THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE CONCEPT OF DEATH BY BLACK AFRICAN LEARNERS IN A RURAL AREA

by

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THESIS

submitted in the fulfilment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF LITERATURE AND PHILOSOPHY in

PSYCHOLOGY

in the

FACULTY OF ARTS

at the

RAND AFRIKAANS UNIVERSITY

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MARCH 2003
DECLARATION

I, Tembeka Norah Mdleleni-Bookholane, hereby declare that the thesis submitted for the degree Doctor of Literature and Philosophy in Psychology to the Rand Afrikaans University, apart from the help recognised, is my own work and has not been formerly submitted to another university for a degree.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my sincere appreciation and gratitude to the following people for their assistance in the undertaking of this study.

My supervisor, Professor W.J. Schoeman, for his meticulous guidance, understanding and encouragement.

My co-supervisor, Dr I. Van der Merve, for her critical comments and guidance.

Lehlohonolo Bookholane, my husband, for his constant encouragement and support, and for editing the first draft of this document.

Dr Teresa Chisanga from the English Department at the University of Transkei for editing the final report.

The principal and staff members of Upper Cala J.S.S. for allowing me to conduct the study at the school and assisting in selecting the participants.

The parents for allowing me to use their children in the study. My deepest thanks goes to all the learners who participated in the study.

Lastly, I would like to extend a word of thanks to my children Piwe, Ngoana’Mohale, and Hlohonolofatso for their patience and source of encouragement during the duration of
this study; Matebello, our dedicated helper for her endurance especially during my absence from home in 2002; and Nellie, who took over as our helper in 2003.
DEDICATION

I hereby dedicate this dissertation to two very special people: my late mother Ntombomzi Ethel Mdleleni and my late aunt Nombulelo Dorothy Mdleleni whose teachings have kept me going strong and focussed through the years.

May their souls rest in peace.

T. N. Mdleleni-Bookholane
ABSTRACT

The present study examined the development of an understanding of the concept of death by Black African learners residing in a rural area in the Eastern Cape. The study was set against the background of the African cultural meaning systems related to death. There were 31 learners whose ages ranged between 6-8, 9-12, and 13-16 years. Only learners whose parents gave consent were included in the study. Data were collected using drawings and semi-structured tape-recorded interviews from a modified version of the Smilansky (1987) Death Questionnaire. Drawings were analysed following Marton’s (1981) phenomenographic method. Pattern coding was used to pull the paraphrased segments of the interview transcripts into meaningful themes. The responses specific to the five components of death were analysed using Smilansky’s scoring method. From the analysis of drawings 9 categories of description emerged and these reflected a contextualised understanding of death. The overview of the drawings reflected more similarities than differences between the age groups. The referent object influenced the pattern of component acquisition. For instance, the level of understanding was better for human death compared to the level of understanding for animal death among the 6-8 age group. The reversal was true for older learners whose level of conceptualising animal death was more advanced than the level of conceptualising human death. This finding demonstrates the influence of cultural practices on the development of the conceptualisation of death. The conceptualisation of old age seemed to develop before the other components followed by inevitability, then irreversibility, and last, finality and causality. Gender differences were noted only in the explanations of causes of death. The conclusions reached demonstrated that the development of an understanding of death is
affected by age, cognition, and by other familial and cultural factors depending on the context within which such development takes place. The principles of the neo-Piagetian theory proved useful in explaining the findings of the present study. Finally, recommendations regarding guidelines for handling death-related issues with children and regarding directions for future research are provided.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Contextualisation of the problem

The purpose of the present study was to examine the development of children’s understanding of the concept of death among Black South African children living in the rural area of the Eastern Cape through their drawings and words. Death is universally regarded as a significant event both for the individual and the social group. Every culture, world wide, provides for its members a way of thinking about, and of responding to death. Different cultures have different attitudes about death informed by their different world-views regarding the concept of death.

Among Africans in South Africa, like elsewhere in the world, death is probably the most intensely felt of all life crises (Huntington and Metcalf, 1981), yet it is the least talked about except when it happens. Even then, it is talked about in whispers. The reason being that, like sexuality, it is regarded as a taboo subject in everyday conversation, especially with children. Ironically, Frommer (1969) strongly believes that quite apart from the need for adults to answer children’s questions, death talk is a necessary exercise in the skill of conversation. The child needs to be offered the opportunity of real conversation with peers and with adults (Webb, 1993). Lazar (1985) therefore, argues that by denying children the chance to think and reflect on death, or even engaging in a conversation with them, parents as well as social scientists might have unwittingly cut out their voice in the literature on death, especially in the reputable psychological journals.
The difficulty in getting even academicians to accept research on children’s perception of death is still noticeable today. Many researchers have stressed the need for research in this area (Candy-Gibbs, Sharp and Petrun, 1984-1985; Gordon and Klass, 1979; Grollman, 1967; Koocher, 1974; Watts, 1975). To-date, there is a lot of literature on studies of children’s conceptualisation of death as reflected in a recent review of literature by Kenyon (2001). Kenyon shows that emphasis on death research, though, has been on how mature children’s concepts of death are when these are compared with adults’ concepts.

The understanding of death among Africans is informed by the broader context of the African world-view. Thus, an overview of how Black African adults conceptualise death is pivotal to the understanding of children’s conceptualisation of death. The available literature on the development of children’s concept of death reflects studies that have been conducted outside of Africa. Furthermore, there is scarcity of data reporting on African children’s death concept development. Despite this scarcity, the majority of accessible data (outside Africa) on the topic of children appear to represent primarily white, urban, middle-class children. A review of some of the few available studies done in Africa focuses primarily on adult conceptualisation of death and the hereafter (Lamlah, 1981, 2003; Lawuyi, 1991; Mbiti, 1969). Some studies focus on grief and bereavement counselling directed at parents of deceased children (Du Toit, 1991; Fourie, 1997; Greyling, 1997). Other studies (Solomon, 1995; Van Dyk, 1993) focus on the therapeutic and practical value of traditional funerals in the mourning process. In addition, Rev. L.
Bookholane (personal communication, June 16, 2000) concurs with these views that funeral rituals have healing elements necessary for the alleviation of grief.

Such literature highlights a one-sided view. Despite this one-sided interest in adult conceptualisation, no obvious attention has yet been paid to children’s conceptualisation of death. The obvious lack of interest is somewhat surprising because children’s conceptual development is of considerable importance. For example, research evidence shows that children are capable and desirous of talking about death (Koocher, 1974) as they have many encounters with separation, loss, and death (Webb, 1993, 2002), and they know about death even when no information is given (Wass, 1997) in (Strack, 1997). Adults therefore should not be too comfortable with the assumption that children are too young to be concerned with death. Instead they should challenge that assumption because parents, according to Visser, 1992), have the specific task of guiding the child through the process of coping with the trauma of death to adequate adulthood.

On adult conceptualisation, Opong’s (1997) investigated the religious significance of ritual practices conducted at births, weddings and funerals in Lesotho. His study reveals that the religious connotation of such ritual practices lies in how people seek transcendental meaning to life through the ritual practices. However, Maloka (1998) has observed that the available literature on the death of the BaSotho in the South African mine compounds is silent on how death and grief has been experienced and handled by African mineworkers. This also brings into question the impact such death might have had on children of the mineworkers.
A review of Mbiti’s (1969) studies in central Africa among the Ndebele and the Abaluyia, for instance, throw some light on how Africans in the remote past conceptualised death and the hereafter. He found that among the Ndebele, immediately after death, the brother of the deceased would start digging a grave in an uncultivated ground where other men would join and help him. For an ordinary member of the family the corpse was wrapped in an animal skin (formally) or blanket. But for the head of the homestead the procedure was different. His body was taken out of the house through a hole in the wall, and then through an opening in the fence that surrounds the homestead. It is not carried through the door of the house or the gate of the homestead because the belief is that the deceased person had not ‘gone’ away from, or completely left the homestead: he was in effect still present.

Before the body of the head of the homestead was laid down in the grave the eldest son struck the grave with a spear. This spear symbolised the weapon of defence and protection. When used on this occasion it neutralised all danger on the way to and in the new country where the dead man was going. Personal belongings were buried with the body to accompany the deceased man, so that he would not find himself poor in the hereafter. When the people later returned home after the funeral, a beast would be killed to ‘accompany’ the deceased, to provide him with food on the way and with livestock in the next world. A month or two after the funeral, a cleansing rite would be performed. This final ceremony is partly a symbolic way of ‘reviving’, ‘summoning back’, ‘inviting back’ the departed, and thus renewing contact with him in the next world. It is also and partly a way of declaring a formal resumption of life.
Among the Abaluyia, Mbiti observed some similarities with the way they viewed death and the hereafter. In his interpretation of the coming of death and funeral rites among the Abaluyia, he points out the following underlying paradox that death brings: The dying person is being cut off from human beings, and yet there must be continuing ties between the living and the departed. Relatives and neighbours come to bid farewell to the dying man and to mourn his departure, and yet there is continuity through his children and through the rituals which unite the two worlds. Death causes ritual impurity just as it interrupts normal life; but this is not permanent since it is cleansed and normal life is afterwards resumed.

In South Africa, for instance, the Southern Nguni are no exception to this practice. To them (as elsewhere in Africa) death does not mean complete oblivion. It means a continuation - a rite of passage from the known to the unknown where the dead continue to live though in a different form – as ancestors (Lamla, 1981, 2001; Mdunyelwa, 1999; Moore, 1968; Ngubane, 1977). Lamla (1981) warns though that this transformation (into ancestors) excludes women and children who in the eyes of the society remain minors even in the spirit world. According to Hammond-Tooke (1962), in the remote past, the dead were buried with their personal belongings. Lamla (1981) reports that isolated areas in the region of Transkei can still be identified where individuals are buried within the homestead, but notes that this practice has completely disappeared among the Southern Nguni. Like elsewhere in Africa, there are also various mortuary rites that are performed to provide an easy passage to the spirit world (Lamla, 1981, 2003). A detailed account of
the methods of burying the dead and the rituals connected to the dead, however, falls outside the scope of the present study.

A further observation on adult conceptualisation is reflected on the role played by burial societies as they interact with the family when death has occurred. These societies are rooted in African cultural and religious traditions (Warnecke 1994), they therefore perpetuate the culture of marginalization of children by excluding the children from the rituals they offer to the bereaved family. This view is supported by Honono’s (1994) study in which she states that when parents handle death-related issues with their children they tend to exclude them in the ritual and this is influenced by their childhood experiences with death. The cycle on marginalization of children continues from one generation to the next through the process of internalisation and this is reflected in the way adults handle death-related issues with their children. It would be reasonable then to echo Anthony’s (1973) views that children’s conceptions of death tend to reflect those of the society in which they are reared. They learn much more by observing than they are intentionally taught.

The main objective here is to point out the framework within which most Africans, children most importantly, conceptualise death and the hereafter, and how such a conceptualisation may influence the way African children think and feel about death and dying. The major focus of the present study is on the development of the concept of death, as such, it is imperative to consider the terms used by adults to describe death and to capture the experience children are exposed to. This is especially so, because the
language adults use form part of the normative culture of death-related behaviour, 
children in turn will internalise this language making it their own. It is therefore 
hyothesised that the way language is used by adults will influence the way children 
think about death. From personal experience, from observations made over the years 
including personal communication with E M. Nogwina (August 30, 2001), as well as 
from the literature reviewed (Lamla, 1981, 2003; Lawuyi and Olupona, 1988; Mbiti, 
1969; Mdunyelwa, 1999; Mosothoane, 1973), adults show a preference for using 
symbolic expressions when referring to death and dying. For instance, the use of such 
symbolic expressions is a reflection of an agreement reached by a social group within a 
particular society on how to address death\textsuperscript{2}. Mbiti’s (1969) observation is that the Basoga 
peoples’ symbolic expressions include the following:

“He has breathed his last’
‘He has kept quiet’
‘He has gone’
‘He has gone down to the grave’
‘Our friend was told by death to tie up his load and go’
‘He is dry as if from yesterday’
‘Life was snatched into two like a bristle stick’
‘Death has made him sleep or lie down’
‘Death has made him go far away’

Among the Abaluyia death or dying is described as:

‘Sleeping’ (for an old man, who dies peacefully)
‘Falling by oneself” (if it is through suicide)
‘Wearing a sweater’ (if killed by another person)
‘Going to the place of the dead’
‘Going home’

Among the Akamba the following are some of the terms used:

\textsuperscript{2} What individuals perceive and experience is not necessarily related 
to what is “out there” but only to how the particular language 
community has agreed to talk about what is “out there.” (Cole and 
Scribner, 1974).
‘To follow the company of one’s grandfathers’
‘To go home’
‘To stop snoring’
‘To be fetched or summoned’
‘To empty out the soul’
‘To sleep for ever and ever’
‘To pass away’
‘To return or go back’
‘To have one’s breath come to an end’
‘To go where other people have gone’

When referring to a deceased person the amaXhosa would say among other things:

‘ugodukile’ (she/he has gone home)
‘uhambile’ (she/he is gone)
‘ulele’ (she/he is sleeping)
‘usishiyile’ (s/he has left us)
‘uye kwelobawonkhulu’ (he has gone to the world of the ancestors)

In many African languages one never refers to a human being as being ‘dead’
(‘ufile’ in isiXhosa) unless one is considered inhuman (Mosothoane, 1973; Pato, 1988).
Mosothoane (1973) puts it very clearly:

It is a feature of many African languages that one never refers to a human being as ‘dead’ unless one holds such a person in such utter contempt that one no longer considers him to be human.

(p.88)

To capture this further from a biblical perspective offered by Morris (1962) death is seen as the most natural of things on the one hand. It may be accepted without rebellion. On the other hand it is the most unnatural of things. For Morris both aspects of this view must not be overlooked. Death is a biological necessity but human beings do not die simply as the animals die. Human beings do not just die as a body but die in totality of their being, that is, as spiritual and physical being. That is why the word ‘dead’ carries a different connotation for human beings when compared to animals.
The implication here is that the linguistic milieu that is provided by the adults regarding death does not provide room for children’s proper comprehension of what is being said. For instance, looking at the words describing death above the implication is that a person has either ‘gone home’ or is ‘sleeping’. This implies that life is like a pilgrimage. The real ‘home’ is in the hereafter, since one does not depart from there. According to Fargues (1966) adults have a tendency of using symbolic expressions when describing death and these expressions might have formed a certain association in the child’s mind. For instance, such symbolic expressions will only reinforce the reversibility concept some children have (Costa and Holliday, 1994). This is also possible because of the relative position the parents hold within the cultural context already described, therefore propagating the above-verified narratives, which then become internalised by the child.

Parents are primary agents of socialisation. They have an implicit or explicit ideal of what their children should be like – what knowledge, moral values, and behavioural standards they should acquire as they grow (Bergh and Theron, 2003; Kaplan, 1998; Mussen, Conger, Kagan and Huston, 1984). For instance, Wahl (1959) in (Lonetto, 1980) has stated that most adults seem to feel that children cannot comprehend death in any form and, therefore, do not need reassuring. The work suggests that adults are more comfortable with the assumption that children are too young to be concerned about death and so they do not want to challenge that. For instance, among the AmaMpondospeaking of anything that is connected with death is treated with great distaste. For

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1 This distaste for speaking of death is not so great as formerly, the change in attitude has been modified by the attitude of Christians.
instance, the name of a person who has recently died is seldom mentioned in conversation. Children are warned that they must not mention someone who has recently died, and it is regarded as ill mannered to introduce the subject of death into any conversation.

What has been raised by the above discussion introduces another angle to the challenge posed by the present literature review. The issue is the role that parents play in the perpetuation of the worldview presented above in knowledge production regarding death-related issues. The position of parents makes it obligatory for them to follow the social norms that prescribe certain behaviours as appropriate for a given social situation (W. Stroebe and M. S. Stroebe, 1994). Because parents have internalised these social norms themselves they will tend to cooperate even when they would prefer not to do so (Mitchell, 1999). Lamla (1981) for example, reports that when death has occurred women weep and men usually sob, and that the weeping for the woman is obligatory rather than emotional. Women then weep in order to prove that they are not responsible for the death and that then absolves them from accusations. This scenario of weeping is also true for the Andamanese and the Nyakyusa where it is reported that the normal emotional response of people at a funeral is never random but falls within an obligatory pattern³ (Huntington and Metcalf, 1981).

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³ The weeping is required by custom, it is mandatory, and the individual is in complete control. The emotional tenor expressed in funerals differs from one culture to another.
Parents are caregivers and playmates, first and foremost, and as the child grows older, they also become much more concerned with the norms of teaching children how to behave (or how not to behave) in a variety of settings. This is the social aspect of the environment that becomes a necessary condition for knowledge production as it consists of personal relations. Parents have been found to play an important role in their children’s death conceptualisation (Matalon, 2000). As agents of socialisation, parents are therefore, supposed to emphasise the relationship between the living and the dead members. They are also supposed to create space for educating the individual, especially the child, about death, even though this no longer happening in certain communities.

Children in many African communities are excluded from the cultural practices concerning death. They however still come to know about a lot of things around them, including death, albeit informally and some of this information may be misleading (Bowlby, 1994). Hence they become confused and are not well prepared to respond to situations that may confront them in the course of their development, for instance when sexually harassed. Death is a transition both for the deceased and for the relatives left behind. Therefore, some readjustment is necessary for everybody including children. The cultural practices that are done to symbolise this transition are noticeable for their marginalization of minority groups especially children. For instance, Costa and Holliday (1994) believe that children, especially those who are exposed to violent and senseless death, need to be able to talk about death and ask questions about it without feeling it is a taboo subject.
The above review reveals the following:

♦ There is scarcity of data reporting on the concept of death in African children.

♦ The few available studies focus on adult conceptualisation of death and the hereafter thereby highlighting a one-sided emphasis. This obvious lack of interest is surprising considering the importance of children’s conceptual development.

♦ Adults’ view of death is paradoxical. It acknowledges death as an inevitable and destructive phenomenon on the one hand. On the other hand it refuses to succumb to the disturbing effects of this experience by postulating a “life after death.

♦ There is an umbrella of silence that surrounds death.

♦ Adults show a preference for using symbolic expressions when referring to death and this is reflected in many African languages. The belief is that one never refers to a human being as being ‘dead’ unless one holds such a person in absolute contempt.

♦ Children are cautioned not to mention the name of someone who has recently died. It is also considered ill mannered to introduce the subject of death into any conversation.

The above literature review demonstrates the framework within which most African, children most importantly, get their orientation towards a conceptualisation of death. It also shows how such an orientation and conceptualisation may influence the way children think and feel about death and dying. This framework poses serious concern because it is not clear on assumptions the marginalization of children are based. The following questions are therefore raised to familiarise the reader with some of the concerns in death research and to
say that these questions can be used as starting points for further research in the area of death.

- Does the marginalization of children in death-related issues mean that children do not experience death as a life crisis in the same way parents do?

Transmission of information seems to be done in an arbitrary fashion, that is, some information is passed on only when death occurs, and if it does not happen nobody bothers to talk about it. This happens despite the fact that when death has occurred children do crave connection and thus need to be included in the events surrounding death (Silverman, 2000). When one looks at whether children’s grief is different from that of adults, past literature emphasises that “grief does not focus on one’s ability to ‘understand,’ but instead upon one’s ability to ‘feel’” (Wofelt, 1983) in (Webb, 1993). Wofelt puts it more succinctly when she says:

> Denial, anger, guilt, sadness, and longing are felt by young and old alike in response to the loss of a loved person. Adults, who expect children to have many of the same feelings they, themselves, experience at a time of bereavement, may be able to help the children realise that these feelings are justified…

(p.13).

It seems that the adult’s view of death itself is paradoxical. It acknowledges death as an inevitable and destructive (particularly in respect of family ties) phenomenon on the one hand; and it refuses to succumb to the disturbing effects of this experience on the other hand, by postulating a “life after death”. This is something that can be regarded as one of the ways in which society and family alike tries to cope with death.
• Does this then amount to a “subtle” wish that death should be “reversible”? If so, what are the implications of the fact that death is actually irreversible?

• What are the implications of this for the children’s “inability to comprehend the irreversibility of events”, especially for the younger children?

• Can we see adults as colluding with what Piaget proposes that children’s cognitive structures are not ready to conceptualise this type of information because, for instance, children less than 8 years can only deal with objects that are physically present and not abstract concepts like death?

• If parents or adults in general have a way of coping with such a crisis (e.g. that “dead” people continue to exist in another world/form) what “harm/damage”, if any, are they doing to their children by not educating them in this worldview?

• What, precisely, are the implications of the silence about death, on the part of parents, for children’s cognitive development and “confusion” regarding the meaning assigned by society to death-related issues?

The silence on the part of the child cannot be interpreted as conveying understanding, absence of anxiety or absence of questions. Where there is no opportunity offered to children to raise questions or express their views and feelings, there can be no
inferences drawn about the child’s state of mind. Adults on the other hand may refrain from discussing death with children because of their own anxiety about the subject. According to Dyregrov (1991) children need to be given open, concrete and direct information to avoid confusion. Furthermore, Fargues as early as 1966 observed, “a direct experience (touching a cold hand, praying at the side of a coffin, being present at a burial) succeeds better than words in informing the child” (p16).

