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# Children's everyday grief and grieving in the preschool setting

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## Biographical notes on contributors

*Gloria Quiñones* is a senior lecturer in the Faculty of Education at Monash University, Australia. Her research focuses on infant-toddler pedagogies, play, emotions, and visual methodologies. Recent research focuses on children's peer relations and friendships, infant-toddlers play and affective pedagogies.

*Lasse Lipponen* is a professor of early childhood education, at the Faculty of Educational Sciences, University of Helsinki. His research work is directed to cultures of compassion; inclusion; and play. He has authored over 100 research articles on teaching and learning, and is a recipient of several awards, such as Helsinki University "Good Teacher" Magister Bonus prize.

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*Melissa Barnes* is a senior lecturer in the Faculty of Education, working within the fields of teacher education, assessment, policy and TESOL. She teaches and leads research initiatives that focus on policy construction, interpretation and enactment, with a focus on how policies impact and shape teaching and learning. She has published in journals such as *Critical Studies in Education*, *Discourse*, and *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, among others. Melissa has been a classroom teacher in the US, Germany, Vietnam and Australia, collectively shaping her understanding and approach to teaching and learning.

## **Children's everyday grief and grieving in the preschool setting**

This article investigates children's everyday grief and grieving experiences. Medical and psychological approaches to grief and grieving usually focus on the death of loved ones. However, research on everyday grief and grieving in early childhood education is absent. A cultural–historical approach was used to examine grief and grieving in the preschool setting. Video observations were made of Mayra, a 5-year-old girl living in a rural Mexican community. The findings show that grief and grieving are affected by children's social situations, the material conditions of the location and the teacher's role in showing compassion. Implications from this study highlight the need to examine everyday grief in the context of the cultural, social and emotional experiences of children who experience a sense of loss when relating to peers. We highlight the importance of focusing on everyday situations in which children feel hurt as part of their grief and grieving processes.

**Keywords:** everyday grief, grieving, wholeness approach, early childhood education, cultural–historical theory

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this article is to understand what encompasses children's everyday grief and grieving. Specifically, we draw on a cultural situation in which a child is attempting to understand how to act in the world (Brinkmann, 2019; Brinkmann & Kofod, 2018). The aim is to explore how everyday grief and grieving can be examined both empirically and theoretically. We draw on cultural–historical theory as an alternative approach to psychological and medical approaches to studying children's grief and grieving.

### ***Medical and psychological approaches to grief and grieving***

Psychological and medical approaches to grief and grieving suggest that grief is a normal universal human phenomenon, commonly following the death of a loved one (Bowman, 2018;

Kochen et al., 2020; Jones, 2020). Grief is an emotional reaction, triggered by the loss of someone close (Brinkmann, 2019; Papa & Litz, 2011), and includes negative emotions and responses such as feelings of loss, pain, guilt, regret, shock, anger and stress, which may last for several months (Arslan & Buldukoglu, 2019; Ener & Ray, 2017; Papa & Litz, 2011).

An everyday example of death experienced by young children is the loss of a beloved pet (Bowman, 2018; Jones, 2020) and loss of a mother (Lubetzky, 2018). Adults can teach children compassion by showing patience, offering hugs and verbally expressing emotions such as sadness (Bowman, 2018). Jones (2020) argues that although young children do not understand death, they may show feelings of grief (such as feeling responsible for the loss of a pet). These psychological and medical approaches offer relatively little understanding of the collective and culturally mediated nature of grief. Moreover, the perspectives of children and their ways of expressing, verbalising and practising grief are almost completely absent.

In relation to cultural approaches, grief and grieving processes are deeply entangled with cultural and normative practices. Further, grief is not passively experienced—humans actively practise grief in an attempt to change their social and material conditions (Brinkmann, 2017, 2019; Kofod & Brinkmann, 2017). We argue that the study of grief and grieving must be contextualised in social and institutional settings and practices (e.g. families or preschools) (Hedegaard, 2020). We consider grief an umbrella concept for various emotional experiences and situations (e.g. longing, loneliness and insecurity).

