Seeing Young Children As People: Having Difficult Conversations and Dealing With the Impermanence of Life

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Thesis Abstract: The single most guaranteed experience of every human life is impermanence. Thus, this thesis seeks to support young children as mindful people capable of thinking about, feeling, and talking about loss and change. The particular nuances and experiences of loss and change recognized by this thesis are supported by research that explores varying perceptions of childhood innocence and the capabilities of children. The research moreover explores how these perceptions influence American social constructions of “difficult knowledge” and taboos surrounding literal corporeal death, and metaphorical deaths, such as the endings of major relationships and circumstances, and the fluidity of identity. Supporting research also looks into the significance and benefits of engaging in self-reflection to help individuals proceed through life with strength, compassion, and the ability to cultivate and protect peace. The work of this thesis concludes with the production of an original piece of art that aims to include children in a conversation about loss and change and about the complicated emotions involved in these experiences. The piece, a kind of children’s storybook, also aims to offer a mindful attitude and coping techniques to children (and really anybody) to use as tools of emotional regulation and well-being in the face of major change.

Keywords: Early Childhood and Childhood Education, grief, loss, change, death, children, teaching, learning, censorship, narrative, storytelling, collage, textiles
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The Objective

**The mission:** Create a conversational narrative where straightforwardness* and abstraction meet.

**The intention:** Merge educational theory and practice.

**The topic:** Destigmatizing conversations about change, loss, death and grief with children. Developing coping skills for experiences of grief.

**The reason:** The only thing guaranteed in every life, in every one of our lives, is change. So, let’s talk about it. Let’s try to support children in developing coping skills that will serve them throughout their lives.

**The product:** A children’s book or a piece of narrative art for children (and for anyone else, too).

*According to the National Association of School Psychologists, and based on my own experiences, it is important to avoid using euphemisms when discussing death with children (Fernandez et al.). Clarity is essential.
Reflections (Building the Conceptual Foundation)

Over the course of my independent study, I wrote a collection of informal responses to articles, movies, podcasts, and storybooks. I also wrote reflections on my own relationship to loss and grief. Before beginning anything, I composed a list of possible prompts for myself:

- Why am I doing this study?/What are my anxieties and concerns going into this project and how do I address them?
- What are my own experiences with major change, particularly during my childhood? How do my parents and I remember them differently? How did they make me feel at the time? How do they make me feel now?
- What makes certain knowledge seem “difficult” or inaccessible to young audiences?
- How do varying perceptions of childhood innocence impact perceptions of difficult knowledge?
  - What do recent book bannings across the United States imply about what people believe about childhood innocence?
Reflections (Building the Conceptual Foundation)

- What are the differences I am noticing in the kinds of language various people use when having “difficult” conversations with children, and particularly in contrast with the way they speak with adults? How do ideas of developmentally appropriate practices influence these differences?
- What is the border between harm and help?
- Which narratives have I explored in-depth? Which narratives could use more exploration? Are there limitations to my ability to grasp certain narratives?
- How am I personally feeling impacted by this study? How has it begun to impact or change the ways I think about grief and processing feelings? How has my philosophy on trusting children as capable of grappling with “difficult” conversations been influenced?
- How can storytelling be therapeutic?
- What are some emerging ways that I feel could be appropriate to display my research? How have these ideas been inspired?
- What trends do I see in illustration/animation and diction for the young childhood audience? What unique examples do I notice? What are some possible implications of these trends?
- Refer back to the original list of guiding questions. What questions have been answered? Which are left to be answered? What new questions have arisen and which feel inappropriate to explore now? How have my goals for this project changed?
Here are two examples of completed reflections that have supported my work:
What are my own early experiences with death, particularly during my childhood? How do my family and I remember them differently? How did they make me feel at the time? How do they make me feel now?

When I was three, I had a goldfish named Dorothy, after Elmo’s goldfish from Sesame Street. I don’t remember this at all, but my mother does, and she tells me that when Dorothy died, she struggled to know what to tell me. She went to my uncle, who had already had several children, for help. He told her to tell me that Elmo just missed Dorothy too much, and so Dorothy had to go back to living with him (I guess I didn’t question that there was only one Dorothy). I bought it. I am told I was a little sad, but understood the feeling of missing, and thus accepted that she had to go back to her original home. It seems that my mom and uncle didn’t think I could comprehend the absence of a deceased subject, nor the permanence of death. I’m not sure what they would have told me if I had asked to visit Dorothy.