Within the broader context of the child’s development, as laid out above, can one draw a distinction between how a child perceives the normal everyday social reality in general on the one hand, and how the same child perceives and responds to specifically crisis situations in life, on the other? In the words of Webb (1993) the taboo contradicts the reality of the contemporary child’s life, however, since most children, through television, view hundreds of deaths, both real and fictionalised, in the daily course of watching cartoons and news. Furthermore, “images of all types of deaths imprint on the minds and psyches of the watching children, but their understanding and feelings about what they see remain unknown.” (Webb, 1993, p.4).

There are various ways of coming to understand the way in which meaning is constructed. The above review has provided the context that can inform processes involved in the development of the concept of death. It has laid the groundwork for understanding how children’s knowledge or understanding is constructed. The revelation of the contextual situation does not claim to deal with a complete spectrum of death-related issues pertaining to the African child but it does provide a meaningful and
significant venture into an otherwise under-researched area of child development. Also, very pertinent questions were raised in order to highlight the kinds of constraints that regulate and direct the development of the child’s thinking on issues of death. It is believed answers to these questions will serve an additive function in complementing the field’s present emphasis on death conception. The review further indicates that knowledge or understanding does not happen in a vacuum but within contexts and these contexts need to be highlighted when trying to describe or explain human development.

1.2 **Aims and objectives**

I. The major aim of the present study was to gather new empirical data in order to examine the development of an understanding (what learners exactly know) of the concept of death among South African Black children living in a rural area, through their own words and drawings. The following objectives propelled the first aim:

♦ To investigate the extent of learners’ understanding of the specific components of death.
♦ To establish what informs the knowledge that they have on death.

II. The second aim was to advance the need for using a context-bound theoretical framework that can facilitate an understanding of the dynamic nature of concept development.

III. The third aim was to develop guidelines on how to handle death-related issues with children.
1.3 **Layout of the study**

**CHAPTER 1** is an introduction, an overview of the problem. It briefly indicates the problem areas around the issue of death in the African context. The chapter presents the framework within which most Africans, especially children, get their orientation towards a conceptualisation of death. The chapter also raises significant questions in exploring the nature of knowledge production in the area of death. At the end of the chapter the aims and objectives of the study are laid out.

**CHAPTER 2** reviews literature pertaining to death. It first highlights the central aspects related to the concept of death and then reviews literature regarding the development of children’s concepts of death.

**CHAPTER 3** discusses the theoretical frameworks that account for the pattern of child development in order to lay the groundwork for capturing the child’s conceptual development.

**CHAPTER 4** introduces the research design and methodology for the study. It details the rationale for the use of drawings in combination with interviews when investigating the concept of death in children. It also describes the procedures used for collecting the data presented in this study. Furthermore, guidelines for analysing and interpreting the data are discussed.
CHAPTER 5 presents the findings on the development in understanding of the concept of death as it relates to the three age groups (6-8 year-olds, 9-12 year-olds and 13-16 year-olds respectively. The chapter focuses on 1. Drawings of “Death” and these are accompanied by story texts expressing the learner’s understanding of what death is and what it means to be dead as a human being and as an animal. 2. A discussion of the categories of description expressed in the drawings. 3. Learners’ answers to “what happens to people vs. animals when dead”? 4. Scoring and discussion of responses on the five components of death based on the scoring keys provided, in order to gauge the overall understanding of death.

CHAPTER 6 provides a summary and discussion of the findings. It explores the patterns and concerns that make it possible to arrive at how the findings can be explained in a developmental perspective.

CHAPTER 7 presents conclusions and recommendations that can be used as guidelines for handling death-related issues with children.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

Death is a universal phenomenon, it is a fact of life and yet it is only in the last 20 to 30 years that this has been studied (Lazar, 1985). Death has replaced sex as the unspeakable subject in the West. It has become the new pornography, spoken of only in hushed tones and never in the presence of children. Although most people, especially parents and teachers, are asking for information and guidance in teaching the children in their care about death, many are still reluctant to deal with this sensitive topic (Corr, 1997; C.A. Corr, Nabe, and D.M. Corr, 2000; Gordon and Klass, 1979; Lazar, 1985).

This reluctance has persisted even though there are three studies going back 50 years, showing that very young children are aware of death and may have concerns about it. Indeed very young children do experience feelings of loss and separation (Webb, 1993) as had been indicated by Bowlby’s (1987) studies of infants and young children who had been separated from their mothers. A review of literature by Kenyon (2001) shows that emphasis on death research, though, has been on how mature children’s conceptualisation of death is. Despite criticisms levelled at this approach, the evaluation of children’s conceptions of death has continued to focus on the development of mature death concepts. Following is an overview of what constitutes the central aspects in the concept of death and, the development of the children’s conceptions of death.
2.2 The central aspects in the concept of death

The review of past literature on the concept of death highlights various components of this concept. According to Brent, Speece, Lin, Dong, and Yang (1996) children’s understanding of death has been described and investigated in terms of a number of distinct components. For instance, Speece and Brent (1984) studied three components: irreversibility, nonfunctionality, and universality, and the authors have considered these three components essential to a presumed mature adult conceptualisation of death. Smilansky’s (1987) own clinical experience working with orphans as well as empirical studies previously conducted by her team on the subject came to the conclusion that the concept of death includes not just three but five principal components and these are the irreversibility of death, the finality of death, the causality of death, the inevitability of death, and old age. The specific interview questions used to elicit information regarding each component vary with each study conducted on the topic. An additional component (personal mortality) sometimes replaces old age (Kenyon, 2001)

In the present study the focus is on the five components of death: irreversibility, finality, causality, inevitability, and old age. The rationale for focusing on these components is firstly, that these components (especially the first four) have been a focus of more than 30 studies (Kenyon, 2001; Speece and Brent, 1984), proving that they are the most widely investigated aspects of children’s understanding of death. Secondly, each of these is considered part of a mature adult’s conceptualisation of death. Old age on the other hand has also been added because it is related to the components of universality and causality (Smilansky, 1987). Following is the definition of each of these components.
i. The irreversibility of death

Irreversibility refers to the understanding that once a living organism dies, its physical body cannot be made alive again. That is, the death of the body is unconditionally irreversible (Brent et al., 1996; Speece and Brent, 1984). Also, terms like: Death is final, death is irrevocable, death as permanent, have been used interchangeably by other researchers to refer to this basic component. Similarly, Smilansky (1987) states that the understanding of this component involves understanding that death is an irreversible phenomenon: The deceased can never return to be a living person. Understanding this component also involves giving up the deceased as a living person forever, and recognising the impossibility of changing the course of biological life and returning to a previous state. Cognitive acceptance and understanding of the irreversibility of death is an essential condition for preparing the child to accept his feelings about the fact of everlasting separation and for the necessary readjustment.

ii. The finality of death

Speece & Brent (1984) use the term nonfunctionality or dysfunctionality to refer to finality of death. This component refers to the understanding that once a person’s body is dead it cannot do any of the things it did when it was alive (e.g. eating, breathing, loving, learning) (Brent et al., 1996). All life-defining functions cease at death (Smilansky, 1987; Speece and Brent, 1984). A child who understands the component of the finality of death gradually accepts the fact that the deceased is no longer alive in any sense and is not a living person. Smilansky (1987) strongly believes that the proper understanding of the finality of death is important during the bereavement and readjustment phase, since such
perception helps the child to understand that the deceased no longer exists as a living person and that in death he is entirely different from what he was when alive.

iii. The causality of death

According to Smilansky (1987) the component of causality of death relates to the physical-biological factors that led to the death. Children must first of all understand the component of causality of death in general. They must then know the specific causes that led to the death of the loved one. This knowledge can in some measure ease the pain of the child, who, like any other mourner, wonders about the cause of death of his or her loved one and is troubled by feelings of guilt related to these.

iv. The inevitability of death

The component of inevitability (used interchangeably with universality) of death involves treating death as a natural phenomenon, which is inherently inevitable. Understanding death’s inevitability involves perceiving death as a universal phenomenon from which no living organism can escape. The child needs to understand that death, being universal, comes to all people (Smilansky, 1987). Universality refers to the understanding that all living organisms must die (Brent et al., 1996).

v. Old age

As Smilansky (1987) has observed the four components described above reflect the connection between cognitive understanding and the emotional processes of mourning and readjustment. Understanding old age involves understanding the biological sequence
of life: birth, growth, ageing and death. The component of old age is related to the components of inevitability and causality. Based on a pilot study, Smilansky found that in examining the concept of death it was necessary to include a specific question relating to old age.

The following section deals with the development of children’s concept of death. It reviews the findings of studies conducted outside Africa on how healthy children understand death. It is worth mentioning that no published material from Africa or South Africa has been found on how children understand the concept of death. It is therefore hoped that this study can help familiarise the reader with the developmental concerns in death research in South Africa.

### 2.3 The development of children’s concepts of death

When tracing research in the development of children’s concept of death it seems that research in children’s conceptions of death began in the 1930s and 1940s (Anthony, 1939; Nagy, 1948; Schilder and Wechsler, 1934). Since then there have been numerous studies and three literature reviews (Kastebaum and Costa, 1977; Kenyon 2001; Speece and Brent, 1984). Emphasis of earlier studies has been on spontaneous characterisation of death in stories, drawings and play. While later studies have focused mostly on the components of death. These components are irreversibility, finality, universality, causality, personal mortality, and lately, old age.
In an effort to find out just how children (ages 5 to 14) develop in their ability to understand death, Anthony (1940) explored children’s discovery of death in three ways: 1. By using parental records, 2. By inserting the word *dead* into a vocabulary list on the Terman-Merrill intelligence test, 3. By giving children a story completion exercise. She distinguished five stages in the children’s thinking, ranging from apparent ignorance of the word *dead* to a logically or biologically accurate one (Lonetto, 1980):

1) Apparent ignorance, by adult standards, of the meaning of the word “*dead*”
2) Interest in word or fact, combined with limited or erroneous concept
3) No evidence of noncomprehension of the meaning of “*dead,*” but definition given by reference to a) associated phenomena not biologically or logically essential, or b) humanity specifically
4) Correct, essential, but limited reference
5) General, logical, or biological definition or description

According to Anthony, children under the age of five gave responses that fell into categories 1) and 2), and no child under the age of eight responded in the 4) or 5) categories. The conclusion reached was that there is a positive association between age and conceptual development. According to Gordon and Klass, (1979) Anthony also studied the development of children’s death conceptions through analysis of their fantasies. She found that thoughts about death were frequent in children’s fantasies.
Nagy’s (1948) work from Budapest forms a kind of transition between intellectual understanding and emotional response (Gordon and Klass, 1979). Nagy was among the first researchers to identify age-related changes in the themes associated with children’s understanding of death (Kenyon, 2001; Prichard and Epting, 1991-1992). Her study included 378 children between three and ten years old. She asked them to tell whatever came to their minds on the subject of death; the general question was “What is death?” The older children wrote their responses. The younger children drew pictures. Nagy concluded that children’s understanding of death developed in stages, similar to Piagetian stages of cognitive development (Lonetto, 1980) thus:

♦ Children under 5 did not see death as final but as a reversible event like going to sleep.

♦ Children from 5 to 9 years old understood death as final, characterised by cessation of functions. This group also personified death making it a thing that catches up with people in unusual circumstances. Death was a bogeyman that can be escaped by running away from it. The children’s personifications of death included most of the following trait descriptions, either singularly or in combination:

    Death is scary, frightening, disturbing, dangerous, unfeeling, unhearing, and silent. Death takes you away. If you see death coming at you in time, you can escape. Death can be invisible like a ghost or ugly as if a monster or it can be a skeleton. Death can be an actual person, or companion of the devil, a giver of illness, or an angel.

    (p. 91)

♦ Children beyond nine years of age recognised death as final, irreversible, and inevitable, and accordingly, no one escapes or recovers from death.
The work of Childers and Wimmer (1971) also supports the view of the child’s gradual increase in awareness of the universality of death. For instance, these writers found that the age of 9 years is a kind of cognitive turning point at which death is seen as being universal. This belief in universality is inconsistent with Kane’s (1979) results where she found that the recognition of inevitability was frequently evident by age 6, but it was seen consistently in children 8-years-old and above. Nagy’s stage theory describes the evolution of children’s understanding of the components of finality, irreversibility, and inevitability (Prichard and Epting, 1991-1992).

Childers and Wimmer (1971) studied the understanding of the components of universality and irrevocability of death in children aged four to ten years. They found that of the four-year-olds, 11 percent recognised that death is universal, of the five-year-olds it was 20 percent, and by the age of nine, 100 percent of the children viewed death as a universal event. The pattern was less clear with respect to the component of irrevocability. Sixty-three percent of the ten-year-olds gave affirmative responses to the question “Can people come back to life?” whereas 27 percent responded negatively and ten percent were undecided. Based on these findings the authors came to the conclusion that after the age of nine years children understood the universality of death, but as yet had not extended this reasoning to include the idea of the irrevocability of death. On the other hand, Wass and Corr (1984) report that the majority of children in another study did not lack comprehension of the concept of irreversibility but they responded to the question “Can dead people ever come back to life?” in terms of theological beliefs such as resurrection or reincarnation.
Nagy believes that these descriptions of death provide examples of how personification can help children deal with death. She describes the sequential changes in the young child’s view of death as reflective of a general movement toward increased realism and decreased egocentrism, which was correlated with increased chronological age (Candy-Gibbs, Sharp and Petrun, 1984-1985; Kenyon, 2001). Although studies like Koocher (1974) have questioned the above studies’ methods (e.g., Nagy used mainly drawings and so personification was not a surprising finding) and subjects (e.g., supposedly Anthony used her own siblings), and possible cultural differences, Lazar, (1985) believes that the relevant issue raised by these studies is that children have an awareness of death.

Safier’s (1964) investigation is an example of another early study. She used the concepts of “animism” and death. According to Piaget (1960) in (Lonetto, 1980), the animism of the child falls into four stages. In each successive stage, there is decreasing use of animistic explanations for behaviours. Safier (1964) found, in studies of boys four to ten years of age, a three developmental progression of animism and death-related concerns that tended to support the work of Nagy (1948) and Piaget (1960). Boys aged 4-5, 7-8, and 10-11 years were asked questions modelled after Piaget. “Animism” (life) and negative (death) scores were obtained. She found that the child’s “animism” score decreased with age. Safier also confirmed Anthony’s findings indicating that children eight years of age and younger do not have, by adult standards, logically or biologically correct concepts about death.
Speece and Brent (1992) findings reveal that although a majority of children from kindergarten on did have a mature understanding of universality, most did not achieve a mature understanding of all three components until at least age ten. A surprise finding was that the proportion of children who exhibited the presumed mature understanding of irreversibility and non-functionality did not increase with age. Instead, a great proportion of third graders (41%) than second graders (12%) indicated that 1) under certain conditions a dead person might become alive again, and 2) after a person is dead they can still do at least some of the things they did when they were alive (45% compared with 39%). Based on the literature review published since the early 1980s, Kenyon (2001) reveals that by age 10 years children have mastered the components of irreversibility, universality, non-functionality, personal mortality, and causality.

Importantly, however, Candy-Gibbs, Sharp and Petrun (1984-1985) also observe that previous developmental research on children’s conceptions of death has concerned itself primarily with refinements of Nagy’s original stage theory. They proposed that there is a need to consider additional factors that may influence children’s comprehension of death, for instance, the type of object and the child’s cultural/religious background are some of the factors that need to be considered. In addition, cognitive ability to comprehend death is seen as one of the major factors contributing to a child’s ability to cope with parental death.

There are other factors that affect the development of the concept of death. For instance, literature reviewed by Kenyon (2001) and Speece and Brent (1984) indicate that
few studies report gender and socio-economic differences in their samples. Of those studies that examined gender effects it seems that the types of explanations that boys and girls provide for what causes death are the only differences noted. The findings show that boys tend to depict more violent causes of death than do girls, who tend to cite accident or illness. Looking at experience, Kenyon (2001) reports that children who have experienced life-threatening illness or have had direct experience with personal loss appear to have a different understanding of death than do their inexperienced age-mates. Other factors are the child’s previous experiences with loss and the educational and supportive help given by the surviving parent (Lazar, 1985). Smilansky’s (1987) work with orphaned children in Israel emphasises the notion that a high-level of cognitive understanding of the concept of death does not guarantee the emotional acceptance of death but constitutes a necessary condition. Yet with Lazar and Torney-Purta (1991), accidents are a major cause of death of children; and these may be more frequent if the child does not comprehend the finality of death. Finally, suicide gestures are used for getting attention when the child does not see death as irreversible. But as Lazar suggests, what is at issue here is whether or not the understanding of the concept of death can be taught and, if it can, what accurate baselines, as to the extent of the child’s understanding, must be determined?

Regarding the adults’ conceptualisation of the three components (irreversibility, universality, and finality) Brent and Speece (1993) found that for many adults the question of whether a person who is dead could “become alive again” is a complex one. It involves a variety of both naturalistic and non-naturalistic considerations. Naturalistic
explanations include discussions of death in the context of natural (scientific) laws – even where those laws are in fact inaccurate or incorrect. Non-naturalistic explanations, in contrast, are those that refer to some super-naturalistic existence, process, force, or being to account for the actual (or possible) reversibility of death. According to Brent et al. (1996) the sources of the non-naturalistic considerations in their studies were less clear, an apparent by-product of the Christian belief system of the culture in which these children and adults were raised. In the same vein, adults scarcely seem aware that children are capable of understanding death.

Vianello and Marin’s (1985) survey in (Vianello and Lucamante, 1988), 80% of the parents stated that children under 5 years of age never think of death, and 50% believed that, until the age of 9 or 10, children have only a very limited understanding of death. Similarly, Vianello and Lucamante (1988) also found that a general comparison of responses from doctors and parents showed that most subjects, in both groups, believed that children are incapable of thinking of death, or of being part of it. And moreover, children are involved with the thought of death only rarely and superficially, and are not able to understand death as a universal, irreversible event until the age of 7 or 8 years.

Adult’s conceptualisation, the linguistic milieu, the current cultural practices, adults’ views of their children’s understanding or non-understanding of the concept, the level of operational thinking are all key aspects in unveiling what children think and what informs their thinking.
2.4 Conclusion

Based on the preceding review of the literature, several observations have been made about the development of the concept of death in children:

♦ Despite methodological differences, children tend to have an awareness of death very early in life.

♦ There is a positive association between age and conceptual development.

♦ Emphasis on death research is on how mature children’s concepts of death are as compared to those of adults.

♦ Children’s conceptions of death tend to reflect those of the society in which they are reared.

♦ Age nine is seen as the cognitive turning point at which death is seen as being universal.

♦ By the age of ten children have a mature understanding of the components of irreversibility, universality, finality, personal mortality, and causality.

♦ Besides age, there are other factors that influence the child’s comprehension of death and these include: gender and socio-economic status, type of object, cultural background, religious background, child’s previous experience with loss.

An overview on the understanding of the concept of death provided in this review gives examples of how the concept of death develops in children. A common trait of the explanations offered is the effort to describe the concept of death by children from the adult’s point of view. Hence it is crucial to provide a theoretical framework that takes into consideration the contexts in which such knowledge and understanding happen. The essence of the research problem is concerned with the development of learners’ understanding. It is therefore argued that such a theoretical framework helps highlight the context in which to describe or explain human development.
CHAPTER 3
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a critique of Piaget’s theory of cognitive development. The main reason for using Piaget’s cognitive theory was the need to study continuum in learner development and concept development in death. Furthermore, Piaget’s cognitive theory is of particular relevance to this study. It provides a relationship between cognitive development and children’s understanding of death and studies suggesting a relationship between cognitive development and children’s understanding of death are reviewed. The introduction of the principles of the neo-Piagetian theory then demonstrates that children’s understanding of death cannot be fully understood without a full appreciation of the context within which development takes place.

3.2 Piaget’s theory of cognitive development

Piaget’s work reveals that children acquire important knowledge about the world without any explicit instruction. He maintained that children continually construct and reconstruct their knowledge of the world, trying to make sense of their experiences. He believed that the core of intelligent behaviour is an inborn tendency that people have to adapt to their environment (Keats, Collins, and Halford, 1978). Children build on the foundation of their sensory, motor, and reflex capacities to actively construct their knowledge of the world. Overall, focusing the attention of investigators on the active role of the individual
in the construction of his or her own knowledge has always been one of the most important features of Piaget’s theory (Case, 1991; Vuyk, 1981a).

Piaget suggested that children learn from their experiences and develop more complex mental structures, which help them progress through a series of four major stages in logical development of cognitive development (Goswami, 1998, 2001). This logical development corresponds to four successive forms of knowledge and these are: the sensorimotor stage (0-2 years), the pre-operational stage (2-7 years), the concrete operations (7-11 years), and the formal operations (11-12 years onwards). Development becomes an active construction process, in which children, through their own activities, build increasingly differentiated and comprehensive cognitive structures about the world around them (Crain, 1985). Constructivism, according to Piaget, characterises the acquisition of knowledge as a product of the individual’s creative self-organising activity (Keats et al., 1978).