From a cultural–historical perspective and in the context of early childhood education, grief involves some degree of suffering, such as being excluded from play activities, missing parents or being hurt (Lipponen et al., 2018). We extend this to examine emotional situations beyond the death of loved ones as mundane and ubiquitous aspects of children’s lives. Everyday examples of children’s grief and grieving include the loneliness and suffering associated with not

having friends, transitioning from home to the early childhood setting, being separated from parents or guardians or suffering from illness. We argue that by focusing on children's grief and grieving in the context of their cultural dynamics, adults can learn meaningful ways to support children's learning and development.

The aim of this paper is to explore everyday social and peer-related situations in which children experience grief and grieving. In this article, we explore 5-year-old Mayra's experience of grief when attempting to make friends and during a game in a preschool setting. In the following section, we offer a theoretical framework grounded in cultural–historical theory for studying children's everyday grief and grieving.

### ***Cultural–historical theory***

A cultural–historical approach is used to analyse children's grief and grieving situations and experiences. Vygotsky conceptualised learning and development as a process in which children participate in their own cultural communities (Hedegaard & Flear, 2010). Vygotsky's theory of children's learning and development focuses on an important concept—the *social situation of development*. According to Vygotsky (1998), the social situation of development in relation to a child's reality

determines wholly and completely the forms and the path along which the child will acquire every newer personality characteristics, drawing them from the social reality as from the basic source of development, the path along which the social becomes the individual. (p. 198)

The social situation of development is an important theoretical concept when studying children's learning and development because children's social reality is the source of their learning and development. Therefore, when studying children's grief and grieving in social

situations, we must pay attention to the social relationships and the path along which the child becomes an individual.

A wholeness approach involves studying children's learning and development from societal, institutional and personal perspectives (Hedegaard, 2009). From the societal perspective, cultural traditions, material conditions, values and norms determine a child's learning and development. From the institutional perspective, various cultural practices, traditions and activity settings (e.g. homework, play, dinnertime) in different institutions (e.g. families or preschools) (Hedegaard, 2009; Hedegaard & Fler, 2013) influence learning and development. Moreover, child-initiated activities and motive orientations are informed by the demands of others. The personal perspective involves children's motivations and engagements as they participate in various institutional settings.

From the institutional perspective, activity settings are structured as traditional activities depending on the specific culture. Institutions create the conditions for a child's social situation in which the child must engage with the institution's practices and traditions (Hedegaard & Fler, 2013). In these institutional practices and activity settings, children must orient their own demands and motives according to those of adults or other children (Hedegaard, 2014). The social situation of development is important in 'recognising the practices and values of families' (Hedegaard & Fler, 2010, p. 165).

From the personal perspective, children's motives shape their actions and intentions in various activity settings and practices. Children participate in a range of institutions, which give rise to the demands and motives that children must navigate (Hedegaard, 2014). As children encounter the demands of different institutional settings and practices, their own motives and intentions may change (Hedegaard, 2020). As they participate in different activities and are

influenced by the demands of these institutions, children acquire competencies and motives and learn how to relate to the world around them (Hedegaard, 2020).

Notably, children can have different emotional experiences in the same activity settings in which they participate (Hedegaard & Fleer, 2013). Experiences depend on children's understanding of the 'circumstances affecting them and their ability to reflect on . . . these circumstances' (Hedegaard & Fleer, 2013, p. 14). Such emotional experiences determine how children position themselves in life. Bozhovich (2009) explains that experiences also involve a complex system of feelings and emotions in others. The people surrounding the child are critical to his or her learning; therefore, it is important to explore how children's environmental conditions affect the nature of their experiences. Thus, we argue that emotions and feelings are important in how children participate in different activities and in grief and grieving experiences. Emotions are 'constructed, enacted, and negotiated in everyday social interactions' (Lipponen et al., 2018, p. 168) and are manifested in everyday life. Children's emotions are an important aspect of their everyday learning and development (Lipponen et al., 2018). We focus on grief and grieving in relation to a child's immediate social situation, emotional experiences and participation in a preschool setting. The following section introduces the research study and the case examples selected for analysis.