I had had several pets after Dorothy, but the one whose death feels most distinct in my early memory is Gus. Gus was a baby guinea pig. He was the first pet I had that we could actually hold and touch, having had only fish prior. I remember it to be very exciting. I was maybe five at the time we adopted him. He died suddenly after a heart-attack two weeks after we brought him home. I remember my mom crying and a regretful, fearful look on her face before she told me he died. My mom recalled what the vet said, which was something along the lines of that it seemed Gus had issues with his heart since birth, that he wasn’t going to make it very far in this life, no matter who had taken him home. I cried with my mom. She had already wrapped Gus’s body in paper towels. We brought him to our community garden on 104th street and buried him under some grape hyacinths and tet-a-tet daffodils. My mom told me not to tell the other people who had plots there.

I am not sure that I would have been as upset as I was about Gus’s death had my mom not expected me to be so distraught. Looking back, it seems that her sadness perhaps centered around the fact that my first “real” pet had died so soon, so suddenly, after we had together built so much excitement around his adoption. Surely, she was sad about the death itself, too. Death of a baby, of an innocent. The subject of animals and babies is tough that way. Is the death of a human adult any easier?
What is the border between help and harm like?

Teaching Hard History podcast - Season 4 Episode 2 - Creating Brave Spaces: Reckoning With Race in the Classroom

After listening to this podcast, I am left thinking about many concepts pertaining to creating safe spaces to have difficult conversations with children, but I am primarily reflecting on the distinction between “safe” and “comfortable” that is described in the episode. The primary voice in podcast, English teacher Matthew Kay, states that “safe does not always mean comfortable” (Kay 4:22). Uncomfortability is where learning happens. Vulnerability is a place from which we grow and learn, wholly and deeply. This reminds me of studying Rough & Tumble play in my last semester’s Humans at Play class– Rough & Tumble play is physical play where there are risks, such as climbing, running, tackling, rolling, etc. The main conclusion I drew from this study is that Rough & Tumble play is a really important way for children to learn about their physical boundaries, and this concept can totally transfer over into emotional/mental boundaries. Testing limits and taking risks is how individuals learn more about themselves, each other, and the world around. In a classroom, students can be safe but still encouraged to be uncomfortable in discussion.

“When bad actors and just as confused people misinterpret the term ‘safe space,’ they think it means that everybody feels comfortable, that no one is challenged, in like this t-ball, everybody wins kind of scenario, everyone gets a trophy... But safe means safe. Safe means this curriculum, this teacher, my classmates, this classroom, are not meant to do me harm... You can be profoundly uncomfortable by the things that you learn and still feel safe” Kay (15:32).

Kay makes a really interesting point, which is that we've seen abstinence education not work in other areas. He refers to sex ed. and D.A.R.E. He questions, so why do we think it will work in the case of race and racial justice? He explains that children, as people of the world, are exposed to racism and race conversation throughout their own lives, and especially in the internet age (the internet is not a safe space), so why not try to introduce these concepts to them in a space that can be intentionally created to be safe?-- Where the concepts are brought forth by a mindful, careful, educated teacher?
In November, I interviewed undergraduate students at SUNY New Paltz about their experiences with loss and grief. I asked varying questions, but consistently asked participants to describe both grief and innocence in their own words. I asked them to recall experiences of grief in their childhoods.

The following are some selected quotes that particularly resonated.

“Sometimes, I grieve the lost child inside of me.”

“She] died before her mom. [Her mom is] well aware of it. It’s just like, you’re the last person who was supposed to carry that grief.”

“My parents made it [divorce] seem like not a good thing, like a very bad thing, so I cried.”

“You usually think about grief in relation to death, but I think it can be mourning the loss of anything. I’m mourning the loss of the relationship I had, or, actually, never had, with my mom.”

Participants wish to remain anonymous.
“We had a shiva at our apartment. And my dad’s family came and everybody told me, ‘Sorry for your loss,’ and I was just like, Well... She was old, you know... I didn’t cry.”

“When my grandfather died, no one was really close to him, and he had a small funeral with a bunch of cousins I had never met in my life, it was really confusing. And I was the only one who cried.”

