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Abstract

The main purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the benefits of implementation of death and dying curricula into our public schools. The role of the school counselor in grief counseling and implementation of death curricula will be addressed. A review of relevant literature will be used to accomplish these purposes.

DEATH CURRICULA IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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by

David Eugene Crotts

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Death Curricula in the Public Schools

Statement of Purpose

The main purpose of this paper is to demonstrate
the benefits of implementation of death and dying
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Introduction

The appearance of death education in our schools'
curricula in this century can hardly be viewed as a
random phenomenon. There is a reason and a need for
its emergence. The premise is readily accepted that
death is no longer a "normal part" of human experience
-- at least in much of the Western world -- but
instead has become a "problem" in need of a solution
(Bernaliel, 1981). Societal changes since the turn of
the century have largely contributed to this view
according to Feifel (1969) and Bernaliel (1981).
Direct experience with the dying has become atypical;
many people have had little opportunity to learn how

to behave during this transition. We go to great lengths to "protect others" by not talking about and sharing our personal meaning of death (Gamble and Brown, 1980). Further, we find that personal belief systems no longer offer existential hope and comfort, but rather, for many persons the future seems marred with uncertainty and dread (Kubler-Ross, 1969).

Herman Feifel (1969), in describing the societal changes affecting man's attitude and relationship with death wrote,

"...Increasing fragmentation of family, decline in neighborhood and kinship groups, the growing impersonality of a culture dominated by technology and the waning of providential faith, death no longer signals atonement and redemption as much as man's loneliness and a threat to his pursuit of happiness. Fear of death reveals less concerns with judgment and more with total annihilation and loss of identity. This fear is perhaps greater today when we find ourselves in a period of instability, a period in which we seem to be losing command of our communal relationships." (p.42).

Although death and dying still affect peoples' lives, the meanings of these encounters have been altered by the culture of the 20th century (Killihea,

1981).   Traditional institutions, such as family and church, that served as primary support systems in past years, directing and guiding encounters with death and dying, have lost some of their effectiveness, according to Killihea.   Thus new institutions have emerged, and the schools have expanded their roles for assisting individuals who are dealing with various stresses of modern life (Thornburg and Thornburg, 1982).   Among these stresses are some in which death is an important feature: the sudden death of a significant person; the prolonged dying of a friend or family member; the process of living with a life-threatening disease.   It is not that these death-related issues are unique to the 20th century that is causing a problem, but that many people are not prepared to cope with them as personal and social transitions, thus enhancing their anxiety and increasing their avoidance to death issues (Kubler-Ross, 1969).   Death has become more of a mystery to most of us than was true earlier in our nation's history.

A primary consequence of our defiance of death and the recognition of man's mortality, has been a denial of death in American culture, as noted by Headington (1981).   Because the denial can never be

total and because it conflicts with the basic nature

of life and of reality, we are then left quite

unprepared for death to make its drastic appearance in

our phenomenal field, according to Headington.

We seem to be aware of the problems which arise

due to information gaps in sex education, and have

begun to respond to this need, yet we continue to

treat death as the last taboo (Kubler-Ross, 1969; Eddy

and Wesley, 1983). Unlike sex education, the lack of

death education does not produce such visible outcomes

as venereal disease and pregnancy; rather, it

contributes to misunderstanding, fear, and lack of

preparedness for the reality of life (Malmquist,

1970).

Rationale, Goals, and Empirical Research

Although the death education movement recognizes

the need to provide young people with death education

and guidance, it is still a controversial issue

whether to introduce a course of this nature into the

school curriculum (McDonald, 1981; Eddy and Wesley,

1983). Many educators raise objections concerning the

appropriateness of discussing death in the classroom,

according to Eddy and Wesley.

Major reasons for death education, according to Eddy and Alles (1978), are :

1) Helping people to deal with their own mortality, and providing them with coping skills and strategies to assist them with personal fears of death.

2) Helping people put into perspective the conflicting messages about death that are found in our art, music, literature, and media.

3) Helping people value life and encouraging them to adopt a "wellness" life-style.

Death education helps to place the experience of dying within the natural realm of human experience as a necessary part of the human life cycle, according to Eddy and Alles.

In an article by Gordon and Klass (1979), four general goals of death education were analyzed: a) to inform students concerning facts about death not widespread in the general society, b) to increase students' capacity to effectively deal with the prospect of their own death and those who are close to them, c) to increase one's consumer understanding of medical and funeral services, and d) to enable the student to formulate or redefine ethical and value

stances in regard to death. In addition to the potential goals for death education enumerated by Gordon and Klass (1979), Grollman (1977), noted that death education should first help students understand social changes through death education and second, should develop insights concerning the broad scope of the humanities, using the human death experience as a focus.