The present review excludes the sensorimotor stage, and focuses only on the last three developmental phases and connects these with children’s ideas about death. The last three stages differ from the sensorimotor stage in that they are all characterised by symbolic activity. Keats et al. (1978) argue that the progression from pre-operations to formal operations may be thought of as a progressive elaboration of symbolic processes into more complex systems. The sensorimotor stage on the other hand typically does not have concepts (Wass and Corr, 1984), and has systems that do not include symbolic processes in any essential role (Keats et al., 1978).
According to Wass and Corr (1984), Piaget himself never specifically studied the question of how the understanding of death develops in children. However, his theory and findings on conceptual development in general has been readily applied to the development of death concepts in children. Researchers in this area have attempted to integrate the concept of “death” into a Piagetian framework for formulating and interpreting their findings (Gordon and Klass, 1979; Grollman, 1967; Wass, Berardo, and Neimeyer, 1988). Such studies have emphasised that awareness or understanding of death is not a separate aspect of a child’s development that, rather, it influences, and is influenced by all of the child’s experiences.

Operations, according to Piaget, are mental representations and actions and thoughts. An operation is defined as a thought that follows rules of logic whereas pre-operational thought does not follow such rules (Wass and Corr, 1984). Central to the understanding of the child’s thoughts and perceptions during pre-operational stage is the child’s egocentric orientation and the inability to appreciate the irreversibility of events including death (Formanek, 1974; Schonfeld and Kappelman, 1992). Research evidence also shows that children cannot be anxious about death or dying because of their inability to comprehend the irreversibility and finality of death (Anthony, 1973; Schell and Seefeldt, 1991). Children conceive of death as a reversible event like going to sleep.

Looking at how children begin to develop a concept of death Backer, Hannon and Russel, (1982) believe that children experience feelings of loss and separation through their progressive stages of growth. A child, during pre-operational thought, may know the
words “dead” and “death” but understand little or nothing of their meaning (Wass and Corr, 1984; Watts, 1975). When a child observes death, it is a puzzle that she or he often solves with a magical or other pre-logical explanation; alternatively, parroting what has been heard from adults.

For children at the pre-operational level (2½ - 6 years), things are as they appear to be, and they will remain so. Life is the experience of movement, and they attribute life to all things that move, and so the absence of movement can connote the quality of no aliveness or death (Gordon and Klass, 1979). When children think about persons or animals that have died, they attribute to them all the qualities they had when these were alive. Thus the dead can be in a box or in heaven, drinking, eating, etc. Since the pre-operational child cannot assume the place of the other, the child assumes that his/her feelings about death are the same as adult emotions. Piaget refers to this way of visualising the world as magical thinking and egocentrism (Dyregrov, 1991; Webb, 1993), and has been related to the conception of death as reversible by various means due to external causes (Prichard and Epting, 1991-1992).

Wass and Corr (1984) report a notable difference between children in the early studies (Anthony, 1939; Nagy, 1940; Schilder and Wechsler, 1934) and later studies (Lonetto, 1980; Speece and Brent, 1984) with American children. At the stage of pre-operations children in the early studies gave accurate accounts on funeral practices than children in the later studies. The reason for this is that early in the century, life expectancy was considerably shorter and contact with death was a more common
experience in the young child’s life. Also, younger children were more likely to have participated in funerals than are young children today. Wass and Corr (1984) give a word of caution though, that the experience of having observed funeral proceedings does not in itself enable the young child to comprehend “death.”

The acquisition of concrete operations is marked by the gradual waning of egocentricity and by reversibility (Goswami, 2001). Children at the concrete operational level, from about 5 – 10 years, are limited to specific causes and actual or possible occurrences but are able to divorce the idea of death from that of their own death or the death of their parents. For example, in two extensive studies Wass and Corr, (1984) found that about 65 percent of children provided logical-semantic definitions of death, such as death is …the end of living,” “… when you don’t live anymore.” A further 15 percent defined death as the cessation of physical functions. At both the pre-operational and concrete operational levels, death is often associated with sleep. The idea is further reinforced by common euphemisms in adult language, identifying death with a sleep-like state (Gordon and Klass, 1979; Wass and Cason, 1984).

Whereas children at the pre-operational stage would answer the question “What happens when people die?” with the reversal or undoing of whatever caused someone to die, Wass and Corr (1984) believe that the children at the concrete operational level would answer this question by accurately describing what is done with the body and what happens to the body physiologically. Studies show consistently that children at this level tend to describe in detail not only the procedures of funeralization but also the process of
decomposition and decay, and further state that the soul goes either to heaven or hell. In all, Wass and Corr conclude that those naturalistic explanations about why people die and concrete physiological descriptions of what happens when people, seem to predominate at this stage. To them, this is completely consistent with Piaget’s theory. Children, who have fully advanced in their cognitive development to the level of concrete operations, have a mature understanding of death (Costa and Holliday, 1994; D.E. Matter and R.M. Matter, 1982), view death as a natural, irreversible event, as attributable to internal causes (cessation of body function), and as a universal phenomenon (Prichard and Epting, 1991-1992). Similarly, Goswami (2001) confirms that death in this stage is understood as final but far away, as an irreversible event, and inevitable. Webb (2002) sums this up by saying that most children at 7 or 8 years of age know that death is irreversible, inevitable, and universal, and this is due to their normative cognitive development and life experiences.

When asked, “why do people die?” Wass and Corr (1984) report that children at the concrete operation stage frequently give concrete causal explanations that focus on physical causes. These concrete explanations can be divided into two categories, 1) external explanations (such as assault, accident, or disaster), and 2) internal explanations, such as disease and old age. Children who have progressed further at this stage list external events less frequently. Furthermore, in the framework of Piagetian theory, the cognitively advanced adolescents who have reached the final period of formal operations fully comprehend death, but may still assume that it cannot happen to them (Matter and Matter, 1982). They know that death is irreversible, natural, and universal. The
recognition that death is universal implies the understanding that it is inevitable and thus personal, and this recognition threatens adolescent’s emerging individual identity. In order to cope with such a threat, the adolescent, similar to the adult, tends to shut the thought of death-as-a-personal event out of mind and deals with death safely in the abstract. However, in cases where adolescents reside in violent stricken areas that make death among their peers a daily occurrence, this can actually raise the level of awareness regarding their impending deaths (Mkhize, 1994). Furthermore, formal operations have been related to the development of complex systems of religious and philosophical thought concerning the nature of death and life after death (Prichard and Epting, 1991-1992).

When reading Piaget’s theory of cognitive development, one misses a discussion of the connection or interaction between the child’s cognitive development and the impact of parental or familial process of socialisation on such development. However, according to Vuyk (1981a), Piaget has written that social life is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for cognitive development. Notwithstanding this observation, the impression created is that Piaget wants to consider this aspect, but is fundamentally less interested in demonstrating it in his experiments and therefore it is not surprising that his theory is still criticised on this issue. Burman (1994), for instance, contends that the failure of developmental psychological research (especially that of Piaget) lies in how it has regarded the biology and the social as polarised factors of development. When directed towards issues of development, Piaget’s theory tends to presuppose that developmental change is natural (Burman, 1994; Morss, 1996). One problem with that
view is the neglect of social, cultural, and situational factors that may influence this development (Wass, 1997). Actually, the development of a child should be viewed and understood from the contexts within which they grow.

For instance, Astington (1999) reports that Vygotsky believed that everything must be investigated in terms of its social context and also in terms of its history (Lloyd and Fernyhough, 1999). Furthering Vygotsky’s theoretical thinking on the subject, Valsiner (1987, 1992) writes that in child development, the developing child and the cultural environment of the child are intrinsically related. She explains that the cultural environment is organised by active members of the culture who belong to the generations older than the child is. Above all, Valsiner explains that Vygotsky’s concept of ‘Zone of Proximal Development’ served for him as a theoretical construct that made it possible to view the child-environment relations in the context of the individual-sociological frame of reference.

For Prichard and Epting (1991-1992) arguments attempting to account for variability in age of acquisition of mature death conception have one of three themes: 1) there is no underlying idiographic sequence; 2) variability is due to the impact of sociocultural factors (that is, the impact of ecological variables in the child’s life context); or 3) variability is due to “premature” experiential and/or emotional contact with death. Furthermore, other researchers (Morss, 1996; Moss, 1992) have observed that social factors remain secondary to Piaget’s theory. This therefore makes the development of concepts like death seem to happen out of context – and may also proceed in a similar
manner no matter where in the world one is. Piaget’s theory tends to put more emphasis on the general (universals) by suppressing the particular. By so doing the focus becomes more on the inborn or inherent traits of the child as an individual, and does not necessarily throw light on how the causal environment itself influences such inherent traits. There is, therefore, no way of spelling out some “identifiers” of what happens to the cognitive development of children when their inborn pre-operational traits interact with how they are socialised on a particular reality they are trying to come to terms with (e.g. the crisis situation of losing someone through death).

From the above review one can reasonably argue that most of the researchers (Gordon and Klass, 1979; Grollman, 1967; Wass, Berardo, and Neimeyer, 1988; Wass and Corr, 1980) in the area of death have attempted to integrate the concept of “death” into a Piagetian framework for formulating and interpreting their findings. Even those studies that have gone beyond a Piagetian approach to suggest other factors affecting a child’s cognition of death show a wide variability of social and cultural factors in their findings. Findings of these studies include the following:


♦ The understanding of irreversibility is not demonstrated until age 10 (M. Tallmer, Formanek, and J. Tallmer, 1974), and this seems to develop before an understanding of deterioration of the body after death (Atwood, 1984).
♦ Children’s experiences with death accelerated death concept development only in 6-year-olds and below (Kane, 1979; Prichard and Epting, 1991-1992).

♦ Others have suggested individual personality factors (Feifel, 1977; Kenyon, 2001).

♦ Culture has been included in the list of important variables (Candy-Gibbs, Sharp and Petrun, 1984-1985; Koocher (1974; Lazar and Torney-Purta, 1991).

♦ Maurer (1966) and Atwood (1984) found that children from low socio-economic groups were more aware of the concept of death than middle class children at each age level (3 to 9 years).

♦ Backer, Hannon, and Russell (1982) have shown that children’s views about death may be influenced by their experiences; self-concept at the time they are considering the question of death; age; family attitudes and values; the cultural milieu in which they live.

♦ Webb (1993, 2002) believes that any analysis of a child’s understanding about death must include not only the individual factors related to the child’s cognitive and emotional development, but also the influences impacting on the child that emanate from the cultural and religious beliefs in the child’s home environment.

♦ The type of object being referred to and the child’s cultural and/or religious background (Candy-Gibbs, Sharp and Petrun, 1984-1985; Lazar and Torney-Purta, 1991; Smilansky, 1987) affects the child’s understanding of death.

In an extensive overview and critique of Piaget’s theory, Vuyk (1981a, b) provides excellent insights into the works of Piaget. Firstly, she cautions that the difficulty of translating Piaget’s is a far greater obstacle for readers who cannot read the
original works. Notwithstanding, the reader, without a profound knowledge of Piaget’s work, may well take the many strong pronouncements in Piaget’s works too literally. Secondly, Vuyk’s opinion is that there are many passages in Piaget’s publications that are vague, contradictory, and too strongly expressed. But the problem is to know when this weakness of his writing invalidates his theory and when it is indeed no more than a style of writing causing his readers extra difficulties. She strongly believes that any of the justified criticisms of Piaget’s style of writing do not invalidate his theory.

Thirdly, Vuyk reminds the reader that Piaget’s work is largely determined by his efforts to convince others that genetic epistemology – that is, the study of how knowledge develops – is a legitimate subject for scientific research and theorising. As a genetic epistemologist, Piaget avoided critical questions that would have forced him to explain why he did not study the influence of socio-economic status, sex, for example. According to Vuyk (1981a) Piaget reasoned that:

...The child, more or less rapidly, catches up with contemporary adults. This can only be explained by the adult social environment which constantly offers the child new problems, thus stimulating his development. This leads the child to new questions for which he must then construct his own solutions...

(p.33)

By comparison, children’s concept of death has been related to cognitive development in the majority of studies dealing with this subject (Nunes, Carraro, Jou and Sperb, 1999). However, children’s individual experiences, as well as culture, which formalises events of each particular society, among others the event of death, have been increasingly considered as important elements in the elaboration of children’s concept of
death. Nevertheless, the highlights of the following section will be to raise the significance of considering the cultural contexts within which cognitive development takes place by applying the principles of the neo-Piagetian. So far difficulty has been experienced in tracing any form of research done on the development of death concepts using the neo-Piagetian theory.

### 3.3 The neo-Piagetian framework

The literature that has been reviewed this far is interesting not only for what it reveals about the development of the concept of death itself. But also for what it reveals about the difficulties encountered in attempting to use a general theory of cognitive development like Piaget’s as the basis for understanding the development of an abstract concept like death.

For instance, the previous section has shown that Piaget viewed the child as a young intellectual who is continually constructing knowledge about the world by applying a set of logical tools he called logico-mathematical operations. These tools are universal in nature, and are not affected by the differences in the content to which they are applied (Case, 1991). Children therefore acquire important knowledge about the world without any explicit instructions. This implies that the core of intelligent behaviour is an inborn tendency to adapt to the environment. Thus, children build on the foundation of their sensory, motor, and reflex capacities to actively construct their knowledge of the world. They learn from their experiences and develop more complex mental structures, which help them progress through a series of four stages of cognitive development.
This view embraces the universal nature of cognitive development that characterises Piaget’s theory. The sequences of intellectual development appear to be universal, both within and across cultures. According to Case (1991), Piaget’s theory proved to have a number of shortcomings in spite of its broad explanatory power. One of the problems included “the inherent difficulty of explaining how a cognitive system could be open to cultural innovation when it is only equipped with a universal and closed set of logico-mathematical operations” (Keating, 1980) in (Case, 1991). Similarly, Sanfeliz’s (1995) study also highlights some theoretical and methodological constraints imposed by the cognitive-developmental approach on research about children’s understanding of death. For instance, Sanfeliz points out that little attention has been paid to the roles of cultural or experiential factors.

One of the aims of the present study was to advance the need for using a context-bound theoretical framework that would facilitate an understanding of the dynamic nature of concept development. The study used the principles of the neo-Piagetian framework proposed by Case (1991) to try and accommodate some of the concerns raised in Chapter 1. Case operates within what Vuyk (1981b) calls the “intraparadigmatic critique” that aims at building on some of Piaget’s core-concepts but goes beyond Piaget by including the role of context in explaining child development. The neo-Piagetian theory that Case proposed has its roots in an attempt to account for the many exceptions to the pattern of development that Piaget had described, without losing the power to account for the pattern itself (Case, 1991; Demetriou, Shayer & Efklides, 1992). The following section will demonstrate how the neo-Piagetian theory fulfilled each of these dual functions.
Firstly, Case (1991) summarises the aspects of development that were presumed to be general, and to give it the universal character that Piaget originally postulated (p.33-34):

1. Each executive control structure represents a device for dealing with a different, specific problem situation. All executive control structures undergo a similar set of transformations with time, and pass through a universal sequence of four major stages.
2. Within each major stage, a universal sequence of three sub-stages (unifocal, bifocal, and elaborated co-ordination) may also be identified. What differentiates these sub-stages is the number of elements that children must represent and the way in which these elements must be organised.
3. Each successive stage of development entails operations that are controlled by a higher level neurological system, and there is a biological limit to how fast each progressively higher system can come ‘on-line’ to perform the integrative function it is designed to serve. This is what gives development the natural time-course.
4. Under conditions where adequate domain-specific experience is provided, each sub-stage is also traversed during a characteristic time period. Sub-stage development is also limited by how fast further maturation of each higher-level system can take place. The rate of this maturation sets an upper bound on the efficiency with which the operations of that level can be executed and this, in turn, sets an upper bound on subjects’ working memory for the products of these operations.

Secondly, Case (1991) also outlines those aspects of development that are presumed to be specific and to account for the considerable variability that is observed from one child, task, or context to the next. He advances the following main arguments:

♦ The intellectual operations that children construct, especially at higher stages of development, are entities that are cultural inventions, such as ratio-comparison, not universal logico-mathematical operations. Accordingly, the course of children’s intellectual development must vary as a function of the culture in which they are raised, and the historical epoch within that culture’s life.

♦ As they grow older, children must depend increasingly on some form of instruction, either formal or informal, in order to acquire the high-level operations that the culture values, and that are used in its communal “work.” It follows that children’s
intellectual development will vary as a function of the social group within a culture in
which they are raised, and the access that this group provides to educational resources
of this sort (Case, 1975).

♦ The control structures children develop at any age are devices for dealing with
specific problem situations. Moreover, it is by the integration of existing specific
structures that an individual progresses from one stage or sub-stage of development to
the next. It follows that development will vary to a considerable extent, both in its
overall course and in its rate, as a function of children’s individual learning history
within their social group (Case, 1978).

♦ Because control structures have three specific components, it follows that children’s
individual learning histories can vary as a function of factors that relate to any one of
them:

i. Because the first component is a representation of a particular situation, it follows
   that children’s development can vary as a function of the particular contexts in
   which they receive their initial exposure to particular problems, and the match of
   these contexts to those in which these problems are encountered at subsequent points
   in their lives.

ii. The second component is a representation of the goal to be achieved in the particular
    class of situations. It follows that children’s intellectual development can, thus, vary
    as a function of affective and motivational features in their own makeup or in the
    world around them, which predispose them to pursue or to avoid particular sorts of
    goals (Case, Hayward, Hurst, & Lewis, 1987).

iii. Finally, the third component is a set of operations that children apply in order to
    reach the goals they elect to pursue in a particular situation. Therefore children’s
    intellectual development can vary as a function of the match between whatever
    endogenous operational capabilities they may possess, and the operations that turn
    out to be most important for solving the particular problems that the culture renders
    most salient.
Case (1991) goes on to say that, although all the foregoing factors are specific, their action is hypothesised to be constrained and potentiated by a set of changes that are system-wide and that have a strong biological component. These changes influence the highest level of intellectual operation that children can execute successfully under optimal environmental conditions, as well as their working memory for the products of such operations. As these upper limits shift, children’s control structures are believed to progress through a universal sequence of four recursive cycles in each problem domain to which the children have any long-term exposure, and in which they maintain a long-term interest.

These four cycles are the sensorimotor stage, the interrelational stage, the dimensional stage, and the vectorial stage. Within each of the four cycles, Case (1991) postulates a universal sequence of changes: At the first sub-stage, children assemble a new class of operations, by co-ordinating two well-established executive structures that are already in their repertoire. As their working memory grows, and as they practice these new operations, they enter a second sub-stage in which they become capable of executing two such operations in sequence. Finally, with further growth in working memory, and with further practice, they enter a third sub-stage in which they become capable of executing two or more operations of the new sort in parallel, and integrating the products of these operations into a coherent system. Once consolidated, these integrated systems then function as the basic units from which the structures of the next stage are assembled.
Rogoff (1990) advanced a similar stance by viewing the individual child, social partners, and the cultural milieu as inseparable contributors to the ongoing activities in which child development takes place. She further stated, “the concept of guided participation attempts to keep the roles of the individual and the sociocultural context in focus” (p.18). Moreover, it has been shown that in cultures where modelling or instruction is not present, children fail to show development into and through the higher stages that Piaget described on tasks that involve component operations.

Case’s (1991) conclusion then is that as children grow older, the culture is increasingly seen not just as presenting children with the opportunity for development. But as providing direct assistance in the developmental process by facilitating the construction of tools necessary to solve the higher order problems children will encounter “independently” at later points in their lives. Furthermore, “given that the context of children’s higher-level structures is culturally specific and that social interaction plays a stronger role in fostering stage transition at higher age levels, one would expect increasing variability in the course and rate of children’s intellectual growth as a function both of the general culture in which children are raised, and each child’s unique developmental history.” (p.39).

Altogether, the neo-Piagetian theory described above has tried to modify those aspects of Piaget’s theory suggesting that children’s development is impervious to the physical or cultural environment around them. The significance of this background is that it has laid the groundwork for investigating a variety of issues without being limited
to children’s understanding of logic, mathematics, and the physical world, but to include tasks that children encounter in their everyday lives – in this instance their understanding of death. Moreover, Keats et al. (1978) have cautioned that one has to consider to what extent the logical operational model, which is reasonably applicable to closed structures, may be used in tasks with more open structures.

Regarding the application of the neo-Piagetian framework in understanding the development of the death concept there is no apparent indication that there are studies available that have used Case’s theoretical framework to study the death concept compared to the works of this nature using the Piagetian theory. What is available regarding the development of children’s social structures includes tests that encouraged children to draw on their everyday knowledge base in formulating a response. The following are exemplary:

♦ The young girl’s conception of their mothers’ role (Goldberg-Reitman, 1991).
♦ The development of empathic cognition in middle and early childhood (Bruchkowsky, 1991).
♦ Young children’s awareness of their inner world: a neo-structural analysis of the development of intrapersonal intelligence (Griffin, 1991).
Case (1991) reports that on the studies listed above, the developmental progression on the various tasks used turned out to be the same. The conclusions that were drawn from these data included the following:

1. The executive control structures children assemble for dealing with a broad range of specific social situations depend on the existence of a central conceptual structure that they have constructed for modelling social interaction.
2. Children’s central conceptual structures in this domain bear certain resemblance – both in their form and in the timing of their emergence – to those in the domain of number.
3. These commonalities suggest that both structures may be subject to a common set of constraints, in speed of processing or in working memory.

### 3.4 The application of the principles of neo-Piagetian framework

In addition to gathering new empirical data one of the objectives of the present study was to use the principles of the neo-Piagetian theory advanced by Case (1991) to explain the developmental progression of children’s understanding of the death concept. The questions raised in Chapter 1 highlight the plight of children’s intellectual development in the hands of adults. It is therefore important to look at the principles of cognitive development forwarded by Case within the context that has been exposed.