“I think I was thirteen at the time, so I was aware and I was present of what was happening, but I also was not emotionally— I would not say that I loved my [paternal] grandmother like I loved my mom’s mother— and that was hard for me to reconcile with, that I liked one grandmother more than the other. [I felt that I was] bad and wrong for that. So, when I was told, ‘Grandma’s going to die soon,’ I thought, What if I don’t cry?”
The *Lo + Cardinal* Process
(Producing the Piece)
Artistic Research

I researched various illustrators and cartoonists, based on recommendations of several early childhood educators, highlighted by renowned public journals, inspired by my visits at the New York Public Library, and sourced from my own childhood. Included in the selection of artists whose work I explored were Dr. Yaounde Olú, Ezra Jack Keats, Hayao Miyazaki, Jeff Smith, Molly Bang, Jamie Hewlett, Shaun Tan, and Rosemary Valero-O’Connell. I explored these artists’ styles while paying mind to their personal histories. In my drafting process, I explored making similar stylistic choices to those that particularly stood out to me in these artists’ works, such as color blocking and thick, dark linework. I attempted various methods using regular graphite pencils, watercolor pencils, oil pastels, felt tip pens, POSCA paint markers, and paper collage.
The story’s text evolved from a few key points that I gathered from my research/reflections and wished to convey through the story:
- Grief is born from love
- It is okay to feel however one does after experiencing a loss or major change and it is important to allow oneself to feel (to experience emotions that authentically arise)
- Growth or healing from grief is often not linear
- There is a myriad of ways that grief can look and be experienced
- Solace in times of grief can be different for everyone, but loving relationships can be supportive
- It is important to ensure that others are able to receive difficult information (stories of trauma) before sharing

Snapshot from my mentor document (revised text and illustration plan):

[Lo picking berries]

[Lo looking sussed out up-close shot]

Cardinal: “Hey, hi, hello, how you doin’.” [Cardinal, up-close]

[Perspective shot: Lo’s feet and Cardinal full w/ wagon and partial track – perhaps double-page span]

Lo: “Hello. What are you building?” 1. [Lo bends down to speak close to Cardinal]

Cardinal: “A skate track. It’s so I won’t have to skate on the human’s road anymore.”

Lo: “You... skate?”

Cardinal: “I can’t fly.”

Lo: …2. [Cardinal looking slightly concerned, still leaning close, Cardinal looks blank, stately]-[alternate completed: concerned-looking Lo in pain up-close position (only face)]

Cardinal: “Well, I can’t fly anymore.” 3. [Cardinal raises wings up to show sleeves rolling down, missing left wing]
**Name:** Lo

**Physical Description:** Lo is an unknown species. They appear with big cow-like ears and horns, human-like large eyes, a cat-ish nose and whiskers, and human-like lips. They appear in shades of blue and wear a blue and yellow sweater with a circular symbol on it, representative of impermanence and change. Lo walks on two legs and has human/ape-like hands. Lo is about four feet tall.

**Backstory:** Lo is the only one of their species that they know of. They do not remember their family. They live a calm and resourceful life, spending their time picking berries, going on walks, and thinking. Despite living a fairly isolated life, their sense of family comes from their relationships with other creatures in the woods (Thistle Forest).

**Personality:** Content and wise, but melancholic, too

**Motivations:** Connection, a sense of belonging, friendship, berries
Name: Cardinal

Physical Description: Cardinal is just that– a cardinal bird. He appears male, as he has the bright red colorings of an adult male cardinal, but he does not assert as particularly masculine, in whatever traditional sense. Cardinal is missing the majority of one of his wings. He wears a purple and yellow-sunset striped sweater and rides a skateboard (he no longer flies). Cardinal is the average size of a scientifically accurate cardinal (about 9 inches in length).

Backstory: Cardinal is very close with his family. Humans are developing the woods, making them smaller and smaller, and bird territories are thinning and getting closer together.

Personality: Friendly and bubbly

Motivations: Building his skate track, protecting his family from human destruction of the woods, friendship
Setting Development

The setting of Lo + Cardinal is based on a recurring dream that I have had annually since the age of 7. In the dream, I am sitting on my mother’s lap, inside a gray room, but facing a large window that looks out to a dark forest.

While my original vision for the landscape of Lo + Cardinal consisted of more shades of purple than what I eventually produced, purple maintains as a frequently featured color in Lo + Cardinal. I see purple as a complex color; it's a secondary color, precious in the history of pigment production, and seen in many shades in nature. Purple is also representative of Lo and Cardinal meeting, becoming vulnerable with each other, and sharing their stories– Blue and red together make purple.