According to Headington (1981), it becomes the goal of such a death education class to enable students to obtain a personal understanding of trends and changes in the death experience and to develop their own coping mechanisms for handling death. Learning about grief, bereavement, and mourning are primary objectives in such a course.

The influence of a course on the social aspects of death and dying has been seen as positive by Shneidman (1975), and has been directly examined by Bell (1977). Initially, a comparison was made by Bell between a group of death education students and a control group of students selected from a general student body of college freshman. Comparisons were made on two cognitive dimensions of death attitudes (frequency of thoughts of death, and interest in death-related discussions) and two affective

dimensions (fear of death, and willingness to discuss
their own death or the death of a close friend). Bell
found the experimental control groups to be comparable
on pretest measures. On the posttest measures,
however, differences were found on the two cognitive
dimensions. Those students who had completed a death
education course indicated that they thought more
frequently about death and were more interested in
death-related discussions.

In another study by Murphy (1986), nurses who
elected to attend a two-day workshop on death
organized by the investigator, were found to have
significantly decreased levels of death anxiety
following the workshop. This decrease in anxiety was
again demonstrated one month after the workshop.

The majority of empirical studies have as the
major criterion for the evaluation of death education
courses, the reduction of death anxiety (Combs, 1981;
Dickstein, 1973; Sadowski, Davis, and Vergari, 1979).
According to Gastein (1980), there seems to be an
unquestioned assumption that it is, in and of itself,
better (and therefore more correct?) to fear death
less. Gatstein suggested that the proliferation of
experimental research focusing on reducing death
anxiety reflects in part our comfort with, and ability

to measure things quantitatively; "a statistically significant drop in death anxiety score means we have done something, had an impact, somehow done our job. But a simple quantitative approach may also reflect an insufficiently examined set of premises about the "proper" human relation to death" (p.36).

In summary, the debate concerning the need for death education in our public schools continues. Many goals and objectives are cited by the proponents of death education. The capacity to deal with one's own mortality and to learn about the grief process, are objectives shared by most of the proponents. However, the goal of reducing anxiety toward death has been challenged by Gastein.

The Existential Advantages of Death Education

The goals of death education addressed in the preceding section, dealt primarily with learning how to better respond to and cope with death and loss situations. This section will consider how the exploration of the concept of death can spur the individual to a greater appreciation of life, and therefore, to the attainment of a more satisfying existence (Geaney, 1981).

With the advent of the works of Kubler-Ross
(1969) and other pioneers in the death education
movement, the last two decades brought a proliferation
of death related literature (Choron, 1967; Felfel,
1969; Dickstein, 1973). American society is slowly
accepting the notion that we have much to learn about
life and death through the study of death.

Apparently, an understanding of death, like
sexuality, is being recognized as an area intimately
related to man's ability to live a worthwhile and
happy life (Reisler, 1977). Choron (1967), stated
that we need to be concerned with the issue of what
death means and "does" to the individual. Weisman and
Hackett (1976), have written that how one has lived
can determine how he will die; conversely, how one
views his imminent death can affect his style of
living.

By examining death, individuals often develop a
greater understanding, and reverence for, life
(Frankl, 1966). When individuals are given the
opportunity to examine factual information and to
clarify personal values, it is probable that their
anxiety will be reduced, which will enable them to
pursue life with enthusiasm and confidence (Eddy and
Wesley, 1983). Discussion of death can help to

legitimize one's inner feelings toward death, according to Headington (1981). Through death education, denial of death can be replaced with a personal philosophy that accepts death as a fact of life.

A basic tenet of existential and actualization theorists is the belief that an actualized and authentic existence is possible only when the individual has come to terms with the fact of personal mortality (Spero, 1981). The meaning of one's life is therefore enhanced as one finds meaningfulness in the contemplation of one's death (Frankl, 1966).

Frankl (1966), May (1957), and Koestenbaum (1964), have had considerable theoretical and practical influence in what Maslow (1954), called the Third Force, i.e., Humanistic Psychology. The primary subject of this literature has been the healthy non-threatened adult. Generally the literature (May, 1957; Koestenbaum, 1964) provides an explicit statement of the importance of the individual's cognitive and affective relationship to the fact of his or her own death and dying.

