleases me most is that I still don't know what's above! I love surprises!" (Bednarek and Pawlak, 2019: p. 20). Positive emotions can also be evoked by the idea that a person's death results in their going to another place that resembles an exotic island which is so attractive that, during one of the excursions through the land of imagination in the short story: *Grandfather's Wonderful Island*, the main character (grandfather), declares to his grandson that he would like to stay on this island forever (Davies, 2018, p. 26).

Figure 1. Ways in which the deceased exist in the books analysed



Another explanation consists in depicting life after death as being *everywhere and in everything*. The deceased mother of one of the book's main character "is in the objects in the house and in the teddy bear she sewed; she is the flower and the wind [...]. She is everywhere and in everything" (Hest and De Bruyn, 2019, p. 20). Showing death in this way seems to suggest that death does not necessarily mean the complete absence of an "earthly presence". Indeed, the person the child misses can be associated with a plant or animal, as in the story: *Dziewczynka z parku [Girl from the Park]* in which the father announces to his daughter that he will visit her after his death in the form of a nuthatch (Kosmowska, 2021). The deceased person can also exist symbolically in the hearts of other people, as exemplified in the book *45 naprawdę niezwykłych stoni [45 Truly Remarkable Elephants]*: "Here. -Dad took Tosia's hand and put it on the place where her heart was beating. - And here it will always be" (Zaremba, 2019, p. 10).

There are also books in which male and female authors make no attempt to explain or rationalise the phenomenon of life after death. An example is *Mała książka o śmierci [The Little Book of Death]* the author of which presents a variety of beliefs and convictions about what happens to humans after death (Stalfelt, 2020). A similar situation occurs in the book *Długa wędrówka [Long Walk]* which describes mourning of a boy who has experienced the loss of his beloved dog, and in the book *Tkaczka chmur [Cloud Weaver]*, a tale about a boy trying to save his terminally ill sister from death at all costs (Jackowska-Enemuo, 2021; Widmark and Dziubak, 2018). In the analysed books for children over the age of six, this lack of clarity is not due to an attempt to

make the theme of death a taboo, but to a conscious decision by the authors to leave it in the realm of ignorance despite the presence of the anxiety that can be associated with an unsolved existential mystery.

Emotions presented in the books under research

The emotions experienced by the children in the texts include primarily sadness, despair, confusion, anger, longing, grief, surprise, fear, and helplessness. Other emotions include tenderness, feelings of relief and agreement, curiosity, joy and trust. The illustrations in the books significantly complement the emotional states described. We can see this in the following examples:

Figure 2. Cover of the book *Długa wędrówka* painted by Emila Dziubak; https://mama.pl/product-pol-335-Dluga-wedrowka.html?utm_source=iai_ads&utm_medium=google_shopping

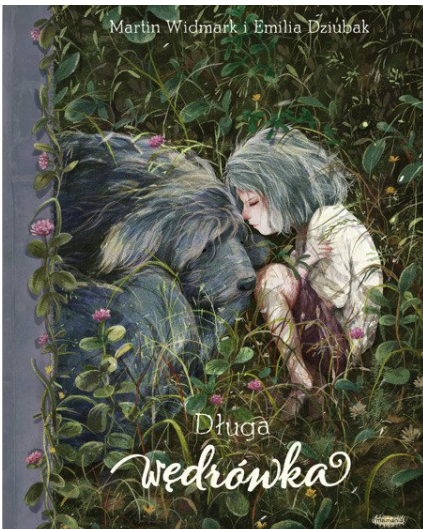
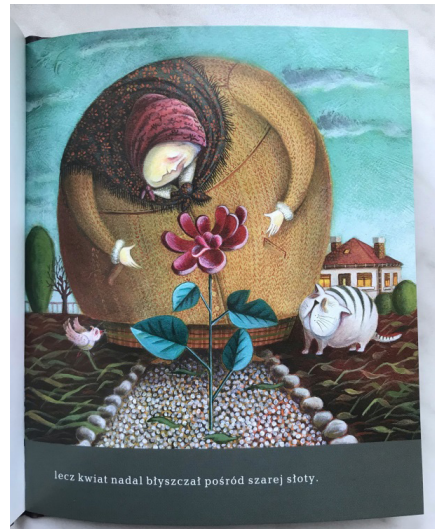


Figure 3. Picture from the book *Wdzięczny kwiat*, made by Sarolta Szulyovszky, p. 12, photo by Zuzanna Smulka



Exploring the wide range of emotions that accompany children when they are mourning is important for both themselves and their adult carers. Careful reading allows adults to become aware of emotional burden the existence of which children often fail to communicate directly. The way the characters communicate their emotions is noteworthy. The following statement by the grandson, the main character in the book *Ostatni dżem babci [Grandma's Last Jam]*, is one example: "With this journey it's not really like that, I know that. Grandma's not going anywhere; she's just

dying. She just won't be with us anymore. And when I think like this, I run to my mum to hug her at once. And I feel like crying. And something clutches me inside" (Szwinta-Dyrda, 2021, p. 29).

Aspects of the process of dying mentioned in the books

The presence of supportive adults is a theme that occurs in the vast majority, i. e. as many as in seventeen of the twenty books analysed.

