

## LOSSES AND GRIEF: PRACTICES IN SCHOOL AND EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY

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### ABSTRACT

The present study aims to reveal the practices adopted by school psychologists regarding the demands of loss and mourning in an educational context. In this sense, a qualitative research and Historical-Cultural Psychology was used as a theoretical-methodological contribution. In order to carry on with this research, 62 professionals from 16 states in Brazil participated. The main results indicate that psychologists' practices are characterized individually, collectively and multidisciplinary. It is possible to identify signs of criticality, taking into account the integral and critical understanding present in the professionals' reports, while individualizing and clinical practices are also engaged in the participants' work contexts. Also, it is noteworthy that the results are not subject to generalization. Furthermore, the need for intersectoral actions among education, health and social assistance, investment in initial and continuing training, more debates, studies and discussions that provide dialogue between different processes of loss and mourning and education is highlighted, with a view to incipience of studies that deal with the dialogue among the themes.

**Key words:** school and educational psychology; losses; grief

## Pérdidas y luto: prácticas en psicología escolar y educacional

### RESUMEN

En el presente estudio se tiene como objetivo revelar las prácticas adoptadas por psicólogos escolares acerca de demandas de pérdidas y luto en contexto educacional. Se trata de una investigación cualitativa y se utilizó la Psicología Histórico-Cultural como aporte teórico-metodológico. Participaron de la investigación 62 profesionales de 16 estados de Brasil. Los principales resultados apuntan que las prácticas de los psicólogos se caracterizan de forma individual, colectiva y multidisciplinar. Es posible identificar indicios de criticidad, llevando en cuenta la comprensión integral y crítica presente en los relatos de los profesionales, al paso en que prácticas individualizantes y clínicas son también empeñadas en los contextos de trabajo de los participantes. Se destaca que los resultados no son pasibles de generalización. Además, se resalta la necesidad de acciones de cuño intersectorial entre educación, salud y asistencia social, investimento en formación inicial y continuada, más debates, estudios y discusiones que proporcionen diálogo entre diferentes procesos de pérdidas y luto y la educación, haya vista la insipencia de estudios que versen sobre el diálogo entre los temas.

**Palabras clave:** psicología escolar y educacional; pérdidas; luto

## Perdas e luto: práticas em Psicologia Escolar e Educacional

### RESUMO

O presente estudo tem como objetivo revelar as práticas adotadas por psicólogos escolares acerca de demandas de perdas e luto em contexto educacional. Trata-se, pois de uma pesquisa qualitativa e utilizou-se a Psicologia Histórico-Cultural como aporte teórico-metodológico. Participaram da pesquisa 62 profissionais de 16 estados do Brasil. Os principais resultados apontam que as práticas dos psicólogos se caracterizam de forma individual, coletiva e multidisciplinar. É possível identificar indícios de criticidade, levando em consideração a compreensão integral e crítica presente nos relatos dos profissionais, ao passo em que práticas individualizantes e clínicas são também empenhadas nos contextos de trabalho dos participantes. Destaca-se que os resultados não são passíveis de generalização. Ademais, ressalta-se a necessidade de ações de cuño intersectorial entre educação, saúde e assistência social, investimento em formação inicial e continuada, mais debates, estudos e discussões que proporcionem diálogo entre diferentes processos de perdas e luto e a educação, haja vista a incipiência de estudos que versen sobre o diálogo entre os temas.

**Palavras-chave:** psicologia escolar e educacional; perdas; luto

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## INTRODUCTION

The development of School Psychology in the Brazilian territory was built upon practices of clinical and analytical nature, with a focus on organicist perspectives, of adjustment and testing students aiming at segregating individuals who were able and who were unable to be in the school environment (Oliveira-Menegotto & Fontoura, 2015). In this sense, the context of strong repression, inaugurated in 1964 with the military coup, condoned psychological practices of elitist nature, with a neoliberal, reductionist basis, and centered on individuals (Correia & Dantas, 2017).