## **Methodology**

The aim of this paper is to explore culturally situated manifestations of grief and grieving in a rural community in Mexico. The larger study was a component of the lead author's doctoral research, which investigated the emotional experiences and everyday lives of children in Mexico (Quiñones, 2013a, 2013b; Quiñones & Fleer, 2011). Lipponen's research on compassion (Hilppö, Rajala, & Lipponen, 2019; Lipponen, 2018; Lipponen et al., 2018; Rajala & Lipponen, 2018),

grief and grieving inspired us to consider diverse cultural practices, specifically in communities such as those in Mexico.

### ***Mexican rural community***

The Mexican rural community adopted for this study is located in the north of Mexico, 80 km from the city. It is a small village with 25 resident families, two small stores, a kindergarten and a primary school. The researcher organised a community meeting at the preschool to introduce the project to potential participants. Families were informed about and invited to participate in the study. The aim of the study was to investigate the everyday lives and emotional experiences of children in different institutions (i.e. the family and preschool). The study was designed using Hedegaard's wholeness approach discussed above. Ethical permission was granted by Monash University, and consent was received from community and family members, children and teachers.

The researcher lived in the community for two 2-week periods, separated by a 3-week break. This enabled the researcher to participate in the community's everyday activities such as birthday parties, providing further insight into the everyday lives of Mayra and the other children in the community. For example, when the researcher walked around the community, she would greet children who were playing. Thus, the community members (see Quiñones, 2014) effectively positioned the researcher as a teacher.

### ***Participants***

#### ***Family***

Mayra's (5.5 years old) family consisted of her mother, Gina, her brother, José (8 years old), and



her stepfather. Gina was born in the city and later moved with her family to the rural community. Mayra's brother attended the local primary school, while Mayra attended the preschool. The primary school and preschool were multi-aged and consisted of one room, with one teacher for all children in both the primary and preschool. The family lived in a small room provided by a family member, consisting of a bed, a television, a fridge, a stove and a clothes chest. The house had a large backyard, where Mayra and José would play with their bikes.

### *Preschool*

A small group of children attended the preschool. Mayra (5.5 years old), Anna (4.8), Mario (5.2) and Luis (4.8) attended the preschool. Preschool sessions took place Monday to Thursday from 9:00 am to 1:00 pm. All the children were in their final year of preschool. Leo was the preschool teacher and was part of a rural program in which teachers lived in the community. After living there for a month, Leo left the community because of health problems, which reduced the number of research visits to the preschool.

### *Video observations*

Video observations were made of Mayra's everyday life, including in both family and preschool settings. Five visits were made to capture Mayra's everyday family practices, making a total of 9 hours of collected data, which included video observations of after-school play, watching television, dinnertime, walking in the community and visiting her extended family.

Seven visits were made to the preschool setting, consisting of a total of 28 hours of data. Video observations were made of everyday practices in the preschool, capturing peer relationships and friendships between the four children. Anna and Luis were cousins, and Mayra and Mario were neighbours. Luis was excluded from the data collection because he was unwell.

The preschool and family dialogues were translated from Spanish to English. Qualitative intercoder reliability was followed to ensure the selection and analysis of a case example related to grief and grieving focused on emotional pain, loss and feeling hurt (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). The research team reached an 'acceptable agreement' (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020, p. 9) in the analysis of data using a wholeness approach, as described below.

### *Analysis of case example*

A wholeness approach was used to analyse Mayra's grief and grieving experiences. The analysis of the case example followed Hedegaard's (2008) levels of interpretation, which build upon each other. First, *commonsense interpretation* involves the meaningful interpretation of data. This consisted of reviewing the data from the preschool setting in which Mayra was in a peer-learning situation and Leo interacted with the children. To ensure intercoder reliability, the research team discussed the dialogue and case example to prepare for theme generation and reporting. Second, *situated practice interpretation* focuses on patterns of interpretation in a concrete activity setting. In this case, the research team selected an example in which Mayra was hurt in an activity setting at the preschool. The preschool video data show that Mayra lost interest in playing a game after being excluded by her peers (see Adams & Quiñones, 2020). The teacher mostly participated in games when invited by children (see Quiñones, 2013). *Thematic interpretation* involves the use of theoretical concepts to analyse data and find meaningful patterns. For example, we chose a distressing social situation and focused on Mayra's emotional pain, motives and intentions. Further, we explored Leo's compassionate approach to alleviating Mayra's grief during the game. The following section presents a discussion of the findings.