The most common, relational aspect of leaving involves the characters' experience of intimacy. The books show relationships with departing loved ones as important encounters with significance in the later development of children. The bonds portrayed in the book refer, on the one hand, to the children's relationship with the departed, as exemplified by Kazio's statement in the book *Ostatni dżem babci* [*Grandma's Last Jam*]: "I saw my grandmother, but I didn't recognise her. She doesn't want to play with me at all, she just lies down. And I thought it would be like always" (Szwinta-Dyrda, 2021, pp.11-13). The protagonist's statement is placed within the context of a significant relationship in his life with his grandmother who is dying. The response to the concerns of the girl from the book *Dziewczynka z parku* [*Girl from the Park*] is a supportive statement from her dying dad who has a strong bond with his daughter: "You need to know that nothing bad will happen to me. People leave every day. Each in their own way. Sometimes far away. It's hard, but we like trips into the unknown after all, don't we?" (Kosmowska, 2021, p. 50).

On the other hand, the relationships shown in the books include people who stay with the children after the death of a close person. Statements from the book *45 naprawdę niezwykłych słoni* [*45 Truly Remarkable Elephants*] are important in this context: "Tosia was crying loudly and her dad was comforting her and hugging her" (Zaremba, 2019, p. 12). The story also resounds with the anxiety-filled question: "What will happen now?" asked in the presence of her dad, i. e. in a safe relationship.

A relationship involving the sincere sharing of a difficult experience has a therapeutic function, as it allows the suffering to be shared with another person, like in the book *Żegnaj, niedźwiadku* [*Goodbye, Bear*] by Jane Chapman: "The summer evenings grew shorter and shorter until they turned into cold, dark, winter evenings. Beaver and Mole talked about the bear and smiled. Sometimes they cried. And sometimes they just sat in silence" (Chapman, 2022, p. 9). Also, a relationship is also sometimes presented as a support for the loneliness felt by the child after the passing of a loved one: "She was not crying, but she was drawing the forest and the neighbouring meadow all day long. [...] In here images there were trees, flowers, entrance to the cave, but there were no people" (Małkowska, 2017, p. 20).

Apart from the relational aspect of death, in two books attention was drawn to its religious aspect, and five books referred to the medical aspect.

Analysed literary texts and sources of children's psychological resilience

By looking at the analysed literary works through the lens of Grotberg's concept of psychological resilience, conclusions can be drawn related to the role of the analysed literary works in developing particular sources of psychological resilience in children who have already experienced the death of a loved one or are yet to experience this.

The child's resources defined by the term: "I have" include the books available in today's publishing market and the relationships presented in them. Good access to books makes them available not only to children, but also to their parents and other carers. On the basis of a book which is the starting point for children's conversations with adults, it is possible to create relationships full of acceptance and understanding of children's emotions. The books analysed, appropriately interpreted by children and adults, make it possible to create a relationship as the key source of psychological resilience.

There is also content in the texts analysed that allows children, with the help of adults, to acquire beliefs about their own qualities that form the basis of psychological resilience ("I am"). It is the conviction of being loved by the ones who are still alive. The very act of spending time reading together contributes to reinforcing this belief in the child. Through the readings analysed, the child can also gain the conviction of being accepted when they realise that what they themselves feel is also close to the characters in the books, e. g. emotions of trust and hope.

Conclusions

The aim of the research presented in this article was to answer the research questions concerning the content of selected children's books on dying (questions 1-4) and the possibility of supporting, by means of the analysed texts (question 5), the psychological resilience of children preparing for the death of someone close to them or already mourning. The content analysis conducted indicates the presence of many elements that can enrich the process of preparing children for the death of a loved one. Particularly noteworthy are the numerous examples of ways in which children communicate their own emotions. These exemplifications may encourage readers to use similar strategies for recognising and disclosing emotions in the presence of supportive adults. The books analysed bring the issue of death to children in a way that is adapted to the natural course of the development of cognitive representations of

death. This is because first “the child grasps death in terms of the interruption of biological and psychological life functions; then he/she becomes aware of the irreversibility of death, and finally the child grasps the universal nature of this phenomenon”

(Kielar-Turska, 2008, p. 326). In an atmosphere of acceptance of natural developmental changes, it is worth supporting children’s resilience by preparing them for the experience of the loss of a loved one. The texts analysed, apart from being helpful in supporting children’s mental resilience, also meet the postulates formulated by M. Kielar-Turska, answering the question: “How to talk about death with a child?” (Kielar-Turska, 2008, p. 324) As the author suggests, “such talks need to be open, honest and reasonable [...]. Conducting such a discourse requires taking into account the cognitive and emotional development of the child; it is also necessary to use words that do not imply a misunderstanding of the topic by the child” (Kielar-Turska, 2008, p. 324).

Increasing psychological resilience is a long-term and systematic effort, not an ad hoc action. It should be noted, therefore, that reading books about death cannot instantly solve the difficult situation of a child after the loss of a loved one. However, the analysis of both the textual and illustrative layers of the selected books indicates that literature provides support for the psychological resilience of children who are mourning or who may experience death of a close person in the future.

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