The reactions by professionals who intended to develop a Psychology that is diverse and imminently Brazilian revealed the necessity for change in perspectives and practices, evolving from a fragmented, limited comprehension of individuals towards an integral, socio-historically referenced view. Critical School Psychology emerges in the 1980s during the class struggle of Social Movements, in defense of the re-democratization of the country and the protection of basic rights, such as health (Law 8.080, 1990) and education (Law 9.394, 1996).

In this context, researchers produce studies such as *“Psychology and Ideology: critical introduction to School Psychology”* (Patto, 1984) that reveal the urging need for overcoming universalizing, decontextualized comprehensions regarding school individuals. The reverberations of the changes in the area of School Psychology led to critical practices in the 1990s and in the 2000s, with reports of professional experiences with amplified views that are contextualized in phenomena such as student failure, poor performance, and indiscipline (Del Prette, 2007; Maluf & Cruces, 2008; Tanamachi, 2000; Yamamoto, 2000).

According to the Federal Psychology Council, or the *“Conselho Federal de Psicologia”* - CFP (CFP, 2019), before we have critical practices in School Psychology, we must look at education, especially at school, as a place that produces and reproduces latent social adversities. In this sense, still in accordance with the CFP (2019), it is possible to emphasize *“the importance of approaching the conflicts and the violence that are often produced in the institutional practices. It is impossible to understand Education without inserting it into the context of economic policies, and of the social and public policies that give it support”* (pp. 24-25). Such recommendations point at the evidence of criticalness that are necessary for professional practices.

We understand that the evidence of criticalness consists of professional postures, perspectives, and practices that expose unequal reality, denounce multiple adversities and the fragilization of the guarantee of rights for school individuals, and announce different possibilities and potential approaches, in order to foster protagonism and mediate processes of emancipation and re-existences. In a study realized by Fonseca and

Negreiros (2021), the authors identified evidence of criticalness in professional practice in School Psychology in the comprehension presented by school psychologists on the insertion of these professionals into the pedagogical discussions of the school environments, in the comprehension of human development in an integral, contextualized way and on the ethical-political practice as a means to act on social commitment in the area.

The demands by loss and grief that emerge in the educational reality must be approached by means of a political-ethical practice, based on the comprehension of how this loss and/or grief was produced, to what social structure the individual, group, school community and/or institution belong, as well as what historical, political, economic, cultural and geographic determinants are anchored on the process of loss and/or grief. Brazilian culture reveals how loss, especially death and grief are phenomena that are socially prohibited and pathologized. Grief is understood as the reactions of an individual regarding the loss of something or someone important (Parkes, 1998; Santana, 2010). In this sense, loss is understood as the process of breaking of a definitive connection with individuals and/or living beings, objects of emotional value, therefore concrete value, and the breaking of a connection with territories, relations, reality perceptions, and symbolic loss (Bowlby, 1997; Rodrigues, 2021).

According to Kovács (2021), death as concrete loss is a phenomenon that is loaded with stigma and, therefore, seems distant from the dialogues that could be established. Among the stigma, the author reveals the conception of death as an uncommon, atypical phenomenon that is therefore prohibited, that is, it is present in the context but it is silenced. News of death often make headlines. It is easy to get information on violent deaths, sudden deaths, and in the past few years, the death of hordes of people due to Covid-19. Kovács (2012, 2021) agrees that the theme is scarcely discussed because of matters related to the little recognition and capacity of the population to handle their emotions regarding loss.

Rodrigues (2021) and Butler (2019) reveal that, in addition to scarce discussions, there are social and political differences regarding the contact and the production of meanings regarding death and grief. The authors recognize that not all forms of grief are ritualized and publicized because not all forms of life are considered valid or legitimate, such as black, poor lives and the ones that do not fit into heteronormative standards.