### **Results**

In this section, we first focus on the family home visit to examine Mayra's self-reflection about

her peer relationships. This is followed by a visual example of Mayra playing a game with her peers in the preschool setting.

### ***Family's social situation and grief and grieving: Sense of loss***

In the initial interviews with Mayra's mother, Gina spoke about Mayra's loneliness and how other girls in the community treated Mayra harshly. In the first family visit, Gina discussed her concerns about Mayra attending primary school.

#### *Vignette 1: Grief and grieving: Loneliness*

The researcher visits the family home for the first time. Gina comments,

Oh dear, they are going to kick her at school... Sometimes Mayra cried because she wanted to go and play with Greta's girls, but those girls always kicked her. So, I tell Mayra, 'So, there are no girls, play by yourself', and she plays by herself. She made a little kitchen, she made a hole there, then she had a glass of water and she made some cakes with dirt... because here there are no girls to play with.

Mayra responds, 'I play by myself'. Gina states, 'She stays here. I don't like them to kick her'.

During the second visit, Mayra, Gina and the researcher go to the community store. Anna's mother owns the store, and Anna is there playing with her cousin Luis. As they leave the store, Anna farewells the researcher. After returning to Mayra's home, Mayra makes a comment about Anna: 'She [Anna] always hits me with her foot, sometimes'.

The social situation of development relates to the child's surrounding reality (Vygotsky, 1994), which is important in the study of children's grief and grieving. The social situation involves social relationships with peers and family members, who are an important source of learning and development for children.

Mayra's feelings of loss and loneliness are reflected by her mother's comments, 'there are no girls to play with' and 'I don't like them to kick her', and Mayra's comments, 'I play by myself' and 'she . . . hits me with her foot'. In this conversation, Gina painted a picture of her grief as a sense of loss—Mayra losing the opportunity to play with others and playing by herself. Further, Gina expressed her grief as an emotional concern and fear of Mayra being hurt by certain girls in the community and Mayra attending primary school. Gina also shaped Mayra's perspective of grief and grieving, influencing her reflections on the social situation. It may be argued that Mayra's grief arising from her sense of loneliness and loss of friends shaped how she participated in different social situations (Hedegaard & Fler, 2013). The social situations important to children's learning and development are related to children's relationships with their peers and friends.

Gina's perspectives influenced how Mayra perceived her social situation and her understanding of how to act in the world (Brinkmann, 2019; Brinkmann & Kofod, 2018). Gina's grief and grieving also became Mayra's grief and grieving about her loss of friends and feeling emotionally hurt by peers, leading to loneliness. Mayra's grief developed over time and was related to her remembering her relationships with her peers, shaping her emotional pain. In this dialogue, Mayra's perspective of her grief and grieving (sense of loneliness and pain) were relevant to her later interactions in the preschool setting.

### ***Grief in the preschool setting***

In the 23 hours of video observation, there were eight occasions in which a game ended because of Mayra no longer wanting to participate in the game. The following vignette shows an example of Mayra no longer wanting to play the game because a plastic dice accidentally hit her.

*Vignette 2: Invitation to play the game 'The Search'*

In this vignette, Anna, Mario and Mayra are playing a card game. The cards belong to Mayra and relate to a television program with which Mayra and Anna are familiar. The teacher, Leo, invites the children to play a dice game: Leo: 'Do you want to play?' Mario: 'What?' Leo: 'The Search'. Leo walks, followed by Mario, then Anna and Mayra. Mario jumps up and down: 'Yes, I do'. Anna offers a card to Mayra, who walks on her knees and takes it from Anna's hand. Leo explains the rules: 'We are going to play The Search. I am going to give [you] the die, and then we hide it, yes?' Mario: 'Yes, me first!' Mayra says, 'I don't want to!' Leo: 'Yes, you do! Only one game!' The teacher rolls the dice as the children sit. Leo gives the dice to Anna (see Figure 1).