If there is less commitment on the part of adults to include children in death-related communication and practices, one can expect to see variability in the development of the concept. For instance, Lawuyi and Olupona (1988) sum this up well when they state that:

> Peoples’ ideas and thoughts are rooted in the history of their experience, the nature of their social systems, and the material (including the physical) conditions, which affect developmental processes. There should hence be variations in notions of and about death, with each society using symbols to speak to experience and to mobilise the psychic and moral commitments that give meaning to normative patterns.

(p.12)
The dynamics of change are therefore partly dependent on the need to preserve the normative framework described in Chapter 1, and the variability in development will be enhanced by the social dynamics found in the child’s particular context when he or she receives the initial exposure to the concept of death. Such dynamics can impact differently on the child depending on the manner in which the concept is handled and on the expectations imposed by the social group within a culture in which the child is raised.

When tracing the development of the concept of death through the four stages proposed by Case (1991) the child’s level of operation seems to be on the basis of intuition. This involves an assemblance of a new class of operations or cognitive structures when children get their first exposure to death. They form mental representations or social scripts regarding death-related behaviours and this marks the beginning of an awareness of death. For instance, many cultural-level scripts and expectations about what is appropriate behaviour when death has occurred are learned very early in life. And therefore representations of death-related behaviour may have effects that last throughout the child’s lifetime. Children’s understanding of death during the 2 and 5 year is largely in terms of social scripts already in their repertoire hence they are able to give appropriate responses when asked about specific situations that they have never experienced personally (situations related to death and dying). Even though these scripts may be fragmented at first these nevertheless indicate progress in the development of intuitive representation.
The advancement in children’s understanding of death depends on the ability to remember the scripted information regarding death which they use as a frame of reference to understand new information they come across in their everyday lives as they get more exposure to death-related behaviours. When children grow older they continue to perceive particular death-related behaviours in terms of what they can remember. As the capacity of the working memory increases and the chances of exposure to death-related settings increase and more assemblance of new class of operations occurs then the child enters into a new stage of development where he or she will be able to integrate understanding of information into a coherent system.

For example, when presented with new scripts that conflict with what they already have in their repertoire, children in their interactions will tend to draw both on those cultural scenarios and on their own personal desires, fantasies, and intentions. During these interactions they will then develop strategies for fulfilling their own wishes and plans on how to fit in. In the process they need to negotiate among the various levels of scripts that they already have and make compromises that may vary from interaction to interaction, reconciling these in their own minds.

The pace of movement from one stage to the next will be facilitated in an environment that puts less emphasis on the obligation to comply with the norms that prescribe how to behave in death-related situations as illustrated in Chapter 1. For instance, Mitchell (1999) has observed that most of the time “the reasons for the prescribed behaviours have less to do with their consequences, and something more to do
with one’s perception of the value of acting in a certain way.” (p.3). As it has already been highlighted in Chapter 1, death scripts that are available to most African children do not recognise children’s desires to talk and to participate in death-related activities.

For instance, efforts by children to observe and/or participate in some activities (e.g. burial rites) of the adults are strictly prohibited. The age of the child is always cited as the significant factor, only that the “proper” age is never defined. Children may come to know about death vicariously by observing others. However, these same youngsters may be kept away from observing the burial rituals. Furthermore, the parents’ efforts to promote the development of their children’s new skills has to be based upon both their understanding of what the child can already accomplish, and what they think the child can learn to accomplish with parental help. But then, how are parents supposed to ascertain the level of the child’s understanding of death if they never talk about it in the first place? This lack of parents’ purposeful efforts to guide their child’s development would eliminate their role from child socialisation. Using Piaget and Vygotsky as frames of reference, Valsiner (1987) reports that the development of internal cognitive processes starts from external acting of the child within its environment, and proceed towards internalisation of the external experience. This then calls for the external experience to be well structured and properly communicated to the child.

There are binding constraints that are set by people around the child to regulate the child’s relationships with the environment in ways that fit the cultural meaning systems. The child’s knowledge about the cultural meanings embedded in death-related
activities can gradually be acquired both by observing and participating in the practices involved. Furthermore, intelligence (Cole and Scribner, 1974), is to a great extent the internalisation of “tools” given by one’s culture and in the context of this study such “tools” represent the symbolic systems. Given the kinds of constraints (that is, the silence on death-related issues, undermining of the child’s intellect, use of symbolic expressions) that regulate and direct the development of the child’s thinking, the following chapter stands to demonstrate methods that are able to capture the context-bound experience that children are exposed to. This will then introduce a change in the form of data that is gathered, a change in the approach to data analysis applied, and also a change in the concepts used to explain the data.

3.5 Conclusion

The chapter has presented a critique of the Piagetian theoretical framework as it accounts for cognitive development. The critique has provided the status of research and knowledge production in the area of death. Its account of cognitive development has also covered those studies that have used the Piagetian theory in interpreting the development of the death concept in children. The discussion raises arguments for why context should be considered when explaining cognitive development. Besides, the principles of neo-Piagetian theory advanced by the literature review challenge the traditional approaches of doing research that ignore the role of a particular context on the course of development of its inhabitants.
These principles pave the way for gathering information about the influence that derives from the children’s perception or interpretation of behaviour settings that they are exposed to in their everyday interaction. Behaviour settings refer to families in mourning when death has struck, together with burial rites that are conducted. The point of departure here is that the knowledge that the environment imparts to the children together with the properties of the whole cultural milieu form an essential and necessary aspect in the regulation of development and, therefore, need to be acknowledged.

An investigation into culturally specific experience that shapes the context of children’s understanding of death can be profitable. To achieve this the neo-Piagetian theory that emphasises the principles of context in understanding human development would have to be applied, as this theory highlights the exceptions to the pattern of development prescribed by Piaget. Consequently, because of the weaknesses highlighted in the literature review, research should consider the context-based setting a basis for explaining cognitive development as well as conceptualisation of death.
CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

4.1 Introduction

The present chapter first looks at the rationale for the choice of the research design adopted in the present study. It then details the methodological steps followed to obtain the data. Data capturing and analysis is also discussed. The chapter ends by discussing issues related to reliability and validity.

4.2 Rationale

Reiterating Freud’s assertion about death as a non-problem, Wittgenstein (1967) and Walton (1971) state that 1) Individuals cannot truly understand or accept their own mortality, 2) It is not possible to know anything about death because no individual has direct experience of their own death at least while they are alive, 3. Death is an epistemically inaccessible state. While there is this important element of epistemic inaccessibility that characterises death, Kastenbaum and Costa (1977) state that the task of the new psychology of death lies in the conversion of these long-held assumptions into questions that can be answered through empirical observation.

Looking at the status of the empirical evidence that is available concerning death, (Chapters 2 and 3) diverse methodologies have been applied in the study of death. The review of literature by Kastenbaum and Costa (1977); Kenyon (2001) and Speece & Brent (1984) shows that these methodologies included standardised and non-standardised
methods, with children as their primary source of data. It is important to note that with those investigators who used interviews some of them also used other techniques as well, for example, Childers & Wimmer (1971); Lonetto (1980); Nagy (1948) used drawings. It is also important to note that even the specific questions used to elicit information regarding each component of death varied among these studies. Similarly, a wide range of ages of acquisition has been observed across these studies because most often adequate information on the population samples had not been provided. As a result, the evaluation of differences in ages of acquisition has been based on procedural differences (Kenyon, 2001).

Despite the variations in methodology, these studies suggest certain general conclusions concerning how children view death before they have achieved a mature understanding of the components of death (Speece & Brent, 1984). In other words, emphasis has been upon how similar children’ concepts are to those of adults, that is, how mature their concepts of death are (Kenyon, 2001). Using adult conceptualisation as a yardstick to measure the mature understanding of the concept of death in children is also problematic because it is assumed there is a universal structure for how mature adults should conceptualise death. Such an assumption can be linked with what Kastenbaum and Costa (1977) calls “the seldom-examined assumption that adults do comprehend death” (p.228).

Furthermore, to account for the difference in ages of acquisition, Speece & Brent (1984) suggest three procedural dimensions: 1) task difficulty, 2) task specificity, and 3)
leading questions. With task difficulty, most studies only required children to make simple verbal responses. Also, in many cases all that was required was a yes/no response. In others, the task involved definitions of the word “dead,” an essay about death and therefore each of these three tasks makes non-target demands than was generally required. Regarding task specificity, the questions used by most studies requested specific information about the component of interest. For example, for universality the question was “does everybody die?” However, some studies asked general questions that did not require children to comment on a specific component. For example, Anthony only had children define the word “dead”; Nagy (1948) only asked the general question, “what is death?” and Lonetto (1980) only asked “what happens to things when they die?” for nonfunctionality. Leading questions also have a tendency of misleading (e.g. “can dead people and animals ever come back to life?” and statements like “when a person dies he can never come back to life.” The words “ever” and “never” may have suggested to some children the possibility of exceptions to the general irreversibility of death.

Comparisons of findings are also made difficult because of the diversity of techniques and samples employed. Major gaps in methodology also include lack of longitudinal studies where changes in the development of the concept of death can be studied using the same individuals over time. Regardless of these methodological problems highlighted in earlier reviews, rendering comparison between studies and generalisation from individual studies continues to be problematic. However, Kenyon (2001) states that some important findings have emerged that advances the understanding of children’s conceptions of death.
In taking cognisance of the nature of the kinds of methodological problems already highlighted, the present study has adopted a qualitative approach that demonstrates a contextualistic research strategy by using a range of methods in order to achieve its goal of producing a research product with credibility and dependability. Studying a child within the neo-Piagetian framework calls for gathering information from particular contexts. This information derives from children’s perception or interpretation of behaviour settings that they are exposed to in their everyday interactions. Hence, the insistence is on an interpretative understanding of the meanings they attach to these interactions in terms of their context. Lessons were also taken from Bronfenbrenner (1979), by trying to understand a child’s understanding of events like death (my emphasis) from the qualities of an environment within which they are reared and in the process learned what those qualities meant for the child.

Such an approach resembles what Babbie and Mouton (2001) would call the contextualist research strategy, where the aim would be to describe and understand what learners know about death against the background of the context within which death occurs. The present study undertook an in-depth investigation of the children’s understanding of death from their own perspectives and this insistence required a methodology that emphasises in-depth engagement of the participants. Drawings and semi-structured interviews were then used to achieve this. Probing what the learners know or understand was an attempt to make this explicit, so that it can be characterised. Engaging the children in drawings of death and combining this with questions regarding the components of death has managed to test their understanding of the concept. The
empirically grounded assumption in qualitative research is that it is possible to describe variation in conceptions of the phenomenon through a number of categories of description. The goal being to provide as rich, comprehensive, and substantial descriptions as possible to the ways in which children experience the concept of death.

4.3 Participants

There were 31 participants, all of who were selected from Upper Cala J.S.S. that is situated in a rural village in Cala, in the Eastern Cape. Their ages ranged between (6-8, 9-12, and 13-16 years). The school was chosen using purposive sampling technique that allowed the researcher to select the school on the basis of the privileged knowledge of the population of the village, and because the researcher is familiar with the social systems employed by the residents. Furthermore, some prerequisites directed the selection of the participants. The village has not been affected much by information technology (Television, for instance is a scarce commodity). The selection of learners was done within the following constraint: (a) the learner had not been exposed to television at home, (b) the learner had to be nominated by the class teacher as being of at least average and above average intellectual capability. There were 10 learners from each age group except for the 13-16 year-olds with 11 learners and this included an equal number of boys and girls. The age groups were chosen because they represent the beginning and end of Stages 2, 3, and 4, within the Piagetian theory. Of significance is the fact that after the age of 7, the learner is able to produce an integrated picture of his or her reality, and has the mental and fine motor skills necessary to represent the images in his or her mind reasonably on paper.
4.4 **Procedure**

In August 2000, introductory letters were sent to the principal of the school, requesting permission to conduct the study. Accompanying these were letters for the parents of learners to be included in the sample. Only learners whose parents gave consent were included in the study. Each child was interviewed individually in a classroom that was provided by the school. The researcher conducted all interviews herself. Learners were required to make three drawings (to draw death, a dead person, and a dead animal). Drawings are supposed to be simple, easy to administer, and fairly non-threatening to the individual. Moreover, they are supposed to be invaluable expressive techniques in determining children’s inner experience and how they interpret reality (Bertoia, 1993). This is especially noticeable for individuals who have a difficult time expressing themselves verbally, and particularly for children. Hammer (1985) in (Bertoia, 1993) endorses this view, adding “children find it easier to communicate, especially those things they will not or cannot share verbally, through drawing.” (p.17)

Having said, that it is important to reveal that this exercise was not as simple as was predicted and as highlighted in the literature. All learners took a long time settling down and beginning to draw and were not sure what they were supposed to draw. First of all, they were startled by the question “what is death”, and then being asked to draw it seemed to be more confusing. When they asked for further instructions or clarification, the instruction was: “Do it whatever way you think is best. Be sure to draw everything you know about what death / a dead person / a dead animal (respectively) looks like.” Finally, after lots of pauses they finally got down to the business of drawing.
Effort was made to ensure that all the learners drew their pictures independently to avoid the problems of copying of other's drawings. First of all, they were asked to “draw a picture of death” on a blank paper that was provided for this purpose. When this drawing was completed, a second clean sheet of paper was provided and the learner was asked to “draw a picture of a dead person”. Finally, a third clean sheet of paper was provided whereupon the learner was asked to “draw a picture of a dead dog”. Paper crayons were provided. Learners were then asked to describe their drawings and their responses were tape recorded, and the identified features written directly on the drawings.

Over and above the questions pertaining to the specific features of the drawings, the interviewer used the same drawings to ask the learners questions about the five components of the concept of death (irreversibility, finality, causality, inevitability, and old age) as these relate to human and animal death. Questions about these components were incorporated to assist the learners to further reflect on the drawings and on the phenomenon of death. According to Robertson (1994) a valid measure of understanding of a concept should involve eliciting the full set of elements a person has in memory about it. These components have been pre-selected from related literature (e.g. Brent et al., 1996; Lazar and Torney-Putra, 1991; Lonetto, 1980; Smilansky, 1987; Speece and Brent, 1984), and are defined as follows:

- **Irreversibility** means that the deceased is in a state from which there is no return, where he/she will never be a live person again.
- **Finality** is a state in which all bodily functions and sensations cease.
- **Causality** relates to the physical-biological factors that led to death
• **Inevitability** involves treating death as a natural phenomenon, which is inherently inevitable/universal.

• **Old age** – understanding old age involves understanding the biological sequence of life, that is, death is part of the normal life cycle.

At the end of the procedure there were three sets of data: firstly, data from the drawings, secondly, data from the questions on definition of death and what happens to people/animals when they are dead, thirdly, data from the questions on specific components of death.

At the end of the interview, all learners were thanked and given a small item as an appreciation for their participation in the study. The researcher then asked them how they felt about the whole exercise. Because of the potentially stressful nature of the emotional issues that the whole exercise might raise, she had made a commitment with the principal to help the learners deal with any unpleasant emotional side effects that might have emanated from participating in the study. This was achieved by making prior arrangements with the psychological services in Umtata to provide therapeutic assistance should the need arise. This meant that the need for follow-up (through visits or telephone calls where appropriate) was prioritised. Two visits were made to the school after the completion of the study (three months apart) and on both occasions nothing out of the ordinary was reported regarding the learners’ well being.

### 4.5 Analysis and interpretation

According to Cox (1993) children do not draw from real objects but from an internal model whose exact nature is unclear. For instance, when the child intends to draw an
object, a child conjures up a mental image of it based on his/her knowledge of the figure. It is this internal model that the present study intended to tap, also because drawings are supposed to reveal something about the nature of thought and problem-solving among both children and adults (Goodnow, 1977). Furth (1980) warns that when undertaking the interpretation of a drawing, one must be very cautious about what one says. Bertoia (1993) puts it very succinctly when she says:

There is always a danger of reading into another’s creation that which is, in reality, only a part of one's own psychology. There is also a need to be tentative, for each drawing is a unique creation, reflecting the one who drew it.

(p. 17)

From this perspective then, the analysis and interpretation was solely focused on the descriptive level of participant understanding, that is, how death appears to them. Qualitative research is a hermeneutical process. Throughout this process the focus was directed at the learners’ understanding of the concept of death. Each of these analyses involved several rounds of reading and reflection in order to discern possible patterns and also develop patterns and categories of conceptions of the phenomenon as described in this section. The second stage involved themes of definitions and understanding by the learners.

4.5.1 Data analysis: Drawings

Phenomenographic analysis can be undertaken without any particular frame of interpretation. Efforts are made to find patterns in variations of people’s conceptions of a particular phenomenon in order to develop a set of categories of description. Hence, the
drawings were analysed following Marton’s (1981) phenomenographic method, where similarities and differences in the pictures were noted. This method proved appropriate for analysing the drawings because the research interest in the present study was that of discovery of categories of elements and the establishment of their connection to the whole understanding of death. Furthermore, such a method proved useful in the identification of patterns found in the drawings across different age groups. Even though the procedure bears resemblance to grounded theory procedures of analysis, the process followed in the present study cannot be said to be that of grounded theory.

Marton (1981) believes that to be aware of learners’ conceptions is to be aware of their social reality and themselves. Categories of description were formed from an analysis of data abstracted from drawings and interview transcripts and these categories formed an abstract tool that was used to characterise learners’ understanding. Regarding the interpretation of the drawings, the following guidelines were utilised:

1. Each learner was asked to describe his/her drawing in order to get an idea of what the picture was supposed to tell, and “to get at the learner’s intentions in the drawings”. This actually helped in accurately perceiving the figures and interpreting the representations.

2. The procedure involved a summary of the items shown in the drawings (each drawing taken as a whole) until categories of illustrations emerged, as well as
describing what they had drawn. When the learners had finished drawing, the following steps were followed:

- The items were labelled on the drawings as soon as the child pointed out what they really were.
- From the creation of categories (themes) that unite the pictures and descriptions thereof, nine eventually emerged and these were compared across age groups as an expression of understanding.
- Each category formed part of a larger whole of conceptualisation.

4.5.2 **Data analysis: Interviews**

Learners were then asked to define “death”. This question was necessary and useful in clarifying further the learners’ understanding. The various definitions illuminated interesting terminology that would not have been captured if reliance of eliciting understanding were based only on the drawings. Learners had to explain “what happens to people/dogs when they are dead?” this question was also necessary because it was directed at spontaneity of responses that would complement understanding in other parts of the interview. Furthermore, learners were asked specific questions related to the five components of death while controlling for the referent object. The questions were designed to encourage the learners to think about the phenomenon, and were made learner friendly, mostly touching on the particular aspects of the drawing and also general to capture their overall understanding. The skill applied here involved making the learners to talk freely by encouraging the flow of their spontaneous responses instead of sticking rigidly to the questionnaire.
At the end of the interview, the tapes were transcribed verbatim prior to analysis, paraphrased, and translated into English in preparation for coding and analysis. An analytical procedure called pattern coding borrowed from Miles & Huberman (1994) was used to pull the paraphrased segments of data together into a number of more meaningful themes. Pattern coding, as a data reduction process required the use of codes to describe phrases and concepts found in the transcript. By supplying these codes one is able to identify the emergence of a theme or pattern. These patterns can then be matched within units and across units. The procedure for analysing the transcripts involved the following guidelines:

- By reading through each and every interview manuscript, pattern codes (working labels) emerged from the data and these were applied on new sets of data. This called for what Glaser (1992) refers to as creating a system of grounding these patterns in the data.
- This required doing constant comparison of learners’ responses and codes within and across age groups, and further checking these patterns for their core relevance.
- Beginning with the data for the 6–8 year-olds, the task was accomplished by jotting down the codes in the text and also writing short notes as the codes emerged.
- The procedure was repeated with the other two sets of data (9-12 year-olds and 13-16 year-olds) until there were three sets of themes from the three sets of data.
At the end of pattern coding, the three sets of themes that had emerged were compared with each other to see whether there were any similarities or differences in the portrayal of matching themes. Also, the comparison was done to see whether there were different themes that emerged as a result of the developmental stage. The themes were then written up as they emerged from the sorting of data. In Glaser’s words, emergent sorting which integrates the material to be written up is what guides the writing.

Common meanings from both the categories of descriptions from the drawings and the themes from the data from interviews were further compared and grouped to represent a collective understanding of the concept of death. Thus, the outcome was a set of logically related conceptions of death.

The responses specific to the five components of death were grouped together for each learner according to the pre-selected themes (irreversibility, finality, causality, inevitability, and old age), and the scoring of responses thereof follows in the next section.

4.6 **Scoring the five components for human death**

Learners were asked specific questions based on the modified version of the Questionnaire for Examination of Human and Animal Death Conceptualisation of Children in Smilansky (1987). The alteration became necessary because in the translated version some questions just did not ‘work’ in practice. For instance, to ask “What does
‘to die’ mean?’ and “What is death?” would mean a repetition of the same thing in isiXhosa – “Yintoni ukufa?” The question about burying a dog just did not fit with the learners’ understanding of the procedure followed when dogs are dead. Also, the question “What do we do with dead cats and dogs?” had to be changed to “What happens to dogs when they are dead?” Therefore the phrasing of the questions on reversibility had to be modified. So, instead of asking, “If a dog dies and is buried in the ground can it be a live dog again?” the question had to be changed to “If a dog dies and is thrown away, can it become a live dog again?”