Guimarães (2022) contributes to the discussion by affirming that necropolitics, a byproduct of capitalism and its principles of profit, productivity, and utilitarianism, produces deaths and renders existences unfeasible especially among socially minority groups,

and at the same time it reveals the impossibility and the unavailability for the elaboration and attribution of suffering due to experiences of loss by death or even of loss of social functions of the deceased ones. In other words, grief is not allowed to be a public manifestation.

Adding further tension to this discussion, it is possible to say that there is a projected exclusion when loss is experienced by individuals from minority groups (the LGBTQIA+ population, black young people, black women, mixed-raced women, indigenous people, poor people, people from the outskirts of big cities, people with disabilities, and native populations). Rodrigues (2021) proposes the important reflection that, in Brazil, black young people get killed every day and little space is provided for the expression of grief for the loss experienced by these individuals. The author emphasizes that there is a scarcity in possibilities for elaboration and collective grief expression, which is a necessary and potent process for a healthy and responsible grief experience. In order to do so, Rodrigues (2021) points at how much the assassination of city councilor Mariele Franco from Rio de Janeiro was a reflection of the non-legitimization of the existences of black people.

The assassination of Mariele Franco triggered expressions of individual and collective grief, especially social minorities residing in the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro and of other regions in Brazil. To Rodrigues (2021), the popular manifestations of grief and indignation were representations of the clamor that gets muted in situations of violent loss, such as police violence, urban violence, and processes of death that are due to social inequalities.

Such reality reveals the death culture that underlies the Brazilian territory ever since the country's violent colonization process, defined as the social legitimization of the extermination of underprivileged populations. The hazard in this type of culture consists of the attempt by the state to disseminate the false idea of a universal individual, without sexuality, social class, personal, territorial, ethnical-racial, economic, age, and history peculiarities and other markers that, according to Rodrigues (2021), lead to the comprehension of multiple categories in order to avoid nullifying these lives.

Such comprehensions dialogue with the way professionals from diverse backgrounds, especially psychology, attribute meaning to individuals and their demands whenever they appear in the different fields of practice. Regarding specifically the practices in School Psychology that are related to loss and grief, it is important to point out that before these people became professionals in different areas of practice, they go through a dialectical process of construction as social individuals. Therefore, within an unequal, oppressive context such as the Brazilian one, they might learn to reproduce inequality and oppression, without a comprehension of such violences.

In this same logic, according to the reflections proposed by Freire (1997), the process of construction of professional practices, produced in this adverse context, if not tensioned at its birth, (where these practices appear, what place and time, from what perspective and with what objective), becomes a tool for the dissemination of adversities, because even when professionals recognize themselves in this context, the oppressive social scenario prevents their practices from becoming instruments for the production of a critical sense, in order to foster processes of emancipation and protagonism.

Tensioning the existing spaces for having dialogues, discussing, claiming, and speaking one's mind on the multiple processes of concrete and symbolic loss and processes of elaboration of distinct forms of grief is a principle for professional practice. Understanding that the basis for a political-ethical practice lies on being acquainted with diverse realities and being provided with practices that make sense with such realities is an ever relevant principle for School Psychology.

Based on what has been presented, the present article aims at revealing practices that have been executed by Brazilian school psychologists on the demands related to loss and grief that appear in the fields of educational work.

## METHOD

### Study outline

The present study is a qualitative research, produced under the process comprehension of the reality adopted by the Cultural-historical Psychology, whose epistemological basis is the dialectical-historical materialism. Cultural-historical Psychology aims at apprehending reality by means of the universal-particular-singular dialectical movement (Negreiros & Fonseca, 2019; Vigotski, 1999).

### Study participants

Sixty two School Psychology professionals participated in the study, the average age was 35 years old (DP=7,7; minimum age: 25; maximum age: 56 years). 93.5% (58) of these participants declared themselves female and 6.5% (04) were male. Such data corroborates the survey carried out by the Federal Psychology Council (CFP), confirming that, in Brazil, psychology is predominantly a female activity. According to the aforementioned council, the contingent of professionals in the area is of 437.356 professionals, while 370.797 (84.8%) are female psychologists (CFP, 2021).