[Insert Figure 1 near here]

Leo: 'Tell the teacher [researcher] to hide it'. All the children look at the researcher. Anna holds the dice and tells the researcher, 'You can hide it!' Researcher: 'You want me to hide it?'. Anna nods and passes the dice to the researcher. Researcher: 'Okay'. Leo: 'You are not going to see, and then you are going to find it'.

In Vignette 2, the social situation in the preschool involved free playtime. The activity setting of playing provided an opportunity for children to initiate games. Children could bring their own toys and other items of interest to the preschool. In this case, Mayra invited the children to play a game of cards. However, the teacher, Leo, interrupted the game and invited the children and the researcher to play an improvised dice game. This created a new demand in the activity setting and a new motive orientation for the children (Hedegaard, 2014). Mario was enthusiastic and willing to play the game. The researcher who was video recording the situation joined in with the activity. This social situation involved the reconfiguration of relationships

because of a change in the activity setting. Leo's pedagogical practice involved including everyone and motivating the children to play the game.

*Vignette 3: Playing 'The Search'*

Leo and the children rise from the floor and walk towards the corner of the classroom. Leo touches the children's backs as they position themselves. Leo comments, 'You are not going to see'. He makes sure the children are not looking and stands behind them while the researcher hides the dice. Leo comments, 'The teacher [researcher] is going to tell us when it's ready'. The researcher hides the dice and says, 'Ready!' Leo: 'Ready!' The children run to find the dice and search inside boxes and bags around the classroom. They take some time to find it, and the researcher says: 'You are very cold!' (an expression from the researcher's familiarity with the game Hide and Seek, in which 'cold' means far away and 'hot' means close). Mayra comes closer, and the researcher says, 'Hot!' Mayra finds the dice, shows it to everyone and throws it to Leo (see Figure 2). Anna and Mario say, 'Aahhh!!'.

[Insert Figure 2 near here]

Leo hands the dice back to Mayra, who throws it back to the researcher. The researcher hides the dice for the second time, saying, 'Me again? Okay, here we go'. The children follow the same procedure, standing in the corner of the classroom and closing their eyes under the supervision of Leo, who says, 'Do not look, do not look!' Mario: 'Ready!' Researcher: 'No! Ready!' This time the children run to find it. Mario finds the dice hidden under the classroom table, then throws it to the teacher (see Figure 3).

[Insert Figure 3 near here]

Leo throws the dice to Mario, who throws it to the researcher. The researcher hides the dice for the third time. Leo supervises the children, making sure they are not looking. Leo: ‘Do not look, do not look!’ Mario: ‘Ready!’ Researcher: ‘Almost ready!... Ready!’ The children run to find the dice. Mario asks, ‘Where did you hide it?’. Researcher: ‘I do not know’. It takes them some time to find it. Researcher: ‘Cold, cold’. Anna says, ‘Maybe here’. Anna looks quickly through a pile of clothing but does not notice the dice. Mayra checks in the same spot and, for the second time, finds the dice (Figure 4a) and throws it to Leo (Figure 4b).

[Insert Figure 4 near here]

In Vignette 2, the activity setting of the game involved participation, coordination and learning the rules. During play, players (Vygotsky, 1966) create imaginary situations, rules and roles. Leo initiated the game, and as the children played the game, they had to coordinate and orient their motives and intentions towards different actions (Hedegaard, 2014). Leo explicitly explained the rules of the game, waiting in the corner of the classroom with his eyes closed, searching for the dice and throwing and catching the dice to the person hiding it. The role of the participants in the game involved finding the dice. The game created emotional excitement for the children as they anticipated where the dice would be hidden. Leo supervised while the researcher hid the dice, eventually leading to the children hiding it (Vignette 3).

From the institutional perspective, the teacher, Leo, created the material and social conditions for the game. The material conditions involved the dice, while the social conditions were the peer relationships that developed during the game. These conditions also influenced the children’s own and collective social situations: Mario, Anna and Mayra had a collective motivation towards and engagement in the game. Because there were few players, the researcher was invited to join the game. Leo also placed demands on the children, who had to follow the

rules of the game. He constantly reminded the children of the rules by repeating ‘Do not look’ three consecutive times while the researcher hid the dice.