I knew that I wanted to make my background collage-based, in some way. I believe in a constructivist approach to learning, which holds that knowledge is constructed through multiple and diverse experiences, rather than passively received. We can see constructivism demonstrated through critical discussion and, visually, through collage.
While exploring various art styles, I found myself drawn to texture. I like the connection that texture in a 2-dimensional image builds to the 3-dimensional world. I thought I would incorporate “real-life” texture in my work by using fabric scraps. I intended to create a sense of real place, but with a certain looseness that may indicate a kind of universality and ambiguity in terms of the location in which the narrative’s concepts could unfold; The experience of grief and related conversations are not confined by place.

Additionally, I feel that fiber arts (weave-based arts) is another visual art form that well symbolizes constructivism, or the integration and development of knowledge.

Finally, I was inspired by the animators and illustrators of the Cartoon Network TV show, *Chowder* (2007-2010), for their use of mixed mediums and patterned backgrounds. In several scenes of the show, a single character or a group of characters take the foreground, interacting and speaking, before a solid color or patterned background (as opposed to an illustrated room, for example). Sometimes, these same stationary patterns fill the lines of clothing on the characters or the objects that they interact with, even as the characters and/or objects move through animation. The quality that this stylistic choice brings about is an intense focus on and presence with the characters and their dialogue. I wished to emanate this quality in my own work, but decided to use textiles instead of smooth 2-D patterns.

The fabrics that I used came from many different walks of life. Some are from my great-grandmother’s sewing box. Others are pieces of my mom’s clothing from 35 years ago. Lots are from the New Paltz Reuse Center. While uncovering and incorporating all those different fabrics, I did feel like I was going through a unique kind of grieving process, or, at least, specially addressing change.
The Images

February, 2023

Making the images on a photocopier:

1. Lay drawn pieces face-down in intended orientation.
2. Lay text strips face-down.
3. Cover text strips with appropriately sized speech bubbles.
4. Add natural pieces if desired.
5. Cover entire creation with chosen fabric.
6. Close copier cover or place heavy object on top of fabric to keep drawings as in-focus as possible (pressed up against the glass).
7. Scan.
8. Check scan.
9. Reposition pieces until satisfied.
10. Scan again.

March, 2023

May, 2023

May, 2023
The Product
Hey, hi, hello, how you doin’?
Hello. What are you building?

A skate track. It’s so I won’t have to skate on the humans’ road anymore.

You... skate?

I can’t fly.
Well, I can’t fly anymore.

Oh.

But skating is lots of fun, you should try it. You’ll need a bigger track, though. I could build it for you, if you’d like.

Thanks.
My name’s Cardinal. What’s yours?

Lo.

Okay, Lo.
I’ve never seen you around Thistle Forest before. Well, to be fair, I’ve never really been to this part of Thistle Forest before. See, I’m from down south, around Heather, and, well, I’ve been building my track all afternoon and...
Where exactly are we?

This part of Thistle Forest is called Wisteria.
I don't have any folks, or at least not anyone I remember.

Wisteria, got it. Do you live with your folks, here in Wisteria?

Oh... But you have a family, don't you?

I must have, a long time ago, but they're gone now. It seems I'm the only one left.

Where'd they go?

I don't know.

Oh.
When I heard you coming,
I thought maybe you could
be another one of whatever I am.
Yes, Cardinal?

What are you doing out here, anyway?

I'm picking berries. Would you like some?

Oh, my, oh, yes, please!
Blueberries—what a treat!
My sister always wanted to save them to crush up and make paint with, so we’d never eat ‘em, and I guess I just haven’t gotten around to picking any myself since she died.
She painted lots of things: stormy clouds, sunset skies, grape hyacinths, and forget-me-nots...
Sorry, too much?
No, it’s okay.
I can tell how much she means to you.

But, thank you for asking...
If you had asked me a couple years ago, I probably would have said yes, it’s a little too much for me.

Now is different.

I get that. I think.
Oh, how delicious these berries are!

I'm glad you can enjoy them.

Me, too.
Cardinal?

Yes, Lo?

I am very sorry to hear that your sister is gone. And I’m sorry that that is all I can think to say.
Thank you, Lo.
Sometimes there isn’t much to say.

But we have much to eat. And much to build.

Yes, we do.
Much to enjoy.
Mind if I pick with you?
I need to head back toward home soon anyways.

Please, join me.
If you don't mind me asking, when did you lose your sister?

She died in May.

We were flying over the humans' road to get to the stream—you know, the humans' road keeps getting longer and longer and there aren't many other ways to get to the stream nowadays besides crossing the road—and then, suddenly, there was a truck. I tried to get her out of the way, but it came too fast. I just touched her, and then she was gone, along with my wing.
What was her name?