The average time of practice as psychologists was 11 years (DP=7,3; minimum time: 1 year; maximum time: 31 years) and the time of practice in School Psychology is 7 years (DP=6,1; minimum time: one year; maximum time: 30 years). Most of the professionals (62.9%) work at public institutions, most of them (41.9%) in the context of high school integrated with professional

and technological education, at the Federal Institutes. Considering that one of the markers for the identification of the professionals was the Brazilian state where they live and work, it is said that the context of the study was 16 Brazilian states, with greater representation in the states of Piauí (25.8%) and of the Distrito Federal (16.2%), according to what was described in Table 01.

**Table 01** - Representation of the participants by State.

State	Representation (%)
Piauí	16 (25.8%)
Distrito Federal	10 (16.2%)
São Paulo	6 (9.6%)
Mato Grosso do Sul	5 (8%)
Minas Gerais	4 (6.4%)
Ceará	3 (4.8%)
Santa Catarina	3 (4.8%)
Bahia	2 (3.2%)
Rio Grande do Sul	2 (3.2%)
Alagoas	1 (1.6%)
Pará	1 (1.6%)
Pernambuco	1 (1.6%)
Paraíba	1 (1.6%)
Paraná	1 (1.6%)
Rio de Janeiro	1 (1.6%)
Rio Grande do Norte	1 (1.6%)
Did not answer	4 (6.4%)

Source: Research Data.

### Procedures for apprehension of data and ethical precautions

The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee, or “Comitê de Ética em Pesquisa” (CEP) with human beings at the UFPI, under Decision number 3.945.795. Then, researchers contacted the psychology professionals working in the educational fields of practice by means of social networks: Instagram, Facebook and Whatsapp groups. They were initially introduced to the research objectives and were provided with a brief description of the form where they would write their reports. After the professionals agreed to participate in the study, they were asked to sign a Free Informed Consent Term, or “Termo de Consentimento Livre e Esclarecido” (TCLE). The apprehension of data took place between the months of April and August of 2020, in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. In this sense, it is important to emphasize that the research had been designed before the national lockdown and social distancing decree, in March of 2020.

The pandemic context was a factor of influence for

the apprehension of data because the professionals were in the process of adaptation of their functions to the new necessities that emerged with the pandemic. Thus, participants were introduced with the link for excess to the form filling tool on the Google Docs platform, which had been previously used in other research works (Damasceno, Costa, & Negreiros, 2016; Negreiros, Costa, & Damasceno, 2016). The form was constructed with questions for identification of the sociodemographic profile of participants, with markers such as age, gender, Brazilian state where they lived, time of practice in psychology, time of practice in the area of School Psychology, and type of institution where they worked, whether it was a public or private institution.

Also, three questions were presented. They were created by means of the objectives of this study: “What are the most frequent demands referring to death and grief in their field of practice?”; “What are the adopted practices to handle the demands related to death and grief?”; “What conception is the basis for the practice when it comes to handling the demands of death and grief?”. The form tool indicates how long each participant takes to answer the questions in this study. So the questionnaire was answered by the participants in an average time of 15 minutes.

### Procedures for data analysis

The data were analyzed by means of Cultural-historical psychology, which presents the necessity for analysis of the process as a whole; thus, the process is based on the appearance of the phenomenon and its essence is revealed by means of explanations, considering the contextual complexity out of which this phenomenon is constituted (Negreiros & Fonseca, 2019; Vigotski, 1999).