The following explanation of this Questionnaire is taken from Smilansky (1987). The questionnaire contained twenty-six questions relating to various components of death: Irreversibility, Finality, Causality, Inevitability, and Old Age. The Questionnaire is composed of two parts: questions relating to human death and questions relating to animal death. The questions for humans and animals are identical, with the exception of some of the references (i.e., ‘how do people die?’ as opposed to ‘how do dogs die?’). For scoring, Smilansky reasoned that a clear structural division among the five components had to be maintained. This was done so that the child’s answers to the specific questions on each component determine the score for that component.

Further, equal weight was given to each of the five component areas composing the conceptualisation of death. The possible score for each component is 0-3 points. Scoring rationale and maximum score are the same for each component. The
questionnaire is a standardised examination with a defined system for scoring and interpretation: Analysis of the answers must take into consideration two aspects:

1. The child’s quantitative scores

2. The quality of the child’s answers and explanations.

A combined view of the quantitative and qualitative indices will make possible a reliable diagnosis of the child’s conceptualisation of death, and will be helpful in locating problematic areas in the child’s conceptualisation of death.

### 4.6.1 Scoring key for the component of irreversibility in human death

The score is determined on the basis of the learner’s answers to questions 3, 4 and 5 of the questionnaire. Question 3: “If a person dies and has been in the grave for some time, can he or she become a living person again? Why?” Question 4: “If a person dies and has not yet been buried, can he or she become a living person again? Why?” question 5: “Can a dead person come out of his or her grave? Why?”

**A score of 3** is given for satisfactory answers to both questions and suitable explanations for both answers.

Sample for satisfactory answer: “No, a dead person will not be alive again.” Sufficient justification would be answers such as, “Because he’s dead,” “Because he can’t”, or “Because he was old and he died.”

**A score of 2** is given for two satisfactory answers and one satisfactory explanation. The score of two can be given in two cases:
- If the learner has answered both questions satisfactorily but has given an explanation only to one question.

- If the learner has answered both questions satisfactorily and has given an explanation to each question but only one of his two explanations is correct.

**A score of 1** is given when the learner answered one question satisfactorily, with one satisfactory explanation. A score of one is also given if the learner answers both questions satisfactorily but his justifications of both answers are not satisfactory.

**A score of 0** is given if the learner has answered both questions unsatisfactorily, or has failed to answer, or has answered one question satisfactorily but its explanation is not satisfactory.

### 4.6.2 Scoring key for the component of finality in human death

The scoring is determined on the basis of the following five questions in the questionnaire:

Question 6: “Does a dead person know that he or she is dead? How? Why?”

Question 7: “Can a dead person see? Why?”

Question 8: “Can a dead person hear? Why?”

Question 9: “Can a dead person move? Why?”

Question 10: “Can a dead person feel anything; can he or she feel any pain?”

**A score of 3** is given if all the five answers and their explanations are satisfactory. The learner gets a score of 3 for negative answers (“No”) to all five questions and for good explanations to the five answers. A satisfactory explanation for question 11 would be “Because he is dead.” An unsatisfactory explanation would be “Because there is a lot of
soil and a large stone on top of him.” A response of this nature shows a lack of understanding of the concept of finality as related to mobility. Thus, despite the satisfactory answers, the learner will not earn a score of 3.

A score of 2 is given if the answer to only one of the five questions is not satisfactory or if one of the five explanations shows lack of understanding.

A score of 1 is given for satisfactorily answering and satisfactorily explaining three out of the five questions.

A score of 0 is given to a learner who has answered three questions but explained satisfactorily only two; or a learner who has answered only two questions satisfactorily with two satisfactory justifications; or has answered fewer questions or none at all.

### 4.6.3 Scoring key for the component of causality in human death

The score is determined on the basis of the learner’s answers to question 11: “How do people die? Of what other reasons can people die?”

A score of 3 is given for an answer citing old age and at least one other satisfactory cause of death, such as war, violence, accidents etc.

A score of 2 is given if the learner has cited only old age.

A score of 1 is given if the learner has cited at least one satisfactory cause of death but has failed to cite old age as a cause. Possible satisfactory answers: ‘Of illness,’ ‘Of shooting, bombing or poison,’ answers such as ‘lightning’ or ‘arrows’ are also considered correct. Answers such as ‘Because they are cursed by a witch’ are unacceptable.

A score of 0 is given when the child has answered unsatisfactorily, failing to produce even one satisfactory cause of death, or has not answered at all.
4.6.4 Scoring key for the component of inevitability in human death

The score is determined on the basis of the learner’s answers to question 13 – “Does everyone die?” If the learner answers “no” and has not explained, he or she should be asked, “Who does die?” “Will you die one day?”

A score of 3 is given if the learner, recognising the universality of death’s inevitability, has answered that all people, without exception, must die and will eventually die. The explanation of “Why” must also be acceptable. An answer such as “Because everyone gets old” would be satisfactory.

A score of 2 is given if the learner recognises the principle of inevitability but makes an individual exception. Three possible answers would get a score of 2:

- If the learner says that everyone must die but excludes himself.
- If the learner says that everyone dies, but only old people and that he/she will die only when he/she is old.
- If the learner has answered that everyone must eventually die but failed to explain this answer.

A score of 1 is given if the learner considers death’s inevitability limited and related to one specific cause or to one specific group of people. The following answers would rate a score of 1:

- If the learner considers death’s inevitability related to causes other than old age and answers, for instance, “No, not everyone dies, but only those who are sick.”
- “No, not everyone, only the very, very old.”
- If the learner excludes other people, in addition to himself, from death’s inevitability and gives an answer such as “Only I and my father and mother won’t die” or “only mean people die.”

A score of 0 is given if the learner has not answered at all or given an answer such as “Nobody has to die.”

4.6.5 Scoring key for the component of old age in human death

The score is determined on the basis of the answers to question 13 “Does everyone get old?” If the learner answers “no” ask, “Who does get old?” “Why?” “Will you get old?

A score of 3 is given if the learners understand that everyone ages and that they themselves will get old. If their answers contain one of the following two qualifications, these are still considered satisfactory:

- Not everyone gets old because some people die before they get old.
- They themselves will get old but after a long, long time, or that they will be old only when they are grandparents.

A score of 2 is given if the learner says that everyone gets old but cites a specific person or group of persons as an exception, as in one of the following answers:

- If the learner says that s/he will get old but not all others will.
- If the learner says that all people get old but that s/he will not.
- If the learner says that only some people get old, like grandparent, and that s/he herself/himself will also get old, but other people will not.

A score of 1 is given if the learner says that a large part of all human beings will get old, as in the following answers:
- That a specific person will get old but that s/he will not.
- If the learner does not mention someone else who will get old but says that s/he will.
- If the learner answers correctly, but the explanation shows faulty understanding.

A score of 0 is given if the learner fails to answer or answers that nobody (including self) will ever get old.

4.7 Scoring the five components for animal death

Scoring for conceptualisation of animal death follows the same principles and guidelines applied in the scoring of conceptualisation of human death. Each of the five concepts for animal death has a possible score of 0-3 and scoring key is identical to that used in human death. However, the wording of the questions is slightly different, and the questions on animal death will substitute words such as ‘dog’ for words such as ‘person’.

There are several minor differences between the scoring on human death and the scoring on animal death, as follows:

The component of inevitability – The learners’ score for animal death will decline as significantly if they exclude their pets from the inevitability of death, as it will decline for human death if they exclude themselves from death. For inevitability in animal death the score will be lowered from 3 to 2 points if the learners exclude their pets from the animals that must die.

The component of old age – As in the scoring of human death, the score in animal death will decline if the learners exclude their pets from the animals that get old.

A score of 3 is given for an answer such as “Yes, I think that all dogs will get old.”
A score of 2 is given for an answer such as “All dogs get old but my dog won’t.”

A score of 1 is given for an answer such as “Not all animals get old; some do and some don’t.”

4.8 Scoring and recording in the “diagnostic summary record” of an individual learner

To obtain the total score for human death, add the scores of the five components of human death. The sum total score can be 0-15. Similarly, to obtain the total score for animal death, add the scores of the five concepts of animal death. The sum total score can be 0-15. Enter the total score for each category in the appropriate column in the “Diagnostic summary record”. To obtain the inclusive score for conceptualisation of death add the total score for human death to the total score for animal death, this produces the inclusive score of Death Conceptualisation. The possible score can be 0-30. Enter the total score for conceptualisation of death in the appropriate column in the “Diagnostic summary record”.

4.9 Validity and Reliability

The aim of the present study was to examine how children understand the concept of death. This meant examining the way in which children create the meaning of death for themselves. The way the question had been formulated led to a choice of a qualitative paradigm as a frame of reference. The implication of this notion therefore required the use of triangulation. Triangulation is generally considered to be one of the best ways in enhancing reliability and validity in studies using the qualitative framework (Babbie and
Mouton, 2001; Denzin and Lincoln, 1994, Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Denzin and Lincoln (1994) state that triangulation forces the observer to combine multiple data sources, research methods, and theoretical schemes in the inspection and analysis of behavioural specimens. Triangulation should then be seen as the best way to elicit various constructions of reality that exist within the context of the study. The overlap methods used in this study represent a form of triangulation. It is worth mentioning at this point that the questionnaire discussed under section 4.5 is a standardised questionnaire with proven reliability and validity. Smilansky (1987) examined construct validity by using factor analysis and the four factors were I. Irreversibility in human and animal death, II. Finality in human and animal death, III. Causality in human and animal death, and IV. Inevitability (including old age) of human and animal death. The results of the analysis indicated that the questionnaire examines one general characteristic – conceptualisation of death. The Coefficients of congruence for the four factors were .962, .960, .860, and .963.

The criterion related validity was examined by means of the correlation between the children’s scores for their answers to the 26 questions in the questionnaire and: 1) their I.Q. scores; 2) their age. Correlation between conceptualisation of death and I.Q. showed a significant Pearson correlation of .43 (P .001). A correlation of .56 (.001) was also found between children’s scores on the questionnaire and their age. The reliability of the questionnaire was examined by means of test-retest reliability and inter-item reliability. The coefficient of correlation for the test-retest scores was 0.84. For inter-item reliability Kronbach Alpha was used and a correlation of 0.77 was found.
In the present study the questionnaire was not used as a mutually exclusive tool but formed part of the questioning process directed at learners’ drawings. The gist of the matter is that here one was not confined to one source of data but was working with different sources of data, and these included the learners’ drawings, the questionnaire, and the observations of the context within which the study was conducted. Data from these sources are significant in obtaining an overall picture of how learners’ understanding of death develops.

Triangulation became the means used to confront the threats to credibility (validity) and dependability (reliability). This allowed the researcher to look at the drawings as one source of information, and interviewing the learners as another source for checking the meanings assigned to those drawings. At the same time one was able to gather enlightening information (go beyond the obvious) and probe for underlying meanings assigned to the representations. Furthermore, the components of death provided in the questionnaire became a valid source for touching on the -factors of what death is all about. In the process of gathering the data, consistency of responses across techniques was also noted and this further accounted for dependability of the study. This type of study therefore required a multidimensional approach (in the form of triangulation) in order to provide relevant information that can provide insight into the objectives of the study. Such information would uncover, among other things: What learners understand, how they get informed about what they understand, and the particular contexts in which learners receive their initial exposure to particular information.
Studying children at the microsystems level (to borrow Bronfenbrenner’s 1979 terminology) calls for gathering information about the influence that derives from the children’s perception or interpretation of behaviour settings that they are exposed to in their everyday interaction. Behaviour settings refer to families in mourning when death has struck, together with burial rites that are conducted. The point of departure here is the knowledge that the environment experienced by the learners in the present study offers, to a great extent, the properties it is supposed to have and this therefore renders the present study relevant. This knowledge was obtained by observation, consciously noting in a non-judgemental manner everything remotely relevant to the topic. Seeking answers to questions like: what happens when there is death in a family, how do people behave, who is actively involved in the setting, how do they talk, move about etc. - sometimes just committing these events to memory. Overall, this whole exercise was about maintaining a spirit of inquisitiveness and exploration. The following chapters are reflective of the procedures highlighted in this chapter.

4.10 Conclusion

The methodological approach that has been presented in this chapter has taken cognisance of the nature of the kinds of methodological problems that have been highlighted in the literature reviewed. The contextualistic research strategy has managed to enrich the data by applying the method of triangulation thereby achieving the goal of producing a research product with credibility and dependability. The findings presented in the next chapter are a reflection of the nature of the data collected.
CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS

5.1  Introduction

The present chapter presents a description and synthesis of the learners’ understanding of death according to age. An interpretation and a more extensive discussion of the findings will be presented in Chapter 6. Because the study used a small sample the emphasis in the presentation of findings was on “thick description” that looked at detailed specifics especially dwelling on the use of categories and concepts used by the participants themselves. This allowed the researcher to stay true to the meanings of the participants. Firstly, the analysis of the conceptions involved using drawings and extracting meaning from these. As a result of this 9 categories were identified. These categories represented 9 topics into which data relating to the learners’ understanding of death could be grouped. However, among these categories, it became apparent that there were differences and similarities in the understanding of death between age groups.

The next step in the analysis involved the learners understanding of what happens to people and animals when they are dead. The data did not need to undergo extensive interpretation or analysis to be classified either under human death or animal death. The presentation of description of findings in this section attempted to capture the essence of what learners said about what happens to people vs. dogs when dead. The use of a dichotomy of referent object, that is, people vs. dogs does not imply that learners were expected to compare these. Learners were expected to draw from their experiences and
observations of what they know about what happens to people and animals after death. Thirdly, learners’ responses on the components of death were analysed. The focus was how they thought about the components of death. The presentation of findings involves:

1. Table 1 showing a distribution of learners by gender and age.

2. Drawings that are accompanied by story texts expressing the learner’s understanding of *what death is* and *what it means to be dead* both as a human being and as a dog.

3. Figures 1-1 to 1-10 represent ages 6 through 8 years. Figures 2-1 to 2-10 represent ages 9 through 12 years, and Figures 3-1 to 3-11 represent ages 13 through 16 years.


5. Learners’ answers to “what happens to people vs. dogs when dead”?

6. Scoring of responses on the components of death and these scores are presented in Tables for both human and animal death across all ages. Discussion of these responses is also given.

7. The final Tables show learners’ overall scores on conceptualisation of death.

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<th>6 – 8 years</th>
<th>9 – 12 years</th>
<th>13 – 16 years</th>
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<td><strong>Girls</strong></td>
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<td>10</td>
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5.2 Learners’ drawings representing what death is
5.3 Categories of description expressed in the drawings

The choice of aspects for analysis and the gradual development of categories are grounded in the context of description expressed in drawings. The essence of phenomenography is that conceptions have their origins in individual expressions. Once identified these categories of conceptions are linked to the phenomenon under investigation, and not to individuals. The aspects chosen for categorisation are: Personification; who did what to whom and how / method of death; choice of colours; physical features; gender; age; positioning of the dead / actions; rituals shown; and life symbols.

♦ Personification

Personification is the representation of a thing or abstraction in the form of a person. In this context the name has emanated through its emergent fit that occurred through coding and constant comparisons of drawings and as part of the way the learners had of defining death. When looking at the 6-8 year-olds, Figures 1-1 to 1-10, the glaring concern in eight drawings of death was the personification of death and the burial rites (graves and mourners). All the learners in this age group represented death as being a dead person (female features and clothing for all the girls, male features unclothed, and only one with clothes on for the boys). One 6 year old drew a dead person lying down and next to him was a circle shaded in brown and that to him represented a funeral.

With the 9-12 year-olds, both the drawings of death and the definitions of death (Figures 2-1 to 2-10) show that even this group of learners still personifies death. There is
difficulty in differentiating the dead with death. In that regard they are not different in
their understanding from the younger learners. To most, death has not lost its human
features. Drawings of death and drawings of a dead person are discussed as if they refer
to the same thing. This is so because all these learners view death to be the same thing as
a dead person. An exception to this rule is an 11-year-old girl, Figure 2-6, who drew a
picture of a dog to represent death, however, when asked to define death she said death is
a dead person. This highlights the confusion displayed by younger learners.

As with the previous groups, the “content” of death conception was not different
in the 13 to 16 year-olds either (Figures 3-1 to 3-11). Death has not lost its human form to
become an abstract form. Death implies an action/process of dying. The term “death” still
meant, “Death is to die.” “Death is a person who is dead.” The definition is also qualified
by a causal explanation: “death is a person who got sick and died;” “death is a person
who has been run over by a car and died;” “death is a person who has been killed,” etc.
Death also implies an absence – “death is a person who is ‘no more’…” Only two
learners gave biologically appropriate responses in addition to “death is to die.” One 14-
year-old boy responded by saying “death is a person who has stopped breathing,” and
another 16-year-old girl took it even further when she said, “death is to stop breathing…
it is to become just a motionless body that cannot feel pain” (Figures 3-1 and 3-6 respectively).
♦ Who did what to whom and how? / Method of death

In the drawings of the 6-8 year-olds, the “who” aspect responsible for a death in the drawings was not very clear, however, the methods of achieving death included being shot, burns from hot oil or water, being hit by a car, dying from sickness and old age, ingesting poison, stabs and cuts from either a knife and in some instances an assegai was used, and dying from AIDS. Interestingly, when it came to dogs, the agent of death was clearly defined. The “who” was always a man beating the dog to death because it stole something and sometimes other dogs bit the other dog to death.

Looking at the 9-12 year-olds, the means of achieving death were also not shown except for the rope with which the dead woman used to hang herself. The actual fatal wound was shown only in one instance by a 10 year old (dog with stab wound in abdomen). The agents of death varied, for instance, one girl mentioned that death was self-inflicted (the man drank alcohol). Accidents were also mentioned (drowning while swimming, tripping and hitting one’s head on a stone, ran over by a car). Suicide appeared for the first time where a woman hanged herself in the forest (she did not want anybody to see or stop her) because she was worried about something and did not want to go to the police. Natural causes were also mentioned (got sick and died). There were also two who fought over alcohol and one ended getting killed in the process. Unlike with the 6 – 8 year olds, where the agent of death as far as dogs are concerned was always a man, in this group natural causes dominated (4 boys and 2 girls). In other instances the dog was stabbed by a man (1 girl), poisoned (1 girl and 1 boy), or killed by other dogs (1 girl).
The concern about the methods of death was also evident in the drawings of the 13-16 year-olds. The fatal wounds are shown - knife stabs with blood coming out of the mouth and wound appear in drawings of two boys. There is a killer standing over a dead man still holding a knife (see Figure 3-1). There were wounds from car accidents (chest and had injuries with red spots on leg and arms). One girl explained that when death is mentioned, the picture of an ambulance comes to mind that is why she has drawn an ambulance. Where death has been caused by a car accident, the car is shown in the drawings, and in both instances the drivers are standing by to check extent of injury.

♦ Choice of colours

All learners used a variety of colours in their drawings except one 16 year-old who chose one colour (blue) for all the drawings. Girls preferred a mixture of colours (especially black, red, green, purple, blue, orange, yellow, brown, and pink), as compared to boys who preferred not to mix colours.

♦ Physical features

The physical features depicting human death showed the relative importance of eyes (closed, and did not have eyebrows except for one girl). The nose only appeared in three drawings (one boy and two girls). Girls and only one boy drew the mouth (shown open or closed, drawn in straight line and sometimes smiling) and the neck frequently). The bodies are mostly square and the limbs where they are drawn are stick-like appendages that do not end with hands except in one instance where they end in fists. Only two boys put some clothing on their drawings as compared to girls whose drawings were all
clothed and one wrapped in blanket. All girls saw death as female figures and all boys saw death as male figures.

There was not much difference on the body features of the 9-12 year-olds and the younger learners as compared to the 13-16 year-olds where the figures no longer resembled sticklike structures, they all showed some flesh and were all clothed in modern fashion with shoes in some instances. This older group showed hair, eyes with eyelashes, noses, and sadness was obvious in the shape of the mouths.

♦ Gender and Age

Human forms were undefined with respect to age. This may throw doubt on the acknowledgement of the possibility of their own mortality. The undefined features may be based on the fact that the learners view death as a distant event from themselves. Girls unlike boys showed the dead person to be female, and most boys tended to show both sexes in their drawings with the rest showing undefined sexual features. With the older groups (9-12 and 13-16 year-olds) the gender of the dead was specified in most instances except in the drawings of two boys and three girls who left it undifferentiated. The age of the dead was not clear from the drawings but it was mentioned only when asked about it.

♦ Positioning of the dead /actions

Even though all the 6-8 year-old learners said that their drawings represented dead people lying down on their backs or on their sides, some nevertheless admitted that they could not make drawings representing such positions. With the older groups one could see a
concerted effort put on drawing the dead lying down and the killers and mourners (where present) were the only ones in a standing position. The dead including dogs were lying down either on the spot where death occurred often with blood oozing out from wounds, or in coffins. Some dogs still maintained standing positions though.

♦ Rituals shown

The 6-8 year-old learners showed awareness regarding the rites of passage regarding humans and animals (dogs). They were aware that the dead has to be put in some kind of box clothed or wrapped in a blanket and buried in a hole or grave. With regard to dogs not much is done except to throw the dead animal away in the open field or dongas. At this stage not much could be uncovered regarding ‘procedure’ of a burial ceremony from the time the person dies until the burial. The responses were fragmented and did not follow any particular pattern.