Stella.

She was wonderful.
Lo, sometimes it feels easier to be angry
about what happened to my sister...
But I can't skate when I'm angry.
And I love skating.

You know, Cardinal,
you can miss her and you can love things,
like skating, and like blueberries.
all at the same time.
That’s true, it’s just hard sometimes...

You’re right, it is.
And I know you don’t want to be angry—
I don’t think most people like to feel angry.

But, sometimes you need to be.
Sometimes you need to be angry, or sad, or everything all at once, or nothing at all.
Sometimes you need to just feel.
Feeeeeel...
Sometimes, I cry... a lot.
I cry, and I cry, and then I stop crying.

And then what do you do?

I pick blueberries.
And that’s not always the end of the crying, and definitely not the end of the missing. But, it does help to feel.

Yes, and to be patient.

And to be patient.
But, being patient can be SO HARD, Lo.

Yes, it can be.
FEEEEL.
Cardinal, would you like to teach me how to make paint from blueberries? Like Stella would do?

I would love to, Lo!
Oh, how exciting, Lo!
Okay, I think maybe we'll need some dandelions,
maybe some kind of big, flat leaf—
Okay, we've got to talk favorite colors—
OH, Lo, you know what?
You should come over to my house to paint!

You can meet the rest of my family!
They'll love you!
Do you think I'll fit in your house?

We'll find a way.
Scan the QR code below to access a Spotify playlist composed of submissions by members of the New Paltz community (and beyond) of songs that they associate with grief.

“Lo + Cardinal”


Recommendations (For You!) From My Supporting Research

- “What Happened to Their Pets?: Third Graders Encounter the Holocaust” by Simone Schweber: https://bbnewpaltz.sln.suny.edu/webapps/blackboard/execute/content/file?cmd=view&content_id=_3368659_1&course_id=_148986_1&launch_in_new=true
Recommendations From My Supporting Research (Cont.)

- “Not An Easy Thought to Hold: Death, Dying, and Oral History” by UNC: https://sohp.org/2019/02/05/not-an-easy-thought-to-hold-death-dying-and-oral-history/
- “Young Children in Divorce and Separation: Pilot Study of A Mediation-Based Co-Parenting Intervention” by Jennifer E. McIntosh And Evelyn S. Tan: https://web-s-ebscohost-com.libdatabase.newpaltz.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=0&sid=3982eaea-22fa-4b48-9e5a-e13ae7dababa%40redis
Recommendations From My Supporting Research (Cont.)

Children’s Literature:
- The Invisible String by Patrice Karst
- The Goodbye Book by Tedd Parr
- When Sophie Gets Angry, Really Really Angry by Molly Bang
- Stones for Grandpa by Renee Londner
- Many Shapes of Clay: A Story of Healing by Kenesha Sneed
- There Was a Hole by Adam Lehrhaupt
- When Dinosaurs Die by Laurie Krasney Brown and Marc Brown
- The Tenth Good Thing About Barney by Judith Viorst
- I Remember Miss Perry by Pat Brisson
- Missing Mommy by Rebecca Cobb
- Tess’s Tree by Jess M. Brailler
- The Arrival by Shaun Tan

Digital media:
- Midnight Gospel (Netflix)
  - S1 E7: Turtles of the Eclipse
  - S1 E8: Mouse of Silver
- Learning For Justice Podcast: Teaching Hard History: https://open.spotify.com/show/4DYEDn0GYHw51Etq76uZid?si=14fb84949c464f21
- The Breadwinner (2017) Cartoon Saloon
- Coco (2017) Disney/Pixar
- Up (2009) Disney/Pixar
- Soul (2020) Disney/Pixar
- Inside Out (2015) Disney/Pixar
- Finding Nemo (2003) Disney/Pixar
- The Lion King (1994) Disney/Pixar

More digital media: HiHo Kids YouTube videos
- “Kids Describe Love to An Illustrator” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kzQuLrKRffc&list=PL2etPlnTb9sXzqhzpNfK1UT2M20kJdp&index=16
- “Kids Describe Coronavirus to An Illustrator” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0__-MD5v4z2w&list=PL2etPlnTb9sXzhpzjhzpNfK1UT2M20kJdp&index=2
- “Kids Meet a Terminally Ill Person” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z8hCRLmKf6w
- “Kids Meet a Holocaust Survivor” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qZS0YlpCS7I