The process and the totality of the studied phenomenon (the practices of the school psychologists regarding the demands of death and grief) are presented by means of the universality-particularity-singularity dialectics (Fonseca, 2018; Negreiros & Fonseca, 2019; Fonseca & Negreiros, 2021). Based on the characteristics of the present study, the immediate expression of the phenomenon is characterized by the practice of the psychologists regarding the demands related to death and grief in the learning institutions. Particularity, that is, the mediation between the singular and the universal, in this study, is characterized by normative, formative, orientation, historical, theoretical, contextual, and the geographical conditioners for the practice of psychologists. Universality, expression of the phenomenon in its complexity is revealed by means of the contextualized practices of the psychologists regarding the demands of loss and grief in different regions of the Brazilian territory.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data presented below refers to apprehension

and reading realized by means of the reports on the professionals. Based on the dialectic movement proposed by Cultural-historical Psychology, it is possible to understand that the axes of analysis, presented on Box 1 indicate a real and immediate comprehension of what was presented by the psychologists. Such axes were identified considering the singularities of the practices adopted by the professionals. By means of the analysis units, the axes revealed the central analysis unit of the studies, that is the executed practices of the psychologist in the context of educational work.

**Box 01** - Axes of analysis of the practices realized by the school psychologists.

Axes of analysis	Title
01	Individual intervention practices
02	Collective intervention practices
03	Multi-professional team practices

The axis of analysis 1 is entitled individual intervention practices and presents mode of practice indicated by the professionals, based on individual processes of the demands of loss and grief that emerge in the fields of educational work. In this sense, 3 units for analysis are identified and they contemplate the singularities and the mode of practice of the psychologists, according to what is presented on Box 2.

Analysis unit 1 is entitled "Reception, assistance, and attention" and emphasizes the particularity of the practices of the psychologists when they receive demands of loss and grief. In this sense, the professionals affirm that in the educational context they usually realized individual assistance especially with students who had gone through loss or were in the process of grief elaboration. Besides that, the professionals affirmed that they realize assistance and psychological listening with school actors who are experiencing processes of concrete or symbolic loss.

Concrete loss corresponds to experiences of loss by death and symbolic loss refers to experiences in which the loss is related to a state or a transition, such as moving to another city, changing schools, or even failing at school or being diagnosed with a disease.

Regarding what practices I realized, psychologist 49 (aged 32 years and working in the context of Professional

and Technological Education) reports: *"it depends on the demand. In cases of death of beloved ones, I offer the students assistance and contact their families and, depending on how the case evolves, I keep on providing punctual assistance to the student or in some intervention with colleagues."*

The report of the professional reveals the individual character of the practice. However, it does not constitute an individualizing practice because the realized analysis was in accordance with the peculiarity of the demand. In this sense, the professionals also reinforce the effort they put on in order to embrace not only their students but also their family members and other members of the university community. Based on the CFP (2019), school psychology professionals must focus their practice on all actors of the school environment considering their singularities and contextualizing their practice, while taking into consideration the aspects that make up the school.

The individualization of demand is sometimes connected with an individualizing character, that is, professionals disregard the contextual aspect of production of the reality in which the demand emerges and tends to blame individuals for their condition. In order to corroborate what is being presented pause dictation, psychologist 16 (50 years old and working in the context of Professional and Technological Education), as she reports on her practice on the demands of loss and grief, affirms: "I listen to the students and try to help them understand a natural part of life and develop with them and understanding that it is necessary to feel death, to grieve, to shed tears, and if the moment of grieving does not fade away it is necessary to seek professional help."

Kovács (2021) emphasizes the power of listening as an important work tool for professionals in contact with the demands of loss. The author reveals that the expression of emotions, as well as ethical and professional assistance lead to effective support in order to face the reality of loss and the identification of a support network. In this context, it is important to emphasize that although the elaboration of the loss is experienced from an individual perspective, that is, based on singular matters for each person, historical and cultural markers influence this experience because they are the ones that reveals how the collective and dialectic

**Box 2** - analytical axis 01: individual intervention practices.

Analysis units	Descriptors
Unit 1: reception, assistance, and attention	Welcoming the students and family members; individual assistance with the student in grief; listening to the experience of loss
Unit 2: orientation for school agents	Orientation for family members, teachers and school managers.
Unit 3: referral of the demands of loss and grief	Referral of this student to psychotherapy and/or psychiatric care.

construction of reality present themselves.