The personal perspective involves the motives, intentions and motivations in the activity setting of play (Hedegaard, 2012). The motive towards the game was competitive—who was first to find the dice. In this game, the children’s perspectives involved their actions, motives and emotions in the activity setting (Hedegaard, 2014). These intentional actions, motives and emotions involved anticipating the search, running with excitement, finding the dice and throwing it to the teacher. During the game, Mayra found the dice twice (Figures 2 and 4a) and Mario found it once (Figure 3). However, the game changed, eventually leading to the group not playing collectively.

*Vignette 3: Encountering grief and grieving: Compassionate approach*

Leo asks, ‘Who wants to hide it?’, and Mario responds, ‘Me’. Mario hides the dice in a bucket, but the teacher quickly stops him, saying, ‘No, no’, because Mayra and Anna are still walking towards the corner of the classroom and have not yet closed their eyes. Leo continues to tell Mario, ‘Not yet, not yet, wait, wait’. Once Anna and Mayra are ready, Mario hides the dice in the bucket. Mario says, ‘Ready!’, and Anna asks, ‘Where is it?’. They run to find it, but Mario retrieves it first (see Figure 5).

[Insert Figure 5 near here]

Mario quickly throws it to Leo, who says, ‘Now I am going to hide it’. This time the children sit down while the teacher hides it. Leo: ‘Do not turn around... Ready!’ Anna: ‘Where is it?’. Anna finds the dice, then hides it again. Mario runs to the corner. Mayra indicates that she no



longer wants to play and walks slowly, while Leo physically encourages her towards the corner (see Figure 6).

[Insert Figure 6 near here]

Anna hides the dice in the same bucket, and Mario asks if she is ready. Mario runs to find the dice, but Anna says, 'Not yet'. Anna places her legs in the bucket, while Mayra runs quickly. Mario takes the dice from the bucket. Mayra is on her knees and tries to take the dice from the bucket, but Mario is holding it. Leo tells Mario, 'Give it to Mayra'. Mario throws the dice to Mayra (Figure 7a), but she cannot catch it because her hands are on the floor (Figure 7b) and it hits her face (Figure 7c). Anna and Mario check whether Mayra is okay (Figures 7b and 7c). Mayra starts to cry.

[Insert Figure 7 near here]

Leo says, 'Don't throw it, Mario' (Figure 7c). Mario: 'I did not see'. Leo approaches Mayra and leans in to hug her (Figure 8a). Mario tells Leo, 'I did not see her, teacher'. Leo lowers his voice and paces himself, asking Mayra, 'Where did he hit you?'. Mario: 'I really did not mean to'. He looks back at the researcher: 'I did not look, right?' Researcher: 'No'. Leo consoles Mayra: 'Are you okay? Where did he hit you?'. Mayra does not answer and continues sobbing (Figure 8b). Leo asks, 'Where does it hurt?' and touches her forehead. Mario and Anna look out the window. Mario asks Anna, 'I did not hit her, right?'.

[Insert Figure 8 near here]

In Vignette 3, the children continued to play the game. Leo invited the children to hide the dice, and Mario expressed his interest and accelerated the pace of the game, which Leo noticed. Leo repeated the rules of the game, allowing time for Anna and Mayra to close their eyes in the

corner of the classroom. Mario continued to stand beside the bucket, providing a clue as to where the dice might be hidden. Anna and Mayra ran to find the dice, but Mario retrieved it first (Figure 5). Mario's motives and intentions were to both hide and find the dice, contradicting the rules, which stipulated that other children find the dice.

Kravtsova (2010a, 2010b) explains that play involves dual subjectivity from individuals who are both players inside the imaginary situation and conscious non-players outside of the imaginary situation. Leo was both a player inside the imaginary situation and a non-player outside of the imaginary situation—as a teacher supervising the children and explaining the rules and roles of the game. In this dual subjectivity, Leo was able to play while simultaneously teaching and explaining the rules of the game. Mario's motivations and engagement as a player in the activity setting were expressed by his keen verbal language, body actions and willingness to play the game.