One of the greatest goals of life is our transformation as organisms to complete and fully developed persons. This is our central goal: the

development of self (Green and Irish, 1971). This is
accomplished only in relationships with other persons
(Rogers, 1961). Here death makes its greatest gift,
for the sure and ever-present awareness that I shall
die much sooner than I would wish, and that others are
moving as quickly and as surely to the same end,
enhances all human relationships from that of casual
acquaintance to that of deepest love (May, 1957).
Death education can thus be viewed as an important
condition of living (Gamble and Brown, 1980). The
person who fully realizes that he will die sometime is
less apt to quarrel with loved ones and more apt to
take the initiative in patching up the quarrels that
already rage around him/her. He or she may work
harder at some things, but may also pause more
frequently to savor everyday experiences which might
otherwise be taken for granted. In short, heightened
awareness of death provides an enriched dimension to
the whole process of living (Koestenbaum, 1964).

Death as a Guidance Tool

Because of the counselor's role in the school as
the primary mental health consultant as well as the
coordinator of a caring faculty support system for

grieving and troubled students, it is the counselor's responsibility for the issue of death and loss to surface somewhere within the curriculum (Klingman, 1980; Nelson and Peterson, 1975).

Significant experiences with death and dying are more than tragic events with negative consequences for people (Spero, 1981). They are conceived as maturational crises through which individuals learn to cope with themselves during times of adversity and change and which function as reminders of the separateness and the connectedness of the human condition (Reisler, 1977). Because of their importance in interpersonal relationships, experiences with death and dying can be viewed as developmental tasks that are a major part of life transitions (Bellin, 1982). Considering the profound nature of these experiences and the potential for human growth as well as for human deterioration, it is to the counselor's benefit to become involved with students and to assist them through the maturational crisis (Atkinson, 1980).

Of all the many painful experiences that beset individuals on their path from birth to death, none seems more central to life's issues than loss. The counselor then, whether engaged in preventative

education or in actual grief counseling, is not only assisting the student to reduce pain, but is also helping the student to develop healthy coping skills (Gamble and Brown, 1980).

The school counselor's involvement in death education and grief counseling transmits powerful subtle messages to the school population (Getson and Benshoff, 1977). Avoidance of the issue and the grieving student similarly sends a strong message. The effective school guidance office will send non-verbal messages to the students by the counselor's participation in death and loss issues, that this is the office and the people to see when troubled, hurt, or confused, no matter how large or small the problem. If this is not the case, then a job-role problem could exist (Reisler, 1977).

With involvement in death education by the school counselor, whether it be by leading a small group workshop, instructing a course, or simply sitting-in when a health or science course spends a week on a death unit, the counselor communicates that it is important and that he or she cares according to Getson and Benshoff (1977). Demonstrating this caring attitude toward the student population will produce a

positive image for the guidance office and create more
student self-referrals (Nelson and Peterson, 1975).

Conclusion

This review of literature has shown evidence that
our experience of death in the last century has
undergone some physical and emotional changes, which
has produced a "denial" response toward death. This
"denial of death", has created a problem according to
some thanatologists. Our current method of dealing
with this problem through "silence" is showing adverse
effects which some suggest may be dealt with by taking
educational initiatives to combat the misconceptions.

The need for death education in our public
schools has been debated for the last two decades.
The goals and objectives of introducing death
curricula into our schools tend to focus on: a)
increasing students' capacity to deal with their own
mortality, and b) providing students with information
and facts about death which are currently not being
discussed because of the "silence". The majority of
the empirical research dealing with the topic of death
evaluates the effectiveness of a course on reducing
death anxiety. At least one author questions the
assumption that it is better to fear death less.

There are existential advantages in exploring the concept of death, according to some Humanistic Psychologists. Through a greater awareness and acceptance of our limited-time existence, individuals often develop a greater appreciation and reverence for life. Also, with an understanding of the fact of personal mortality, comes less self-created obstacles inhibiting an actualized and authentic existence. If viewed in this manner, death education becomes an important condition of personal growth.

The ability to cope with death and loss is seen as involving developmental skills which young people should be trained to develop. It is seen as the school counselor's responsibility to ensure that the issue of death is dealt with somewhere within the school curriculum.

The counselor's involvement in direct grief counseling and preventative death education emits messages to the school population that the guidance personnel are the ones to seek when troubled by death and loss issues. The counselor's involvement also demonstrates a deeply supportive, caring attitude toward the school population's social-emotional well-being.

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