Consequently, reactions to a reality of breaking away from connections, of grief, is not a predetermined movement. It is rather built by means of emotional expressions, which are understood as constructions that are common in a specific culture, which according to Vigotski (2007) singularize the experience of individuals in their social context and influence their individual development and their development in community because the community itself in its dialectic relations the one that favors or hinders emotional expressions; In other words, expressions of fear, sadness, anger and joy, in addition to being physiological reactions, are reactions that are felt and constructed in a social and cultural context (Víctora & Coelho, 2019; Vigotski, 2007).

At school, exercising the comprehension of loss from an integral perspective of listening and embracing, regarding the singularities of how this phenomenon was produced and what markers of existence – as social condition – are mobilized by loss, is a social and ethical-political commitment.

Would you my analysis unit 2 is entitled “Orientation for school agents” and indicates the perspective of practice of the professionals based on the contract realized with the family members teachers and school administration. Psychologists highlight the fact that the dialogues established with the school community have the objective to promote for students a strengthening of their support network when they experience loss. Besides that, such contact also promotes embracing families when the whole family is going through some significant loss.

On this condition, psychologist 01 (35 years old and working at a private school) reports that she realizes the following practices:

*Guidance on how to deal with the demand which can be for the whole family. For example, when they lose a family member and specifically how to work this moment with the child so that the child does not feel excluded from grieving and is left to their own devices to cope with suffering. Grief is also approached in a game-like way at school so that children have an opportunity to assess their own suffering and find their own ways to handle it. It is a preventive intervention that assesses [sic] the children's social emotional skills.*

Regarding this family-school relation, Negreiros (2021) emphasizes that this relation has a constructive potential for school learning and formation whenever this process happens in a positive way and with the efforts by the school and family for the establishment of a good relation. In this direction, the CFP (2019) emphasizes the importance of practices that comprehend a contextualized practice in the reality of schools, which includes considering but scenario and the singularities of

the family unit to which the student belong.

In this sense, it is important to emphasize that considering the family a necessary agent to the mediation of school demands is the exercise an integral and critical view because, according to Negreiros (2021, pp. 83-84): “family support and help are fundamental when it comes to overcoming the difficulties faced by children in school everyday life [...] It exercises a social function in the educational process while promoting a guarantee for the caretaking of children.” This comprehension reviews that the orientation for families is a formative and educational practice, especially when it concerns the experience that is shared and is collective during processes of loss and grief.

Kovács (2012) indicates that the death separation, when it is present in the school environment, depotentializes a respectful, responsible approach by school professionals with the educational actor who is going through the process of loss. Silence in this sense does not mean insensitivity, neither does it reflect anything of the construction of the experienced loss. In order to do it, it is recommended that the more discussed and planned collectively the interventions are from mediating processes of loss and grief, the more critical reflexive and socially referenced the school experiences are.

Analysis unit 3 is entitled “referral to demand of loss and grief” and highlights practices that reveal the necessity, identified by the psychologists of referring to the students who were going through the loss and elaboration of grief to psychotherapy and, in some cases, to psychiatric assistance.

Psychologist 38 (25 years old and working at a private school) characterizes her practice the following way: “reception and listening, offering a therapeutic support that is based on the TCC techniques, at this difficult moment of breaking emotional connection, and later on, referral to psychotherapy.

In this same direction, psychologist 24 (36 years old and working in the reality of professional and technical education) reports: “in cases when the demand is received, there's a psychological reception for support, in addition to punctual listening and orientation for available psychotherapy services”. Likewise, psychologist 44 (33 years old and working at a private institution), affirms that she realizes: “reception, collaborative restructuring, for row for psychiatry and clinical psychology and immediate contact with family.”

In the school reality, the referral realized by psychology professionals constitutes a practice that is not common because it is understood that the demands that emerge at school are produced by means of diverse influences, And also because it is understood that the demands at school are exclusively educational (CFP, 2019). In many cases, the referrals realized by the school