The game continued with Leo hiding the dice and Anna finding the dice, leading to Mayra withdrawing from the game. Mayra expressed that she did not want to play, both verbally and through her body language (Figure 6). She used her body, which became heavy and slow, as a social resource for withdrawing from the game. However, her teacher, Leo, encouraged her to participate by moving close to her and lifting her (Figure 6). Emotions are manifested in life and are an important aspect of children's learning and development (Lipponen et al., 2018). This became evident as Mayra's intentions, motives and emotions changed from her being happy and excited on finding the dice to being unhappy after Mario and Anna found the dice. In contrast, her peers, Anna and Mario, continued to engage in the game.

It may be implied that Mayra needed encouragement to continue playing from her teacher (Figures 6a and 6b). Motives and demands are in a dynamic relationship in different activity settings (Hedegaard, 2014). By creating an inclusive environment (i.e. encouraging everyone to

participate in the game), Leo created a new demand for Mayra. This became an opportunity for Mayra to continue to play the game with her peers. Mayra continued to play, but this time it was Anna who found the dice.

From the child's perspective, Mayra's grief and grieving developed in relation to the activity setting—the game—and her peers, who were willing to continue the game. First, Mayra's everyday grief and grieving were reflected in her loss of motives, intentions, motivations and engagement with the game. Motives and intentions are formed through interactions with others (Hedegaard, 2012); thus, it may be implied that Mayra not finding the dice led to her loss of interest in the game. Second, Leo continued to encourage and motivate Mayra to participate, directing Mario to give the dice to her. However, Mayra was not ready to catch the dice (Figure 7a). These events occurred in a matter of seconds. Mayra's grief developed further as Mario accidentally hit her with the dice, causing emotional pain, which she expressed through crying (Figures 7b and 7c).

Acts of compassion from adults and peers can help alleviate children's emotional pain, sadness and suffering. Adults can develop empathetic concern for others, fostering a culture of compassion in early childhood settings (Hilppö, Rajala, Lipponen, et al., 2019; Lipponen et al., 2018). Teachers who respond to children's concerns create a space for dialogue to help children in distress. It is important to support, give, receive and witness compassion in early childhood settings (Rajala & Lipponen, 2018). Compassionate responses to children's distress include helping children and showing them affection through reciprocal and affective touch (Cekaite & Bergnehr, 2018). Teachers show compassion to children in emotional pain and distress through the use of a 'comforting embrace' (Cekaite & Bergnehr, 2018, p. 945), which involves affectionate contact, hugs and kisses.

Compassion and culturally situated practices in early childhood education and care can create a positive effect in children's suffering and emotional pain (Hilppö, Rajala, & Lipponen, et al., 2019). Mayra's grief as emotional pain was alleviated through Leo's compassionate responses. For example, Leo's focus was on Mayra as he provided a comforting embrace involving close, affectionate bodily contact (Cekaite & Bergnehr, 2018, p. 945) (Figures 8a and 8b). Patiently, Leo asked Mayra, 'Where did he hit you? Are you okay? Where does it hurt?'. However, Leo's use of 'he' reflects the actions of Mario rather than the dice. Leo's attention was on Mayra rather than on Anna and Mario. Mario commented to everyone, 'I did not see it... I did not look, right? I didn't hit her, right?'. Because Leo was focused on alleviating Mayra's grief and helping her grieve rather than answering Mario, his compassion for Mario was impeded. Mario also expressed concern about the 'hitting', which could have been an opportunity for Leo to create a space for dialogue between the children (Rajala & Lipponen, 2018). In contrast, both Mario and Anna provided space for Mayra's grief and grieving by looking out of the window.

#### *Vignette 4: Time and space for grief and grieving*

In Vignette 4, while comforting Mayra, Leo explains to the researcher, 'She [Mayra] always falls and always cries'. Anna and Mario continue playing with the dice. After a few minutes, Leo asks Mayra, 'Are you feeling better now?'. Mayra says, 'Yes'. Leo moves to another activity, handing the children some books. Mayra participates in the activity and looks at the book (Figure 9). There is some distance between Mayra and her peers, Mario and Anna. The teacher then invites the children to eat a snack.