With the 9-12 year-olds there was nothing out of the ordinary regarding awareness of rituals. One could still see graves and dead bodies in coffins called boxes as in the younger group. One girl made a tombstone with a cross. The word “mortuary” appeared for the first time in 3 learners’ drawings, however, the function of a mortuary was not yet clear at this stage judging by the responses given. The dead are taken to the mortuary to be kept until the day of the funeral. Keeping a person in the mortuary gives the relatives time to notify other people about the day of the funeral. Feelings were also acknowledged for the first time – mourners were shown crying because they feel sad. One boy painted the picture well when he said: “people cry if the dead person was a
relative who was providing them with money – you think about who will take care of you and then you have (isingqala) a sigh of sadness”.

Learners in this group, like the previous groups were still not clear about the exact procedure followed in taking care of a dead person. Their responses were still fragmented. The picture changes though when it came to dogs that have to be thrown away in the field and they supply justifications for these actions. “… Thrown in the forest because dog meat cannot be eaten”, “a dog cannot be buried because it is an animal”, “dead dogs are thrown away but I do not know why, I just see people doing it.”

As compared to the younger learners, the 13-16 year-old group of learners showed more concern about what happens to the dead. For the first time there seemed to be some form of clarity about what happens when a person is dead even though a few still supplied a fragmented version similar to the younger learners. For instance, the dead person is taken to the mortuary where s/he is washed; an ointment applied to the body and is then put in a box. The date of the funeral is then announced. A day before the funeral, a night vigil is held and the following day the dead person is buried in a grave that has been dug for that purpose and stays there for good. After the funeral all the people are given food to eat.

Some sentiments were expressed regarding the condition of the dead in the grave as expressed by statements like “in the grave people put zinc under the box in order to prevent ants from entering the box and also to prevent the box from getting rotten.” Also
there seemed to be more clarity regarding the function of the mortuary: “The ice in the mortuary helps prevent the body from getting rotten.” Dead dogs on the other hand are just thrown away because they are not people and they are going to smell. Exceptions would be made only if the owner loved the dog, he would then bury it. A strong statement came from a 14-year-old boy who acknowledged that dogs are thrown away in the mountains “but I will make a grave for mine because it is also a living being like a human being. Others are thrown away because their owners hate them.” There seemed to be a significant shift in the way of thinking and expression of views about what these learners felt and believed in.

One 14-year-old girl summed this up very well by saying “when dogs die people who love them bury them in shallow graves, other people just throw them away. A dog is not buried like a human being because it is an animal and animals were never meant to be buried like people. Our dog at home would be buried in a shallow grave and covered with soil. I feel pity when I come across a dog lying in the open field uncovered, I think that people are not grateful for the services that these dogs have rendered to them when they were still alive. Its difficult for them to even dig a shallow grave and cover them.” This spontaneous insight is an excellent example of beginning to understand the function dogs perform in the society.

♦ Life symbols

Only two 7-year-old girls showed a connection between life and death through the use of symbols. One showed a live hen standing next to the body of a dead person and the other
girl showed women mourners attending the funeral (Figures 1-9 and 1-10 respectively). Among the 9-12 year-olds the only life symbol was a tree serving as an anchor for the rope that hanged the woman (Figure 2-2). Four learners in the 13-16 year-olds showed a connection between life and death through the use of symbols. Two girls drew trees, there was soil in some drawings, and mourners were also shown standing by. One 13-year-old girl (Figures 3-10a and 3-10b respectively) made heart shaped flowers and a big tree with heart shaped leaves all over it and she explained that these heart shapes represented an expression of love for the one who had died.

5.4 **What happens to people when they are dead?**

Sections 5.4 and 5.5 look at the understanding of learners to the question “what happens to people vs. dogs when they are dead?” the responses are given according to age groups. The question was posed such that the learners would respond in a spontaneous manner to the question.

**Responses of the 6-8 year-olds:**

**Luzuko** (7 yrs): “The dead is buried in the soil.”

**Zukisa** (7 yrs): “People bury the dead person.”

**Asanda** (8 yrs): “Many people come to bury that dead person in the grave.”

**Ongezwa** (6 yrs): “There is a funeral. There is a night vigil and people come to pray. The box is put may be in the kitchen. The following day a lot of people come and the person is buried.”
Nompumelelo (8 yrs): “If it is the mother who is dead the child is shown the dead body. There is singing, then the box is put in a grave, and the grave is covered with soil and stones. Children also put stones on the grave.”

Responses of the 9-12 year-olds:

Sifiso (11 yrs.): “He is going to be taken to mortuary, I do not know why. Whilst he is in the mortuary relatives will decide on the day of the funeral and this will be announced to the people.”

Sinazo (10 yrs.): “When people find her she will be taken to the mortuary and then buried. She will be put in a hole, covered with soil and stones.”

Yonela (9 yrs.): “A dead person is put in a box and buried in a grave that has been dug for that purpose.”

Fikiswa (11 yrs.): “When a person is dead people dig a hole, put the dead person inside a box, put the box in the hole and cover it with soil and stones.”

Sakhumzi (11 yrs.): “People are going to look for him and when they find him they will take him to the hospital mortuary where he will be kept until the funeral. Then he will be buried in a grave, put in a box and covered with soil.”

Responses of the 13-16 year-olds:

Sandise 13 yrs.): “First there is a night vigil and the following day the person is buried in a grave that has been dug for that purpose. In the grave people put zinc under the box in order to prevent ants from entering the box and also to prevent the box from decaying.”
Nomvuyo (14 yrs.): “the dead is going to be taken to the mortuary washed, apply ointment and put in a box. The date of the funeral is then announced. When the day comes the dead is buried underground and stays there for good.”

Noxolo (14 yrs.): “the dead is put in a box that then family buys and sent to mortuary where s/he is kept until the day of the funeral. The ice in the mortuary helps prevent the body from decaying. The date of the funeral is announced. A grave is dug on the announced date the dead is buried. After the funeral all the people are given food to eat.”

Siphokazi (16 yrs.): “people will come and take the dead to the mortuary, where all the dead are kept, until the day of the funeral. Notices will go out to the people and then the dead will be buried on the day of the funeral.”

Nyaniso (15 yrs.): “the dead is put in box and buried in a grave and covered. The dead will remain in the grave for a long time.”

5.5 What happens to dogs when they are dead?

Responses of 6-8 year-olds:

Siphamandla (6 yrs.): “It is thrown away in the dongas, I do not know why.”

Luzuko (7 yrs.): “I saw boys burying it in a hole and covered it with soil. Other dogs are thrown away, I don’t know why.”

Zukisa (7 yrs.): “When a dog dies it has to be thrown away, that is what my mother says.”

Ongezwa (6 yrs.): “A dog is not buried in a box like a dead person, it is thrown away.”
Nompumelelo (8 yrs.): “You just throw it away in the open field when it is dead because it smells bad. You do not bury a dog I do not know why. If our dog at home could die I would not throw it away because I love it, instead I would bury and we would sing for it.”

Responses of 9-12 year-olds:

Sifiso (11 yrs.): “It is going to be thrown in the forest because dog meat cannot be eaten. It cannot be buried because it is an animal.”

Sinazo (10 yrs.): “Now that it is dead, it is going to be thrown into the river. It has to be thrown away because it is going to smell.”

Ncumisa (9 yr.): “Dead dogs are thrown away but I do not know why, I just see people doing it.”

Busisiwe (9 yrs.): “When the dog is dead it is thrown into the forest and the older boys go and check if it is really dead. If it has closed its eyes, and does not move when they call its name, then they dig a hole and bury it.”

Yonela (9 yrs.): “When a dog dies it is thrown in the open field where it can be eaten by other dogs. I have seen people throwing dogs away when they are dead. Dogs cannot be buried because they are animals. Only people get buried.”

Responses of 13-16 year-olds:

Sandise (13 yrs.): “when a dog is dead it is thrown away because it is going to smell. If its owner loves it, he will bury it.”
Nomvuyo (14 yrs.): “when it is dead it is thrown away because it is going to smell. When my dog dies I’ll throw it away even though I love it. My sister told me that that once a dog dies it has to be thrown away because it is not a human being.”

Malixole (14 yrs.): “a dog is thrown away in the mountains but I will make a grave for mine because it is also a living being like a human being. Others are thrown away because their owners hate them.”

Noxolo (14 yrs.): “when dogs die people who love them bury these in a shallow grave, other just throw them away. A dog is not buried like a human being because it is an animal and animals were never meant to be buried like people. Our dog at home would be buried in shallow grave and covered with soil. I feel pity when I come across a dog lying in the open field uncovered, I think that people are not grateful for the services that these dogs have rendered to them when they were alive. Its difficult for them to even dig a shallow grave and cover it.”

Andile (16 yrs.): “when it dies it is thrown away because it is not like a human being, it is not created like a human being. Nobody has told me this, but I know. I do not think that is a good thing to do, at least people should dig a hole and bury it, but not bury it like a person.”

5.6 Scoring the components of death

Figures 4 and 5 show respectively the responses of the 6 through 16 years old on the components of death of humans and animals. These figures need to be read in conjunction with Tables 2 to 10 in Appendix E, which show the distinction of learners’
conceptions according to various categories. The age and number of learners and the scores they obtained is given along with each component.

**Legend:** purple – 6-8 years; red – 9-12 years; white- 13-16 years.

Irreversibility = Irr; Finality = fin; Causality = cau; Inevitability = inev; Old age = o/a.

![Bar chart](image)

**Figure 4** Learners’ scores on human death
Figures 4 and 5 show the distribution of scores regarding the five components of death across ages. Furthermore, a bird’s eye view of Tables 2, 3, and 8 in Appendix E show that the overall understanding of the concept of death is average for the younger learners. Scores on animal death are exceptionally lower than those concerning human death. Table 9 shows that the total scores on animal death are higher compared to those on human death. A cursory look at Table 10 indicates that the overall understanding of death has remarkably improved when compared to Tables 8 and 9.
5.6.1 Discussion of responses on components of death

The present section discusses the learners’ responses regarding the components of death.

♦ Irreversibility

Among the 6-8 year-olds only three learners had a full understanding of the irreversible nature of death. Some gave correct answers but could not supply explanations, and the rest could only give one correct answer with one explanation. One alluded to the fact that the dead will come back from the dead in a changed form, that is, as a ghost. The trend was more or less the same when it came to dogs where only one learner understood that death is irreversible.

With the 9-12 year-olds one girl (9yrs.) obtained a zero for not understanding the irreversibility of death. “My grandmother told me that dead persons can wake up and become ghosts when they have been killed by other people.” Not only this but also the exclusion implied show a limited understanding of the component as applied to dead persons, however the learner did not have any problem with the component when applied to dead dogs. Seven learners obtained the full score of 3 each; two got a score of 2 each either for giving an unsatisfactory answer “he won’t be able to wake up and live again because the box is closed or the dead is covered with soil”. Otherwise, all learners in this group understood the component when it was applied to dogs.

Regarding the 13-16 year-olds there was an emerging belief that death is irreversible and finality was also implicated. People lie in their graves until they turn into
bones. Some learners in this group began giving biological explanations like “The dead will not be live persons again because their breath is no more.” There was also an emergence of faith in the answers of two to the question of irreversibility “No, they will “wake up” when the Messiah comes (mhla kugwetyayo).

♦ Finality

The 6-8 year-old learners showed a limited understanding on the finality of death. With many giving contradictory answers to the questions and some not supplying correct explanations or saying simply that they do not know. The understanding became even lower on finality of death in animals, where the responses were characterized by “I do not know”.

On the other hand, only four learners in this group showed a complete understanding of the finality of death. Six obtained a score of 2 each because either one of the answers was incorrect or one explanation was incorrect. These statements by one 11-year-old boy and one 10-year-old girl respectively are exemplary: “He does not know that he is dead because he cannot see and cannot think”, “I do not know whether she knows that she is dead”. The concept of finality in dogs was totally understood by six learners, and the rest got a score of 2 each. There is a better understanding observed in this group that was not there in the previous group, but still only one 11 year-old mentioned a biological explanation by saying that a dead person cannot be alive again because “a dead person does not breath.” All the older learners understood the component.
♦ **Causality**

The condition here, for a total understanding of what causes death, was for the learner to cite old age and at least one other correct cause of death. Even though most learners were able to cite some causes of death, only one 7-year-old learner cited old age as a cause, however, the same learner did not consider old age when it came to dogs. Another learner cited old age only in dogs and did not consider it when it came to humans. The rest of the learners excluded old age in their responses. There were no biological explanations for death, such as “one dies because one’s heart stopped.” This shows a lack of understanding on the component of causality.

The 9-12 year-old group also did not understand this component well; nevertheless, there was marked progress. Similar to the younger group, these learners still found it difficult to understand old age as a cause of death. Four girls did not consider old age as a cause of death in both human death and animal death. Three boys and one girl cited old age as a cause of death only in animals. Only two boys got a total score of three in both categories. Learners in the 13-16 year-old group comprehended the concept of death with the exception of the component of causality. Most learners (seven) still did not include old age as cause of death in humans and this was carried over to dogs where another six excluded old age.

♦ **Inevitability**

Even though the 6-8 year-old learners recognized the principle of inevitability of death, this was generally accompanied by individual exceptions to the universality of death:
“Some people won’t die, those who die are those who are sick or poisoned”, “Yes dogs do die when they are old”, “All dogs die, but I do not know about young dogs”. Only one learner fully understood what the component entails.

For the first time there appeared a great leap among the 9-12 year-olds in the understanding of this component as compared to the younger group. Six of the learners obtained a total score of 3 each. The other three (9-year-olds) got a total score of 2 each for being able to recognize the principle of inevitability but made individual exceptions, e.g. “all people die … I will also die if I talk about death”. Another 9-year-old girl got a score of 1 because she considered the inevitability of death to be limited to one specific cause, e.g. “people who die are only those who are killed, I can only die when I am killed.” On the contrary, the 13-16 year-olds seemed to have fully accepted the principle of the inevitability of death. Everyone dies including him or herself - regardless of gender or age; the very young and very old can die. This shows that they can also perceive of their own death as inevitable.

♦ Old age

This was the best-understood concept by this group. Most learners seemed to understand this component as it applied to both humans and animals. However two seemed to believe that the component does not apply to their own dogs. The 9-12 year-olds also fully understand this component with the exception of one 9-year-old girl who recognized the principle of old age but cited a specific group whose death is limited to one cause.
Statements like “everybody gets old but others die young when they get sick” illustrate this. The older understood the component very well. They understood that everyone gets old except those who die young, before they reach old age. All dogs also do get old. When old dogs become deaf and blind, they lose hair, and they disappear and die. The statement by one 14-year-old girl illustrates this “all other dogs get old, those that do not get old are the ones that get killed when they are still young, that is, those that bite a lot and get killed in the process”.

5.6.2 Learners’ overall conceptualisation of death

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 8</th>
<th>Learners’ overall score on conceptualisation of death (6-8 years)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Possible score</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total score for human death</td>
<td>0 – 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total score for animal death</td>
<td>0 – 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total conceptualisation death</td>
<td>0 - 30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 9</th>
<th>Learners’ overall scores on conceptualisation of death (9-12 years)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Possible score</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total score for human death</td>
<td>0 – 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total score for animal death</td>
<td>0 – 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total conceptualisation of death</td>
<td>0 - 30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 10  Learners’ overall scores on conceptualisation of death (13-16 years)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Possible score</th>
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<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>11</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total score for human death</td>
<td>0 – 15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
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<td>15</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total score for animal death</td>
<td>0 – 15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total conceptualisation of death</td>
<td>0 - 30</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A bird’s eye view of Tables 8, 9, and 10 shows that the 6-8 year-olds understand the concept of death better when it is applied to human beings than when it is applied to animals. The total understanding of the concept of death is lower for the 6-8 year-olds when compared to the older groups. When looking at the 9-12 year-olds one finds the reversal is true. Scores on animal death are exceptionally higher than scores concerning human death. The total understanding has somehow improved when compared to the 6-8 year-olds but still lower than the 13-16 year-olds who seem to have almost mastered the concept.
CHAPTER 6

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

6.1 Introduction

The basic aim of the present study was to gather new empirical data in order to examine the development in the understanding (what exactly do they know) of the concept of death by learners through their own words and drawings: (what is death; what happens to people/dogs when they are dead: the extent of understanding regarding the specific components of death); what informs the knowledge that they have on death. The second aim was to show how the principles of the neo-Piagetian theory could be used to explain the findings. Lastly, the study also aimed at developing guidelines on how to handle death-related issues with children.

The data was obtained by means of drawings and semi-structured interviews to 31 learners with ages ranging between 6-8, 9-12, and 13-16 years from Upper Cala J.S.S. in the Eastern Cape. The drawings were analysed following Marton’s (1981) phenomenography method, where similarities and differences in the pictures were noted. The procedure involved a summary of the items shown in the drawings (each drawing taken as a whole) until categories of illustrations emerged, as well as describing what they had drawn. An analytical procedure called pattern coding borrowed from Miles and Huberman (1994) was used to pull the paraphrased segments of data from interviews together into a number of more meaningful themes. The responses specific to the five components of death were grouped together for each learner according to the pre-selected themes (irreversibility, finality, causality, inevitability, and old age), and the scoring of
responses thereof was based on Smilansky’s (1987) scoring procedure.

In the previous chapter, the overall learners’ conceptions were presented and described. The emphasis in the chapter was on describing and summarising learners’ conceptions on death. This chapter serves beyond presentation and description of the conceptions and provides an interpretation based on further analysis of the data. The interpretation involves taking the presentation of data and analysing it in relation to this study’s literature review in Chapter 2 and the theoretical framework outlined in Chapter 3. The purpose of the chapter is to look beyond the evaluation of learners’ conceptions of death to focus on the development of mature death concepts as described in Chapter 1 and 2. For instance, do the learners’ views replace conceptions of death as reflected in Chapter 1? Which type of approach do they reflect? Do they represent an attempt to recognise the importance of context? This chapter seeks to provide possible interpretations to address these questions. What follows then is a summary and discussion of the results presented in the previous chapter.

6.2 Development in understanding of the concept of death

The coding of data resulted in the creation of categories of death. These categories reflected a contextualise understanding of death. As the following section will illustrate, understanding of the concept of death is still some how a taboo for adults to discuss it with children. This is suggested by the use of various concepts by the learners. Although the role of the adult is valued as a source of knowledge, it is challenged as the only tool for understanding death. The process of understanding death is no longer focused on
death as interpreted by adults. Instead real-world, holistic content and context allow for individualised meaning and purposeful conceptualisation of death.

6.2.1 Categories of description expressed in drawings

The data demonstrated that even younger learners (6-8 years) found it difficult to draw death. They managed to come up with some representations of what they thought death looks like, thereby conjuring up images of objects based on their experiences of events that they had either witnessed or overheard regarding death. Overall, learners’ drawings revealed use of personification. Death to them meant a person who is dead. To be dead had to assume a particular position even though some confessed they could not draw a person lying down. Also, the drawings depicted death as involving funerals (behaviour settings), where there were graves, mourners, and a ‘box’ carrying the dead person. The dead were either clothed or wrapped in blankets.

On the other hand, older learners demonstrated a much better understanding of the concept of death compared to the younger learners. Nevertheless, the drawings of death showed personification of death. The content of drawings showed was not different in the older group of learners. Death still had its human features. Drawings of death and drawings of a dead person were discussed as if they refer to the same thing. Death meant a person who is dead. These personification-type responses provide an interesting similarity to Nagy’s (1948) findings. From the phenomenographic method used in analysing the drawings, nine categories of illustration emerged from the three sets of data, and these included personification, method of achieving death, choice of colours, physical features, gender, age, positioning of the dead, rituals shown, and life symbols.
Personification

The naming of this category emerged through its emergent fit that occurred through coding and constant comparisons of drawings and as part of the way the learners had of defining death. For the 6-8 year-old group, the glaring concern was the personification of death and the burial rites, graves and mourners. All learners in this age group represented death as being a dead person (female features and clothing for all the girls, male features unclothed, and only one with clothes on for the boys). Comparisons done to check whether there were any similarities or differences with the two older groups revealed more similarities than differences. In other words, death still retained its human form.

Who did what to whom and how? / Method of achieving death

Among the 6-8 year-olds, the “who” aspect responsible for a death in the drawings was not very clear, however, the methods of achieving death included being shot, burns, ingesting poison, car accidents, sickness and old age, and dying from AIDS. Interestingly, when it came to dogs, the agent of death was clearly defined as a man beating the dog to death because it had stolen something and sometimes other dogs bit the other dog to death.

With the 9-12 year-olds, the means of achieving death were not shown except the rope with which the dead woman used to hang herself. The actual fatal wound was shown only in one instance by a 10 year old (dog with stab wound in abdomen). The agents of death varied from those that were self-inflicted, to fights and various forms of accidents. Natural causes were also mentioned and suicide appeared for the first time where a
woman hanged herself. Unlike with the 6-8 year-olds, where the agent of death in dogs was always a man, in this group natural causes dominated.

Concern about the methods of achieving death was present in the drawings of the 13-16 year-olds and involved mostly shootings, stabbings, and accidents. The “who” or what aspect responsible for the death was made clear. One girl explained that the mention of the word death brought to her mind the picture of an ambulance that is why she had drawn an ambulance to represent death. Where death was a result of a car accident, the car was shown in the drawings, and the drivers standing by to check the extent of injuries.

Choice of colours

Both boys and girls used a variety of colours in their drawings. Girls preferred a mixture of colours as compared to boys who preferred not to mix colours. This trend continued with the older learners as well except for two of them.

Physical features

The physical features depicting human death showed the relative importance of eyes that were closed, and did not have eyebrows except for one girl. The nose only appeared in three drawings of one boy and two girls. The mouth was shown either open or closed, drawn in straight line and sometimes smiling. Girls and only one boy drew the neck frequently. The bodies were mostly square and the limbs, where they were drawn, were stick-like appendages that did not end with hands except in one instance where they ended in fists. Only two boys put some clothing on their drawings as compared to girls
whose drawings were all clothed and one wrapped in a blanket. There was not much
difference detected on the 9-12 year-olds. When it came to the 13-16 year-olds figures no
longer resembled stick-like structures instead they all showed some flesh and clothing.

Gender

With the 6-8 year-olds, girls unlike boys showed the dead person to be female, and most
boys tended to show both sexes in their drawings with the rest showing undefined sexual
features. For the older groups, the gender of the dead was specified by most.

Age

In the younger group, human forms were undefined with respect to age throwing doubt
on the acknowledgement of the possibility of their own mortality. The undefined features
may be based on the fact that the learners view death as a distant event from themselves.
Among the older groups, age was differentiated in most cases.

Positioning of the dead / actions

Even though all the 6-8 year-olds said that their drawings represented dead people lying
down on their backs or on their sides, they nevertheless admitted that they could not
make drawings representing such positions. On the other hand, one could see an effort
put in by older learners on drawing the dead lying down.
Rituals shown

The 6-8 year-olds showed awareness regarding the rites of passage pertaining to humans and dogs. They were aware that the dead had to be put in some kind of box clothed or wrapped in a blanket and buried in a hole or grave. With regard to dogs not much is done except to throw the dead animal away in the open field or dongas. At this stage not much could be uncovered regarding ‘procedure’ of a burial ceremony from the time the person dies until burial. The responses were fragmented and did not follow any particular pattern. There was not much difference with the 9-12 year-olds, but feelings were acknowledged for the first time.

As compared to the younger learners, the 13-16 year-olds showed more concern about what happens to the dead. For the first time there seemed to be some form of clarity about what happens when a person is dead even though a few still supplied a fragmented version similar to the younger learners. Some sentiments were expressed regarding the condition of the dead in the grave as expressed by statements like “in the grave people put zinc under the box in order to prevent ants from entering the box and also to prevent the box from getting rotten.” Also there seemed to be more clarity regarding the function of the mortuary: “The ice in the mortuary helps prevent the body from getting rotten.”

Dead dogs on the other hand are just thrown away because they are not people and they are going to smell. Exceptions would be made only if the owner loved the dog where it would then be buried. A strong statement came from a 14-year-old boy who acknowledged that dogs are thrown away in the mountains “but I will make a grave for
mine because it is also a living being like a human being. Others are thrown away because their owners hate them.” There seemed to be a significant shift in the way of thinking and expression of views about what these learners felt and believed in. This spontaneous insight was an excellent example of the beginning in understanding the function that dogs perform in the society.

**Life symbols**

Only two 7-year-old girls showed a connection between life and death through the use of symbols. One showed a live hen standing next to the body of a dead person and the other girl showed women mourners attending the funeral. With the 9-12 year-olds, the only life symbol was a tree that served as an anchor for the rope that hanged the woman who committed suicide. The 13-16 year-olds showed a variety of life symbols as compared to the younger learners.

### 6.2.2 Themes on definitions of death

The learners’ responses to the question “What is death?” are reflected as texts that accompany the drawings. In the final analysis of these responses there were five major themes expressed in definitions of death provided by the learners: 1) Death as a dead person – *umntu oswelekleyo*. 2) Death as involving an action – “to die”, to be dead - *ukusweleka*. 3) Death as a funeral/burial – *ukufa sisifihlo, sisingcwabo*. 4) Death associated with violence – being killed, shot or murdered. 5) Death as a spiritual continuation of after death existence – to go and rest with the Lord. These findings are consistent with previous research that suggests that the most frequently reported belief
regarding death is that of personifying death (Lonetto, 1980; Nagy, 1948), equating death with violence and viewing it as spiritual continuation (Morin and Welsh, 1996).

Another interesting observation, though, was still with the presence of personification even in the older learners (13-16). This defies the fact that in the African worldview, death is different from being dead. The former is a causal agent, which brings about the latter – death does not die (Lawuyi and Olupona, 1988; Moore, 1968). Like elsewhere in Africa, in reporting about death, the amaXhosa say “ufikelwe kukufa”, “ukufa kumthabathile”, (death visited him, and death took him away respectively). Also, they talk of death as having a sting – “ulwamvila”. The sting presupposes that when death visits it stings the person thereby causing him or her to be dead. This probably indicates that the concept of death is too abstract to comprehend.

6.2.3 What happens to people/dogs when they are dead?

Lonetto (1980) asked the specific question “what happens after things die?” to investigate a specific component, nonfunctionality. In the present study the question “what happens to people/dogs when they are dead?” was an open question not directed at tapping any particular component. The question was better suited to measure what learners would spontaneously say about death. The interpretation of the question by the learners was uniform, and it concerned the procedure. The narrations to the question were presented in a haphazard and simplistic manner. Even though most of the learners seemed to know that there is a certain procedure that needs to be followed when there is death, one can safely say that this knowledge is based on their own observations of events and not from
any formal or informal education about these events. They all knew that there has to be a night vigil, a burial or a funeral.

For the older learners the focus was on giving concrete or stereotyped accounts of the procedure in their responses and drawings. The procedure involves washing of the body in the mortuary, getting a box within which the dead person is put, the box has to be lowered into a grave, and other people have to come to the funeral. These older learners were spontaneous in supplying additional details about funerals and this is probably due to personal observations and experience. These details were not forthcoming in younger learners. These narrations contradict the results of previous studies on the question “what happens after things die?” (Lonetto, 1980), “what happens after death?” (Morin and Welsh, 1996). For instance, children in these studies responded by describing in detail not only the procedure of funeralization, but also the process of decomposition of the body and the departure of the soul to heaven. This may be because of cultural differences.

Within this context, it becomes crucial to view comparisons made with caution. For instance, the questions from these two studies were geared towards uncovering what happens to the state of the body. The contradictions in the way children responded to the question only demonstrate the lack of task specificity referred to by Speece and Brent (1984) both in the present study and these previous studies. All three questions are general and do not require the children to comment on any specific factor.
Interestingly enough, when it came to dogs, all learners irrespective of age seemed to agree that there is one procedure to be followed when a dog dies – to throw it away. The learners did not know the reason why dead dogs need to be thrown away. There was certainty that was shared by almost all that burial rites is associated with human beings only. The general rule of thumb is that dogs are thrown away but some would hold exceptions to this rule and this was based on whether one loved the dog or not. Even though learners at the concrete-operational level (9-12 years) and formal-operational level (13-16 years) were expected to draw on the experiences of others in evaluating their environment, giving more realistic and naturalistic explanations they still performed lower than expected. Nevertheless, the performance of these two groups was distinguishable from the (6-8 years) pre-operational group.

Along with the assertion that dead dogs are thrown away, came a certain disenchantment with the practice, that is, for the first time one learner, who thought that people are not grateful for the services that these dogs have rendered for them, criticised the practised custom of throwing dead dogs away instead of burying them. This is an indication that children feel dogs deserve the same respect as people. This confirms past research which state that children at formal operational stage are capable of questioning social customs or rituals at death, showing that they do not accept adults’ view of the world uncritically (Gordon and Klass, 1979). Asking the learners about the specific components of death was crucial in determining the overall understanding of death. These are discussed in the following section.
6.2.4 The extent of understanding regarding the specific components of death

While the three sections above focussed on the conceptualisation of death, this section presents discussion on conceptions relating to the components of death. This discussion again aims at interpreting the learners’ understanding of the concept of death in relation to the components of death as outlined in Chapter 2.

Irreversibility

When asked about irreversibility of death, the expectation was that the learners between 6 and 8 years old would detail various means to accomplish the reversal of operations. According to Piaget’s theory, children at this stage have yet to develop the reciprocity of interaction that comes with concrete operations, and since they have had no personal experience of death, they can draw only from their own fantasies. The findings of the present study show that the learners were quite limited in terms of what their cognitive schemata would be able to accommodate. This confirms Piaget’s presumption to some extent, for instance, only three understood the component. For those who believed that the dead have the capacity to be alive again, it was not clear whether the dead would continue to exist in physical form or in spiritual form, as this was not covered by the interview.

Regarding the 9-12 year olds there was total understanding for irreversibility as it relates to animal death. However, when the concept was related to human beings these learners did not fully comprehend the component. For example, two learners (9 year old
and 11 year old) gave explanations like “no, he won’t be able to wake up and live again because the box is closed,” “he won’t wake up again because he is covered with soil.” However, one 9 year old obtained a zero rating for failing to comprehend irreversibility at all. Otherwise, the rest of the older learners seemed to have a full comprehension of the concept. This contradicts past research evidence stating that by age 7 or earlier, children understood most of the components including irreversibility (Brent et al., 1996; Kenyon, 2001; Speece and Brent, 1984; Speece and Brent, 1992; Vianello and Lucamante, 1988).

Literature reviewed by Speece and Brent (1984) highlight two issues that make it problematic to determine the age at which children can be said to understand a component. Firstly, previous studies varied widely in the statistical criteria that they used to determine that age. For instance, these studies required that 60%, 75%, or 100% of the children of a given age demonstrate an “adult” understanding of a component in order to specify a particular age as the age of acquisition. Secondly, other studies did not even indicate their criterion for the age of acquisition they reported, and their published data made it difficult to determine the percentage of children who understood each component. Speece and Brent have observed that the wide range of ages of acquisition found across these studies is a result of population and procedural differences among them. The components of irreversibility, non-functionality, and universality are understood at about the same time – age 4 or younger (Kane, 1979; Nagy, 1948), between age 5 and 7 (Koocher, 1973; Schilder and Wechsler, 1934;), and 8 or older (Anthony, 1939; Childers & Wimmer, 1971; Wass & Corr, 1984).
Finality

The limited conceptualisation for both human death and animal death was particularly marked on the component of finality followed by causality. No learners between 6 and 8 years understood the component of finality. Only four learners between 9 and 12 years understood the component (two 9-year olds and one 11-year-old and one 12-year old). This supports what Childers and Wimmer (1971) observed, that 9 years is the turning point for an understanding of the components of death including finality. In the present study the condition for obtaining a score of 2 was if the answer to only one of the five questions was wrong or if one of the five explanations showed a lack of understanding. Most 9–12 year-olds fell prey to the former by indicating that they were not certain whether the dead know that they are dead, and this was extended to dogs as well.

This finding contradicts Nagy’s (1948) observation that death at this stage is understood as final. However, it has demonstrated that children, regardless of cognitive level, certainly know something about death and dying. This confirms what other researchers have concluded, that even though children do not comprehend the finality of death, they are aware of death, have feelings about it and do speak about it when given the opportunity to do so (Anthony, 1972; Nagy, 1948).

Causality

For almost all learners, the frequent explanations focused on external physical causes, such as stabbing, car accidents and gunshots, but internal explanations like sickness and old age were also highlighted by most including the 6 year olds. This illustrates that these
younger learners at pre-operational level were not limited to providing reasons consistent with egocentricity and adherence to animism, as described by Piaget. This finding provides a contradiction to the expected developmental progression found in previous studies. A literature review by Wass and Corr (1984) state that the children at the beginning of the concrete operations (between 7 and 9 years of age) view death as an unnatural event. It is only children who have progressed further at this stage list external event less frequently, and begin to list illness and old age most often. Two of the 13-16-year-olds also gave theological explanations such as “God has called him because he was old,” “he is resting eternal peace.” This is in keeping with findings reported in other studies like Koocher (1973).

For the 13 – 16 year olds, the comprehension was more advanced with almost perfect scores compared to the other two groups. However, similar to the younger learners, an unexpected conceptual difficulty was still encountered as related to causality pertaining to both human death and animal death. This finding challenges those studies that have reported that by age 10 children have a mature understanding of all the components of death including causality (Kenyon, 2001). The only explanation that can be given for this lack of a full conceptualisation is that there was an addition of old age to the reasons expected.

**Inevitability**

The findings show that the younger learners (6 - 8 years old) encountered difficulties in understanding this component. Only two (6 years and 8 years) fully understood this
component but only as it related to human beings. Even those who did understand the component pushed the thought of dying themselves to a distant future and this confirms the conclusions reached by Wass and Corr (1984). This is not a surprising finding because it has already been reported that children younger than eight understand that others will die before they understand that they themselves will die (Speece and Brent, 1984). While acknowledging this finding, at the same time available evidence from past research cannot be ignored. For instance, research evidence shows that children as young as 4 and 5 years old (11% and 20% respectively) already recognise death as final (Childers and Wimmer, 1971), and by 9 years old 100% recognise death as a universal event (Speece and Brent, 1984).

Regarding the older learners (9 – 12 years old) there was total understanding for inevitability regarding animal death, and all the 9 year-olds encountered the problem in understanding inevitability. In response to the question “does everybody die?” one 11 year old responded by saying “everybody can die, nobody can live forever.” This kind of response resembles explanations that fall into the category of general law of nature explanations found in past research (Brent et al., 1996; Corr, 1997; Wass and Corr, 1984).

**Old age**

For the 6 – 8 year olds, the overall understanding of the concept of death regarding animal death was lower compared to human death. The learners seemed to only have a better understanding of the component of old age as it related to human death. Smilansky
(1987) suggests that the reason for a better understanding of old age in humans may be due to the fact that the process of ageing is much more visible in humans than it is in animals. There was no problem with the older groups regarding the understanding of this component.

**Overall conceptualisation**

Learners demonstrated a different understanding of death and a difference in the pattern of component acquisition depending on the referent object. This confirms the findings of Lazar and Torney-Purta (1991) who found that the pattern of component acquisition appears to be different for animals and humans. Even though the gap between the responses given for human death and those given for animal death was narrower among the 6-8 year-olds, the overall conceptualisation and also clarification of the components of human death was better than that of animal death. For instance, old age, inevitability, and irreversibility were understood better when related to human death.

For the 9-12 year-olds the overall understanding of the concept of death regarding animals was exceptionally higher compared to human death. This was a noticeable shift compared to the younger learners where the reverse was true. For this group, the gap in conceptualisation between human and animal death was specially noted on the components of causality followed by finality. This was another shift in the sequence of conceptualisation. These learners showed a progress in the comprehension of finality but the scores for causality were still exceptionally low in human death than in animal death.
Both the learners at the concrete-operational and formal-operational levels demonstrated the use of their newly acquired reciprocity skills by being able to express the permanence of death even though some had never had direct contact with it. Furthermore, the tendency on the part of adults to use symbolic expressions or euphemisms in their everyday language identifying death with a sleep like state – ‘akafanga, ulele’ implying the person is not dead but sleeping – might make the child to associate death with sleeping with a view of waking up again.

This is specially so because most of the time these expressions are accompanied by “commands” such as *musali ukulila*” (do not cry), “*sulani ezo nyembezi*” (wipe off those tears), thereby undermining the emotions that accompany the event of death. The implication is that one should not cry for somebody who is sleeping because sooner or later that person will wake up again. And, one should get comfort from the fact that the dead has paved the way for one and that one will also be joining them. Moreover, crying for the departed is a sign that one does not believe in God.

Contrary to evidence from past research (Brent et al. 1996; Nagy, 1948; Speece and Brent, 1984), the developmental sequence on conceptualisation of death in the present study was different. Learners first conceptualised old age, inevitability, and irreversibility. Then they conceptualised finality, and last, partly causality. Notwithstanding, it is also important to note that the findings of the present study share some similarities with other studies (Lazar, 1985; Lazar and Torney-Purta, 1991) in that learners within the age groups 6-8 years comprehend human death before they
comprehend animal death. But, for the older group between ages 9-12 years, the reverse is true – comprehension of animal death becomes much clearer than that of human death.

6.3 **Implications for theory**

In all the situations presented in the previous section, learners proceeded from a stage where they did not know – where they gave a fragmented picture of the procedure followed when death has occurred – to a stage where they gave spontaneous commentary of events surrounding death, as they knew it. The focus of this section therefore is to reiterate the concerns that Berry (2000) (in Miller, 2002) has identified. The first concern is with giving a greater role to culture in psychological theory. The second concern is with uncovering respects in which existing psychological theories may need to be broadened in order to account for alternative modes of psychological functioning. There is therefore a need to understand psychological processes as always grounded in particular socio-cultural historical contexts (Miller, 2002; Case, 1991). Working within this framework, development of concepts like death can be understood to be constituted, in part, by cultural meanings and practices, and by interactions with different cultural artefacts rather than formed independently of cultural input.

In the light of the above concerns, the findings in this paper have presented a challenge to demonstrate the realistic nature of grounding psychological processes. Some examples from the data will highlight this issue further. When the younger learners (6-8 and 9-12 years) were asked to define death they labelled it by using other concepts that they already had at their disposal without necessarily elaborating on what these other
concepts really meant. It was only the 13 – 16 year olds that managed to supply responses accompanied by spontaneous accounts of events surrounding the drawings and also gave some logical and biologically sound accompanying such concepts. These concepts included “ukusweleka”, “ukubhubha” among others. But even for this group the information they supplied was still incomplete.

The learners seemed to have mastered the proper use of these everyday concepts but these were still empty (especially for the two younger groups) and not filled with concrete, personal knowledge. Also, the primary concept-learning task that these learners have developed is learning which concepts are culturally sanctioned when referring to the death of either human beings or animals and which concepts are not. These are everyday concepts that have been acquired outside of the context of explicit instruction. Van der Veer and Valsiner (1991) would state that concepts like these are mostly taken from adults, but they never have been introduced to the child in a systematic fashion. According to these authors it is Vygotsky who has explicitly acknowledged the role of adults in the formation of “everyday” concepts like these.

When Vygotsky investigated the everyday and scientific concepts in a quest to understand child development, Piaget criticised such endeavours. Piaget had discarded the investigation of these concepts because in his opinion such concepts only reflect the characteristics of the cultural knowledge and not truly reflect the characteristics of the child’s mind (Van der Veer and Valsiner, 1991). To Vygotsky, though, it was self-contradictory to claim that theoretical concepts do not reflect the child’s way of thinking
as Piaget himself had shown that concepts are transformed in the process of mastering them. For example, the scripts, regarding the practice of not burying the dead dog but throwing it away, are what guide the way of thinking of the younger learners who most of the time just repeat what they have observed or been told. But as they grow older and come across contradicting scripts that stress the burial procedure even for a dog then they will tend to question the practice especially when there are emotional ties with the animal concerned.

In the process one sees the original scripts being questioned and transformed thereby confirming Vygotsky’s argument that symbolic expressions in learners’ responses reflect cultural knowledge and the characteristics of the learners’ minds (Van der Veer and Valsiner, 1991). It cannot be stressed enough that one has to know the children’s everyday thinking (use of everyday concepts) in order to determine the baselines in gauging their understanding of concepts like death. This confirms the observations made by past researchers (Fargues, 1966; Lamla, 1981, 2003; Mbiti, 1969; Mosothoane, 1973; Pato, 1988) regarding the preference for using symbolic expression when referring to the death of human beings as compared to the death of animals.

Contrary to Piaget’s proposition, it is crucial to consider the impact of environmental processes as both necessary and sufficient conditions for cognitive development. This confirms the emphasis that the development of a child should be viewed and understood from the particular contexts within which they grow (Case, 1991). The implication is that the presence of concepts that are evident in the responses of the
learners is the function of the way language (scripts) about death is modelled to them by
the culture in order for them to be able to successfully manipulate (or construct in
Piaget’s terms) information presented to them by those around them. For instance, when
dealing with particular problems that learners encounter like “what to do with dead
dogs”, they immediately and spontaneously responded by using the modelled behaviour
in their environment to make sense of the world around them (dogs are thrown away
when they are dead).

To effectuate a change in children’s understanding of the components of death,
for example, the finality of death means final and not that on death ‘one goes to another
place’, would require change at a number of levels. For instance, participation in the
burial of a relative by a child would help imprint the finality of death. As Case (1991)
pointed out, effectively promoting concept development requires a change in the child’s
learning through a process of Contextualisation. Social negotiation with the community
may be required in order to reconcile the apparent gap of communication between adults
and children.

Another fruitful explanation may come from the work of Valsiner (1987).
Valsiner states that children’s development is organised around what he terms zones and
that adults become the leading and dominant organisers of these zones for the child
(Zone of Freedom of Movement (ZFM) and Zone of Promoted Action (ZPA). These
zones represent a “socially constructed cognitive structure of child-environment
relationships” (p.98). The zones are ‘socially constructed’ because they are based on
adults’ cultural meaning systems, and constructed in interaction with them. Zones are ‘cognitive structures’ because they organise child-environment relationships on the basis of cultural meanings of the society that becomes internalised by the developing children in the process of them acting within these environments.