[Insert Figure 9 near here]

Vignette 4 shows that Leo's compassionate approach alleviated Mayra's emotional pain. Leo made a remark about Mayra falling down and crying. We argue that from a child's

perspective, crying is an expressive form of easing grief and grieving. The emotional experience of falling (as mentioned by Leo) or, in this case, being accidentally hit involves paying attention to children's complex system of feelings and emotions (Bozhovich, 2009). Expressions of emotion such as crying may be a manifestation of grief in which the child is attempting to understand how to act in the world (Brinkmann, 2019; Brinkmann & Kofod, 2018). These everyday distressing situations (being hit and falling) and emotional experiences (pain, sadness and a sense of loss) are not simply isolated emotions but are culturally situated dynamics in which children attempt to make sense of the world and the relationships around them.

The teacher, Leo, transitioned to another activity involving everyone; however, he waited until Mayra was able to verbalise her emotions. He asked Mayra, 'Are you feeling better now?', to which Mayra responded with a 'yes'. She stopped crying and looked at a book (Figure 9). Mayra's grief and grieving process involved the need for time and space on her own and the understanding of her peers, who provided her the time and space to grieve and self-reflect on events. In addition, transitioning to another activity is a helpful strategy for dealing with an emotional and distressing situation.

## **Conclusion**

The present study aimed to investigate children's everyday grief and grieving experiences from the cultural-historical approach, which provided a framework for examining the everyday manifestations of children's grief and grieving, with a focus on the culturally situated dynamics of early childhood education. The process of grief and grieving draws together several emotions (e.g. sadness, anger, frustration and hurt) and emotional experiences (e.g. loneliness, pain and suffering). Providing a safe space for children to express these emotions is important to alleviate the grief associated with emotional pain.

Everyday examples from a Mexican community were adopted to frame grief and grieving in relation to social situations involving peers. Hedegaard's (2008, 2009, 2014, 2020) wholeness approach provided a framework with which to examine grief and grieving from a societal perspective (a Mexican community), an institutional perspective (the family and preschool) and the personal perspective (that of a child). These perspectives are currently missing in the literature. In this study, we theorised grief and grieving from a child's perspective as she participated in institutional practices and activity settings. We extended the view to emotions and motives, dynamically contextualised in a social situation, moving beyond the view that grief triggers emotional reactions. Grief and grieving are situated in practices in which emotional pain, a sense of loss and feeling hurt become everyday experiences for children.

We entered into Mayra's everyday life, noting the loneliness expressed in her words and the concerns of her mother, Gina. These perspectives provided a glimpse into grief and grieving as a sense of loss in the desire to have peers with whom to play. Then, in the preschool setting, a game was initiated by the teacher, Leo, who took a supportive and compassionate approach to Mayra's grief and grieving. A situation in which Mayra was hit by a dice thrown by a peer actively manifested as grieving. Grief is manifested by the human body (e.g. crying) and exists in both temporal and spatial contexts. Mayra's peers, Mario and Anna, allowed space for these manifestations to occur. Even so, Mario expressed concern about Mayra, which may have been his way of showing compassion. From the child's perspective, Mayra had the right to grieve and express her grief to others in her own words and actions.

The study provides a framework for studying children's manifestations of grief and grieving and exploring other situations of distress that may lead to emotional pain. More research is needed across cultural communities to further understand the variations of grief and grieving in various institutions, family and preschool settings. More research is needed on how compassion

develops in everyday grief and grieving experiences and how teachers may promote or hinder compassion in diverse cultural contexts (Lipponen et al., 2018).

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Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9

Figure 1. Leo passes the dice to Anna, who is sitting next to Mario and Mayra.

Figure 2. Mayra throws the dice to Leo.

Figure 3. Mario throws the dice to Leo.

Figure 4. a) Mayra finds the dice; b) Mayra throws the die to Leo.

Figure 5. Mario 'finds' the dice that he had hidden.

Figure 6. Leo physically encourages Mayra to play the game.

Figure 7. Sequence of Mayra being hit by the dice.

Figure 8. Leo comforting Mayra.

Figure 9. Mayra looks at the book.