Valsiner (1987) uses zones to represent “socially constructed cognitive structures” of environmental relationships, and Case (1991) proposes a “central conceptual structure” for modelling social interactions. To understand the results of the present study, both the principle of zoning and the principle of a conceptual structure have been applied. Firstly, the development of the executive control structures that learners had assembled for dealing with death depended on the existence of a unifying structure that can also be called a conceptual structure that they had constructed for handling death-related issues. Secondly, the findings demonstrate that learners’ central conceptual structures regarding the development of death bear more or less certain resemblance in their content and in the timing of their emergence (e.g. drawings, definitions, procedure of funeralization, and components). Thirdly, these commonalities suggest that both the executive control structures and the central conceptual structures may be subject to a common set of constraints in the processing of information.

When children grow up there seems to be unlimited access to certain areas in their environment, but this access to other areas like thoughts and feelings about death is denied or blocked. For instance, when there is death in a family the whole zone or atmosphere surrounding death-related activities is absolutely “off” limits for the child.
Furthermore, there is no attempt by parents/adults to clarify the myth surrounding this zoning. There is a blanket of silence that can certainly lead to confusion and anxiety. Valsiner (1987) states that such zoning is based on the meanings of different aspects of the environment. When there is death, a novel environment for the child, it is the adults who are the gatekeepers of the zone that allows for freedom of movement as it is structured, and reconstructed from time to time. The child is left with the option of just conforming to the zone or setting, as it is unilaterally set up for him. Because the zone is often set up on the basis of the parent’s understanding of what the children can do in the given setting, in conjunction with what they are doing, or have done in the past, orientation towards the future possible actions or behaviours thus becomes entrenched.

Furthermore, Valsiner (1987, 1992) and Van der Veer and Valsiner (1991) believe that setting up such zones becomes an inhibitory psychological mechanism. Zones are set up to organise child-environment relationships, and through that, to canalise the development of the child in directions that are accepted in the given culture at large. Therefore it is the duty of parents to socialise their children on death as a rite of passage. The reality here is that the kind of socialisation around the issue of death contains some limits, as Case would say, set up to constrain the developing children’s exposure to, and participation in, death-related issues. Timing is always cited as the main reason - children are not yet ready to understand – but the fact is the rites of passage do not have any space for educating children about death anyway. Most children obtain death education vicariously through observation, from peers, and overhearing when people talk when death has occurred.
Moreover, the assumption that children are incapable of comprehending death talk is unjustifiable. Children experience death, as a life crisis in the same way as parents do, maybe even more. Similarly, Wofelt (1983) (in Webb, 1993) stresses that children have the ability to feel grief without necessarily being able to understand its origin. Society has to move from a situation where children’s environment is constrained to a situation where there are sets of activities (zones) put in place in the child’s environment to promote the direction of growth and development. Valsiner (1987) cautions, though, that the actualisation of the expected direction in further development depends on how the particular aspect of child-environment relationships that is actively promoted by the adults relates to the child’s current cognitive capabilities.

The reasoning in this paper is that parents’ efforts to promote the development of their children’s understanding must be based upon two things: i.) An understanding of what children already know and, ii.) What parents think children can still learn in order to accomplish higher levels of understanding (with parental help). However, the irony is that with all the silence that surrounds the issue of death, parents will never know what their children already know and therefore the latter becomes a distant reality. Case’s (1991) argument that the variation in children’s development has to be seen as a function of the particular contexts in which they receive their initial exposure becomes justifiable. It puts emphasis on context-dependency of children’s actions, and that implies that to understand the development of the death concept research needs to uncover the constraints, (e.g. the silence that directly or indirectly undermines children’s intellectual capabilities among other things) that are present in the particular context in which the child develops.
6.4. **Conclusion**

To sum up, the findings of the present study have demonstrated a shift in the way death is conceptualised by the learners. In terms of causal explanations, witchcraft and sorcery are conspicuous for their absence. Instead diseases like AIDS, accidents, alcohol abuse, and poisoning are being prioritised in the list of causes. Again this is an indication of the influence of particular contexts within which children grow and develop. The scenario would be different though if children grew where, for instance, witchcraft-related killings; death as a result of faction fights associated with stock stealing; drowning whilst swimming; and bombings predominated. The current thinking about death-related issues is determined by the particular socio-cultural practices that are applied within a given space and time in history, hence the significance of studying an individual in context.

Furthermore, the social scripts or knowledge structures that children can assemble are determined by their working memory capacity. When they have to think about death they do so in terms of scripted events that have accumulated in memory. These scripted events refer to the observed cultural practices regarding death-related behaviours. That is, the learners continuously integrate their understanding of various types of death-related behaviours that adults characteristically exhibit when death has occurred using social scripts already in their repertoire as frames of reference in order to deal with the situation.

The qualitative research strategy adopted in this study was useful in studying variation among the 31 learners regarding their conceptualisation of death. This approach
made it possible to describe variation in learners’ ways of conceptualising and experiencing death in a number of categories of description.
CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Death confronts us and our children in many ways. There are no simple, standard rules we can call on to help young people understand and cope with death except the principle of keeping the lines of communication open within the family and the community. Different situations have within them special dangers and unique growth opportunities for us and for our children.

(Gordon and Klass, 1979:41)

7.1 Conclusions

I began this thesis by acknowledging the context within which knowledge production in death occurs and raised very pertinent questions as a sound base for including children in death-related issues. These questions were raised to highlight the kinds of constraints that regulate and direct the development of the child’s thinking on issues of death. The principles of the neo-Piagetian theory provided a useful framework within which to understand development of the concept of death. Furthermore, the methodology chosen demonstrated how the context-bound experience that children are exposed to can be captured by using various methods of investigation. The findings indicate that the child’s knowledge about the cultural meanings embedded in death-related activities can gradually be acquired both by observing and participating in the practices involved. Based on the findings of the present study the following conclusions have been arrived at:

- Basing the interview of the components of death on the aspects of the drawings the learners made, enriched the scope of the nature of their understanding.
• The categories of expression that emerged in the learners’ drawings and responses indicate that there were more similarities than differences between the age groups. For instance, all the learners represented cultural burial practices and provided more non-naturalistic explanations for death thereby reflecting their cultural background.

• Cultural practices greatly affect the development of the conceptualisation of death. Also, the variation in the development and age of acquisition of the various components is a function of the particular contexts in which learners have received their initial exposure to death:

  - The findings of the present study show that the children, who grow up in an environment where there is great distaste (hence the silence) for speaking of anything that is connected with death, are behind the children in other environments in the level of their conceptualisation of death.

  - It should be indicated that the learners in the present study were and are growing up in a “protective” environment that does not provide sufficient communication on the subject of death – where children are regarded as young, naive and therefore not capable of comprehending death-related issues.

• Learners demonstrated a different understanding of death and a difference in the pattern of component acquisition depending on the referent object. This confirms the findings of Lazar and Torney-Purta (1991) who found that the pattern of component acquisition appears to be different for animals and humans.
There was a gap in the level of conceptualising death between different age groups. This confirms the results of past studies that have indicated that age is a significant predictor of the concept of death (Candy-Gibbs, Sharp, and Petrum, 1984-1985; Mahon, Goldberg and Washington, 1999). These authors, for instance, have found that children first conceptualise irreversibility and finality of death. Then they conceptualise causality followed by old age and inevitability (Smilansky, 1987). In the present study the sequence of conceptualisation was different though in that learners first conceptualised old age (as early as 6 years), then inevitability of death followed by irreversibility, and lastly, finality and causality.

Even though the gap between the responses given for human death and those given for animal death was narrower among the 6-8 year-olds, the overall conceptualisation and also clarification of the components of human death was better than that of animal death. For instance, old age, inevitability, and irreversibility were understood better when related to human death.

The reversal was true for the 9-12 year-olds where the level of conceptualising animal death was more advanced than the level of conceptualising human death. The assumption is that children at this age (sometimes even younger) tend to be exposed more readily with dead animals than with dead human beings for various reasons:

- Dead animals especially dogs are not seen in the same light as death of persons. Actually, the death of a dog is hardly a noticeable and discomforting event.
- Dead animals are thrown around in their play areas.

- In rural areas children encounter death of animals at an early stage in their lives – when they see dead birds, when animals are slaughtered they are also involved in the process, dead animals being thrown away (e.g. dogs, donkeys, and snakes). Experiences like these could advance their understanding of animal death.

- Herding domestic animals and hunting (birds, hares and others) brings them much closer to the animal world.

- It is assumed that adults find it easier to talk to a child about the death of an animal than about the death of a neighbour.

- The gap in conceptualisation between human and animal death is particularly marked with the 9 – 12 year-olds on all the concepts especially old age, inevitability, irreversibility, causality, and finality in that order.

- Learners found it easier to understand that dogs grow old too – as the dog grows older, the teeth get blunt and it can not eat properly; the hair falls off; it cannot see properly; then it disappears only to be found dead later.
- When there is death of a family member, children are often left out of the planning and decision-making, they merely watch the proceedings from a distance.

- Gender differences in the conceptualisation of death were noted in the explanations of the causes of death. For example, boys cited violent causes (gunshots and knife stabbing) more than girls did who cited sickness, car accident, and poison more. Kenyon indicates in her 2001 review that studies that examined effects of gender on children’s death concepts have noted that the only differences are the types of explanations that boys and girls provide for what causes death. For instance, boys tend to depict more violent causes of death than do girls, who tend to cite accident or illness.

- The conclusions reached in the present study demonstrate that death is not a purely cognitive construct but that its development is strongly affected by other factors depending on the context within which such development takes place.

### 7.2 Recommendations

#### 7.2.1 Recommendations regarding guidelines for handling death-related issues with children

The above conclusions can serve as rough guidelines concerning what children of different ages can be expected to understand about death. Many questions have been posed in Chapter 1, and this section has been organized around some of these questions
(and beyond) and the answers address in a broad sense each situation presented. The reader, however, is reminded that no two confrontations with death are the same, and therefore the answers should only be viewed as providing general guidelines within which adults can broaden their self-understanding and their understanding of their own children.

- Do the rites of passage in general have any space for educating the individual, especially the child, about death? If so, at what level and how? Parents as primary agents of socialization should create space for educating their children about death as early as possible. The assumption that children are incapable of comprehending death talk (based on age) is not enough and therefore not justifiable.

- Children also experience death as a life crisis in the same way (maybe even more) as parents do. Adults have a peculiar way of coping with a crisis resulting from death (by, among other things, convincing themselves that “dead” people continue to exist in another world), and this has got implication for the development of components like irreversibility and finality that get delayed in the process. Moreover, when a parent dies, children are mostly concerned with the here and now and need somebody to allay their anxieties about who will take care of them and the mystery of another life after death is the least of their problems.

- Opening up to a child’s curiosity about death is a crucial issue that parents need to address. If a child is curious to see how the dead person looks like, should the child be given the opportunity to view the body, to satisfy their curiosity directly by
looking or should they not? The answer lies in knowing why the child wants to view the body in the first place.

- These direct observations do not really satisfy the child’s curiosity, for the sight of the dead body really explains nothing, but the child may experience this looking as secretly exciting/scary/confusing and then becomes depressed later on.

- Therefore, breaking the silence, explaining before viewing may allay the anxiety, explaining after may decrease any fears, uncertainties.

- Parents may find themselves quite uncertain about the handling of these circumstances. I recall the concern of my aunt who once asked for my opinion on the handling of what she thought was a problem with her grandson who had just lost his mother. When it was time to view the body, ‘K’ asked repeatedly to see his mother and my aunt was not sure whether to allow this or not. Her fear was that ‘K’ would not be able to recognize his mother because the ice had changed her colour and as a result she was much darker. She was relieved when I said I would first talk to him before the viewing; accompany him when he views the body, and then talk to him afterwards. Everything went well.

- If we restrict the child’s curiosity, and let the mind run wild with imagination or fantasies, won’t the child think there is something secret about his mother’s
body that it is not his mother in the coffin, thereby perpetuating the conception that she is still coming back?

- Children must also be allowed to have a proper good-bye especially with their significant other.

- This also reminds me of another incident when my brother died and his 16-year-old daughter on viewing the body actually kissed him on the forehead. This sent shudders through the grandmother and the other elderly who viewed this behaviour with distaste and could not believe what this child had just done. On speaking to them after the funeral, they utterly condemned the behaviour saying that one does not touch, let alone kiss, the dead – especially a girl child, because that is a bad omen, it will bring bad luck to her.

- The daughter had a different perspective to this saying that actually touching and kissing her dead father was a way of saying her last goodbye. This also convinced her that he was really dead – he was very cold.

- When the coffin is lowered into the grave, children want to see where the coffin is going, how deep is the grave, how is the coffin put in the grave, what is put under and on top of it – this should not be a secret, a mystery but it should be permitted.
- Children should be allowed to look into the grave. It should be understood that children do not share the parents’ fears. Children should not be labelled as uncontrollable, disrespectful but simply curious.

- Sitting down with the children and talking about what has happened, the procedure to be followed in disposing of the body, answering any questions that may crop up would accomplish several things. There is acknowledgement of the child’s right to be curious and ask questions. The child has not been told that wanting or desiring to view the body is bad or disrespectful but the curiosity has been put into words. And most of all their right to be curious and ask questions has not been denied.

- The data shows that as early as age 6 years children already have their own notions about death and dying. These notions are based on their own observations. Because there is always an umbrella of silence, and children are not allowed to ask questions about death, the results are often a further confusion.

- When these children reach adulthood the cycle of silence will be repeated because they know no other way of handling death-related issues.

- It may be very helpful then to take the children’s notions into account before we introduce them to new facts. For instance, when ‘K’ insisted on viewing his mother’s body the grandmother should not have just shrugged (introducing
more fear, uncertainty and anxiety in the process) but should have perhaps asked him why it was important for him to see the body, and take it from there. Also, after viewing the body the questioning should continue because we want to know what the child thinks and whether his expectations have been met. As in sex education, if adults use the child’s own questions and notions as a guide, there is rarely a danger of going too fast in educating about death. One has to make sure that information is not given until the child’s own notions have been explored to avoid building education about death over the child’s distorted notions.

• In communities whose beliefs are traditional, there exist differences that are complicated by a barrier for open communication between adults and children. It is argued that in order to bring about a change, practices relating to death would have to change. In this sense, adults may have to adapt some of their own ways of expression and practices. For instance, adults who are willing to change their attitudes but experience conflict with the views of the community would need encouragement and support to translate their unexpressed views into a change in practice.

• Cultural and religious practices that emphasize an afterlife existence need to clarify (for children’s sake) whether this existence would be in physical form or spiritual form as this may have implications for understanding irreversibility and finality of death.
• Death is a common feature in our communities. Values are still held that exclude the reality of death for children, where childhood is valued as a time of innocence and naïveté thereby justifying the overall “silence” on death-related matters. What is the frame of reference for upholding these values when the same children are dying because of brutality of men around them? Everyday there are reports on children being raped and sodomised to death; people dying from AIDS. Childhood cannot still be valued as a time of innocence and naïveté because there are many factors that are threatening that innocence, and that naïveté can no longer be prolonged. Adults need to face talk about death-related issues head on, and talk about HIV/AIDS could be an appropriate introduction. Educating children about death and death-related issues is very important for the future of our country.

7.2.2 Recommendations regarding directions for future research

Chapter 4 discussed the study’s methodology. Information was provided pertaining to the design of the study, the participants and procedures. The purpose of this section is to highlight some of the strengths and weaknesses. Suggestions are also made in terms of different approaches that could be taken when studying children’s conception on the subject of death.

A critical review of literature by Kenyon (2001) indicates that the greatest problem in the current research on children’s conceptions of death is methodological. The present study cannot be said to be exempt from this observation, but its strength lies in combining the non-standardized measures and standardized measures to test the concept
of death. With the exception of the interview, the methods used to collect data represented an experience with new and innovative research technique. The dialogues were driven more by the agenda of the researcher than by participants. The dialogues made it easier to focus on particular issues. Furthermore, using the interview method based on the five components of death has demonstrated the value of allowing learners to engage themselves more in the construction of meanings they assigned to death as these related to their drawings. The study acknowledges the fact that drawings alone cannot be indicative of the entire content of the learner’s understanding of the concept. The significance of the methodology applied is that it responded to the linguistically complex nature of interviewing children especially about abstract concepts like death. Researchers, therefore, need to continue to develop innovative and effective ways to study conceptions.

The other strength of the present study is that it has examined the development of the understanding of the concept of death by using the principles of a theoretical framework to explain how the development occurs. A literature review of studies conducted in the last twenty years (Kastenbaum and Costa, 1977; Speece and Brent, 1984; Kenyon, 2001) shows that many of these studies were atheoretical, with a few exceptions of course. The present study has tried to fill this gap by applying the principles of the neo-Piagetian framework in addressing the concept of death. This has helped in unveiling the fact that the mechanism by which children’s death concepts develops can only be understood if the particular contexts within which the children develop are acknowledged as influences of such development. The application of the principles of neo-Piagetian
theory did not determine a perfect demonstration, but allowed freedom to try out these principles using a different concept – death. By modelling this framework to study the development of children’s concepts of death, the present study demonstrated the advantage of using drawings to stretch the learners’ construction of representations.

The conclusion that the learners’ understanding of the concept of death is context dependent supports the assumptions contained in the principles advanced by Case. The present study, therefore, may be considered an extension of the neo-Piagetian theory with its emphasis on context recognition. This opens up an important area for further investigation. The following quote from Walton (1979) provides a profound way of acknowledging the complex nature of the prevailing conceptions of death.

“…After all, we do not have direct experience of death, at least while we are alive, and thus death is for us an epistemologically inaccessible state. ...It is possible to have some indirect knowledge of death even though, obviously, our knowledge must be limited in certain ways. ...If we can have knowledge about death, what is the nature and source of this knowledge, and what are the limits?

(p.86-87)
REFERENCES


APPENDIX-A

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR EXAMINATION OF HUMAN AND ANIMAL DEATH CONCEPTUALISATION OF CHILDREN.

Name : 
School : 
Grade : 

Concept of death related to humans

1. What does “to die” mean? What is death? Have you ever seen a dead person?

2. What happens to people when they are dead?

3. If a person dies and has been buried in the grave for some time, can he or she become a living person again? Why?

4. If a person dies and has not yet been buried, can he or she become a living person again? Why?

5. Can a dead person come out of his/her grave? Why?

6. Does a dead person know that he or she is dead? How? Why? Does the person know what is happening to him/her when he/she is dead? Why?

7. Can a dead person see? Why?

8. Can a dead person hear? Why?

9. Can a dead person move? Why?

10. Can a dead person feel anything? Can he/she feel any pain?

11. How do people die? How else do people die?

12. Does everyone die?
If the learner answers “no”, ask who does die?
Will you die one day?

13. Does everyone get old?
(If the learner answers “no”, ask who does get old?) Why?
Will you get old?

**Concept of death related to animals**

1. Have you ever seen a dead animal?
   What kind of animal/s have you seen?

2. What happens to dogs when they are dead?

3. If a dog dies and is buried in the ground, can it become a live dog again? Why?

4. If a dog dies and is thrown away, can it become a live dog again? Why?

5. Can a dead dog come out of its grave if it was buried? Why?

6. Does a dead dog know that it is dead? How so? And why?
   Does it know what is happening to it when it is dead? Why?

7. Can a dead dog see? Why?

8. Can a dead dog hear? Why?

9. Can a dead dog move? Why?

10. Can a dead dog feel anything?
   Can it feel any pain?

11. How do dogs die? (If the learner’s answer to question 1 is that he or she has seen a dead bird, for instance, include birds in this question.)
   How else do dogs die?

12. Do all dogs die?
   (If the learner answers “no”, ask: Which dogs do die?) Why?
   Will your dog die one day?

13. Do all dogs get old?
   (If the answer is “no”, ask: “Which dogs do get old?” Why?
   Will your dog get old?
APPENDIX-B

LEARNER’S DRAWING OF DEATH

NAME:

GRADE:

SEX:
APPENDIX-C

LEARNER’S DRAWING OF A DEAD PERSON

NAME:

GRADE:

SEX:
APPENDIX-D

LEARNER’S DRAWING OF A DEAD ANIMAL (DOG)

NAME:

GRADE:

SEX:
## APPENDIX-E

### Table 2  Learners’ scores on human death (6 – 8 years)

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### Table 3  Learners’ scores on animal death (6 – 8 years)

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Table 8  Learners’ overall score on conceptualisation of death (6 – 8 years)

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Table 9  Learners’ overall scores on conceptualisation of death (9 – 12 years)

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Table 10  Learners’ overall scores on conceptualisation of death (13-16 years)

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LEARNER’S REPRESENTATIVE RESPONSES TO FIVE COMPONENTS OF DEATH

Learner’s Name: __________________ Age: _______ Grade: _____ Sex: ______

### Scoring the component irreversibility

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APPENDIX-G
THE DIAGNOSTIC SUMMARY RECORD OF AN INDIVIDUAL LEARNER’S CONCEPTUALISATION OF DEATH

Learner’s scores on human death:

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<th>CONCEPTS</th>
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<th>Child’s Score</th>
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<tr>
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</tr>
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<td>2. Finality</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Causality</td>
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<td>4. Inevitability</td>
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<td>5. Old age</td>
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<td>6. Total Score for Human Death</td>
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Learner’s scores on animal death:

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</tr>
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<td>2. Finality</td>
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<td>3. Causality</td>
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<td>4. Inevitability</td>
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<td>5. Old age</td>
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<tr>
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Learner’s scores on conceptualisation of death:

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